



## Women in Politics

*Times are changing. When I get really excited about this, I feel we are on the cusp of something, that we have passed some kind of a threshold. But we still have a long way to go.*

By MADELEINE MAY KUNIN

*[EDITOR'S NOTE: On January 24, 2007, the Vermont Historical Society sponsored a program at the Pavilion Building in Montpelier celebrating the life and work of Clarina Howard Nichols (1810–1885). The keynote speaker for the program was Madeleine May Kunin. What follows is adapted from the transcript of Gov. Kunin's remarks.]*

**T**he theme of tonight's program is women in politics. Of course, Clarina Howard Nichols has a big role in that, but having just watched the State of the Union address, I'm going to begin my remarks by talking about Representative and Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi. Wasn't it amazing to see her sitting behind the president on that occasion! Those of us who have watched State of the Union speeches will have noted that the scene at the podium has always been the vice president and the Speaker of the House and the president; and the message that was conveyed by that image was always, "This is a man's world." When we watched Speaker Pelosi, and when the president graciously said "It is my high honor and privilege to be the

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*Madeleine May Kunin being sworn in for her second term as Governor of Vermont by Frederic Allen, Chief Justice of the Vermont Supreme Court, January 8, 1987. Photo by Sandy Macys.*

first president to call you ‘Madam Speaker,’” something really changed. It was as if a sign that had said “Girls not allowed” had been torn down and a new sign put up that said, “Women are welcome.” And as Speaker Pelosi said, “we are welcoming the president as our guest in this chamber,” it was as if she were welcoming all of us. Women around the United States, regardless of party, and women in many parts of the world felt that they were included; that this is our house, not just their house. That scene tells you about the power of images, the visual power of just being there and of holding the gavel.

Of course, we know Nancy Pelosi would not be there today if it weren’t for all the foremothers who helped pave the way. There is a well-known metaphor that we all stand on each other’s shoulders. I can’t quite do that physically, but it may be equally expressive to say we all hold each other’s hand; we all hand the gavel from one to the other. We are fortunate in Vermont that we have a woman Speaker of the House, Gaye Symington, who also wields the gavel and also is welcoming by her very presence. Person after person, young girls, and young women, who see a woman at the helm, who see a woman at the podium running

the show, have a different view of what it means to be a politician. They have a different view of what it means to be a decision maker.

Gaye Symington is one of four women Speakers in the United States. And here's an interesting fact, which some of you may not know because it hasn't been publicized: the State of Vermont has the highest percentage of women in its legislature of any state in the country. Now that is something to cheer about. I have to add, since I am married to a gentleman from New Hampshire, that New Hampshire is the *second* (a close second to Vermont) in the number of women in the legislature or, to be exact, the percentage of women in its legislature. New Hampshire would win hands down, if it were just a matter of numbers, since the number of people in the legislature is more than 400, but we have to deal in percentages.

Now you know, that didn't just happen. It happened because people like Gaye Symington, people like Deb Markowitz, people like myself, helped recruit women to run; we were role models and encouraged them. The world used to look like this [pointing to a portrait of U.S. Senator Justin Smith Morrill by Thomas Waterman Wood]. These were our leaders and these were our portraits on the wall. And it's only when you see different portraits and different images, whether it's Nancy Pelosi, Gaye Symington, Deb Markowitz, or the women in the legislature, that you begin to think differently about yourself and what you might do with your life.

Times are changing. When I get really excited about this, I feel we are on the cusp of something, that we have passed some kind of a threshold. But we still have a long way to go. You can be either an optimist or a pessimist. The pessimist says, we're not going to be equal—I wouldn't say that's pessimism; I'd say that's justice—we're not going to be equal until 50 percent of all legislative bodies are composed of women (and we're more than 50 percent of the population, so we're really being generous). But things have changed.

As I came in here this evening I met one of the staff members of the Vermont Historical Society who said, "I am glad to meet you. My daughter was in the statehouse when she was nine years old and she looked at all the men, and finally she came to your portrait and she said, 'finally, a woman. It's about time.'" Well, I think that is the attitude today: It's about time.

The political scene today isn't like it was when I first ran for governor, when it was such a phenomenon for a woman to run for high office. When I walked into the executive office and saw all the portraits of ex-governors, I felt the portraits "tilt" as I stepped in and I felt as if they were saying to me, "What are *you* doing here?" But that's no longer the

case. Now we know we belong there. And as we belong there in leadership positions, we represent all women, all young women, all girls, who also belong there.

