The Hello Girls
Frontispiece: Merle Egan was twenty-nine, unmarried, and inspired to serve. After the war, she fought the U.S. Army another six decades. Merle Egan, 1917, National Personnel Records Center (NPRC), St. Louis, Missouri.

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for

James Christopher Shelley
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Over there, over there,
Send the word, send the word over there—
That the Yanks are coming,
The Yanks are coming,
The drums rum-tumming
Everywhere.
So prepare, say a prayer,
Send the word, send the word to beware.
We’ll be over, we’re coming over,
And we won’t come back till it’s over
Over there.

... Hoist the flag and let her fly,
Yankee Doodle do or die.
Pack your little kit,
Show your grit, do your bit.
Yankee to the ranks,
From the towns and the tanks.
Make your mother proud of you,
And the old Red, White and Blue.

—George M. Cohan, 1917
(unofficial anthem of the U.S. Expeditionary Forces in France)
Seven touring cars, roadsters, and model T Fords constituted almost a traffic jam in the partially paved capital of windswept Montana in 1919. A local hero was coming home. The wide western sky was still luminous that June evening, when midsummer’s light bathed the town well past nine o’clock and crickets took up their nightly chorus late.

Some in the party that wheeled jauntily up to the train station were veterans who had been discharged months earlier. Conspicuous with their colorful Victory Medals, the men drew up into an honor guard and saluted as the tall, dark-eyed woman stepped from the train in her blue army uniform after crossing five thousand miles of ocean, forest, and prairie. Thirty-year-old Merle Egan was a “big towner” and one of the best long-distance telephone operators in the United States even before she sailed to France. Now she was a local celebrity with her fitted suit, brass insignia, tan parade gloves, and cocky aviation cap. Merle smiled and waved, drained from her long ordeal but happy to spy the eager crowd and the copper dome of the state capitol. It meant she was home.

Montanans adored their girl, a soldier of “unique distinction” and “one of the few women who was in the military service of the United States,” the Helena Daily Independent
boasted.¹ Many patriotic Americans had done their bit to win the Great War, but Merle Egan’s bit was especially remarkable. She and two hundred other women had braved shot, shell, and submarines to operate the army’s vital communications system overseas. General John Pershing recruited them personally. After the armistice, Merle commanded the switchboard for the epic peace conference at Versailles.

What wasn’t clear as she shook hands with friends and admirers for nearly an hour on the crowded platform was where Merle Egan and other American women were going next. So much had changed in barely a year. The war had made women into soldiers and America into a world power. It had given the vote to women in Europe, then the United States. Only the week before, the U.S. Senate had approved the Susan B. Anthony Amendment after an exhausting seventy-year fight. Yet things were not entirely as they appeared. Despite the hero’s welcome, Merle would soon discover, to her great surprise, that the army denied she had ever been a soldier.

This wasn’t what officials promised when they first went looking for women to run the telephones that American generals needed in order to command every advance or retreat. And Merle Egan was a woman who believed in promises. Little did she know that evening in Helena that the next leg of her journey, from army switchboard operator to women’s rights organizer, would take sixty years.

America’s first female soldiers had been stationed throughout shell-shocked France as part of a compact branch of the U.S. Army known as the Signal Corps. The Signal Corps did not fire cannons, sink submarines, or bayonet invaders. Their job was to send messages. In March 1918, Stars and Stripes hailed the women who arrived during Germany’s bombardment of
Paris as “Bilingual Wire Experts.” They called them Uncle Sam’s “Hello Girls.”

Army nurses also served in uniform. Yet theirs was an altruistic occupation designed to alleviate the ravages of war, not to advance military objectives per se. The purpose of Signal Corps operators was to help the United States win its war. They were soldiers, not angels.

Technology set the course, propelling change in unexpected ways. In May 1917, the month after Congress declared war, General John Pershing sailed for France on a ship stuffed with equipment. Nicknamed “Black Jack” for having commanded an all-black regiment on the American frontier in the 1890s, Pershing made sure to carry not only standard gear but also the newest devices.

Military tackle had undergone a revolution since the last Indian wars only two decades earlier, when Black Jack rode with the Buffalo Soldiers of the Tenth Cavalry. Planes had replaced horses. Trucks had overtaken mule trains. Telephone wires had outrun semaphore flags and smoke signals.

