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# Holes in the Historical Record: The Politics of Torture in Great Britain, the United States, and Argentina, 1869-1977

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**CLAREMONT McKENNA COLLEGE**

**Holes in the Historical Record: The Politics of Torture in Great Britain, the United States, and Argentina, 1869-1977**

SUBMITTED TO

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FOR

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## Introduction

In class in high school, my history teacher had a single poster that he never removed, despite changing all of the other posters in his classroom each summer. A quote by George Santayana, it read, in large font placed over a blurred image of the German concentration camp at Auschwitz: “Those who don’t know the past are condemned to repeat it.”

It is very easy to think of history as a progressive, ever-improving continuum. Learning about the violence and bloodshed spanning every major event emphasized in high school curriculum in the United States, for instance, from the Civil War to World War I or World War II to the Civil Rights Movement, it was comforting to think that these events had already happened—at the fault of *other* people, entirely different from those in today’s society, in *my* society—and it was easy to blame the people of the past with the benefit of viewing these events with twenty-twenty hindsight. Such hindsight, however, can also be used as a lens to point out the shocking similarities between seemingly different societies and circumstances, and the use of violence and terror as a means to control or subdue a group of people or a single person. How do governments respond to internal crises? Do we acknowledge violent aspects of the historical record that are not in the context of war?

As part of the generation growing up in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, terror is portrayed in the United States as a recent, contemporary phenomenon—the result of unprovoked religious extremism in the singular, isolated area of the Middle East. Contrary to public opinion, however, U.S. government law broadly states in its legal definition that terrorism is, “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by substantial groups of clandestine agents.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in the *Journal of Ethics*, Jeremy Waldron defines terrorists in a similarly expansive context, merely as people who use “violence in a particular way, aiming at certain kinds of intermediate results *en route* to their ultimate ends.”<sup>2</sup> Terror, and the people who use it as a means to reach “intermediate results,” as Waldron terms it, can be viewed as a tool by which the use of planned, purposeful violence achieves, or attempts to achieve, an end goal against unarmed victims. Terror is the use of violence as a political tool.

More importantly, such violence as a political tool has been repeatedly employed against female activists as a premeditated, purposeful strategy across differing regions, nations, and time periods. From the Rape of the Sabine Women in Ancient Greece to the burning of Joan of Arc at the stake to the Salem Witch Trials, women have been the victims of overzealous, irrational political tactics at the hands of male government leaders.<sup>3</sup> More recently, in Great Britain with the extension of the Contagious Diseases

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<sup>1</sup> “Legislative Requirements and Key Terms,” US Department of State, US Code, Title 22, Section 2656f,

<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Waldron, “Terrorism and the Uses of Terror,” *The Journal of Ethics* 8.1 (2004): 5, accessed December 22, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25115779>.

<sup>3</sup> Hundreds of Sabine women were kidnapped by Roman soldiers in what is now referred to as the Rape of the Sabine Women. The women were allegedly kidnapped as a source of leverage for Romans amid negotiations with Sabine government representatives. With the case of Joan of Arc, she was burned at the stake in France as matter of advancing diplomatic relations between the French and the English. Lastly, in

Act in 1866, the United States during the Women's Suffrage Movement leading up to the amendment of the national Constitution in 1920, and in Argentina during the Junta dictatorship's *Guerra Sucia* from 1976 to 1983, women were brutally tortured at the hands of their own domestic government forces in an attempt to be silenced.<sup>4</sup> Even with the twenty-twenty hindsight of the present to dissect these separate events, it is difficult, if not impossible, to discern the exact perpetrators of the crimes that were committed against women. Is it possible for a state to charge someone with the crime of physical harassment, physical torture or murder when a state apparatus is responsible for perpetrating such suffering? Or is it systemic? This leads to the more perplexing question—is the person committing the physical act of violence against these female activists the sole person to blame?

Looking at these three markedly differing, separate cases, the governments of each of these countries effectively employed similar acts of intimidation and terror and violated what we now recognize as the inalienable human rights of human beings, including these female activists. Although these three cases are distinct from one other for multiple reasons, all three occurred as swift, decisive government action amid a lack of media coverage and following the direct confrontation of a single government leader or group of leaders. In these cases, Great Britain, the United States, and Argentina had different government structures, different leaders, different legal systems, and different

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the United States, women were killed by hanging following the Salem Witch Trials in Massachusetts illuminating the gaps in due process.

<sup>4</sup> La Guerra Sucia refers to what is more commonly known, at least in the United States, as the Dirty War in Argentina. This process of government reorganization, however, is more accurately referred to as *El Proceso*, meaning the process.



militaries, but each responded to an individual, unarmed female activist in the same way: with violence.

While Josephine Butler in Great Britain was fighting for the rights of women to protect their bodies, Alice Paul in the United States was fighting for the right for women to vote, and Azucena Villaflor in Argentina was fighting for information on the locations of innocent civilians incorrectly labeled government subversives, all three governments in each activist's respective country of residence responded by utilizing public intimidation, kidnapping, torture, and, with the case of Villaflor, murder, in an attempt to silence the women. In all three cases, the political activism of women resulted in unjust acts of government-sponsored terrorism and the violation of fundamental human rights.

#### Government-Administered Torture and Human Rights

Perpetrators of unfathomable acts of violence against unarmed individuals are not always crazed, radical individuals—monsters psychologically compartmentalized as “the other.” Similarly, such perpetrators do not always exist independently of the government. Rather, perpetrators of torture and murder, counter to common knowledge, often act *on behalf* of their domestic governments. As governments exist to maintain systems of laws, to uphold justice, and to attempt to ensure that violent individuals do not endanger innocent members of society, threats or possible dangers are misidentified, often purposely, and, more notably, mishandled.

The continued use of torture, and the inevitable violation of human rights that accompanies the physical or psychological attached sufferings, raises important questions about the objects of such a crude, barbaric act. It would appear that something more

important than the physical wellbeing of the individual being tortured takes precedent over the pain of the tortured in these situations. Why does the repetitive implementation of torture against women, resulting in severe, unnoticed human rights violations occur? Is the build up to physical torture gradual? Is the state justified in determining circumstances under which human rights should be blatantly disregarded?

The concept of human rights emerged with the rise in importance allotted to the single, independent individual throughout the eighteenth century. By the end of the century, it was solidified with Thomas Jefferson's argument that rights were self-evident merely on account of biological existence.<sup>5</sup> George Mason first articulated the existence of what he termed the "rights of man" in the Virginia Declaration of Rights in 1776. The indisputable existence of natural rights, applicable to all of mankind, again is acknowledged in the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen in France in 1789.<sup>6</sup> A central paradox emerging from these otherwise positive declarations, however, revolves around the need to assert the existence of these rights in an official document in the first place. The assertion of the existence of human rights in these documents validates the need to argue for their existence; if they were self-evident, they would not need to be asserted in a declaration. Nonetheless, these three documents, along with documents of similar type, such as the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, written in 1948 and ratified in 1949, collectively endorse three tenets: rights must be natural—that is, inherent—rights must be equal—that

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Jefferson explored the basis for human rights and articulated specific, necessary, and universal human rights in writing multiple drafts of the Declaration of Independence in 1776.

<sup>6</sup> Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 18.

is, the same for all—and rights must be universal—that is, applicable across the globe, regardless of differences in domestic forms of government.

Despite undeniable progress over the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries in articulating the existence of human rights, human rights and violations of human rights still are not universally defined or enforced. The differing components of human rights, whether according to a prestigious international body like the United Nations or the average individual, continue to vary based on reason and the ability to empathize.<sup>7</sup> Reason has repeatedly approved of the existence of the natural rights of man, as different political leaders, whether in the United States, France, or in a collective body of nations, have written and ratified multiple declarations.<sup>8</sup> With social and political changes, however, the ability to internalize the sufferings of others is consistently changing. The distinct emotion of the individual fosters a one-of-a-kind definition of the specifics of which fundamental rights should be granted to each being. Lynn Hunt explains this phenomenon in greater detail in *Inventing Human Rights: A History*, describing, “empathy depends on the recognition that others feel and think as we do, that our inner feelings are alike in some fundamental fashion...to have rights go along with [our] bodily separation a person’s selfhood must be appreciated in some more emotional fashion.” Reason is not the only determinant allowing us to grant one another human rights. We use emotions to recognize that other individuals, although separate, autonomous beings share something in common with us. Thus, despite an inherent

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<sup>7</sup> For more on the theory that reason and human emotion are inextricably intertwined in spurring the constantly evolving accepted standards of human rights, see Lynn Hunt’s *Inventing Human Rights*, pages 26-34.

<sup>8</sup> Declaration of Independence (United States, 1776), Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen (France, 1789), and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (adopted by forty eight countries in the United Nations in 1948)

separateness, as humans experiencing the same situations and enduring the same emotions, we realize our similarities. Hunt continues, “Human rights depend both on self-possession and on the recognition that all others are equally self-possessed.”<sup>9</sup> Sometimes, however, such recognition that others are equally self-possessed fails to materialize. Instead, groupthink allows for the politicization of someone as an enemy of state—as the other. As a result, human rights are often violated due to the absence of the ability to empathize with the sufferings of others.

Lack of empathy, despite good judgment, can help explain why women, universally, were denied fundamental human rights before the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> Reason, as asserted in the Declaration of Independence and Declaration of Rights of Man, respectively, dictated, “all men are created equal” and “men are born and remain free and equal in rights.” Similarly, each Declaration explicitly defined rights as “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” or “liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression.”<sup>11</sup> Yet two world powers, the United States and France, founded to secure these accepted rights and to derive power from the consent of the governed, denied these necessities to half of the body of people granting such consent—women. Whether stemming from a biological or psychological basis, men disregarded the rights of women for more than one hundred years. Was this merely negligence? Have social interactions between the sexes increased to sufficient levels for men to relate to the necessity of rights for women as well? Or is such empathy continually changing amid shifts in political context?

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<sup>9</sup> Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*, 29.

<sup>10</sup> The first nation to grant women universal suffrage was New Zealand in 1893.

<sup>11</sup> Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*, Appendix.

When we explore the treatment of female political activists in late Victorian Great Britain, the post-Great War United States, and post-Peronist Argentina, it is important to clarify a mutually applicable definition of human rights than can accommodate the experiences and feelings such women in all three places, instead of foisting our own expectations on the past. In this thesis, I propose, as does historian Lynn Hunt and other western scholars, that human right is grounded in the fundamental integrity and ownership of each individual's human body; specifically, the right to protection from any violence inflicted to cause pain to the human body.

As a scholar of human rights, I have an unusual personal history in which I have been always aware of the limitations and power of my body. While, based on reason, I acknowledge the importance of human rights as commonly accepted, my emotional basis for valuing human rights, and my ability to empathize with the sufferings of other individuals, is specific. Born with a joint disease called arthrogyrosis, I spent many nights of my childhood in a hospital bed, recovering from orthopedic surgeries. One pivotal moment in particular, at the age of eight years old, sticks out in my emotional pedigree as a lasting source of anxiety. I had just undergone a procedure to insert four staples in my knee, and it was my third day in the hospital. IV needles were not yet plastic, but rather in the 1990s they were still unpliant, sharp needles. A new male nurse came on shift and tried to proceed with the normal routine of changing the IV fluid and administering morphine directly to my IV using a syringe. Given my petite stature, however, the needle did not remain connected to my vein. I felt the needle completely slip out and shift positions. Despite my plea to the nurse that he temporarily halt the injection, so that the needle could be properly reinserted to my vein, this aggressive

attendant ignored me, a mere child assumed to be unversed in formal medical procedure. The nurse, simply repeating, “You’re fine,” continued without further justification or concern. After a seemingly perpetual sixty seconds, my hand started shaking violently and visibly gushing blood. The vein had popped, and, thanks to the multiple incisions made by repeated bouts of jerking the needle around the area of its previous residency, blood vigorously burst out of my hand and down my arm. The nurse, suddenly slacking his previous clenched lower jaw, simply stared at me. My voice had been rendered silent. I had endured pain, and been left with a sizable scar on my hand, all at the fault of someone else. The nurse, unsympathetic, inserted another IV into my other hand and left the room to visit the patient next door. No one knew about my sufferings or my physical pain; no one was punished. One of thousands of patients in the hospital system, I was rendered silent and alone after such an abrupt, pointless experience of suffering. No evidence documented my pain, no one in the public knew of my helpless state, and no one benefited—not even the nurse, the perpetrator.

After self-reflection, it is evident that, thirteen years later, the emotions from this experience have strongly dictated my personal sense of human rights. More importantly, because of such an experience, I hold a central value in challenging a specific violation of human rights: security of an individual’s body from violence wrongly inflicted by others. I understand the experience of an American patient in a hospital bed subject to violence and pain at the hands of an inexperienced nurse does not compare to the experiences of political prisoners. Nonetheless, the pain experienced as a result of this physical violence elicits an emotional understanding for those whose bodily integrity is violated now and in times past. As Elaine Scarry points out in her book *The Body in Pain*, physical pain,

excluding the psychological impacts, is without object and cannot be adequately described, either in a written or pictured representation. Pain cannot be adequately articulated—only experienced.<sup>12</sup>

The violence faced by political prisoners, and the resulting physical and emotional pain resulting from such a total loss of control over one's human body, in our post-1948 world, is a legal violation of the "rights of man."<sup>13</sup> After more than two hundred years of discussion, the principle that each person has a right to his or her inviolable person, as a physical and psychological body, was validated and defined in the United Nations' 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Specifically, articles three, five, and nineteen postulate these fundamental rights. In Article Three of this Declaration, it states, "Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person."<sup>14</sup> Such a security of person, however, is further explored and defined. Article Five details, "No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment." While cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatments and punishments are open to some interpretation and welcome debate on further definitions for specific examples of these three types of treatments, it is indisputable that, at a base level, torturous acts, and those that are cruel, inhuman or degrading inflict bodily pain.

In addition to protecting individuals from physical pain against their will, the Declaration of Human Rights further and specifically protects all individuals, and thus political activists, from such punishment merely on account of differing ideology. Article

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<sup>12</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 306.

<sup>13</sup> The vague phrase commonly used in both the Declaration of Independence and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen.

<sup>14</sup> "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights," United Nations, accessed January 28, 2014, <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>.

Nineteen of the Declaration states, “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”<sup>15</sup> The Declaration validates the common belief that each individual inherently holds opinions and beliefs differing from those of others; subsequently, it ensures the protection of individuals holding such diverse opinions. Furthermore, the Declaration allows individuals to share their opinions with any form of media or expression. The Declaration was adopted by Great Britain, the United States, and Argentina, voting members of the United Nations, on December 10, 1948.

While Josephine Butler and Alice Paul both advocated for changes in their governments pre-1948, before the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, this Declaration solidified pre-existing, accepted norms. The Bill of Rights of 1689 in Great Britain granted Members of Parliament freedom of speech and the Libel Act of 1792 expanded this free speech as it granted the power to decide the legality of criminal libels to juries, ending the previous authority of government-employed judges. Although Great Britain did not have a formalized law granting free speech, such a right is inherently favored in its system of common law. Additionally, in the United States, freedom of speech was directly supported under the ratification of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1791.

Human rights law protecting the physical body from the infliction of physical pain and violence by others based on differing viewpoints, however, does not apply to leaders of the government systems that exist to protect these very rights. Domestically, outside of

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<sup>15</sup> “The Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”



the international context of the United Nations, governments may individually choose whether or not to enforce the accepted human rights standards of the Universal Declaration. Both pre-1948 and post-1948, governments have violated, and continue to violate, articles three, five, and nineteen of the Declaration. Governments continue to commonly violate the rights of their own citizens in perpetuating torture and inflicting pain on noncombatant, unarmed political activists.

As the concept of inalienable human rights has its roots in the Enlightenment and French and American Revolutions, the word “terror”—inflicting violence on the innocent to achieve political means—originated in France during the Revolution of 1789-1794. From 1793 to 1794, during the “Reign of Terror” in France, it is estimated that 17,000 executions took place legally, with an additional 23,000 illegally performed by representatives of the French government.<sup>16</sup> Overall, this time period, often historically grouped to include 1793 to 1795, when an additional 200,000 people were killed, was deemed the first of its kind—one of terror. Historians attribute such a designation due to the epidemic of “state-organized or state-backed visitation of violence on France’s dissident citizenry.”<sup>17</sup> Therefore, it was after the French Revolution that the meaning of the term terror expanded to apply to multiple types of human rights violations.

It is important to recognize that widespread violations of human rights, and terror, are systemic. While the word terror is currently widely used in the vernaculars of Great Britain, the United States, and Argentina, this has not always been the case. Initially, terror applied only to violent government-perpetrated acts to intimidate and silence—

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<sup>16</sup> Charles Tilly, “Terror, Terrorism, Terrorists,” *Sociological Theory* 22.1 (March 2004): 8, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3648955>.

<sup>17</sup> Tilly, “Terror,” 9.

often quite literally, with death—its constituency. Only recently and *later* did the term expand to include attacks by foreign opponents. Although the word terror is often misused in the current political context, both its original and current meaning include the effect it has on others, outside of those directly injured by torturous, violent acts. In the article “Terror, Terrorism, and Terrorists,” Charles Tilly concludes, “In addition to whatever harm [terror] inflicts directly, it sends signals—signals that the target is vulnerable, that the perpetrators exist, and that the perpetrators have the capacity to strike again.” These psychological signals permeating through a society after acts of violence reach three particular groups: the targets of the violence, potential partners or allies of the perpetrators, and, most importantly, members of the public who then are coerced to cooperate with the perpetrators. Inflicting violence on the innocent is successful as a strategy because of its impact on all three of these groups. Tilly summarizes the effectiveness of such physical violence when used by government systems. He concludes, “terror works...[as] it alters or inhibits the target’s disapproved behavior, fortifies the perpetrators’ standing with potential allies, and moves third parties [often the general public] toward greater cooperation with the perpetrators’ organization and announced program.”<sup>18</sup>

Violating human rights by means of physical violence is not a new phenomenon and, similarly, neither is the forced silence that results from the deployment of terror. Inflicting pain on a single, non-violent individual inevitably signals, whether consciously or subconsciously, to a larger group of people that the human rights violations can continue in a longer-term power struggle. Governments continue to play central roles in

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<sup>18</sup> Tilly, “Terror,” 9.

advocating such violations and, despite the recent focus of the United States government on the terrorist acts of extremists or minorities, it is historically more often the case that governments utilize violence as a tool on their citizens to evoke silence and complacency. The very minorities that are now exhibiting terrorism as a vocal point of their political strategy are, in fact, the same groups that undoubtedly endured violent acts of terror previously.

No act of violence, or the infliction of physical pain, is justifiable based on differing opinion or viewpoint—regardless of if the perpetrator acts on behalf of a government entity, another existing entity or out of individual malice. Nonetheless, torture inflicted by a government works especially effectively to instill fear in all third parties observers, usually the common citizenry, as a gradual onslaught of bystander apathy effectively further prevents such citizens from protesting such a disregard for accepted standards of human rights. The experiences of women enduring government-perpetrated torture particularly serve as interesting case studies to trace violations of human rights, given the nature of the resulting intimidation and inaction in domestic civilian populations. While women are often considered delicate, weak members of society in Great Britain, the United States, and Argentina, the political activism of Butler, Alice Paul, and Azucena Villaflor was met with particularly strong and unjustifiable aggressive resistance from their respective governments.

The experiences of Butler, Paul, and Villaflor in Great Britain, the United States, and Argentina, respectively, over a time period of more than one hundred years, exemplify the reoccurring nature and seeming ease of violating human rights. Despite the popular public viewpoint of human nature as a progressive society, a common thread in

the historical record remains as similar circumstances repeatedly allow for the occurrence of atrocities *increasing* in severity.

As this thesis will show, these three cases studies demonstrate that advocacy efforts directly confronting male government leaders resulted in repressive, state forces inflicting torture and violence on female noncombatants. Secondly, a suppression of the citizenry and the media, due to the attempt to forcibly silence political foes, fosters the emergence of an environment unsympathetic and socialized to accept harmful violence. Until government leaders consistently maintain transparency of information with their constituents through open media sources and are held accountable for the acts of violence and torture they encourage of political activists, violations of human rights against innocent women will continue to escalate in severity.

## Chapter 1

### Great Britain: Josephine Butler and the Contagious Diseases Acts

Josephine Butler revised the second edition of her controversial book *Personal Reminiscences of a Great Crusade*, in 1898, first published in 1893 in London, to begin, “Our long years of labour and conflict on behalf of this just cause, ought not be forgotten.”<sup>19</sup> The book sufficiently details her multifaceted activism combatting, and repealing, government policy that legalized the existing double standard between men and women in Victorian England. Yet despite her tireless, unwavering commitment to ensuring basic bodily human rights for women, the *Times* generalizes her achievements in her obituary from January 2, 1907 stating that Butler exhibited a love for “unhappy women” in the British Empire in the late nineteenth century.<sup>20</sup> A mere twenty one years after Butler successfully led male members of Parliament to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts, London’s premier information source fails to acknowledge the monumental impact of her efforts on blatant Parliamentary and public gender biases. While only remembered as “an almost ideal woman” by the *Times*, Butler single-handedly forced needed social reform, giving a voice not only to the unhappy women of Great Britain, but all women; her advocacy spurred recognition of the sexual exploitation

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<sup>19</sup> Josephine Butler, *Personal Reminiscences of a Great Crusade* (Westport: Hyperion Press, 1976), v.

<sup>20</sup> Editorial Board, “Obituary Notice of Mrs. Butler,” *Times*, January 2, 1907; reprinted in Josephine Butler, *Personal Reminiscences of a Great Crusade* (Westport: Hyperion Press, 1976), vii.

of poor and ideal women alike amid the formal norms of the Victorian era. Thirty-eight years before women could hold any form of political office and forty-nine years before women would gain partial suffrage, Butler used political strategizing and dedication to unveil the state-supported torture of women.

Butler credited her attempts to change discriminative government policy in a statement published in her own obituary in *The Times* exclaiming, “I love my country. It is because of my great love for her...that I will not cease to denounce the crimes committed in her name, so long as I have life and breath.”<sup>21</sup> Her relentless activism, despite domestic opposition given accepted gender roles in Victorian England, improved the individual human rights granted to women. As Parliament enacted and subsequently repealed her “Cause,” the Contagious Diseases Acts, Butler subsisted in a society that did not acknowledge the purpose of women beyond procreation. In *The Victorian Lady*, Barbara Rees contextualizes Britain at the end of the twentieth century: “It was a thrustful, pushing age. Fortunes were made and lost very rapidly indeed. But the women were kept apart from the struggle—decorative, leisured, and of no commercial value except in the marriage market.”<sup>22</sup> Butler challenged this norm and forcefully entered the political arena. In an age when reputation, centered only on affluence of the family and, only secondly, education, designated a genuine Victorian lady, women concentrated on social privilege, acceptable conduct, and “proper” feelings. Glen Petrie additionally describes Butler’s epoch in *A Singular Iniquity*, explaining, “It must be remembered...that in the conventional meaning of the word, she was not a ‘feminist’, and, as we have seen, found it difficult to have sympathetic relations with...feminists.

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<sup>21</sup> Editorial Board, “Obituary Notice of Mrs. Butler.”

<sup>22</sup> Barbara Rees, *The Victorian Lady* (London: Gordon & Cremonesi, 1977), 10-11.

She was, if anything, profoundly conservative, and believed, for all her activity, that her first duty was to her husband and her children.”<sup>23</sup> This duty, nonetheless, quickly changed and expanded as she dedicated sixteen years of her life to ensuring bodily rights for women in Great Britain. As her obituary in *The Times* ends, Butler used her “powerful mind, and a soul purged through fire,” and changed the acceptable role for the ideal woman.<sup>24</sup>

### Background

While Josephine Elizabeth Grey did not always intend to serve as a force for lasting social change in Great Britain, she followed the lead of role models in her own life. Her family was a member of the aristocracy, the Tankervilles and the Greys both members of the House of Lords in British Parliament. Her father was loosely involved in the Abolition of the Slave Trade and advocated, as Josephine phrases it, broadly for the “individual”. His genuine respect for the rights of the individual is visible in a letter he wrote to *The Times*. In this printed letter, her father argues, “you cannot treat men and women exactly as you do one-pound notes, to be used or rejected as you think proper.”<sup>25</sup> In addition to the influence of the teachings of her father, Butler’s dedication to an equal and just society stemmed from her devout upbringing. Nancy Boyd describes the religious nature of Butler’s father in *Three Victorian Women Who Changed Their World*. Boyd writes, Butler’s father “felt strongly that all men and women are equal in the sight of God. There are no spiritual distinctions between male and female, rich and poor,

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<sup>23</sup> Glen Petrie, *A Singular Iniquity: The Campaigns of Josephine Butler* (New York: The Viking Press, 1971), 89.

