

## Thinking Forward from a Complicated Past by Amy Peloff, continued:

This discussion of the complexity of our history has been foregrounded in much of the coverage of the centennial, in LWVUS' communications, media coverage, and museum exhibits—no one is letting this go by unacknowledged right now. Just this past Thursday, I listened to a presentation by the LWV of Ohio on Building Inclusive Suffrage and Anniversary Programs, in which they argued that we should use the language of commemoration rather than celebration when we discuss the anniversary of the ratification of the 19th Amendment in recognition that this was not a victory for all women. And that is absolutely how it should be, because the history of the US Suffrage movement and that of the League of Women Voters is complicated. There is some amazing stuff in there! For all of us who have read Elaine Weiss's book *The Woman's Hour*, we know that the ratification of the 19th Amendment was the culmination of a lot of hard labor, dangerous activities, and political cunning. These women in their fancy dresses, white sashes, and snazzy hats were, excuse my language, serious badassess. Nothing can erase the fact that LWV Founder Carrie Chapman Catt was the mastermind behind the state-by-state strategy to pass and ratify a Constitutional amendment to protect women's right to vote, that she dedicated decades of her life pursuing this goal, that she mentored other women in leadership roles, and laid the foundation for this organization which is respected for its commitment to protecting the voting rights of all people in this country.

But those successes also can't obscure the fact that in her laser focus on her goal of winning the war for women's suffrage, she was willing to sacrifice the rights of other groups. Whether she personally bought into these beliefs or not, we don't know. But we do know that she was perfectly willing to invoke racist rhetoric and eugenic language to sway people to her cause. The fact that she made these arguments makes a lot of sense. Women's social power derived from their role within the family. In the Progressive Era, women were able to build lives outside of the household by articulating their work as an extension of that role. Temperance, abolitionism, and the Settlement House movement were all movements that frequently invoked women's moral and civilizing influences within the home to justify their involvement in political work outside of the home. This made it very tempting for white suffragists to use those ideas to argue for the need for white women's suffrage to offset the votes of the non-white, the immigrant, and the poor. Thus, we end up with these haunting quotes from Carrie Chapman Catt:

*In 1894, Catt warned that the United States was "menaced with great danger...in the votes possessed by the males in the slums of the cities and the ignorant foreign vote." "White supremacy will be strengthened, not weakened, by women's suffrage."*

And it is tempting to argue that as a product of her time, she should not be judged too harshly for voicing these ideas that were prevalent at the time. So yes, and there were also people pushing back against that tactic from early on in the suffrage movement. In 1851 Sojourner Truth delivered her famous "Ain't I a Woman?" speech at the Ohio Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio. In 1869 Frederick Douglass and Lucy Stone engaged in a very public argument with Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady

Stanton about sacrificing black male suffrage for white women's suffrage. To argue that Catt and other white suffragists should not be held accountable for their decisions to not just prioritize white women's suffrage over the voting rights of others, but to actually perpetuate racist, xenophobic, classist, and ableist rhetoric, because they didn't know any better is, I suspect, wishful thinking on our part.

So to return to the theme of "your fave is problematic," I want to look at what Seattle writer Ijeoma Oluo (author of the book ***So You Want to Talk About Race***) has said on this topic. In her essay, "**Admit It: Your Fave Is Problematic**," she argued that part of what makes us so resistant to acknowledging the flaws of our heroes, is a fear that if these people who we admire so much can be racist, classist, or homophobic, etc., what does that say about us? Well, she says that this means that we're flawed, too, and that we need to figure out how to not just make peace with this fact, but actually embrace it.

As she says:

*"But you can and you are at least some of these things sometimes. So am I. Own it. Learn from it. It's not an attack, it's the truth. Nobody is a perfect example of civil rights virtue. **If you aren't screwing up, you aren't trying.**"*

I think that last part is really important because it gets to the heart of the work that we have before us, which is to TRY. Once we recognize that not only are we not perfect, but that perfection is, in fact, an unrealistic goal, we can focus on the more realistic work of being better. As Maya Angelou once told Oprah,

*"You did then what you knew how to do. When you knew better you did better. And you should not be judged for the person that you were, but for the person you are trying to be."*

So, while LWV Founder Carrie Chapman Catt said some terrible things in her efforts to persuade people to support the 19th Amendment, she is also the person who in 1933 organized the Protest Committee of Non-Jewish Women Against the Persecution of Jews in Germany and who pressured the federal government to ease immigration laws to make it easier for Jewish people to find refuge in the United States. The U.S. never did do that. While some Jewish people did manage to immigrate to the U.S. in spite of popular opposition, most did not. While her work in this area was unsuccessful, I think it is important to recognize that decades after disparaging the right of immigrants to vote, she worked to advocate for the need to increase Jewish immigration into this country when it was needed most. Her public work changed. She did better.

So what does this mean for us? As we reflect back on the immense successes of the last 100 years, and the areas in which we have failed to live up to our mission, this is an opportunity to think about the next 100 years. But I think it would be useful to approach this with an eye to the future: What story do we want people to tell about the League 100 years from now? And once we figure that out, what actions do we need to take *now* to make sure that's what happens? I'm pretty sure that in 2120, we want to be able to say that the League has lived up to its mission of Empowering Voters and Defending Democracy, without any pesky asterisks.