

PART SIX



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The Struggle for Justice at Home and Abroad (1914–1920)

11 Suffragists Storm over Washington

WILLIAM LAVENDER AND MARY LAVENDER

The women's rights movement actually began back in the Jacksonian period, when American women first organized to break the shackles of strict domesticity and to expand their rights and opportunities. Led by two brilliant crusaders, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, the early feminists rejected the notion of female inferiority and advocated full sexual equality with men. They demanded equal access to education, the trades, the professions and an end to the sexual double standard. They wanted the right to vote, too, not as an end in itself, but as a means of achieving their broader aim—to make women self-sufficient, equal partners with men in all areas of human enterprise.

A few feminists like Victoria Woodhull went even further than that to champion free love and licensed prostitution. That, of course, enraged the enemies of the movement, who charged that feminists were members of the lunatic fringe, out to destroy the nuclear family and wreck the moral fiber of America. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, most feminists rejected radical ideas like Woodhull's and became conspicuously conservative, placing renewed emphasis on feminine virtue, motherhood, and community service.

By 1900, a new generation of feminists had narrowed the vision of their predecessors mainly to one goal: the winning of the elective franchise. In the following selection, William and Mary Lavender recount the struggles of the unrelenting suffragists, who faced an uphill battle to gain the right to vote for women. When Woodrow Wilson, a Progressive Democrat, was elected president in 1912, the

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future seemed bleak indeed for the suffragists. Most Progressive reformers were male, white, and upper middle class and had little sympathy for equal rights for women or African Americans. The suffragists realized that they had to pressure Wilson and the other Progressives if the women's movement was ever to achieve more than token gestures. After the start of the Great War in 1914, the suffragists also faced a disapproving public, which viewed any form of protest as unpatriotic. Even so, suffragists also Paul and Lucy Burns continued the sisterhood of leadership that Stanton, Woodhull, and Anthony had begun in the previous century. When Paul and Burns were unjustly imprisoned for picketing the White House, they had to endure scathing ridicule and horrible prison conditions. Still, they and their followers persevered. And they won in the end. They did so by identifying their movement with progressivism and winning President Wilson and the entire nation to their cause. It is an inspiring story, and the Lavenders tell it brilliantly in "Suffragists Storm over Washington."

GLOSSARY

ANTHONY, SUSAN B. An eloquent champion of women's rights, Anthony helped found and lead the nineteenth-century women's movement. She opposed the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution because it did not extend the elective franchise to women. Later, Anthony received a \$100 fine (which she refused to pay) for attempting to vote in the 1872 presidential election. Because of her contributions to the women's movement, the proposed constitutional amendment that would grant women the right to vote was called the Susan B. Anthony Amendment.

BURNS, LUCY Like Alice Paul, Burns lived in England and observed the successful strategy that the British suffragists employed. Burns was more outgoing than Paul and felt comfortable participating in the street demonstrations that helped advance the women's movement in America. The notoriety associated with her imprisonment pressured the Wilson administration to support the Nineteenth Amendment.

MALONE, DUDLEY FIELD A friend of President Wilson and counsel to the National Woman's Party, Malone resigned his position as collector of the Port of New York because of the government's harsh treatment and imprisonment of suffragists. Along with fellow attorney Matthew O'Brien, Malone defended those women who peacefully protested for the right to vote.

NATIONAL AMERICAN WOMAN SUFFRAGE ASSOCIATION (NAWSA) Formed in 1890, NAWSA consisted mainly of middle-class women, with Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton among its early presidents. NAWSA helped influence Progressive leaders to include women's suffrage on their agenda of reform. After the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified, NAWSA became the League of Women Voters.

NATIONAL WOMAN'S PARTY (NWP) This organization opposed the slow and generally unsuccessful strategy of pressuring individual states to support women's suffrage through legislative initiatives and referenda. NWP's membership was more youthful and radical than the membership of NAWSA. In later years, NWP championed the end to all forms of legal discrimination against women and supported the Equal Rights Amendment to the United States Constitution.

NIGHT OF TERROR In November of 1917, as many as forty guards brutalized suffragists at the Workhouse for Women in Occoquan, Virginia. They manhandled Lucy Burns and chained her hands to the cell bars. In protest of their treatment, the women started a hunger strike.