<sup>24</sup> Editorial Board, “Obituary Notice of Mrs. Butler.”

<sup>25</sup> Butler, *Personal Reminiscences*, xiii.

gentleman and farmer, educated and uneducated.”<sup>26</sup> Yet given her exposure to an environment of equality in her youth, Butler was aware of the sufferings of others. Boyd describes Butler’s inner-struggle to rationalize her life of privilege. While Butler was,



**Image 1.** A young Josephine Butler shortly after her marriage to George Butler in 1852.

“blessed with the protection of material prosperity, set in the bright family circle, she had always been sensitive to the contrast between her own secure life and the fragile existence of others, specifically women. Her reading was largely a history of death and oppression.”<sup>27</sup> From a young age, Butler demonstrated an interest in dissecting the greatest ills of society from ancient Rome through the looming public memory of the Crimean War of 1853 to 1856.<sup>28</sup> Later in her own book *Personal Reminiscences of a Great Crusade*, Butler reflects on the important role of her vast historical knowledge in spurring her activism. On the first page of her book, Butler writes, “History, in recounting the saturnalia of vice in Asia Minor, in Greece, and especially in Imperial

<sup>26</sup> Nancy Body, *Three Victorian Women Who Changed Their World: Josephine Butler, Octavia Hill, Florence Nightingale* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 25.

<sup>27</sup> Boyd, *Three Victorian Women*, 30.

<sup>28</sup> The Crimean War was the first war involving Great Britain to be widely documented with photographs and written reports available in multiple sources of media.



Rome, narrates horrors which cause us to shudder. But never, either in Rome, or in Athens, or even in Corinth, was the spectacle witnessed of public abodes of shame kept open by the State.”<sup>29</sup> Butler’s life as an activist would serve to expand such public knowledge of state regulation and control in Great Britain. Overall, her religious faith, instilled by her father, served as an unwavering force. Boyd credits, “Josephine was a radical Christian, committed by birth, temperament, and training to the establishment of a just society.”<sup>30</sup>

Butler’s early life followed stereotypical norms for women of her social class in Victorian Great Britain. In 1852, at the age of twenty-four, Butler married George Butler. During the first five years of their marriage, the couple lived at Oxford University. At Oxford, Butler experienced significant restrictions, based on her sex. In her book, Butler recounts of her time at Oxford, “Every instinct of womanhood within me was already in revolt against certain accepted theories in society.”<sup>31</sup> Overall, Butler was not impressed with the supposedly “educated” role of scholars, specifically their inability to act on existing societal problems. Boyd expands on Butler’s perspective of Oxford and its languid intellectual body, “The chief charge which she [Butler] brought against this ‘educated public opinion’ was that it refused to deal with most of the pressing human problems of the day. One might discuss the merits of different translations of Thucydides, but the double standard of sexual morality must not be questioned. If a woman became pregnant, she—not her seducer—was held to be at fault.”<sup>32</sup> At Oxford, Butler identified the existence of troubling restrictions on the action of British women. As she sat with her

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<sup>29</sup> Butler, *Personal Reminiscences*, 1.

<sup>30</sup> Boyd, *Three Victorian Women*, 15.

<sup>31</sup> Butler, *Personal Reminiscences*, xiv.

<sup>32</sup> Boyd, *Three Victorian Women*, 33.

husband and his male friends in the evenings, discussing current events, she became acutely aware of government-imposed economic limitations facing women. While Butler's husband agreed with his wife on the existence of such an inhibiting standard, Butler remained in her proper position, and could not always readily join the debate. Boyd describes the change in Butler's perspective while at Oxford: "Josephine saw full employment for men was bought at the price of enforced idleness for women. If the responsibilities and duties of marriage and motherhood had been available to all women, this might have been tolerable. In a society in which there was a surplus of women, it was intolerable."<sup>33</sup> Butler learned about the existing laws restricting women from professors as *recent* developments following the Industrial Revolution. As during her childhood, Butler again gained an expanded consciousness for the privilege she experienced, even in the mere act of being married amid the grand surplus of women.

#### Her Pivotal Moment

Butler's life permanently changed in 1863 when her six-year-old daughter, Eva, died in an accident. As Butler and George entered their home from an evening out, their four children raced down the stairs to greet their parents. As Eva ran down the stairs, however, she tripped and fell over the bannister—landing just inches from her mother's feet. A few hours later, Eva died. Butler recounts, "Never can I lose that memory—the fall, the sudden cry, and then the silence... Would to God that I had died that death for her."<sup>34</sup> Eva's death sparked awareness in Butler of her seeming failure as a mother and, similarly, of her narrowed role as a woman in the first place. Presented with the apparent

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<sup>33</sup> Boyd, *Three Victorian Women*, 79.

<sup>34</sup> Boyd, *Three Victorian Women*, 35.

failure of her womanhood in her apparent inability to ensure the survival and safety of her daughter, Butler became severely depressed. The following year, amid an inner emotional struggle, Butler and her family moved to Liverpool to escape the haunting memories and to allow George to serve as Headmaster at Liverpool College.

An expansive seaport and shipping community, Liverpool allowed Butler to witness rampant poverty and suffering. She wrote of her new home, “I became possessed with an irresistible desire to go forth, and find some pain keener than my own—to meet with people more unhappy than myself (for I knew there were thousands of such).”<sup>35</sup>

Both the death of her daughter and her outside perspective, moving to a new city, offered Butler a heightened level of empathy and the ability to relate to the problems endured by those around her. Butler further describes, “I did not exaggerate my own trial; I only knew that my heart ached night and day, and that the only solace possible would seem to find other hearts which ached night and day; and with more reason than mine.”<sup>36</sup>

For the first time since her daughter’s death the previous year, in 1863, Butler realized women around her faced much greater suffering than she did—repeatedly and daily. Butler attributes witnessing women facing such physical and continual suffering with allowing her “to draw down upon my head an avalanche of miserable, but grateful womanhood.”<sup>37</sup> Acutely aware of her sex and its role as narrowly dictated by Victorian society, Butler recognized the greater inhibitions adversely impacting women, especially women of the lower classes.

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<sup>35</sup> Boyd, *Three Victorian Women*, 37.

<sup>36</sup> Boyd, *Three Victorian Women*, 37.

<sup>37</sup> Butler, *Personal Reminiscences*, xv.

Butler found her initial escape from the depression resulting from her daughter's death at the Brownlow Hill Workhouse in Liverpool in 1864. As a volunteer, Butler focused her efforts on any activities allowing her to engage directly with the women at the workhouse. Often, Butler physically participated in work with the women to converse with them and to better understand *why* the female inmates suffered. Butler no longer viewed poverty as a necessity in society, but rather as part of a greater system of injustice facing women. Unlike other respectable women of her age, who merely comforted the inmates as a source of comparison to feel better about their own lives, Butler wanted to understand the greater cause prompting their suffering. Why had these women ended up in this position? Was it their direct fault? What was the real cause?

The workhouse exposed Butler to the inescapable and inextricable relationship between poverty and prostitution in Great Britain during the late nineteenth century. In expansive ports, such as Liverpool, women engaged in prostitution as desperate final attempts to avoid moving from poverty to a life on the streets, and possible extinction. Glen Petrie, a historian who closely examined Butler's rise to activism, contextualizes the differences between prostitution in the modern world and Victorian Britain, explaining, "The modern prostitute...calls to the passing male, 'Feeling lonely, sweetheart?' or some other phrase indicating that, for a small consideration, she is prepared to confer a favour on him. Her predecessor of the 1860s invariably called out, 'Feeling good-natured, Charlie?'—the wheedling cry of the beggar."<sup>38</sup> Prostitution thus was a way to stay alive, rather than an intentional occupational choice. More notably, prostitutes infected with venereal diseases were often left to die. Any prostitute with such a disease did not have

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<sup>38</sup> Petrie, *A Singular Iniquity*, 70.

alternative options to pursue, but rather was abandoned in the streets unable to seek refuge or pursue the already extremely limited forms of work available to poor women.

Prostitution as an industry of occupation remained a reality entirely separated from women in the middle and upper classes. For unmarried women, or girls—as the age of consent was twelve years of age—of the lower class, prostitution, conversely, was very visible. In 1851 in Great Britain there were more than two and a half million unmarried adult females. By 1861, this figure increased to nearly three million. By 1871, there were more than 3.2 million unmarried adult women.<sup>39</sup> As domestic services alone could not support the employment of such a large number of women, prostitution remained the alternative. In 1858, it is estimated that one sixth of unmarried women between the ages of fifteen and fifty engaged in prostitution for subsistence—eighty three thousand women. Overall, the *Westminster Review* varied the number of prostitutes between fifty thousand and three hundred and sixty thousand. Police estimates, drastically lower than other estimates available, state there were more than five thousand prostitutes in the city of London and nearly twenty five thousand across both England and Wales. Some figures from French commentators placed the number of prostitutes in London at two hundred and twenty thousand in the 1860s.<sup>40</sup> In *Josephine Butler: Flame of Fire* by E. Moberly Bell, she describes, “Every man knew, of course, about prostitutes; there always had been such and no doubt always would be; the less said about them the better. The important

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<sup>39</sup> Petri, *A Singular Iniquity*, 78.

<sup>40</sup> E.M. Sigsworth and T.J. Wyke, “A Study of Victorian Prostitution and Venereal Disease,” in *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, ed. Martha Vicinus, (New York: Routledge, 1972), 2.

thing was to ensure that his wife and daughters should hear nothing. They were far too pure and innocent even to know of the existence of vice.”<sup>41</sup>

After recognizing the dire circumstances faced by women straddling the gap between poverty and prostitution, Butler decided to act to create a space of refuge for such women. In 1866, Butler initially opened her own home, and subsequently opened a separate, independent space, called the Home of Rest. Butler sought and received funding



**Image 2.** A drawing of a poor girl attempting to prostitute herself at a market. In 1875, the age of consent in Victorian Britain increased from 12 to 13 years old. While the age was increased a decade later, it remains 16 years old in Great Britain.

from a group of rich men to establish the space—the initial capital easily secured, she credits, due to her born social class.<sup>42</sup> The space was intended for the unmarried, young women, usually plagued by prostitution and poverty. The Home of Rest offered a safe, stable living place for women and, innovatively, also served as a coupled job source. Women living in the house were required to work. Initially, many of the women earned a

<sup>41</sup> E. Moberly Bell, *Josephine Butler: Flame of Fire*, (London: Constable and Company Ltd, 1963), 71.

<sup>42</sup> Bell, *Josephine Butler*, 72.

living by sewing. As the House expanded in residents, the women also created a thriving envelope factory inside the House.<sup>43</sup>

In 1869, Butler's work with the Home of the Rest expanded into advocacy as she joined the recently founded Ladies National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts as the secretary. The Contagious Diseases Acts, which been passed by Parliament in 1864, 1866, and 1869, gave police the right to identify women in the street as prostitutes and make them legally undergo a venereal examination. Divisions between the written law and its imposed enforcement ensued as the initial Contagious Diseases Acts of 1866 stipulated that prostitutes, not necessarily all women *suspected of* prostitution, must undergo medical examinations to test for venereal diseases. More specifically, the Acts required prostitutes to voluntarily complete such examinations at least once every twelve months, but no more than once every six months, as regulated by the government. A second round of the Contagious Diseases Acts, however, passed in 1868 to tighten restrictions on the pre-existing law. The successive Acts extended the law's application and included enforced hospitalization for women suspected of prostitution or women with venereal diseases. Such hospitalization was permitted for up to nine months and included "moral and religious instruction" while women presumed prostitutes were confined to hospitals. In her biography of Butler, Bell writes, "The Acts horrified her. They established a corps of special police, not in uniform, centrally appointed and not, as other police, under the control of the local authority. To these men

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<sup>43</sup> Bell, *Josephine Butler*, 71.

was entrusted the business of making and keeping a list of licensed prostitutes, who must submit to regular medical examination.”<sup>44</sup>

While the Acts were only initially enforced in port or garrison towns, the subsequent versions in 1866 and 1869 attempted to expand enforcement of the intrusive law to additional cities in the north of England. This expansion, however, was met with resistance as Butler and other prominent Victorian women, such as Florence Nightingale and Harriet Martineau, joined together to protest this physically intrusive government regulation. Judith Walkowitz, a historian of Butler and the Contagious Diseases Acts, describes, “Female participation in the repeal campaign astonished and perplexed the press and the British public, unused as they were to women speaking.”<sup>45</sup> In this context, Butler began her tenure as an unprecedented, female activist in Great Britain by using her distinguished class standing to promote the rights of females of the lower classes over a sixteen-year period.

#### Political Advocacy:

Butler and the greater Ladies National Association, established in 1869, resulted to political activism against the British Government as the full ramifications of the Acts and the physical abuses that took place at the will of the police were realized in 1869. For instance, one woman named Caroline Wyburgh of Chatham—more properly termed a girl, as she was nineteen years old—was brutally subject to the Contagious Diseases Acts merely for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Wyburgh, similar to the many

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<sup>44</sup> Bell, *Josephine Butler*, 71-72.

<sup>45</sup> Judith R. Walkowitz, “Butler, Josephine Elizabeth (1828-1906),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), accessed February 15, 2014, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/32214?docPos=1>.



women involved in prostitution, endlessly straddled the line between poverty and a life on the streets amid the surplus of women in Victorian England. She rented out a single room with her mother, barely earning enough to stay alive by scrubbing basements and doorsteps for a penny or two per cleaning job. Glen Petrie, who examined this particular case in the context of other human rights violations that legally took place during the tenure of the Contagious Diseases Acts, argues Wyburgh was “generally held to be a good girl, sober, honest, industrious and never home late.”<sup>46</sup> Nonetheless, one evening as Wyburgh was leaving work for home, she stepped out of a building behind a soldier. Allegedly, due to her appearance in worn clothing and her presence outside at night, a policeman nearby assumed Wyburgh was a prostitute. As a result, Inspector Wakeford of the Metropolitan Police arrived at Wyburgh’s residence to require she undergo a government-regulated, vaginal and genital examination. When Wyburgh initially refused, Wakeford allegedly informed Wyburgh that the alternate option was to be forcibly placed in Maidston Gaol, a hard labor camp, for three months.<sup>47</sup>

Ultimately, this threat was enough to persuade Wyburgh’s mother to push her daughter to undergo the venereal disease examination, regardless of the negative social ramifications. Her mother could not subsist without the additional wages provided by her daughter’s work. Petrie grimly describes Wyburgh’s subsequent treatment, “At the police station, she was presented with a piece of paper and ordered, since she was illiterate, to make her mark. She did so, carefully stating at the same time that she ‘had always been a good girl.’ Since the paper was a form of ‘voluntary submission’ her statement was

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<sup>46</sup> Petrie, *A Singular Iniquity*, 105.

<sup>47</sup> Petrie, *A Singular Iniquity*, 105.

ignored.”<sup>48</sup> Once in view of the surgical instruments, with her legs forcibly clamped in metal stirrups, Wyburgh refused to submit to the examination. As a result, she was taken to a Lock Ward, where she was strapped into a bed, unable to leave, and only provided with black tea and dry bread. After five days in such solitary confinement, she agreed to an examination—on the stipulation that it be performed in the absence of medical tools. Nonetheless, male police officers disregarded Wyburgh’s rights to her own physical being as an innocent civilian and forced Wyburgh into a straight jacket and clamped her feet into locked stirrups, once again. To keep her from resisting, an additional male assistant used his elbow, sharply forced down on Wyburgh’s breasts, to keep her from moving.<sup>49</sup> Still attempting to resist a vaginal examination with the unknown surgical instruments and unknown male government employees, Wyburgh rolled off the exam table, onto the floor, with her feet still locked in the stirrups—leading police reports to use the term “serious injury” to describe her resulting condition. Wyburgh’s mother, waiting outside the room, recalled to Butler that the police doctor *laughed* after the examination was complete and told Wyburgh, “Well, now you can go home. You have been telling the truth. You are not a ‘bad girl.’”<sup>50</sup> Before Wyburgh was able to leave, she was told that she was not allowed to tell anyone what happened, although, she did not follow this request. She left this experience emotionally traumatized, physically injured, and permanently disbarred from getting married.

Butler’s exposure to Wyburgh’s sufferings and identical experiences of other women pushed her to dedicate her energies to the repeal of the Acts, regardless of the

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<sup>48</sup> Petrie, *A Singular Iniquity*, 106.

<sup>49</sup> Petrie, *A Singular Iniquity*, 106.

<sup>50</sup> Petrie, *A Singular Iniquity*, 106.

possible negative ramifications in her personal life. Boyd illuminates Butler's courage in making the conscious decision to fight both the police and the British Government, explaining, "Seventeen years later [after marriage and childrearing] this well-bred woman of position who had found exceptional personal happiness in the institutions of marriage and motherhood chose to leave the security of her home and to embark on a course that led to social ostracism, violence, and the horror."<sup>51</sup> With the support of her husband, Butler sought to contain the human rights violations of the government's regulation of prostitution. Butler lamented over the public embarrassment and harassment she would inevitably subject her husband to with such an advocacy campaign, writing "I could not bear the thought of making my dear companion a sharer of the pain; yet I saw that we must be united in this as in everything else. I had tried to arrange to suffer alone but I could not *act* alone, if God should indeed call me to action."<sup>52</sup> Butler continues, "weeks of self-questioning and hesitation" followed her immediate decision to combat the Acts and the Government's immoral and unjust physical degradation of its female constituency. After witnessing police examinations in which women were removed from exam rooms unconscious, with a "flooding of blood" behind them, however, she did not question her decision after 1869.<sup>53</sup>

Butler spoke publicly to bring the plight of these women to audiences in Liverpool and across Great Britain. Butler writes, "If I may use the simile, the example of Qunitus Curtius of old Roman fame, and to leap into this yawning gulf in order that the nation's wound might close again. But this Roman hero, I had read, met his fate fully

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<sup>51</sup> Boyd, *Three Victorian Women*, 31.

<sup>52</sup> Boyd, *Three Victorian Women*, 40.

<sup>53</sup> Boyd, *Three Victorian Women*, 36.

equipped, armed from head to foot, fearless, and in the perfection of self-reunification. I felt that, for such an enterprise, I should require nothing less than ‘the whole armour of God.’”<sup>54</sup> Butler embarked on a dual campaign to address both the mistreatment of women suspected of prostitution by the police and the justification behind state regulation of prostitution by Members of Parliament. After joining the Ladies National Association, Butler visited the garrison towns of Maidstone and Dover. During this visit, she noted in her journal that no attempt was made to prevent men from spreading venereal disease. Men contracting sexually transmitted diseases were never isolated or obliged to refrain from spreading disease—illegally or legally.

Butler quickly realized the police played a central role in this unjust policy. Butler wrote of her observations in Dover, “The honest working girl was subjected to a permanent threat of blackmail—it required only one information laid at a police station,



**Image 3.** A neighborhood of the “daughters of the poor” in London, where women who were unmarried or widowed vastly outnumbered the number of men in the area.

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<sup>54</sup> Butler, *Personal Reminiscences*, 7-8.

one badly scrawled and unsigned note, stating that a certain girl had been seen with soldiers, for that girl, if she belonged to the working classes, to be summoned for medical inspection; hundreds of such information were laid as acts of spite, as acts of revenge...or as crude practical jokes.”<sup>55</sup> As Butler previously identified the expanding link between prostitution and the poor, the police took advantage of this expansion in subjecting innocent women to the medical examinations legally dictated by Acts. According to the police, the “principle difficulty,” as Butler termed it, surrounded identifying servant-girls or laboring women who maintained steady employment yet also supplemented their wages with prostitution. As a result, Butler writes, “plainclothes officers were seconded from the Metropolitan Police to the garrison towns, with orders to summon before a magistrate any woman they had cause to suspect was a prostitute. Should a woman fail to comply with such an order she could be detained at the magistrates’ discretion, and be subjected to imprisonment with hard labour.”<sup>56</sup>

The major injustice surrounding the Acts, in addition to the resulting human rights violations from the examinations, was the faulty identification of innocent women as prostitutes. Women presented before the magistrates, after being identified by plainclothes officers, were forcibly subjected to medical examinations, regardless of existing counter evidence related to personal character or reputation. All females of the lower class were presumed guilty, rather than innocent and subjected at the will of the police to violent vaginal medical exams performed by unknown, male doctors.

Butler never applied a singular subject to illuminate whom it was that advocated for such a repeal. Butler did focus the blame, however, on men in the upper class and

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<sup>55</sup> Boyd, *Three Victorian Women*, 19.

<sup>56</sup> Butler, *Personal Reminiscences*, 13-14.

Members of Parliament. She describes in her journal the moral dilemma she faced knowing “men of gentle and loveable natures, ‘true gentlemen’, generous and ever ready to do a kind act...at the same time have been ‘possessed’ by a spirit of impurity [seeking prostitution].”<sup>57</sup> Harriet Martineau, often cited as the first female sociologist, similarly identified the inherent, government-supported inequality and acceptance of impurity in the need for the Acts in the first place. Before Butler took action to advocate for the repeal of the laws in 1869, Martineau wrote to the *Daily News* to explain her disdain for the Acts: “There can be no resistance to seduction, procuration, disease, regulation, *once the original necessity is granted*. Further, the admission involves civil as well as military society, and starts them together on the road which leads down to what moralists of all ages and nations have called the lowest hell.” Martineau’s article continues, “It is a national disgrace that our people should have ever been asked to regard and treat their soldiers and sailors as pre-destined fornicators.”<sup>58</sup>

Motivated by articles written on the injustice of the Contagious Diseases Acts, Butler dedicated her life to a series of public speaking and multifaceted media campaigns to repeal the Acts. Butler was somewhat late in her advocacy efforts, starting three years after the initial passage of the Acts in 1866. With hindsight, Butler remembers her reaction to the Acts initial passage in 1866, dramatizing “The depression which took possession of my mind was overwhelming.”<sup>59</sup> Nonetheless, she voluntarily decided to “enter into this cloud,” as she described her dedication to the repeal of the Acts. Following the lead of other activists working to repeal the Acts, Butler strove to attract

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<sup>57</sup> Boyd, *Three Victorian Women*, 89.

<sup>58</sup> Butler, *Personal Reminiscences*, 3-4.

<sup>59</sup> Petrie, *A Singular Iniquity*, 86.

attention to the Acts injustices and rampant human rights violations by public speaking—an unprecedented tactic that was uncharacteristic of Victorian women.

Butler delivered her first public speech opposed to the Acts in Crewe, England in 1870. She spoke in a venue called Popular Hall in front of an audience widely dominated by male railway engineers.<sup>60</sup> Butler also published articles in the *Daily News*, following Martineau’s lead in leveraging increasing literacy rates in Great Britain. Petrie justifies Butler’s bold first moves as an activist, explaining “Josephine was well aware of her own talents; she knew that, while others were capable of engaging in direct rescue work, she possessed the influence in political and academic circles to work for, and perhaps win, a nation-wide struggle against the Acts.”<sup>61</sup>

After her first speech in Crewe in 1870, Butler continued to speak publicly to the working class inhabitants of England. She spoke to large audiences in Leeds, York, Sunderland, Newcastle and Carlisle. Butler allegedly declared in her speech at Carlisle, “The first obstacle we find is these chains imposed by legislation upon the frail and fallen (of one sex only, and that the weaker) to bring them under a legal bondage, to a recognized and superintended shame.”<sup>62</sup> This strong rhetoric was meant to illuminate previous symbols and restrictions placed on the lower class in pre-Victorian England. By using powerful imagery, such as is imagined by chains, many in the middle and lower classes started to gain an increased consciousness for their class and the many pre-existing levels of bondage imposed on them by the British Government. Butler captivated her male audiences with the idea that Great Britain’s innocent daughters were being

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<sup>60</sup> Petrie, *A Singular Iniquity*, 88.

