

A Tyranny Most Odious

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Antebellum America inspired many individuals to claim their voice in society. Both African Americans and women all over the country were demanding their rights as citizens. During the Civil War, however, the women's movement faded to the background, as women joined the abolitionists. The close of the Civil War marked the beginning of freedom for many former slaves that were now truly considered citizens of the United States. The American Equal Rights Association was formed in 1866;¹ the goal of this group was equal rights and suffrage for both African Americans and women. After the war concluded the government had to incorporate the newly freed slaves into society. An Amendment to the Constitution was deemed necessary. In 1868, the fourteenth Amendment was ratified, this defined citizens as "all persons born or naturalized in the United States." It also gave the states the option of enfranchising the freed slaves. Still, Congress believed another piece of legislature was necessary to define voting rights, hence the fifteenth Amendment, ratified in 1870, this Amendment stated that, "the right of citizens to vote cannot be denied on account of race, color or previous conditions of servitude."² The controversy that surrounded these amendments and the changes that took place during the Reconstruction era of the United States were immense.

¹ John M. Murrin et al., *Liberty, Equality, Power: A History of the American People*, 4th ed. (California: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005), 641.

² Ibid. A-16.

Women's rights advocates, including Victoria Clafin Woodhull, used this unrest to their advantage. Woodhull was especially revolutionary. In the 1870s she published her own journal in New York city, worked as the only female broker on Wall Street, and spoke openly about the concept of free love. She would go on to be the first woman to run for President of the United States. On February 16, 1871, Woodhull delivered a lecture on Constitutional Equality to thousands of suffragists in Washington D.C. Woodhull capitalized on the established human rights debates, she used the fresh Amendments to the Constitution to her advantage, and she sent out a battle cry to women, that relied strongly on comparisons to the American Revolution, slavery and the Civil War. More powerful than her lecture though was her lifestyle, which constantly challenged modern views of women and society as a whole.

Colonial America was built around a solid Christian faith. Deep rooted in this faith was the idea that women were second to men. A married woman had no rights at all, and was often times subject to abuse. If she deserted her husband, she had no rights to her children.³ This common law guideline was embraced by the lawyers in the colonies: "The husband and wife are one and that one is the husband."⁴ Frequently women were viewed as nothing more than livestock, workers that produced more workers, in the form of children.

During colonial times women were also confined largely to the homestead, as it was regarded as shameful for a woman to work outside of the home.⁵ These ideas of female inferiority continued. Later, a woman's career options broadened to include

³ Israel Kugler, *From Ladies to Women*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 4.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

schoolteacher, or for the poor, factory worker. As for middle and upper class women in early America, the less one had to do the higher her social status. These women were trained from childhood to look forward to marriage and maintaining a beautiful home. This was later known as the “ideal of empty idleness.”⁶

Victoria Woodhull was raised in a manner that bore no resemblance to this paradigm. At the age of fourteen she was the main breadwinner for the poor family, working as a medium. Woodhull attained confidence in knowing she could provide for herself. Despite her unusual youth and remarkable confidence, she still believed her only way out of poverty was marriage. At the age of fifteen Woodhull, then Clafin, married Canning Woodhull. The marriage was turbulent to say the least. Being in a unhappy marriage was the birth of her passion for women’s rights.⁷

Woodhull moved to New York city. She set off to show by example that the fairer sex could support themselves. At a time when only five of the 40,736 lawyers in America were female and sixty-seven women were of the 43,874 clergymen,⁸ Woodhull set out to be the first female stock broker on Wall Street. On February 5, 1870, along with her sister Tennessee, she did just that, Woodhull, Clafin & Co. opened for business. This caused a very large commotion, understandably, women were not supposed to wear pants, let alone set up shop on Wall Street. The sisters had many admirers and just as many critics; these critics labeled Woodhull as “Mrs. Satan.”⁹

Woodhull quickly became a force in New York, and to have her voice heard she

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Mary Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, (North Carolina: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill) 10.

⁸ Ibid., 39.

⁹ Ibid., 3.

decided she would become a publisher as well. Her journal was not designed for one group in particular but aspired to unite many different people for the woman's cause. *Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly* distributed its first issue on May 14, 1870, with the motto "Upward & Onward." Woodhull was also the first publisher in America to print the *Communist Manifesto*. She held revolutionaries in high regard.

