

Feminism, femininity, and power: **Nellie Tayloe Ross and the woman politician's dilemma**

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Had you been standing in a supermarket checkout line in the first week of May 1984, leafing through the National Enquirer, you might have come across a story inviting you to "Meet the Mama of Women's Lib." The person the Enquirer proposed to introduce was Nellie Tayloe Ross, who was elected governor of Wyoming in 1924, succeeding her husband, who had died in office. "Some of today's feminists act as if they started the women's movement," the article began, "but way back in 1924 the U.S. had its first elected woman governor."⁽¹⁾ Unfortunately for the accuracy of the headline, Ross herself had declared some years earlier that "I have no interest in women's lib."⁽²⁾

No one would mistake the Enquirer for a reliable source of historical information. Neither should we underestimate its power as a fountain of popular ideas, however silly its style. In this instance the grocery store tabloid made the common mistake of confusing a woman's participation in electoral politics with a politician's commitment to feminism. Instead, Nellie Tayloe Ross provides the classic example of the kind of woman politician who has sometimes made feminists gnash their teeth. But Ross also stood as an early example of a person facing a continuing dilemma for women in public life, who must prove at once that they will govern as well as any man without "losing their femininity" in the process.

Nancy Cott, in *The Grounding of Morlem Feminism*, noted that women's rights activists of the 1920s bemoaned the fact that after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, male-dominated political parties seemed only to support women candidates who distanced themselves from feminist advocacy.⁽³⁾ During her two years as Democratic governor of Wyoming, the self-styled "Equality State," Ross avoided connection with feminism and its advocates, seeking, she said, to prove sex irrelevant in politics. Over the course of her long public career, she would also frequently invoke the idea that woman's greatest social role and moral purpose was motherhood,

concept many women's rights advocates, then as now, viewed as naive and retrograde. She would also repeatedly admonish women who aspired to office to avoid being perceived as aggressive or mannish and not to "lose their femininity" even while holding positions of power. Ironically, Nellie Tayloe Ross would be celebrated as an emblem of a successful crusade for women's rights, in her time as in our own, even by some who deplored her intentional distance from feminist positions.

In this essay I examine Nellie Ross's coming to power and her bid for reelection, her move into national Democratic party politics, and, briefly, her twenty years as head of a federal agency. Nellie Ross was a politician's wife, small town socialite, and devoted mother until her husband, Governor William B. Ross of Wyoming, died in office in 1924. She was elected to finish out her husband's unexpired term, but when she ran for reelection in 1926, she lost, narrowly. Defeat at the polls taught her lessons that reshaped

her political identity, freeing her to take a prominent role in national party circles. In the process, she developed remarkable political and professional savvy and, with her children grown and her financial affairs in her own hands, enormous personal independence. In recognition of her contributions to the Roosevelt campaign, she was appointed director of the mint in 1933, a position she held until 1953. throughout this remarkable career, Ross faced the double bind of insisting that sex was no handicap for a politician while assuring her constituency that politics did not "unsex" any woman. For more than fifty years, she preserved her image as a feminine woman who carried out the duties of high office as capably as any man. She also acted as a role model for some women politicians who followed in her footsteps.

"Really, I dropped accidentally into politics," Ross told reporters as she attended a national governors' conference in Atlantic City, carefully maintaining her pose of feminine passivity. During and long after her entry into public life, she depicted herself as more devoted to womanly domesticity than to public affairs and often celebrated homemaking as the greatest vocation for all women. "I am old-fashioned enough to believe that no career for women is as glorious or satisfying as that which wifehood and motherhood offers, and it is there she fulfills her highest destiny," she told a group of Girl Scouts midway through her term.(4)

Nellie Tayloe was born in St. Joseph, Missouri, in 1877. She moved to Omaha, Nebraska, as a young woman and for a short time taught school there. She never attended college but, as the daughter in a well-to-do family, expected to make a career of marriage and motherhood. On a visit to relatives in Tennessee in 1902, she met William Ross, a young attorney who had gone to Wyoming in 1901 to recover from an illness and decided to move to Cheyenne. The couple married later that year, and the new bride moved west with her husband. He quickly established a thriving law practice, and the couple soon counted themselves among the town's elite. As a nostalgic widow, Nellie Ross portrayed their relationship as a model companionate marriage, affectionate, cooperative, and devoted to the children's comfort and the husband's advancement. She listened endlessly and readily as William Ross talked about his cases; he, for his part, took on the job of getting up to attend their four sons when they woke in the night. She wrote that "like the usual loyal wife, I found my absorbing interest in my husband's career....we stood shoulder to shoulder every step of the way.(5)

For all her attempts to portray family life as tranquil and delightful, Ross admitted that domesticity had its frustrations. The gregarious couple found Cheyenne's social life "alluring"; she recalled that "we enjoyed it in so far as the cares of a growing family permitted us to participate." Often, she said, "we had no choice but to forego some tempting pleasure because it was frequently difficult to find any person brave enough to undertake the care of babies, in numbers, long into the night"

