

Who Is Jeannette Rankin?

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Who's Jeannette Rankin? I've asked that question to a number of people, both men and women, in classes I teach at the university and just people I come across day to day—I suppose it's been a total of thirty—and so far nobody's heard of her. That has intrigued me, because I see Jeannette Rankin as an important figure in American history and somebody to know about, and yet, at least from my little unscientific survey, Jeannette Rankin has been dropped down the memory hole of history; nobody these days, so it seems, knows she existed.

Jeannette Rankin (1880-1973) was the first woman elected to the Congress of the United States. She was elected as a Republican to the U.S. House of Representatives to represent an at-large district in Montana. After she was elected, she said, "I may be the first woman member of Congress, but I won't be the last." She was the only member of Congress who voted against declaring war on Japan after the attack on Pearl Harbor—think of it, the only one. When asked by incredulous interviewers how she could have done such a thing, she declared that war was a barbaric relic of the past and absurd and immoral, and that there are better ways to resolve international disputes than violence, and that she was not going to send mothers' sons to be blown to bits in some distant land. For that lone vote, she was mocked and ridiculed and shunned and in the next election voted out of office.¹

To me, Jeannette Rankin seems for sure to be a person worth remembering. First woman in Congress, and whatever you may think of the wisdom of voting against World War II, that looks to me like a principled and courageous act. Yet nobody has heard of her. Yesterday, I asked my "Have you heard of Jeannette Rankin?" question to a woman in mid-life who works in my university's library. After she said no, when I told her who Rankin was, she remarked, "I think of myself as feminist, and I'm surprised I don't know about her. Jeannette Rankin—two n's in Jeannette—I'll look her up."

I'm interested in history, so that alone prompts my interest in Jeannette Rankin. But even more than that, her invisibility intrigues me for what it brings up about the operations of the public

discourse: that is, who and what we hear about both the present and the past and who tells and shows that to us.

Here we are living our day-to-day lives. We have *direct knowledge* of our immediate circumstance: what our house looks like, and the streets we walk and drive, and we have contact with our relatives and friends and the schools we attend and our workplaces. By direct, I mean we come by first hand contact with it through our senses: we see it, hear it, touch it, smell it (a flower, gasoline), and taste it (an apple, calf's liver). But everything else isn't in our vicinity, it's over there somewhere, or back then, so we can't learn about it directly but rather indirectly: somebody has to tell us about it or show it to us, in a movie, say. The knowledge that results from that is *indirect knowledge*.

The key distinction foundational to this writing is the one between direct and indirect knowledge. I know what my young daughter is like because I'm around her; I have direct knowledge of her. Alternatively, anything I know, or think I know, about September 11 has been acquired second hand--I read about it, including analyses of it, and saw video footage, and so on. I have indirect knowledge of 9/11.

It doesn't quite work to draw hard and fast distinctions between direct knowledge and indirect knowledge. Back to the example of my daughter, my perception of her--there she is, right in front of me--is colored by what I've read about children her age and parenting. But for our purposes here, it's good enough to work with the contrast between direct and indirect knowledge, and to say that the focus in this writing is on indirect knowledge. You and I were never in the presence of Jeannette Rankin; we never saw her or talked to her. We are dependent on somebody telling us about her, if they choose to do that (or what she may have written about herself; that's important, but let's not get into that here). Any knowledge we have of her is indirect.

Similarly, we've never been around Franklin Delano Roosevelt. We weren't sitting in on the negotiations between Japan and the United States in the years before Pearl Harbor. The Japanese generals never told us personally why they attacked the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor. Bringing it up to the present time, I've never been in the presence of President Obama, or George Clooney for that matter. I've never been to Iraq or Afghanistan. I've never spoken to either Prince William or Princess Kate, and anything I

know about baby George I got from a tabloid I glanced at waiting in line at Hannaford's super market.

The basic point I'm using the Jeannette Rankin example—and one other I'll get to later on—to make is that if you are going to make sense of things, including what's going on in your own life, it is important to distinguish between direct and indirect knowledge, and to take a hard look at what you have learned indirectly and how that happened. Because the vast majority of what you and I know, or assume even if in fact it isn't true, didn't result from our immediate, here-and-now, with-our-senses, encounter with the world. Rather, people stood between the reality that is out there, or was out there in the past, and let us know about it, including what it meant—it's significance, where it fit into the scheme of things, how good or bad it was, and what to do about it, if anything. In the case of Jeannette Rankin, these people have decided that we didn't need to know about her, so they never brought her to our attention. Another way to say it, people *mediated* our contact with the reality of Jeannette Rankin. And they mediated our contact with Franklin Roosevelt, Pearl Harbor, President Obama, George Clooney, and Prince William, Princess Kate, and baby George.

