Susan B. Anthony and the Struggle for Women's Suffrage : "Failure is impossible"

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> To them [women] this government is not a democracy. It is not a republic. It is an odious aristocracy; a hateful oligarchy of sex; the most hateful aristocracy ever established on the face of the globe; an oligarchy of wealth, where the rich govern the poor [...] this oligarchy of sex, which makes father, brothers, husband, sons, the oligarchs over the mother and sisters, the wife and daughters of every household — which ordains all men sovereigns, all women subjects, carries dissension, discord and rebellion into every home of the nation.
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> New York, 1873. [1]

Ramrod straight, eyes blazing with an inner fire, Suzanne B. Anthony spoke these words at the mid-point of her career as an ardent campaigner for the equality of women, an objective crystallized in the right to vote. In 1872, she had committed the crime of voting in a presidential election and was now standing trial for this offense. The courtroom itself became a platform for her ideas.

Who is this Susan B. Anthony revered by her twentieth century American feminist sisters? What had transformed this quiet Quaker into a firebrand of revolutionary ideas? What was it about her that incited Gertrude Stein to sing her praises in a short opera (1946) and the United States Government to mint a special dollar coin in her honor in 1979?

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1. Charles Hurd, *A Treasury of Great American Speeches*, New York: Hawthorne Books, 1959, p. 124.

Born in 1820 in Adams, Massachusetts, Susan B. Anthony's childhood seems to hold no hint of the woman to come. What does set her apart, and perhaps unwittingly laid the base for her future life's work, was the education she received. In keeping with the Quaker tradition, she received an education far richer than that of other girls of her time. Her father, who alternated between periods of prosperity and relative poverty, at one time even conducted classes in his own home. Later, Susan was among the few girls of her time who attended a female seminary, in her case, Deborah Moulson's Female Seminary, a Quaker boarding school in Pennsylvania. A glimmer of her future self-abnegation and dedication flickers in the background of her half year at this school in her search for perfection and her unfailing devotion to her work and her admiration of her female teachers. Some of her letters home also demonstrate her intense attachment to her family, an intensity and an attachment that will later be transferred to women and their rights as citizens.

After six months in this school in 1837, Susan returned home and began a career as a teacher, the only one considered acceptable for a woman. She earned $2.50 a week, one quarter of the salary earned by male teachers, and seemed unaware of or, at least, untouched by the injustice of this inequity. Young and untried, she was unprepared for the aggressiveness of dissatisfied parents and burst into tears on one occasion when displeasure with her methods was expressed. The young Susan is still a far cry from the mature woman who will not even flinch before the insults hurled at her during her public lecture tours.

From 1846 to 1849 (age 26-29), she held her last and most prestigious teaching position as headmistress of the Female Department at Canajoharie Academy in Rochester, New York — her family had moved to New York when she was still a child. She also began attending meetings of the Temperance League in Rochester and gave her first speech in 1849 as president of the local Daughters of Temperance.

It was in the context of these meetings that Susan B. Anthony was forced to recognize the incongruities inherent in the dichotomy between the roles assigned to women and those assumed by men. When she rose to speak at a Sons of Temperance meeting in Albany, New York in January, 1852, she was bluntly

told that "the sisters were not invited there to speak but to listen and learn."[2] The effect of this cutting rebuff was immediate. Stung into action by the so evident denial of a woman's ability to contribute anything of worth to serious deliberations and the resoundingly pompous paternalism of this statement, a new Susan B. Anthony, one who had been quietly taking form, emerged.

Followed by a number of other women, she stormed out of the meeting in protest and quickly organized a countermeeting. In April, she founded the Women's State Temperance Society. The following June, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the outspoken feminist whom Susan had met the previous year and with whom she would maintain a sometimes stormy yet always fruitful friendship and working relationship, was installed as president. The women of the organization appointed Susan as their agent and, as such, she set out on what was to become the pattern of her life: work on the front lines organizing, drawing up petitions, seeking signatures, raising funds, and lecturing. This tandem relationship between Anthony and Stanton would persist throughout their lives, the former dedicating every moment to the cause in what was often exhausting, ungratifying, unseen work and the latter alternating between lengthy periods with her husband and children and brilliant lecture series on feminist issues.

