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The Crisis

Carrie Chapman Catt
September 7, 1916

I have taken for my subject, "The Crisis," because I believe that a crisis has come in our movement which, if recognized and the opportunity seized with vigor, enthusiasm and will, means the final victory of our great cause in the very near future.

I am aware that some suffragists do not share this belief; they see no signs nor symptoms today which were not present yesterday; no manifestations in the year 1916 which differ significantly from those in the year 1910.

To them, the movement has been a steady, normal growth from the beginning and must so continue until the end.

I can only defend my claim with the plea that it is better to imagine a crisis where none exists than to fail to recognize one when it comes; for a crisis is a culmination of events which calls for new considerations and new decisions.

A failure to answer the call may mean an opportunity lost, a possible victory postponed.

The object of the life of an organized movement is to secure its aim.

Necessarily, it must obey the law of evolution and pass through the stages of agitation and education and finally through the stage of realization.

As one has put it: "A new idea floats in the air over the heads of the people and for a long, indefinite period evades their understanding but, by and by, when through familiarity, human vision grows clearer, it is caught out of the clouds and crystallized into law."

Such a period comes to every movement and is its crisis.

In my judgment, that crucial moment, bidding us to renewed consecration and redoubled activity has come to our cause.

I believe our victory hangs within our grasp, inviting us to pluck it out of the clouds and establish it among the good things of the world.

If this be true, the time is past when we should say: "Men and women of America, look upon that wonderful idea up there; see, one day it will come down."

Instead, the time has come to shout aloud in every city, village and hamlet, and in tones so clear and jubilant that they will reverberate from every mountain peak and echo from shore to shore: "The woman's Hour has struck."

Suppose suffragists as a whole do not believe a crisis has come and do not extend their hands to grasp the victory, what will happen?

Why, we shall all continue to work and our cause will continue to hang, waiting for those who possess a clearer vision and more daring enterprise.

On the other hand, suppose we reach out with united earnestness and determination to grasp our victory while it still hangs a bit too high?

Has any harm been done?

None!

Therefore, fellow suffragists, I invite your attention to the signs which point to a crisis and your consideration of plans for turning the crisis into victory.

First, we are passing through a world crisis.

All thinkers of every land tell us so; and that nothing after the great war will be as it was before.

Those who profess to know, claim that 100 millions of dollars are being spent on the war every day and that 2 years of war have cost 50 billions of dollars or 10 times more than the total expense of the American Civil War.

Our own country has sent 35 millions of dollars abroad for relief expenses.

Were there no other effects to come from the world's war, the transfer of such unthinkable vast sums of money from the usual avenues to those wholly abnormal would give so severe a jolt to organized society that it would vibrate around the world and bring untold changes in its wake.

But three and a half millions of lives have been lost.

The number becomes the more impressive when it is remembered that the entire population of the American Colonies was little more than three and one-half millions.

These losses have been the lives of men within the age of economic production.

They have been taken abruptly from the normal business of the world and every human activity from that of the humblest, unskilled labor to art, science and literature has been weakened by their loss.

E Millions of other men will go to their homes, blind, crippled and incapacitated to do the work they once performed.

The stability of human institutions has never before suffered so tremendous a shock.

Great men are trying to think out the consequences but one and all proclaim that no imagination can find color or form bold enough to paint the picture of the world after the war.

British and Russian, German and Austrian, French and Italian agree that it will lead to social and political revolution throughout the entire world.

Whatever comes, they further agree that the war presages a total change in the status of women.

A simple-minded man in West Virginia, when addressed upon the subject of woman suffrage in that State, replied, "We've been so used to keepin' our women down, 'twould seem queer not to."

He expressed what greater men feel but do not say.

Had the wife of that man spoken in the same clear-thinking fashion, she would have said, "We women have been so used to being kept down that it would seem strange to get up.

Nature intended women for door-mats."

Had she so expressed herself, these two would have put the entire anti-suffrage argument in a nut-shell.