In her lecture on Constitutional Equality comparisons to the American Revolution were one of Woodhull's tactics to inflame her audience. Woodhull poignantly compared the oppression inflicted by King George III upon the colonies, to that which the women of America suffered at the hands of male electors and their male relatives. She concluded the situations were very similar because "the inherent right to self-government is equally over-ridden by the assumption of power."¹⁰ It is a very significant similarity which spoke to patriots, female and male. Woodhull insisted that actually this tyranny was worse, because it made the false claim of being constructed "by the people and for the people." The colonies were at least understood to be under the king's rule.¹¹ The king had exercised his rule over them without their consent for too long.¹² The colonists came to the conclusion that they could no longer tolerate England taking money from their pockets,¹³ and they fought to claim their independence. The women of America on the other hand, lived in a purportedly democratic nation, where the government's power is derived from its people, this made their situation more complicated. This is one reason women's suffrage took so long, women had to convince a completely male delegation to grant them the vote.

¹⁰ Woodhull, *A Lecture on Constitutional Equality*, 7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Murrin et al., 195.

Woodhull proposed that women were capable of creating a government and running it efficiently.¹⁴ This new government Woodhull proposed would “be applicable, not to women alone, but to all persons who shall transfer their allegiance to it.” Whether or not she believed this was truly possible is unknown, but she cried, “We will not fail.”¹⁵ She attempted to instill a sense of confidence and fury in her attendants.

Woodhull used fierce language to display how similar a situation the women in America were now facing with the revolutionary Americans, and how they could resolve their predicament. She explained how one half of the population of America was experiencing “taxation without representation,” the very thing that was deemed intolerable by America’s forefathers. To this Woodhull exclaimed:

To be compelled to submit to these extortions that such ends may be gained, upon any pretext or under any circumstances, is bad enough: but to be compelled to submit to them, and also denied the right to cast my vote against them, is a tyranny more odious than that which, being rebelled against, gave this country independence.”¹⁶

Woodhull pressed on to question what might happen if she refuse to pay her taxes, because she was not being represented, would she have been justified? She claimed she would be justified in not paying, but of course she doubted she could “escape the tyranny.”¹⁷ Woodhull listed all of the things she must pay taxes for, publishing a paper, engaging in banking and brokerage, high prices for tea, coffee and sugar, “so that *men’s* government may be maintained.”¹⁸ Just as England exploited the colonies for its own benefit, Woodhull accused man’s government of taking advantage of women, by taxing

¹⁴ Woodhull, 32.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 11.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 10

them without their consent, with the intent of furthering their government and the oppression held over women.

Woodhull contended that the founding fathers of this nation believed no one should be bound by any law that they did not have a voice in constructing. She also stated that the government had strayed far from the original vision of the men who framed the constitution, “of which we hear so much, and who thought so differently from what is now predicated of them.”¹⁹ She conceded the forefathers had failed at times to apply some of their own ideologies, but said that this failure should not be made an excuse by the present leaders. She asked, “Shall the omission of others to do justice keep the government from measuring it to those who now cry out for it?”²⁰ Woodhull accused the government of her time of using past wrongs as a scapegoat of sorts. Woodhull was convinced that the colonists who fought the American Revolution, fought for equal rights for all citizens, and that their vision was still attainable, if only Congress would answer the suffragists’ pleas. If the government refused to listen, her resolution was clear, she had threatened secession, inspired by the rebellion that had given the United States its independence.

Woodhull appealed to all women to stand up and claim their independence. Woodhull suggested things that had never been imagined in the mainstream suffrage circles. Even if her statements were not meant literally they still provoked something rebellious in the movement that had not been seen before. After Susan B. Anthony read a transcript of Woodhull’s lecture she wrote a letter to Woodhull conceding, “It is ahead of anything, said or written--bless you dear soul for all you are doing to help strike the

¹⁹ Ibid. 22.