NINETEENTH AMENDMENT Ratified in 1920, this amendment guaranteed American women the right to vote, stating that "the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex."

PAUL, ALICE The Lavenders describe Paul as "one of the most daring and imaginative leaders the women's movement had ever seen." The daughter of Quakers, she was the grand strategist who inspired fierce loyalty among her followers. Paul's hunger strike while in the District of Columbia jail helped put pressure on the reluctant Wilson administration to support the Nineteenth Amendment.

WHITTAKER, WILLIAM Superintendent of the Workhouse for Women in Occoquan, Virginia, Whittaker was responsible for the cruel treatment of the suffragists under his care.

ZINKHAN, LOUIS The warden in charge of the jail in Washington, D.C., Zinkhan was responsible for the inhumane conditions that suffragist prisoners had to endure.

Six well-bred women stood before a judge in the Washington, D.C., Police Court on June 27, 1917. Not thieves, drunks or prostitutes like the usual defendants there, they included a university student, an author of nursing books, a prominent campaign organizer and two former schoolteachers. All were educated, accomplished and unacquainted with criminal activity. But today they stood accused in a court of law. Their alleged offense: "obstructing traffic."

What they had actually done was to stand quietly outside the White House carrying banners urging President Woodrow Wilson to support their decades-long struggle to add one sentence to the Constitution: "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex."

The Susan B. Anthony Amendment was introduced in Congress in 1878. There it lay, regarded with fear and loathing, for almost 40 years. Some saw no point in women voting; with no understanding of politics, they would only vote as their menfolk told them. Others argued that after getting the vote, women would take over the government. With such opposition, the Anthony Amendment seemed doomed to lie dormant forever. The six accused of obstructing traffic that summer day in 1917 denied all charges, insisting that the crowd outside the White House had gathered only because police had announced that arrests would be made. Moreover, picketing had gone on since January without obstructing anything, and with no interference. It was, after all, entirely legal. Why the sudden crackdown now?

But the judge declared the ladies outside the White House were the "proximate cause" of the curious crowd, and must take the consequences. Besides, he added, "there are certain . . . people . . . who believe you ladies ought not have the vote."

Unimpressed by the prisoners' spirited defense, the judge found them guilty as charged, and imposed a

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\$25 fine or three days' imprisonment on each. Refusing to pay, which they saw as admitting guilt, they were led off unrepentant to the Washington jail.

Those six made a bit of history that day. All were members of the National Woman's Party (NWP). They were the first of a long procession of women jailed on trumped-up charges solely for demonstrating for their right to vote. NWP members came from all across the country and all levels of society, with little in common except dedication to obtaining that right. This was the exclusive goal of the NWP, whose driving force was a determined young woman named Alice Paul.

At 32, Paul was widely admired as one of the most daring and imaginative leaders the women's movement had ever seen—and just as widely denounced as a dangerous radical. The daughter of Quakers in Moorestown, N.J., she was petite, frail and soft-spoken—hardly a radical image. She never married, nor displayed romantic interest in any man or woman. All her energy was concentrated on her one obsessive passion: women's political rights. Even her closest associates never claimed to know her well, yet her magnetism inspired in them idolizing loyalty. Campaign strategy was her forte, and she planned with such military precision that some likened her to a general.

Paul arrived in Washington in December 1912 to take over the local office of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), headquartered in New York. Committed to a state-by-state approach, NAWSA considered the nation's capital so unimportant that the Washington office's budget for 1912 was \$10. Paul was expected to raise her own operating funds.

With her came her chief assistant Lucy Burns. Tall, robust and flame-haired, at 38 the Brooklyn-born Burns was Paul's temperamental opposite, yet they complemented each other perfectly: Paul directing strategy from the background, while Burns was leading public demonstrations.