In Europe, from the Polar Circle to the Aegean Sea, women have risen as though to answer that argument.

E Everywhere they have taken the places made vacant by men and in so doing, they have grown in self-respect and in the esteem of their respective nations.

In every land, the people have reverted to the primitive division of labor and while the men have gone to war, women have cultivated the fields in order that the army and nation may be fed.

No army can succeed and no nation can endure without food; those who supply it are a war power and a peace power.

Women by the thousands have knocked at the doors of munition factories and, in the name of patriotism, have begged for the right to serve their country there.

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Their services were accepted with hesitation but the experiment once made, won reluctant but universal praise.

An official statement recently issued in Great Britain announced that 660,000 women were engaged in making munitions in that country alone.

In a recent convention of munition workers, composed of men and women, a resolution was unanimously passed informing the government that they would forego vacations and holidays until the authorities announced that their munition supplies were sufficient for the needs of the war and Great Britain pronounced the act the highest patriotism.

Lord Derby addressed such a meeting and said, "When the history of the war is written, I wonder to whom the greatest credit will be given; to the men who went to fight or to the women who are working in a way that many people hardly believed that it was possible for them to work."

Lord Sydenham added his tribute.

Said he, "It might fairly be claimed that women have helped to save thousands of lives and to change the entire aspect of the war.

Wherever intelligence, care and close attention have been needed, women have distinguished themselves."

A writer in the London Times of July 18, 1916, said: "But, for women, the armies could not have held the field for a month; the national call to arms could not have been made or sustained; the country would have perished of inanition and disorganization.

If, indeed, it be true that the people have been one, it is because the genius of women has been lavishly applied to the task of reinforcing and complementing the genius of men.

The qualities of steady industry, adaptability, good judgment and concentration of mind which men do not readily associate with women have been conspicuous features."

E On fields of battle, in regular and improvised hospitals, women have given tender and skilled care to the wounded and are credited with the restoration of life to many, heroism and self-sacrifice have been frankly acknowledged by all the governments; but their endurance, their skill, the practicality of their service, seem for the first time, to have been recognized by governments as "war power".

So, thinking in war terms, great men have suddenly discovered that women are "war assets".

Indeed, Europe is realizing, as it never did before, that women are holding together the civilization for which men are fighting.

A great search-light has been thrown upon the business of nation-building and it has been demonstrated in every European land that it is a partnership with equal, but different responsibilities resting upon the two partners.

It is not, however, in direct war work alone that the latent possibilities of women have been made manifest.

In all the belligerent lands, women have found their way to high posts of administration where no women would have been trusted two years ago and the testimony is overwhelming that they have filled their posts with entire satisfaction to the authorities.

They have dared to stand in pulpits (once too sacred to be touched by the unholy feet of a woman) and there, without protest, have appealed to the Father of All in behalf of their stricken lands.

They have come out of the kitchen where there was too little to cook and have found a way to live by driving cabs, motors and streetcars.

E Many a woman has turned her hungry children over to a neighbor and has gone forth to find food for both mothers and both families of children and has found it in strange places and occupations.

Many a drawing-room has been closed and the maid who swept and dusted it is now cleaning streets that the health of the city may be conserved.

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Many a woman who never before slept in a bed of her own making, or ate food not prepared by paid labor, is now sole mistress of parlor and kitchen.

In all the warring countries, women are postmen [sic], porters, railway conductors, ticket, switch and signal men.

Conspicuous advertisements invite women to attend agricultural, milking and motor-car schools.

They are employed as police in Great Britain and women detectives have recently been taken on the government staff.

In Berlin, there are over 3,000 women streetcar conductors and 3,500 women are employed on the general railways.

In every city and country, women are doing work for which they would have been considered incompetent two years ago.

The war will soon end and the armies will return to their native lands.

E To many a family, the men will never come back.

E The husband who returns to many a wife, will eat no bread the rest of his life save of her earning.

What then, will happen after the war?

