Letter: Ida M. Tarbell to The Editor-in-Chief of The American Magazine

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Dear Mr. Phillips:

You want me to explain my position on the extension of suffrage to women. You declare that it seems to your illiberal and contradictory - that it disappoints your idea of my mind and character. You have intimated that I am kept out of the present movement by vanity - that is - having several years ago allowed the use of my name in a protest against the extension of suffrage to women at that time, that I am too proud to admit I might have been wrong - which is to say that I have not the "self-correcting conscience". You also seem to be coming to the conclusion that what Helen Keller is reported to have said of me not long ago is true - that is, that I am getting too old to understand and sympathize with the aspirations of a growing world!

It is quite probable that there is at least a suspicion of truth in all you say. I have always found it difficult to explain myself, even to myself, and I do not often try. However, the fact that I am one of your staff on the American Magazine, as well as one of your regular contributors, the fact that I know how deeply you have it at heart that the magazine should in its own way encourage free experimenting with life makes me feel rather in duty bound to try to put down as honestly as I can what I do think in the matter. No doubt it will be good for me - though I feel pretty sure in advance it is not going to satisfy you.

"Come across" you say and I really don't know that I can. There is in
feminine nature a strange barrier against complete self-revelation. The woman
she never admits all even to herself. This is possibly a protective
device of nature, intensified by social conditions. At all events
the most impersonal and unimaginative and experienced of us rarely get
entirely away from it. I don’t know that I can even on a subject
which has come to be as purely objective to me as suffrage, but I’ll
try! And in trying I fear I shall be boresome for I don’t think I
can explain, or at least, put down what seems to me to explain with-
out some retrospecting. I’ll try to make it brief. You see my feeling
about suffrage is different from that of a great number of people today
because I was really born to the idea and considerable members of both the
men and women active in the movement now seem to have heard or at least
thought of it, for the first time.

I grew up among people who believed in women’s suffrage as
much as they did in the abolition of slavery, the observance of the Sabbath,
or the beneficence of the protective tariff. It was part of the creed I
learned as a child — a part of the liberal program of the day. Elizabeth
Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony were grouped in my young girl’s mind
William Lloyd
with Garrison and General Grant and Abraham Lincoln and Geo. M. Curtis
and Horace Greeley and Carl Schurz. I took suffrage as one of the
great “rights” that women were born into the world for the express pur-
pose of acquiring. Suffrage was but one of the “rights”. A college
education was another and I reasoned it out that it was the one for
which I should first strike. I would go to college — and to a man’s
college. Co-education was still an advanced step and there were plenty
of people in my environment to hint to me that it was not “respectable”
although my father and mother stoutly defended me in the adventure to go
to a man’s college and to fit myself for a man’s work — that was to be
my contribution to the cause! My little revolution!
But when you are in a co-educational college you gradually learn that there are other things in the world beside "causes" and "rights" and "reforms" and "revolutions." At least, I did. The "program" diminished rather than increased in value. Suffrage which I had taken for granted I should one day fight for, seemed to fade from the horizon. I don't remember that we ever discussed it in college. It is true that there was a lull in the suffrage movement in those years for that movement like all others goes in cycles. It had reached a peak of activity in the early 70's and subsided - to rise again in the late 80's. I was out of college by that time and at editorial work. I had begun to examine even the ideas I had been born to and suffrage was one that I attacked.

I had heard it discussed so much in my childhood, was so familiar with the arguments for it that I decided to approach it by a path new to me. I had become interested in biographical study. It seemed to me the character parts in the past of the contributions made by women who had played in public affairs in different countries might throw light on the question as it was shaping itself in my mind. Did or did they not contribute something valuable which men could not give. If they did, I should feel that I ought to exercise what little influence I might have for it - if I found the opposite I should feel that they better concentrate on what they were doing for I should say that I had come, by this time, to have a very profound feeling that sound education and cultivation depend almost solely on women. I don't know where I got the notion but time has only intensified my conviction of the overwhelming importance of the civilizing work of women - quite apart from what we call public life.

I laid out a laughably ambitious scheme of study - only a fragment of which I have carried out. That fragment concerned itself with women in the French Revolution. Although I read rather widely on the
subject I was never able to produce anything but a biographical study
of Madame Roland. Still I felt fairly well acquainted with the activities
French
and contributions of all of the women prominent for a period of 50 or more years.