She could hardly fault potential baby-sitters for their reluctance. "Let any young mother, overwhelmed with the care and responsibility of one well baby, picture the situation," she wrote in an article for *Good Housekeeping*. "An inexperienced, delicate mother, who in after years as the Governor of Wyoming was to demonstrate unlimited physical

endurance, thrown prostrate upon the bed beside those wailing, colicky babies, and from sheer exhaustion and despair mingling her tears with theirs....I still remember one such hour, and the distinct feeling that though those babies might survive the perils of infancy, their mother would never live to tell the tale." Parenthood indeed brought the Rosses tragedy as well as tribulation; their third son died when, at the age of ten months, his perambulator tipped over and he suffocated before anyone discovered him. In light of this horrifying tragedy, along with the death of a second son in an automobile accident, it is not surprising that in later years Nellie Ross spoke so often and so passionately of the urgent claims of motherhood.(6)

Nellie Ross loved spending time with her husband and wanted him to succeed as a lawyer. She was thus less enthusiastic about his political ambitions, finding "the acrimonious controversies of political campaigns wearing, especially when they took my husband from home on long speaking trips, as they usually did--and they came so woefully often." Still, she swallowed her opposition when he was narrowly elected county attorney in 1904, a position that brought him statewide notice. By the time he ran for governor in 1922, campaigning as a Progressive Democrat against a divided Republican party, she had become familiar with party politics, Wyoming style. She had opposed his candidacy partly because she worried about the financial costs of his abandoning his practice and partly because she understood the difficulties of campaigning as a Democrat in a heavily Republican state. When she finally acquiesced to his desire to run, "for two solid months he was away. Left alone with my ten-year-old son and a domestic, my nerves ran the whole gamut, I think, of human emotions.(7)

If her husband's temporary absences brought such discomfort, we can only imagine how devastating to her his death must have been. After less than two years in office, William Ross died from appendicitis on October 2, 1924. When Nellie Ross lost her husband, she not only had to come to terms with a personal crisis but also found herself thrust into a public role she had never considered possible or desirable. Given her previous devotion to domesticity (albeit, as a politician's wife, a highly public variety of housekeeping), her response to widowhood is little short of astounding.

Only days after William Ross's funeral, the chairman of the state Democratic committee asked the bereaved widow to run in the coming special election as the party's candidate for governor. Upon reflection, she said, she agreed to do so, in order to carry on her late husband's work. She believed that in her years of experience as a lawyer-politician's wife, she had "unconsciously absorbed" much of his craft. Ruth Loomis, who would later serve as her secretary, observed that the Rosses were "always very compatible and well-matched intellectually." "Naturally," Nellie Ross wrote later, "it may be asked whether

felt within myself the ability to fill this position. I hope it does not suggest egotism when I reply that not for one moment did I doubt it."(8)

Wyoming's Democratic leaders convened, and Nellie Ross was unanimously affirmed as the party's choice. Doubtless some believed that a housewife-socialite would be easy to manipulate. As contemporary newspapers, and later the historian T. A. Larson,

suggested, some were probably motivated by "chivalry and sympathy." The grief-stricken Ross may have encouraged such feelings with her decision to "not leave the house to campaign." (9) As political scientist Diane D. Kincaid observed in an article on widow politicians engagingly titled "Over His Dead Body," notions of feminine deference would likely have obliged Ross to hide any ambition for office she may have felt, "especially that worst and most unwidow-like 'naked ambition.'" As Kincaid explains, widows who succeeded their deceased husbands in office "had not merely to submit to that situation, but to somewhat actively engage themselves in seeking it; at the same time, they had to "fit more conventional concepts of passivity and diffidence." (10)

Wyoming's pride in its status as the "Equality State" was another factor in the party's willingness to break precedent and nominate a woman, just as the state's egalitarian heritage surely played a part in Ross's huge victory. Senator John B. Kendrick said at the time that Wyoming, as the nation's first suffrage state, ought to elect the first woman governor. Campaign language offers evidence of the significance of Wyoming's historical connection with women's rights. Ross's opponent, Eugene J. Sullivan, was widely connected with the oil interests, no asset to him given the 1922 Teapot Dome scandal involving petroleum reserves in Wyoming. Nellie Ross was perceived not only as an opponent of big oil but as the bearer of a peculiarly feminine reforming and civilizing influence. In 1924, most Wyomingites who knew anything about the history of woman suffrage in the state believed that the movement for women's votes had originated at an 1869 tea party given by Esther Morris of South Pass City. In 1924, the Wyoming Labor Journal celebrated Ross's candidacy with the quip, "Better tea parties than Teapot Dome parties." As the national Democratic ticket suffered a landslide defeat, Ross won the governorship by more than eight thousand votes, a huge margin for Wyoming in 1924. (11)

Throughout the public career that the 1924 election initiated, Ross would strive to reconcile feminine modesty with political ambition, seeking to please and conciliate male allies by giving them credit for good ideas while affirming women's right to exercise power. As a loyal Democrat, she also portrayed her own party as the true fountain of women's emancipation. She invoked these themes, in explicit terms, in one of her very first political pronouncements, an "address to women voters" published as part of a pamphlet in the 1924 campaign. Ross began the address by proclaiming Wyoming's pathbreaking role in women's rights, noting that, for fifty years, "the women of Wyoming have in common with men enjoyed, unquestioned and unchallenged, those rights and privileges of citizenship which have been only recently won, at great cost, by the women of other states." While the statement was not strictly true (an all-Democratic Wyoming territorial legislature had voted to repeal woman suffrage in 1871, but the measure had been vetoed by the governor), Ross went on to give men all the credit for the 1869 suffrage victory. She paid tribute to "the generosity and chivalry of the founders of our state who were the first in our country to so honor womanhood." Democratic men, Ross continued, were to be particularly commended because in choosing her "a great political party has conferred, unsought, upon a woman the nomination for the highest executive office in the state." Indeed, she reminded women voters who might have been less convinced that male "chivalry and sympathy" were sufficient causes for the

empowerment of women, "In view of these facts, it would scarcely become us as women to present my candidacy as a demand for recognition which had heretofore been resisted."(12)