E Will the widows left with families to support cheerfully leave their well-paid posts for those commanding lower wages?

Not without protest!

E Will the wives who now must support crippled husbands give up their skilled work and take up the occupations which were open to them before the war?

E Will they resignedly say: "The woman who has a healthy husband who can earn for her, has a right to tea and raisin cake, but the woman who earns for herself and a husband who has given his all to his country, must be content with butterless bread?"

Not without protest!

On the contrary, the economic axiom, denied and evaded for centuries, will be blazoned on every factory, counting house and shop: "Equal pay for equal work"; and common justice will slowly, but surely enforce that law.

The European woman has risen.

She may not realize it yet, but the woman "door-mat" in every land has unconsciously become a "door-jamb"!

She will have become accustomed to her new dignity by the time the men come home.

She will wonder how she ever could have been content lying across the threshold now that she discovers the upright jamb gives so much broader and more normal a vision of things.

The men returning may find the new order a bit queer but everything else will be strangely unfamiliar too, and they will soon grow accustomed to all the changes together.

The "jamb" will never descend into a "door-mat" again.

The male and female anti-suffragists of all lands will puff and blow at the economic change which will come to the women of Europe.

They will declare it to be contrary to Nature and to God's plan and that somebody ought to do something about it.

Suffragists will accept the change as the inevitable outcome of an unprecedented world's cataclysm over which no human agency had any control and will trust in God to adjust the altered circumstances to the eternal evolution of human society.

They will remember that in the long run, all things work together for good, for progress and for human weal.

The economic change is bound to bring political liberty.

From every land, there comes the expressed belief that the war will be followed by a mighty, oncoming wave of democracy for it is now well known that the conflict has been one of governments, of kings and Czars, Kaisers and Emperors; not of peoples.

The nations involved have nearly all declared that they are fighting to make an end of wars.

New and higher ideals of governments and of the rights of the people under them, have grown enormously during the past two years.

Another tide of political liberty, similar to that of 1848, but of a thousandfold greater momentum, is rising from battlefield and hospital, from camp and munitions factory, from home and church which, great men of many lands, tell us, is destined to sweep over the world.

On the continent, the women say, "It is certain that the vote will come to men and women after the war, perhaps not immediately but soon.

In Great Britain, which was the storm centre of the suffrage movement for some years before the war, hundreds of bitter, active opponents have confessed their conversion on account of the war services of women.

Already, three great provinces of Canada, Manitoba, Alberta, and Saskatchewan [sic], have given universal suffrage to their women in sheer generous appreciation of their war work.

Even Mr. Asquith, world renowned for his immovable opposition to the Parliamentary suffrage for British women, has given evidence of a change of view.

Some months ago, he announced his amazement at the utterly unexpected skill, strength and resource developed by the women and his gratitude for their loyalty and devotion.

Later, in reply to Mrs. Henry Fawcett, who asked if woman suffrage would be included in a proposed election bill, he said that when the war should end, such a measure would be considered without prejudice carried over from events prior to the war.

A public statement issued by Mr. Asquith in August, was couched in such terms as to be interpreted by many as a pledge to include women in the next election bill.

In Great Britain, a sordid appeal which may prove the last straw to break the opposition to woman suffrage, has been added to the enthusiastic appreciation of woman's patriotism and practical service and to the sudden comprehension that motherhood is a national asset which must be protected at any price.

A new voters' list is contemplated.

A parliamentary election should be held in September but the voters are scattered far and wide.

The whole nation is agitated over the questions involved in making a new register.

At the same time, there is a constant anxiety over war funds, as is prudent in a nation spending 50 millions of dollars per day.

It has been proposed that a large poll tax be assessed upon the voters of the new lists, whereupon a secondary proposal of great force has been offered and that is, that twice as much money would find its way into the public coffers were women added to the voters' list.

What nation, with compliments fresh spoken concerning women's patriotism and efficiency, could resist such an appeal?

