Women,  
Wilson,  
and Emergency War Measures  

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On November 11, 1918, the armistice was signed that ended World War I. The Allies, including the United States, had won. The very next year the nineteenth amendment, guaranteeing women the right to vote passed Congress and in 1920 went on to be ratified by the states. The women of the United States had also won. This timing was not mere coincidence. The war had a profound impact on the suffrage movement. It became the central issue in women’s activism for a federal suffrage amendment. In turn, the women used it as a plea and a bargaining chip for the support of politicians, specifically President Woodrow Wilson. Wilson was a pivotal figure in the last two years of the fight for women’s suffrage, 1917 and 1918. It was his influence on suffrage that ultimately won women the vote by his support of the federal amendment as an emergency war measure. Wilson’s support for a federal amendment was remarkable because before the war, he had not considered women’s suffrage a federal amendment issue. Other historians rightfully credit Wilson for his all-important support of the federal suffrage amendment. Yet some do not document the evolution of his ideology on the issue, and those who do not go far enough.

For years, Wilson had held the position that women’s suffrage was a states’ rights issue. On August 15, 1912, as Wilson was campaigning in Massachusetts, Governor Eugene Noble Foss wrote him to ask about his position on women’s suffrage. The Governor stated that he had been under pressure from local factions of the women’s movement to learn Wilson’s thoughts on the issue. Two days later Wilson responded and spelled it out for the Governor. “I must say to you very frankly that I do not think that it would best to bring the woman suffrage question into the national campaign...It is not a national question but a state question.” Wilson supported the women ideologically, but he did not consider the national platform to be the proper forum for the issue.

Yet by 1917 Wilson firmly supported the idea of a federal amendment for women’s suffrage. It was undoubtedly this shift in Wilson’s ideology that gave the suffrage movement the impetus it needed to be successful. The question is why and how did this shift occur. The reasons are various and intertwined. Seven philosophical and practical concerns influenced Wilson on this issue. Some came directly from the women activists themselves; others indirectly from other politicians and staffers who worked for Wilson, but were influenced by the women activists. The practical concerns ranged from the dissent of picketing activists and support for the war to the United States’ image in international circles. Meanwhile, the philosophical concerns included democracy, injustice, psychological war support and the fulfillment of campaign promises. All of these concerns influenced Wilson and worked together to win his support for a federal amendment.

Historians who write of women’s sociopolitical activism during World War I, especially the final years of the women’s suffrage movement, acknowledge Wilson. They credit his support of a federal amendment as being essential to successfully fulfilling the agenda of the suffrage movement. They also mention the shift in his ideology that brought this change about.
Nevertheless, they do not attempt to explain how or why this shift came about. They cite two or three possible influences, but do not delve further into the issue. For example, Barbara J. Steinson in her book, *American Women’s Activism in World War I*, devotes only one sentence to Wilson’s shift. She hesitantly suggests that Wilson may have been impressed with how women had worked together so efficiently in previous suffrage campaigns on the state level. She adds that he admired their current war support efforts. Steinson does not elaborate on these ideas, nor does she explore Wilson’s reasons for support any further.

Christine A. Lunardini goes a little further in her book, *From Equal Suffrage to Equal Rights*, but not much. However, she recognizes Wilson’s concern for democracy and how the women activists’ tactics were wearing him down. She gives most of the credit for these influences to only one faction of the women’s movement: the younger, more militant group represented by the National Woman’s Party, or NWP. Lunardini asserts that the militant tactics of the activists, such as aggressively picketing the White House, got Wilson’s attention. They were then able to appeal to his sense of democracy, and win his support for a federal suffrage amendment. Like Steinson, Lunardini focuses on Wilson’s outward response to the movement, but does not deal with the inner evolution of his ideology on suffrage. Neither historian is incorrect. The influences and sources they mention were important factors of Wilson’s thinking. Yet they were not the only influences on Wilson, and they came from more than one source. Lunardini and Steinson did not go far enough in trying to explain Wilson and the reasons for his support. In order to understand the women’s suffrage movement and Wilson’s stance leading up to the pivotal years of 1917 and 1918, it is important to understand what had been happening in the movement and Wilson’s position in the years preceding the war.