The effect of that acquaintance was decidedly reactionary. It took from
me all the enthusiasm I had ever felt for women in public life. Radical
and conservative, Royalist and democrat, aristocrat and proletarian. I
had the same repulsion against them all. I think it possible that I was
not quite fair to any of them. I certainly was too hard on Madame Roland
but I have always found it difficult to be patient and just to people who
feel themselves able to play the part of Providence in human affairs.

Where I found myself at the end of my French Revolutionary
studies I have been ever since — that is convinced, that woman's contribution
to the public cause is not sufficiently distinct from man's to offset the com-
Moreover I am convinced
plications it will bring. A they are liable to retard progress by
their intensity and implacability — this applies whether they are radical
or conservative in temperament. They are harder to budge than men and
that means that they are more partisan than men. I had never attached much
importance to the argument that women would infuse a higher moral quality
into politics and this view was confirmed repeatedly in my little studies.
their
Women take on the political morality of a times rising and falling with it
as men do. This we see every day. I have heard a queer logic
used by good women who were trying to persuade me into the suffrage movement.
One woman, a scholarly lady in an important position once warned me that
if I stayed out I could not hope for an office when the vote was won as
I otherwise might.

She added — "you live by your writing, women
will cease buying your books" — and when I put to her baldly that what
she had asked me to do was to follow a cause for what might be in it — she
was insulted. This sort of argument ought not to surprise any one or
drive him away from suffrage unless indeed he is believing in it because
of the higher moral standards it would compel. That there is I think
a delusion. We are of our times, no better, no worse. The only way in
which women can make politics fundamentally better is to send a larger
number of boys into public life whose principles are sound and whose
as they
courage and faith are high. This they can do They
hold the line where this work is done.

One point of some importance to those who try to count
up the possible gains and losses through suffrage is constantly demon-
strated in the French Revolution and that is that woman’s presence al-
ways complicates political situations by bringing in the inevitable sex
repulsion or attraction. There is nothing gained by shying at this fact -
and I have never been able to find it shocking as many women seem
to. I have never been able to see why nature’s method of continuing the
race was not as clean as any other of her processes. Sex does complicate all the relations of life,
politics included, in proportion to the intimacy allowed. The political bear-
ing of this fact lies in the fact that when an important public crisis arises
the woman will go with her man. That is the way she is made. Then will be
the so called “sexless” woman who will follow only their own “views” - to be
sure - but they are a negligible quantity and precious few of them are to
be as fully trusted as they may themselves suppose!

But if I remain in my judgment in suffrage about where the
French Revolution left I do not mean to say I have never been swayed by
the
later day developments of the argument. There is claim that we must have
it because only through it can the woman in industry be properly protected.
Now I have for a number of years been seeing something of women and girls in industry and if I believed that the improvement of their hard and unsatisfactory conditions depended in any great degree on the ballot I think I should drop everything else and fight for it so important do I think it for society that their condition be raised to a point where they are really improved by their periods of work. It is not votes it is training that the girl and woman in industry need most. It is unjust and dishonest to teach her that by votes she can raise wages, shorten hours, improve conditions. These things are the results of sounder economic management knowledge, of improved tools, of a higher degree of co-operation. Her progress lies in good health, good morals, increasing skill.

I do not mean to say that good laws will do nothing for her. They will, and she will have the laws votes or no votes as XXXX has been proved scores of times in the years since she became conspicuous in industry. Probably no body of laws in this country has advanced so rapidly as those touching women and children. As rapidly as the public has seen a need a law has been demanded. I know that such experienced people as Jane Addams and Florence Kelley and Mrs. Nathan contend that they could get what they need much more easily with the vote. I have no experience with which to gain say them. It is my judgment that they are wrong — that the complications of politics would make their case harder. Once pool their simple and appealing measures with the multitude of intricate, evasive and technical measures, and divide their now solid phalanx on party lines and I confess I shudder for their good causes. But I realize I should be very humble in this matter and that they are more likely to be right than I.