²⁰ Ibid.

chains from woman's spirit."²¹

She wanted to bring the public, men and women, to the conclusion that a new government must be formed if Congress would not listen to their pleas. Woodhull used very inciting vocabulary and filled the hall with the sense of a coming battle, not so different from the Civil War, which was still a fresh wound and a vulnerable matter for many Americans. Woodhull proclaimed:

“We mean treason; we mean secession, and on a thousand times grander scale than was that of the South. We are plotting revolution; we will overthrow this bogus republic and plant a government of righteousness in its stead, which shall not only profess to derive its power from the consent of the governed, but shall do so in reality.”²²

Although this statement appears to be solely a threat, Woodhull utilized these words to unite and empower her audience. Woodhull believed that the fight for equality had to begin in each household, so here she was speaking to her troops, and their homes were the front line. She claimed that if they chose to, the women of America could create a division much greater than was experienced during The Civil War.

Woodhull based her argument entirely on the recent abolishment of slavery. Woodhull understood that she could manipulate the argument. When talking about individual civil rights they apply to all human beings; she could simply switch the subject of the debate from black slaves, to all women. She utilized the opportunity to the fullest extent. It is clear that Woodhull absorbed the petitions that were the basis for enfranchising the former slaves. They are of the utmost importance because every single argument could also be applied to the case of women's enfranchisement. It is apparent,

²¹ Mary Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, (North Carolina: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill) 87.

²² Woodhull, 32

however, that Woodhull realized that the women's cause attracted fewer advocates than that of the African Americans. She remarked:

“The Negro found many advocates -- men whose souls were large enough to take in all God's family. But with this great effort they closed. Woman must be her own advocate. Few of the male sex -- few of those who battled so manfully for the Negro -- now come forward and lift their voices against this thrice greater, this terrible wrong.”²³

She drew upon that fact, questioning why tyranny was expected to be tolerable for the fairer sex.²⁴ Woodhull plainly exploited the emotions of the recent debates. She questioned why the same words, that provoked males to stand up for black men, did not incite the same sense of injustice, when applied to the whole female sex.

Woodhull went as far as to say that the women of America were in fact enslaved, and in need of emancipation just as much as the African Americans. Woodhull probed, “The extent of the subjection may be less and its severity milder, but it is a complete subjection nevertheless. What can women do that men deny them? What could not the slave have done if not denied?”²⁵ According to Woodhull, a complete revolution of domestic relations was in order. She believed that with or without suffrage, women in America would be enslaved until there was an upheaval of the general ideas toward women.²⁶

Throughout the nineteenth century slaves found many advocates in women because women started to see many parallels between their situations. Women were expected to be passive, cooperative, and acquiescent to their husbands, just as slaves were

²³ Ibid. 22-23.

²⁴ Ibid. 8.

²⁵ Ibid. 18.

²⁶ Gabriel, 38.

to their masters.²⁷ Both groups of people were denied education, for slaves education was against the rules, and for females, formal education had been secondary to that for boys. Reading for grown women in the nineteenth century was limited to “proper ladies” books and magazines, which were censored to contain only that which pertained to “true womanhood.” Women were stereotyped to have no intellect or organizing ability.²⁸ The women’s rights activists including Woodhull challenged this generalization.

Woodhull suggested that if women, or anyone for that matter, did not have a say in the appointment of those who frame the laws, they were in fact not free.²⁹ They were slaves, and the law makers were their masters. One hundred years earlier there was a revolution in the name of self-government. Certainly women were not self-governed, in a country where self-government allegedly carried so much value.

Not only did the suffragist’s capitalize on the anti-slavery movement but, the women’s suffrage movement owed its existence to the struggle for human rights brought on by the injustices of slavery.³⁰ It was during the abolition movement that the early suffragists developed their skills of critical thought, the very skills they were believed not to possess. Women were not thought capable of critical thought, and seen as too fragile to enter the realm of political debate. A woman was suppose to be pious, pure, submissive and domestic, nothing else was expected or accepted.³¹ It was Woodhull’s life mission to change the way society viewed women. Woodhull also believed it was simply a matter of prejudice against women that could be relieved, upon the education of

²⁷ Compton’s Interactive Encyclopedia (on-line); available from <http://www.wic.org/misc/history.htm>; internet; accessed 24 March 2007.

²⁸ Kugler, 23.

²⁹ Woodhull, 10.