Prior to 1915 the women’s movement was experiencing a lull. Since the death of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the central organization of the women’s movement, the National American Women’s Suffrage Association (NAWSA), had been under weak leadership. In 1915 a new leader came to the fore. Carrie Chapman Catt breathed new life into NAWSA with her effective, organized, and politically savvy leadership. Also at this time a new element of activism was introduced into the American women’s movement. New, young, up-and-coming activists who had been educated in Britain were joining the ranks in America and bringing more militant tactics with them. British women had recently won their suffrage by using aggressive strategies such as marches and pickets. The combination of new leadership and new tactics brought a new atmosphere of urgency and tension to the movement which spurred it on to direct its focus from the state level to the federal.

Also in 1916 President Wilson had just won reelection to his second term in the White House. He held firm to a position of American neutrality in the recently erupted war in Europe and continued to believe that women’s suffrage was a states’ rights issue. By 1917 both positions were changing. On April 6, 1917 Wilson, with the backing of Congress, declared America’s entrance into World War I. His ideal of neutrality had crumbled and the United States was plunged into the turbulence of a society at war.

For almost three months prior to the declaration of war, the White House had been under constant siege by the protesting suffrage activists. This is one of the militant tactics the leaders of the American movement learned in Britain. Since January, some members of the suffrage movement had been employing this new tactic of aggressive picketing. They stood outside the White House in all weather, regardless of how onlookers and the press treated them. The combination of the war, the demonstrating, and the death of Wilson’s neutrality ideal created an atmosphere of tension in Wilson’s life. So both President Wilson and the women’s movement
were experiencing periods of stress, the perfect environment for change. It is in this environment that the women's movement and its political supporters worked to convert Wilson to a believer in a federal suffrage amendment.6

A month and a day after Congress declared war, Carrie Chapman Catt wrote a letter to Wilson in which she suggested Wilson support a federal suffrage amendment as an emergency war measure. Catt very carefully noted that Wilson's primary concern was the war and that he likely would not approach Congress with anything not directly pertaining to the war at this time. So she drew a direct correlation between the women's movement and the war effort. She argued that if the federal government gave women the vote, women in turn would enthusiastically support the war. She elevated women’s role in the war to that of men by stating that “we [women] are placed on the firing line.” With this statement, Catt was equating women’s sacrifices of sending their men to the war with the men's sacrifice of their lives. In light of this comparison it was not fair to make women sacrifice to the war effort, just like men, if they did not have the vote. This strong argument must have been enough to at least make Wilson pause, as evidenced in his response of the next day. He agreed with Catt that now was not the time to take suffrage before Congress.8 Still he did not disagree with Catt in principle. Nowhere in his response did he disagree with her call for a federal amendment. He did not specifically endorse one either, but he did not openly disagree.

Helen Hamilton Gardener, Catt's subordinate at NAWSA, also wrote to encourage the President to act on a federal suffrage amendment. She argued that suffrage was a simple matter of democracy. She called it “a small measure of justice to the women of America.” She compared the situation of women in America to that of women in other leading democracies that were “preparing to give their women full suffrage.”9 This comparison, she said, would make the U.S., and more specifically Wilson’s Democratic Party, appear shameful in international circles. Unlike Catt’s letter, Gardener’s introduced a practical as well as a philosophical concern. The expression of democracy is one thing, but America was in the midst of a world war, a war that, in Wilson’s own words, was being fought to make the world safe for democracy. It would appear shameful, not to mention hypocritical, for the United States to fight for the world’s democracy and ignore the concept at home.