But equipment cannot fight. Pershing urgently needed people who could operate these machines instinctively. As a result, once Pershing and his generals arrived in Paris and observed the lay of the land, they ignored laws that said only men could serve in the army. The Industrial Revolution had called daughters and wives from the home to fill new jobs. Telephone operating was largely sex segregated. If America was going to position and command its immense forces, it needed women to handle the advanced technologies at which they were expert. They would have to withstand torpedoes, cannon fire, influenza, and petty-minded bureaucrats in order to send the word “over there.”
Most worked behind the lines. A small group followed Pershing wherever he made his headquarters, from the short but intense Battle of St. Mihiel to the desperately drawn out Meuse-Argonne Offensive. They labored day and night within range of artillery that lit the horizon and shook their switchboards. This group achieved the highest aspiration of nearly every female Signal Corps member: to serve as near the battle as possible. Civilians may find it unconceivable that soldiers actually wanted to risk their lives, but volunteers accepted this as axiomatic. It’s why they signed up.

The Hello Girls returned after helping to bring back two million doughboys, or infantrymen. Although their units were disbanded, they blazed the path for ongoing enlistment of women in the U.S. Army after 1943. Today, females constitute roughly 15 percent of the armed forces. Many aspects of their service seem routine rather than remarkable. Yet their role in combat remains deeply controversial. It challenges our beliefs about what females can or should do.

These same issues arose in World War I, when Signal Corps women first proved that remarkable acts could become routine. Afterward, the army refused to recognize women like Merle Egan as veterans. Some men turned their backs, while others saluted them. Revisiting this moment reminds us that institutions fight innovation. Individuals sometimes compel them to respond, but they usually fail. The experience of the Hello Girls is a microcosm of the ways that governments resisted sex-role change in the twentieth century—and into the twenty-first.

It also shows that change sometimes happens very quickly. In a short period of time, women demolished the barrier to voting that had long seemed insurmountable. Activists deserve much of the glory for amending the U.S. Constitution,
but unanticipated events led listeners to hear old arguments in new ways. Technology had already expanded female contributions outside the home and the Great War demanded more. The convergence of feminism with these events gave women the vote and brought some into the U.S. Army. Then, when suffrage and the war were won, and women seemed poised to participate in society on a basis of full equality with men, the first wave of feminism dissipated like foam on the beach.

This wasn’t altogether surprising. People find ways to preserve traditions they value while adjusting to changes they cannot avoid. Yet the most powerful trends are global, making them harder to resist. Emergencies hasten them.

The conflict into which the world tumbled almost by accident in 1914 altered expectations globally. Not only did the Russian, Ottoman, and German empires fragment into a dozen new nations, but cracks also ran under the British, French, and Dutch empires, as diverse peoples claimed a right to popular sovereignty. New republics proliferated: most unsteady, all imperfect. Subjects became citizens. Within older democracies, groups who had never had much of a voice raised theirs with new conviction.

Women used the conflict to achieve their long-standing demand for full citizenship. Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Great Britain, New Zealand, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and ten other countries enfranchised females before America. The nation accustomed to congratulating itself as the vanguard of liberal democracy brought up the rear.

The United States was late to the war and women’s suffrage. After President Woodrow Wilson endorsed both causes, he told the U.S. Senate that the popular vote was vital to the “realization of the objects for which the war is being fought.”
He held out the hope that America might organize an enduring democratic peace. But how could it lead the free world if it was behind everyone else? Once entangled with foreign policy, women’s suffrage suddenly became necessary, not discretionary. International credibility required it, and an aspiring world power must have credibility.

We know a great deal about the organizations that marched, sweated, and created a groundswell for female suffrage. We know less about how and why men changed their minds—and changing men’s minds was critical, as only they had the legal authority to enfranchise women. More specifically, we have scant information to interpret President Wilson’s most poetic lines to the resistant men of the Senate, who, with arms crossed, repeatedly rejected his pleas:

This war could not have been fought, either by the other nations engaged or by America, if it had not been for the services of the women,—services rendered in every sphere,—not merely in the fields of effort in which we have been accustomed to see them work, but wherever men have worked and upon the very skirts and edges of the battle itself.3

The story of the women’s Signal Corps unit allows us to look through the eyes of Woodrow Wilson and leaders in other democracies—new, old, and about to be demolished—and observe what they saw. The pioneers who served “upon the very skirts” of the battle help set a new standard of citizenship for women. They accepted the harshest responsibility of democracy: placing one’s life in danger when necessary to defend the country. Their story, like a missing puzzle piece, completes the picture of how women around the globe not only demanded but also earned the vote.
Their victory, like most victories, was partial. The Hello Girls went to war at a time when women possessed citizenship only through their fathers and husbands. Merle Egan and her wartime buddies came back to a world in which females enjoyed new rights, yet some aspects of their status were mysteriously unchanged. This book calls them “soldiers” even though that label quickly became a source of contention. The U.S. government denied them bonuses, Victory Medals, honorable discharges, and a flag on their coffins. Although Signal Corps veterans embraced the whimsical moniker Hello Girls, they also wanted recognition as soldiers. And so they commenced a new struggle that eventually caught the second wave of feminism. Grace Banker, a twenty-five-year-old Barnard College graduate, led the Hello Girls to France. Decades later, Merle Egan finished their fight.