The new organization admitted men to its membership but, when in the following year the male members refused to allow women's issues, such as divorce or possession of property, to be included in their platform, the liberal members withdrew. Women's temperance work in New York came to a halt and Susan B. Anthony turned her attention fully and, henceforth, unfalteringly to the improvement of the situation of women in the United States. She even had her hair bobbed and wore, for approximately one year (1852-1853), the Bloomer outfit which consisted of a dress whose skirt came to about eight inches below the knee worn over a pair of wide trousers. This was the costume of the "ultras," those most radical and controversial of feminists. This garb amounted to something of a political statement and became the object of such ridicule that Susan finally abandoned it and wore instead, for the rest of her life, a simple black dress for all public appearances so as never to allow anything to distract from the message she wished to convey.

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2. Kathleen Barry, *Susan B. Anthony: A Biography of a Singular Feminist*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1988, p. 66.

In 1853, she attended the New York Teachers Convention of which two-thirds of the participants were women, women who were not accorded the right to speak. After listening to the male teachers discuss at length why their profession did not receive as much respect as doctors and lawyers, she asked to respond to the question. While the men were still debating as to the legitimacy of her demand, she simply took the floor and delivered the following thunderbolt:

> It seems to me that you fail to comprehend the cause of the disrespect of which you complain. Do you not see that so long as society says woman has not brains enough to be a doctor, lawyer or minister, but has plenty enough to be a teacher, every man of you who condescends to teach, tacitly admits before all Israel and the sun that he has no more brains than a woman.[3]

The shocked silence that followed was eloquent testimony to the accuracy of her aim.

1854 saw the beginning of a campaign in New York State that would last until 1860 and the passage of the Married Woman's Property Act by the New York legislature. In 1848 a law had been passed permitting married women to hold property in their own right. Anthony and Stanton joined forces to do battle for the extension of this law to include the right to control of wages earned and to child custody, in instances of divorce, and, of course, to the vote, woman suffrage. While Stanton, unable to leave her family, wrote the speeches, Susan delivered them, organized the petition drives, and collected signatures. Their efforts were rewarded by the passage of the law in 1860 granting control over wages, the right to sue, and equal rights for both partners in so far as the estate was concerned. Unfortunately, even this partial victory was short-lived; over the next ten years, the state legislature gradually rescinded the various articles.

During the same period, in 1856, the American Anti-Slavery Society asked Susan B. Anthony to become its New York agent. Having grown up in a home where such anti-slavery figures as Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison were frequently her father's guests, she herself was an ardent abolitionist. In addition, the parallel between the situation of women and of slaves was certainly not lost on her. She accepted the Society's proposal and swung into work with fervor, organizing lectures throughout the state and often giving them herself. Her confidence in her own oratorical skills began to grow and more and

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3. Barry, Ibid., p. 77.

more often she departed from prepared texts and spoke extemporaneously. The results were lectures burning with the ardor of her convictions.

The Presidential race of 1860 also drew on the energies of this woman who did not have the right to cast a vote. The New Republican Party was formed and Susan, together with other abolitionists, pushed for a platform of immediate emancipation of slaves rather than a platform of opposition to the extension of slavery into the territories or new states. This radical program elicited violent reactions that actually placed lecturers in danger. On one occasion, the mayor of Albany maintained order by sitting on the speakers' platform with a gun on his knees.

Throughout the Civil War, Anthony did everything in her power to advance the cause of the slaves. She, as the other feminists, allowed the rights of women to disappear from the foreground in order to free those held in physical bondage. Yet, the wording of the Fourteenth Amendment, formulated in 1865, proposed in 1866 and ratified in 1868, stung like a whiplash. Article I states the rights, privileges and protection due to all citizens and thus explicitly defines citizenship. Article II, with its triple repetition of the word "male" in relation to the process of electing representatives, implicitly accords the right to vote to men only.[4] The conclusion is obvious: only men, of any skin color, are citizens. Through this amendment, the abolitionists, together with the Republicans bent on punishing the South by enfranchising black men, were effectively excluding women from citizenship and the legal protections it implies.