These concerns expressed by Catt and Gardener, as well as other manifestations of the suffrage agenda, were wearing on a President at war. In a letter to one of his daughters on June 22, 1917, Wilson vented a little of the tension. He commented that the pickets, who had been aggressively targeting the White House for five and a half months, were “obnoxious.”10 He had always been civil and genteel with the pickets in person. In fact, in the early days of the pickets he was one of the few who were not openly angry with them. This comment to his daughter gives a small revelation into his private thoughts. The pickets were getting to him. Whether or not he agreed with their tactics or agenda, they were wearing down his resolve. Lunardini gives much credit to the pickets for this accomplishment. She considers it one of the major influences in convincing Wilson, because it was a new, aggressive and relentless tactic. It proved to Wilson that the women were serious, and if they were willing to go to this extreme, there was no telling what they may turn to next. It was an influential factor on Wilson, but it would play a minor role compared to the suggestions that would begin to bombard Wilson as soon as next month.

In July 1917, the first of many subtle deals concerning women’s suffrage landed on Wilson's desk. In another letter from Helen Hamilton Gardener, she seemed to suggest a subtle trade off. She began by reminding Wilson of Catt’s emergency war measure plan. She then went on to argue that Wilson should endorse the suffrage amendment as an emergency war measure
because when the suffrage battle was won, it would free all the suffrage activists to devote their time and energy to the war effort. As Wilson already knew simply by looking out his window, the suffrage activists were quite a force and their efforts could be a tremendous help in support of the war. She equated enfranchisement for women with enabling them “to throw, more fully and whole-heartedly, their entire energy into work for their country...instead of for their own liberty and independence.” Gardener’s suggestion is subtle, but is there. If women get the vote, not only will the pickets end, but women will also be able to use the organizations they already had in place to support the war. For the first time there was a request on the table that would benefit both sides. Wilson now had a clear incentive for supporting a federal suffrage amendment. Not only that, but here was a clear justification for a federal suffrage amendment as an emergency war measure. Here was another practical concern for Wilson to consider, even though he did not take immediate action on it. It would germinate in his mind and come to fruition in 1918.

On January 8, 1918, Wilson delivered his fourteen points to Congress. The next day a Congressional committee released a statement revealing that the President would not force his hand in Congress on the suffrage amendment issue. What he would do was advise anyone who sought his counsel to vote for the amendment on the grounds of democracy and justice. Wilson had come to the realization that a federal amendment was the right thing to do for women, but was not ready to force it through Congress.

But Wilson’s fourteen points were not going over well. Congress was reluctant to change its isolationist stance. Wilson needed support and as soon as January 15 he seemed to know where and how he could drum some up. On that day he received a letter from leading suffragist and peace activist Jane Addams. She thanked him for his fourteen points and pledged the support of her organization, the Woman’s Peace Party, to them. Her support was not conditional. She did not ask for anything in return. She did not even imply that the President would be indebted to her, her organization, or women in general. But Wilson read between the lines. In his reply, Wilson told Addams her support gave him a “peculiar gratification” and seemed to imply that she had a hidden agenda. His note conveyed a tone of obligation, a return of favors, his support of her agenda for her support of his. Gardener’s earlier suggestion of a trade off was beginning to reveal itself in Wilson’s thinking. He was beginning to see the mutual benefits of a federal suffrage amendment and how endorsing one as an emergency war measure could work to his advantage. A suffrage amendment would get the pickets off the White House lawn and free a powerful political lobby that would be indebted to Wilson. Also, it would be easy for Wilson to justify his support of a federal amendment on the grounds that it was necessary for the war effort.