In March 1913, Woodrow Wilson began his first term as president. Paul considered his support essential to the cause—but women's suffrage, it turned out, was not on this president's agenda. Repeated appeals for his support of the Anthony Amendment were just



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This banner-carrying woman was photographed at the gates of the White House in 1917. Later that year, forty-one women from fifteen states were arrested outside the White House for demanding the right to vote. In 1919, after women had rallied in support of President Wilson's wartime policies, he finally threw his support behind the Nineteenth Amendment.

as repeatedly evaded, Wilson claiming that a president should not try to influence Congress, but should follow the dictates of his party (the Democratic Party, then dominated by arch-conservative Southerners). Women scoffed at this, since Wilson was known as an autocratic president, constantly exerting influence on Congress even in trivial matters. But the more they pressed him, the more he resisted, and the standoff lasted throughout his first term in office.

Meanwhile, Alice Paul's Washington-based group split from NAWSA in a fundamental dispute over

strategy. NAWSA's conservative leadership, committed to patient, state-by-state campaigning, disdained action on the federal level and deplored Paul's tactics as far too aggressive. Paul insisted that the snail-paced, state-by-state approach was futile; victory could come only by passage of the Anthony Amendment, and the weak-kneed Congress would never pass it without the president's support. After the rupture, the indignant parent organization distanced itself from its unruly offspring as much as possible.

Headquarters for the Washington group was the handsome Cameron House, overlooking Lafayette Square, conveniently near the White House. There, on January 9, 1917, a fateful decision was made. Hours earlier President Wilson, recently elected for a second term, had walked out on a visiting suffrage delegation after angrily repeating his refusal to endorse their cause. This most brusque dismissal yet was the last straw. After years of polite appeals, it was time for direct action.

The next morning, 12 women carrying banners on long poles left Cameron House and took up positions outside the White House gates. In their movement's traditional colors—purple, white and gold—their banners demanded: "MR. PRESIDENT, HOW LONG MUST WOMEN WAIT FOR LIBERTY?"

They returned every day, in good weather and bad, silently directing this pointed question at the grand house behind them. No one quite knew what to think. Political picketing was uncommon in those days, and by women unheard of. Some passersby gawked, some hurled angry taunts, others were merely amused. The press was sharply divided. The president said nothing. Seemingly unperturbed, he sometimes smiled and tipped his hat at the pickets as his limousine drove through the White House gates. For long grueling weeks the women's severest challenge was a winter so biting cold that hands ached and feet felt like blocks of ice.

In March 1917, Alice Paul's organization joined an allied western group to form the National Woman's Party, and Paul, overwhelmingly elected chairwoman, became nationally prominent. A month later, the United States entered World War I—and the NWP faced a major crisis.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, it was the nearly unanimous opinion of the leaders of the women's movement that they should suspend their work until peace was restored. Only Susan B. Anthony disagreed, fearing that what little progress they had made up until then would be lost. As Alice Paul knew, Anthony had been right, and she was determined that the mistake made in that earlier time must not be repeated.

"We shall fight for the things we have always carried next to our hearts," President Wilson said in his

war message to Congress. "For . . . the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own governments." So shall we, declared the women of the NWP, hearing in Wilson's words an exact description of what they were striving for. The demonstrations would continue.

Public hostility toward the picketers dramatically increased. Rather than merely foolish and undignified, they were now branded as unpatriotic—even traitors. Some dropped out under the pressure. But the NWP's courage in the face of vilification also inspired a steady flow of eager recruits. The demonstrators became a peculiar kind of tourist attraction in Washington, objects of admiration, curiosity—or outrage. They were so quiet and orderly that the newspapers called them the "silent sentinels." But they were attracting attention—entirely the point in the eyes of master strategist Alice Paul.

For five months the White House siege continued, while Congress, controlled by the Democrats, refused to act without word from the president. Still Wilson remained silent. Finally, in late June, the stalemate broke. Public anger erupted and the administration's patience snapped when NWP pickets raised a banner highly critical of Wilson as a Russian delegation visited the White House. A hostile crowd ripped down the banner, and next morning Lucy Burns and another woman became the first picketers to be hustled away in a police patrol wagon. They were scolded for their behavior and released pending trial; four more later received the same treatment. Within a few days, those six women were convicted on the traffic obstruction charges and spent three days in jail—the first suffragists imprisoned for their cause. It was only the beginning. Early in July, 11 women—including Lucy Burns—were sent to jail. Two weeks later 16 women were stunned to get 60-day sentences, and not in the D.C. jail, but the more dreaded Workhouse for Women at Occoquan, Va.