Another argument for suffrage which I find convinces many people is that it will educate women. Now there is no doubt considerable educative value in the ballot. I don't know that it has done so much for man as yet that we can boast much and if it has not for him I don't quite see
why we should expect more for women. There is something in it however. The
most convincing statement of this argument that I have seen comes from Pro-
fessor Henry R. Mussey of Columbia College:—

"The ballot for women is important fundamentally," he says
"not because of what they will accomplish with it, but because of what it
will do for them and what it will do, not immediately and directly, but in
the long course of generations and as an indirect result of the demands it
will make on them. The indirect educational results constitute the one in-
refutable argument for women suffrage, and by comparison all others are of third-
rate importance. The idea that women's voting would purify politics has well-
igh disappeared into the limbo of discarded notions, where it belongs. Such an
idea never had any reason behind it, but unenlightened optimism. Now the in-
dustrial consequences are emphasized — the raising of wages, shortening of
hours and improvements in working conditions for women that may be expected from their
obtaining the ballot. These expectations will probably in large part be dis-
appointed. Industrial conditions are determined chiefly outside of the political
sphere. High wages, short hours and good conditions of work do not hang
primarily on acts of Legislature. To enfranchise women will not remove their
economic handicaps, though help a little. Any class of people, given the ballot
use it for their economic advantage at their full value — and there is no
question that they are in general grossly exaggerated. The chief gain to
come from it is its steady educational pressure on women."

Even admitting all that Prof. Mussey says, I confess that the
idea that women need the vote for education seems almost comic to me. Education
comes from life. It is the essence of experience. And it is woman alone that can
taste the highest earthly experience and it is upon her that the steadiest and
most demanding pressure comes. Her bearing and rearing of the child and the
greatest of human facts. They are the one which has aroused the world most
deeply — have given its divine ideals — which oftenest stay brutality — soften
its heart. Only death compares in wonder to the coming of life — and death
is without sex. Birth is a woman's work — I confess I've always pitied men a
little that they could not know the death struggle for a new life and I always
had a feeling of superiority over them not unlike that of Bernard Shaw's scrub-
woman who when she wanted to put the English mungiter of war as well as men in
general in their proper place, shrieked:—

"If three quarters of you was killed we could replace you with
the help of the other quarter. If three quarters of us was killed how many
people would there be in England in another generation!"
This fragment of the educational value of the vote has not really the weight with me. If the one I have heard you assert that Suffrage a you claimed would help in a degree which you in no way exaggerated and in a time which you in no way over-estimated to break down the wicked barriers which separate women from women. It would be something which would give the poverty-stricken helpless, cringing women a sense of being somebody - of possessing something in common with those more fortunate women she sees from afar and must but too often dimly hate for their happiness, their ease, their fullness of opportunity. Here would be one point at least where she must be as good as they - where she would count as much as they - where they would need her - seek her and respect her. She would be the more of a human being because of this value in herself. It would give her courage, self-respect, freedom. "Trade with it of course she will as men do," you said, "as she does with her person today." But having this legitimate value which brings her nearer the more fortunate she would sometimes use this value to save herself and her sisters from baser trading.

"It is not only she, the unfortunate, who would get it from a ballot a new sense of her value as a human being which she so terribly needs. The fortunate who would get a new sense of the value of other human beings which she quite as much needs. Women may discover women, $35, in this operation. It is a discovery many of us need to make. You remember Lady I clever remark - "The only reason I am glad that I am a woman is that I will have to marry one." The ballot, perhaps, would help reconcile us to one another. But I don't know that it has done so much for men in this particular.

I have much more sympathy than most people who are opposed to or indifferent to the extension of suffrage that they are deprived of a "right" in being deprived of the vote. It is a bad thing for a community that any of the members should feel
that they are being wronged. It is not sufficient that I don't believe myself that I or they are wronged. I never could see the vote as a right. It is a tool devised for recording public opinion. It has little or nothing to do with creating opinions which is the only essential matter. As rapidly as the public has realized that it probably would be advantageous to enlarge the number who used the tool this has been done. As soon as a considerable number of women really are convinced that they need the vote they will be asked to exercise it. The fact that I don't think there is a right involved only an expediency and that I feel sure that nothing can keep the vote from women if the need is seen pretty generally, makes me lukewarm to this situation. I do deplore however that any body feel wronged in the community. I prefer that everybody should at least have the chance to try what he wants. But in this case we have a troublesome dilemma. There seems to be more women who don't want the vote - who think they already have more than enough to think about than join those who cast it. There are who think they need it and who want to think about the question. There seems to be no way to satisfy both sides at once.