In a somewhat ambiguous appeal to women voters, Ross noted that "in case of my election, I should feel a deep sense of responsibility toward my sex, and should hope to so conduct my administration that it might never be said that women were unfitted for executive office."(13) The first half of the statement might have meant that she would pursue a governing course guided by a commitment to "women's issues," defined variously, at that time, as maternal and child welfare measures and equal rights provisions.(14) The second half of the statement, however, suggested a determination to prove herself equal to the exercise of power apart from, or even despite, her womanhood. In fact, in another section of the pamphlet titled "Where Mrs. Ross Stands," Ross assured voters that "I shall expect and feel in duty bound to make my own decisions in every case, realizing that on me alone would rest the responsibility. The fact of my being a woman would in no way alter my obligation to the people in this respect."(15)

Ross described taking the oath of office as "something like a birth into a new world."(16) She was forty-eight years old at the time. She had lived nearly half a century as a housewife, mother, and private person, having joined only one organization, the snobbish Cheyenne Women's Club (which was, Ross admitted, a "select and exclusive organization....Civic enterprises made no claim upon our attention. Self-improvement, purely intellectual, was frankly our objective").(17) Never a participant in the suffrage movement (she claimed that Wyoming's long-standing enfranchisement of women had obviated the necessity for such activism), she was destined to live another half century as a public woman--Democratic party activist, government official, and national icon of women's political power. The irony was not lost on her. "It does seem passing strange," she wrote later, "when one considers the countless women who are well fitted to fill the office of governor, that I should have been the pioneer."(18)

Wyoming, of course, had its share of ardent suffragists. Along with such national voices of feminism as *The Woman Citizen*, local veterans of the women's rights movement greeted Ross's 1924 election with delight. As one Wyoming woman wrote to Ross in a letter of encouragement, "Personally, I am an ardent feminist, and most earnestly believe that women can perform, as well as men, any task that comes to their hands, so do not let any obsolete traditions or doubts disturb your confidence."(19)

Grace Raymond Hebard, a University of Wyoming professor, western historian, Republican, and the state's best-known feminist, had written to Ross before the election to express her condolences and support, and Ross wrote back a long, warm, intimate letter. After thanking Hebard for understanding her loss and "desolation," she continued:

My dear Miss Hebard, the word now comes to me that you have confidence in my ability to carry on my husband's work to the end of his term. I can't tell you what courage it gives me to know that you believe in me and that you are using your strong influence to

promote my candidacy. I do not underestimate the value of your support and I want you to know that I am deeply grateful.

When Ross won, Hebard wrote her friend Cattie Chapman Catt that Ross's inauguration was a vindication of woman suffrage.(21) A woman voter from the town of Douglas invoked the "Equality State's" favorite trope, exclaiming, "It is a great joy to me to know that Wyoming, the pioneer suffrage state of the Union, in selecting you my dear Mrs. Ross, gets the honor of electing the first woman Governor.(22)

Wyoming women activists, some of whom did refer to themselves as "feminist," hoped that Ross would prove a special advocate of the measures they held dear, but they had no way of knowing whether their hopes were based on anything more than an accident of sex. One month after Ross was elected, Grace Hebard wrote an uncharacteristically deferential letter to ask the governor how she stood on the Child Labor Amendment, adding that "if this in any way embarrasses you, please make no reply."(23) (That Hebard did not know Nellie Ross's position on that question seems worth noting in light of events of the previous year. In 1923, Hebard had orchestrated a successful campaign for a state child labor bill, with the strong backing of then-governor William Ross.(24)) Ross wrote back that she was "earnestly in favor of the amendment, believing that it is the only means by which we can secure adequate protection for the children of our country," a response that must have encouraged Hebard. Ross also showed something of the master politician's gift for personal politics when she closed the letter by telling Hebard, "I look forward to a little quiet when I may read your latest publication...I am very proud to number among my friends a woman so talented."(25)

At the same time that she shared ideas about child labor with Wyoming women who had been active in the causes of social reform and women's empowerment, Nellie Ross was aware that her landmark administration would be treated as a test of whether women were fit to govern. To prove that womanhood was not an impediment to holding office, she felt that she had to demonstrate her abilities as an individual, regardless of sex. Thus, in public, she deliberately avoided identification with women's organizations or issues. Wyoming women, feminists in particular, quickly learned that they would have no special claim on the woman governor's loyalty or even her time. A January 1925 letter from Hebard suggesting that Ross appoint women to positions on the Child and Animal Protection Board and the University Board of Trustees was marked "No Answer File."(26) One month later, Hebard wrote to the governor, regretting that she would not be able to meet with the League of Women Voters. Politicians' schedules say a great deal about whom they want to court and whom they are willing to ignore, a message not lost on interested parties.(27)