But the picketers had their legal champions, attorneys who were well aware that demonstrating was entirely within the rights of any citizen, and that the arrests were blatantly illegal. One of these, Dudley Field Malone, collector of the Port of New York, was

a friend of the president's. As counsel for the NWP, Malone argued with Wilson against the Occoquan sentences, threatening to resign his own position in protest. He believed, like many others, that Wilson was directing the crackdown from behind the scenes. Wilson professed to know nothing; but a few days later, all suffragists at Occoquan were suddenly pardoned. Partially mollified, Malone returned to New York—but he would be heard from again.

More troubles arose in mid-August, when picketers unfurled a banner referring to the president as "Kaiser Wilson." Congressmen often called the autocratic Wilson that, or worse, but doing so publicly, in the midst of rabid, wartime anti-German sentiment, ignited mob violence. For two days, the women could not set foot outside Cameron House without being physically assaulted. Attackers climbed to the second-floor balcony, grappling with defenders and ripping down banners. A shot was fired through one window, narrowly missing one of the women inside. After passively watching the melee for two days, police finally restored order. The next day, arrests of the picketers resumed. Six more women received 30 days in Occoquan—and this time there would be no pardons.

For six more tension-filled weeks, arrests and convictions on the transparently false obstructing traffic charge continued, with the luckless prisoners receiving 30 to 60 days in Occoquan. Yet women kept picketing, and in early September, Lucy Burns and 11 others drew 60-day sentences there. It was her second time behind bars.

Dudley Field Malone now carried out his threat to resign over the administration's use of such oppressive methods, making headlines and ending his already strained friendship with Wilson. Thereafter, Malone and Washington attorney Matthew O'Brien would comprise a formidable legal team for the embattled NWP.

Despite its quiet, rural setting, the workhouse at Occoquan was run like a concentration camp by its superintendent, William Whittaker. His name struck terror in all inmates, but the suffragist picketers aroused his special animosity—here were educated women, deliberately engaging in what he considered treasonable behavior.

Soon, in defiance of Whittaker's policy of pressing his prisoners' contact with the outside world, horror stories began to leak out of Occoquan in the form of scribbled messages, cleverly smuggled to friends on the outside. "The worst misery was food," one prisoner wrote, describing rancid corn bread green with mold, grits containing rat droppings and dead flies. "We tried to make of the worm hunt," reported another, but "when a prisoner reached fifteen worms during one meal spoiled our zest for the game." There was no contact with regular inmates who, though suffering from contagious diseases, received almost total isolation. Even their lawyers rarely in, and then only under tight restrictions.

Armed with affidavits from former inmates, employees, attorney Malone demanded an investigation to expose "the rotten, filthy, depraved conditions at Occoquan under its present superintendent." The investigative board only exonerated Whittaker, blaming all complaints on unruly prisoners. Whittaker was triumphant—for the time being.

Once, during a police court trial, a government attorney shook his finger at Alice Paul and said, "I get you yet." Although she had been directing her strategy from behind the scenes until then, he was sure that sooner or later the general would go out to lead her troops—and be captured. It happened in October 1917, when Paul was hauled off the picket line twice in two weeks and hit with the heaviest sentence to date—seven months in the D.C. jail.

There she and her companions encountered hardships rivaling Occoquan's—no privacy; stifling, overcrowded vermin-infested cells; a near-starvation diet that left them almost too weak to stand; close to total isolation. Privileges enjoyed by regular inmates were denied the suffragists. Washington's Warden Louis Zinkhan was apparently competing with Occoquan's Whittaker for the title of "Most Ferocious."

Already detested by their jailers as troublemakers and traitors, the suffragists infuriated them further by demanding political prisoner status. Their claim

temptuously dismissed, they soon devised a form of resistance not so easily ignored. The moment of decision came, as Alice Paul told it:

At the end of two weeks of solitary confinement . . . without any exercise, without going outside of our cells, some of the prisoners were released, having finished their terms. . . . With our number thus diminished to seven . . . the doors were unlocked and we were permitted to take exercise. Rose Winslow fainted as soon as she got into the yard. . . . I was too weak to move from my bed. Rose and I were taken on stretchers that night to the hospital. . . . Here we decided upon . . . the ultimate form of protest left us—the strongest weapon left with which to continue . . . our battle. . . .



