

## **A Political Union: The Relationship of Alice Paul and Woodrow Wilson**

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Discovering new and different aspects of a historical figure you respect is very hard to do. Sometimes you feel as though you have examined all the areas of a historical subject's life but then, unexpectedly, you find yourself in a position to investigate material that may offset a prior understanding. When I began to research Alice Paul, I wanted to investigate her militancy during the campaign in the United States to gain a federal suffrage amendment for women. Through that investigation I stumbled upon an interesting conflict between firsthand reports which emerged during her suffrage campaign and interviews that the activist granted years later. I was drawn to the clashing character of primary-source accounts. As a historian, I began to question the validity of oral interviews and reports that are given many years after an event has taken place. Alice Paul's documented life and her later personal recounting of specific events has compelled me to ask: does our own perception of events change, or do we gradually grow to understand the situation in a different light as the years go by?

Alice Paul was an activist in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century who had fought for suffrage alongside the militant Pankhurst mother and daughter duo in England. She then came back to the United States after British suffrage was won and began to work towards the enfranchisement of women in America. Because Alice Paul was associated with the English Pankhursts, she was not very well accepted on the home front of the American suffrage campaign. Leaders in prominent suffrage groups, such as Carrie Chapman Catt of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NASAW), did not agree with her tactics and beliefs about how the vote should be won.<sup>1</sup> Paul subsequently left NAWSA in 1914 and started her own association, the Congressional Union for Women Voters. The Congressional Union later became the National Woman's

Party when the two merged in 1916. With Paul as their leader, the National Woman's Party became the dominant force behind pressing the President for a federal suffrage amendment.

During Paul's time as a suffrage leader, she had many complex relationships. One of these relationships involved the President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson. When I embarked on a study of this relationship I wanted to examine Paul's belief that a new and radical set of tactics would be needed if women were to win the suffrage campaign. Significantly, the adoption of such tactics, according to contemporary accounts, was central to the growing acrimony that developed between Paul and President Woodrow Wilson. This was intriguing given that Paul, in interviews given later in her life, insisted that she held no animosity toward Wilson and had never been opposed to him in any way. My investigations, therefore, have focused on comparing and contrasting newspaper reports and speech transcripts from the 1910s and 1920s with an interview that Paul granted Amelia Fry in 1973 and an excerpt from Doris Steven's work, *Jailed for Freedom*, which provided a firsthand account of Paul's relationships during her suffrage campaign in the United States.

In my research, I was able to use an interesting variety of primary sources. I utilized these sources to complete my history capstone and gain a better understanding of oral and public history. This project allowed me to define my topic in such a way that I became rather enthusiastic when approached about its content. Much of my previous understanding about this topic had been based on a large misinterpretation. To my great benefit I have gained a better understanding of the events of Alice Paul's life and her relationships through the diligence and efforts of my recent reading and tireless research.

The articles that I chose to examine were primary and secondary sources that surrounded Alice Paul during the American suffrage campaign. Another piece, *Conversations with Alice Paul: Woman Suffrage and the Equal Rights Amendment*, was an oral history interview of Paul by Amelia Fry. The oral interview was done over a period of several days in two separate settings nearly seven months apart. The first session was held on November 24, 1972 and was finished two days later on November 26. The second session was started on May 10 and was finished

on May 12, 1973. The interview went in depth regarding her fight for woman suffrage in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as well as her lifelong pursuit of the Equal Rights Amendment that has yet to be ratified by Congress.<sup>2</sup>

The first article I examined was from the *Milwaukee Journal* published in 1916. Alice Paul was known to express disapproval for President Wilson at this time when he publically showed no support for women's suffrage. During Paul's American suffrage campaign she received any press as good press. The National Woman's Party attempted to sway women (who were enfranchised due to the state-by-state suffrage laws) in western states to vote against Woodrow Wilson, during his re-election campaign in order to show him how important women's votes were.<sup>3</sup> This article suggested that Alice Paul was opposed to President Wilson entirely based upon the context and presentation of the material. Alice Paul directly stated in her interview with Amelia Fry that:

No, I *didn't* support him. I didn't support anybody in that campaign. I didn't have anything to do with that campaign.<sup>4</sup>

Paul then clarified in the interview with Fry decades later that women were not voting in New Jersey during this campaign. In 1916, only 6 states, which were primarily western states, allowed women to vote in the presidential election.<sup>5</sup> In the *Milwaukee News* article, Paul is quoted saying:

A statement by Miss Alice Paul, national chairman of the Congressional union says: 'Mr. Wilson opposed suffrage and we opposed him.'<sup>6</sup>

This was a political statement that was misunderstood greatly within the suffrage movement as well as the history of the suffrage campaign by Alice Paul. Although Paul clearly stated that she did not support President Wilson, the context of her words came across as though she personally, not politically, did not support him. The interview Paul gave with Amelia Fry clarifies this statement by emphasizing that she did not support him due to women's unavailable political rights during the actually campaign.