<sup>61</sup> Petrie, *A Singular Iniquity*, 88.

<sup>62</sup> Petrie, *A Singular Iniquity*, 92.

abducted by the police and raped by medical equipment on behalf of government-employed, male doctors.

In addition to public speaking, Butler organized committee of workers to endorse and sign multiple Declaration of Policy petitions after each speaking engagement. Each Declaration, written and printed before each speech by Butler, outlined eight policies for change. The first major offense, according to Butler, was that the law, “had not, hitherto, discriminated between men and women. The Acts, however, constitute just such a discrimination. Moreover, a significant alteration to the Constitution...has been passed through Parliament without the knowledge or consent of the electorate as a whole.”<sup>63</sup> From the start, Butler asserts her two major criticism of the Acts: their discrimination against women and their wide implementation without public approval, outside of Parliament. The second criticism states, “the Acts placed the liberty, reputation, and persons of young women entirely into the hands of the police.” This argument catered to the predominantly male demographic of her audiences, and was intended to illicit the unregulated role of the police wrongly and permanently tarnishing the lives of their innocent daughters. The third criticism, similarly, exemplifies Butler’s disdain for the role of the police in enforcing the Acts. It reads, “When an individual is detained by the police, the Law clearly demands that the office for which he is detained should be publicly stated. The Acts constituted a complete disregard for that demand.” Butler carefully uses the pronoun “he”, demonstrating the male makeup of her audiences, and, once again, asserts that the Acts fundamentally changed a key tenet of British Law.

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<sup>63</sup> Petrie, *A Singular Iniquity*, 93.



After covering the three basics of how the Acts affect the human rights standards of all British citizens, Butler's final five complaints firmly apply only to women and the extending negative ramifications of the Acts in the context of the norms enjoyed by the rest of the civilized world—which she defines as France and Prussia. While the modern terminology of a feminist did not yet exist, Butler proudly proclaims in the fourth demand, what can be assumed as the one least read by members of the respective Declaration committees, it is “manifestly unjust to punish one partner only for the practice of a vice which obviously required two participants. Particularly it is unjust since the female partner is all too frequently the social and moral victim, in effect the consequence of the vice, rather than its root cause.” This criticism was the first appearance of a powerful ideological framework that Butler would implement in successive battles in repeal of the Acts. The Acts' legitimization of a “moral vice” was one argument that Parliament and members of Butler's aristocracy class had difficulty countering, especially given the strong ties between the church and state in Great Britain.

The remaining four criticisms focus in on the injustices of only forcing women, not men, to undergo either medical examinations or, alternatively, forced labor and the expansive effects and ramifications of the Acts on British society and the greater Western world. As Butler closes the Declaration with the eighth criticism reading, “By imposing a system of ‘regulated’ vice, Society is divesting itself of the responsibility of examining the social and moral causes of that vice.”<sup>64</sup> Overall, her first argument in the Declaration and her last both offer her strongest points that appealed to a wide audience.

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<sup>64</sup> Petrie, *A Singular Iniquity*, 94.

### The British Government Responds:

Two years into Butler's advocacy efforts, in 1871, after collecting more than two hundred and fifty thousands signatures on respective Declarations to repeal the Acts, a Royal Commission held a series of hearings to consider if the Acts should be repealed. William Fowler, a Member of Parliament, submitted a bill to repeal the Acts in May of 1870. In early 1871, hearings on what Parliament vaguely termed "the matter" began.<sup>65</sup> Butler, in between traveling to speak against the Acts, appeared before the Royal Commission framing the Acts as the government regulation of prostitution, and thus support of prostitution—a mere act of the exploitation of the poor by the rich. With the recent abolition of slavery still in public memory, Butler drew parallels between the two, submitting in written testimony to the Commission: "I have seen girls bought and sold just as young girls were, at the time of the slave trade. Are you not aware that there are young gentlemen among the higher classes who will pay?...I will set a floodlight on your doings—I mean the immorality which exists among gentlemen of the upper class."<sup>66</sup> Before verbally testifying in front of the Lords comprising the Royal Commission, Butler insinuates in her written testimony that the Lords themselves are the ones benefitting from the law and engaging in prostitution. Conversely, in her wide public speaking engagements, often geared towards farmers, she warned of the dangers of daughters suffering against their will. While she similarly used police's objectification of innocent daughters appeal when speaking to the Anglican church network of her own class as well, Butler purposely changed her rhetoric for the Royal Commission. Members of the Royal

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<sup>65</sup> "Butler's Legacy," last modified 2006, <http://www.jbs.webeden.co.uk/#/timeline-1824-1891/4549457111>.

<sup>66</sup> Boyd, *Three Victorian Women*, 44.

Commission, in turn, focused the blame on female prostitutes. The Commission generated a confidential written response after Butler's oral and written testimony for the King opposing the repeal of the Acts.<sup>67</sup>

According to London College archives, the Commission wrote candidly to the reviewing Royal body, using Butler's rhetoric against her, explaining, "The absence of public solicitation [for prostitution] is a material gain to public decency and morality. It is hardly disputed that a sensible improvement has been observed in the streets in the conduct and demeanour of the women since the Acts came into operation. Soldiers and sailors under the influence of drink are no longer importuned and seized upon by filthy prostitutes as they were in former days."<sup>68</sup> While the Lords re-assert their firm belief of the instigation of prostitution by women only, they do address the counter-argument that



**Image 4.** A drawing of the medical examination performed by the British Government on women suspected of prostitution under the Contagious Diseases Acts.

soldiers should undergo medical examinations as well as prostitutes. The Commission responds directly to Butler's request for equal medical examinations, regardless of gender, writing, "Witnesses have urged that...on grounds of justice as expediency,

<sup>67</sup> "Royal Commission into Contagious Diseases (1871)," University of London, Queen Mary and Birkbeck College, accessed February 28, 2014, <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/deviance/sexuality/41-3-2%20rc.htm>.

<sup>68</sup> "Royal Commission into Contagious Diseases (1871)."

soldiers and sailors should be subjected to regular examinations. We may at once dispose of this recommendation...it is founded on the principle of putting both parties to the sin of fornication on the same footing by the obvious but not less conclusive reply that there is no comparison to be made between prostitutes and the men who consort with them.”<sup>69</sup> Such a comparison between prostitutes, or alleged prostitutes, and men, the Commission argues, is not possible due to undeniable biological differences between the sexes. The Commission openly admits its deciding factor to uphold the Acts, in writing, and its justification for the one-ended examination of prostitutes: “With one sex [women] the offence is committed as a matter of gain; with the other [men] it is an irregular indulgence of a natural impulse.”<sup>70</sup> The Commission failed to address the fact that women not engaged in prostitution also were forcibly subjected to such violent examinations.

In direct response to Butler’s testimony, the Commission claimed Butler failed to tell the truth and exaggerated. The Commission reported, “She thinks the moral tone of the working classes on this subject is higher than that of gentlemen. She has heard university men say that it would be better to dispense with marriage; never heard a workingman say this. Witness related a case of a girl diseased by a gentleman.”<sup>71</sup> The Commission did not acknowledge that the Acts directly violated the human rights of women or that the Acts disregarded the equal possibility that men could infect women with venereal diseases.

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<sup>69</sup> “Royal Commission into Contagious Diseases (1871).”

<sup>70</sup> “Royal Commission into Contagious Diseases (1871).”

<sup>71</sup> “Royal Commission into Contagious Diseases (1871).”

In July 1871, the Commission enacted a minimal alteration, deciding that medical examinations for women would not be “compulsory”, but, nonetheless, could continue for those suspected of venereal disease—or as police saw fit to define compulsory. As the bill to repeal the Acts failed in front of the Royal Commission, with this assertion James Stansfeld, a Cabinet member, was fired for his support of the repeal of the Acts. Stansfeld, however, joined the National Association, allowing Butler to relinquish her former duties as Secretary to focus the campaign for the repeal of the Acts on leveraging alliances with other organizations in Western Europe.

To attract international media attention, as newspapers in Great Britain failed to report on her advocacy efforts, Butler started addressing the trafficking of prostitutes between Great Britain and “the Continent,” Western Europe, and aligning with organizations in France, Italy, Switzerland, and the United States. After understanding the increasingly vocal and influential role of organizations counter to the government in France, Butler pushed her contacts in the medical field in Great Britain to establish the National Medical Association in July of 1875 to additionally advocate for the repeal of the Acts. In 1875 Butler also successfully pushed for the establishment of the Working Men’s National League to allow working-class men to advocate for the Acts’ repeal. Similarly, Butler traveled to the United States to generate outside attention to her cause. Following her visit, a popular article appeared in the *Daily News*, published by an American Quaker, Alfred Dyer, stating that a young Englishwoman had been lured to Brussels on the promise of marriage and subsequently kidnapped and forcibly sold into bondage at a brothel. Such negative outside attention prompted the British Government to re-evaluate Butler’s claims that prostitution and the tied coercion of the lower class were

domestic, British issues, rather than problems faced by other less civilized countries as well. Shortly after the article was published, seventy-two Members of Parliament supported the motion “This House disapproves of the compulsory examination of women under the Contagious Acts.”<sup>72</sup> Nonetheless, Parliament rejected a bill in 1883 that would have raised the age of consent for prostitution from twelve years of age to sixteen—a small alteration Butler proposed—and penalized businesses or individuals transporting women for a profit.

In 1885, sixteen years into her crusade, Butler carried out a strong operation with the editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* newspaper, a man named William Thomas Stead, to exemplify the terrors behind existing routes to prostitution. Stead arranged for a thirteen year old girl, Eliza Armstrong, to be purchased from her family for five pounds for labor. As was common, however, Stead told the family he was kidnapping the child permanently, and sold her into prostitution.<sup>73</sup> To document the successful operation, Stead published an article with the details, entitled “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon.”<sup>74</sup> Despite the article’s reveal of the domestic reality of prostitution in Great Britain, Stead was arrested for unlawful abduction, despite promptly giving the girl back to her family after documenting her sale for the article, and sentenced to three months of hard labor by the British Government. Boyd reasons for the Government’s strong negative reaction to the article given its wide exposure, explaining, “The House of Commons was terrified that Stead [and Butler] would proceed to give the names of the wealthy and powerful patrons and partners in crime, names which would undoubtedly

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<sup>72</sup> “Butler’s Legacy.”

<sup>73</sup> Boyd, *Three Victorian Women*, 50.

<sup>74</sup> “Butler’s Legacy.”

include many distinguished members of Parliament.”<sup>75</sup> Despite Stead’s personal sufferings in enduring such a punishment by the British Government, Parliament passed the Criminal Law Amendment Act as a result of the article. The Criminal Law Amendment raised the age of consent for prostitution from thirteen to sixteen years old, and even restricted brothels from employing any women under the age of thirteen.<sup>76</sup> A veteran of faulty government regulation of pre-existing laws, Butler helped create the National Vigilance Association to ensure that brothels were obeying the new law.

Overall, Stead and Butler’s work proving the unjust realities of the system of prostitution pushed Great Britain’s constituency to address the gaps in its otherwise civilized society. A year later, in 1886, Parliament repealed the Contagious Diseases Acts in full. While the Act’s equivalents, under different names, were continued in British-controlled territories, the repeal of the Acts marked the end of Butler’s highly public role—and the success of advocacy efforts to grant women basic human rights to control the medical objectification of their physical beings. After the Acts were repealed, Butler began to focus more on her children and family. Most importantly, Butler began writing testimonials of her experience combatting the Government’s implementation of a moral vice and creating a public interest campaign outside of normal routes to media.

### The Aftermath

While Butler aided the effort to successfully repeal the Acts—in total submitting more than seventeen thousand petitions to Parliament with more than two and a half million signatures—her treatment by the press and police, with both parties refusing to

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<sup>75</sup> Boyd, *Three Victorian Women*, 50.

<sup>76</sup> Boyd, *Three Victorian Women*, 51.

act at the will of the British Government, was appalling.<sup>77</sup> Butler received little, if any, support from the press as Members of Parliament and other British Government officials used methods of intimidation to ensure that the apparent uprising of women was not covered.

Pursuing the innovative strategy of using public speaking as a tool to increase awareness for the Acts, Butler's widespread speech campaigns were poorly covered, at best, by the newspaper media outlets.<sup>78</sup> For instance, while she presented orally to different groups in Liverpool, Crewe, Leeds, Newcastle, Sunderland, Darlington, Sheffield, and Birmingham and other towns of the Midland district, *all in* January of 1870 alone, not a single one of these talks was mentioned in print media. Butler writes in her book, "The denial to us of publicity in the press made it of urgent necessity that we should continually address the public in other ways."<sup>79</sup> Butler's speeches were widely attended, with each of these speeches attracting, Butler estimates, six thousand people.

In addition to the press's failure to document such meetings, the police, similarly, refused to protect Butler from protesters at such engagements. Butler recalls one incident when her life was directly threatened as a result of the police's failure to perform their duties. She recounts how protesters, "shook their fists in our faces, with volleys of oaths. This continued for some time, and we had no defence or means of escape...it seemed all the time as if some strong angel were present; for when these men's hands were literally upon us, they were held back by an unseen power."<sup>80</sup> Many men physically accosted

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<sup>77</sup> Sigsworth and Wyke, "A Study of Victorian Prostitution," 1.

<sup>78</sup> As previously mentioned, women rarely spoke in public, much less to large crowds, in Victorian England.

<sup>79</sup> Butler, *Personal Reminiscences*, 20.

<sup>80</sup> Butler, *Personal Reminiscences*, 49.



Butler merely based on her presence as a vocal woman in a public space. Butler continues, “hope came at last, in the shape of two or three helmeted policemen... ‘Now,’ we thought, ‘we are safe!’ *But no!* These were Metropolitans who had come from London for the occasion of the election; they simply looked at the scene with a cynical smile, and left the place without any attempt to defend us.”<sup>81</sup> Despite the support Butler received from many working men in the countryside, many police of authority came directly from London, where Members of Parliament felt threatened by Butler’s advocacy and dictated police or action, or lack thereof. In response to Josphine’s testimony in front of the Royal Commission, one Member of Parliament allegedly admitted, “Your manifesto [repealing the Contagious Diseases Acts] has shaken us very badly in the House of Commons; a leading man in the House remarked to me, ‘We know how to manage any other opposition in the House or in the country, but this very awkward for us—this revolt of the women. It is quite a new thing; what are we to do with such an opposition as this?’”<sup>82</sup> Thus while the Government did not arrest Butler for her advocacy, policemen refused to protect Butler from any non-Government forces she faced—in this case, as was common, a hysteric mob of violent, enraged men.

While such a lack of protection for Butler was a hindrance to her advocacy efforts and put her in serious, real danger, her opponents lacked empathy as they reasoned she was rejecting her high class standing and attacking otherwise accepted norms of society. Many members of Butler’s own class responded to her advocacy with violence, claiming she actively defied her honorable class position and, more importantly, fought to repeal legislation that directly benefitted the men of her class. Boyd explains, “If Josephine had

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<sup>81</sup> Butler, *Personal Reminiscences*, 49-50.

<sup>82</sup> Butler, *Personal Reminiscences*, 11.

confined her attention to acts of charity, her work on behalf of these outcasts might have been accepted. But that she, a British Brahmin, should not fear the contamination of associating with them, that she sought them out, calling herself one of them, ‘a fellow-sinner, a fellow-sufferer,’ this was a scandal.” Given stark differentiation of class standing in Victorian Great Britain, Butler’s involvement with poor women caused great controversy. Boyd continues, “She was considered by many to be worse than a prostitute because, by daring to question the assumption upon which its privileges rested, she had betrayed her class.” Butler questioned the sexual norms of her time as she “challenged the male view which separated women into two categories: the ‘good’ but dull virgin-wife and the ‘bad’ but exciting mistress-prostitute.”<sup>83</sup>

Butler downplayed the violence she faced in her writings after the Acts were repealed and failed to realize why, outside of religion justification, she had been a target of such attacks. She valiantly proclaimed in her book, “Those who have not may well think that the discipline of being traduced, slandered, threatened... a very hard discipline. But one who has endured the deeper and keener spiritual discipline, when there seemed no escape, no ray of hope, must regard the outward persecution and violence only as a welcome sign that the battle is set in array, and that the enemy is roused to bitterest hatred because his claims are disputed and... about to be overthrown.”<sup>84</sup>

When Butler died on December 29, 1906, the *Times* did not document her lengthy campaign to permanently repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts. In her obituary in the publications, her “Cause” is vaguely labeled as the “moral question,” without ever defining such a question or, more notably, the resulting answer to the question in the

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<sup>83</sup> Boyd, *Three Victorian Women*, 76.

<sup>84</sup> Butler, *Personal Reminiscences*, 9.

repeal of the Acts. The article does not call her moral question the government regulation of prostitution. Boyd argues the *Times* failed to address the question because, even after Butler's campaign, "Prostitutes represented not the 'worthy' poor for whom British society had found a place, but those who had been rejected."<sup>85</sup> Prostitution, however, was merely an economic symptom of a greater gender-biased problem facing Great Britain. As Butler identified, British society could not rightfully reject poverty as a social crime when few options, outside of prostitution, were available to women as paid work. Butler not only fostered the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, but also drew attention to a greater plague in British Victorian Society: the inevitability of poverty for women, outside circumstances of their control. Before a government funded system of social safety nets, Butler was a pioneer in bringing about a consciousness and empathy for such women. The impact of her activism in validating the rights of women to their bodies aided wider developments to improve the standing of women in British society.

**Image 5.** An oil painting of Josephine Butler created by George Frederic Watts in 1894.



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<sup>85</sup> Boyd, *Three Victorian Women*, 78.

## Chapter 2

### The United States: Alice Paul and Women's Suffrage

As Josephine Butler spent sixteen years fighting against the British government to ensure bodily rights for economically disadvantaged women, Alice Paul similarly fought for equality for women in the United States. Paul secured the basic political right of the vote for women in the United States. Over the course of fifty-four years, Paul advocated to change public opinion and successfully *earned* universal suffrage for women with an amendment to the federal Constitution, ratified in 1920. In relentlessly confronting leaders of the US government, Paul endured harsh physical punishments; ultimately, however, Paul spurred political progress and permanently changed the accepted norms of behavior for activists. Like Josephine Butler, Paul entered a fight that had already begun and faced opposition, but used direct confrontation to force government change and promote equality.

In one of her last interviews before a detrimental stroke, Paul reflected on her motivations for activism in 1972, contextualizing, "I never doubted that equal rights was the right direction. Most reforms, more problems are complicated. But to me there is nothing complicated about ordinary equality."<sup>1</sup> As Paul began her career as a political activist at the turn of the twentieth century on the cusp of World War I, women still had not been granted such equality by their federal government with the rote to vote. After

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<sup>1</sup> "The Equal Rights Amendment," Alice Paul Institute, last modified November 8, 2010, <http://alicepaul.org/alicep3.htm>.

nearly one hundred years of advocacy, beginning with the acts of the trailblazing duo Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton in the 1830s, Paul recognized that the intellectual framework and justification for women's suffrage had already been achieved; Paul's role rested in action to solidify a change in the written law. While the government of the US claimed to rely on the consent of the governed, half of such a body, more than fifty million women, remained without this basic right nearly one hundred and fifty years after its "universal" acceptance in the Declaration of Independence in 1776.<sup>2</sup> Amid wider injustices facing women, such as automatic custody rights for fathers, lack of equal access to education, and even dress reform (women could be jailed for appearing in unconventional clothing), the vote represented a starting point to greater equality.<sup>3</sup> Continuing the work of two successive generations of female suffragists, Paul was determined to achieve an all-encompassing change in voting rights for women. Jean Baker credits in her book *Sisters: The Lives of America's Suffragists*, Paul's "bold tactics...move[d] suffrage from a trivial matter of little concern to an inescapable issue."<sup>4</sup> By the time she was thirty five years old, Paul had dedicated more than half of her life to equality for women and endured multiple occasions of torture and force-feeding. These acts of coercion, however, did not stop her. She strove to expand and advance a militant, decisive battle for equality in the United States. In a statement printed in the *New York Times*, for the second time, it summarized Paul's activism in her obituary on July 10, 1977: "I think it is fair to say [Paul] was ahead of her time."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In addition to women, African Americans males and other minorities were often denied the right to vote as well.

<sup>3</sup> Jean Baker, *Sisters: The Lives of America's Suffragists* (New York: Hill and Wang 2005), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Baker, *Sisters*, 191.

<sup>5</sup> Dee Wedemeyer, "A Salute to Originator of E.R.A. in 1923," *New York Times*, July 10, 1977, 42.

Background:

Contrary to Josephine Butler's struggle to maintain a family amid her attempts to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts in Great Britain, Paul started her life-long crusade to earn equality for women at the age of twenty three, and did not stop her activism—refusing to marry—until her death at the age of ninety two. Paul was born on January 11, 1885 in Moorestown, New Jersey, and raised in a Quaker family. With such a religious foundation, she was raised to adhere to her own opinions, to reject gender notions, and, most importantly, to serve in positions of community leadership. Paul's mother, Tacie, took the minutes at local Quaker meetings and her great-aunt was a Quaker preacher.<sup>6</sup> As Butler came from an economically advantaged family, Paul also enjoyed a stable upbringing, although, as Quakers, her family was particularly frugal. William Paul, her father, was President of the Moorestown Bank and owned multiple working farms across New Jersey. Living in one of the largest homes in town, Paul's family employed a full-time live-in maid and could afford to send Paul to the best educational institutions. Overall, Paul's renegade personality was viewed favorably in her Quaker community. Paul's father later reflected in a newspaper article in October of 1919, "If you want something hard and disagreeable done, I bank on Alice to do it."<sup>7</sup>

Like Butler, Paul possessed an intellectual curiosity. In her case, she acquired six degrees from academic institutions in both the United States and Great Britain. Because her mother served as a founding member of the institution, Paul was able to attend and earn her undergraduate Bachelor of Arts degree in Biology from Swarthmore College in

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<sup>6</sup> Baker, *Sisters*, 192.

<sup>7</sup> Anne Herendon, "What Her Home Town Thinks of Alice Paul," *Everybody's Magazine*, October 1919, 41: 362.

1905. Paul pursued a major in biology because it was a subject she “knew nothing about.”<sup>8</sup> Disregarding gender norm, she also played sports, ranging from field hockey to basketball. After completing her bachelor’s degree, Paul earned her master’s in sociology from the University of Pennsylvania in 1907. Additionally, she completed her doctoral degree in economics at the University of Pennsylvania in 1912. With few jobs available to women, Paul initially remained in academia. During her time at the University of Pennsylvania, however, she went abroad to Great Britain to take courses on economics and politics at the University of Birmingham and the London School of Economics.

#### Her Pivotal Moment:

In 1908, Paul’s experiences living in Great Britain fundamentally changed her goals and illuminated the need for prompt change to provide greater equality for women. After her father’s death, Paul’s mother was unable to manage finances. Paul publicly claimed the death had little impact on her life, testily admitting in one interview, “I was too young. Life just went on...I only talk about these things because you ask me.”<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, the death of her father significantly affected her financial stability. Paul was eager to assert her independence, although still regularly receiving some money from her mother as she moved to England in 1907. After studying social work at the New York School of Philanthropy, Paul worked in Quaker settlement house near Birmingham before transferring to work in some of London’s poorest slums.

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<sup>8</sup> Baker, *Sisters*, 192.

<sup>9</sup> Alice Paul, “Woman Suffrage and the Equal Rights Amendment,” 1976 interview by Amelia Fry, Bancroft Library Suffragists Oral History Project, University of California, Berkeley, <http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO/projects/suffragist/>.