In the fall of 1917, Alice Paul went on a hunger strike to protest her imprisonment. Jailors tied her to a chair and forced liquids through a tube that they inserted in her throat. In an excellent film, *Iron Jawed Angels*, Hilary Swank portrays the courageous suffragist.

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Their ultimate form of protest was the hunger strike. Having worked with English suffragists some years before, Paul knew from painful experience what terrors lay in that direction: "From the moment I undertook the hunger strike, a policy of unremitting intimidation began. 'You will be taken to a very pleasant place if you don't stop this,' was a favorite threat of prison officials, as they would hint vaguely of the psychiatric ward, and the government 'asylum.'" Particularly frightening was examination by the "alienist" (a specialist in mental disorders), a word was enough to commit anyone to the asylum.

Seriously weakened after three days of no food, Paul was taken to the psychiatric ward and subjected, along with some of her companions, to being fed three times daily. Between those feedings she endured solitary confinement in a tiny cell with boarded-up windows. This frail woman was the power behind the suffrage demonstrations. To crush them required breaking her spirit—and the authorities meant to break it.

But the government's heavy-handed tactics only made matters worse. As reports of the suffragists' experiences emerged, angry women from all over Washington from across the country to join the cause and continue the picketing. In mid-November more demonstrators, drawing sentences ranging from six days to six months, were shipped to Occoquan. Grimly awaiting them was Superintendent Whittaker. Once accused by a suffragist prisoner of practicing cruelty, he readily admitted, "Very well, I will practice cruelty." His November 1917 arrest of his latest group of picketers would be remembered in memory as the infamous "Night of the Long Walk."

On Whittaker's order, one woman was taken to the psychiatric ward. "I was immediately seized by two men, dragged across the room, scattering papers and furniture as I went . . . so fast that my feet were flung into the air . . . to the punishment cell. I was flung into a concrete cell with another woman. 'I saw Dorothy Day brought in by the police,' Nolan, at 73 the oldest of the picketers, said. "The two men handling her were looking at me above her head. Then suddenly

banged her down over the arm of an iron bench—twice . . . and we heard one of them yell, "The damned suffragers!"

The feisty Lucy Burns, returning for the third time, got special treatment. Disobeying Whittaker's order to keep silent, she was handcuffed to the bars of her cell. Finally released from this torturous position, she was left handcuffed all night. But all this, and a near-sleepless night shivering on thin straw mattresses, only made the "suffragers" more defiant. They launched their own hunger strike. Undertaking Alice Paul's "ultimate form of protest" took courage. One faster described nausea and headaches, fever and dizziness, dry, peeling skin and swollen lips, and eventually, aphasia. "I could remember no names," she wrote, "and it was quite impossible to read." Many hallucinated and often fainted.

To crush the strike, prison officials tried everything from dire threats to tempting the strikers with fried chicken, mashed potatoes and all the trimmings. Nothing worked. After seven days, the fasters were dangerously weak. There was no escaping it—forced feeding was next. And facing that took the last ounce of courage they had left. One prisoner reported, "I was seized and laid on my back, where five people held me, [one] leaping upon my knees. . . . Dr. Gannon then forced the tube through my lips and down my throat, I was gasping and suffocating from the agony of it. I didn't know where to breathe from, and everything turned black. . . ."

A Washington prisoner later recalled:

Three times a day for fourteen days Alice Paul and Rose Winslow have been going through the torture of forcible feeding. I know what that torture is. The horrible griping and gagging of swallowing six inches of stiff rubber tubing—[it] is not to be imagined. That over, there is the ordeal of waiting while the liquids are poured through—then the withdrawal of that tube! With streaming eyes and parched, burning throat, one wonders how the people of this nation already tasting blood and pain can let this be done. . . .