So it happens that above the roar of cannon, the scream of shrapnel and the whirr of aeroplanes, one who listens may hear the cracking of the fetters which have long bound the European woman to outworn conventions.

It has been a frightful price to pay but the fact remains that a womanhood, well started on the way to final emancipation, is destined to step forth from the war.

E It will be a bewildered, troubled and grief-stricken womanhood with knotty problems of life to solve, but it will be freer to deal with them than women have ever been before.

"The Woman's Hour has struck."

It has struck for the women of Europe and for those of all the world.

The significance of the changed status of European women has not been lost upon the men and women of our land; our own people are not so unlearned in history, nor so lacking in National pride that they will allow the Republic to lag long behind the Empire, presided over by the descendant of George the Third.

If they possess the patriotism and the sense of nationality which should be the inheritance of an American, they will not wait until the war is ended but will boldly lead in the inevitable march of democracy, our own American specialty.

Sisters, let me repeat, the Woman's Hour has struck!

Second, as the most adamant rock gives way under the constant dripping of water, so the opposition to woman suffrage in our own country has slowly disintegrated before the increasing strength of our movement.

Turn backward the pages of our history!

E Behold, brave Abbie Kelley rotten-egged because she, a woman, essayed to speak in public.

E Behold the Polish Ernestine Rose startled that women of free America drew aside their skirts when she proposed that they should control their own property.

Recall the saintly Lucretia Mott and the legal-minded Elizabeth Cady Stanton, turned out of the World's Temperance convention in London and conspiring together to free their sex from the world's stupid oppressions.

E Remember the gentle, sweet-voiced Lucy Stone, egged because she publicly claimed that women had brains capable of education.

E Think upon Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, snubbed and boycotted by other women because she proposed to study medicine.

Behold Dr. Antoinette Brown Blackwell, standing in sweet serenity before an Assembly of howling clergymen, angry that she, a woman dared to attend a Temperance Convention as a delegate.

E Revere the intrepid Susan B. Anthony mobbed from Buffalo to Albany because she demanded fair play for women.

These are they who builded with others the foundation of political liberty for American women.

Those who came after only laid the stones in place.

Yet, what a wearisome task even that has been!

Think of the wonderful woman who has wandered from village to village, from city to city, for a generation compelling men and women to listen and to reflect by her matchless eloquence.

Where in all the world's history has any movement among men produced so invincible an advocate as our own Dr. Anna Howard Shaw?

Those whom she has led to the light are Legion.

E Think, too, of the consecration, the self-denial, the never-failing constancy of that other noble soul set in a frail but unflinching body -- the heroine we know as Alice Stone Blackwell!

A woman who never forgets, who detects the slightest flaw in the weapons of her adversary, who knows the most vulnerable spot in his armor, presides over the Woman's Journal and, like a lamp in a lighthouse, the rays of her intelligence, farsightedness and clear-thinking have enlightened the world concerning our cause.

The names of hundreds of other brave souls spring to memory when we pause to review the long struggle.

The hands of many suffrage master-masons have long been stilled; the names of many who laid the stones have been forgotten.

That does not matter.

The main thing is that the edifice of woman's liberty nears completion.

It is strong, indestructible.

All honor to the thousands who have helped in the building.

The four Corner-stones of the foundations were laid long years ago.

We read upon the first: "We demand for women education, for not a high school or college is open to her"; upon the second, "We demand for women religious liberty for in few churches is she permitted to pray or speak"; upon the third, "We demand for women the right to own property and an opportunity to earn an honest living."

Only six, poorly-paid occupations are open to her, and if she is married, the wages she earns are not hers"; upon the fourth, "We demand political freedom and its symbol, the vote."

The stones in the foundation have long been overgrown with the moss and mould of time, and some there are who never knew they were laid.