Anthony's reaction was immediate. By the end of 1865 she and Stanton had organized an immense petition drive destined to inundate the Congress with demands for female suffrage, this in the face of the open opposition of abolitionists and Republicans who cloaked their true anti-feminist sentiments in proclamations of the "Negro's hour." Wendell Phillips blocked all attempts to coalesce the Anti-Slavery Society, of which he was president, with the women's rights associations meeting in a national convention in New York in 1866. Undaunted, Anthony proposed to the Convention the union of the antislavery and

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4. "All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction there-of, are citizens of the United States..." (Art. I) "... when the right to vote [...] is denied to any of the *male* inhabitants [...] the basis of representation therein shall be reduced in the proportion which the number of *male* citizens shall bear to the whole number of *male* citizens twenty-one years of age in such State." (Art. II) Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution (emphasis added).

woman's rights movements into a single association, the American Equal Rights Association that would "bury the woman in the citizen." Her resolution passed and the Association was formed but opposition from even liberal males continued on the pretext that the issue of woman suffrage would jeopardize the vote for black men.

In late summer, 1866, Anthony and Stanton campaigned vigorously throughout Kansas, dividing the state between them, for a State amendment giving women the vote. They won 9,000 of the 30,000 votes, almost a one-third showing in favor of woman suffrage. They were making progress in spite of overwhelming odds.

During this campaign, a Democrat who was completely unknown to Anthony, had proposed to campaign with her. George Train was against black male suffrage but Susan was not squeamish about working with him since the issue involved here was the female vote. He ultimately proved to be something of a disaster but, after the campaign, he offered to help Susan realize a cherished dream by loaning her the money necessary to create and publish a newspaper. She and Stanton accepted and returned East with their benefactor, lecturing on the way. Train seized every opportunity to publicly castigate the Republicans and abolitionists for their abandonment of the woman's cause.

A virulent response was not long in coming. Those attacked by Train quickly pointed the finger of scandal at Anthony for her affiliation with a known anti-black male suffrage campaigner and heaped abuse upon her both in the press and in public meetings. Privately, the American Equal Rights Association even accused her of misuse of their money. Calmly, she gave them her account ledgers and they acknowledged the exactness, to the penny, of her expenses. One more humiliation; one more confirmation of her absolute rectitude. Courageously, she refused to yield to these pressures and continued to set up her newspaper *The Revolution*.[5]

The first issue appeared on January 8, 1868. The paper's motto was "Men their rights and nothing more; women their rights and nothing less." It carried

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[5]. Research by Barry has proven that the Anthony-Train association was the result of a well-calculated plan on the part of Blackwell and Wood, two male liberals who wished to see Anthony discredited. Their goal was double: use Train to secure Democratic votes in Kansas and his association with Anthony to besmirch her reputation. (182-183)

articles on all controversial and radical issues related to women and reprinted Mary Wollstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" and John Stuart Mill's "The Subjection of Women". Unable to find financial backers because of the paper's controversial nature, the debts mounted until, heartbroken, Anthony had to surrender to the inevitable and abandon publication in 1870. All she retained from this major undertaking was a huge debt of ten thousand dollars, every cent of which she repaid by 1874 completely on her own. No one in the woman's movement, not even Stanton, offered to help her.

During this same period, Anthony and Stanton, together with Augusta Lewis, a journalist and the typesetter of *The Revolution*, founded the Working Woman's Association (1868). In response to discrimination against women in printing, Lewis also set up the Women's Typographical Union. Anthony manifested great sympathy and understanding for the working woman but, by 1869, the WWA consisted mostly of professional women such as journalists, lecturers, and writers. Women from the working class became conspicuous by their absence.

Anthony's basic philosophy is at the root of their disappearance. Earlier, she had failed to support the printers' strike of 1867 against the *New York World*. She went even further in 1869 and set up workshops to train unskilled women to replace the typesetters in the strike against bookbinders and printers, a strike strongly backed by the new women's union. Her explanation of this move is typical of her intention to help women improve their lot, no matter what:

> Well, of course, I am not in the Working Women's Association especially to advance men's wages; I am there specially to help women out of the kitchen and the sewing-room [...] and I said to girls who applied to me by the fifties, go in and learn your trade [...] I said to myself, they will have acquired a little education, a little help, and I will have helped them this much.[6]

Anthony was not affiliated with labor organizations; they were not her concern. Her field of action, her unique goal in life, was the improvement of the lot of women. And, for her, the only way to achieve this goal was through the vote. To advance this cause, educated women capable of speaking in public, of carrying the torch to every corner of the country, were needed. This meant women who would not be distracted from this task by that of earning enough to hold their families together. Therefore, it is not surprising that the working-class

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6. Barry, Ibid., p. 215.

woman is largely absent from the WWA. On the one hand, Anthony's actions drove away the dedicated unionists and, on the other, the working-class woman must have felt intimidated by the social level of the Association's major constituents.

