



Winning Suffrage, Losing Equal Rights: 1912–1920

By Jonathan Menon

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EIGHT YEARS AFTER ‘Abdu’l-Bahá left America, all seemed lost one morning in Nashville, Tennessee. It was Wednesday, August 18, 1920. Outside the state legislature, forty-nine state representatives wore red roses, and only forty-seven wore yellow ones. This meant that forty-nine of the men walking into the chamber that day would vote against the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which proposed to grant equal suffrage to women, and only forty-seven were on the side of ratification.

The yellow roses had descended on Nashville in the weeks before the vote. A diverse army of suffragists—wealthy and working class, urban and rural, black and white—wrote letters, made speeches, and lobbied legislators. Anti-suffragists, bearing red roses, did the same. If Tennessee voted yes, it would become the thirty-sixth of the forty-eight states to ratify the constitutional Amendment, putting it over the top. If Tennessee voted no, the suffrage campaign had few other states to hope for.

But Representative Banks Turner switched his vote during the first roll call, and the issue was deadlocked. Nervous tension filled the hall when the second roll call produced no change. Then, on the third vote, Harry Burn, the youngest member of the legislature, who wore a big red anti-suffragist rose on his lapel, astonished the chamber by casting his vote in favor of the bill. Chaos reigned; opponents chased Burn around the room. He climbed out of a third-floor window, inched along a ledge, and hid in the Capitol’s attic. After decades of battle, just one word from one man (“Yay!”) had delivered universal suffrage to the women of America. Although his lapel bore a red rose, Harry later explained, no one could see what he carried in his breast pocket: a telegram from his widowed mother in East Tennessee urging him to do the right thing.¹

But no sooner had the drama passed than powerful voices began walking back the plan. That same month, August, 1920, *The Ladies Home Journal* was already asking women to cool it in their battle for equal rights. The magazine’s “Credo for the New Woman” endorsed suffrage, but stressed the limits to equality that women should

¹ Cheryl Hiers, “The Nineteenth Amendment and the War of the Roses,” Blueshoe Nashville Travel Guide, <http://www.blueshoenashville.com/suffragehistory.html>.

accept. “I believe in woman’s assertion of self;” it read, “but I believe also in her obligation of service to her family. . . .”² Journalist Marian Castle, in the July, 1930, issue of *Women’s Journal*, recast women’s newfound freedom as oppression itself, explaining how she sang “paean of joy over the fact that I may depend upon my husband for money instead of earning it myself.” Dorothy Thompson wrote that if she had a daughter who wanted to be a novelist, she would tell her that “that little talent of yours” would be unlikely to produce anything worthwhile and that her time would be better spent raising a fine man than writing “a second-rate novel.”

In hindsight, this resurgence of conservative thinking, a hallmark of the late Progressive Era, is not surprising. Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and the other early suffragists had been true radicals in demanding changes to America’s gender order. But other than holding noisy parades, they made little progress until conservatives took up the suffrage torch in the broader interests of temperance and urban reform. Instead of challenging the gender order, the conservatives, also sometimes called “maternal feminists,” defined womanhood as a set of essentially domestic values, and sought suffrage to bring their motherly morality, piety, and purity to bear on social issues. When many women put aside the fight for equal rights in order to support the war effort, it became clear that women were “responsible,” and could be counted on not to rock the boat if they were given the vote.³ “Once legislators became convinced that woman suffrage meant a strengthening rather than a questioning of social norms,” feminist scholar Carol Lee Bacchi writes, “women had not long to wait for a ballot.”⁴ “The feminist cry for women’s equal educational and occupational rights became muted and died.”⁵

From the moment ‘Abdu’l-Bahá arrived in America, he argued that transforming America’s gender regime would be more than a legal battle. Although he supported suffrage, the underlying problem was not legal, but *ideological*. “The chief cause of the mental and physical inequalities of the sexes,” he argued, “is due to custom and training, which for ages past have molded women into the ideal of the weaker vessel.”⁶ “It has been objected by some that woman is not equally capable with man and that she is deficient by creation,” he told a gathering of suffragists. “This is pure imagination.”⁷

² Quoted in Stephanie Coontz, *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 42.

³ Carol Lee Bacchi, *Liberation Deferred? The Ideas of the English-Canadian Suffragists, 1877–1918* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), 143.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 133–134.

⁶ Wendell Phillips Dodge, “Abdul-Baha’s Arrival in America,” *Star of the West* 3, no. 3 (April 28, 1912): 4.

⁷ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 2nd ed. (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1982), 135. See also “Address by Abdul-Baha at the Woman’s Suffrage Meeting Held at Metropolitan Temple, Seventh Avenue and Fourteenth Street, New York, May 20th, 1912,” *Star of the West* 3, no. 8 (August 1, 1912): 19.

Even as his steamship was still crawling up New York Harbor to its pier on April 11, 1912, he was already laying out a far broader agenda for women's equality than what the progressive suffragists envisioned. Women, he argued, must have the same educational and occupational opportunities as men, and they must march forward into the front ranks of the sciences and the arts. "If women were given the same advantages as men, their capacity being the same, the result would be the same." It was more important to educate girls than boys, he said, and if a family could not afford to educate both its sons and its daughters, they should give the priority to the girls. "[W]hen womankind partake fully and equally in the affairs of the world—in the great arena of laws and politics—war will cease; for woman will prove the obstacle and hindrance to it."⁸

'Abdu'l-Bahá visualized not merely a society of equal legal and political rights, but an entirely different kind of civilization built on feminine ideals. "The world in the past has been ruled by force," he stated, "and man has dominated over woman by reason of his more forceful and aggressive qualities of both body and mind. But the scales are already shifting—force is losing its weight and mental alertness, intuition, and the spiritual qualities of love and service, in which woman is strong, are gaining ascendancy. Hence the new age will be an age less masculine, and more permeated with the feminine ideals—or, to speak more exactly, will be an age in which the masculine and feminine elements of civilization will be more properly balanced."

In advocating a more feminine civilization, 'Abdu'l-Bahá could almost have been speaking to the men standing guard over the glass ceiling in 2012: "As long as women are prevented from attaining their highest possibility, so long will men be unable to achieve the greatness which might be theirs."

⁸ "Address by Abdul-Baha," 19.

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FOOTNOTE/ENDNOTE:

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