A Commentary on the Life of Jeannette Rankin

By Robert S. Griffin

My daughter Dee, as I'll call her here, has just finished her sophomore year in college. One of the jobs I've taken on is to direct her to sources and people she's not encountering in her life—in school, mass entertainment, and the internet (which looks to me to come down to wall-to-wall TikTok). A couple of weeks ago, I flashed on someone I wrote about in a late 2022 article about Americans from the past who don't get much if any attention in our time and should, Jeannette Rankin. About Rankin, I wrote:

> **Jeannette Rankin (1880–1973) was the first woman elected 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. 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. She was mocked, ridiculed, and shunned for her action.**[1]

The first woman elected to Congress and the only person to vote against WWII, which on the face of it would seem to merit mention in schools and attention from the media, but no. The question for us is why the silence. Nikki Haley writing "Finish Them" on Israeli bombs meant for Gazans is brought to our attention, but not someone akin to Jeannette Rankin. The big

movie of last summer, "Oppenheimer," was a sympathetic portrayal of a man who devoted his life to creating a horrendous bomb that was dropped on the civilian population on two cities, but there are no Jeannette Rankin movies. I decided it would be good for Dee to know about Jeannette Rankin.

I knew little about Rankin beyond those few sentences in the 2022 article. I checked to see if a book has been written about her that I could give to Dee for summer reading. I found one on Amazon, *One Woman Against War: The Jeannette Rankin Story* by Kevin S. Giles. It was self-published in 2016 by Giles through BookLocker.com, which operates out of Saint Petersburg, Florida. Jackie Robinson, the first black player in major league baseball warrants innumerable books by major New York publishers, but it's only by paying a publisher like BookLocker.com that you can get a book in print about the first woman elected to Congress. As I expected, Giles' tome is not in the collections of the university and public library near me, but Amazon sells a reasonably-priced paperback if you want to get it.

I read *One Woman Against War* this week. This writing doesn't offer a review of the book; enough to say here that I think Giles does a solid job and I recommend his book to you. With the space I have to work with here, I'll recount what came up for me as I went through the book and what I made of it. So this is a commentary prompted by reading the book rather than an assessment of its merits.

Until reading the Giles' book, I wasn't aware that Jeannette Rankin had voted no on war twice, on WWI as well as WWII. She served two widely-spaced terms in the House of Representatives as a Republican from Montana, 1917–1919 and 1941–1943.

In April of 1917, President Woodrow Wilson addressed a joint session of Congress asking it to "make the world safe for democracy" by declaring war against Germany. The clerk of the House began the roll call vote on Wilson's war resolution. When he called out "Rankin," she rose from her chair and spoke softly: "I want to stand by my country, but I cannot vote for war." As she sank back into her chair, she said, inaudibly to many, "I vote no." Later, she explained, "I felt that the first time a woman had a chance to say no to war, she should say it." She wasn't alone in her no vote: 49 other House members voted as she did, with 373 voting yes and nine abstaining. Six senators voted against the war resolution. Wilson quickly signed the resolution and within eighteen months 322,000 American troops had died or suffered wounds. From the Giles book:

> **Hundreds of thousands of American troops endured mustard gas, cholera, trench foot, rat bites, and other horrors of trench warfare. The boys who kept journals wrote of fearing the dreaded whistle calls to charge into cratered fields to face hails of lead. p. 193**

During the period between the world wars, Rankin actively promoted the cause of peace. She gave college lectures, went on national radio, appeared before Congress, and participated in organizational activities. "War is the slaughter of human beings who are temporarily enemies," she declared. In the late '30s, noting the clear signs of an impending war, she asked, "Have we learned nothing from the two decades? Did the brave boys who

went to war in 1917 and never came back actually die in vain? Must the whole ghastly story be repeated?" She said that we need to stand up to the people telling us that mass destruction and killing is both necessary and moral, and stop providing them with the wherewithal to carry it out.

Rankin pointed out that American arms manufacturers lobby for military appropriations, bribe government officials, disregard our national interests, sell weapons to anyone who can come up with the money, and rake in excessive profits. "It's perfectly possible to take the profit out of war," she insisted. "Let's think about how to get that accomplished." She was enamored with the ideas of Ghandhi and Thoreau. She promoted an International Court of Justice that could marshal the power of world opinion against war.

As I read about Rankin's International Court suggestion in the Giles book, I thought about the extent to which the internet can be a force for marshalling the power of world opinion in the direction of peace. In the 1960s those involved in anti-Vietnam War protests chanted "The whole world is watching!" By that, they meant the three television networks and *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* newspapers and *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines and that's about it, or at least what those outlets decided to show. Now with the internet, the whole world really *is* watching what's going on at the time of this writing in Gaza—on websites, YouTube videos, podcasts, X. More, the internet provides ways of communicating and organizing—texts, Zoom, social media—to get across powerfully to the destroyers and killers and the politicians who direct and support them, "What you're doing doesn't play—knock it off!"