Similar to Butler, Paul initially wanted to work in the slums of London to engage one-on-one with women facing poor conditions and, hopefully, to remedy such conditions. However, coming to the same rationalization as Butler, Paul soon started searching for the greater causes and societal patterns that allowed for seemingly innocent civilians to end up in such debased conditions. Paul's mother urged her to return home and continue with academic work, but Paul refused. Paul replied to her mother's letter arguing, "Well I am not doing it for their sakes, but in order to learn about conditions myself."<sup>10</sup> Amid a politico-economic climate that provided little to no safety nets for the unemployed, Paul realized by working in the slums of New York City, Birmingham, and London that academics did not provide answers for the problems women faced in reality.

A suffrage parade and political meeting in Birmingham in 1908 provided an answer to Paul's search for the catalyst that could place women in better living conditions: political equality. After witnessing an event organized by the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), a British group advocating for women's suffrage chaired by Emmeline Pankhurst, Paul transcended her academic interest in women's causes and started participating in direct, confrontational action to engage with political leaders. The women of WSPU engaged in every facet of the political arena in Great Britain, from shouting at passing politicians to staging disruptions at campaign speeches to throwing stones at government buildings. Shouting at meetings of Parliament, "Why talk about free trade not free women?" and waving placards reading "Votes for Women, Chastity for Men," the women of the WSPU, called "she-men" by then prime minister candidate

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<sup>10</sup> Baker, *Sisters*, 194.



Winston Churchill, voluntarily suffered the consequences of their actions in enduring multiple arrests, beatings, and jail sentences.<sup>11</sup>

After observing WSPU's political advocacy efforts for two years, in 1909, Paul soon faced sexual discrimination as her mother grew increasingly weary of her extended stay abroad. While Paul hoped to complete an additional doctoral degree in London to continue to observe the suffrage movement and the expansion of feminist action, her mother refused to send further tuition money as long as she remained abroad. As a result, Paul began working in a rubber factory to pay for school and rented a makeshift room in an attic. Where academia failed to promote change to improve the conditions of poor women, newly including Paul, she believed the suffrage movement was different. In a letter to her mother in 1909, explaining her newfound passion for the British suffrage movement, Paul argued that social work proved tedious as "You only help one person at a time. You spend all of your life doing something that you know you couldn't change."<sup>12</sup> Conversely, Paul proudly proclaimed to her mother in a letter from March 1908, "I have joined the suffragettes, the militant party of the woman's suffrage question. The difference between the suffragists and the suffragette militants who have excited so much criticism is that they are the ones who have really brought the question to the fore."<sup>13</sup> Paul was drawn to the militant suffragettes because they effectively attracted the attention of their own government and used creative tactics to spur the dialogue surrounding "the question"—then without a clear answer—of whether women should be granted political equality.

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<sup>11</sup> Baker, *Sisters*, 195.

<sup>12</sup> Baker, *Sisters*, 195.

<sup>13</sup> Baker, *Sisters*, 196.

The prospect for change and the ability to behave autonomously, free from social restrictions on women's behavior, excited Paul and pushed her to act boldly, amid steep repercussions. As the potential to break free from her stereotypical role and single-handedly force a permanent change in the lives of women pushed Butler to serve as a political activist, Paul followed WSPU's lead and engaged in radical operations designed to attract the attention of specific British politicians. In addition to executing more traditional political acts in London, such as giving speeches and selling newspapers pamphlets—both of which emerged as common political tactics after Josephine Butler's campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts—Paul was instructed to directly target Prime Minister Henry Herbert Asquith. Paul went as far as to climb on his roof to throw stones at the window where he stood overlooking the streets of London.<sup>14</sup> Paul was angered by the fact that Asquith would meet with men facing economic hardship, but refused to meet with suffragists irrespective of class standing.<sup>15</sup>

As Butler entered political activism after suffering psychological trauma, Paul endured a similar pivotal trauma in surviving repeated physical torture in Great Britain. By 1910, due to her involvement in the women's suffrage movement in London, Paul was arrested and jailed on three different occasions. Upon arrest, suffragists in WSPU made it a universal policy to refuse to pay any associated fines—as the legal system excluded the participation of women, and thus could not exert legitimate authority over such an otherwise unacknowledged group. Paul was denied political prisoner status, and rather treated as a common criminal at London's infamous Holloway Prison. Enduring conditions in a regular, decrepit jail, Paul had to eat wormy food, sleep on the floor of an

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<sup>14</sup> Baker, *Sisters*, 196.

<sup>15</sup> Baker, *Sisters*, 196.

unheated cell, and even use the same toilets as syphilitic prostitutes.<sup>16</sup> Along with other English suffragettes arrested and treated as common criminals, Paul was not allowed writing materials or the comfort of an individual cell. In protest, Paul and the other women went on a hunger strike and, as a result, were brutally force-fed by government officials.

Then serving as Home Secretary, Winston Churchill approved the policy of force-feeding for jailed WSPU female activists.<sup>17</sup> Paul's mother tirelessly attempted to get her daughter out of jail, going as far as to approach the US Ambassador to Great Britain, Whitelaw Reid. Reid, however, was opposed to women's suffrage. In an article resulting from a special cable from London, published on the front page of the *New York Times* on December 10, 1909 with the detailed headline "Miss Paul Describes Feeding By Force: American Suffragette in Holloway Jail Lay Abed During Whole of 30-Day Sentence. Refused Prison Clothes. Three Wardresses and Two Doctors Held Her While Food Was Injected Through Nostrils—Now Released," Paul candidly and coldly described the ordeal of force-feeding, as administered by British government officials. The journalist contextualizes Paul's actions leading up to the arrest and jail sentence, saying Paul was "struck by the contrast between the academic interest in woman's suffrage in American and the lively character of the movement here [London]." Paul recounts the specifics of the torture sessions, which were performed twice daily starting November 11, three days after her arrest on November 9, and continued until her release from jail on December 8, 1909. In a dry, detached, and objective tone, Paul is quoted explaining "the largest wardress in Holloway sat astride my knees, holding my shoulders down to keep me from

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<sup>16</sup> Baker, *Sisters*, 217.

<sup>17</sup> Baker, *Sisters*, 197.

bending forward. Two other wardresses sat on either side and held my arms.” In addition to such human participation, Paul added that a towel was wrapped tightly around her throat, similar to a leash for a dog, and she was tied down to a chair with sheets. Paul pays special attention to the role of medical professionals in her printed description of the torture, adding “one doctor from behind forced my head back, while another doctor put a tube in my nostril. When it reached my throat, my head was pushed forward.”<sup>18</sup> Paul mildly recalls, “putting the tube down is a rather difficult operation.” Often the doctors would have to try forcing the tube down both nostrils up to five or six times during each force-feeding, up to twelve times a day. Additionally, once liquid food and milk began flowing through the tube reaching down to her stomach, Paul recalls that spasms would begin as her body attempted, and failed, to inhale oxygen. The tube would be withdrawn once spasms began and re-inserted again.<sup>19</sup>

Overall, rather than promoting sympathy for the inhumane conditions Paul survived, the article makes Paul sound like a barbaric, crazed animal. In a quote equaling the length of her description of the force-feeding, the article includes that Paul also explained, “Once I managed to get my hands loose and snatched the tube, tearing it...I also broke a jug, but I didn’t give in.” Concluding the graphic testimony from the twice daily torture, the article, void of a specific author, merely states “Miss Paul lives alone in London.” Such behavior for a woman, given the expected social role of women at the turn of the twentieth century, was far from the norm and was not likely to illicit much compassion from the *New York Times*’ primarily male reader base. The author of the article downplays Paul’s debilitated condition the day of her release from jail, writing,

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<sup>18</sup> Special Cable, “Miss Paul Describes Feeding by Force,” *New York Times*, December 10, 1909, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Baker, *Sisters*, 197.

“Although palpably ill, Miss Paul was cheerful, telling me she did not regret her conduct, and was prepared to repeat it again if necessary.”<sup>20</sup>



**Image 1.** An unidentified suffragette is forcibly fed with a tube entering her nasal cavity reaching through her esophagus, and down to the stomach in Holloway Prison in Great Britain. Undigested liquid was poured directly down to the stomach through the tube (1911).

After such a traumatic experience in jail, and with a bill granting women the right to vote before Members of Parliament in Great Britain, Paul returned home to the US in 1910; nonetheless, the emotional impact of such tortures prompted a permanent change in Paul’s self-identification and sense of purpose. In the article “Incarceration and Torture: The Self in Extremity,” Donald Gutierrez analyzes the role physical torture plays in

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<sup>20</sup> Special Cable, “Miss Paul.”

predicting future behavior of victims. Gutierrez describes, “It is consciousness that heightens the experiences of physical and psychic suffering.” In facing such an extreme experience, Paul’s sense of self was tested and she had to use what Gutierrez terms “inner reserves” to endure such “extreme humiliation and psychological or physical disintegration.” Gutierrez reasons, “terrorization is part of the strategy of softening the victim up so that he [or she] will do or say what the captors want. In the process, the victim’s self can be destroyed; whether it is destroyed temporarily or permanently depends on...the victim.” In such a brutal circumstance, Paul had the single power to subsist. Paul’s subsequent actions demonstrated her heightened empathy for the suffering of others as she chose to pursue women’s suffrage upon her return to the United States, using her own methods, tactics, and strategies.

#### Political Advocacy:

Paul turned her first encounter with torture into an inner triumph, and channeled motivation from her suffering, as she returned to the US determined to bring the same “lively” action as her British counterparts to the deteriorating American suffrage political movement. Baker credits, following such an experience, “Clearly the personal life of Alice Paul, to Alice Paul at least, was not significant and was never as important as her work.”<sup>21</sup> The political had become the personal, as her high level of subsequent unwavering dedication would illuminate.

As of 1910, only six state legislatures in the United States allowed women to vote: Kansas, Wyoming, Utah, Washington, Colorado, and Idaho. Moreover, starting in

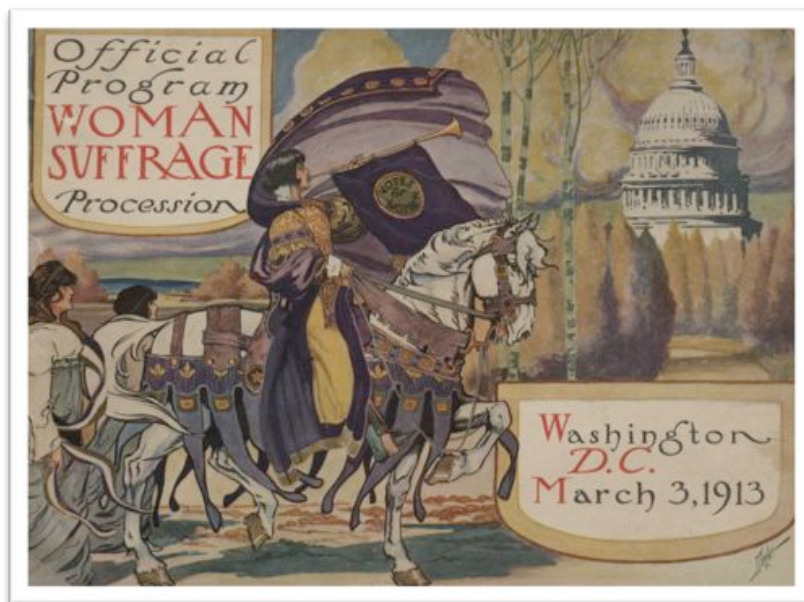
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<sup>21</sup> Baker, *Sisters*, 193.

1911, a group of women formed the National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage, claiming that some women did not want to vote, and rather enjoyed being “protected” by men. Woodrow Wilson’s inauguration as President of the United States in 1913, however, provided a platform for Paul to implement a strategy targeting the dual head of state and head of government. Contrary to Great Britain, where the positions were then divided between the Queen of England and the Prime Minister, Paul saw prospects in forcing the singular leader of the United States to suggest a federal constitutional amendment.

After finishing her doctorate degree in 1912 on her return from Great Britain, Paul used Wilson’s inauguration to set a standard for what he would face from suffragists during his ensuing two terms in executive office. At the time of his inauguration, Democrats controlled the House of Representatives, the Senate, and the Executive. While fifteen percent of women worked outside the home at the start of the twentieth century and constituted sixty percent of high school graduates and twenty percent of college graduates (amid the three percent of Americans who attended college in the United States), women still could not control their wages or inheritances in one third of all states. Moreover, state-by-state action to grant women voting privileges had come to a standstill.

In her first attempt to attract the public to her cause, Paul quickly planned and implemented an attention-grabbing political ploy that was unheard of at the time: a march on Pennsylvania Avenue stretching from the nexus of the legislature on Capitol Hill to that of the executive at the White House. While such a march was characteristic of government-sponsored events, such as the looming presidential inaugurations, Paul was the first to organize such an event *counter* to the government. Attempting to encourage a



**Image 2.** The invitation sent to all NAWSA members announcing the upcoming parade in Washington, DC.

stand off with President Wilson—in an act that would lead President Wilson for the first, but not the last, to label Paul a “lunatic”—Paul planned a parade to catch the attention of the nation’s top leaders, who were already gathered in Washington for Wilson’s inauguration in March of 1913.<sup>22</sup> Baker describes the motivation for the spectacle noting, Paul “expected her procession...to embarrass a government that still did not permit women to vote. Certainly her parade would be different from any the capital had ever witnessed.”<sup>23</sup> A mere twenty eight year old, Paul organized eight thousand women, led by another suffragette Inez Milholland triumphantly riding on a white horse, and a small group of men. Marching down historic Pennsylvania Avenue at approximately two-thirty in the afternoon, the group displayed a banner reading: “We Demand an Amendment to the Constitution of the United States Enfranchising the Women of this Country”. The word choice of the demand exhibited no subtly in foreshadowing the lengths Paul was

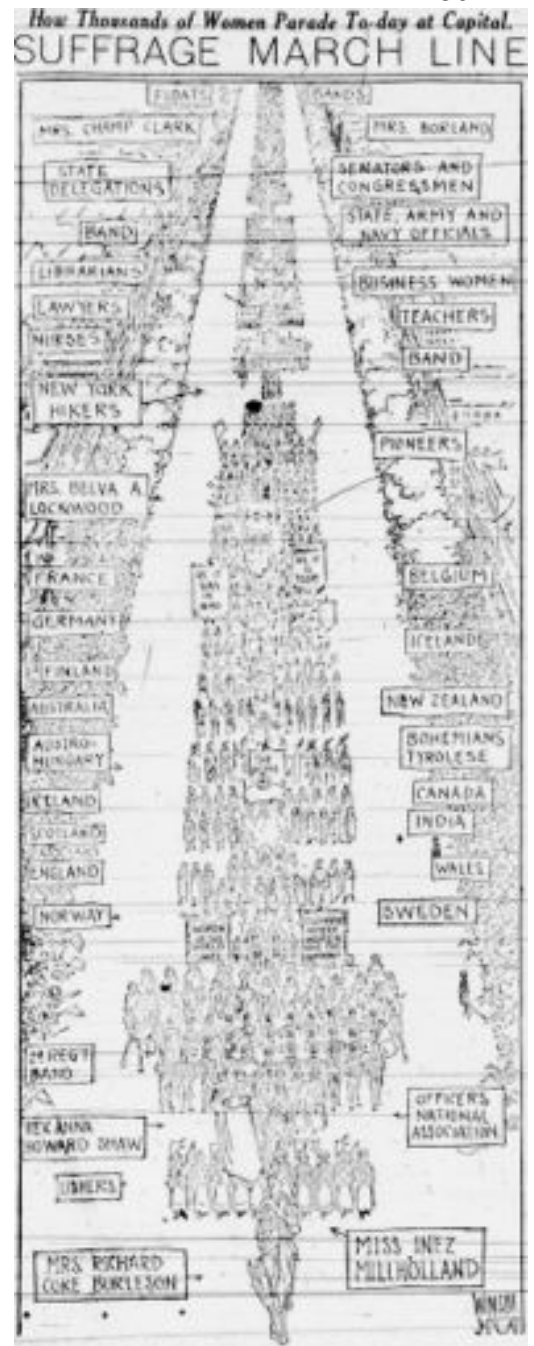
<sup>22</sup> Baker, *Sisters*, 183.

<sup>23</sup> Baker, *Sisters*, 183.



willing to go to in order to ensure women's suffrage over the ensuing presidential term. Overall, the march, both in concept and in execution, was designed by Paul to show that women could be disciplined in organization, and would be able to bring the same orderly yet meaningful advocacy to the American political system.<sup>24</sup> Despite the attempt of policemen to move the parade—following a route that up until then had exclusively been used in inaugural parades—to side streets, the women marched free from resistance, initially.

Shortly after the parade began, however, Paul's first political tactic enacted in the US resulted in violence as the police and male bystanders clashed with suffragists. Males made up the majority of the onlookers, and quickly advanced from serving as passive onlookers to belligerent and disruptive perpetrators. Baker describes the men's specific behavior: "Some were grabbing and trampling the suffragists' banners, toppling their floats, yelling obscenities, spitting at, pinching, and groping women as the police turned their heads."<sup>25</sup> In a sociopolitical era entirely historically void of such direct female demonstration, men, easily outnumbering the women in the parade, yelled "Why don't you go home and cook



<sup>24</sup> Baker, *Sisters*, 184.

<sup>25</sup> Baker, *Sisters*, 185.

dinner?” and “Who is minding the babies?” Some men even yelled out requesting sexual favors.<sup>26</sup> As local policemen refused to protect the women from the rioting, vulgar men increased in aggressive advances, and federal troops eventually arrived from Fort Myer. The assembled crowd grew to an estimated two hundred and fifty thousand spectators—at a time when the District of Columbia only had three hundred and thirty thousand residents.<sup>27</sup> As federal cavalry forcibly dispersed the crowd, the women were unable to reach the White House; the public spaces surrounding the building had been sectioned off for Wilson’s inauguration parade, an event that women were banned from attending. Following complaint by the two hundred women who were injured by male spectators as a result of police inaction, an investigation revealed that policemen justified not protecting the women parade participants from male-incited violence because of a high volume of women and babies. This argument, however, provides little truth, as the crowd was nearly exclusively comprised of males, rather than women; nowhere in pictures from the event are any babies shown.<sup>28</sup> The *Washington Post* reported in an article on March 4, 1913, “Five thousand women, marching in the woman suffrage pageant today, practically fought their way foot to foot up Pennsylvania Avenue, through a surging throng that completely...swamped the marchers, and broke their procession.”<sup>29</sup> As a result of Paul’s lobbying, the Senate Committee on the District of Columbia completed an investigation on the violence at the parade, and suspended the Police Chief of the District, Richard

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<sup>26</sup> Baker, *Sisters*, 185.

<sup>27</sup> “Table 23. District of Columbia,” US Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0056/tab23.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> As such a highly attended event, the suffragists took many pictures to send out in the NAWSA newsletter.

<sup>29</sup> Katherine H. Adams and Michael L. Keene, *Alice Paul and the American Suffrage Campaign* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 93.



**Image 4.** Inez Milholland leading the parade on a white horse, despite male bystanders blocking the path of the parade.

Sylvester, as a result.<sup>30</sup> Despite the *Post*'s degrading comments on the “pageant,” the article effectively captured the attention of US politicians in the Senate and encouraged such an investigation. In this first jarring investigation, Paul proved her abilities to gain the attention of the federal government, despite her nonthreatening young age, small stature—and gender.

Following the pre-inauguration parade, the dormant issue of women’s suffrage regained attention in the Washington, DC area and the greater United States. Paul forged ahead and single-handedly focused her campaign against President Wilson as the elected director of the National American Woman Suffrage Association’s (NAWSA) Congressional Committee. Members of Congress remained divided on the issue, with few publicly in support of women’s suffrage. Four categories existed for Congress members: those who opposed suffrage, remained indifferent, approved in theory but not in practice, or came from suffrage states where women could vote, and thus had to support it. Baker

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<sup>30</sup> Adams and Keene, *Alice Paul*, 93.

asserts, “a fifth variety—a politician who actually worked for women’s suffrage—was rarer than a prohibitionist, a socialist, and even a vegetarian.”<sup>31</sup>

Despite such limitations and resulting political stagnation, Paul mimicked the tactics of British suffragettes, and decided to direct all lobbying efforts exclusively toward the President. Paul justified her choice to incite government officials in a speech entitled “The English Situation” at the NAWSA convention of 1910. Paul explained, “The essence of the campaign of the suffragists is opposition to the Government...It is not a war of women against men, for the men are helping loyally, but a war of men and women together against the politicians.”<sup>32</sup>

Paul opposed Wilson’s empty rhetoric and executed successive severe publicity stunts. Wilson stated in his acceptance speech in 1912 that his duty was not just to the Democratic Party, but to all people.<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, Paul aggressively interpreted such vague words as a prediction for future inaction on women’s suffrage, contrary to the warm reception his speech received from others in NAWSA leadership. Baker explains Paul’s objected to Wilson’s leadership as “she was convinced that American progressives like Wilson used women to work as volunteers for small-bore local reforms—more public bathrooms for women, more playgrounds and better teachers—all the while withholding the equalizing lever of the vote.”<sup>34</sup> Paul understood that without a federal amendment, African Americans males would also still be trying to legally secure the vote in some states. While the tactics of previous suffragists, such as Lucy Stone, Elizabeth

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<sup>31</sup> Baker, *Sisters*, 186.

<sup>32</sup> Linda G. Ford, *Iron-Jawed Angels: The Suffrage Militancy of the National Woman’s Party 1912-1920* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1991), 5.

<sup>33</sup> Baker, *Sisters*, 186.

<sup>34</sup> Baker, *Sisters*, 186.

Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony in holding yearly conventions, developing a philosophical basis for women's suffrage, and lobbying *once* a year before the Senate Judiciary Committee had initially promoted equality for women, Paul recognized that the speechmaking and philosophical writing of suffragists was no longer effective—it merely resulted in successive losing state campaigns.

In her second bold action, using her delicate appearance, Paul scheduled a meeting with President Wilson shortly after his inauguration. The political journalist David Lawrence credits Wilson openly believed women interested in suffrage were



**Image 5.** Alice Paul shortly after her return to the United States.

“aggressive and masculine with harsh voice.” Lawrence reasons, Wilson “must have been surprised...at the appearance of their leader [Paul]—the demure, utterly feminine Alice Paul who greeted him with her soft voice and shook his hand with her dainty, childlike

hands.”<sup>35</sup> Favoring the stereotypical female colors of purple, lavender, gray, and white for her wardrobe choices, standing a mere five feet and six inches, and weighing one hundred pounds, Paul attempted to persuade Wilson in a meeting at the White House to promote women’s suffrage with members of Congress. Paul’s petite stature received a warm reception initially. Similar to Josephine Butler’s experience testifying before the Royal Commission and being laughed at by Members of Parliament, however, Paul provoked little action from Wilson. Although Paul reminded Wilson of his words in a speech published in his book *The New Freedom*, in which he argued, “old political formulas do not fit the present problems,” the meeting did little.<sup>36</sup> Overall, Paul’s meeting with Wilson, and two meetings later that month, proved ineffective. Wilson told Paul he had “neither the time nor the stomach” to address the issue of women’s suffrage.<sup>37</sup> Wilson believed that since women had no experience in public affairs, they wouldn’t be able to understand politics—the ultimate Catch-22. Despite Paul’s presentation of a possible sixteenth amendment to the Constitution allowing women to vote to Wilson, the President refused to act or support the cause. In the weeks following in April 1913, Paul organized the Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage to formulate and enact an aggressive lobbying campaign.

During Wilson’s first term as President, Paul, consciously making the decision to make the president the target of a political movement for the first time in US history, organized radical, innovative events and split from NAWSA. Paul ran the Congressional Union as the lobbying arm of NAWSA for two years, but soon grew impatient. Katherine

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<sup>35</sup> David Lawrence, *The True Story of Woodrow Wilson* (New York: Literary Licensing, 2011), 135.

<sup>36</sup> “Alice Paul (1885-1977),” National Women’s History Museum, accessed February 24, 2014, <http://www.nwhm.org/education-resources/biography/biographies/alice-paul/>.

<sup>37</sup> Baker, *Sisters*, 186.