The Hello Girls explores how Americans mobilized for World War I, telephones transformed the United States, females joined the armed forces, suffragists won the vote, and women and men fought together for justice. It illuminates the battles that defined the twentieth century and still shape our own.
MERLE EGAN’s full adventure spanned nearly one hundred years. The day she met with a newspaper reporter in August 1979, at age ninety-one, she wore the earrings explicitly forbidden when she served with the U.S. Signal Corps during the Great War. At that time, army rules prohibited any jewelry other than rings while in uniform, which meant no accessories except in one’s quarters. It was the only place a uniform was not required. Even there, soldiers might wear civilian clothing only “when not receiving visitors.”\(^1\) So there was really no point to earrings. Aluminum dog tags on a string were the closest thing to personal decoration.

Although Merle told the reporter that she didn’t care if the army gave her a proper ceremony, she certainly did. She had fought too hard, too long. Once leery of modern feminism, she now championed the National Organization for Women.

They were clip-on earrings, the sort her generation preferred. Merle wore them whenever she had her picture taken, such as when she spoke to elementary schools near the retirement home, telling the forgotten story to eager, upturned faces and showing them the doll with the smart blue uniform she had sewn.\(^2\) She had attached the buttons from her own jacket and the metal insignia from the collar: a torch of gold between crossed wigwag flags above the initials “U.S.”
The Signal Corps was a small branch of the army with its own motto—*Pro patria vigilans* (watchful for the country)—and song, its lyrics promising to “speed the message day or night.”

The plastic doll wore no earrings, and its only concession to fashion were the black high heels painted on by the manufacturer. If Merle had had the talent, she would have cobbled a pair of regulation boots like the ones that had given her such trouble when she crossed the Atlantic on the *Aquitania*, praying a German torpedo would not send her and seven thousand doughboys to the bottom.

Now, compelled by Congress, the U.S. Army was at last ready to recognize her service. But was she ready for them? Why hadn’t she accepted the army’s invitation to go to Washington, D.C.? Perhaps she was still too mad at those who dared forget Grace Banker.

Merle turned to the reporter in the legal office of her friend and champion Mark Hough. “I’m surprised at them,” she said. “Here they ignored us all these years, tried to pretend we didn’t exist. Now they want to make a festival of it.”

Hough directed the conversation to a loftier plane. The secretary of the army, Clifford Alexander—the first African American to hold the position—might attend the ceremony. “It’s not final yet,” he said, but if Secretary Alexander came, Merle and “the relatives of those women who died before recognition was achieved” would be invited.

Merle broke into a smile and hugged the sweet-faced man, a boy to her at age thirty-four. “We couldn’t have done it without him,” she told the reporter.

And so she would wait. Mark Hough would call with the news. But it would be on an instrument very different from the receiver that President Woodrow Wilson had pressed to
his ear when she connected him to Prime Minister David Lloyd George in 1919.

At the outbreak of World War I, no one imagined its unintended consequences for women in the United States and elsewhere—certainly not the U.S. president.

In 1914, Woodrow Wilson opposed women’s suffrage, the most dramatic of the demands activists had been making since the Seneca Falls Convention sixty-six years earlier. A whole generation had lived and died since Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott called the assembly to discuss women’s rights after finding themselves shunted behind a curtain at a London antislavery meeting to protect their modesty against their wishes. They had sailed thirty-five hundred miles to tackle the most important political issue of the day, only to be treated as an embarrassment.

Not that Woodrow Wilson wasn’t progressive. He was a fervent Progressive who supported most innovations: the eight-hour workday, nature conservation, progressive income taxes, use of the secret ballot (known as the Australian ballot for its point of origin), and so on. In 1899, before his political career took off, Wilson wrote that government could improve America “by forbidding child labor, by supervising the sanitary conditions of factories, by limiting the employment of women in occupations hurtful to their health, by instituting official tests of the purity or the quality of goods sold, by limiting the hours of labor in certain trades, [and] by a hundred and one limitations on the power of unscrupulous or heartless men.”

