

Congresswoman Rankin Votes 'No'

The following comes from a newspaper cutting in one of my WWII scrapbooks. It was published in the *Daily Mail* on the 8th December, 1941. The day after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour.

'Congress Hisses Woman Member

President Roosevelt in ringing tones, today demanded an immediate declaration of war against Japan in a speech to the Senators and Representatives gathered in the Hall of the House of Representatives.

The Senators then filed out and voted for the declaration by 82 votes to nothing in 20 minutes. There was no fuss, no needless emotional speechifying. The Senators did the job quickly and calmly. Even Senator Nye, the man who only yesterday said England had planned the whole thing and was the cause of America being attacked in the Pacific voted for war.

Deafening 'Aye'

So did Senators Wheeler, Vandenberg, and Taft – men who have said that Mr. Roosevelt had been wrong all long the line, and who once bitterly accused England of trying to get America to fight Britain's war.

In the House of Representatives, it was different, The House is a bigger body, composed of a wider cross-section of the American people, and has among its members men who care nothing for ceremony and who believe in doing things in a plain, blunt way.

From the great crash of applause that greeted President Roosevelt it looked at first as if the vote would be 100 percent for war.

"All those in favour of a joint resolution declaring a state of war will say 'Aye,'" boomed Mr. Sam Rayburn, the Speaker. Then he began reading out names: "Allen, of Illinois." There came back a deafening "Aye."

The Only 'No'

And then "Allen, of Louisiana." "Anderson, of Minnesota," and so on down through the list of members in alphabetical order. To every name came a loud "Aye."



Then came the name "Congresswoman Rankin, of Montana." There was dead silence.

Congresswoman Rankin (*left*), who in 1917, when she was the only woman member of Congress, voted against the declaration of war against Germany, shouted "No!"

"I voted 'No' to the last war. I vote 'No' to this one," she shouted, her voice screeching with emotion.

"Sit down sister," shouted one Congressman. People in the gallery joined in telling her to be quiet. She was loudly hissed as she left after voting.'

On December 8th, Rankin was the only member of either chamber of Congress to vote against the declaration of war on Japan. Hisses could be heard in the gallery as she cast her vote; several colleagues, including Rep. (later Senator) Everett Dirksen, asked her to change it to make the resolution unanimous—or at very least, to abstain—but she refused. "As a woman I can't go to war," she said, "and I refuse to send anyone else."



After the vote, a crowd of reporters pursued Rankin into a cloakroom. There, she was forced to take refuge in a phone booth until Capitol Police arrived to escort her to her office, where she was inundated with angry telegrams and phone calls. One cable from her brother read, "Montana is 100 percent against you." A wire-service photo (*left*), of Rankin sequestered in the phone booth, calling for assistance, appeared the following day in newspapers across the country.

While her action was widely ridiculed in the press, Progressive leader William Allen White, writing in the *Kansas Emporia Gazette*, acknowledged her courage in taking it:

Probably a hundred men in Congress would have liked to do what she did. Not one of them had the courage to do it. The *Gazette* entirely disagrees with the wisdom of her position. But Lord, it was a brave thing! And its bravery somehow discounted its folly. When, in a hundred years from now, courage, sheer courage based upon moral indignation is celebrated in this country, the name of Jeannette Rankin, who stood firm in folly for her faith, will be written in monumental bronze— not for what she did but for the way she did it.

Three days later, a similar war declaration against Germany and Italy came to a vote; Rankin abstained. Realizing she had all but ended her political career with her vote against the war resolution, she did not run for re-election in 1942. Asked years later if she ever regretted her action, Rankin replied, "Never. If you're against war, you're against war regardless of what happens. It's a wrong method of trying to settle a dispute." John F. Kennedy would write about Rankin's decisions, "Few members of Congress have ever stood more alone while being true to a higher honour and loyalty."

Rankin died on May 18th, 1973, at age 92, in Carmel, California. There is a memorial stone dedicated to her in the Missoula Cemetery. She bequeathed her estate, including her property in Watkinsville, Georgia, to help "mature, unemployed women workers". Her Montana residence, known as the Rankin Ranch, was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1976. The Jeannette Rankin Foundation (now the Jeannette Rankin Women's Scholarship Fund), a nonprofit organization, awards annual educational scholarships to low-income women 35 and older across the United States. Beginning with a single \$500 scholarship in 1978, the fund has since awarded more than \$1.8 million in scholarships to more than 700 women.

A statue of Rankin by Terry Mimnaugh (*right*), inscribed "I Cannot Vote For War", was placed in the United States Capitol's Statuary Hall in 1985. At its dedication, historian Joan Hoff-Wilson called Rankin "one of the most controversial and



unique women in Montana and American political history." A replica stands in Montana's capitol building in Helena. In 1993, Rankin was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame.

Sources

- Daily Mail
- Wikipedia