For my part while I am not to work for the ballot, I am not willing to work against it. Of course I know this sounds pusillanimous and maybe it is. I am told it is a thing much despised in this up and down age called "sitting on the fence". As a matter of fact I sit on the fence a great deal. I have always understood and act of William James which amused me tremendously at the time and has often comforted me. Mr. James had never wanted the suffrage extended to women but one day some ardent suffragist called upon me with a petition - and he signed it. I heard him confess with a groan saying he was always a coward when it came to denying good people what they thought they ought to have.

This more wanting the vote cannot be treated lightly or at least should not be. There are no doubt many cases particularly in the
present upward swing of the movement where the advocates want it because they have so recently discovered it was something they did not possess.

There is a small proportion of the recent society advance on suffrage which seems to be of this kind - ladies who accustomed to having everything - wakened to the fact that they did not have suffrage - and ordered it. All over the country in inland towns there are the ladies who have "taken it up" because of New York society's interest. There are those whom espouse it as a new excitement and those who hope through it to improve their social position they nut really are but a handful of the body. The far greater part wants suffrage because they believe it means more freedom and more life.

I have a tremendous sympathy myself with women who want the ballot because they feel that with it they will be more fully in the stream of life. With a great many women practically the whole cry is that they do not want anything going on in the world in which they are not sharing. They are willing to trust themselves in the full current of things, feeling that the rush, confusion and restlessness of that current is more desirable than the steadier seat they might have on the bank watching the current go by. They do not ask to be in a safe place, they want the tumult of natural life and they have the courage to attempt it. This is to be expected of the tug of life which is going on everywhere in the world. There were never so many men and women convinced that it is possible that life should be for everybody a much larger affair than it has ever been for anybody outside of a few - not by any means those whom we call "the favored few". The are not necessarily the ones who get the big things out of life. This look into the possibilities of life for all has been accompanied - in perhaps explained by a spreading conviction that the things which have so largely defeated life for the many are unnecessary. Poverty is not necessary; war which is the chief cause of poverty is unnecessary.
privilege which is the chief cause of war is not necessary. They are
the ogres which have shut off happy, full lives from the great mass of the
earth and they must go. Women like men are after them. They would legis-
late them out of the world and they rush for the same tools which to make
the attack. But it can't be done that way. Poverty and war and privilege
are the children of greed and selfishness and unbridled natures. Nothing but
the slow processes of education will put an end to them and believing this
how can I fight for that which I do not feel I need for that which I
believe will hamper the direct use of the tools which will do the work.

You will gather I think from this that the chief reason
I am not interested in the extension of suffrage is because I feel that
it is part of what seems to me the most dangerous fallacy of our times and
that is that we can be saved morally, economically, socially by laws and
systems. Suffrage is a panacea; a sword which to cut our way to
happiness, peace of mind, universal prosperity. To me it seems the least
of a woman's tools. She has others so much stronger. Of the value of these
I have no doubt whatever. They have stood the test of use through centuries as
human beings
no other tools have tried. They may be slow in their operation but they
are sure. I cannot make myself see that suffrage belongs in her kit. It
seems to me like an alien tool in her hands, as an alien as a gun and
I can no more see that she has no part in public life because she does not
cast her ballot than that she has no part in war because she does not carry
a gun. The world bows to the brave part she plays in its present
struggle and it has and always will bow the knee to her part in
public life.

When you come down to it I suspect the reason I feel
as I do about suffrage is a kind of instinct; it is not logic or argument,
I mistrust it do not want it. I feel so sure of woman's place, so clear
in my mind about her part in things. It is really worth being "Old", dear
by my younger sisters
Mr. Phillips, even worth being twitted in public on that fact, to be so
proud and so sure of anything as I am of the place and the value of women
in the world - without the ballot.

I shall be much interested in knowing whether you think I
have "come across" or not!