I can't think of a bigger set of questions to answer than who are the *mediators of reality*; how did they get into positions to do their mediating; and what are these people up to, their motives, what are they trying to get done. To put labels on these mediators, I'm thinking of teachers in schools and colleges, politicians, the clergy, special interest advocates (labor, feminists, ethnic and racial organizations, gay rights proponents, the NRA, etc.), and so, so, important, people in the media (good word for it)—journalists, book publishers, filmmakers, TV producers, the music industry, and video game manufacturers. These people tell us what is going on and went on and what difference it made. They mediate reality. They are the sources of our indirect knowledge.

The term for both the process and content of what these people, these mediators, of what these people do, I referred to it in passing earlier, is the *public discourse*. The public discourse is made up of the facts (or better, the claims about what is factual—remember we weren't there to check it out for ourselves), ideas, stories or narratives (this happened and then that happened), images (literal images, photographs or films, or the images put in our minds by descriptions), significance (how it fits in to things,

importance), and arguments or propositions (how to think about something and what to do about it). It's all that "out there" stuff that provides the context for our lives (Napoleon and Einstein and The Holocaust and Martin Luther King and feminism and terrorism (I've had zero contact with a terrorist) and Puffy Combs. (I'm not trying to be flip with the last one in that list. I'm just referring to the popular culture, and making the point that I have never had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of Mr. Combs. He's words on a page and pictures somebody put in front of me, an aspect of the public discourse).

While we're making sense of the public discourse, we need to keep the *private discourse* in mind. You and I aren't the only ones on the receiving end of the messages the mediators of reality transmit either knowingly or unknowingly (just because somebody is in the business of selling a CD and really has no other conscious intention, that doesn't preclude that he or she isn't getting across ideas about what's going on in the world and what ought to go on). Others in our lives get these same messages. I'm thinking of our family and friends and the people we text and contact through Facebook and Twitter and Instagram. They receive and interpret these same messages and pass the results of that on to us. In effect, they become mediators themselves. "Here's what's going on with Obamacare." "This is what happened in Vietnam." Or, closer to the Rankin example, "Here's what World War II was about."

So we are getting told and shown the reality outside of our immediate, or direct, experience from both the public and private discourse. But the driving force, the one to make sense of in the first instance, is the public discourse. Primarily the private discourse responds to the public discourse. And yes, it works the other way around too—what is happening in the private discourse affects what's in the summer comedy playing at Cinema Nine. What's actually going on is an ongoing interplay, exchange, between the private and public realms of communication, with each having an effect on the other. But with all those qualifications and blurred distinctions on the table, I come back to the importance of singling out and shining the light on the public discourse—that "out there" material or data and the people that transmit it, because I think investigating that has the highest *heuristic* value, it holds the most promise of informing and enlightening and empowering us.

What makes the public discourse so crucially important is that whatever came from the outside into our heads and bodies (we can take things in and store them physically as a pre-articulate—without words—sensations or feelings), however it got there—facts, ideas, images, narratives, concepts of what is important and preferable (and not preferable, bad, wrong)—*shapes our actions*. When we decide what to do about, say, race, or gender, or the environment, who to vote for, how to be in a relationship, whatever it is, we check ourselves out, what we think and feel—and by feel I mean literally feel, our bodily sensations--and do whatever that tells us to do.

And yes, we might bypass that and just do what people around us are doing; it's called *modeling*, or imitating. But still, whoever put what is inside us, or has become us (those felt sensations of what something is all about—say, Democrats are good and Republicans are bad, whatever it is—are, in a very real way, part of our being, part of the organism we call “me”) is incredibly powerful because in a major way they are controlling our lives. They are educating, or shaping, or conditioning, what we think and feel, and ultimately our behavior. That is big time power. If we are to live our lives autonomously; if we are to determine our own fate; if we are going to live the lives we want and not the ones others want for us, we had best get onto what the various mediators of reality are up to. We need to study the public discourse.

I had never heard of Jeannette Rankin until a couple of weeks ago. There was a passing reference to her in a book I was reading about the lead-up to World War II (*Human Smoke*, by Nicholson Baker, I highly recommend the book). The question I raised to myself is the one I'm raising here: “Rankin sounds like a big deal. How come I've never heard of her?”