Of late, four cap-stones at the top have been set to match those in the base, and we read upon the first: "The number of women who are graduated from high schools, colleges and universities is legion"; upon the second, "The Christian Endeavor, that mighty, undenominational church militant, asks the vote for the women and the Methodist Episcopal Church, and many another, joins that appeal"; upon the third, "Billions of dollars worth of property are earned and owned by women; more than 8 millions of women are wage-earners.

Every occupation is open to them"; upon the fourth: "Women vote in 12 States; they share in the determination of 91 electoral votes."

After the cap-stones and cornice comes the roof.

Across the empty spaces, the roof-tree has been flung and fastened well in place.

It is not made of stone but of two planks -- planks in the platform of the two majority parties, and these are well supported by planks in the platforms of all minority parties.

And we who are the builders of 1916, do we see a crisis?

Standing upon these planks which are stretched across the top-most peak of this edifice of woman's liberty, what shall we do?

Over our heads, up there in the clouds, but tantalizingly near, hangs the roof of our edifice -- the vote.

What is our duty?

Shall we spend time in admiring the capstones and cornice?

Shall we lament the tragedies which accompanied the laying of the cornerstones? or, shall we, like the builders of old, chant, "Ho! all hands, all hands, heave to!

All hands, heave to!" and while we chant, grasp the overhanging roof and with a long pull, a strong pull and a pull together, fix it in place forevermore?

Is the crisis real or imaginary?

If it be real, it calls for action, bold, immediate and decisive.

Let us then take measure of our strength.

Our cause has won the endorsement of all political parties.

Every candidate for the presidency is a suffragist.

It has won the endorsement of most churches; it has won the hearty approval of all great organizations of women.

It was won the support of all reform movements; it has won the progressives of every variety.

The majority of the press in most States is with us.

Great men in every political party, church and movement are with us.

The names of the greatest men and women of art, science, literature and philosophy, reform, religion and politics are on our lists.

We have not won the reactionaries of any party, church or society, and we never will.

From the beginning of things, there have been Antis.

The Antis drove Moses out of Egypt; they crucified Christ who said, "Love thy neighbor as thyself"; they have persecuted Jews in all parts of the world; they poisoned Socrates, the great philosopher; they cruelly persecuted Copernicus and Galileo, the first great scientists; they burned Giordano Bruno at the stake because he believed the world was round; they burned Savonarola who warred upon church corruption; they burned Eufame McIllyane because she used an anaesthetic; they burned Joan d'Arc for a heretic; they have sent great men and women to Siberia to eat their hearts out in isolation; they burned in effigy William Lloyd Garrison; they egged Abbie Kelley and Lucy Stone and mobbed Susan B. Anthony.

Yet, in proportion to the enlightenment of their respective ages, these Antis were persons of intelligence and honest purpose.

They were merely deaf to the call of Progress and were enraged because the world insisted upon moving on.

Antis male and female there still are and will be to the end of time.

Give to them a prayer of forgiveness for they know not what they do; and prepare for the forward march.

We have not won the ignorant and illiterate and we never can.

They are too undeveloped mentally to understand that the institutions of today are not those of yesterday nor will be those of tomorrow.

We have not won the forces of evil and we never will.

Evil has ever been timorous and suspicious of all change.

It is an instinctive act of self-preservation which makes it fear and consequently oppose votes for women.

As the Hon.

Champ Clark said the other day: "Some good and intelligent people are opposed to woman suffrage; but all the ignorant and evil-minded are against it."

These three forces are the enemies of our cause.

Before the vote is won, there must and will be a gigantic final conflict between the forces of progress, righteousness and democracy and the forces of ignorance, evil and reaction.

That struggle may be postponed, but it cannot be evaded or avoided.

There is no question as to which side will be the victor.

Shall we play the coward, then, and leave the hard knocks for our daughters, or shall we throw ourselves into the fray, bare our own shoulders to the blows, and thus bequeath to them a politically liberated womanhood?

We have taken note of our gains and of our resources! and they are all we could wish.

Before the final struggle, we must take cognizance of our weaknesses.

Are we prepared to grasp the victory?

