



BIOGRAPHY

Jeannette Rankin

“I want to stand by my country, but I cannot vote for war.” So said Representative Jeannette Rankin as she cast her vote against U.S. entry into World War I, one of 56 members of Congress to vote “no.” Just four days earlier she had been introduced in Congress as its first elected woman member. Certain popular accounts of the day reported that she had nearly fainted and had wept openly after the vote. Rankin had not cried—but some of the men had.

As you read, think about the issues that were important to Jeannette Rankin.

Jeannette Rankin’s vote in Congress on April 6, 1917, reflected two of the causes to which she dedicated her life—women’s rights and pacifism. Her election was the culmination of her struggle to gain the right to vote for the women of her native Montana. That struggle succeeded when the Montana legislature granted women suffrage in 1914, six years before it was granted nationally. In 1916, Rankin ran for Congress “to repay the women of Montana who had worked for suffrage.” Her first congressional vote signaled her lifelong pacifism: “As a woman I can’t go to war, and I refuse to send anyone else.”

Rankin had always had an independent streak. Born on a ranch near Missoula, Montana, in 1880, she was the oldest of seven children. Frontier life made her highly self-reliant. After her father’s death in 1904, her mother became withdrawn, and Jeannette assumed responsibility for raising her younger sisters and brother. When the children were grown, she became a social worker, a suffrage activist, and, finally, a member of Congress.

Her career in Congress was brief, however. Her pacifism grew unpopular with Montana voters, and

she was unable to run for a second term because her congressional seat was eliminated due to redistricting. She then ran for the Senate, but was badly defeated. Rankin became a lobbyist, pushing bills favoring mother and infant care and better working conditions for women. She also lobbied for the Women’s Peace Union, which favored a constitutional amendment outlawing war.

By 1940, war was again threatening to involve the United States, and Rankin ran for Congress as a pacifist. Many Montanans agreed that the United States should stay out of the war, and she was elected. In 1941, after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, she cast the one and only vote against U.S. entry into World War II, losing any chance for reelection.

Jeannette Rankin never abandoned her work on behalf of women’s rights and peace. “We could have peace in one year if women were organized,” she once said. At age 87, she led 5,000 women, the Jeannette Rankin Brigade, in a march on Capitol Hill to protest the Vietnam War. She died five years later after musing that if she had her life to relive, she would do it all again. “But this time I’d be nastier,” she added with a wink.

Questions to Think About

1. What factors made possible Jeannette Rankin’s election as the first woman member of Congress?
2. What were the major causes to which she dedicated her life?
3. **Formulating Questions** If you had had a chance to interview Jeannette Rankin, what questions might you have asked her to understand her beliefs?