I was thinking recently about what I would like my granddaughters to know about their future in politics, their future in civic engagement. Well, I'd like them to know a few things.

I'd like them to know about Abigail Adams, who wrote to John Adams when he was in Philadelphia writing the Constitution, "Remember the ladies." She also said something that is less well known. She opined that she would like to have been a rover. She would like to have traveled and seen the world. She couldn't have done that then. We can do that now.

I'd like my granddaughters to know about Clarina Howard Nichols. When I wrote about Clarina in 1970 I was thrilled just to discover her: a Vermonter who was active in the suffrage movement. I found her in a book, *Century of Struggle*,<sup>1</sup> about the women's movement, and she was just a name. I researched her and found her newspaper, the *Windham County Democrat*. She is a person worth knowing and worth reading about because she was one of the first national suffragists. But she got her start in Vermont. One of the stories about her is that she was invited to be the first woman to testify before the Vermont legislature in 1852 about a bill that would have given women the right to vote in school meetings. The women suffragists who promoted this legislation figured that was safe: we don't want too much, we just want a vote because we educate our children. The story goes that she was threatened at that time by the editor of the *Rutland Herald* with being presented with a pair of trousers, because any woman who spoke up about suffrage or any woman who spoke up about women's rights was accused—and it sometimes still happens—of wanting to wear, guess what, the pants. And she retorted: "We will not be after our men's trousers until they give us the right to own our own petticoats." Women then literally did not own the clothing on their own backs; they had no property rights; they had no child custody rights if they got divorced; they were really considered the property of their husbands.

It was also said that Clarina was so nervous speaking to the Vermont legislators that she almost fainted. Now I don't know if that's true, and maybe there was a little editorializing, because she spoke all over the country.

Clarina also spoke at the second women's rights convention in 1851 in Worcester, Massachusetts. There is one phrase in that speech that I find especially beautiful and appropriate. She said, "I commenced life with the most refined notions of women's sphere. My pride of womanhood lay within this nice sphere. I know how it was—perhaps because I

am of mountain growth,—but I could, even then, see over the barriers of that sphere and see that however easy it might be for me to keep within it, as a daughter, a great majority of women were outside its boundaries.”<sup>2</sup> She saw beyond that sphere. She became an agitator, a speaker, a writer, and a newspaper editor.

In the years just before Clarina gave up on Vermont because we were too conservative and went to Kansas to join the fight for abolition, she was the editor of the *Windham County Democrat*, which was published in Brattleboro. She became editor because her husband, who had been the editor and publisher, became sick. She turned the newspaper into a suffragist publication. She wrote a column about “wimmen’s rights,” and that led to her fame.

Clarina raised eyebrows in the town of Brattleboro because she and her daughter walked around in “bloomers”—the prototype of the pants suit. It shocked and amazed the natives that women would walk around in such attire. The suffragists finally gave up wearing bloomers because it detracted so much from what they were trying to say that they decided to go back to long skirts. It was because of women like Clarina Howard Nichols in the nineteenth century that people like Nancy Pelosi and Gaye Symington could wield the gavel in the twenty-first century.

What else would I like my granddaughters to know? I’d like them to know about the women who struggled for the vote. I’d like them to know about the first women’s rights convention, held in 1848 at Seneca Falls, New York, sponsored by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton; and that it took almost a hundred years—they never lived to see it—of lobbying (that would be the contemporary term) for women to get the right to vote. I’d like them to know who Sojourner Truth was, and about her speech at a women’s rights convention that was entitled, “Ain’t I a Woman?” Sojourner Truth was a Black woman who had been a slave; but instead of talking just about slavery she talked about women’s rights.<sup>3</sup>

I’d like my granddaughters to know about Alice Paul, who chained herself to the White House fence, was arrested and force-fed in prison because she and other suffragists protested and tried to get the attention of Woodrow Wilson to pass the Nineteenth Amendment. And I’d like them to know about a nice man in Tennessee, the last state to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment. Passage depended on one vote, one man. Just in the nick of time he opened a telegram sent by his mother, and the telegram said, “Be a good boy and vote for suffrage.”