Alas, no! our movement is like a great Niagara with a vast volume of water tumbling over its ledge but turning no wheel.

Our organized machinery is set for the propagandistic stage and not for the seizure of victory.

Our supporters are spreading the argument for our cause; they feel no sense of responsibility for the realization of our hopes.

Our movement lacks cohesion, organization, unity and consequent momentum.

Behind us, in front of us, everywhere about us are suffragists -- millions of them, but inactive and silent.

They have been "agitated and educated" and are with us in belief.

E There are thousands of women who have at one time or another been members of our organization but they have dropped out because, to them the movement seemed negative and pointless.

Many have taken up other work whose results were more immediate.

Philanthropy, charity, work for corrective laws of various kinds, temperance, relief for working women and numberless similar public services have called them.

Others have turned to the pleasanter avenues of clubwork, art or literature.

There are thousands of other women who have never learned of the earlier struggles of our movement.

They found doors of opportunity open to them on every side.

E They found well-paid posts awaiting the qualified woman and they have availed themselves of all these blessings; almost without exception they believe in the vote but they feel neither gratitude to those who opened the doors through which they have entered to economic liberty nor any sense of obligation to open other doors for those who come after. T

E There are still others who, timorously looking over their shoulders to see if any listeners be near, will tell us they hope we will win and win soon but they are too frightened of Mother Grundy to help.

There are others too occupied with the small things of life to help.

They say they could find time to vote but not to work for the vote.

There are men, too, millions of them, waiting to be called.

These men and women are our reserves.

They are largely unorganized and untrained soldiers with little responsibility toward our movement.

Yet these reserves must be mobilized.

The final struggle needs their numbers and the momentum those numbers will bring.

Were never another convert made, there are suffragists enough in this country, if combined, to make so irresistible a driving force that victory might be seized at once.

How can it be done?

By a simple change of mental attitude.

If we are to seize the victory, that change must take place in this hall, here and now!

The old belief, which has sustained suffragists in many an hour of discouragement, "woman suffrage is bound to come," must give way to the new, "The Woman's Hour has struck."

The long drawn out struggle, the cruel hostility which, for years was arrayed against our cause, have accustomed suffragists to the idea of indefinite postponement but eventual victory.

The slogan of a movements sets its pace. T

The old one counseled patience; it said, there is plenty of time; it pardoned sloth and half-hearted effort. T

It set the pace of an educational campaign.

The "Woman's Hour has struck" sets the pace of a crusade which will have its way.

It says: "Awake, arise, my sisters, let your hearts be filled with joy -- the time of victory is here.

Onward March."

If you believe with me that a crisis has come to our movement -- if you believe that the time for final action is now, if you catch the rosy tints of the coming day, what does it mean to you?

Does it not give you a thrill of exaltation; does the blood not course more quickly through your veins; does it not bring a new sense of freedom, of joy and of determination?

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Is it not true that you who wanted a little time ago to lay down the work because you were weary with long service, now, under the compelling influence of a changed mental attitude, are ready to go on until the vote is won.

The change is one of spirit!

Aye, and the spiritual effect upon you will come to others.

Let me borrow an expression from Honorable John Finlay: What our great movement needs now is a "mobilization of spirit" -- the jubilant, glad spirit of victory.

Then let us sound a bugle call here and now to the women of the Nation: "The Woman's Hour has struck."

Let the bugle sound from the suffrage headquarters of every State at the inauguration of a State campaign.

Let the call go forth again and, again and yet again.

Let it be repeated in every article written, in every speech made, in every conversation held.

Let the bugle blow again and yet again.

The Political emancipation of our sex calls you: Women of America, arise!

Are you content that others shall pay the price of your liberty?

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Women in schools and counting house, in shops and on the farm, women in the home with babes at their breasts and women engaged in public careers will hear.

The veins of American women are not filled with milk and water.

They are neither cowards nor slackers.

They will come.

They only await the bugle call to learn that the final battle is on.