The *Miami News* published an article in 1917 which aggressively suggested that Alice Paul was the only reason Wilson began to contemplate woman suffrage. The interpretation of Alice Paul's influence and tactics is somewhat misrepresented in this article as well. The *Miami News* article stated:

IN speaking of the changed attitude of President Wilson on federal suffrage, Miss Paul said: 'The president is simply beginning to realize that we cannot go before Europe as a democracy while we do not practice democracy at home. Within his administration he has seen all of the allied nations take steps to nationally enfranchise their women, while we lagged behind. That is why President Wilson has taken his first step toward recognition of the federal suffrage amendment.'<sup>7</sup>

President Wilson had been meeting with Paul on a regular basis prior to his appointment of a suffrage committee in the House of Representatives. Historically, Alice Paul is represented as a very militant character who spoke on behalf of President Wilson on the topic of suffrage. Much scholarship suggests she was a very forward and direct individual who was somewhat aggressive. During the interview with Amelia Fry, Paul describes her dealings with President Wilson in this way:

There was a long series of them [deputations]. It went on and on and on through that whole year. Let's see that was 1913. They went on through 1913, [pause] and 1914 and 1915, and 1916 I guess we kept up these delegations. I'm not sure when we stopped. Finally the President—it is my recollection, vague recollection—he was getting mixed up with the international situation, and the war seemed to be in the offing, and he said he could not take the time to see [the women] anymore, that they all said the same thing and he said the same thing.<sup>8</sup>

Paul had been going around and around with Wilson but ultimately made no progress by the time World War I erupted. Alice Paul, contrary to

some historical accounts, did not begin her relationship with President Wilson when the war broke out. Newspapers like the Milwaukee Journal, as well as the Miami News, suggested during the suffrage campaign that Paul did not personally know the President and merely attacked his political ideology due to his publically known morals and principles. Specifically, the article in the *Miami News* proposed that Paul forced Wilson into considering suffrage, primarily in the democratic South, which may or may not have been the case.<sup>9</sup> In May of 1917, Paul and her supporters had only been protesting at the White House for several months. This newspaper could have been aiding Paul in her quest for national attention for suffrage, or it could have been, yet again, a misguided attempt at representing her addresses and speeches that were made on her campaign for a federal suffrage amendment.

Doris Stevens, a close confidant of Paul, wrote *Jailed for Freedom*, which focused entirely on the National Woman's Party.<sup>10</sup> The specific passage I analyzed to describe the relationship Paul had with Wilson shows President Wilson's view on suffrage during his first term and heading into an election year. Stevens was one of Paul's close associates during the American suffrage campaign. This relationship gave her a very interesting perspective on the entire campaign. Stevens wrote her book commemorating her friend's leadership and techniques and the behind-the-scenes action during the imprisonment they both had faced. In *Jailed for Freedom*, Stevens gives a personal account regarding the back and forth relationship of Alice Paul and Woodrow Wilson. Specifically, Stevens describes the inauguration week of President Wilson's first term, a week that included Paul's famous suffrage parade that took place just days before her first scheduled meeting with the newly-seated president.<sup>11</sup> Since Stevens was so close to Paul, her insight and knowledge of the events that took place were helpful in uncovering the actions and motives of Paul. Stevens described the first deputation as somewhat frightening experience. Stevens recalled the meeting:

A few days later the first deputation of suffragists ever to appear before a President to enlist his support for the passage of the national suffrage amendment waited upon President Wilson. Miss Paul led the deputation. With her were

Mrs. Genevieve Stone, wife of Congressman Stone of Illinois, Mrs. Harvey W. Wiley, Mrs. Ida Husted Harper, and Miss Mary Bartlett Dixon of Maryland. The President received the deputation in the White House Offices. When the women entered they found five chairs arranged in a row with one chair in front, like a class- room. All confessed to being frightened when the President came in and took his seat at the head of the class. The President said he had no opinion on the subject of woman suffrage; that he had never given it any thought.<sup>12</sup>

President Wilson confessed he had never really contemplated suffrage. During the Fry interview, Paul also relived the deputation with Wilson:

He explained how, as governor of New Jersey, he had supported it, how they had had a referendum and he had voted for it in New Jersey himself. And as a states' righter from Virginia, believing in all the states' rights traditions, he felt that that was the way to proceed, and he did not feel inclined to press for action by Congress. So we gave our point of view to him and we didn't, I think, change him at all; but he couldn't have been more courteous and more considerate and more deliberate in giving us all the time in the world to say what we wanted to say.<sup>13</sup>

Paul later described Wilson as a very tolerant educated man and concluded that Wilson's intentions were not to spite anyone, especially women, directly. Wilson had expressed a very different belief in how he believed the federal government should handle situations regarding matters at a state level. At the close of the suffrage campaign for women, Dorris Stevens released *Jailed for Freedom* in 1920.