Susan B. Anthony never made any apologies for this seeming contradiction between her concern for the working woman and the latter's exclusion from the WWA. For her, the reasons were evident. Once women had the vote, they could then change the laws, including those governing working conditions, by their combined voices at the ballot box. This radical concept was beyond the grasp of many working-class women. Thus, it is not surprising that, although she forced open the doors of the National Labor Union to women in 1868 and, in 1869, saw them included as representatives of women in the trades, she, herself, was excluded from their congress because of her position on Labor.

Not only had she managed to turn the abolitionists and the Republicans against her because of her association with Train but also Labor for not upholding strikes. Thrust into the national spotlight by these very controversies, she became a focal point for feminist issues and a beloved figure to a vast female constituency throughout the nation. By her fiftieth birthday in 1870, she had won a loyal following and a place in the national eye.

It was in this same year that the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution was ratified. It granted the right to vote to all citizens regardless of "race, color, or previous condition of servitude." Anthony had fought vigorously to include the word "sex" in the amendment but to no avail. Her intention had never been to deny the vote to black men but simply to extend it to women. When, at a meeting of the American Equal Rights Association in 1869, Frederick Douglass, the renowned black leader, stated that it was incomprehensible that anyone could imagine that the vote for women was as urgent as for black men, the room rocked with applause. Anthony quickly retorted that those applauding were all men and that Douglass himself "would not today exchange his sex and color with Elizabeth Cady Stanton." [7]

So began the fifty year struggle to have the word "sex" added to the list of non-impediments to the right to vote. At her fiftieth birthday celebration, Susan exhorted her followers to begin fighting for a sixteenth amendment giving women

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7. Barry, Ibid., p. 193.

the vote. She promised not to stop working until this had been achieved and, indeed, kept her word. She died before the amendment was ratified; by the time it was, in 1920, it had become the Nineteenth Amendment. Income taxes, election of senators by direct popular vote and liquor prohibition were all considered more important than allowing at least fifty percent of the American population to vote.

Faithful to her method of operation, Anthony set off to campaign for the new amendment. In November 1882, having satisfied the three month residency requirement, she fulfilled a resolution made in 1870 and voted in Rochester, New York in that year's election. That is, she, together with fourteen other women, committed the crime of voting. Throughout the United States, women had been registering and even sometimes succeeding in voting since 1868. Each time, they created a small local stir but, when Susan B. Anthony voted, she created a nation-wide furor, a sure measure of her national stature.

Three weeks later, she was arrested together with the other women. At the second hearing on December 23, each defendant was bound over for trial and released on bail. Susan alone refused to pay the bail of five hundred dollars. Based on her argument that she had exercized a right and not committed a crime, she applied for a writ of "habeas corpus," challenging the government's right to imprison her. She was released while awaiting action on the writ, probably to the great relief of the officials who did not want to improve her position by making her a martyr.

At the end of January, 1873, the writ was denied and the bail raised to one thousand dollars. Again, she refused to pay but her lawyer, against her objections, paid the sum himself. This gesture effectively prevented her from bringing her case before the Supreme Court, an event that would have placed the question of women's right to vote at the highest possible level. Her local trial began in June, 1873. She was denied the right to act as a witness in her own defense because, as a woman, she was considered incompetent. Her attorney pleaded on her behalf for three hours and, after the defense's rebuttal, the judge, United States Associate Justice Ward Hunt, drew out a paper with his prepared statement and gave his instruction to the jury to find Anthony guilty. Her lawyer objected; this was a criminal case involving trial by jury not decision by a judge.

What followed was both confusing and comic. The judge told the clerk of court to take the verdict from the jury which had not yet even deliberated. Anthony's attorney demanded that the jury be polled individually. The judge

dismissed the jury without hearing their verdict, either collective or individual. He then proceeded to prepare to pass sentence without any regard for justice or correct legal procedure.

Hunt ordered the defendant, in this case the condemned, to stand and he asked the traditional question: "Has the prisoner anything to say why sentence should not be pronounced?" Susan B. Anthony began a long and eloquent tirade against the injustices of a system that made her subordinate to any and all men and that abrogated her rights as a citizen. Over and over, the judge shouted at her to sit down, an order she blithely ignored until, having finished her speech, she concluded by saying that since justice was not possible, she requested not leniency "but rather the full rigor of the law." Once again, Hunt insisted that she sit. Having finished, she did so. At which point, seemingly having lost all control of the situation, he bellowed at her to stand and pronounced his sentence of a one hundred dollar fine and the costs of the trial.