Adams and Michael Keene describe in *Alice Paul and the American Suffrage Campaign*, “In the fall of 1913, in response to all of this activity, officers of NAWSA, which had originally placed Paul in charge of the federal efforts, began to respond negatively...Paul’s group was moving forward too quickly, without consultation, [and] was taking energy away from the state campaigns.”<sup>38</sup> Eager to implement the British doctrine of “deeds, not words”—rather than to “keep things steadily in hand...for there are certain laws of order that should be followed by everybody,” as she had been sternly instructed by the President of NAWSA. Paul continued to expand her advocacy without NAWSA to create a full-fledged national campaign.<sup>39</sup> Despite Congress’s debate of a constitutional amendment in 1913 allowing for women’s suffrage, for the first time since 1887, Paul grew weary as no action resulted on the bill.

Paul’s key political tactic was her direct involvement of members of government. In addition to four meetings with Wilson in the months after his inauguration, Paul had women enter Wilson’s drawing room and get his attention when he was traveling in other cities across the US. Paul’s goal was “to see that no excuse or evasion would lead to the women’s giving up and going home.” Adams and Keene attribute Paul and other suffragists, “were constantly on Capitol Hill and at the White House, a continuing visual presence in powerful sites where, Paul intended to demonstrate, these women were meant to be.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Adams and Keene, *Alice Paul and the American Suffrage Campaign*, 100.

<sup>39</sup> Adams and Keene, *Alice Paul and the American Suffrage Campaign*, 101.

<sup>40</sup> Adams and Keene, *Alice Paul and the American Suffrage Campaign*, 140.



**Image 6.** One of Allender’s cartoons from 1915, after Paul gathered four million signatures supporting women’s suffrage in a nationwide auto-caravan.

Paul’s advocacy progressively exceeded in creativity and severity as Wilson refused to acknowledge that national sentiment was changing in favor of women’s suffrage—mostly as a result of Paul’s leadership of a nationwide movement. At the 1916 State of the Union address, at the exact moment as Wilson called for democracy

and freedom for the people of Puerto Rico, foreigners, Paul and other suffragists unveiled a giant banner directly in his line of sight reading “Mr. Wilson what are you doing for woman’s suffrage?” Additionally in 1916, Paul further personalized the assault on Wilson in hiring a cartoonist, Nina E. Allender, to create politically charged images criticizing President Wilson and his Democratic Party in Paul’s widely circulated newspaper, *The Suffragist*.<sup>41</sup> As Paul believed in action over words, she believed that national opinion would only change as a result of strong and effective imagery. Allender’s cartoons would continue to appear in *The Suffragist* and nationwide until the successful ratification of the nineteenth amendment in 1920.

<sup>41</sup> Baker, *Sisters*, 207.



### The United States Government Responds:

With Wilson's re-election to the presidency for a second term at the end of 1916, Paul further radicalized her advocacy to ensure that Wilson would not be able to physically escape women's suffrage. Splitting from NAWSA and starting the National Woman's Party (NWP), Paul moved the headquarters of her newly established *party*, named to indicate its assumed political role, directly across the street from the White House in Lafayette Square in Washington, DC. From the second-floor windows of his daughter's bedroom, Wilson had a clear, unobstructed visual of NWP headquarters and the purple, yellow, and white suffrage flag.<sup>42</sup> Paul embarked on a campaign to put constant pressure on Wilson, in addition to the hundreds of cartoons Allender created mocking Wilson for weekly NWP newspaper distribution.

**Image 7.** Paul stands in the balcony of NWP headquarters, hanging the purple, white, and yellow suffrage flag visible and in plain view of windows on the north side of the White House.



Two months before Wilson's second inauguration, Paul again planned to attract both Wilson's attention and that of the nation. On January 11, 1917, Paul and other NWP members walked across the street from their headquarters to the north gates of the White

<sup>42</sup> Baker, *Sisters*, 215; *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Arthur Link, et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 27.

House to hold up placards, allegedly large enough to be seen through the windows of the White House. The signs read: “Mr. Wilson, what are you doing for woman’s suffrage?” and “We demand the passage of the Susan B. Anthony amendment.”<sup>43</sup>

While such an act is today a routine happening for political advocacy groups, Paul was the first to singly confront an American president in his place of residence. Before 1917, no group of protestors had stood outside the White House in open, unrestrained defiance of presidential policies. Without precedent, no judicial decision existed yet dictating picketing as a form of constitutionally *protected* symbolic expression as is the case in the United States today. Moreover, picketing was not considered an act of free speech and the right to assemble had not yet been ruled constitutionally protected. Nonetheless, Paul interpreted the Clayton Act provision, “exempting trade union members from persecution as ‘illegal and in restraint trade,’” to argue that NWP members were similarly protected. From January 11, until Wilson advised Congress to support the Susan B. Anthony amendment granting women the right to vote in 1918, NWP members stood outside the White House every day from ten in the morning until five in the afternoon, regardless of the weather, to remind Wilson of their existence.<sup>44</sup> On the day of Wilson’s second inauguration, March 5, 1917, one thousand suffragists, organized by Paul and the NWP, stood outside the White House in the pouring rain, banners in hand.

As the picketing subsisted, day after day, and the US entered World War I on April 6, 1917, the US Government’s response to Paul and the NWP’s picketing turned violent. In the speech announcing the US’s decision to enter the first World War, Wilson

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<sup>43</sup> Baker, *Sisters*, 219.

<sup>44</sup> Baker, *Sisters*, 215; *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Arthur Link, et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 27.

announced, “we shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts—for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own government.”<sup>45</sup> Unwilling to let another war deter from the domestic battle of earning universal women’s suffrage—as has happened with the Civil War and the initial wave of support for women’s suffrage in the 1850s—Paul continued her campaign of picketing, and increased her direct confrontation with President Wilson. While NAWSA ended all activism on account of the war, telling women to use the same energies, if not more, to support the war effort, Paul used the war effort to coin a new name from the president: Kaiser Wilson.<sup>46</sup>

Two months after the US entered the war, Paul’s picketing touched a nerve in President Wilson on June 20, 1917, when the Russian mission representing the



**Image 8.** Paul and members of the NWP picket outside the White House.

government of Kerensky and Lvov arrived at the White House. In usual form, members of the NWP arrived to hold signs in front of the White House. A special group of

<sup>45</sup> Baker, *Sisters*, 215; *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Arthur Link, et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 27.

<sup>46</sup> Baker, *Sisters*, 215

banners, however, started appearing after the US entered World War I. Banners read, “Mr. Wilson, you say you will make the world safe for democracy. What are you doing for the women in America?” and “Mr. Wilson. You say that every people have a right to choose the sovereignty under which they shall live. What about 20 million American women?”<sup>47</sup>

Paul created a special banner for the visit of Russian government officials to the White House. Displaying a larger than usual banner, Paul and other suffragists stood by the gates of the White House as the Russian officials drove through, with a sign reading: “President Wilson and Envoy Root are deceiving Russia. We women of America tell you that America is not a democracy. Twenty million American women are denied the right to vote. President Wilson is the chief opponent of their national enfranchisement. Help us make our government really free. Tell our government that it must liberate the people before it can claim free Russia as an ally.” While Wilson had endured Paul’s signs spread nationwide during campaign season reading “He Kept Us Out of Suffrage,” mimicking his campaign slogan, “He Kept Us Out of War,” Wilson responded immediately to this banner. With banners questioning his credibility in front of top Russian officials, amid an international war, Wilson acted swiftly to punish Paul.<sup>48</sup>

Immediately following the Russian envoy’s entrance to the White House, unidentified plainclothesmen from the White House forcibly ripped down the banner. According to a *New York Times* article published a few days later, the men were members of the President’s Secret Service, who had received orders directly from President Wilson. When Paul calmly returned with more banners the same day, an amassing crowd

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<sup>47</sup> Baker, *Sisters*, 216.

<sup>48</sup> Baker, *Sisters*, 212.

started attacking Paul and other NWP women. The police, repeating their behavior from the parade four years earlier, merely observed the violence, without protecting the women who were serving as nonviolent political activists. Later that afternoon, the District of Columbia police chief appeared at NWP headquarters demanding the picketing stop and threatening to arrest Paul if the picketing continued. Paul allegedly replied, ““Why? Has picketing suddenly become illegal? Our lawyers have assured us all along that picketing was legal. Certainly it is as legal in June as in January.””<sup>49</sup> For Paul, her behavior was much less than radical than that of her counterparts in Great Britain—after all, she had refrained from hurling stones at the White House or sneaking past the gates to speak with President Wilson, as she had done in Great Britain.

Consciously ignoring the threat of the Washington, DC Police Chief, the following day on June 21, 1917, Paul returned to her usual post holding banners outside the White House; within minutes, Wilson immediately ordered arrests begin for her presence with such degrading signage. While Paul did not engage in the militant, openly illegal behavior of her British counterparts, Baker argues Wilson did not allow for the presence of the group Paul assembled outside the White House. Baker describes, ““For the first time in American history, an organized group of dissidents...had employed passive resistance and civil disobedience in a direct confrontation with presidential authority.””<sup>50</sup> An article published by the *New York Times* the next day with the headline ““Crowds Again Rend Suffrage Banners: Another Inscription Aimed at Wilson and Root Destroyed to Prevent More Disorder,”” recounts, ““A duplicate of the one destroyed yesterday,

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<sup>49</sup> Baker, *Sisters*, 216; Inez Haynes Irwin, *The Story of the Woman’s Party* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1921), 210.

<sup>50</sup> Baker, *Sisters*, 217.

bearing the accusation against the President and Mr. Root was seized and destroyed by the local police as it was being borne toward the White House...from the headquarters of the Woman's Party, half a block away."<sup>51</sup> The article vaguely attributes with the headline "Arrest of Picket Demanded," that five "businessmen" called and, again, using the words "demanded" that the District Attorney issue arrests. It continues, "the District Attorney's office, like the police department, has been requested by the President not to take any legal action against the suffragists without consulting him."<sup>52</sup> With President Wilson directing all police and judicial action relating to the suffragists, Wilson also stationed "khaki-clad" secret service men "on guard duty day and night around the White House grounds." One woman even violently attacked the suffragists, crediting her action to *Times* reporter, "These women [suffragists] are a bunch of traitors." The article ads policemen who wore "no badge of authority at the time" suppressed the situation. Two suffragists, Lucy Burns and Katherine Morey, appeared shortly outside NWP headquarters holding a replica of the same banner that had been destroyed earlier that day. The reporter writes, "The two women stepped on the sidewalk, and immediately a



**Image 9.** The duplicate banner, shortly before it was ripped down.

<sup>51</sup> Special to the New York Times, "Crowds Again Rend Suffrage Banners," *New York Times*, June 22, 1917, 5.

<sup>52</sup> Special to the New York Times, "Crowds Again Rend Suffrage Banners."

squad of uniformed policemen and plainclothes men advanced toward them. Lieutenant James Hartley ordered them to return to the building with the banner.” When the women refused the group of men attacked them and seized the banner.<sup>53</sup>

The article closes with a section entitled “Women Here Disapprove,” quoting a woman in charge of the New York City Woman Suffrage Party, Mary Garrett Hay. Hay argues, “It is time the country should stand as one in everything that is done. Whatever our political beliefs, we should stand by the President...he should be treated with the greatest respect, and particularly when foreigners are here.”<sup>54</sup> Ironically, the same day this article appeared on page five, another article appeared announcing the defeat of the state suffrage bill in Maryland.

By July 17, 1917, sixteen suffragists, including Paul, were arrested and sentenced to sixty days in the Occquan Workhouse in Virginia, after refusing to pay fines of twenty five dollars as punishment for holding banners outside the gates of the White House. The counsel for the women—required by law to be a man—was Dudley Field Malone. Rather than focusing on the women enduring the terrible sentence, the headline reads “Suffragists Take 60-Day Sentence; Won’t Pay Fines: Defended by D.F. Malone: Port Collector Indignant Over the Conviction and May Even Resign.” The article cites that Malone, the Collector at the Port of New York submitted his resignation “over the attitude of the National Administration...toward the participants in this latest militant demonstration.” Malone defended the women because he believed all American citizens—void of political rights or not—had the right to petition for a “redress of

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<sup>53</sup> Special to the New York Times, “Crowds Again Rend Suffrage Banners.”

<sup>54</sup> Special to the New York Times, “Crowds Again Rend Suffrage Banners.”

grievances, and that it was a breach of constitutional guarantees to interfere with a group of citizens exercising this right.” The article further cites Malone’s claim that a single policeman could have dispersed the supposed “crowd” in the front of the White House, and that the women did not create a disturbance. The article notes the prominence of the women arrested.<sup>55</sup> In the trial, one of the sentenced suffragists, Miss Beatrice Kinkead refuted, “The Administration has ordered the conviction. It has been a ridiculous farce for three days.” Another sentenced suffragist, Mrs. John Rogers, similarly allegedly testified “Your Honor, you have the wrong party at the bar... The primary cause is the President of the United States who has the power to start in motion the machinery.” Ultimately, the judge declared the words in the now famous banner displayed to the Russian envoy in one, single occurrence to be “treasonable and seditious.” The article closes, “There has been no exhibition of this banner since the first arrests, and the pickets have been displaying milder placards.” Nonetheless, the women were not granted the opportunity to postpone their sentence or to file an appeal and were transported directly from the courthouse to Occoquan.<sup>56</sup> Despite a one-on-one meeting between J. A. H. Hopkins, whose wife was sent to the workhouse, with President Wilson on August, 13, 1917, the harsh sentence remained.

Amid the unjustified arrests and harsh sentences, Paul continued picketing and leading the NWP, until she was forcibly removed and sentenced to jail after her third arrest. In October of 1917, Paul was denied a jury trial and sentenced to seven months in

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<sup>55</sup> The women ranged in prominence from Mrs. John Winters Brannan, a 62 year old and the wife of physician and the daughter of Charles Dana, the editor of the *New York Sun*, to Mrs. Florence Bayard Hilles, the daughter of the Secretary of State during President Cleveland’s Administration and Ambassador to the Court of St. James, to Miss Mary Ingham, the granddaughter of President Jackson’s Secretary of the Treasury.

<sup>56</sup> Special to the *New York Times*, “Suffragists Take 60-Day Sentences; Won’t Pay Fines,” *New York Times*, July 18, 1917, 1.



jail for “obstructing traffic” outside the White House. Having experienced the Occquan workhouse for sixty days, Paul fearlessly commented on her sentence to reporters. She proclaimed her sentence resulted not “because we obstruct traffic, but because we pointed out to the president the fact that he was obstructing the cause of democracy at home, while we are fighting for it abroad.”<sup>57</sup> In preceding months, Paul had been a target of local police who regularly roamed Pennsylvania Avenue after the Russian envoy debacle. One policeman implemented a basic terror tactic, firing a gun shot at Paul’s window at the NWP headquarters.<sup>58</sup>

Sentenced as a common criminal and denied political prisoner status, Paul endured worse treatment than actual criminals. An enemy of the state, Paul was promptly placed in a ‘punishment cell,’ where prison staff subjected her to constant scrutiny. In unnecessary abuse, for instance, a prison matron shined a flashlight on Paul’s face every three hours for two weeks straight. Next, in an attempt to keep Paul permanently detained, she was sent to a psychiatric ward. With the prospect of detaining Paul at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital indefinitely at the will of a single psychologist, Paul was subject to a terrorizing transfer. Baker recounts from an interview with Paul, “Paul remembered several strange men entering her cell late night—for what she did not know, until one began asking her questions about her mental state. If an alienist (psychiatrist) thought she displayed any symptoms of paranoia, perhaps in an obsessive hatred of Wilson, a permanent incarceration would be possible.” An article a few weeks later in the *New York Times* detailed, “Miss Paul is imprisoned in a room in the midst of insane patients, whose shrieks she can hear day and night. For fear she may not hear them the door of her room

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<sup>57</sup> Special to the New York Times, “Suffragists Take 60-Day Sentences; Won’t Pay Fines.”

<sup>58</sup> Baker, *Sisters*, 218.

has been taken off. One of the windows has been boarded up with heavy wooden shutters, and the other one cannot be opened to let in air.”<sup>59</sup> Luckily, however, a subsequent examination by Dr. William White, the superintendent, credited Paul as psychologically sane—despite the trauma endured. Her attorney told the *Times*: “she is more sane than any of the administration officials who have been responsible for this outrage.”<sup>60</sup> While forcibly placed in the psychopathic ward without justification, Paul was additionally subject to two doctors and three nurses all simultaneously drawing her blood at once, by force, among other unorthodox and inhumane procedures. Paul aptly identified they used this and “other means to make one know one’s sanity was doubted.”<sup>61</sup>

Returning to jail, Paul was in her second month of her seven-month sentence when she began a hunger strike to protest the government’s refusal to grant her political prisoner status; as in Great Britain ten years earlier, Paul was again subject to Government-administered force-feedings as Wilson decided the women needed to stay alive. In an article appearing in the *New York Times* on November 7, 1917 deep on page thirteen, the publication announces Paul’s hunger strike. The article recounts Paul’s sentence resulted solely from picketing the White House and attributes, “Miss Paul, a slight, little woman, weighing about ninety pounds and of delicate constitution, was taken to the jail hospital...she was ill because of bad food, bad air, and no exercise.” Consuming a diet restricted to salted pork and cabbage a mere eighteen times in thirteen

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<sup>59</sup> Special to the New York Times, “White House Pickets Held Without Bail; 31 of Those on Parole Are Re-arrested—Malone Denounces Treatment of Alice Paul,” *New York Times*, November 14, 1917, 6.

<sup>60</sup> Special, “White House Pickets Held Without Bail.”

<sup>61</sup> Special to the New York Times, “Miss Paul Removed to Prison Hospital: Transferred from Psychopathic War on a Stretcher, She Writes in Smuggled Notes,” *New York Times*, November 19, 1917, 11.

days, the article continues, “When Paul was taken to the hospital a diet, including milk and eggs and without the salt pork and cabbage was offered her but she announced she would have none of it unless her sisters got the same.” In a testament to Wilson’s over-reaction in Paul’s harsh treatment, the article compares, “Paul was much thinner than when she entered the jail...and would not touch a morsel until she and her companions received the same treatment as seventeen murderers, who have the privilege of special food, air, exercise, and the newspapers.” Paul powerfully concludes the article in further open defiance, explaining: ““If we are to be starved, I prefer to be starved at once.””<sup>62</sup>

Two days later, an article in the *New York Times* on November 9, 1917 verified and recounted that Paul had been force-fed by government officials. With the headline “Hunger Striker is Forcibly Fed: Had Fasted for 78 Hours: Washington Officials Said She Would Die Unless Strenuous Measures Were Taken,” it vaguely states “The authorities refused to allow Miss Paul’s physician, Dr. Cora King Smith, to be present when she was fed.” Nonetheless, other than referencing Paul’s previous exposure to force-feeding in England, the article does little to describe the process or the torture characteristic of the violent, invasive operation, or “authorities” administering it. The article was placed on the last page of the *New York Times*, next to the obituaries. Helen Paul, Alice Paul’s sister, is quoted in the article warning, “What has she done that she should be treated like a criminal...She has given her life to working for suffrage for

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<sup>62</sup> Editorial Board, “Miss Alice Paul on Hunger Strike: Suffragist Leader Adopts This Means of Protesting Against Washington Prison Fare,” *New York Times*, November 7, 1917, 13.



**Image 10.** A member of the NWP stands outside jail requesting that Alice Paul be released.

women. I know she has bitterly opposed the Democratic Party, but I cannot believe that the President or the men he has appointed will deliberately risk her life in this way.”<sup>63</sup>

Paul was subsequently force-fed by government employees three times a day by a nasal tube for the next four weeks. When a group of suffragists reached the single open window she was allowed in her solitary confinement, Paul spoke of her condition through the wall. According to the ensuing *New York Times* coverage in an article from November 12, 1917 entitled “Force Yard of Jail to Cheer Miss Paul: Massed Militants Break Past Guards and Talk to Leader Through a Window,” Paul’s conditions were significantly worse than in Great Britain. Paul allegedly yelled to the women, “I am being forcibly fed three times a day...in England...they feed you only twice. I am able to prevent them from giving me half of what they bring, but I have not the strength to

<sup>63</sup> Special to the *New York Times*, “Hunger Striker is Forcible Fed: Miss Alice Paul, a Suffragist Picket, Is Greatly Exhausted After the Ordeal,” *New York Times*, November 9, 1917, 13.

prevent them from forcing me to take some.”<sup>64</sup> As is common in force-feeding via a tube, the stomach usually rejects any food that enters, as the food has not been properly digested before reaching the stomach. Moreover, the administrators had to alternate between Paul’s nose and throat, as each was injured and bloody due to the frequency of the invasive procedure. Additionally, despite the fact that Paul only needed food every three days to subsist, she was force-fed three times every day for four weeks.

Paul was not the only woman to endure government-administered torture as punishment for holding banners outside the White House in support of a Constitutional amendment. As Paul was no longer able to lead the picketing group each day, other suffragists followed and, as a result, were arrested. A *New York Times* article from November 13, 1917, reports, “Thirty-one militant suffragists, members of the Woman’s Party, most of whom were arrested for picketing last Saturday and yesterday, almost caused a riot.” The key statement in this article—almost—illuminates the fabrication behind the suffragists’ arrests. The article continues, “boys set upon the women and tore down their banners. Some of the women in defending themselves were roughly handled.” The article underplays that males were attacking defenseless women—and that the women were not offered protection from police onlookers. Moreover, the women were arrested for inciting civil unrest, rather than the men who initiated the physical abuse leading to any perceived unrest. The women were refused the option of bail. The article concludes, “the police said they were unable to find anybody who had torn down the banners.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Special to the *New York Times*, “Force Yard of Jail to Cheer Miss Paul: Massed Militants Break Past Guards and Talk to Leader Through a Window,” *New York Times*, November 12, 1917, 8.

<sup>65</sup> Special, “White House Pickets Held Without Bail.”

As the other women were brought to prison the same evening, Paul witnessed what would later be coined the Night of Terror on November 17, 1917. As subsequent NWP suffragists had continued to display the same placards as before the encounter with the Russian envoy, arrests became the norm. Upon arrival to the jail, the superintendent Alexander Whitaker, Baker recounts, ““threw them [suffragists] down stairs, dragged them off to isolation cells by their hair, and threatened sexual assaults and straightjackets. Lucy Burns spent part of the night with her hands handcuffed to the bars above her head...Seventy-year-old Mary Nolan was dragged along a damp floor and hurled into a cell. Alice Cosu vomited all night from a concussion.”<sup>66</sup>

As thirty-one women and Paul remained in jail, all on hunger strike and undergoing daily force-feedings, regardless of age, public sentiment remained in favor of their harsh treatment on nationalistic grounds. In one opinion piece appearing in the *New York Times* on November 18, 1917, one day after an article described that a seventy year old woman was “hurled” into a cell, an anonymous letter to the editor exclaimed, the suffragists “have been treated with the greatest consideration. Our President has been terribly burdened with momentous issues of war. The women who have hounded him and have increased his burdens.” Outside of the context of war, additionally, the letter argues, “They have enjoyed to the full the advantages of an enlightened democracy...In what strange manner, then, do they demonstrate their appreciation of their land of the free?”<sup>67</sup> Nonetheless, eleven days later, on November 28, 1917, twenty-two of the women were released from jail. There was no reason given for their release, other than that the Police

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<sup>66</sup> Baker, *Sisters*, 218.

<sup>67</sup> Fay Simmons Davis, “The Pickets in Prison: No Sympathy for Them Even Among Suffragists,” *New York Times*, November 18, 1917, E2.

Court Judge, Alexander Mallowney, who had sentenced them to jail for picketing in the first place, ordered their release. It is likely that President Wilson was displeased with the biweekly *New York Times* articles following the incarceration of the suffragists. Paul was the first of the group to be released, cutting her seven-month sentence short by five months. In a spectacle President Wilson intended to attract *positive* media attention, a surprisingly articulate Paul—given the abuse of the previous two months—gave a speech to reporters upon release from jail. Paul announced to the press waiting outside, “We are put out of jail as we were put into jail, at the whim of the Government. They tried to terrorize and suppress us. They could not, and so freed us.”<sup>68</sup> At first only the women who had been force-fed were released, but the others soon followed, similarly, without any rationale for the sudden change in government policy and sentiment.