Like many politicians, he paid close attention to the social reforms sweeping the country and rode the wave to power.⁴
Yet Wilson drew a line at votes for women, which violated the laws of nature, he thought. Female political activity was both offensive and ludicrous. It violated propriety. Only loose women, or old, used-up women, drew attention to themselves outside the home.

As a younger man, Wilson told his fiancée in 1884 about a Baltimore meeting touting the advancement of women. “Bar-ring the chilled, scandalized feeling that always overcomes me when I see and hear women speak in public, I derived a good deal of whimsical delight . . . from the proceedings.” One of the participants was “a severely dressed person from Boston, an old maid from the straitest sect of old maid.” Indeed, the speaker was “a living example of—and lively commentary—of what might be done by giving men’s places and duties to women.”

Wilson opposed female voting throughout his presidency of Bryn Mawr, a women’s college whose students he found vacuous, and during his subsequent governorship of New Jersey. In his 1912 campaign for U.S. president, he told a colleague that he was “definitely and irreconcilably opposed to woman suffrage; woman’s place was in the home, and the type of woman who took an active part in the suffrage agitation was totally abhorrent to him.”

Most men felt the same. So did many women, who constituted the backbone of antisuffrage organizations. The seclusion and subordination of females was centuries’ old. In the same year that the Fifteenth Amendment prohibited disenfranchisement because of “race, color, or previous condition of servitude,” a founder of the University of California commented that reforms like abolition rectified terrible historical abuses, but proposals such as women’s suffrage trifled with biology. They courted disaster, theologian Horace Bushnell warned.
Most nations never confronted the problem of enfranchising former slaves, but all wrestled with the vote for women. It was its own kind of world war, though largely nonviolent. Of the tiny handful of governments that allowed any democratic participation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, none welcomed females. In enlightened England, prominent men vilified political women as “filthy witches” and “hyenas in petticoats.”

Female suffrage was so controversial that it was the only plank of the 1848 Seneca Falls “Declaration of Sentiments” that failed to pass the convention unanimously. Even Lucretia Mott, the elderly Quaker who called the gathering along with Elizabeth Cady Stanton, quailed at the possibly deleterious effects on the gentler sex: “Far be it from me to encourage women to vote or take an active part in politics in the present state of the government.”

Ridicule met those who dared. As the *New York Herald* described an 1853 meeting of suffragists, “The assemblage of rampant women which convened at the Tabernacle yesterday was an interesting phase in the comic history of the Nineteenth Century . . . a gathering of unsexed women, unsexed in mind, all of them publicly propounding the doctrine that they should be allowed to step out of their appropriate sphere.” When a British suffragist chastised David Lloyd George in 1908—“We have waited for forty years!”—the leader of the Liberal Party replied to the amused crowd, “I must say the lady rather looks it.”

Even women sympathetic to the cause recoiled at suffragists who paraded in public. Few females wanted to be seen in the way Australian activist Louisa Lawson described the stereotype of a women’s rights advocate in 1900: “an angular, hard-featured, withered creature, with a shrill, harsh voice,
no pretense to comeliness and spectacles on the nose.” Few wished to risk the security and love that came from attracting a worthy husband.

In 1910, Dutch suffragists chose not to walk in their own parade, anxious to avoid “making a spectacle of themselves.” Instead they pinned posters and banners to wagons and cars that male coachmen drove through the streets for them. In subsequent processions, as they became bolder, activists marched in demure folkloric costumes with white caps and wooden clogs to appeal to Dutch nationalism and cloak their controversial message in images of faithfulness, domesticity, and tradition.12

In countries under colonial rule, which described much of the world at the time, women walked an even higher tightrope. Egyptian women who wanted to be part of the independence movement had to contend first with the resistance of their own men. One of these women was fortunate to have a husband who read her statement aloud to a 1910 convention calling for Egyptian sovereignty, since she was not allowed to appear in mixed gatherings. Veiled women marched against British rule in March 1919, claiming their right to public space as well as an autonomous country. After independence in 1922, they demanded the vote. In 1923, feminists Huda Sha’rawi and Saiza Nabarawi uncovered their faces in an Egyptian train station as a political act.13

