

## Jeannette Rankin: Nothing Left but My Integrity

- **Compelling Question**
  - Is maintaining your integrity worth what it may cost you?
- **Virtue:** Integrity
- **Definition** – Integrity is personal consistency in moral goodness.
- **Lesson Overview**
  - In this lesson, students will review and evaluate the actions of Jeannette Rankin, who was the first woman elected to U.S. Congress, the only woman to vote in Congress to extend the franchise to women, and the only person to have voted against the declarations of war in both World Wars. They will use her story to help them understand integrity in their own lives.
- **Objectives**
  - Students will analyze Jeannette Rankin’s character as a citizen.
  - Students will examine Rankin’s demonstration of integrity and commitment to truth.
  - Students will understand why integrity is an essential virtue in their own lives.
  - Students will act with integrity to protect freedom even when their beliefs are unpopular.
- **Background**
  - *“What one decides to do in crisis depends on one’s philosophy of life, and that philosophy cannot be changed by an incident. If one hasn’t any philosophy in crises, others make the decision.” – Jeannette Rankin*

Jeannette Rankin, born in 1880, was the eldest of six children in a wealthy and prominent family in Montana. She graduated from Montana State University with a bachelor’s degree in biology, and then attended the New York School of Philanthropy (later the Columbia University School of Social Work). A woman of many interests, she considered careers in dress making, furniture design, and, after seeing slums in Boston, social work. However, none of these fields provided occupations that she found satisfying for very long. She was also known for many reform causes: women’s suffrage, pacifism, civil rights, social welfare programs for women and children, and opposition to child labor. She worked in poor areas of San Francisco, New York, and Washington, and she was a professional lobbyist for the National American Women Suffrage Association (NAWSA). What Rankin was best known for, though, was that she was the first woman elected to U.S. Congress. Furthermore, she was the only woman to cast a congressional vote in favor of women’s suffrage, and the only member of Congress to have voted against the U.S. entry into both World Wars. She saw her pacifism as a natural outgrowth of her commitment to women’s rights. Influenced by Mohandas Gandhi and Jane Addams, she believed that women were naturally more inclined to peace than men were, and if women participated more fully in civic and political life, there would be fewer wars. Throughout her lifetime, Rankin consistently upheld her convictions even when they were unpopular and led to bitter criticism.

- **Vocabulary**
  - Philanthropy
  - Slums
  - Pacifism
  - Civil rights
  - NAWSA
  - Suffrage
  - Mohandas Gandhi
  - Jane Addams
  - Advocate
  - Propagate
  - Vehement
  - Constituents
  - Lobbied
  - Inadvertent
  - Abstain
  - Redeemed

- Irrelevant
- Propagandist
- Codified
- **Introduce Text**
  - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.
- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
  - As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
    - What challenges are you facing?
    - What fears or concerns might you have?
    - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?
- **Observation Questions**
  - Integrity may be defined as the power and capacity that we use to adhere to the truth of things, to what is right and good. In what ways did Jeannette Rankin demonstrate integrity to enhance life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?
  - Jeannette Rankin had many different interests and skills, and had a hard time settling on a career as a young woman. What did she understand her identity to be and to what extent did her identity change over time?
  - What did Jeanette Rankin understand her purpose to be? How did she want to be remembered?
- **Discussion Questions**
  - Discuss the following questions with your students.
    - What is the historical context of the narrative?
    - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
    - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
    - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
    - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
    - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
    - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
    - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?
- **Additional Resources**
  - National Public Radio; All Things Considered: The Lone Dissenter. [www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org)
  - United States House of Representatives, History, Art, & Archives: Jeannette Rankin <http://history.house.gov/People/Listing/R/RANKIN,-Jeannette-%28R000055%29/#biography>
  - James J. Lopach and Jean A. Luckowski. *Jeannette Rankin: A Political Woman*. Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2005
  - Jeannette Rankin Women’s Scholarship Fund <http://www.rankinfoundation.org/>

## Handout A: Jeannette Rankin: Nothing left but my Integrity

### Background

*“What one decides to do in crisis depends on one’s philosophy of life, and that philosophy cannot be changed by an incident. If one hasn’t any philosophy in crises, others make the decision.” – Jeannette Rankin*

Jeannette Rankin, born in 1880, was the eldest of six children in a wealthy and prominent family in Montana. She graduated from Montana State University with a bachelor’s degree in biology, and then attended the New York School of Philanthropy (later the Columbia University School of Social Work). A woman of many interests, she considered careers in dress making, furniture design, and, after seeing slums in Boston, social work. However, none of these fields provided occupations that she found satisfying for very long. She was also known for many reform causes: women’s suffrage, pacifism, civil rights, social welfare programs for women and children, and opposition to child labor. She worked in poor areas of San Francisco, New York, and Washington, and she was a professional lobbyist for the National American Women Suffrage Association (NAWSA). What Rankin was best known for, though, was that she was the first woman elected to U.S. Congress. Furthermore, she was the only woman to cast a congressional vote in favor of women’s suffrage, and the only member of Congress to have voted against the U.S. entry into both World Wars. She saw her pacifism as a natural outgrowth of her commitment to women’s rights. Influenced by Mohandas Gandhi and Jane Addams, she believed that women were naturally more inclined to peace than men were, and if women participated more fully in civic and political life, there would be fewer wars. Throughout her lifetime, Rankin consistently upheld her convictions even when they were unpopular and led to bitter criticism.