#### The Aftermath:

The women were released as articulated increased in frequency and, in December 1917, Wilson finally recommended Congress enact universal suffrage. Amid Wilson’s pre-occupation with his famous Fourteen Points speech in January 1918, the House of Representatives voted on suffrage for the second time in forty years. The amendment passed the House of Representatives with exactly the two-thirds vote necessary. In September of 1918, Wilson addressed the Senate reasoning, “neither party could justify not substituting the Federal initiative for the state initiative,” although not directly supporting the amendment.<sup>69</sup> A year and six months later—during which time period

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<sup>68</sup> Special to the *New York Times*, “Suffrage Pickets Freed From Prison: Twenty-two Hunger Strikers Get Out, but Nine Others Stay in Washington Jail,” *New York Times*, November 28, 1917, 13.

<sup>69</sup> Baker, *Sisters*, 223.

Paul resumed picketing—in June of 1919 the Senate similarly agreed to the constitutional amendment allowing universal suffrage for women. The amendment marked the nineteenth alteration to the federal US Constitution, despite the fact that it originally started as the sixteenth; income tax, direct election of Senators, and prohibition had come first. In June 1920 the nineteenth amendment to the Constitution was ratified by the thirty-sixth state necessary, Tennessee.

Ending a campaign that lasted over seven years, Paul spent the rest of her life attempting to earn equality for women in everything the government could control. When a *Newsweek* journalist asked Paul why she dedicated so much of her life to the nineteenth amendment, Paul replied, “When you put your hand to the plow, you can’t put it down until you get to the end of the row.”<sup>70</sup>

It is greatly disturbing and perplexing that Paul’s physical sufferings are not remembered, despite the fact that they were readily available in news sources of her time. Like Josephine Butler, Paul consistently downplayed the violence she endured and her contribution in revolutionizing the political advocacy space for women. As Josephine Butler leveraged targeting the House of Commons and the House of Lords, Paul advanced on this tactic by singling out the President of the United States, and reminding him of such targeting each day, outside his place of residence. Would picketing outside the White House still be illegal if not for Paul? Would such torture of activists merely for standing on public grounds with a sign warrant an arrest today? Why are the failings of the US Government and its judicial system blatantly absent from the historical record?

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<sup>70</sup> “Alice Paul: Feminist, Suffragist, and Political Strategist,” Alice Paul Institute, last modified November 8, 2010, <http://www.alicepaul.org/alicepaul.htm>.



Paul died on July 9, 1977. In her obituary from the *New York Times*, author Dena Kleiman summarizes Paul’s career as a political activist, “Dr. Paul also organized marches and rallies and managed to arrange a meeting with a newly elected President, Woodrow Wilson, to urge him to support the right of women to vote. Almost immediately after the women’s suffrage amendment was ratified in 1920, she turned to the equal rights amendment, which she is credited with drafting.”<sup>71</sup> While Paul is remembered for her general involvement in efforts to earn the “right” to vote for women, the need for the existence of this right is now the norm. Although a small blurb announcing her death made it to the front page of the *New York Times*, Paul is not remembered for the physical suffering she endured in order to earn women the right to vote. Paul achieved suffrage for all women not by asking the US Government for a federal amendment, but by acting and demanding an amendment—at any physical cost necessary.



**Image 11.** Alice Paul toasts to the passage of the nineteenth Constitutional amendment with a valiant salute to the suffrage flag outside NWP Headquarters.

<sup>71</sup> Dena Kleiman, “Alice Paul, a Leader for Suffrage And Women’s Rights, Dies at 92,” *New York Times*, July 10, 197, 42.

### Chapter 3

#### **Argentina: Azucena Villaflor and *El Proceso***

As Josephine Butler and Alice Paul advocated against certain policies inhibiting equality for women, Azucena Villaflor pushed her government, a military dictatorship called the Junta—comprised of three military leaders—to recognize similar equality and the basic rights of its constituents. Villaflor advocated against *the* single policy of torturing and deliberately killing more than thirty thousand innocent civilians in Argentina, labeled subversives by their government. For one year, before she was murdered by her own government, Villaflor tirelessly sought to reveal the mass murders occurring at the conscious, direct will of General Jorge Rafael Videla, a leader of the Argentine Army, Admiral Emilio Eduardo Massera, a leader of the Argentine Navy, and Brigadier Ramón Agosti, a leader of the Argentine Air Force, during the Process of National Reorganization, *El Proceso*—often referred to imprecisely as the Dirty War in the United States. Laying the groundwork for the renowned organization the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, Villaflor was the first activist—male or female—to courageously confront her government in a search for her forcibly disappeared son and daughter-in-law. While Josephine Butler and Alice Paul successfully attracted the attention of government leaders and prompted change in government policy in Great Britain and the United States, with unprecedented political tactics, Villaflor also used direct confrontation, implementing the strategies of each respective female activist, but, as a

result, endured sadistic torture and premature death.

No obituary of Villaflor exists, as she was forcibly disappeared, a *desaparecido* and never legally reported dead or alive again. She was kidnapped by plainclothesmen government “security forces” outside her home on December 10, 1977, and never seen again by her family or friends. US State Department officials later confirmed her body washed up on the shore of the Rio de la Plata, the river surrounding Argentina’s capital of Buenos Aires, along with the bodies of other female Argentine activists and two French nuns. In a US Government document that was recently declassified in 2002, the only public document acknowledging Villaflor’s murder, it states that the US Embassy intelligence services on the ground in Argentina were aware of the involvement of the Argentine Navy, the Army First Corps, the Presidential State Intelligence Services, *and* a military detention facility in her disappearance.<sup>1</sup> In a document dated March 30, 1978, three months after her disappearance, it states “confidential information through an Argentina government source (protect) that seven bodies were discovered some weeks ago on the Atlantic beach near Mar del Plata. According to this source, the bodies were those of the two nuns and five mothers who were disappeared between December 8 and December 10, 1977.”<sup>2</sup> Of these four thousand and seven hundred documents declassified by the US Department of State pertaining to the general tag of “human rights violations” in Argentina, one document written by the US Ambassador to Argentina, Raul Castro, summarizes the international response to the horrific human rights violations taking place in Buenos Aires and greater Argentina from 1976 until 1983: “The one-issue groups, such as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, will clamor for the government to make an

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<sup>1</sup> “US Declassified Documents: Argentina Junta Security Forces Killed, Disappeared Activists, Mothers

<sup>2</sup> “US Declassified Documents.”

accounting for the missing. The issue will be increasingly and dramatically reported...[But] we should avoid...demanding accountability for the disappeared, since that does nothing directly to eliminate further abuses.”<sup>3</sup> Later, in a document from January 26, 1978, the Assistant Secretary for Inter-American Affairs, John Bushnell, wrote to Deputy Secretary of State, Warren Christopher, “No one doubts that elements of the Argentina government are implicated in this affair, but hard facts are unavailable.” Similarly, following Villaflor’s activism counter to the Junta dictatorship and the Argentine government, no information on her or her political activism remain.

Background:

Similar to Josephine Butler, Villaflor was initially content with her duties as a housewife and a mother of four children. She entered a role of political advocacy later in life. Villaflor was born in Avellaneda, a province of the capital of Buenos Aires, Argentina on April 7, 1924. Her parents, Emma and Florentino, were a young couple, fifteen years old and twenty one years old, respectively, at the time of her birth. Florentino was a wool factor worker and had some ties to the leftist Peronist workers movement in Argentina. Villaflor, however, grew up with her aunt and uncle. When Villaflor was sixteen years old, she started working as a telephone operator. In this role, Villaflor met her husband, Pedro De Vicenti, and the couple married in 1949.

Given Villaflor’s short tenure serving as a political activist prior to her murder, not a lot is known about Villaflor’s life after marriage. As was common in Argentina, Villaflor quit any form of work and started a family with De Vicenti. In *Revolutionizing*

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<sup>3</sup> “US Declassified Documents.”

*Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo*, Marguerite Guzman Bouvard contextualizes the role of mothers in Argentina leading up to the dictatorship in 1976 explaining, mothers “had been socialized into these roles by a traditional Argentine society that regards the male as the dominant figure, the sole participant in public life and the undisputed head of the home. Not many of them had completed secondary-school education because in the generation of the 1930s and 1940s, only males went to school.”<sup>4</sup> Void of the strong educational backgrounds characteristic of Josephine Butler and Alice Paul, Villaflor gladly accepted her role as a mother.

In the machismo culture of Argentina in the late 1970s, men predominated the economic and public spaces, while women remained in the home caring for the children. Ana María Marini clarifies the role of women in an article entitled “Women in Contemporary Argentina,” written in 1977. Marini explains how media sources in Argentina emphasize “the importance of education and the ability of women to pursue any career, [but] carefully stress that women’s activities outside the family should not interfere or replace their family concerns.”<sup>5</sup> Women were considered to be directly responsible for the socialization of “healthy children”—thus prompting the necessity that women quit their jobs after marriage in preparation for providing sufficient energies to foster the existence of such a family. Rather than embracing education for women as part of a greater intellectual exploration, as with Josephine Butler or Alice Paul, Argentine women leading up the 1970s were valued for their economic role, as consumers, given the developmental woes characteristic of Argentina’s volatile economy. In contrast to a

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<sup>4</sup> Marguerite Guzman Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* (Oxford: SR Books, 1994), 65.

<sup>5</sup> Ana María Marini, “Women in Contemporary Argentina,” *Latin American Perspectives* 4.4 (1977): 117, accessed October 8, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2633180>.

formal economic position with a paid position in the work force, Villaflor and other average, middle-class women contributed to the greater society by making consumer decisions, and, more specifically, by adequately planning and budgeting to consume as efficiently as possible. For instance, one common economic role for women often rested on hiring domestic help, sometimes one or two workers, to ensure that all attention could be focused on the children without the distraction of time-consuming housework. Marini describes this impact: “In the context of present legislation, employers are reluctant to hire women.”<sup>6</sup> Coupled with the hesitation to hire women outside of the domestic-focused positions, Marini continues, “Unless economic need forced them to continue working, women thought that their place was at home with the child, even when childcare services from relatives and friends were available.”<sup>7</sup>

The role of women remained centered on childcare, notably stemming from a strong Christian influence, throughout the middle of the twentieth century and into the 1970s. With low rates of population growth, women were encouraged to have children. Amid bleak population increases of only 1.3 percent each year, the government actively utilized media campaigns to encourage greater rates for reproduction to supply the looming shortage of workers. Government controls to encourage reproduction were so significant that abortion was legally a crime and family allowances were allotted on a per-child basis to promote and support larger families. Additionally, in March 1974, a government executive decree outlawed birth control information and immediately closed any existing family planning agencies. Marini credits she witnessed, “daily accounts in the newspapers about women dying...because of unsanitary abortions. Newspaper

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<sup>6</sup> Marini, “Women in Contemporary Argentina,” 117.

<sup>7</sup> Marini, “Women in Contemporary Argentina,” 117.

stories...simply stress the violation of legal and religious principles and celebrate the capture of the midwives or the doctors willing to commit such ‘crimes.’”<sup>8</sup>

Overall, as Villaflor quit her job and willingly dedicated her life to her children, she represented the norm. In 1977, more than one hundred years after the beginnings of the women’s movements in Greater Britain and the United States, the government, the Church, and the media in Argentina strictly dictated this widely accepted, “special role” for women. Marini concludes, “Christian virtues have a virtual monopoly over the attention of Argentina women...I did not find an organized women’s movement in Argentina...I found no literature on the issue and no news about women’s activities except those of a purely traditional nature (religious and charity organizations).”<sup>9</sup> Marini’s observations help explain the lack of information available on Villaflor’s child rearing years. Raising our children, Villaflor, initially, Villaflor did not engage in the liberal practices of expanding her education or pursuing career opportunities like Josephine Butler and Alice Paul.

#### Her Pivotal Moment:

As the Junta dictatorship came to power in 1976 in Argentina, Villaflor continued with her daily routine of maintaining her household and her family—until forces outside her control permanently changed her family. On November 30, 1976, eight months after the start of the military dictatorship, government security forces kidnapped Villaflor’s son, Néstor de Vicenti, and his wife Raquel in Buenos Aires. Amid a suspended Congress and Junta-appointed Supreme Court and provincial judges, Villaflor was left without any

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<sup>8</sup> Marini, “Women in Contemporary Argentina,” 118.

<sup>9</sup> Marini, “Women in Contemporary Argentina,” 120.

channels to attempt to locate her son.

Since 1930 in Argentina, military coups existed as the norm. Despite its status as the eighth richest country in the world directly following World War II and its designation as the “Paris of South America” due to its perceived sophistication with a ninety-eight percent literacy rate in the capital city—the highest in Latin America—Argentina endured nine different military coups between 1930 and the start of the Junta dictatorship in 1976. The average life span of each of these regimes was two years and ten months. In each regime, seemingly every aspect of the government changed. No government institution was immune to overhaul with each new group of government leaders.

A change in government in Argentina was not merely a change in leadership, but rather a complete, albeit usually temporary, change in government functioning. For the most part, each of the coups was civilian-backed and facilitated by the military. In the book *A Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture*, Marguerite Feitlowitz credits, “One of the ironies of Argentine history is that in 1930, relatively few officers participated...in [the] coup, yet political culture was decidedly militarized from that point on.” Many of these coups did not affect the daily lives of Argentine citizens. Feitlowitz continues, “Over and over the Argentine military...proved that it is notably lacking in both economic savvy and the skills of governance...Good relations with the army was the key to staying in power. No president—civilian or military—has managed to stay in office against the wishes of the men in uniform.”<sup>10</sup> From this political history in the twentieth century emerged the popularly cited tenet, still repeated today in Buenos Aires,

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<sup>10</sup> Marguerite Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 5.



of “*Necesitamos una mano dura,*” translating to English as “we need a strong hand” in government leadership. As the military favored an economy following Western systems of capitalism, people like Villaflor, mainly of the middle class and upper class, stereotypically supported the military in control of the government. While no evidence exists documenting Villaflor’s opinions on the Junta prior to the abduction of her son, it is highly likely that she similarly, more generally, favored the decisive rule of the military in spurring economic development and was not necessarily opposed to the initial military takeover in 1976.

Prior to her son’s kidnapping, Villaflor witnessed the violent guerrilla warfare following the death of President Juan Perón in July of 1974. In attempt to fill a rapidly developing power vacuum, Perón’s wife, Isabel, attempted to maintain control of the government by unleashing a squad of policemen vaguely called the Argentina Anti-Communist Alliance, the AAA.<sup>11</sup> Fighting quickly ensued between the ultra-right and ultra-left as Feitlowitz contextualizes, “kidnappings, executions and random violence made everyone vulnerable. The upper and middle class hired bodyguards. Businesses paid both sides for protection.” The main leftist group, the Montoneros, remained at the center of government blame as the perpetrators of what, in reality, existed as two-sided fighting. Feitlowitz credits, “Both before and after the coup, the government grossly exaggerated the strength of the insurgent forces. Over the entire decade of the 1970s, the leftist groups carried out a total of 697 assassinations, killing 400 policemen, 143 members of the military, and 54 civilians.”<sup>12</sup> Government officials of the Junta dictatorship, following the successful military coup of March 24, 1976, however, claimed

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<sup>11</sup> Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror*, 7.

the Montoneros and leftist opponents amounted to twenty five thousand people and fifteen thousand combatants, respectively.<sup>13</sup> General Rafael Videla declared in 1975, one year before Villaflor's son, Néstor, forced disappearance, "As many people as necessary must die in Argentina so that the country will again be secure."<sup>14</sup> Following Decree 261, the Junta mobilized the AAA and additional security forces to begin process to guarantee control over the population. General Videla justified in 1976 "the aim of the Process [El Proceso] is the profound transformation of consciousness."<sup>15</sup>

With the disappearance of her son eight months after a "gentlemen's coup" put the Junta in power and *El Proceso* began, allegedly to promote a western, Christian civilization in Argentina, Villaflor remained powerless in her search for hard facts or information on the disappearance of her son; random, lasting government-perpetrated kidnappings of young adults spread as a common occurrence. In the eight months since the start of the dictatorship—and even leading up to the coup—labor unions, professional guilds, teachers' associations, and even high school or college student council members had been disappearing without reason and without return. Amid the secret establishment of three hundred and forty torture centers and concentration centers, the Junta government did not intend to return kidnapped, innocent members of Argentine society, labeled "subversives" by the military.

Abductions carried out by plainclothesmen government forces, entirely void of due process or a legal framework, were intentional and intended to spread mystery and

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<sup>13</sup> Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror*, 338.

<sup>14</sup> Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror*, 7; originally published in *Clarín*, Argentina's largest circulation daily newspaper, on October 24, 1975.

<sup>15</sup> Oscar Troncoso, *El proceso de reorganización nacional: Cronología y documentación I*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 29; quote from two-month anniversary of the coupe on May 24, 1976.

terror. Bouvard explains the Junta “portrayed its efforts as a religious crusade—a Holy War that subordinated any concerns of due process of human rights.”<sup>16</sup> Such efforts of kidnapping subversives, the Junta argued, needed to remain secretive to avoid tarnishing the image of Argentina abroad and thus threatening possible economic or trade developments benefitting the population of Argentina.



**Image 1.** The three leaders of the Junta military dictatorship: Admiral Emilio Massera (Argentine Navy), General Jorge Rafael Videla (Argentine Army), and General Orlando Ramon Agosti (Argentine Air Force).

Kidnappings and disappearances were carried out in broad day light often amid multiple passersby in Buenos Aires and surrounding regions of Argentina. Bouvard explains, “Under a semblance of normality, thousands of people were dragged from their homes, their places of work, from the streets by plainclothesmen in fleets of unmarked cars. Their families and friends were hurled into a limbo of terror and nightmare while the country continued to conduct its business as if nothing had happened.”<sup>17</sup> Villaflor and the rest of the constituency in Buenos Aires witnessed Ford Falcons, without license plates, circling the streets throughout the night or before dawn. Anonymous security

<sup>16</sup> Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 23.

<sup>17</sup> Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 24.

forces, lacking any form of visible identification and talking in code names, refused to identify themselves while administering such violent, often unprompted, kidnappings.

The kidnapping of Villaflor's son and daughter-in-law was far from a cordial police abduction characteristic of police arrests in Great Britain or the United States. Villaflor did not witness her son's kidnapping, but another mother, Evel Aztarbe de Petrini, was home when her son, Sergio, was arrested less than a year later in 1977. Aztarbe described one evening, while her husband was still at work, *ten* heavily armed men knocked on her door, wearing regular street clothes. When she answered the door, the men claimed they were looking for a thief in the neighborhood. The men, after spotting Aztarbe's two sons in the home, dragged her sons out on the patio, pushed them to the ground, and began kicking each of the boys repeatedly in the genitals. Bouvard, who interviewed Aztarbe in November 1990, describes Aztarbe's recollection of the incident: "They held them at gunpoint while they searched the house, pillaging, taking ties, belts, even an iron. When they found some cords belonging to her son that were used for attaching patches to blue jeans, they claimed the cords were for making bombs." While Aztarbe denies such a ridiculous and unreasonable claim, one of the ten men subsequently declared they were taking her son Sergio. Aztarbe attempted to force the men to take her instead, but a man proceeded to hold a gun to Sergio's head while another hit Aztarbe repeatedly as she attempted to free her son. Like Villaflor, Aztarbe never saw her son again. Amid such unpredictable raids, no member of Argentine society was immune. Bouvard concludes after conducting interviews with multiple mothers of *desaparecidos*, "by actually witnessing or hearing about the abductions through whispered rumors, the public was forced to acknowledge the power of the Junta and its

own helplessness and fear.”<sup>18</sup>

After the disappearance of her son Néstor in 1976, Villaflor boldly left her home in an attempt to uncover information on the location of her son and his wife. Many Argentines initially assumed a mistake had been made in the kidnapping of their children.<sup>19</sup> Villaflor, like other desperate family members of those who were kidnapped, rationally assumed that if she could notify the proper government authorities and explain the misunderstanding, her son would be returned.<sup>20</sup> Villaflor repeatedly searched police stations, hospitals, and military garrisons searching for Néstor. Over and over, however, Villaflor was informed “no information existed” on Néstor or Raquel; their existence after their kidnapping was denied. Government employees were instructed to tell all family members of the kidnapped that no information was available to instill psychological terror. Bouvard justifies, “the most terrible deeds [are] committed without records and without a trail of information.”<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, the basics of Villaflor’s family stability, structure, and privacy were permanently impacted as the days passed on without the return of Néstor and Raquel.

Coupled with the lack of information available at any government agency, the Argentina Junta launched a public relations campaign to blame the disappearances on non-descript terrorist groups. As Villaflor and other porteños, the people of Buenos Aires, could not decipher what was happening as government-controlled media sources in Argentina merely perpetuated “God is with us” as a common slogan justifying the lasting disappearances of thousands of civilians.

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<sup>18</sup> Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 28.

<sup>19</sup> Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 28.

<sup>20</sup> Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 27.

<sup>21</sup> Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 30.

Many adults were too frightened to act to search for information on the location of their loved ones, and rather remained in isolation. Bouvard credits Villaflor and other family members of *desaparecidos* were “propelled into a netherworld where no rules, no institutions to which one could direct one’s concern, and no death to mourn [existed]. The family lived in a surreal limbo; deprived of all information and recourse and stripped of social support and comprehension.”<sup>22</sup> In contrast to those searching for abducted family members, the Police Chief of Buenos Aires announced in newspapers in 1977: “we didn’t disappear persons, but subversives.”<sup>23</sup> In the presence of such seemingly credible statements, those subsisting without kidnapped family members, *yet*, started to view the increasingly common government-perpetrated kidnappings of civilians as a legitimate sacrifice for long-term security. Meanwhile, General Videla announced that terrorists were not those with visible weapons, but rather those who were spreading ideas contrary to the Western, Christian civilization.<sup>24</sup> Those that remained quiet bystanders to such relentless abductions believed they would remain safe. Some family members of *desaparecidos* even started to convince themselves that perhaps their loved ones had secretly done something to warrant arrest and lasting detainment.

Confident that Néstor had not committed any crimes worthy of permanent abduction, Villaflor tirelessly searched for six months, repeatedly waiting in lines at any government institution that might be able to provide information on her son’s location. Taken outside the comfort of her home and away from the structure of her usual, gender-specific routine, Villaflor had the opportunity to interact with other mothers of

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<sup>22</sup> Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 36.

<sup>23</sup> Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 36.

<sup>24</sup> Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 37.

*desaparecidos* and relatives enduring the same hardship and confusion. Day after day, government officials instructed Villaflor to “come back tomorrow” for additional information.<sup>25</sup> Mothers of disappeared civilians—as the fathers remained at work each day—searched for information on their children. As Josephine Butler and Alice Paul also

**Image 2.** Azucena Villaflor shortly before her forced disappearance in December of 1977.



both initially enjoyed the comforts of routine and structure, Villaflor was forced outside of her previously enjoyed lifestyle after her son’s kidnapping. For the first time, she began to witness the existing ills of society with the heightened consciousness of a political outsider.

As Villaflor emerged from her home to search for information on the location of her son following his unjust kidnapping by government security forces, she realized that she was not alone; rather as Josephine Butler and Alice Paul attracted a following, Villaflor started uniting with other Mothers.<sup>26</sup> Villaflor quickly became aware of the role of the Junta in the kidnappings. After months of seeking help from different government

<sup>25</sup> Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 66.

