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From Women's Rights to Woman Suffrage

Of all the women who had served the Union and Confederacy during the Civil War, only feminists active in the Northern women's rights movement asked for recognition and for what they considered a fair reward. During the war, feminists claimed, women had proven their political abilities and importance to the nation. After the war, they felt sure, politicians would express their gratitude.

The reward feminists expected was the vote. When Republican Congressmen proposed suffrage for black men during Reconstruction, feminists demanded the same right for women. Not only was the vote women's due for having helped to fight the war, but it was also woman's natural right. Reconstruction, according to feminists, was the time to grant "equal rights to all that the ideal of the Founding Fathers be now made a fact of life."[1]

Republican reconstructionists, however, cared little about equal rights for women or for blacks. The men who formulated Reconstruction policy were interested in their own political power. By giving black men the vote, Republicans hoped to control the South. They never seriously considered woman suffrage.

This bias was clearly revealed in section two of the Fourteenth Amendment, which specifically referred to "male inhabitants" and "male citizens" in the section dealing with the right to vote. For the first time the Constitution contained the word "male" instead of speaking simply of "the people" or "citizens." With that word the amendment introduced the principle of discrimination by sex into the Constitution, with the implication that women were not citizens.

Before the Civil War women were denied the vote by state law alone. With ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment, women needed another amendment to the Constitution before they would be able to vote in federal elections. "If that word 'male' be inserted now," wrote Stanton, "it will take us a century at least to get it out

again." Anthony, Stone, and other feminists joined Stanton in protesting the Fourteenth Amendment. But none of their appeals to Republicans was successful, and Stanton's prediction was not so wide of the mark. The Fourteenth Amendment was ratified in 1868; the Twentieth Amendment, granting women the right to vote in national elections, did not come until 1920, half a century later.

On the heels of the Fourteenth Amendment came the Fifteenth, stipulating that suffrage could not be denied on the basis of "race, color, or previous condition of servitude." Feminists urged that the word "sex" be included. But again, Republicans would not change their plan to give the vote only to black men. In reaction, many feminists came to feel that male-legislated justice was no justice at all, and they acquired a deep and lasting distrust of politicians and political parties. In the fifty years it took women to win the vote, feminists continued to seek the support of individual politicians while they adopted a strictly nonpartisan policy. Never again would they endorse or support one political party, as they had during the Civil War.

Abolitionists also refused to support woman suffrage. After the war abolitionists stood with Republicans and organized a national campaign in support of black male suffrage. They expected feminists to join them, once more postponing the demand for their own rights. This rejection by a former ally hurt feminists most deeply.

It was the "Negroes' hour," feminists were told, and women would have to wait their turn. Such abolitionist leaders as Wendell Phillips reasoned that the nation could handle only one reform at a time. Northern and western politicians were ready to give black men the vote, but no section of the nation was ready to enfranchise women. If feminists rashly insisted on the vote for themselves, abolitionists stated, they would only jeopardize the hard-won chance of black men.

Abolitionists justified their rejection of woman suffrage during Reconstruction by claiming that the vote was more important for blacks than for women. "I am engaged in abolishing slavery," wrote Wendell Phillips to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "in a land where abolition of slavery means conferring or recognizing citizenship, and where citizenship supposes the ballot for all men." Stanton was quick to point out that emancipation applied to black

women as well as black men. "Do you believe the African race is composed entirely of males?" she asked.[2]

Not even Stanton's appeal on behalf of black women could change the minds of abolitionists. Race came before sex. Black men needed the vote to reclaim the manhood they had been denied under slavery. Frederick Douglass, who had seconded Elizabeth Cady Stanton's demand for woman suffrage at the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, stated the general case.

> When women, because they are women, are dragged from their homes and hung upon lamp-posts; when their children are torn from their arms and their brains dashed to the pavement; when they are objects of insult and outrage at every turn; when they are in danger of having their homes burnt down over their heads; when their children are not allowed to enter schools; then they will have an urgency to obtain the ballot.[3]

Sojourner Truth was one of the few blacks who spoke for women as well as men.

> There is a great stir about coloured men getting their rights but not a word about coloured women; and if coloured men get their rights and not coloured women theirs, you see, coloured men will be masters over the women. . . . I wish woman to have her voice.[4]

But most blacks agreed with Douglass.

Enfranchisement did not protect black men from the systematic enforcement, by violent means, of white male rule in the South. Abolitionists failed to realize that the vote alone would not bring racial equality. Feminists had a similarly inflated idea about suffrage. They believed that once black men got the vote, they would assume the power and privileges of white men, and to this belief they reacted with racist anger.

Tragically, feminists made black men the scapegoats for their disillusionment with white male politicians and reformers. Though Stanton wanted both blacks and women to have the vote, she also felt and stated that it was "degrading" for educated Anglo-Saxon women to remain voteless while "two million ignorant men are being ushered into the legislative halls. . . . What can we hope for at the hands of the Chinese, Indians, and Africans?" she

protested.[5] The analogy feminists had once drawn between the plight of women and slaves was forgotten. After Reconstruction the women's movement no longer spoke for black freedom.

The Republican and abolitionist rejection of woman suffrage during Reconstruction changed the course of the women's movement. Winning the vote became a kind of obsession to which other aspects of women's struggle for equality lost out. A few feminists, particularly Stanton, did not place so much faith in the ballot, but many feminists began to refer to their movement not as women's rights, but as woman suffrage.

The failure of feminists to win the vote had the further effect of splitting apart the women's movement. When abolitionists broke their ties with feminists, feminists broke with each other.

All feminists felt betrayed by abolitionists, but Lucy Stone, Julia Ward Howe, and others who lived in Boston remained intimately connected with the Boston-based abolitionist movement. They could not and would not sever their ties with such old friends and neighbors as Phillips and Garrison. Reluctantly they agreed that women should wait to win suffrage until black men were safely enfranchised. Though Stone wrote that there were tears in her eyes and that a nail went through her breast when abolitionists forgot about women, she accepted the antislavery priorities. If there could be "only one great moral victory at a time," she noted, then black men should come first. "I will be thankful if *any*body can get out of the terrible pit."[6]

Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony would not wait. They deplored the Boston group's resignation to the will of male abolitionists. The cause of woman suffrage, they insisted, should be led by women who put their sex first.

Stanton and Anthony had both moved to New York City during the war, but they still commanded the support of feminists from small towns in western New York and the Midwest, where the women's movement had originated. They used this support to force a break with the abolitionist establishment. In 1869 Stanton and Anthony withdrew from the Equal Rights Association and called a secret meeting of their own followers to form the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA). A year later

Women's Rights to Woman Suffrage Questions

Name:

Instructions: Please write answers of a separate sheet of paper.

1. Why did women expect the vote as a reward?

2. What did the Fourteenth Amendment do in terms of women as citizens?

3. What is the difference between the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments?

4. Who did the abolitionists support after the Civil War? For what reason did they support this group?

5. How did abolitionists feel towards woman suffrage? How did this stance make women feel?

6. Based on your knowledge of the Seneca Falls Convention, explain how Frederick Douglass's stand on woman suffrage had changed.

7. What happened between blacks and women when black men were awarded the vote?

8. How did views of Stone and Howe differ from those of Stanton and Anthony?

9. What group was founded by Stanton and Anthony and when?