Calmly, Anthony replied that she would never pay one penny of this "unjust penalty", this "unjust claim" but would, rather, "earnestly and persistently continue to urge all women to the practical recognition of the old Revolutionary maxim, 'Resistance to tyranny is obedience to God.'" Rather than imprisoning her until payment of the fine, as was usual in such cases, Hunt set her free. Amidst the general stupefaction caused by this apparently illogical decision, he swept from the courtroom leaving a stunned audience behind him.

For all his seeming bumbling, Hunt had manoeuvred with skill and intelligence. By not imprisoning Anthony, he had prevented her, as her own attorney had already done once before, from appealing to the Supreme Court. What he could not prevent, however, was the notoriety that accompanied the trial and the attendant transformation of its victim into a martyr, for some, a criminal, for others. In either case, Susan B. Anthony could no longer be ignored.[8]

Faithful to her promise not to stop working until women had the vote, Anthony spent the rest of her life either on the lecture circuit or lobbying in Washington. Her lectures took her throughout the United States — Utah, California, Oregon, Washington, Michigan, Colorado, Kansas, South Dakota, and, for the first time, the South in 1895 — anywhere where her voice could be raised for the cause.

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8. Barry, Ibid., pp. 255-57.

In 1883 she even travelled in Europe and the British Isles, a trip that led to the foundation of an international committee for women's rights, its first convention in Washington in 1888 and, ultimately, the creation of the International Council of Women. She returned to Europe to participate in meetings of the ICW in London in 1899 and Berlin in 1904.

Towards the end of the 1870s and in the 1880s, Anthony spent a part of each year lobbying in Washington for her cherished amendment. Her presence there had become so predictable, so much a fact of life, that the members of the Congress knew Spring had arrived when her red shawl brightened the city. Even those who did not agree with her came to admire her high principles, tenacity, and unswerving loyalty to the cause.

During these same years, she and Elizabeth Cady Stanton worked on the compilation of a history of the struggle to obtain the vote. The first volume of *The History of Woman Suffrage* appeared in 1881, the second in 1882, and the third in 1886. A fourth volume appeared in 1902, a collaboration of Anthony and Ida Husted Harper. The latter also worked with her to produce Anthony's official memoirs which appeared in three volumes published between 1898 and 1908. The two sets of works provide a precious mosaic of the feminist movement of the nineteenth century.

Finally, in 1890, the two major, and rival, suffrage organizations fused into the National American Woman Suffrage Association with Elizabeth Cady Stanton as president and Anthony as vice-president-at-large. As always, Anthony had played a crucial role in this major advance and, although she refused to occupy any position of superiority over Cady, was actually the driving force of the united groups. When, in 1891, she moved to Rochester, her absence in Washington was sorely felt. Even with a single representative body to campaign for the cause, the loss of the most vigorous and effective congressional lobbyist for female suffrage did not go unnoticed. Her many "nieces" carried on the Washington campaign but, in so far as the opponents were concerned, the battle had, perhaps, lost some of its snap with Anthony's withdrawal to her home in Rochester.

In 1900, after a long struggle culminating in a harrowing day of frantic fund raising, she succeeded in opening the doors of the University of Rochester to women. Refused, literally at the last moment because of a lack of two thousand dollars, she pledged her life insurance in order to reach the sum the university

demanded in order to agree to accept women. The toll of this effort on a woman of her age was almost fatal; she suffered a stroke the next day. Her recovery was slow and she never regained her full vigor.

On the occasion of her eighty-four birthday, a reception was held for her in the White House, a measure of the respect and honor accorded to this woman who had once been publicly vilified. True to form, she took advantage of the moment to speak with the President, Theodore Roosevelt, and exhort him to enfranchise women as Lincoln had enfranchised the slave.

In February, 1906, she made her last public appearance at a combined convention — birthday celebration. Weak, aware that she was dying, she closed her few remarks with the words: "Failure is impossible." One month later she died, surrounded by her "nieces," secure in the knowledge that the work she had begun, not only for the vote but for women's rights, would continue. Indeed, failure *is* impossible.

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