While Ross governed at a remove from feminists like Hebard, the press was celebrating her as the living embodiment of both womanliness and political competence. Ross had found media scrutiny of her life, views, and person during the campaign very trying "so unaccustomed was to having intimately personal affairs of mine paraded before the public. My opinion was asked on absurdly irrelevant subjects. Writers described my appearance from the cast of my features to the shape of my foot"(28) The Omaha Bee

offered a typical example of postelection media coverage, declaring, "Six Months' Trial Proves Governor Nellie Ross Has Met and Defeated Enemies of Women in Office." Praising her "sound judgment, rare courage, and clear-sighted statesmanship," the Bee insisted that "she is a governor who knows how to govern, and she has betrayed none of the weaknesses and uncertainties which so many predicted would be inevitable in a woman." At the same time, the Bee drew attention to her "charmingly feminine personality, with attractive presence, cameo features and a beautiful smile."(29)

However dazzling her smile, Ross had to call on other resources as governor. Already a staunch member of the state's minority party, she quickly moved to cement her ties with organized labor in the state, and throughout her life she remained devoted to the welfare of working people, taking care, for example, to pay Social Security taxes for her domestic employees.(30) She would make new friends and enemies as she championed mine safety legislation, argued against federal authority and for state control of lands adjoining Yellowstone Park, worked to protect Wyoming's claims to Colorado River water, pressed for a state severance tax on mineral development, and shouldered the heavy burden of enforcing Prohibition. Her husband had been elected as an advocate of the Eighteenth Amendment, and Nellie Ross would earn the undying bitterness of "wets" in Park County when she engineered the ouster of the sheriff of Cody, a man more than casually involved in bootlegging. Confronting a Republican-dominated legislature and being the only Democrat elected to statewide office, she also faced a hostile Republican press. She responded in two ways. First, she asserted her loyalty to the Democratic party and to her husband's former advisors. Second, she zealously protected gubernatorial authority, but not in the name of partisanship only; she also wanted to ensure that the power of the governorship would not be diminished while a woman held office. For her, proving women's fitness meant denying gender difference in administrative ability. She insisted that "the office was quite impersonal. A woman will succeed or fail just as a man will succeed or fail, and it is difficult to understand why a generation which has been brought up under the coeducational system of the American public schools should imagine that there is any real difference in the manner in which men and women approach intellectual or practical problems."(31)

Where Ross had cultivated a seemingly widow's passivity in 1924, by 1926, she was ready to seek re-election on her own. She appears to have been convinced that two years of competent administration and national acclaim had made her sex a moot point. Having never advanced the claims of women as a group during her two years in office, Ross had remained aloof from feminists and their causes. She wanted to run not as a woman but as an individual, and to that end, "I felt, and so also did the managers of my campaign, that the appeal should be made to the voters of the state strictly upon the merits of the administration. We deliberately avoided any appeal to sentiment We deliberately refrained from any attempt to organize the women as women. We stood squarely upon my record in office."(32)

Yet the gender issue was not so easy to leave behind. Some Wyoming voters persisted in believing women incapable of responsibly exercising power. The governor's campaign literature attempted to refute at view, asserting that "this woman has vindicated the right

of women to hold office." A pamphlet published by the Wyoming Labor Journal resurrected the tea party metaphor but this time, in order to deny the relevance of gender, insisted that Ross's administration had not been "a soft affair, a four o'clock tea party."(33) One Democratic supporter, Ross's good friend Rock Springs attorney Thomas Seddon Taliaferro, Jr., indulged in what might be described as waving the bloody shirt of sexism. In a campaign broadside, Taliaferro, charged that women who voted for Ross's Republican opponent would "confess before the expectant world that your sex is fundamentally, physically and mentally incapable of high office and high responsibility.(34)

Some women, notably Taliaferro's wife, Lucy, who was president of the state's General Federation of Women's Clubs, certainly supported Ross for governor.(35) Nonetheless, Taliaferro's attack outraged longtime feminists who were also Republicans. One veteran of the suffrage campaign, Therese A. Jenkins, replied to Taliaferro's charge in a broadside proclaiming, "AN OPEN ANSWER: A Pioneer Suffragist who has been

Wyoming Resident for over 50 Years, takes the Measure of a Democratic Politician who attempts to revive a Settled Question to Prejudice Women Voters." Jenkins, who had been prominent in Wyoming suffrage ranks since at least 1890, first addressed the question of partisanship, asking Taliaferro, "Do you really want Mrs. Ross to be re-elected because she is a woman, or because she is a Democrat?" Next, she pointed out Ross's long-standing indifference to women's rights and causes.

What has Mrs. Ross done to particularly deserve the votes of women? Had she ever, since coming to Wyoming, taken any interest in Woman's Suffrage? Has she ever been a delegate to a Woman's Suffrage Convention, to a Woman's Christian Temperance meeting, to a Woman's Relief Corps Convention, to a meeting of the Federation of Woman's Clubs for Wyoming or to any meeting of any kind, in any place, or at any time, to do anything for the advancement of the women and children of the state?(36)

Adopting for her own oppositional purposes the argument that Ross had been elected in the first place "purely on the basis of sympathy and charity," Jenkins remarked that "now that issue is dead." She invoked her own credentials as a Wyomingite and a suffragist of some fifty years' standing:

I have lectured in 14 different states on Woman's Suffrage and we, those who have worked for it, have won a glorious victory which cannot be taken from us. As far as the East or the West, or the North, or the South is concerned, we don't care what they think. It is what we think--What Wyoming thinks. We shall always have Woman's Suffrage, and we shall always have prohibition, and we shall always get into public office. Never fear!...You are now asking Republican women to vote for [Ross's] reslection. My dear friend, I will ask you this question. What has she done o merit the votes of the Republican women?(37)