At this point Wilson’s tactics in pursuing a federal suffrage amendment underwent a change. In five months he would begin taking an active role by writing Senators directly to influence their votes on the matter. This possibly occurred as the fulfillment of the effects on Wilson of the resignation letter of Dudley Field Malone. Malone, up until September 7, 1917, had been a great supporter of Wilson. In his letter of resignation, dated September 7, Malone fondly recalled the days he had spent campaigning for Wilson. Specifically he mentioned how he worked in the West on Wilson’s reelection campaign in 1916. By this time, several western states, namely California, had adopted suffrage for women. In these states Malone campaigned to the women on the issue of a federal suffrage amendment. He promised women that if they voted for Wilson, he would see to it, at whatever personal cost, that the current Democratic administration would win all the women of the U.S. a suffrage guarantee in the form of a federal amendment. Wilson had won reelection on a platform that included a federal suffrage
amendment. Whether he liked it or not, Wilson had this campaign promise hanging over his head. Not only this, but Malone went on to hammer Wilson on foreign affairs. He compared the United States to two other nations that had recently made provision for women’s suffrage. English women had just won the right to vote after the war started. Also the new Russia, fresh from a spring revolution, had promised to make women’s suffrage a top priority as they formed their new government. In light of these developments, Malone asked Wilson “should we not be jealous to maintain our democratic leadership in the world by the speedy national enfranchisement of American women?”\(^5\) Malone went on to reiterate that it was not fair to make women sacrifice for the war effort without giving them a voice of their own in government. This fact alone, said Malone, would justify making a federal suffrage amendment an emergency war measure. He concluded by saying that he must resign because he promised women the vote and this administration was not complying.

These were the weightiest arguments yet to come before Wilson. They included a specific justification for classifying suffrage as an emergency war measure. As with most concerns presented to Wilson, it took some time for them to manifest themselves in Wilson’s life. Nevertheless, Malone’s letter was by far the most explicit and comprehensive plea for universal women’s suffrage that had come before Wilson. He could not ignore it and many of the ideas it contained would come to the fore in Wilson’s upcoming communications with other politicians in attempts to garner support for the amendment.

Merely five months after his correspondence with Adams, Wilson began to play an active role in pushing the suffrage amendment through Congress. He wrote to Senators individually to try to ensure a positive vote. Wilson targeted Senators whose votes would influence those of other Senators, and even addressed Congress directly on the matter, relating the importance to the war of a timely passage of the suffrage amendment. In Wilson’s own words, in his letters and Congressional address, his real thoughts on suffrage are revealed. His thoughts and the letters that reflect them are the best insight to Wilson’s hasty push for the amendment in the last months of the war.

In late June 1918, Wilson wrote to Senator John Knight Shields encouraging him to vote for the amendment. Wilson opened by saying that if these were “ordinary circumstances” surrounding the vote, he would not feel as though he could “take a liberty” by trying to influence the Senator’s vote. Nonetheless, it was a time of war, which would account for the circumstances being other than ordinary, and Wilson was writing to influence a senatorial vote. Obviously by this time Wilson felt strongly enough on the issue to justify such a letter. He argued that women’s suffrage was a matter of democracy. Wilson called it an illustration of “our sincere adherence to democratic principles.” He also considered the war effort spirits an important justification of a well-timed, swift vote and invoked “the morale of this country and of the world” as grounds for supporting the amendment. Wilson made a point of relating the significance of the ratification of the Suffrage amendment to foreign relations. He hinted that since “the fortunes of nations are so linked together" and allies must stick together in war time, it would be unseemly in the eyes of the world if the United States voted down a measure to give their women the vote.\(^6\) This is a weighty letter, especially coming from Wilson. In past letters he tended to focus on only one main issue; this letter has three. Apparently he had come to feel more strongly about the need for a federal suffrage amendment. These arguments had worked on him and now he was using them on Shields. Wilson concluded that the importance of the issue and the volatility of the times justified his interference in the Senate.

Yet suffrage supporters were still asking for more from Wilson. Three days after his
letter to Senator Shields, Wilson received still another letter from Helen Hamilton Gardener asking him for an even more aggressive stance on the suffrage amendment. Gardener reminded the President of an imminent conference with several Senators. The Senators had requested the meeting so that President Wilson could advise them as to how to vote on the measure. She wanted him to take the opportunity to give the Senators “a ‘war measure’ blast.” She believed that this tactic was the “one best hope” of ensuring the amendment’s passage. She reminded the President how the measure was needed to extend full democracy to all citizens of the United States. She also made references to the state of world politics. She asserted that if the Senators could see the “world democratic significance” of the measure, they would surely vote for it.17

More specifically, she cited a particular Senator, John Sharp Williams, who had made it known that he could not support the suffrage measure as such, but would support anything Wilson called an emergency war measure. Obviously such a label would buy one vote and likely more. With no more hinting, suggesting, or dealing, Gardener unabashedly asked for presidential support for suffrage as an emergency war measure. She even asked the President to demand this support from group of Senators. She believed that this was the most effective method for winning the suffrage war, and so, apparently, did the President, but he was not willing to go public with it.