The prisoners endured their punishment with unwavering resolve, but they were near collapse. If they

meant to win or die, it seemed increasingly likely that dying would be their fate. But far away, the tide of their desperate war was turning, thanks to the tireless lawyers working overtime for the prisoners. During the Malone concentrated on the Washington jail, and their neighbors were producing results. Forcing their way into the prisons with court orders, both were outraged at what they found. In Washington, Alice Paul was guished in a hellhole on the psychiatric ward, despite a clean bill of mental health from the alienist. The irate Malone demanded, and got, her prompt removal to the main jail. At Occoquan, O'Brien obtained a writ of habeas corpus ordering Superintendent Whittaker to produce all his suffragist prisoners for a hearing before the U.S. Court of Appeals in Alexandria, Va. Whittaker tried frantically to evade the writ—even hiding out in his own home in vain. The hearing was held November 23 and 24 before a packed house, including newspaper reporters from far and wide.

Both attorneys argued eloquently for justice for Americans who, as O'Brien declared, "were railroaded to Occoquan, where unspeakable brutalities occurred, for the sole purpose of terrorizing them and compelling them to desist from doing what they have every legal right to do."

The sympathetic judge called the testimony given on the prisoners' behalf "blood-curdling." But more compelling than any evidence was the appearance of the prisoners themselves. Haggard, pale and disoriented, many with ugly bruises sustained during the Night of Terror, some barely able to walk or sit upright, their condition sent a wave of shocked disbelief throughout the courtroom. The sight of those mistreated women, vividly reported in newspapers, clinched their case. The judge ordered the prisoners' immediate transfer to the Washington jail pending further review—and the grim conflict took a startling turn.

For months the government had gone to extremes—even breaking the law—to suppress the picketing. But the movement only grew stronger as public opinion shifted toward the women. Clearly

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

the policy was not working. Perhaps in recognition of this, three days after the Alexandria hearing—and with no explanations—all suffragist prisoners were abruptly released.

On November 27, emerging from the jail to blink in the sunlight after five weeks of living death, Alice Paul could not stand without assistance. But her indomitable will was intact as she declared, "We were put out of jail as we were put in—at the whim of the government." She hoped that "no more demonstrations will be necessary, that the Federal Amendment is well on its way," but added, "What we do depends on what the Government does."

Things were peaceful along the White House sidewalks that Christmas season. The picketers were gone, the former prisoners having retreated to heal their wounds. It was only a truce: They would be back soon to continue the fight.

Several developments that took place in early 1918 were morale boosters. On January 10—40 years to the day since it was introduced into Congress—the Anthony Amendment was passed by the House of Representatives. In March the District Court of Appeals overturned as illegal all the arrests and jailings of the suffragists. And soon afterward—going almost unnoticed except by his former victims—William Whittaker's tenure as superintendent of the Occoquan workhouse was abruptly terminated.

Nevertheless, a long road lay ahead before the ultimate victory on August 26, 1920, when the Anthony Amendment finally took effect as the 19th Amendment to the Constitution. But for many who lived through it, the climatic battle took place in the fall of 1917, when Alice Paul and her courageous, half-starved band laid their lives on the line to defy a repressive government—and the government backed down.

- 1 What was the goal of the Susan B. Anthony Amendment to the Constitution? Why did it foment so much opposition that it took forty years to get the amendment added to the Constitution?
- 2 How did the personalities of Alice Paul and Lucy Burns differ? What strengths did each of these women bring to the suffrage movement? Why would the author conclude that those two women "complemented each other perfectly"?
- 3 Explain President Wilson's position on the women's suffrage issue at the start of his first administration. How did Alice Paul pressure him to recognize the importance of her cause?
- 4 After the start of the Great War of 1914-1918, what change took place in the public reaction to the suffragist demonstrations? Explain how growing patriotism and calls for unity during the Great War helped the federal government justify its harsh treatment of the White House picketers. Think of other wars where civil liberties have been sacrificed for the sake of national unity.
- 5 Describe the conditions that the suffragists endured in the Washington, D.C. jail and the Workhouse for Women at Occoquan, Virginia. How did Alice Paul and her fellow prisoners protest such harsh treatment?
- 6 Why did the Progressive reform movement need pressure before it supported women's suffrage? Do the personalities of Theodore Roosevelt (selection 9) and Woodrow Wilson (selection 12) offer clues as to why such pressure was necessary? Do those selections also help you better understand why the Progressives did not advocate equal rights for African Americans (see selection 10)?