³⁰ Gruening, *The Crisis*, 245-247

³¹ Lillian Duck, Lecture on Cult of Domesticity, April 10, 2007.

males. She made this comparison, “No greater prejudice exists against equality than there did against the proposition that the world was a globe. This passed away under the influence of better information, so also will present prejudice pass, when better informed upon the question of equality.”³²

Discussions concerning the fourteenth and fifteenth Amendments originally focused on the freed black men. Soon, women’s rights activists realized the Amendments could also apply to them as well. This motivated Victoria Woodhull to develop a compelling argument for women’s rights based on the interest in individual equalities. The two Amendments, Woodhull argued, ensured all citizens a right to vote, unless, “I forfeit it by an infringement upon others’ rights, in which case the State becomes the arbiter and deprives me of them for the public good.”³³ Woodhull’s explanation was possibly too simple, she deduced that because the fifteenth Amendment stated that the “right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged,” in combination with the fourteenth Amendment which defines citizens as “all persons born or naturalized in the United States.”³⁴ Therefore women, who are citizens, cannot be denied the right to vote. Some viewed the fourteenth Amendment as a denial of women’s suffrage. The second section of the Amendment contained the word “male.” It specified that if male voters were denied the right to vote, the state in which the denial occurred would lose seats in representation. Woodhull saw only what was written; the Amendment did not grant anyone the right to vote. Woodhull declared:

“If the Constitution mean nothing but what is expressed, how can it be presumed to infer anything from the use of the word male in this second section, except

³² Woodhull, 4.

³³ Woodhull, 5.

³⁴ Gabriel, 69.

what it expresses? The right of women to vote, or the denial of that right to them, is not involved by this section under the furthest fetched application.”³⁵

Woodhull adopted a strict constructionist’s view of the constitution, she took it apart word for word, and used it to her advantage. She stated that because there is no mention of the female sex in the amendment, they are not explicitly denied the right. More to the point, the fourteenth Amendment clearly states those who are born in the United States are citizens, and that no state shall abridge the rights of citizens. Although, the second section expresses that the states do have the right to deny suffrage to male inhabitants, with the consequence of reducing congressional representation. Congress took for granted that women did not already possess the right to vote, so nowhere was it specifically denied.

Woodhull ascertained that nowhere does the constitution actually grant the right to vote to anyone.³⁶ In the constitution the phrase, “the right to vote,” does not appear anywhere, except in the fifteenth Amendment, and in this location it is only admitting that the right to vote cannot be denied.³⁷ When she questioned where the right originates, Woodhull drew upon the spiritual, she suggested that all humans receive the right from their Creator, who does not discriminate according to gender.³⁸ According to Woodhull, every human being in the United States was granted the right to vote upon birth. Therefore, in order to deny the right to a specific group the denial must be clearly expressed. Woodhull stated:

“If the right to vote cannot be denied on account of race, how can it be denied on account of a constituent part of race, unless the power of denial is specially

³⁵ Woodhull, 13.

³⁶ Ibid. 6.

³⁷ Murrin et al., A-16.

³⁸ Woodhull, 18.

expressed. The larger always includes the smaller, which, if reserved, the reservation must be expressed...It seems to me that no logic can be plainer than this. Had this amendment recited that the right to vote should not be denied on account of race, except to *females*, it would have left the right of denial to the States, but even then, under the fourteenth Amendment, the denial would have to be made...³⁹

No denial of the right to vote had ever been made, to women or African Americans. Yet, it was clear, in America women were not thought to “possess the requisite qualifications for electors of the most numerous branch of the State Legislature.”⁴⁰ This excerpt from the Constitution is the only place, Woodhull claimed, where denial of women’s right to vote could possibly be found,⁴¹ and by “requisite qualifications,” Woodhull understood the word “qualifications,” to mean “male.” To Woodhull this was intolerable, not to mention unconstitutional. She insisted that gender cannot possibly be made a qualification because it is not something that can be attained.⁴² Woodhull suggested that the same qualifications should apply equally to males and females. Woodhull explained:

“If there are good and consistent reasons why some should not be electors let them be applied without regard to sex or any other general condition. Let men as well as women be subject to them. If they include me I will not complain; I will but ask that every man shall be prevented for the same reasons I am, and for none other.”⁴³

The argument for Woodhull was more about equality than the right to vote, she insisted that if men were denied suffrage she would have fought for them just as wholeheartedly.⁴⁴ The issue was only that the qualifications must be equally attainable, women

³⁹ Ibid., 15.