Jenkins went on to criticize one of Ross's political appointments. Ross had replaced Eloise Ellsworth, a deputy in the office of the State Humane Society (and a widow with a

child) with "a married woman who is a Democrat." With some melodrama, Jenkins concluded, "Eloise is dead, and I suppose cannot cast a vote at the election, but her friends can." As a parting shot, she told Taliaferro, that "if your wife had signed the article which you sent me, it would have looked more 'Woman Suffragy' and less political."(38)

This public exchange, coming little more than a month before the election, ensured that controversies over both gender and feminism would fester. Ross had been popular during her administration, and Wyomingites tended to approve of the free advertising their unusual governor gave the state. But running as a Democrat in a traditionally Republican state, as a "dry" in a place where Prohibition was almost impossible to enforce, and as an incumbent in an economically troubled time, Ross could little afford to lose votes over her campaign's mishandling of the gender issue. Ross also faced the organized opposition of the Ku Klux Klan, at that time a powerful force in Wyoming (one of her supporters claimed that the Klan "probably does control some 3,000 to 5,000 votes"), and rumors circulated that the devoutly Episcopalian woman governor was a secret convert to the Roman Catholic church.(39) When the votes were counted, Ross had lost by 165 votes, running the best race of all Democrats in the state.(40)

Just after the election, Grace Hebard wrote to Carrie Chapman Catt to offer her version of the causes of Ross's defeat.

Hebard warned Catt that she could not risk writing some of the things she knew "inasmuch as we at the University must keep out of politics." Still, the account that followed suggested that Hebard and other women in her statewide network had watched Ross for some time and had been intimately involved in electioneering. First, Hebard mentioned that many faulted Ross as a tool of her late husband's advisors, "all men. I do not mean because they were all men, but I just give you that data." Then she turned to the matter of Taliaferro's campaign circular, which, she said, some people thought was the outstanding reason for Ross's defeat. Taking up the matter of Jenkins's reply, Hebard warned Catt that Jenkins had made inaccurate charges regarding "that woman who died" but backed up Jenkins's accusation that Ross's indifference to woman suffrage had made her no friend to feminists. Hebard quoted one Cheyenne suffrage veteran as saying that

she had heard Mrs. Ross make the statement, before she was governor or had thought of being governor, in a group that was trying to do something for suffrage and women who did not have the opportunity to vote, that she was not in favor of the woman suffrage movement because she believed the home was the place for the mother....[Ross] was a woman who was not in favor of suffrage and never lifted her hand to bring about suffrage. Why should she be twice honored?(41)

Going on, Hebard criticized Ross for her failure to appoint women to government positions (critics charged she had appointed 174 men and only 5 women to state jobs, and in no case had she put a woman in a job formerly held by a man).(42) Ross had taken pains to tell voters that she wanted their support because she was a good governor, not simply because she was a woman, a sentiment ironically echoed by Hebard. Hebard

admitted that "I am more of a feminist [than Ross] of course, but in all my talks for women to go into activities, political and otherwise, or to occupy positions of responsibility, we women should never back up a woman because she is a woman."(43)

In closing, Hebard sought to reassure Catt that Ross's defeat was no defeat for women's rights, offering a glimpse of her own ire at the Democrats' claim to any kind of feminist mandate. "I think you will be glad to know that the sun is shining in Wyoming and the winter birds are singing and things are going on as usual, except in the home of Mrs. Ross and a group of Democrats," she informed Catt. "I think I should have said that there were many prominent Democrats that did not endorse Mrs. Ross for the second term on account of her petticoat."(44)

Ross's own brother Alfred came close to voicing such sentiments when he wrote her that "man has a prejudice against a woman occupying a position of equal importance in business or politics, or of occupying a position of authority over him" Invoking the time-honored antifeminist notion that women were physically unfit for public life, Alfred Tayloe continued, "I fear that the honor [of being reelected] would have been too dearly paid for. I think the responsibility and worry of the arduous task was sapping your strength and reserve force....I think it is very possible that a wise Providence has interceded to prevent your reassuming a task which you are physically unable to carry."(45) For the woman politician, running as an individual rather than as a symbol of the group was a double-edged sword indeed.

Instead of answering her brother's letter, Ross asked Tracey McCracken, editor of the Wyoming Eagle and one of her closest advisors, write back. McCracken's long letter of reply explained the multiple causes of the defeat--the strength of the Republican machine, the slanderous charges of secret Catholicism, the strong opposition of the Klan, and the fear that Ross might name a Democrat to succeed the aged and ailing Francis E. Warren in the US. Senate. "Of course," McCracken wrote, "there are those, probably two, three, or four thousand of them--who, while admitting that she had made a good governor, just shrugged their shoulders and said they couldn't and wouldn't vote for a woman. They...just stuck to their he-man stuff and claimed it was no place for a woman."(46)

Nellie Ross lost her bid for re-election for a variety of reasons, probably foremost because she was a Democrat running in a heavily Republican state in a year in which Republicans made gains nationwide. For the purposes of this essay, however, it is important to know why Nellie Ross thought she lost the governorship in 1926. One year later, writing in *Good Housekeeping*, she looked back in some bitterness, both at her own mistakes and at the charges leveled against her. She regretted not having left the state capital to campaign actively and answer her opponents. Wyoming's women, she explained, had been voting for so long that they voted as party people rather than as gender loyalists: "The women of Wyoming have enjoyed the franchise for more than a generation, and never have had to strive for it, so their political alignment and activities, generally speaking, are determined by those same considerations which influence men rather than by any solicitude for the advancement of women as women in the political realm." Referring obliquely to Jenkins's letter (while ignoring her own supporter's role in

provoking the attack), Ross elided its feminist content while acknowledging its political impact. According to Ross's account, "an aged woman Jenkins was seventy at the time]...charged that the woman Governor, for partisan expediency, had thrown a poor frail, young widow out of employment in one of the departments, incidentally thereby inducing her death....I was assured by friends that the loss of one large county was due more to that infamous charge than any other factor."(47)