Rankin encouraged women to join the cause for peace. "The peace problem is a woman's problem," she said. "It is woman's work to raise human beings and human beings are being sacrificed in war. Killing is the antithesis of life. The love a woman expresses for her children needs to become an ideal in society, incarnated in our daily actions and sustained in adversity and conflict." Her organizational involvements reflected this perspective. Two examples, the Women's International League of Peace and Freedom and the Women's International Conference for Permanent Peace.

In 1940, Jeannette Rankin was again elected to the House of Representatives from Montana.

"Yesterday, December 7, 1941—a date which will live in infamy—the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan."

A resolution for war against Japan.

The Senate votes 82-0 for the resolution.

The roll call begins in the House of Representatives. Through the alphabet: Allen, Anderson Andrews, Arnold--all yes. . . . McLean, McMillan, Maciejewski--yes. Rankin. "As a woman, I can't go to war and I refuse to send anyone else." Boos rain down from

members on the floor and observers in the gallery. The House vote is being broadcast on NBC radio. Commentator Earl Godwin declares, "Jeannette Rankin would just as soon see the Japanese sweep over the country and kill everyone in the streets."

The final vote counting both the Senate and the House: 470 to 1.

Giles in his book reports that

> **thousands of letters and telegrams of condemnation flooded Rankin's office. "You made an ass out of yourself trying to be like a man. Now come home like a lady." "I hope a Jap bomb drops on your head or home." "I am shocked and ashamed that the only member of our sex in Congress showed to the world such a total lack of patriotism, courage, and understanding as you did today when you voted 'NO.'" "When you come to your end you will go down as a blight upon the pages of American history." "I was never more ashamed of my sex or more convinced that women are unfit for public office." p.321.**

Rankin was informed by her brother back home that "Montana is 110% against you." She confides to a friend, "I have nothing left now except my integrity."

Rankin accused Roosevelt of conspiring with Churchill to impose an economic blockade that deprived Japan of raw materials until it felt compelled to strike a military target. She alleged that Churchill had duped Roosevelt into war to protect Britain's imperial interests in Asia. She said the decision to go to war was rushed, made without due deliberation. Her remarks were lost in the war hysteria.

While the responses to Rankin's no vote were almost all harshly negative, here and there were words of praise. One woman wrote, "In all of history no man has done so brave, so commendable a thing, let alone a woman." Personally, I'm with this correspondent. In 1956, before he became president, John F. Kennedy nominally wrote (his aide Ted Sorenson did the actual writing) a best-selling book called *Profiles in Courage*. The book is made up of short biographies of eight members of Congress who did what they thought was right and suffered severe criticism and losses as a result. (Her chances of winning slim to none, Rankin didn't stand for re-election in 1942.) Jeannette Rankin didn't make the list in *Profiles in Courage*, but I consider her WWII no vote to be at least on a par with those included in the book, like John Quincy Adams who broke away from the Federalist Party and Edmund G. Ross who voted for acquittal in the Andrew Johnson impeachment trial. I would have put her in the book. In any case, and to me the bottom line, over a million young Americans were killed or wounded on foreign soil in WWII and it wasn't because of anything Jeannette Rankin did.

Before being elected to Congress in 1916, Jeannette Rankin was prominent in Montana's women's suffrage movement. "The government comes into our homes and tells us what to do but we have nothing to say about it," she pointed out. Giles:

> **Rankin traveled 9,000 miles across Montana's broad reaches giving speeches. Her automobile bogged to the axles in the mud of unpaved roads. She rode in drafty trains that climbed steep mountains that filled with spring snow. If she wanted to read at night, she sat on stiff furniture in hotel parlors lit by flickering smelly oil lamps. She was isolated from family and friends and relied on benevolent farmers and ranchers to provide supper and a place to sleep. pp. 75–76**

On November 3rd, 1914, a Tuesday, Montanans went to the polls and Montana became the tenth state to grant suffrage to women. Two years later, Jeannette Rankin was elected to represent the state in the U.S. House of Representatives, to great fanfare. Giles:

> **From the Shoreham Hotel [in Washington, D.C.], the nation's first woman in Congress rode to the Suffrage House on Rhode Island Avenue, where she spoke briefly to the crowd on the street. Then the big moment came to make her debut in Congress. She climbed into the back seat of an open touring car, smiling at onlookers while the gloved, capped chauffeur eased the automobile into a parade that included suffragists from nearly all forty-eight states. The flag-draped automobiles swept down Pennsylvania Avenue. Crowds of people hurrying toward the Capitol cheered and waved as they witnessed the lady from Montana making history. Rankin, hardly comfortable with the fanfare, waved back. When the progression stopped near the south entrance to the Capitol, photographers rushed to her car, pushing and shoving for a good picture. Hundreds of her colleagues waited in the House chambers. Journalist Ellen Slayden described her as "just a sensible young woman going about her business. She's not pretty but has an intellectual face and nice manner." When Jeannette's name was bellowed during roll call opening the 65th Congress, the tide of men around her stood and cheered. Handkerchiefs**

waved from the galleries. The ovation continued until she rose and bowed first to the Republican side and then to the Democratic side. Speaker Clark pounded for order. Before the new Representative Rankin could sit, men jostled to shake her hand. They stood in line waiting for an introduction to this female creature voted to sit among them. She returned their courtesies with a direct smile. pp. 127-128

Rankin had faith that women would change politics. She believed that women and men have differing basic natures, with women inherently having greater regard for peaceful relations and family and children. In office, she acted accordingly. An example, in 1918 she introduced the first-ever federal legislation to provide instruction in female hygiene, maternity, and infant care.

But flip forward to modern times, let's say since WWII. There has been no major women's thrust to put an end to war. Politically, women have been more focused on career advancement than children and families. The most visible, vocal public expression of women's posture toward children has been to be free to kill them in the womb. The word for it is abortion. Its reality:

During the second trimester of pregnancy, the fetus is too large to be broken up by suction alone. Once the cervix is stretched open the doctor pulls out the fetal parts with forceps. The fetus' skull is crushed to ease removal.

From twenty weeks to full-term, grasping a leg with forceps, the doctor delivers the fetus up to the head. Next, scissors are inserted into the base of the skull to create an opening. A suction catheter is placed into the opening to remove the brain. The skull collapses and the fetus is removed.

What accounts for this turn of events? I'll offer some thoughts for your consideration.

Rankin thought that men and women have different basic natures. I agree with her. Men and women are different animals. Different physiology. Different brains. Different chemistry. Different instincts and impulses. I'm not a science type, but I think empirical evidence when it isn't suppressed to serve social/political interests supports those assertions. Though really, I draw my conclusions from a long life of dealing with men and women. They aren't the same. I'm not talking about better or worse, I'm talking about different.

The story doesn't end there, however. Knowing that it's a woman involved in something doesn't give you the power to predict thoughts and behaviors. Rankin thought it did: when women get involved in the political process there are going to be fewer wars and greater attention paid to children and families. Well, not necessarily. And why not? Three major reasons: 1. Women (and men) model other people. 2. Women (and men) have facts and ideas in their heads that guide them. 3. Women (and men) have basic needs they feel pressed to serve. I'll discuss the three in turn.

One reason women—and men—do what they do is because other people are doing it. We model, emulate, copy other people. If other people think WWII is a good idea and join up to fight, so do we. If other people like abortion that's good enough for us. And that can override inner urges. Dee can't model herself after somebody she doesn't know about, like Jeannette Rankin.

A second reason, women—and men—have what can be called *visions* that guide their thinking and behavior. By visions I mean facts—or better, what are assumed to be facts—and ideas that go together, cluster up, in a coherent way that make sense to us. This has been a brief introduction to Jeannette Rankin, but I think both you and I have a pretty good sense of her vision, about herself and about the world, about what's worth doing and about what's worth trying to prevent.

Whatever its merits, Jeannette Rankin's vision hasn't been in women's minds—let's focus on women in this discussion. We could speculate about why. I'll throw out one possibility. The people who control the flow of information and ideas in this country really, really like WWII. They love this picture of German women cleaning up rubble in Berlin at the end of the war and aren't going to shine the light on anybody who wouldn't take to it.

I'll describe someone's vision who has been in American women's consciousness even though, particularly if they are young, they may have never heard of her: Betty Friedan.

Betty Friedan (1921–2006) is regarded as the founder of modern, or second wave, feminism in America. Her 1963 best-seller, *The Feminine Mystique*, is arguably the most

influential book in the area of women's concerns ever. In it, she identifies what she calls "the problem that has no name," an issue experienced by the college-educated, likely suburban, housewife. It manifests as a stirring within her, a dissatisfaction, a frustration, a yearning. As she makes the beds and shops for groceries and picks up the children at school a question comes into her awareness . . . "Is this all there is?" In 1966, she was elected the first president of the National Organization for Women (NOW), which she helped start. Betty Friedan became very prominent in American life. Everybody knew about Betty Friedan.