<sup>26</sup> Mothers capitalized will refer to mothers of *desaparecidos*

agencies, Villaflor concentrated her efforts on the Ministry of the Interior. While the Ministry of the Interior did not provide any information on Néstor's location or specifics on his abduction, Villaflor met other Mothers at the office. All similarly facing emotional hardship, Villaflor suggested some of the mothers meet at home to comfort one another. Mothers who attended these initial group meetings later credited that they decided to attend because Villaflor "stood out...[with] her energy, her initiative, and her unforgettably radiant smile."<sup>27</sup>

Similar to Alice Paul's relentless determination to prompt a federal constitutional amendment allowing women to vote, Villaflor's unrelenting dedication to finding her son, amid successive setbacks, separated her from the other mothers and family members of *desaparecidos*. One Mother recalls, "there were mornings when I woke up and told myself, he must be someplace, he must be alive. But the next day, I imagined the contrary. I thus lived tortured, driven mad, thinking of him the entire day, seeing him in each young man I passed on the streets, jumping every time I heard the telephone or the doorbell, believing I had heard his voice."<sup>28</sup> Despite facing a similar emotional grief, however, Villaflor, other mothers credit, emerged as a "tower of strength."<sup>29</sup> After drastically transforming from only leaving her home to shop for groceries or to meet with friends to leaving her home every week day to probe government officials for information, Villaflor started using weekly meetings of mothers of the disappeared for more than emotional solidarity.

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<sup>27</sup> Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 68.

<sup>28</sup> Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 67; *Madres Boletín*, no. 1 (no date provided).

<sup>29</sup> Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 68.



### Political Advocacy:

In a matter of weeks, Villaflor established her home as a meeting spot for mothers of the disappeared. Villaflor initially encouraged the women to use traditional modes of advocacy to seek answers to their questions on the treatment and location of their children. The women wrote letters to international organizations seeking help and drafted petitions in an attempt to encourage government officials to release information. In meetings that often lasted all day, the small group of mothers wrote letters to Amnesty International and the Organization of American States' Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.<sup>30</sup>

As Josephine Butler leveraged contacts abroad and Alice Paul hoped to gain international publicity in picketing the White House amid the visit of Russian officials, Villaflor realized that bringing international attention to the increasing commonality of government kidnappings could expedite the release of information from the Argentine government. As the meetings grew in size, Villaflor moved the meetings to local churches.

Following the strategy of Alice Paul, Villaflor suggested the group's best initial hope was to use petitions, asking the government for answers. As such petitions did not result in a response of any kind from foreign or domestic governments, however, Villaflor suggested bolder tactics. María Adela Gard de Antokoletz—the mother of Daniel Victor Antokoletz, who was disappeared on November 10, 1976 at the age of thirty-nine years old while working as a professor in Buenos Aires—recounts that Villaflor proactively suggested action. In an interview with historian Matilde

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<sup>30</sup> Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 68.

Mellibovsky, Antokoletz recounted, ““one of the Mothers [Azucena] said that we were wasting our time listening to this man and going to the police stations and military chaplains and command posts and even by making all the inquiries each one of us was making.”” She continues, ““We did not realize the truth of the situation, the ‘why’ of the disappearances, the fact that the main responsibility fell on Videla and his cronies: that it was necessary to silent the voices of the dissident in order to establish a specific economic policy—under the fateful doctrine of national security—that would completely hand over the country.””<sup>31</sup> Unlike the other Mothers, Villaflor realized that the Argentine government was responsible for the disappeared and, most importantly, that the leaders of the Junta needed to be targeted in order for any information on the location of Néstor and Raquel and thousands of the other mission people.

Villaflor announced that the women needed to attract the sole attention of the de facto President Videla by gathering outside his home, the Casa Rosada, in the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires. In April 1977, exactly six months after Néstor’s disappearance, Villaflor unveiled her strategy. Antokoletz recalls Villaflor explained in detail, ““At 5 o’clock we are going to demonstrate at the Plaza de Mayo, across from the presidential palace, so that at long last Videla will have to agree to give proper attention to the cause of our disappeared children.”” Antokoletz added her reaction to Villaflor’s statement: ““I could not imagine then that the dictator, Videla, was one of the main people responsible for the disappearances.””<sup>32</sup> Similar to the early followers of Josephine Butler and Alice Paul, the other mothers initially could not fathom government officials perpetrating

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<sup>31</sup> Matilde Mellibovsky, *Circles of Love Over Death: Testimonies of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo*, (Willimantic: Curbstone Press, 1997), 19.

<sup>32</sup> Mellibovsky, *Circles of Love Over Death*, 20.

violent or unjust acts.

A week later, on April 30, 1977, fourteen mothers of *desaparecidos* arrived, individually, at the historic Plaza de Mayo, fearful for their lives and unsure of how they would be received by government officials. Antokoletz admits that Villaflor insisted no action be taken, but rather that the Mothers simply provide a silent presence to remind the President of their existence and their constant search for information on the disappeared. As Alice Paul didn't focus on the philosophy behind the suffrage movement, Villaflor ensured that the women gathered did not discuss the possible crimes committed by their children. Rather, Antokoletz recalls, as the women assembled in the Plaza, "we did not ask anybody about their ideas, or 'what their children had been involved in,' or about their family's ideology. The fact of having a disappeared person, that alone, created a sisterhood among us."<sup>33</sup> Quietly and orderly, the Mothers arrived—each prepared with their identification cards, in case they were interrogated, and extra bus fares, in case they needed to escape the Plaza quickly.

Villaflor carefully selected the Plaza de Mayo, surrounding the President's residence of the Casa Rosada for political leverage, as Alice Paul selected the White House for the initial picketing of the Women's Party. The Plaza de Mayo was the location where the Assembly of 1813 abolished all instruments of torture and declared the use of torture to get information on crimes illegal. Moreover, in the Plaza, the Assembly declared that the tools used for torture be burned by the executioner's themselves in the Plaza, for the public to witness.<sup>34</sup> The Plaza encompasses the state's most important buildings. Around the Plaza are the *Cabildo*, the colonial city council, the

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<sup>33</sup> Mellibovsky, *Circles of Love Over Death*, 20.

<sup>34</sup> Mellibovsky, *Circles of Love Over Death*, xiv.

Casa Rosada, the center of the executive branch and the greater federal government, the Metropolitan Cathedral, the religious center of Buenos Aires, the city hall, and the headquarters of the national bank. Additionally, the May Pyramid or *Pirámide de Mayo* is in the center of the Plaza de Mayo. It is the oldest monument in Buenos Aires, constructed in 1811, and represents the May Revolution of 1810, when Argentina declared independence from Spain.

When Villaflor and the Mothers met on April 30, 1977 at the Plaza de Mayo it was a Saturday, and thus the Plaza was empty. With the initial intimidation out of the way, the Mothers decided to meet again on Friday so the likelihood of attracting an audience would increase. Similar to Alice Paul and the NWP's picketing outside the White House, Villaflor wanted both to captivate the attention of Argentina's political leaders and the public. At the same time, however, given the severity of punishments for government "subversives" and the undisputed strength of the Junta government leaders, Villaflor and the Mothers could not draw too much attention and hold up directive banners, as Alice Paul encouraged. Instead, the Mothers simply gathered in the Plaza and sat down with one another. For three successive weeks, the Mothers met every Friday afternoon in the Plaza. On the third week, Villaflor and a woman named Mária del Rosario de Cerruti attempted to deliver a collective letter to President Videla. Walking to the doors of the Casa Rosada, government officials refused the letter from Villaflor and Cerruti. Nonetheless, the pair kept returning to the doors of the executive residence every week until, two months later, an under secretary for of President Videla agreed to meet

with them—that same day.<sup>35</sup>

**Image 3.** A group of mothers gather outside the Casa Rosada in the Plaza de Mayo in late 1977.



**Image 4.** Mothers gather to march around the May Pyramid in the Plaza de Mayo in either late October or early December of 1977, shortly before Villaflor's abduction and permanent disappearance. Government security forces in plainclothes remain in the center of the circle.

The meeting with President Videla's secretary, ultimately resulting in a meeting with the President himself, similar to Alice Paul's initial meeting with President Wilson, provoked excitement among the informal group of Mothers gathered in the Plaza. Unlike with the case of Alice Paul, however, it also instilled fear in the group. Many Mothers were unsure if Villaflor or Cerruti would return from the doors of the Casa Rosada, or

<sup>35</sup> Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 70; transcription from an interview Bouvard completed with Maria del Rosario de Cerruti in August of 1989.

simply become *desaparecidos* as well. At seven in the evening, with a large crowd of Mothers, Villaflor and Cerruti successfully met with members of the executive branch and returned, unharmed. Cerruti recalled years later in an interview as Villaflor questioned about the location of their respective, innocent children, the President informed the two Mothers, “How could they be detained if I know nothing about it? What do the writs of habeas corpus say?” He allegedly continued, “They say that they are not detained. Many of these young people were mixed up in subversion and have left the country. The young women who leave the country are prostituting themselves in Mexico. Your sons must have gone with some girl.”<sup>36</sup>

Blaming the disappearances of their respective sons on prostitutes draws many parallels with the British government blaming women suspected of prostitution for the spread of venereal disease among men in the armed forces at the end of the nineteenth century in Great Britain. As an unspoken and unaddressed societal wrong, especially in the highly religious Argentine society of the late twentieth century, the two mothers were left unable to deny such a ridiculous allegation. Nonetheless, the nonsensical excuse similarly illuminates the cowardice of an otherwise seemingly omniscient and omnipotent political leader. As the leaders of the House of Lords refused to acknowledge the innocence of women arrested without any link to prostitution and President Wilson refused to explain any reasoning for why women should not have the right to vote, President Videla used an excuse; at first, he did not openly confront the Mothers with violence. After the meeting, Villaflor allegedly told President Videla, “You are not going to remove us from the Plaza until you tell us what happened to our children.”

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<sup>36</sup> Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 70; transcription de Cerruti interview

Villaflor continued according to Cerruti, ““You don’t sign death warrants for those that you kill, [and] you won’t take responsibility for what you do. You are more cowardly than anyone.””<sup>37</sup> Despite Villaflor’s audacious response, President Videla allowed the women to leave the Casa Rosada to return to the amassing group of Mothers outside.

**Image 5.** The Casa Rosada, home of the Executive Branch of government in Argentina and the May Pyramid, the object the Mothers initially circled in a counterclockwise fashion in defiance of the violent, unjust Junta.



Following her proclamation to President Videla, Villaflor consistently returned to the Plaza each week with a group of Mothers, hoping any government official would be able to provide information on the location of her son. The group quickly grew in size, amounting to nearly sixty Mothers following Villaflor and Cerruti’s meeting with the President. Initially, the security forces and identifiable policemen in the surrounding area did not bother the women. As the group started growing in size, however, policemen informed the women sitting in the Plaza they were acting in violation of the law. Cerruti recalled in an interview with historian Marguerite Guzman Bouvard that the policemen argued, “the country was in a state of siege and [thus] sitting there was tantamount to

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<sup>37</sup> Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 70; transcription de Cerruti interview

holding a meeting and would mark...an illegal organization.” One policeman’s, now famous, words to the group of mothers were “Keep moving, keep moving.”<sup>38</sup> As a result, the mothers started walking, two by two, arm in arm, to avoid arrest. To demonstrate their defiance, the women decided to march counterclockwise around the May Pyramid given its symbolism for liberty. While many at first believed the women were aimlessly walking to avoid confrontation with the police, Cerruti recalls Villaflor led the Mothers and purposefully wanted to start a protest. Despite initially escaping police scrutiny and arrest, the women attracted successive negative attention as the number of Mothers marching increased and the group switched the meeting day to Thursday afternoons.

Like Alice Paul endured a sudden, unprompted police response to her advocacy, Villaflor and the Mothers circling the May Pyramid each Thursday slowly received police pushback as time progressed. Two months after the mother’s began marching once a week, vans of policemen arrived to document the names of the Mothers and, most importantly, to force them to leave. Given the terror-ridden political climate, the Mothers did not resist the requests of the police, like Alice Paul, but rather left the Plaza when requested. Even as policemen started unleashing dogs on the women, directly threatening their lives, and, most notably, spraying the women with tear gas, the original fourteen mothers, growing in size, returned each Thursday. Bouvard contextualizes, “The Mothers had decided to work openly against a regime that enforced secrecy and total compliance, and their...meetings represented the beginning of a long and courageous struggle to claim space for truth and dissent in the very setting of government power.”<sup>39</sup>

With a government system giving complete power to the military Junta, the

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<sup>38</sup> Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 70.

<sup>39</sup> Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 69.



women found ways to counteract the police methods of intimidation and deterrence, with the same unity Alice Paul advocated outside the White House. Most notably, the women started to carry white handkerchiefs to wipe their eyes, counteracting the adverse effects of the tear gas. Even in the face of water cannons, Villaflor urged the Mothers to remain in the Plaza. Villaflor allegedly proclaimed, “If you take one, you have to take all of us.”<sup>40</sup> As police arrived and took away any women remaining in the Plaza, Villaflor and the mothers were not permanently detained or tortured, but rather, initially, released after twenty-four hours. Such police bullying, surprisingly, did not deter other mothers of *desaparecidos* from joining the weekly demonstration. Repeating the acts of police forces outside the White House in 1917, policemen in Argentina arrested as many as seventy mothers in the Plaza de Mayo at one given time.

Cerruti proudly proclaimed that Villaflor encouraged the women to continue to seek information—even amid arrest. Cerruti remembers as a policeman started taking her statement in the Plaza, preparing her for arrest, she declared, “My son is not a Communist. He is a young person who thinks and acts politically. I don’t care what party he belongs to because I am not defending a political party. I am looking for my son who has the right to think.”<sup>41</sup> Unlike the disappeared, Villaflor and the other Mothers who were repeatedly arrested were able to leverage what little functioning of the judicial system remained and consistently appealed their arrests. Shocking policemen, Villaflor regularly left an extra sum of money at the police station to cover the next time she would be arrested for marching around the May Pyramid.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 72.

<sup>41</sup> Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 72.

<sup>42</sup> Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 72.

Unable to deter the women with the threat of arrest, policemen constructed a barricade to physically keep the Mothers out of the Plaza de Mayo. Seeking alternative meeting spots, Villaflor retreated to her original plan of meeting with the other Mothers in churches. While the majority of churches were government affiliated, and thus refused to let the women enter, a small number of churches allowed the women to meet in their space. Villaflor continued to write letters to international organizations with the signatures of the Mothers and to create petitions to submit to the Argentine Junta requesting information on the locations of their children. Under the guise of women gossiping, the Mothers met in smaller numbers and continued their business without the prospective for police arrest. Initially, Villaflor kept the meetings small. Infiltration was a significant, legitimate concern, and any Mothers not recognized by group members were barred from participating in the intimate church gatherings. Ensuring a constant flow of letters and petitions, Cerruti recalls, “Azucena was always there, bringing food, keeping up everyone’s spirits, and urging them on. She seemed tireless, a whirlwind of energy.”<sup>43</sup> As policemen, in sadistic acts of cruelty, started sending the Mothers pictures of their tortured children, intended to scare the women into isolation, Villaflor planned an additional political campaign separate from the blockaded Plaza.<sup>44</sup> With the Junta’s attention, Villaflor followed the political strategies of Alice Paul and attempted to utilize media outlets to additionally engage greater public participation.

As the gatherings of the Mothers continued and started to formalize with specific, recurring members, Villaflor tried to involve the Catholic community to expand public support counter to the Junta. Villaflor was able to uncover some information relating to

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<sup>43</sup> Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 73.

<sup>44</sup> Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 73.

the location of her son after speaking with former detainees. She crafted a communication network connecting various church congregations, mainly comprised of released prisoners, to determine the names of the people responsible for the disappearances and even the names of people responsible for torturing her son.<sup>45</sup> Also, amid such information, Villaflor planned specific political demonstrations to attract new supporters and to evade government officials. Bouvard credits Villaflor and the Mothers were forced to expand their campaign from the passive circling around the May Pyramid as “each new horror transformed them, and because...there was no turning back.”<sup>46</sup> Villaflor quickly expanded her role from a leader in the passive act of marching and petition writing aimed to uncover information from the government to an active, strategic political activist.

In September of 1977, Villaflor led the Mothers to infiltrate a parade of Catholic community members venturing from Buenos Aires to the town of Luján, roughly thirty miles outside of the capital city. While Alice Paul planned a parade previous to picketing the White House, Villaflor decided to join a pre-existing parade to market her discoveries of the Junta’s policies of torture and murder of innocent civilians. At the parade, the Mothers, many too old to walk the entire distance, intermittently took buses and trains, joining the parade at different intervals. In order to identify one another, the Mothers decided to wear white shawls, made of the same material as baby diapers.<sup>47</sup> In addition to wearing clothing illuminating their matronly roles, the Mothers started repeatedly praying in unison or speaking with priests as police began to approach them. The

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<sup>45</sup> Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 73.

<sup>46</sup> Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 73.

<sup>47</sup> Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 77

Mothers, attempting to get the attention of the Catholic Church, stayed in the cathedral after the parade ended in Luján until mass at five in the morning. Nonetheless, the Mothers were ignored by the Bishop in all speeches and prayers related to the event.

While unable to partner with the church to draw attention to the increasing number of *desaparecidos*, the Mothers earned a reputation for their white shawls after the parade. Switching the fabric from baby diapers to batiste, the Mothers' baby shawls provided imagery and identification in stark contrast to the uniformed policemen and military officials. Appearing in clothing emphasizing their roles as mothers, the women visibly represented the strength of family ties over the destruction and false rhetoric of the military dictatorship.

Despite the Junta's media campaign portraying *desaparecidos* as terrorists or delinquents and, additionally, claiming that many were killed during armed conflicts, Villaflor insisted Néstor, and the children of other Mothers, had not been killed and were not worthy of arrest or torture. To counteract misinformation in the press, Villaflor decided to place an advertisement in the two most popular newspapers in Buenos Aires. As the informal organization led by Villaflor expanded to more than one hundred and fifty members, Mothers returned to the Plaza de Mayo to march each Thursday once the blockade was removed. As newspapers—all controlled by the Junta government—refused to report on the weekly demonstrations, Villaflor approached two newspapers in

**Image 6.** Azucena Villaflor with her four sons.



Buenos Aires, *La Nacion* and *La Prensa*, to pay to advertise the unjust government abductions.

On October 5, 1977, Villaflor, after hosting fundraisers with the Mothers, paid for an advertisement titled “We Do Not Ask for Anything More than the Truth.”<sup>48</sup> The advertisement referenced a speech President Videla gave in the United States falsely crediting that any *desaparecido* who told the truth would suffer what he vaguely termed “reprisals” at the will of the Junta. In addition the headline and the request for information, the advertisement listed the names of some of the disappeared, included their pictures, and displayed the signatures of the Mothers. This edition of the newspaper is not available in the online archives of either *La Nacion* or *La Presna*; the sites read “no editions available.”<sup>49</sup>

While Villaflor hoped the advertisement would spread information about the permanence of the disappeared, it also spread information on the identities of the Mothers. In order to publish the advertisement, the newspapers required the Mothers give

<sup>48</sup> “Speaking Truth to Power: Madres of the Plaza de Mayo,” Women in World History Curriculum, last modified 2013, <http://www.womeninworldhistory.com/contemporary-07.html>.

<sup>49</sup> “Archivo Impreso – La Nación,” Grupo Nación, <http://www.nacion.com/archivoimpreso.html>, and “Ediciones anteriores: Diario La Presna,” La Prensa Digital, <http://www.laprensa.com.ar/Editions.aspx>.

their full names and addresses. Providing a paper trail for their intentions to uncover the truth about the location of their children—clearly and concisely, publicly *demanding* the Junta disclose the location of their loved ones—the Mothers also charged the radios, newspapers, and television reporting with ignoring the disappearances in the advertisement. Despite the accuracy of the claims, Villaflor did not adequately prepare for the negative ramifications of her direct advocacy counter to the Junta, visible to nearly the entire population of Buenos Aires, through the distribution of the newspaper advertisement.<sup>50</sup>

#### Argentine Government Pushback:

Shortly after the advertisement, Gustavo Niño joined the Mothers, claiming that his brother had also been disappeared. Despite the female dominance of the group, Villaflor accepted Niño, and welcome his youthful energy to her cause. Amid warnings from her husband, Villaflor enjoyed interacting with the twenty-something boy, evoking her past usual conversations with her disappeared son. Villaflor allegedly told her husband of Niño “with his angelic face he could never hurt a fly.”<sup>51</sup>

Two months later, in early December 1977, Villaflor purchased a second advertisement to commemorate international Human Rights Day. With the help of two French nuns and other Mothers participating in the weekly marches, Villaflor planned to run the advertisement on December 10, 1977. Two days before the advertisement’s appearance, a group of Mothers, gathered at the Church of the Holy Cross, were abducted

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<sup>50</sup> “Speaking Truth to Power: Madres of the Plaza de Mayo.”

<sup>51</sup> Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 77.

without release.<sup>52</sup> Under the false cover of a drug operation, plainclothesmen, accompanied by Niño, beat the two old Mothers in front of the entire congregation and violently kidnapped the women.

Amid the confusion surrounding the location and condition of the disappeared Mothers and nuns, Villaflor insisted on printing the advertisement. As Villaflor left her home the morning of December 10, 1977 to purchase the newspaper to view her advertisement, plainclothesmen abducted her, in broad daylight. Villaflor was never seen, alive, again.



**Image 7.** This is an advertisement from *La Prensa* newspaper, published in Buenos Aires, Argentina on December 10, 1977. Azucena Villaflor and the Mothers purchased the advertisement to celebrate Human Rights Day. Listing the names of eight hundred disappeared persons, the advertisement angered Argentine government officials and led to Villaflor's abduction by government security forces the same day the advertisement appeared.

Although unknown to her family or friends, Villaflor was taken to the Navy Mechanics school, the *Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada*, referred to as ESMA, located on the busy Avenida Libertador near the center of Buenos Aires. The Navy

<sup>52</sup> Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 77.

school was turned into a concentration camp at the beginning of the Junta dictatorship—yet such a use for the space was invisible to passersby. It was the largest detention center during *El Proceso* and the site where five thousand people died throughout the dictatorship.<sup>53</sup> According to US intelligence declassified documents dated nine days after her disappearance, December 19, 1977, Argentine Navy officers took Villaflor to ESMA. The memorandum documenting a conversation between US Regional Security Officer James Kelly and Ambassador Castro describes, “the Plaza de Mayo Mothers...were taken into custody by the Navy...The most likely explanation is that they are victims of the political ambitions of [Navy] Admiral Massera.”<sup>54</sup>

The next US declassified document, dated December 20, 1977, expands on the disappearance of the “Mothers Group” and validates the falsehood of public media reports stating Villaflor’s kidnapping resulted from the leftist group, the Montoneros. A telegram from Ambassador Castro to the Department of State recounts a group of Villaflor’s relatives visited the US Embassy on December 19, 1977. Ambassador Castro reports, Villaflor’s children “urge the US government to...pressure the government of Argentina to release their relatives. They claimed that international pressure from the US and France was the only hope for their relatives’ release...[and] the Montonero document as being a fabrication...Family members are also concerned that in the ‘Montonero’ document only the two French nuns were mentioned...Not surprisingly even our contacts within the government privately discount the ‘Montonero ploy.’”<sup>55</sup> As the US

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<sup>53</sup> Alfonso Daniels, “Argentina’s dirty war: the museum of horrors,” *The Telegraph*, May 17, 2008, accessed October 12, 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/3673470/Argentinas-dirty-war-the-museum-of-horrors.html>.

<sup>54</sup> “US Declassified Documents.”

<sup>55</sup> “US Declassified Documents.”



Government openly acknowledged the Junta abduction of Villaflor, and other Mothers and the two nuns, US officials did not act further to encourage their release. An interview with Miriam Lewin, one of only one hundred and fifty ESMA survivors, further validates the accuracy of these documents. In an article from May 2008 in the *Telegraph*, Lewin describes her first-hand observation that the, “two French nuns who backed the mothers’ struggle to find their vanished children, and who were kidnapped and later murdered by the military, were photographed in front of a Montoneros banner in one of the rooms in the basement at ESMA.” She continues, “the picture was then published in the right-wing newspaper *La Nación* to try to blame Montoneros for their disappearance.”<sup>56</sup>

After her kidnapping, Villaflor was tortured at ESMA, as imprints on her body later indicated. Feitlowitz simple states, “In Argentina, the model sequence was disappearance, torture, death.”<sup>57</sup> Torture at ESMA was standardized. Following disappearance, modeled on the Nazi doctrine of Night and Fog, the prisoners similarly were treated as if they lacked identities.<sup>58</sup> María Careaga, another one of the few survivors of forced disappearance in Argentina, described the process in detail. Arriving usually in hooded condition, Careaga explained, “The first thing they told me was to forget who I was, that as of that moment I would be known only by a number, and that for me the outside world stopped there.”<sup>59</sup> Following entrance to ESMA, Villaflor was likely kept in the same state, if not worse due to her attempted public profile. Prisoners spent the day and night hooded, *and* blindfolded, handcuffed, shackled and cramped in a

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<sup>56</sup> Daniels, “Argentina’s dirty war.”