Most important of all, Ross regretted not having confronted sexist accusations that no woman was fit to govern. With seeming reluctance, she admitted that the most effective way to have done so would have been to appeal to women as a group: "I feel now that perhaps I should have been justified in a deliberate attempt to arouse the women to resentment of that argument;" Speaking for herself, if not for supporters like Taliaferro, she wrote: "In my campaign speeches I did not ask anyone to vote for me because I was a woman, but I did ask that

should not be discriminated against on that ground." She acknowledged that "during the two years of my service...I had indulged little in those diversions which would have kept me in closer contact with many of my feminine friends," citing the press of official business. Had she overcome her distaste for "the woman issue" and gathered around herself a group of sympathetic and active women, she concluded, "that would have been entirely proper, and I believe, effective enough to have changed the result of the election."(48)

Nellie Tayloe Ross, housewife turned ambitious professional politician, had learned a costly lesson. Though she would always assert the irrelevance of gender to executive ability, she had discovered that she could not simply sit placidly and hope that the votes would roll in. Whatever feminine charms she might display, there was no end run around "the woman issue" at campaign time, and the best way to deal with it was to campaign like a man, or like a disciple of feminist politician Carrie Chapman Catt, and get out the vote. Never again would she ignore women's networks; indeed, she would seek to master them on her own terms while continuing to cultivate male allies. The year 1928 found her taking her new political wisdom to the national stage, seconding the nomination of Al Smith for president and serving as co-director, with Eleanor Roosevelt, of the National Women's Committee of the Democratic Party.(49) The memory of her own failure to appeal to women voters fresh in her mind, Ross advised her colleague Emily Newell Blair to emphasize Smith's commitment to women and the causes they upheld. "His record of social and welfare legislation is absolutely unsurpassed," Ross wrote, "and there is really no reason why we should not stress his work for child welfare." She also emphasized that "Smith's record of appointment of women to positions of real power and responsibility is something that should be brought home to the women of the country." Ross counted herself a liberal and believed that during her time in office, "the Woman's Division was about the most liberal element abroad, bearing the Democratic banner."(50)

In 1932, Ross again emerged as a popular campaign orator and major figure in Democratic women's circles, turning over direction of the Women's Division of the Campaign Committee to Molly Dewson.(51) She later recalled that she had emerged

from the '28 campaign strong in the belief that the Democratic party...could make itself a triumphant majority by recourse to one expedient--that was to go aggressively after the support of the woman-half of the electorate, then largely unaligned....So obvious were the possibilities I marveled [sic] that the men of both parties had not vied with one another in wooing the women from the day they received the ballot.

Ross took on this task, hiring Sue Shelton White, a well-known Tennessee activist in the National Woman's Party, as her executive secretary, and made speeches all over the country.(52)

Following Franklin Roosevelt's victory, Ross hastened to meet with Eleanor Roosevelt, Dewson, and White to set priorities for women's patronage. Roosevelt and Dewson were, by then, clearly in more powerful positions than Ross or White, and Ross was hardly altruistic in seeking female allies. Her name had been mentioned for secretary of the interior, and she was ultimately appointed director of the mint.(53) The distance she had come from the political wife-mother-hostess she had been in 1924 was nothing short of amazing. In 1926, then governor Ross had written to her brother Alfred asking if he would "be kind enough to send me a statement of the amount of investments you have made for me, the character of the security, whether it is in notes, bonds, or what; how long the loans run and what periods interest payments are made?" She admitted that she was by that time "quite embarrassed" to realize that she knew so little about her own finances and had come to realize that "it would be unpardonable carelessness on my part not to have developed more self-reliance and at least understanding of my own business affairs."(54) Seven years later, she was in charge of Fort Knox.

As mint director, she presided over the nation's money supply, recruiting and supervising a skilled labor force, expanding the nation's capacity to mint coins and print bills, and carefully monitoring potential for theft, fraud, and waste. A 1948 official State Department profile of Ross pointed out that she had not only directed technical improvement and expansion of the mint but also appointed women to positions of responsibility. At the same time, Ross's official profile emphasized that "Mrs. Ross has much personal charm and her record proves that a woman need not sacrifice femininity in holding down what is usually considered a man's job.(55)

After more than twenty years in public life, Nellie Tayloe Ross was still walking the line between affirming her womanhood and asserting her human talents. She retired from government service in 1953, but the dilemma she faced would continue to bedevil women politicians long after. Many would choose to resolve the problem as Ross had, by downplaying opposition to women's struggle for equality and insisting that "in politics, as in all other human relationships, best results can be realized only by utmost cooperation between men and women. Anything suggestive of rivalry or competition only impedes the progress of both.(56)