Acceptance of women’s presence in public was grudging everywhere. When the inventor of the telephone, Alexander Graham Bell, told his fiancée, Mabel Gardiner, about Susan B. Anthony’s speech outside Philadelphia’s Independence Hall in 1876, she expressed dismay. Although Gardiner believed that women should be entitled to rights then widely denied, such as the privilege of owning property, Anthony’s violation of
“the public sentiment that forbids women to appear in public life,” was unfortunate. To respectable women like Gardiner, activists willing to flout propriety attracted the stigma of fanaticism.¹⁴

Opponents of suffrage warned that feminism was un-American and would lead women astray. Ex-president Grover Cleveland told the *Ladies’ Home Journal* in 1905 that the vote would have “a dangerous, undermining effect” on proper women. The suffrage movement, he said, was “so aggressive, and so extreme in its insistence, that those whom it has fully enlisted may well be considered as incorrigible.”¹⁵ The New York State Association Opposed to Women Suffrage warned in 1908 that civic life would be “disruptive of everything pertaining to home life.” Women who rejected the vote embodied the highest values of “American Institutions, American Ideals, and American Homes,” the New York organization claimed. It praised a kindred group in England: “The wiser women of Britain, the women opposed to the extension of the parliamentary franchise to women, are doing the right thing.”¹⁶

Aside from the fear that politics desexed and degraded women, a central argument against political equality was that women were physically unequipped for a citizen’s duties, particularly the obligation to defend one’s country. Citizenship brought responsibilities with privileges.

As a British opponent of suffrage put it in 1907, “Women are quite as capable of expressing an opinion on political questions as men are, but they are not capable of enforcing it, they are physically disqualified.”¹⁷ In struggles involving contests of strength, women depended on men. If a nation could not oblige females to forfeit their autonomy, dress in uniform, and risk their lives, why should they enjoy equal privileges with those who did?
Bringing women into government also threatened to “sissify” nations at a time when international rivalries seemed to require virile men. Public leaders like Theodore Roosevelt cautioned against weaklings and pacifists whose fear of strife could rot a great nation “by inches.” The turn of the century—an era when social Darwinists argued that only the fittest survived—was not the time to bring swooning damsels into government.18

“The primordial argument against giving woman the vote is that the vote would not represent physical force,” a British author agreed in 1913. Enfranchising voters who had no capacity to defend the state endangered it. For “it is by physical force alone and by prestige—which represents physical force in the background, that a nation protects itself against foreign interference . . . and enforces its own laws.” Chaos would result. Nothing could “more certainly lead to war and revolt than the decline of the military spirit and loss of prestige which would inevitably follow if man admitted woman into political co-partnership.”19

In the United States, voting, fighting, and citizenship were braided together in the nation’s origins. Popular sovereignty spread when propertyless Revolutionary War veterans demanded the vote. They had earned the franchise by aiming their muskets and risking their lives for the republic’s defense. In the words of a toast raised in 1783 to celebrate triumph over Britain, “May all our Citizens be Soldiers, and all our Soldiers Citizens.”20

Women were thus a lesser class of Americans. They couldn’t be soldiers, and by law, they were an extension of their husbands and fathers under the rule of feme covert. Married women had no legal identity separate from their male protectors. Even their nationality wasn’t all their own. They
inherited their father’s at birth and acquired their husband’s upon marriage. Up through the 1950s, American-born brides risked their citizenship if they wed a foreigner. Some were declared aliens against their wishes.

In 1907, the U.S. Supreme Court rejected a California woman’s appeal to keep her nationality after marriage with the observation that she chose “expatriation” when she chose her man. Suffragist Harriot Stanton Blatch, daughter of the famous Elizabeth Cady Stanton, lost her citizenship when she married an Englishman. Only his death in 1915 allowed her to reclaim it. Full, irrevocable citizenship was intertwined with self-sacrifice in war.²¹

Yet what if women volunteered to be soldiers? Would that make them real, true citizens, with all the appertaining rights? Such questions were nonsensical until 1914, when the Great War became the first international conflict of the Industrial Revolution. Nations fought with equipment that rewrote physical requirements for soldiers, making some kinds of expertise as valuable as brute strength.