I’d like my granddaughters to know about Margaret Sanger, who fought for birth control, and to make information and the means for birth control legal. I’d like them to know the names of Betty Friedan, and

Bella Abzug, and Shirley Chisholm—the first African American woman elected to Congress and the first African American woman to run for president—and Geraldine Ferraro, and of course, Gloria Steinem. I'd like them to know about the struggle behind the U.S. Supreme Court decision *Rowe v. Wade*; and I'd also like to point out to them that things do turn out differently when women hold the gavel.

Do you remember that when Nancy Pelosi was sworn in, she invited the children and grandchildren of members of Congress to come up to the podium? Had children ever been there before at such an important moment?

I'm not saying that women are perfect. I'd like to think so, but I know better. And we don't all agree: we're Republicans, we're Democrats; we have lots of different views on lots of things. But certain things do connect us, and one of them is our families and children. Women across party lines voted for such issues as civil union in the State of Vermont, voted in greater numbers for child care throughout the country, and voted for health care and environmental issues. It doesn't mean that men don't care about or vote for these issues, but there's a slight margin that women are more willing to extend themselves on these issues. So women can and must make a difference.

Most of all, I'd like my granddaughters—and my grandsons—to know that they not only have an opportunity in this great country of ours to be good citizens, but they have a responsibility to be good citizens. They cannot be bystanders to the events of our time. They cannot be glued to their iPods, the YouTube, or whatever else may come along. They will have to be engaged, involved, and responsible. When young women and men are dying in Iraq, when more are being sent on their way towards uncertain fates, none of us can be bystanders.

Those of us who are here in this room by our very presence have been taught these lessons, knowingly or unknowingly; now we must teach them to our children. What I find in teaching and what I find in speaking to young people is that what they need most is hope; what they need most is optimism; that they need to believe all the best things have not happened in the past; that they are not living in the worst of times; that they can, by their individual energy, passion, anger, and hope, create change. And we must make sure that we encourage them to do that.

I took great pleasure when I was teaching a seminar at the University of Vermont on "Women, Politics, and Leadership," that one of my students ran for the legislature, got elected, and is the youngest member of the legislature.<sup>4</sup> So it can be done. I also took great pleasure in learning that three of my former students worked for Peter Welch in his campaign for Congress and are now on his staff in Washington, D.C.

We've come a long way. In the time of Clarina Howard Nichols, we didn't have rights to property, we couldn't even claim our children after a divorce. We know that things are different today; but we also know that there is much, much more to be done. We still don't have 50 percent of the legislators; we know that we don't have equal power; but we have role models. And in a way, we've catapulted with Nancy Pelosi's election. Women comprise only 16 percent of the Congress, yet a woman was elected to be its leader. We also know that in the year 2007, when a woman announced her candidacy for president, it was front page news and she was automatically the front runner.<sup>5</sup> This has never happened before.

So this is something I would like my granddaughters to know: that the women in the past and the women today have opened the doors for them. There are not the same barriers that were there before. Young women can dream dreams, and it is not only to our sons that we can say, "maybe some day you'll be president"—and fortunately, we still hold the presidency in awe—but it is also to our daughters that we can say, "maybe someday you'll be president." And what's the importance of that? The importance isn't the presidency itself; the importance is the dream; the importance is the imagination; the importance is the vision and the vision of saying to a young person, "you can be whoever you want to be."

There is a history here. There are others who paved the way. Clarina Howard Nichols was one of them; some of the others I've mentioned have been among them; and others I haven't mentioned have been among them: mothers and grandmothers have been role models. The important message is: make an impact; make a difference. Be a whole human being. Do not think of "women's sphere" as they did in the old days. Do you remember the days when we had "help wanted" ads and it was "women wanted" and "men wanted"? We're all wanted today. There is no distinction. Our country needs us and we can respond. And it does make a difference in the world. Women, minorities, and whoever has been left out, are now on the inside.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1959).

<sup>2</sup> Clarina Howard Nichols, "The Responsibilities of Woman" (Second National Woman's Rights Convention, Worcester, Massachusetts, 1851). [http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/speeches/nichols\\_responsibilities.html](http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/speeches/nichols_responsibilities.html).

<sup>3</sup> Sojourner Truth, "Ain't I a Woman?" (Delivered at the Women's Convention, Akron, Ohio, 1851). <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/sojtruth-woman.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Rep. Rachel Weston, D-Chittenden County, District 3-3.

<sup>5</sup> On January 20, 2007, U.S. Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-NY, announced that she had formed an exploratory committee to be a candidate for president of the United States.