When Lorena Hickok wrote to Ross in 1953 to ask her help for

book that Hickok and Eleanor Roosevelt were planning to write about women in politics, Ross emphasized, as always, her kind treatment at the hands of men: "I believe the prejudice that once existed among men against women's participation in affairs outside the home is pretty well broken down." And yet, Ross cautioned, the wise public woman needed to maintain the protective coloration of femininity if she wanted to get ahead. Affirming women's right to hold office and exercise power, she cautioned, "It is important also that a woman beware of giving any impression by voice or bearing that political activity takes toll of her femininity. A strident, masculine bearing can create for her a handicap."(57)

One can only imagine what Lorena Hickok and Eleanor Roosevelt might have thought about such advice. And surely male politicians also took advantage of their ability to turn on the "charm" for which Nellie Ross was so well known, none better than Eleanor's husband, Franklin. But the example Nellie Tayloe Ross set, in this regard, was not lost on other women who managed to become exceptions to the rule of male political authority, even those whose party affiliation was Republican. "Well do I remember the days when you were Governor and my admiration for you," wrote Senator Margaret Chase Smith in 1958. "I have through the years tried to emulate you--to do my job as well as any man could without losing my femininity."(58)

Ross and Smith, loyal members of different parties, were still members of the same sex, operating under the same gender rules. While others pressed on toward the feminist goal of detaching fitness to govern from conformity to gender norms, the "Mama of Women's Lib" had undeniably had, in her long public career, an influence on the course of women's politics. Navigating the narrow straits of political opportunity for women, Ross, Margaret Chase Smith and others insisted that women were fit to hold office because they could exercise power as well as any man without losing the appealing feminine qualities that made them attractive and unthreatening to the men they needed as allies.

Though few historians of women in public life have chosen to examine the choices and accomplishments of those who insisted that they were both ladylike and equipped to wield power, women in politics to this day face the same dilemma: affirming both their femininity and their equality.(59) But perhaps the lady politicians themselves, circumscribed though their options were, bear some of the responsibility for their slide into historical obscurity. Women who succeed in breaking into previously all-male domains and maintain positions of power by adopting a tactic of feminine deference run the risk of never getting credit for their real achievements. Still, contemporary critics must recognize both the limits and the ambiguities of their choices. As Nellie Tayloe Ross--a political survivor--knew, for women entering political races, victory sometimes could be won only at the cost of covering one's own tracks. cknowledgments

A symposium on "Women in Public Life," held at the University of Wyoming in September 1994, recently provided the starting place for a discussion in progress about feminism, femininity, and women in politics. Many thanks to the University of Wyoming Women's Studies Program, to the Wyoming Council for the Humanities, and to the participants in the ongoing conversation, including Katherine Anderson, Melanie

Gustafson, Judith MacArthur, Elisabeth Israels Perry, Lewis C. Perry, Paula Petrik, and Katherine Jensen.

Notes

1. National Enquirer, May 1, 1984.
2. Casper Star Tribune, December 23, 1977. For information on Ross's career, see T. A. Larson, *History of Wyoming*, 2nd edition (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 198), 441, 457-460, 611; Barbara . Aslakson, "Nellie Tayloe Ross, First Woman Governor" (MA. thesis, University of Wyoming, 1960).
3. Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987) 111. Cott, 5-9, also offers a set of definitions of early twentieth-century feminism, citing in particular "three core components...belief in what is usually referred to as sex equality," an assumption that "women's condition is socially constructed," and a vision of women as a social group.
4. Riverton Chronicle, November 29, 1976; Cheyenne Tribune, December 20, 1977.
5. Ann Schmidt, "The 95 Great Years of Wyoming's Nellie Tayloe Ross," *Empire Magazine*, October 29, 1972, Newspaper Clippings, 1925-1972 File, Box 3, Nellie Tayloe Ross Papers, coll. #948, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming (hereafter cited as NTR Papers); Nellie Tayloe Ross, "The Governor Lady" (part one of three parts), *Good Housekeeping* (August 1927): 331, 118, 120, 122, 124.
6. Ross, "The Governor Lady" (August 1927): 31, 118; undated news clipping Nellie Tayloe Ross vertical file, Wyoming State Historical Research and Publication Division, Cheyenne, Wyoming (hereafter cited as NTR vertical file); Schmidt.
7. Ross, "The Governor Lady" (August 1927): 120, 122.
8. Undated clipping, NTR vertical file; Schmidt; Ross, "The Governor Lady" (part two of three parts), *Good Housekeeping* (September 1921): 37.
9. Undated clippings, NTR vertical file; Aslakson, 7-8; Larson, 457.
10. Diane D. Kincaid, "Over His Dead Body: A Positive Perspective on Widows in the U.S. Congress," *The Western Political Science Quarterly* 31:1 (March 1978): 101.
11. Latson, 457. Also Cheyenne Tribune, December 20, 1977, NTR vertical file. The Esther Morris tea party story gained currency in a 1920 pamphlet by Cafe Raymond Hebard, "How Woman Suffrage Came to Wyoming," Grace Raymond Hebard Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming Laramie, Wyoming (hereafter cited as Hebard Papers.) For rather different interpretations of the coming of woman suffrage

to Wyoming, see Virginia Scharff, "The Case for Domestic Feminism: Woman Suffrage in Wyoming" *Annals of Wyoming* 56 (Fall 1984); Michael A. Massie, "Reform Is Where You Find It: The Roots of Woman Suffrage in Wyoming" *Annals of Wyoming* 62:1 (Spring 1990).

12. "Mrs. Ross' Address to Women Voters," Box 3, Newspaper Clipping 1925-1972 File, NTR Papers.