I can't take answering that question very far. In truth, I haven't given much energy to thinking about it. Off the top, I ask myself, does it have anything to do with the fact that Rankin was a Republican? Do the people who are interpreting the world for us want us to think that nothing good comes from Republicans? Is the narrative, the story, about the world we are being told, essentially a “the left good/the right bad” one?

Quick, name some conservative women to be admired, either from the past or now? How about some laudable Republican, or conservative, men? Lincoln was a Republican, but that's not exactly

punched up when he's talked about. Ronald Reagan? I suppose, but the jury is out on him—dim-witted, backward kind of guy, you know?

How about people in the media who lean to the right? We've got George Clooney and Ben Affleck on the left, along with every film director and singer except those country and western yokels. There's the actor Jon Voight, Angelina Jolie's father, but he's a little out of it, no? Anybody on TV except those pinheads on Fox News is a tuned-in liberal, right? The conservatives in Congress--all of them a little, or a lot, backward and even nutty, yes? How about that Ted Cruz character? He went to Harvard?—nah, he couldn't have. And don't even bring up those Tea Party wackos. Today's feminists who are doing all the talking aren't going to punch up Jeannette Rankin. Former Representative Bella Abzug yes, Jeannette Rankin no. Besides, they've got enough on their hands shooting arrows into Sarah Palin—and what is with that glassy-eyed Michele Bachmann?)—or have those targets dropped out of sight? I guess so. Anyway, there's nothing a bit glassy-eyed about Hilary Clinton (right?).

And could it be that the people doing the talking in America really, really, *really* like World War II and don't want you getting any bad ideas about that heroic and absolutely—make that double absolutely—necessary mass killing and destruction? I recently read a biography of the black civil rights activist Bayard Rustin, who was a conscientious objector in World War II (fine book, *The Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin*, by John D'Emilo). Reading about Rustin, I remember thinking, conscientious objector? I thought everybody bought into that World War II no exceptions, The Good War and all that. Rustin went to prison for his pacifist beliefs, and his biographer noted that one of every six federal prisoners during WWII was a conscientious objector—one out of six, that's a lot. In a writing for this site back in 2007 on Ken Burns' well-received PBS series on World War II, "The War" ("Ken Burns' War"), seven episodes and not a mention of conscientious objectors, or anyone that didn't think that while World II was hell, it was completely, don't even think about it, imperative that it happen in just the way it did, including dropping atomic bombs on civilians, women and little children, in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. More than a few interviewees in that series got it across that World War II was a

high for them: hey, was this an adventure or what? Needless to say, Jeannette Rankin's name didn't come up in Burns' show.

I'll take the opportunity here to add a second name besides Jeannette Rankin as someone I bet you don't know about and ought to, or if you do know about him, you've had a distorted picture of him painted for you—he's the devil incarnate, stone him—William Pierce. I have a personal interest in letting you know about Pierce (1933-2002) because I wrote a book about him you've never heard of (no book reviews, no feature stories, it isn't in the library or in bookstores, no publisher would put it out, I had to self-publish it). The name of the book is *The Fame of a Dead Man's Deeds*—Amazon sells it. Pierce had a Ph.D in physics and was a tenured professor of physics by his early thirties. So far, so good. Where Pierce ran into trouble is he was an outspoken advocate for European heritage, white, people and a critic of the Jewish influence on America. According to the people in power in America, both of those endeavors are no-no's. Pierce had to be kept out of sight, and if he did surface at all, he had to be beaten to a pulp, scorned and dismissed as ignorant, misguided, anachronistic, and malevolent, and beyond the pale of decent society. And I'm here to tell you that anybody who had any contact with Pierce—say, wrote a book about him--got a taste of that same medicine.

Writing the portrait of Pierce—it was more along the lines of an in-depth feature story, I wouldn't call it biography—I spent a great deal of time with him, at his property in West Virginia and I traveled in Europe with him. I came to know him very well indeed. And from that experience, I think you ought to know about his life and give some attention to his ideas. That's not to say Pierce was without flaws—but then again who is? I'm not, are you? And it is not to say I bought into all of his ideas; I didn't. But then again, I can think of a lot of people whose ideas and actions don't curry my fancy that I nevertheless think the world ought to know about—the afore-mentioned Franklin Roosevelt comes to mind in that regard.