Friedan was born Bettye Naomi Goldstein. She was of Jewish heritage, her family's roots in Russia. After college, she became active in Marxist causes and worked as a journalist for leftist publications focusing on women's issues in the workplace—unfair hiring practices, unequal pay, pregnancy discrimination, and the like. Eventually, she became what she later wrote about: a depressed and frustrated suburban housewife feeling imprisoned by an unsatisfying marriage, three children, and the tedium of domesticity.

Success to Friedan didn't mean being loving and supportive to your husband and nurturing your children. Personal fulfillment isn't found in the home but rather in the business and political arenas. Love isn't the answer; power and prestige are.

Friedan had mixed feelings about men. On the one hand, she envied them—they've got it made, they are CEOs. On the other hand, they are the enemy—sexist, oppressive, pawing around, who needs them. Rankin had no beef with men.

Friedan was tough, abrasive, imperious, in your face. She didn't come on like diffident, soft-spoken Jeannette Rankin. She came on like a Russian Jew, not like a Scottish Protestant whose people immigrated from Canada.

Friedan wasn't about to punch up inherent differences between men and women. You're feminine because they put you in a dress and gave you a doll. Bring it forward to today's transgender debate, if he says he a woman, he's a woman.

Friedan's action was with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and the National Woman's Political Caucus, not the Women's International Conference for Permanent Peace. An avid supporter of Israel, surrounded as it is by hostile Arabs and dependent on American miliary support, she was not about to be pushing pacifism.

Friedan co-founded the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws. She sold the idea that abortion was a matter of a woman having control of her body, though it can be argued that there are three other players in the abortion game besides the woman hosting the unborn baby. One of them is the father. Another is society. And the third is the baby. The baby is getting his or her brain sucked out and that ought to count for something.

Friedan was urban; Rankin rode horses on a farm in Montana. Friedan was to the far left politically; Rankin wasn't.

You get where I'm going with this. Over the past decades, women's consciousness has been more Friedan-like than Rankin-like and that has influenced their actions.

The third brake on basic nature directing women's lives (and men's) is they have basic, fundamental, needs they feel compelled to serve: safety, sustenance, approval, inclusion, good feelings. If you want to know why someone does what they do, check how it effects the satisfaction of their basic needs.

What are some implications that can be drawn from this last discussion? I'll offer three.

The first is my contention that you and I will feel better about our lives to the extent that we live them in alignment with our basic nature. But to do that we are going to have to clear out what obscures our basic nature: the examples of how other people do things that aren't right for us; and the facts and ideas in our heads about ourselves and the world that take us in the wrong direction. And we are going to have to realize that the needs we feel pressed to serve—approval from others and so on—are really wants that we can live without, and that doing what it takes to satisfy those wants may come at too great a personal cost. When Rankin said "All I have is my integrity," I don't think it was in despair.

Whoever gets to put ideas and images in our awareness—Friedan's over Rankin's, say--has enormous power. Steven Spielberg in his movie "Saving Private Ryan" showed us a World War II mother from Iowa lying crumpled at the feet of military personnel, devastated but acquiescent, after they informed her that three of her sons had been killed in the war. Spielberg didn't show us a mother like Lyrl Clark Van Hyning—somebody else you've never heard of—who a few weeks before the anticipated invasion of Europe that turned out to be at Normandy said defiantly, "Those boys who will be forced to throw their young flesh against that impregnable wall of steel are the same babies mothers cherished and comforted and brought to manhood. Mother's kiss healed all hurts of childhood. But on invasion day no kiss can heal the terrible hurts and mother won't be there. Mothers have betrayed their sons to the butchers."[2]

A third implication, and really, it's more along the lines of a suggestion. When you are trying to get a point across to people, get them to see something or do something, direct it at their basic nature. Amid all the propagandizing and conditioning, it's there, and if what you offer aligns with it and is true and good, and you are patient and persistent, you'll get through to them and they'll respond "Yes." There's hope.

Jeannette Rankin lived a very long life, until 92, and she never gave up the fight. She opposed the war in Vietnam. She pointed out that the explosives dropped on North Vietnam were greater than the tonnage rained on Germany and Japan during WWII. "American taxpayers are paying twenty-five billion dollars a year for human destruction," she proclaimed. She said that war is a "mad dog that should be locked up" and that women in particular need to oppose the "war habit." There was even a Jeannette Rankin Brigade to Stop the War in Vietnam in her honor.

Shortly after Jeannette Rankin's death, her friend Reita Rivers wrote to Jeannette's sister Edna. "How we shall miss her! And how responsible we felt, having known her, to measure up as best we can to her courage, integrity, and concern for others." I hope Dee is inspired by the life example of Jeannette Rankin.

Endnotes

1. Robert S. Griffin, "Nine American Voices," *The Occidental Observer,* posted December 24, 2020.

2. Glen Jeansonne, *Women of the Far Right: The Mothers' Movement and World War II,* University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 94.