Suffrage for women in the United States was not won by stepping aside and waiting for those in power, particularly men, to deliver voting rights on a silver platter. Women needed a leader and a voice to speak on behalf of all women. Alice Paul took up her picket signs and led the charge against President Woodrow Wilson during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to empower women and help extend suffrage to all citizens in the United

States. The crusade for woman's rights had started nearly fifty years prior and had changed directions several times over before Paul entered the final drive that sanctioned women and urged them to stand together against the social and political forces that were holding all women back. Alice Paul fought for all women and was the voice of those who could not be heard. The fight helped encourage different relationships with many different types of people; one of those included the President of the United States of America.

Alice Paul led a successful campaign for woman suffrage in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Much of her national attention and popularity came from the aid of newspapers and headlines. I began to question the validity of newspapers reporting on Paul's campaign speeches and statements made directly to and for the President. Even though Paul was close with the press and used any and every excuse for publicity for the NWP and the suffrage campaign, it is hard to distinguish fact from embellishment. Paul, and those who knew her, such as Doris Stevens, represented her actions in a very different perspective. Stevens and Fry's interview gave a more personal account to the suffragists' life which was very different from her political perspective. Many of the newspapers Paul published, *The Suffragist*, is available for viewing and research at Belmont-Sewall house in Washington, D.C. Because much of Paul's personal work was unavailable for my research, I relied on other primary and secondary sources that were obtainable to aid my understanding of the relationship I found so perplexing.

The relationship Alice Paul had with President Woodrow Wilson is a complex about which perspectives have shifted over the last ninety years. Various historical and political scholarship gives the impression Alice Paul embraced President Wilson as an ally in the suffrage movement. Some interviews and newspapers from the era insist that Alice Paul was very much against the President and his blatant disregard of suffrage. While Jean Baker gives a striking account of the relationship between Woodrow Wilson and Alice Paul in her book *Sisters: The Lives of American Suffragists*, she does not discuss Paul's personal feelings toward Wilson. Baker describes Wilson as being angered by the suffragists and irritated by the pressure they applied.<sup>14</sup> The views of Alice Paul are described in political rather than personal terms. Another article by

Christine A. Lunardini and Thomas J. Knock is devoted entirely to Woodrow Wilson's involvement in the suffrage movement and contains no mention of Alice Paul. In the article, however, Wilson is revered as a hero to the suffrage movement, which is contrary to Baker's article. I completely disagree with the thesis within the Lunardini-Knock article because of how transparent President Wilson was regarding his beliefs on woman suffrage.

There was an article that made quite an impression on me when I began to further immerse myself into my topic. The article was written by Sally Hunter Graham, examining the elaborate tap dance between Paul and Wilson. Graham considers the Lunardini-Knock thesis to be a flawed account of Wilson's ideals.<sup>15</sup> Much like Baker, Graham does not convey the personal aspects of Alice Paul's feelings. A lot of what Graham describes in her article is based on the political aspects of Paul's campaign to influence the position of President Wilson. Alice Paul led the attack on President Wilson strictly on his political stances and his own duplicity.

Paul decided to mount the attack on the administration's weakest point: the hypocrisy of waging a war for democracy abroad while denying the vote to women at home. Most woman suffrage associations, including NAWSA, supported the war effort. They hoped to convince the president and Congress that as patriotic citizens they were entitled to the ballot. Paul's group, however, remained a single-issue organization throughout the war. NWP (National Woman's Party) members used Wilson's war goals to point out his hypocritical attitude toward woman suffrage, but refused to lend their services in any way to the war effort.<sup>16</sup>

This specific article helped drive me to my conclusion of the complex relationship between Paul and Wilson. I agree completely with Graham's political approach to identifying the relationship between Wilson and Paul. Much of the scholarship surrounding Alice Paul suggests she always had a plan and never allowed her emotions or personal feelings to offset what she was implementing in her strategies. Graham makes reference to Alice Paul's strategies and their effectiveness on the government and the Wilson administration.<sup>17</sup> At no time does she describe any personal feelings regarding the episode, which I found quite interesting.