Pierce was the brightest, most dedicated, most authentic, hardest working person I have ever been around—nobody close. And he was incredibly thoughtful, and his ideas deserve serious consideration. I've been an academic for forty years and studied the world hard, and while Pierce may have been off-base in some, a lot, all, of his thinking—your call—he was no nut case, and his voice,

his message, his existence, should be part of the ideational world we live in. And it isn't. And why it isn't is just as important as Pierce's life example and the substance of his message

So much to say about this topic. I'll leave it with this:

People are selling you things, and there are things they aren't telling you about. Keep that in mind.

Keep in mind too that for virtually everything you know about, there is another legitimate take on it. I can't think of anything except in science and mathematics, and even in those areas reasonable people differ, that is just one way, period, no question about it. Look around for it, and you'll find somebody articulately expressing just the opposite to what you've picked up. You're strengthened to the extent that you see both sides, or angles, on whatever it is—or all three, or four, or ten, perspectives; often there are multiple ways of looking at something. Be wary of anyone who tries to sell you the idea that there it comes down to what he is pushing versus the forces of darkness. It's what I'm telling or Hitler, he gets across; that's your choice, which side are you on. I know this is controversial, but the civil rights battles in the South in the 1950s and '60 were more complicated than saintly Martin Luther King versus ax handles and fire hoses. This is not to say that King was wrong, not at all, but it was not a simple picture. Nothing is. Beware of anyone telling you that it is.

Develop a kind of healthy perversity. Every time you get the idea that something is just one way, case closed, use that as a prompt to search out the strongest possible counter-argument. You're going to have to look for it on your own, because whatever mediator has gotten your eye and ear isn't about to let you in on it. But you'll be stronger, more in charge of your life, less a lab animal for this mediator, if you take the time to find it. Now you have two (at least) ways to look at something, and that means you have a choice. And making true choices, from viable alternatives, is what distinguishes a human being from a rat that is conditioned to go down a particular pathway no matter what.

Watch how personal attack and ridicule and mockery are used to put ideas across to you. People, and thus their ideas, the mediators don't like are inevitably not just wrong, they are ignorant, weird, mentally deranged, and malevolent if not outright evil. Back to World War II, Tojo and those other Japanese leaders, fanatics,

right? Remember Saddam Hussein? Nuts. Remember that Libyan leader, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi? He had a concubine of little girls, didn't he? Hitler only had one testicle as I recall. Romney and the one before him, McCain, kind of flakey, don't you think? Saturday Night Live jokes those two, no? Remember that governor of Texas, Rick Perry, is he still around? What a dumbo. And how about that Fox News crowd—they're flat out con artists, really—I mean, they're lying. Bill O'Reilly? a blowhard. But Jon Stewart, now there's a fine satirist.

I know I'm coming off as putting down the left in this piece. But I do believe in our time that basically the public discourse is dominated by the left-of-center, in the universities and in news and entertainment (talk radio and Fox News the notable exceptions). Plus, I personally lean in a conservative and libertarian direction (actually, libertarianism is more left than right, but it isn't progressivism of the government-is-your-friend and beware-of-straight-white-Christians sort), and I'm a mediator, for some reason you are reading this, so you are getting a taste of my sell. I believe in what I'm putting out here, but I realize that I don't have a corner on objectivity. What you are reading right now is a part of the public discourse I've been talking about. Bring the same critical faculties to making sense of me as I've been suggesting you do with all those other guys.

Check out the mediators themselves. Don't get caught up with the appealing rhetoric and lose sight of the people getting it across. Particularly, ask yourself, what's in it for them to be putting out what they are? They always pitch their idea as not being in their own self-interest--oh no, it's just the right thing to do. I've noticed, though, that whatever they are pushing just happens to get them and theirs ahead of me and mine. Their kind are good and my kind are bad. They and their relatives get the attention, and the funding, and the preference in school admissions and the jobs and the contracts. If there's a waiting line, they are ahead of me in it. I've also noticed that amid all their moralizing, I could fall down a manhole and they wouldn't bat an eye.

And just generally, quit believing everything you are told by people with a lectern and a recording device. Wake up. Think for yourself. Get out of the line of elephants plodding along trunk-to-tail around the circus ring being led by their trainer.

And yes, when you get a chance, check out Jeannette Rankin.
And William Pierce too.

Notes

1. There is this biography of Rankin, guaranteed not to be checked out in the library: Hannah Josephson, *Jeannette Rankin: First Lady in Congress* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1974).