In his response to her letter, Wilson wrote that he had influenced the Senate enough.18 He feared that any more meddling from him would not be welcome and would do more harm than good for the suffrage cause. Wilson recognized that the political games he had engaged in, trying to influence the Senators were tenuous. He felt that too much pressure from him would be detrimental. Wilson was not quite ready to go public and declare his support for suffrage on a large scale, but he would continue to influence Senators privately.

The very next day, Wilson sent a letter to Senator Ollie Murray James encouraging him to support the suffrage amendment. He based his argument primarily on how the United States would be viewed by other nations if the amendment failed. He said, “it would be a matter of very serious embarrassment...to the country,” should the amendment not pass.19 He went on to say that it would be very difficult for the United States to successfully settle the war in Europe if it could not grant suffrage equally to all its citizens. Wilson was beginning to refine his thinking on suffrage and how the amendment was connected to the war. He was becoming able to articulate this connection persuasively to the Senate. He was not to ready to make a public announcement of support for the suffrage amendment as a war measure, but he was solidifying his position on the issue and continuing to use it to influence senatorial votes.

Wilson’s back-room tactics did not begin to change until he got feedback from the Senators he had been attempting to influence. Senator John Knight Shields responded to Wilson’s plea of support by saying that he could not back a suffrage amendment at this time. Yet he did say that he “would unhesitatingly vote for it” if he believed it “would contribute to the successful prosecution of the war.”20 With this statement he implied he would support it as an emergency war measure. Here was a clear incentive for Wilson to announce his endorsement of the amendment as an emergency war measure. Yet he did not quite take the initiative. Instead he continued to use subtle persuasion. In his reply to Senator Shields, Wilson made reference to “a single sentence in your letter” and used it to assure Shields that daily he was growing more committed to the belief that the suffrage amendment would have a direct effect upon the war. He stated that for women, the suffrage amendment was “an essential psychological element” in the war.21 Wilson accepted the argument made by the suffragists that the vote for women would be rewarded by increased female support for the war. He knew that it could serve as a morale-booster for the war. Now he was turning around and using this argument on the Senator. The
earlier influences of the women activists were being manifested in Wilson’s writings. Still, though, they had not pushed him to the point of an open declaration of support for a war measure.

On August 16, 1918, Helen Hamilton Gardener wrote to Wilson, asking him for that open declaration of support. She wanted him to address the Senate about the measure, which would “place [him] and the question before the world in the clear light where none can misunderstand.”22 Such a declaration would be a point of no return for Wilson. He did not respond to the letter, but he did address the Senate, as requested, a month later. This letter from Gardener inspired that speech, but it was not the only inspiration.

A month later, Carrie Chapman Catt took stock of how the vote stood in the Senate, and realized that if Senator Benet, whose name came early in roll call, voted for the measure that would sway other Senators to vote likewise. On September 18, 1918 she sent this information to the President, encouraging him to act.23 Wilson, by this point, was so convinced of the immediate need for a federal suffrage amendment, that he responded to Catt that very morning. His two-line letter assured he was “alive to the situation” and was attempting to contact Senator Benet.24 He wrote to Benet that he was aware how influential the Senator’s vote would be, and encouraged him to vote for the amendment. Wilson called it “of capital importance...to the country, and to the maintenance of the war spirit and...indispensable to the winning of the war.”25 This position summarized all the elements of influence on Wilson. It covered the philosophical and the practical aspects, and connected them to the war effort and America’s standing in the international community. Yet this was just another private letter, and not an open declaration of these ideas.