On the eve of this event, campaigners for women’s suffrage had little to show for decades of unceasing effort. Leaders of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) had published innumerable pamphlets, circulated thousands of petitions, given countless stump speeches, and crisscrossed the country in buggies and trains with little observable effect. Harriot Stanton Blatch described the movement as stuck in “a rut worn deep and ever deeper.”²²

In contrast, the controversial Fifteenth Amendment enfranchising black men decades earlier had taken but a year to pass Congress and achieve ratification in 1870. (Though a civil war was required to make it thinkable, and Southern states soon subverted the law.) Nearly a dozen states granted
the vote to immigrant aliens virtually without debate. America led the world in universal manhood suffrage, yet not a single state gave women this basic right of citizenship before the 1890s, despite endless pleas. As of 1910, women had garnered the vote in only four out of forty-eight states, all in the sparsely populated west.23

The legal treatment of women had otherwise improved, making resistance to the vote even more peculiar—and thus telling. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, many of the “injuries and usurpations” condemned at Seneca Falls had been rectified. Thirty-three states and the District of Columbia had granted married women the right to keep their own wages. Divorced women had obtained shared custody of their children in most states, and wives could own land. Married women were finally allowed to make wills for separate property, though as late as 1940, a quarter of states still did not allow them to make contracts. The sexual exploitation of female minors had been mitigated, too. Age of consent laws that allowed men to wed girls as young as ten were raised to fourteen in most states, though in cases of incest some still required children to prove physical resistance or be judged “accomplices.” Susan B. Anthony acknowledged in 1900 that changes in family law “represented a complete legal revolution during the past half century.”24 Since only males could vote, it was they who passed these laws—determined to do a better job protecting women, while denying females the power to protect themselves.

Yet paternalism was also matched by a new maternalism, or the notion that respectable middle-class women could take public stands on matters of “social housekeeping,” like temperance and child labor, since such causes served others. Elite women such as Abigail Adams, Mary Todd Lincoln, and Edith
Bolling Wilson shaped the nation as well, through their public roles as the wives of politicians. Indeed, well-connected females had long been stereotyped as the “power behind the throne,” expected to cajole and manipulate yet step back when commanded. But the idea of political power for oneself alone challenged the Judeo-Christian belief that God had plucked Eve from Adam’s rib to be his helpmate. The vote epitomized personal autonomy. The highest privilege of citizenship simply did not apply to women, or so antisuffragists believed.

The older regions of the country resisted change the most fiercely. Political machines in eastern states adamantly blocked women’s enfranchisement. Southern states fought suffrage, too, opposed to anything that deepened the pool of black voters. And women themselves remained ambivalent, as revealed by an 1895 referendum in Massachusetts, when the Pilgrim state allowed both sexes to vote on a nonbinding resolution. The suffrage measure lost 187,000 to 110,000. Female opponents knocked on doors across Boston to defeat it.

Activists lowered their sights. In the 1890s, the National American Woman Suffrage Association relinquished the aim of a national amendment like the one that enfranchised freed slaves. Instead, they refocused on state campaigns, most of which flopped. Public indifference increased. In 1900, eighty-year-old Susan B. Anthony turned over the presidency of NAWSA to her handpicked successor, Carrie Chapman Catt, an Ohio native anxious to breathe new life into the old-time religion.

A charming, relentless, masterful strategist, Catt served as president for four years, yet had to resign when her husband fell ill in 1904. His death the following year, combined with the deaths soon thereafter of her mother and brother, left Catt devastated. But she healed and took up the mantle again in
1915, replacing Anna Howard Shaw, a competent but less charismatic leader. A wealthy supporter of the cause died the same year, leaving Catt two million dollars and a treasure chest of emeralds, diamonds, rubies, and pearls. Catt put the gift in an independently managed trust—a war chest—for women’s suffrage. The fight was back on. Membership rose from 117,000 in 1910 to two million by 1917.27

Catt hoped to gussy up the movement’s image by recruiting “the best people,” including heiresses, socialites, college students, and middle-class matrons. Whereas early reformers like Elizabeth Cady Stanton assumed women would enact radical social changes once empowered, Catt adopted neutrality on how women would use their votes or for which political party. She sought to put the tool in their hands rather than prescribe its use. This enabled suffragists to attract support across a broader political spectrum, the opposite ends of which had little in common. Catt believed suffragists should welcome support from any quarter. They would need it.28

The suffrage movement reached out to working women as well. The notion that women belonged in the home had been steadily undermined by industrialization. New jobs and personal need brought women into the labor force in record numbers. Working-class women did not have the luxury of staying home. They labored in textile mills, department stores, garment sweatshops, fish canneries, and manufacturing plants. Their participation in white-collared occupations swelled, too. In 1870, only 3 percent of clerks were female. By 1910, they numbered 35 percent.29 Suffragists developed ties with the Women’s Trade Union League, a cross-class coalition. “The disfranchised worker is always the lowest paid,” the union declared in 1914, and in Boston, its leaders recruited eager telephone switchboard operators for the suffrage
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