<sup>57</sup> Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror*, 59.

<sup>58</sup> Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror*, 59; The Night of Fog doctrine stated, “the prisoners will *disappear* without a trace. It will be impossible to glean any information as to where they are or what will be their fate.”

<sup>59</sup> Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror*, 59; Javier Alvarez, CONADEP File No. 7332.

cell so narrow that it was called a tube.

In addition to subsisting blindfolded each day, prisoners at ESMA, likely including Villaflor, were incessantly tortured multiple times a day. Careaga continues, “As soon as we arrived at the camp, they stripped, and began torturing me.” Forcing women to subsist completely naked in the prison camp was a hallmark of the concentration camps in Buenos Aires. Careaga continues, “the worst torture was with the electric prod—it went on for many hours, with the prod in my vagina, anus, belly, eyes, nose, ears, all over my body. They also put a plastic bag over my head and wouldn’t take it off until I was suffocating.”<sup>60</sup> Licensed doctors administered the electric shock to test the limits of human capacity, carefully monitoring each victim to ensure that they would not be afforded the opportunity to die. On the brink of suffocation, Careaga describes, “When I was on the verge of cardiac arrest, they called in a doctor who gave me pills. Then I had convulsions, [and] lost consciousness. So he gave me something else and that brought me round.” Careaga closes, “I wanted to die, but they wouldn’t let me. They ‘saved’ me only so they could go on torturing me.”<sup>61</sup>

With the case of Villaflor, the person heading the torture center was the same man who successfully infiltrated her informal organization and arranged for her abduction—Niño. Niño’s real name was Alfredo Astiz. At the time of her forced disappearance, Astiz was the Navy commander in charge of the ESMA detention center; he did not have any disappeared relatives, but rather had personally undertaken an undercover operation to plan for the successful disappearance of Villaflor.<sup>62</sup> Similar to other military personnel,

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<sup>60</sup> Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror*, 59.

<sup>61</sup> Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror*, 59.

<sup>62</sup> “US Declassified Documents.”

Astiz enjoyed torture as a way to push the limits of human psychological endurance. His nickname at ESMA was *El Angel Rubio de la Muerte*, meaning the Blonde Angel of Death. The main form of torture at ESMA, outside of the basics of rape and rampant physical abuse, centered on *picana*: electric torture. As Careaga described her experience with the electric probe experimentation, Navy officers at ESMA leveraged such torture technique to exemplify their skills in torture as “the best-educated generation in the history of Argentina.”<sup>63</sup> Electric probes were originally used for police interrogation in 1934 and introduced by German Nazis working in Argentina’s intelligence service. Another torture survivor, Graciela Geuna, recounted her experience. She explains, the Navy officer, “knew the limits of human resistance. Once after he had beaten me, I managed to steal a razor blade from the desk. All I wanted was to kill myself, it was the only way to escape the horror...[he] confiscated it, saying ‘You’re not going to be able to die, little girl, until we want you to. We are God here.’”<sup>64</sup> Torture was thus more an act of theatre than a process to divulge information from the kidnapped.

After an extended period of torture, without set time limits, *desaparecidos* were “transferred” and met with extermination. According to a 1984 report of the National Commission of the Disappeared, now part of the greater group of declassified documents on human rights violations in Argentina, Villaflor was “held in the [Navy Mechanic School’s (ESMA)] ‘capucha’ for very few days...then transferred. During that time...[she was] lead to the cellar where...[she was] interrogated and tortured by [Navy] Capt. Acosta, Antonio Pernía, [Army] Major Coronel, Lt. Schelling.”<sup>65</sup> *Capucha*,

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<sup>63</sup> Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror*, 11.

<sup>64</sup> Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror*, 13.

<sup>65</sup> “US Declassified Documents.”

meaning hood in Spanish, was the section of ESMA where prisoners were kept hooded and blindfolded for days on end. Careaga described the experience of *capucha*: “The psychosocial torture of the *capucha* was as bad or worse than the physical...with the ‘hood’ on, I became fully aware of my complete lack of contact with the outside world. There was nothing to protect you, you were completely alone...The mere inability to see gradually undermines your morale, diminishes your resistance.” The main purpose of the hood was to dehumanize prisoners and defeat any pre-existing morale or hope of escape. Careaga concludes, “*capucha* is a place, and that place meant torture and ultimately death.”<sup>66</sup>

Following *capucha*, US declassified intelligence documents recount that Villaflor was killed using the technique of *comida de pescado*, fish food. Villaflor was drugged and thrown from a plane into the Rio de la Plata.<sup>67</sup> Usually, prisoners also had their stomachs slit open before their release. A document from May 31, 1978 listing the transcription of a conversation between Political Officer Tex Harris and US Assistant Secretary of State Patt Derian describes, “the Argentine police official...bragged to one our [US] Embassy officers regarding the Argentine method for disposing of the bodies. This is now according to the source...centralized in an operation.” This operation, the document continues, starts as prisoners, “have been interrogated or are deemed no longer of use and a decision has been made at a senior level they should be executed. The people are then being told that they are being transferred to Corrientes Province and must receive an injection before they go for health reasons.” It describes that *desaparecidos* “gracefully submit to the injection,” thinking it will protect them from disease and

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<sup>66</sup> Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror*, 62.

<sup>67</sup> “US Declassified Documents.”

infection. Instead, however, the injection contained curia—a poison originally used by Amazon natives in blowguns that impacts the contraction of muscles. The document adds, “By receiving the dose the people very shortly there after die and one of the effects of the poison is to contract their lungs.” It grimly concludes that the dead bodies are then transferred to the Campo de Mayo airfield in Buenos Aires, where planes take off to drop the bodies at the mouth of the Rio de la Plata. The bodies “sink and are quickly devoured by the fish.”<sup>68</sup>

On March 30, 1978 the US Embassy in Argentina documented that Villaflor’s body, along with six other bodies—the two French nuns and four other abducted Mothers—were found on the Atlantic beach near Buenos Aires. The document clearly states, “the bodies were those of the two nuns and five mothers who disappeared between December 8 and December 10, 1977.”<sup>69</sup> Villaflor’s family, however, did not learn of the *vuelo de la muerte*, or the death flight, until July of 2005. In an article from the *Los Angeles Times* in March of 1979 it elaborates that the killing continued throughout December 1977 and “thirty-five bodies had washed up on a beach not far from Buenos Aires in December, their heads and hands severed to prevent identification.” The article downplays the violence, however, comparing, “Argentina has become like Chicago in the 1930s. Each service has its own hit squads which operate freely beyond the law.”<sup>70</sup> The role of the Argentine government is not acknowledged.

While the US Government knew Villaflor’s life ended in 1977 after she was drugged, stripped naked and flung from a plane by early 1978, the Argentina Forensic

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<sup>68</sup> “US Declassified Documents.”

<sup>69</sup> “US Declassified Documents.”

<sup>70</sup> Charles A. Krause, “Argentina in Shock Over Envoy’s Murder,” *The Los Angeles Times*, March 18, 1979, 2.

Anthropology Team or *Equipo Argentino de Anrpología Forense* only positively identified what remained of Villaflor twenty seven years later—following declassification of Junta documents in 2002. Villaflor’s remains featured multiple fractures, consistent with impact of a fall from an airplane. Her remains were cremated, at the request of her children, and placed in the center of the Plaza de Mayo at the bottom of the May Pyramid on December 8, 2005 to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the first disappearance of Mothers affiliated with the weekly march in the Plaza de Mayo. Villaflor’s daughter, Cecilia, credited the location of her mother’s remains: “Here [at the Plaza] is where my mother was born to public life and here she must stay forever. She must stay for everyone.”<sup>71</sup>

#### The Aftermath:

After Villaflor’s disappearance—and her murder—the other Mothers carried forward her mission to hold the Argentine Junta accountable for the disappearances of innocent students and young professionals. The group formalized the marching each Thursday in the Plaza creating an organization called the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*, or Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, in 1979. At its inception, the organization had twenty Mothers openly volunteering their participation and leadership for the cause. To this day, each Thursday, a group of Mothers of the disappeared gather in the Plaza de Mayo at three thirty in the afternoon, wearing the same white handkerchiefs, to circle, counterclockwise, around the May Pyramid. To this day, even after the fall of the Junta government, the disappeared remain disappeared—without a trace.

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<sup>71</sup> “Speaking Truth to Power Madres of the Plaza de Mayo.”

Initially following Villaflor's disappearance, participation in the marches drastically declined. Bouvard recounts, "people had been afraid to associate with the Mothers before; now it meant risking one's life."<sup>72</sup> Many Mothers continued to lose children as *El Proceso* continued and government security forces attempted to bully the Mothers into stopping their activism counter to the government. One Mother credited that she continued to march weekly because she remembered Villaflor's words. Villaflor allegedly told the Mothers shortly before her disappearance, "If you let down your guard, they will triumph."<sup>73</sup> While the Junta dictatorship released a statement on December 16, 1977 blaming "nihilistic subversion" for Villaflor's disappearance, the Mothers responded with a press conference blaming the kidnapping on the Junta and the greater military-administered government. In the press, the Junta attempted to publicly discredit the group, referring to the Mothers exclusively as *Las Locas*, crazy women. Nonetheless, the church, the home and the family, all previous places of security for the women, had fundamentally changed following the Junta coup.

By April, four months after Villaflor's disappearance, the Mothers had resumed the weekly march in the Plaza de Mayo. In a declassified US Department of State document dated April 26, 1978, it states, the Junta "have started harassing the mothers group again on the Plaza de Mayo. Evidently, the mothers meeting there on Thursday has started to grow. It fell sharply after the leader...disappeared in early December." The document states that more than two hundred Mothers were present at the most recent march. Despite the fact that policemen moved in and attempted to clear out the Plaza, the document claims, "the mothers are becoming experts at civil obedience." The US

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<sup>72</sup> Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 78.

<sup>73</sup> Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, 78.

Embassy official ends the document, “I will close with my best regards and a bon mot—Argentina is the only country in the world where you are safe in the streets, but not in your home.” Thus the Mothers remained outside their previous safe havens, the home, and continued to demonstrate to protect the lives of their children. Amid a military dictatorship, ensuring the well being of their children meant entering the political system, in addition to cooking and cleaning.

Disappearances continued, exceeding thirty thousand people, through the end of the Junta regime in 1983. As one Mother of a desaparecido described, “there were two well-marked worlds: the Plaza—one of the contained fury, protest, impotence in the face of the genocide...[and] away from the Plaza—the world of business, of executives, of those who have real power and for whom the military were the armed instrument.”<sup>74</sup> By leveraging a great, common pain shared by the Mothers of disappeared children, Villaflor started a movement and single-handedly demanded accountability from her government when others did not. The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo still have not received information on the location of their children.

Torture requires victims to succumb to the inherent physical limitations of the body and instills certain tenacity in those whom survive. With the case of Villaflor, however, the Junta government no longer tolerated allowing political activists to survive beyond the punishment of physical and psychological torture. President Menem pardoned and freed all of the ex-commanders of the Junta government in April 1990. He credited, “the past has nothing more to teach us...we must look ahead, with our eyes

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<sup>74</sup> Mellibovsky, *Circles of Love Over Death*, 119.



fixed on the future. Unless we learn to forget we will be turned into a pillar of salt.”<sup>75</sup> For Villaflor’s family, however, it is impossible to forget; their innocent mother was brutally tortured and killed as a result of the past. No justice was served.



**Image 8.** Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo still wait outside the Casa Rosada in the Plaza de Mayo, wanting information from the Argentine government on the location of their children.

As survivors encounter their torturers walking freely in the streets of Buenos Aires, it is not clear that Villaflor’s efforts to confront government wrongs had any lasting impact. After drawing attention to government crimes using the media, Villaflor was easily disposed of—although brutally punished first. Villaflor successfully heightened public awareness for the rampant violations of human rights occurring at the hands of government officials, but permanently lost her identity and her life as a result. With Villaflor’s death, Junta dictator Admiral Massera’s justification of his acts while in a position of government leadership appears to be accurate: “I am responsible, but not guilty.”<sup>76</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror*, xii.

<sup>76</sup> Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror*, 15.

## **Conclusion**

Over the course of more than a century, from 1869 to 1977, across three different continents, three women experienced the excessive—even deadly—negative ramifications of questioning the judgment of male government leaders. Government pushback to female political activism in favor of reform increased in severity, from mere violent threats and lack of police protection to torture to complete forced disappearance, and murder.

In 1869, following the third, severest enforcement of the Contagious Diseases Acts in Great Britain, Josephine Butler embarked on a belated career as a political activist to stop the government-perpetrated torture of women with unjustified and violent vaginal examinations. Merely for speaking publicly to draw attention to the injustice of plainclothesmen police secretly selecting innocent women for such examinations, Butler endured significant pushback from the British government. Although able to speak before a Royal Commission, she was mocked, refused coverage for her cause by the media, and endangered amid a lack of police protection. Butler ensured the repeal of the Acts after confronting the multiple male centers of power—the police, military, and Parliament—but is not remembered for the social change that accompanied such a victory.

Less than fifty years later, leading up the passage of the nineteenth amendment of the Constitution in the United States, Alice Paul similarly advocated for the US government to grant women the basic political right of the universal vote. Similar to venereal disease, equal rights for women was a silenced topic of discussion. Nonetheless, Paul encouraged a federal constitutional amendment by publicly speaking and, for the

first time, directly confronting the President with banners outside the White House. For such efforts, Paul was denied due process and tortured, in the form of excessive, violent force-feedings, multiple times a day, for months on end. Newspapers and the public alike wrongly blamed Paul for endangering national security amid the outbreak of World War I. Almost one hundred years later, individuals in common vernacular refer to women being “given” the right to vote, rather than women *earning* the right to vote; universal suffrage for both sexes as a political right is assumed.

Lastly, in 1977, Azucena Villaflor fought for the release of information relating to the disappearance of thousands of innocent Argentine citizens, including her own son. To attract the attention of the military Junta dictators, she stood outside the Casa Rosada, passively walking in a circle around a state symbol of liberty. By staging a weekly public demonstration and organizing a group of Mothers, Villaflor sought to draw attention to the wrongdoings of the Junta with advertisements in the newspaper. As a result of leveraging otherwise inaccessible media sources, Villaflor was both brutally tortured and murdered. To this day, the Argentine government refuses to disclose information on the forced disappearance of Villaflor, her son, and more than thirty thousand civilians.

All three women spurred change in their respective countries, as Butler ensured the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, Paul forced the passage and ratification of the nineteenth federal amendment to the US Constitution, and Villaflor attempted to alert the general population to the permanency of the government-perpetrated, forced disappearances of alleged subversives. Despite such triumphs, however, they are not remembered for their personal sacrifices; the common historical record does not emphasize that female activists were harassed, tortured, and even killed, for opposing the

flawed policies of political leaders. Should individuals of subsequent generations care that women were tortured merely for advocating for change in government policy?

Varlam Shamalov, a Russian writer and Gulag survivor under Stalin wrote, “A human being survives by his ability to forget.”<sup>1</sup> From the personal sufferings of Butler, Paul, and Villaflor, it is evident that the historical record—compiled by human beings—is not an ever-improving, linear evolution; we do indeed forget. Moreover, it is not clear that such a hole is necessary to human survival. At the individual, state and collective level of society, the acts of these female political activists seem to disappear rather as the result of a lack of information and amid empathetic sentiment for domestic leaders in nationalist histories.

Clear gaps in truth and information work to promote ambiguities and encourage the individual, regardless of system of government, to accept a limited view of the past. Butler, Paul and Villaflor used activism in an attempt to alleviate such a lack of information. Denied full, unbiased media coverage—whether or not directly government encouraged—the populations of each activist’s respective era were apparently unaware that government policies were plaguing a portion of the population.

While self-determination dictates that individuals can control their own ideology and subsequently, their actions, this often does not promote justice. Bystander apathy, the psychological effect of witnessing another individual in trouble and doing nothing about it, was rampant before Butler, Paul, and Villaflor each experienced a pivotal moment, and a change in consciousness, that pushed them to expose existing ills. As human rights scholar Wendy Lower rightly acknowledges, the “agency of women in history more

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<sup>1</sup> Slavenka Drakulić, *They Would Never Hurt a Fly: War Criminals on Trial in the Hague*, (New York:

generally is underappreciated.”<sup>2</sup> Their efforts in advocacy prove that spreading information to individual constituents often is not enough to promote change in government policy; individuals leading a government must also be persuaded.

The negative government pushback endured by Butler, Paul, and Villaflor illuminates the hubris of male government leadership in the face of female opponents. Targeting Members of Parliament in Great Britain, President Wilson in the United States, and the Junta military dictators in Argentina, Butler, Paul, and Villaflor each endured unnecessary sufferings. More importantly, over the course of time, such physical sufferings have increased, rather than decreased. In the compelling book *They Would Never Hurt a Fly*, Slavenka Drakulić attributes, “Politicians are all too happy to join the majority of the people and preach the message of ‘turning a new page of history’—blank, if possible—because many of them are still in power and don’t want to accept the responsibility.”<sup>3</sup> Members of Parliament listened to Butler’s viewpoints on the Contagious Diseases Acts, only to placate her activist efforts and belittle her efforts in the official government record in the Royal Commission’s report. President Wilson requested Paul’s arrest, leading to her force-feeding, to keep her from continuing to hold controversial banners outside his home that drew attention to his gender bias. The Junta dictators ordered the torture and murder of Villaflor to ensure prolonged military control over the population of Argentina, free from opposition. As female political activists brought attention to flawed policies, government leaders quickly acted to cover up the potential for the appearance of their errors.

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<sup>2</sup> Wendy Lower, *Hitler’s Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields*, (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt, 2013), 11.

<sup>3</sup> Drakulić, *They Would Never Hurt a Fly*, 12-13.

Silencing, torturing, or murdering political activists is not just. It is essential that we collectively remember what happens to such activists. Political leaders may be rightly remembered for their accomplishments, but, similarly, they also must be remembered for their faults. Nationalism is important to ensure unity, but cannot serve as the rationale for *domestic* violations of physical human rights. With successive generations unaware of the actions taken by political activists to correct wrongdoings, a cycle of violence will continue. Raphael Lemkin, who coined the term genocide, reasoned: “I was appalled by the frequency of the evil and, above all, by the impunity coldly relied upon by the guilty.”<sup>4</sup> The previous inequalities and injustices resulting from government policies in Great Britain, the United States, and Argentina, may not be positive moments in the state histories of each respective government, but it is essential that the treatment of activists by political leaders be remembered.

Despite the heightened awareness for human rights evident in increased scholarship and also greater accountability for human rights violations with the establishment of international courts, the experiences of Butler, Paul, and Villaflor suggest a decreasing value for the physical body and pain. Over the course of one hundred years, female political activists were initially tormented, then tortured, and, finally, brutally murdered. In the article “Approaching the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” Mark Philip Bradley asserts, “In a normative sense, for most people, to...torture another person is unthinkable. But, of course, in practice, it isn’t.”<sup>5</sup> Human rights norms and beliefs do not dictate the actions of government leaders or individuals.

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<sup>4</sup> Adam Jones, *Genocide: A Comprehensive Introduction*, (New York: Routledge, 2011), 9.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Philip Bradley, “Approaching the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” in *The Human Rights Revolution: An International History*, ed. Akira Iriye et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 332.

Our failure to remember, and thus to learn, from these three cases prompts the question: is such a gap purposeful? Drakulić points out, “It is much easier, and much more comfortable, to live with lies than to confront the truth and with that truth the possibility of individual guilt—and collective responsibility.”<sup>6</sup> Are government leaders to blame for the near historical disappearance of Butler, Paul, and Villaflor, their activism and physical sufferings? Or is it the result of a greater collective avoidance of the capabilities of our own governments?

Before beginning to write this thesis, I had never heard of Josephine Butler, Alice Paul or Azucena Villaflor—and I have been studying history for the past three years in an academic setting. Adam Jones, a genocide scholar, credits, “We have a harder time condemning those with whom we sympathize, even when their actions are atrocious. Consciously or unconsciously, we distinguish ‘worth’ from ‘unworthy’ victims.” It appears that whether in Great Britain, the United States, or Argentina, constituents of a nation sympathize more with those who lead their nation than with those who oppose it. These female political activists, it seems, are such unworthy victims.

No ambiguity exists for the justification of administering any form of torture; torture only benefits the perpetrator; torture only offers a temporary, sadistic source of power. The individual administering torture, however, is part of a greater network of the state and the greater, global collective of mankind. In the age of increased information, it remains easier than ever to selectively ignore the lessons from the sufferings of others. Josephine Butler, Alice Paul, and Azucena Villaflor illuminate the complicity of the

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<sup>6</sup> Drakulić, *They Would Never Hurt a Fly*, 16.

individual, the state, and the collective in failing to acknowledge holes in our national historical records.



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### **Image Sources**

Many of these images originated from print sources used in the course of my research. However, all of the images are also available in digital versions online in multiple locations. The links provided represent the digital images placed in the text of this thesis.

#### Chapter 1: Great Britain

Image 1:

<http://liv.ac.uk/library/sca/colldescs/butler.html>

Image 2:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/0/20097046>

Image 3:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/0/20097046>

Image 4:

<http://longstreet.typepad.com/thesciencebookstore/images/2008/07/04/blogonbstetrics271.jpg>

Image 5:

<http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/george-frederick-watts/josephine-elizabeth-butler-n-e-grey-1894>

#### Chapter 2: United States

Image 1:

<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/58/Forcefeeding.jpg>

Image 2:

[http://americanhistory.si.edu/sites/default/files/styles/548xflex/public/exhibitions/suffrage\\_548.jpg?itok=CQt6CPUz](http://americanhistory.si.edu/sites/default/files/styles/548xflex/public/exhibitions/suffrage_548.jpg?itok=CQt6CPUz)

Image 3:

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Image 4:

[http://intelligenttravel.nationalgeographic.com/wp-content/blogs.dir/10/files/2012/03/Secret\\_Heroes\\_Inez\\_Boissevain\\_Public\\_Domain.jpg](http://intelligenttravel.nationalgeographic.com/wp-content/blogs.dir/10/files/2012/03/Secret_Heroes_Inez_Boissevain_Public_Domain.jpg)

Image 5:

<http://www.vfa.us/AlicePaulHD.jpg>

Image 6:

<http://www.sewallbelmont.org/collectionitems/nina-allender-cartoon/>

Image 7:

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Image 8:

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Image 11:

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### Chapter 3: Argentina

Image 1:

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Image 2:

<http://www.diarioc.com.ar/media/img/07/12/20/Villaflor.jpg>

Image 3:

[http://www.perfil.com/fotogaleria.html?filename=/contenidos/2011/03/22/noticia\\_0042.html&fotoNro=8](http://www.perfil.com/fotogaleria.html?filename=/contenidos/2011/03/22/noticia_0042.html&fotoNro=8)

Image 4:

[http://www.perfil.com/fotogaleria.html?filename=/contenidos/2011/03/22/noticia\\_0042.html&fotoNro=10](http://www.perfil.com/fotogaleria.html?filename=/contenidos/2011/03/22/noticia_0042.html&fotoNro=10)

Image 5:

<http://www.guiafe.com.ar/fotos-argentina-2005/piramidedemayo.jpg>

Image 6:

<http://www.diasdehistoria.com.ar/userfiles/image/azucena-villaflor-playa.jpg>

Image 7:

[http://www.perfil.com/fotogaleria.html?filename=/contenidos/2011/03/22/noticia\\_0042.html](http://www.perfil.com/fotogaleria.html?filename=/contenidos/2011/03/22/noticia_0042.html)

Image 8: <http://3.bp.blogspot.com/-3Mm36z1SnwA/UX-Bxq1ZlrI/AAAAAAAAAGpg/dsqGnFafQuI/s1600/madres.jpg>