On the last day of September 1918, Wilson made his public declaration of support for a federal suffrage amendment as an emergency war measure that the women’s movement had waited two years for. He opened by reminding the Senate that the country was now judged “in the view of all nations and peoples.” He used this as justifiable grounds for the timeliness of the suffrage amendment. He told the Senate that the adoption of the measure was “clearly necessary to the successful prosecution of the war and the successful realization of the objects for which the war is being fought.” In one sentence he connected the importance of women’s support to the inherent injustice of their lack of suffrage. He asked them if it was fair “to ask and take the utmost that our women can give,—service and sacrifice of every kind,—and still say we do not see what title that gives them to stand by our sides in the guidance of the affairs of their nation and ours?” He concluded with “I tell you plainly that this measure which I urge upon you is vital to the winning of the war and to the energies alike of preparation and of battle.”26 This speech was the culmination of two years of Wilson’s thinking on suffrage. He went from not taking any national stance on the issue to spelling it out to the Senate and urging them to pass a federal suffrage amendment immediately as an emergency war measure.

Wilson himself acknowledged his conversion on the issue in a speech he delivered before Carrie Chapman Catt and other assembled suffragists on October 3, 1918. He did not explain how his change came about, but he admitted that he had come a long way. He spent most of the speech turning all the credit over to the aggressive women who had spent two years working on him. He concluded by referring to the voice of the people by saying: “that voice speaks with very authentic tones.” Wilson accredited “that voice” with convincing him to act on women’s suffrage.27 This speech did not reveal much of the process, but it is a concrete statement of the fact of Wilson’s ideological conversion.

Reading Lunardini and Steinson clearly shows Wilson’s important influence on the
suffrage movement. It even conveys the fact that Wilson had not always supported a federal suffrage amendment, but neither Lunardini nor Steinson goes far enough in explaining the why and the how of his conversion. Through his correspondence with leaders in the women’s movement and other politicians, Wilson abandoned his previous position of suffrage as a state’s rights issue. He came to believe in a federal amendment for a variety of philosophical as well as practical concerns. This conversion and its process were important occurrences in the course of American women’s history. Without Wilson’s support it is impossible to tell how much longer the suffrage battle would have worn on, and his support would never have come about if it were not for all these influences on his evolving ideology.

4 For more information concerning the history of the women’s movement in the U.S., see Lunardini, Christine A. From Equal Suffrage to Equal Rights. New York: New York UP, 32-49.
5 For a more comprehensive discussion of Wilson’s early stance on women’s suffrage, see ibid., 50-70.
6 Ibid., 142-143.
9 Gardener, Helen Hamilton to Woodrow Wilson, June 10, 1917. ibid., 474-5, vol. 42.
13 Addams, Jane to Woodrow Wilson, January 14, 1918, Papers, v. 45, 586.
14 Wilson, Woodrow, to Jane Addams, January 15, 1918, ibid., v. 48, 593.
16 Wilson, Woodrow, to John Knight Shields, June 26, 1918, Papers, v. 48, 440.
17 Gardener, Helen Hamilton to Woodrow Wilson, June 23, 1918, ibid., 400-1.
18 Wilson, Woodrow, to Helen Hamilton Gardener, June 24, 1918, ibid., 404.
19 Wilson, Woodrow, to Ollie Murray Jones, June 24, 1918, ibid.
20 Shields, John Knight to Woodrow Wilson, June 25, 1918, ibid., v. 48, 427.
21 Wilson, Woodrow, to John Knight Shields, June 26, 1918, ibid., 440.
22 Gardener, Helen Hamilton to Woodrow Wilson, August 16, 1918. ibid., v. 49, 268.
23 Catt, Carrie Chapman to Woodrow Wilson, September 18, 1918. ibid., v. 51, 58.
24 Wilson, Woodrow to Carrie Chapman Catt, September 18, 1918, ibid., 58.
25 Wilson, Woodrow to Senator Benet, September 18, 1918, ibid., 59.
26 Wilson, Woodrow, Address to the Senate, September 30, 1918, ibid., 158.
27 Wilson, Woodrow, Remarks to a group of suffragists, October 3, 1918, ibid., 190.