⁴⁰ Article I, section 2 of the Federal Constitution.

⁴¹ Woodhull, 20.

⁴² Ibid., 21.

⁴³ Ibid., 22.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

must be able to qualify to vote by the same means that men qualify to vote.⁴⁵

The women's suffrage movement in the United States was ignited by the equal rights debates that followed the American Civil War. Woodhull and other suffragists capitalized on the discussions by announcing to the nation that they were of the same social position as the slaves were before their emancipation. The women's rights advocates fought for abolition and rejoiced when it was won. Afterwards they were enraged to find that their cause was not considered a pressing issue. Woodhull's conclusion that women were in bondage was affirmed. Another substantial contention Woodhull made was pertaining to the recent Amendments to the Constitution. The fourteenth Amendment guaranteed citizens rights, and the fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution disallowed suffrage to be denied, although her stance was compelling, this is only more proof of how limitless was man's power. Even though there was nowhere in the Constitution that denied women the right to vote, they were blatantly denied, and continuously denied for fifty years to come. For Woodhull it was truly a study in semantics. She disassembled the constitution and held it up to her audience piece by piece. The conclusions she made were very black and white. Unfortunately, the government and the general public were not persuaded by the suffragist's simple deductions.

Woodhull's most effective method throughout her lecture was her appeals to the hearts of patriots. The Americans that rebelled against King George III were considered American heroes, comparing women to these men was a brilliant strategy. The underlying tone of rebellion in Woodhull's lecture would have appealed to many men

⁴⁵ Ibid., 21.

who might not have come to this conclusion on their own. Woodhull sent out a battle cry to all women to join the ranks of females who, as she stated:

“Rebel against, denounce and defy this arbitrary, usurping and tyrannical government which has been framed and imposed upon us without our consent, and even without so much as entertaining the idea... that we existed at all, except in the simple case in which we might be found guilty of some offense, when it has not failed to visit on us its sanctions with as much rigor as if we owed rightful allegiance to it; which we do not, and which, in the future we will not even pretend to do.”⁴⁶

With her comparisons to the Civil War, Woodhull demonstrated that nothing less than a complete rebellion would succeed. When she threatened secession, she was trying to inspire her audience.

The importance to be gathered from this analysis is that tyranny is not always an obvious oppressor, at first glance these women were not enslaved, but they were excluded from the government, which claimed to be a republican version, but “when government is fashion for the people it is not a republican form.”⁴⁷ Also to be gained from this research is the fact that the struggle for equal individual rights is of the most importance, even more, that the struggle is never over, especially for women all over the world. Women continue to be oppressed in various ways. Reflection of this kind is particularly crucial in the United States today, where it is hard to imagine this kind of injustice. Yet, everyday it is occurring. Which also means, gratefully, everyday there are women like Woodhull who are speaking out against it. For instance, Deborah Rodriguez is an American woman from Michigan, who went to Afghanistan as part of a disaster relief tour with a humanitarian group. After arriving in the distraught nation she came to realize that the women had no voice. She has no plans to return to the United States and

⁴⁶ Ibid., 32.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 6.

she explained, “I can’t leave until the Afghan women are heard.”⁴⁸

It is important to note how protracted the women’s suffrage struggle became, and to think Woodhull’s lecture was five decades before the battle was won. On January 11, 1871, Woodhull became the first woman in history to address a congressional committee; her cause was equality for all. In 1878, a women’s suffrage amendment was proposed to Congress for the first time. It was refused to even be voted on. The same amendment was proposed every year, for forty years. It was refused for voting by Congressmen every single time. Finally, with the aftermath of World War I, women in the United States were granted the right to vote; many strong women had played various roles in the war and many anti-suffragists surrendered. It is important that we remember Victoria Woodhull and all the activists for equal rights. It is remarkable how much rejection the suffragists endured and still they persevered. Their perseverance granted us our liberties today.

⁴⁸ Heidi Benson, “Social change- and a haircut- care of Kabul’s trend setting salon,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 11 April 2007, Datebook.