Through my reading and research I was able to find works written by close companions, like Doris Stevens and Inez Haynes Irwin, who worked with Alice Paul on the forefront of the suffrage campaign. In their works they describe Paul as having a lot of respect for Wilson. I found it very hard to believe that scholars, such as Graham, never mentioned such references to the personal feelings of Paul with regard to Wilson. Nevertheless, much of the scholarship I have been able to ascertain and familiarize myself with has been quite helpful in understanding the Paul-Wilson dynamic. Alice Paul did respect President Wilson and admired him for his social and political contributions to the people of the United States. I believe it has been important to stress that Paul's intention was strictly and sincerely a political tactic and strategy. To suggest that her personal feelings about the President did or did not have an impact on her campaign has certainly been the heart of this entire debate. Alice Paul did feel respect and admiration towards the President, but this did not affect her tactics in the American suffrage campaign.

The contrary side to all of this is President Wilson's feelings towards Alice Paul. Paul tested him in ways he never sought to be tested, especially by a woman. His entire attitude on censorship and free speech began to change when women stood in front of the White House picketing him and using his own words against him. He disregarded Paul and her fellow protesters' request for political prisoner status and only reluctantly helped when he began to receive "bad press."<sup>18</sup> The relationship was not mutual in any sense, a dynamic that became fascinating to understand. I also think that the dearth of scholarship about Alice Paul creates a sense of uncertainty about how she focused on a means to an end. I believe the general understanding is that Paul was frustrated and was looking to press this conservative man from his political views in any way possible. This is where I believe many scholars have it wrong. I agree with Graham's interpretation because she presents Wilson's irritation as well as Alice Paul's determination to win the vote for all women. President Wilson was quite finished with Alice Paul's political pressure when the suffrage campaign compelled the president to act. Paul would not rest until every woman was granted equal suffrage under the law. This friction between Paul and Wilson was seemingly endless until one gave into the other.

Concluding this project, I found answers to my questions as well as new and interesting views on much of the material I have unearthed. The research was extensive and, in some instances, very frustrating. Alice Paul's personal feelings have been very hard to locate whereas Wilson's were quite out there in the open. The attitude of Alice Paul seemed to be a little more mature and developed whereas Wilson's approach to the issue appeared fraught with frustration and anger. The newspaper coverage apparently thrilled and excited Paul and inflamed the political passions of countless people, but they very much annoyed President Wilson. I am pleased with the answers I was able to procure and ascertain. Research on Paul is minimal and has given me a spark of confidence for reading and learning more about the specifics in her life, especially the formation of the National Woman's Party. I plan to continue my investigations on Alice Paul in the near future and further examine the many complex ideals and principles that surrounded the suffragist's life.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Robert D. Johnston, ed., *Encyclopedia of US Political History Vol. IV: From the Gilded Age through the Age of Reform* (Washington D.C.: CQ Press, 2010), 260.

<sup>2</sup> Amelia Fry, *Conversations with Alice Paul*, (University of California, 1972) <http://content.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/kt6f59n89c/>. (last accessed June, 1, 2012)

<sup>3</sup> Alice Paul campaigned in the western states that voting women should help to swing the votes out of Woodrow Wilson's favor because of his lack of support for woman suffrage. Read and Bernard L Witlieb, eds., *The Book of Women's Firsts* (New York: Random House, 1992), 333.

<sup>4</sup> Fry, *Conversations with Alice Paul*, 90.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Finkelman and Peter Wallenstein, eds., *Encyclopedia of American Political History* (Washington D.C: CQ Press, 2001), 374.

<sup>6</sup> "Suffrage Leaders Say They Made It Harder For Wilson To Win," *Milwaukee Journal*, Nov. 11, 1916.

<sup>7</sup> "Miss Paul Confident of Suffrage Successes in South," *Miami News*, May 25, 1917.

<sup>8</sup> Fry, *Conversations with Alice Paul*, 92.

<sup>9</sup> Inez Haynes Irwin, *The Story of the Woman's Party* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1921), 167.

<sup>10</sup> Doris Stevens, *Jailed for Freedom* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1920).

<sup>11</sup> Johnston, ed., *Encyclopedia of US Political History Vol. IV*, 259.

<sup>12</sup> Stevens, *Jailed for Freedom*, 23.

<sup>13</sup> Woodrow Wilson believed woman suffrage was at the states' discretion and, therefore, did not require his endorsement. Wilson veered from these areas of reform which would seemingly enlarge the Federal Government. See Francine Sanders Romero *Presidents from Theodore Roosevelt through Coolidge, 1901-1929: Debating the Issues in Pro and Con Primary Documents* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2002), 99-100.

<sup>14</sup> Jean H. Baker, *Sisters: The Lives of American Suffragists* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005), 205.

<sup>15</sup> Sally Hunter Graham, "Woodrow Wilson, Alice Paul, and the Woman Suffrage Movement," *Political Science Quarterly* 98 (1983): 678.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 667.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 669.

<sup>18</sup> Baker, *Sisters: The Lives of American Suffragists*, 213.