13. "Mrs. Ross' Address," NTR Papers.

14. See Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, for a much less perfunctory exploration of "women's" politics in the 1920s; also Wendy Sarvasy, "Beyond the Difference versus Equality Policy Debate: Postsuffrage Feminism, Citizenship, and the Quest for a Feminist Welfare State," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 17:2 (1992): 329-362.

15. "Where Mrs. Ross Stands," Box 3, Newspaper Clipping 1925-1972 file, NTR Papers.

16. Ross, "The Governor Lady" (September 1927): 36.

17. Ross, "The Governor Lady" (August 1927): 120.

18. Ross, "The Governor Lady" (August 1927): 30.

19. Ida Riner Gleason Nellie Tayloe Ross (hereafter in reference to correspondence cited as NTR November 7, 1924 Congratulatory Correspondence 1924 Pile, Box 2, NTR Papers.

20. NTR to Grace Raymond Hebard, October 24, 1924, Safe File, Box 2 NTR Papers.

21. Aslakson, 12; Hebard to Carrie Chapman Catt, January 5, 1925, Hebard Papers.

22. Elsie Cross Hawley to NTR, November 9, 1924, Congratulatory Correspondence File, Box 2 NTR Papers.

23. Hebard to NTR, December 8, 1924. On feminist support for the Child Labor Amendment, see Susan Ware, *Beyond Suffrage: Women in the New Deal* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981) 19, 36, 81, 82, 104.

24. "Dr. Hebard Given Credit for Child Labor Legislation" *Wyoming State Tribune*, May 21, 1923. Clipping in Hebard Papers.

25. NTR to Hebard, December 11, 1924, Safe File, Box 2, NTR Papers.

26. Hebard to NTR, January 22, 1925, Correspondence--Professional 1922-1926 file, Box 1, NTR Papers.

27. Hebard to NTR, February 25, 1925, Hebard Papers.
28. Ross, "The Governor Lady" (September 1927):208.
29. Typescript of article, Omaha Bee, July 26, 1925.
30. Schmidt.
31. Nellie Tayloe Ross, "The Governor Lady" (part three of three parts), Good Housekeeping (n.d, assumed to be October 1927), clipping in NTR vertical file, and Ross, "The Governor Lady" (September 1927): 218.
32. Ross, "The Governor Lady" (nd.).
33. "Let Wyoming Tell the World How the First Woman Governor Has Made Good," 1926 pamphlet, NTR vertical file.
34. "Taliaferro Says Women Are Facing a Crisis," Hebard Papers.
35. Lucy Taliaferro to NTR, November 18, 1925, Box 1, Correspondence--Professional, 1924-1926 file, NTR Papers.
36. "An Open Answer," NTR vertical file.
37. "An Open Answer," NTR vertical file.
38. "An Open Answer," NTR vertical file.
39. Tracey S. McCracken to Alfred Tayloe, November 11, 1926, Correspondence--Professional, 1924-1926 File, Box 1, NTR Papers.
40. Larson, 460.
41. Hebard to Catt, November 9, 1926, Hebard Papers.
42. Hebard to Catt, Hebard Papers, also Larson, 460.
43. Hebard to Catt, Hebard Papers.
44. Hebard to Catt, Hebard Papers.
45. Alfred Tayloe to NTR, November 5, 1926, Correspondence--Professional 1924-1926 File, Box 1, NTR Papers.
46. Tracey S. McCracken to Alfred Tayloe, November 11, 1926, Correspondence--Professional 1924-1926 File, Box 1, NTR Papers.

4 Ross, "The Governor Lady" (n.d.).

48. Ross, "The Governor Lady" (n.d.).

49. Ware, 39-40.

50. Agnes V. O'Mahoney to Emily Newell Blair, September 12, 1928, Correspondence--Professional, 1924-1926 File, Box 1, NTR Papers; draft of NTR article for The Democratic Digest, April 190, Manuscripts by NTR ca. 1940 File, Box 3, NTR Papers.

51. Susan Ware, *Partner and I: Molly Dewson, Feminism, and New Deal Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 168.

52. Nellie Tayloe Ross, manuscript dated April 1940, Manuscripts by NTR ca. 1940 File, Box 3, NTR Papers.

53. Nellie Tayloe Ross, manuscript dated April 1940, 186; Ware, *Beyond Suffrage*, 46.

54. NTR to Alfred Tayloe, April 28, 1926, Correspondence Professional, 1924-1926 File, Box 1, NTR Papers.

55. "Biographical Profile of Nellie Tayloe Ross, Director of the Mint," reproduced from State Department Publication, July 1948, Biographical Information File, Box 1, NTR Papers.

56. Untitled manuscript, manuscripts by Nellie Tayloe Ross ca. 1940 File, Box 3, NTR Papers.

57. NTR to Lorena A. Hickok, February 20, 1953, Safe File, Box 2 NTR Papers.

58. Margaret Chase Smith to NTR, Correspondence - Personal, 1922-1957 File, Box 1, NTR Papers.

59. For a rare treatment of this dilemma, see Elisabeth Israels Perry, *Belle Moskowitz: Feminine Politics and the Exercise of Power in the Age of Alfred E. Smith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 198). More recently, see Sara Alpern, ed., *The Challenge of Feminist Biography: Writing the Lives of Modern American Women* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1992) and Linda Witt, Karen M. Paget, and Glenna Matthews, *Running as a Woman: Gender and Power in American Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

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