### Narrative

In 1916, women had the right to vote in forty states, including Montana. The Great War had started two years earlier in Europe, and Jeannette Rankin was concerned that the United States might allow itself to be pulled into that conflict. If she were in Congress, she would be in a position to take a stand both for women’s suffrage and against the war. Rankin’s brother, Wellington, financed and managed her campaign for Congress, in which she advocated women’s suffrage, social welfare, and staying out of Europe’s troubles. Her pacifism was apparent in the campaign; she said, “If they are going to have war, they ought to take the old men and leave the young to propagate the race.” Wellington Rankin’s position in the Montana Republican Party helped assure her the victory. When she won the race, Rankin said, “I may be the first woman member of Congress, but I won’t be the last.” Within a short time of taking her seat in Congress, she was one of 57 representatives who voted against the U.S. declaration of war on Germany after that country began unrestricted submarine warfare on all Atlantic shipping. Her vote against the war brought vehement criticism, even though her constituents in Montana largely opposed the war. Her detractors said she was disloyal or fearful because women simply were not suited to participate in politics. Her suffragist colleagues turned against her because they thought her stand on the war would harm the suffrage movement.

However, Rankin continued to advocate woman suffrage. In 1918 she opened the very first House debate on the subject by asking, “How shall we answer the challenge, gentlemen? How shall we explain to them the meaning of democracy if the same Congress that voted to make the world safe for democracy refuses to give this small measure of democracy to the women of our country?”

Rankin ran unsuccessfully for a seat in the U.S. Senate in 1918, and then turned her attention to additional efforts for women’s rights and pacifism, both within the U.S. and on the world stage. She joined the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom and founded the Georgia Peace Society. She served in the National Council for the Prevention of War, the National Consumers’ League, and lobbied Congress to pass various types of social welfare legislation.

By 1939, Europe was once again entangled in war. Rankin ran for Congress in 1940 specifically so she would be in position to vote against America’s involvement in it. She won her seat with 54% of the vote and, keeping her campaign promise, introduced several resolutions opposing U.S. entry into the war. After Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt appeared before a joint session of Congress to ask for a declaration of war. The

nation's radio networks had reporters on the scene who recorded the president's speech. Then, the reporter for the Mutual Network, in an inadvertent violation of House rules, continued to record the session in the only live radio broadcast of a regular session of Congress up to that time. In the recording, Rankin's voice can be heard as she repeatedly tried to gain recognition to speak. House Speaker Sam Rayburn recognized other representatives, all of whom favored a declaration of war against Japan, but he resolutely refused to recognize Rankin and declared her out of order. Congressional aides and spectators tried to persuade Rankin to vote for the war or at least abstain. She was visibly upset as she continued to fight for her right to speak. But she was just as unyielding in her determination to firmly say "no" in the roll call vote, which she did—to a chorus of hisses and boos. The resolution in favor of war passed the House with a vote of 388-1. Rankin explained her position: "As a woman I can't go to war, and I refuse to send anyone else." An angry mob of spectators followed Rankin out of the Capitol and she sought refuge in a phone booth while waiting for the Capitol police to escort her safely to her office.

Her brother Wellington wired her to say, "Montana is 100 percent against you." But she told constituents, "I voted my convictions and redeemed my campaign pledges." Rankin's vote made the rest of her term irrelevant in the war fever that followed as reporters and colleagues largely ignored her. She told friends, "I have nothing left but my integrity."

The Helena *Independent* compared her to "a dagger in the hands of the German propagandists, a dupe of the Kaiser, a member of the Hun army in the United States, and a crying schoolgirl." NAWSA dissociated itself from the pacifist position by announcing, "Miss Rankin was not voting for the suffragists of the nation—she represents Montana."

For her part, Jeanette Rankin said, "There can be no compromise with war; it cannot be reformed or controlled; cannot be disciplined into decency or codified into common sense; for war is the slaughter of human beings, temporarily regarded as enemies, on as large a scale as possible."

After completing her second term in Congress in 1943, Rankin chose not to run again for public office, but to direct her energies to the efforts that had the most meaning for her: civil rights, pacifism, and social welfare. In a 1972 interview, Rankin said, "If I am remembered for no other act," she said, "I want to be remembered as the only woman who ever voted to give women the right to vote."

She opposed U.S. involvement in the wars in Korea and Vietnam, and led a Vietnam War protest at the Capitol when she was 87. In order to continue to oppose the Vietnam War, she was even considering a third run for Congress when she died in 1973.

Walter Cronkite, who was a United Press editor in 1941, gave an interview in 2001 describing the scene in Congress after the president's speech requesting a declaration of war. Cronkite called Rankin "The one member of Congress paralyzed by principle in the face of an enemy attack in 1941." Matt Wasniewski, historian of the House of Representatives, summed up Rankin's life: "Just a remarkable career. Whether you agreed with her or not, she stuck to her guns."

## Handout B: Journaling

Answer the following questions in your journal, as you prepare to voluntarily share some of your responses in a class discussion.

1. Based on your purpose as a citizen, give two or three examples of ways you can act with integrity.
2. To what extent are you currently demonstrating integrity? What other virtues are you cultivating and improving? How can you help others cultivate integrity?
3. Cronkite called Rankin “The one member of Congress paralyzed by principle in the face of an enemy attack in 1941.” What do you think he meant by “paralyzed by principle”? Is it a good thing or a bad thing to be paralyzed by principle? How does acting with integrity help you to achieve your purpose?