

Erasing women

The Trump administration's moves against women leaders are not new. We've been here before.

by [Liz Charlotte Grant](#)

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Suffragettes protest at the White House in 1917 (Harris & Ewing / US Library of Congress)

Women are losing power daily under the second Trump administration. This January, NASA officials received an urgent, “drop everything and reprioritize your day” [email](#)

via the federal government: the Trump administration was demanding they scrub NASA websites of any mention of DEI, or words that could refer to underrepresented groups of Americans or environmental justice. Also on the chopping block? “Anything specifically targeting women (women in leadership, etc.).”

By March, NASA had neutered the mission statement of its Artemis moon landing, erasing a sentence clarifying their [intention](#) to “land the first woman, first person of color, and first international partner astronaut on the Moon.” By mid-April, even a free educational graphic novel called *First Woman*—depicting a fictional diverse crew piloting a NASA moon landing—had disappeared from the site.

In late April, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth [dismantled](#) the “Women, Peace & Security” program at the Defense Department because the champions of the program had supposedly been U.N. “feminists and left-wing activists.” (President Trump had actually signed the bipartisan bill into law during his first term in 2017.)

In early May, the Associated Press [reported](#), “The only two women serving as four-star officers, as well as a disproportionate number of other senior female [military] officers, have also been fired.” The only African American woman to serve as [Librarian of Congress](#), Carla Hayden, was unceremoniously fired over email. Even conservative Justice Amy Coney Barrett has received MAGA’s favorite insult: They’re calling her [“a DEI hire.”](#)

In fact, members of Trump’s cabinet may have the voices of [Christian Reconstructionists](#) in their ears who, according to their own admission, would prefer to regain patriarchal rule in our nation. As previously [reported](#), Pete Hegseth has close ties to Doug Wilson, an Idaho Christian Nationalist pastor who has stated in the past that [suffrage](#)—giving women the right to vote—disenfranchised the institution of family because the male head of the household should vote for the interests of the unified family group. (Meanwhile, [others](#) in Wilson and Hegseth’s circles have stated that the 19th Amendment should be repealed.) This raises questions regarding Hegseth’s own views about the appropriateness of women in government.

I am not, by nature, an alarmist, and yet what other conclusion can a woman draw from this data but that she is unwelcome in our country’s halls of power? It is now normal for dissenting women to be fired, to be [charged](#) by law enforcement, to be [dragged](#) or carried away from the object of their protest in the arms of men.

As we ushered in 2025, many of us were still reckoning with the loss of the second woman presidential candidate in a decade. Whatever contributed to Kamala Harris's failed run, we can assume gender played a role.

Yet this move against women leaders is not new. We have been here before.

Over 100 years ago, suffragettes like sociologist Alice Paul faced similar discrimination. Raised within a liberal Quaker community that modeled and taught gender equality, Paul and her mother attended suffrage meetings together, and naturally, Paul took up the cause for herself in adulthood. After a stint protesting alongside the militant British suffrage movement led by the Pankhurst sisters, she was determined to apply some of the same tactics across the Atlantic. She and her organization, the National Women's Party, organized shifts of picketers at the White House, the first political protestors to take up the post. On a frigid January day in 1917, they demanded women's political "enfranchisement." They stood as "silent sentinels," holding up hand-sewn banners addressed to President Woodrow Wilson by name. By revising portions of his wartime speeches, they sought to highlight the hypocrisy of America fighting for democracy abroad during World War I while ignoring the rights of 20 million American women to democracy at home. One sign called the president "Kaiser Wilson"—a comparison to World War I enemy, German emperor Wilhelm II—and enjoined the president to "take the beam out of your own eye."

After months of protest, Paul and 170 other suffragettes were arrested, receiving months-long sentences rather than paying unjust fines, charged with "[obstructing traffic](#)"—by which police meant, protesting on the sidewalk in front of the White House. By spring 1917, the public, law enforcement, and those who governed the nation came to see the wartime protests as disloyalty to the country, even representing a form of treason. Alice Paul received a seven-month sentence. During her time in jail, she led her fellow suffragettes in a hunger strike—which guards broke by force-feeding her a mixture of milk and eggs through a tube inserted into her nose. Guards also beat and injured several of the activists.

By November 1917, fellow activists and their families had grown concerned for the welfare of the imprisoned suffragettes. Paul herself had been transferred to a "psychopathic ward," where doctors threatened to detain her long term. When news of the ill treatment of these activists got out, the public pressured the president to release the suffragettes, which he swiftly did, pardoning any jailed activists. Their

resolve ultimately changed his mind, and in 1918, he endorsed the cause of suffrage. The civil disobedience of women such as Alice Paul led to the ratification of the 19th Amendment and the election of the first congresswoman, [Jeannette Rankin](#), in 1918.

Still, the work of enfranchisement of American citizens was not complete. African Americans, Chinese Americans, Indigenous Americans, and other marginalized communities could not vote, or at least could not vote reliably across the country. Seven decades of crusades for women's equal participation in the American government still left swaths of the population without the practical opportunity to assert their political power. Work continued throughout the 20th century, with activists determined to fight for their civic power. By the heroism of so many notable activists, each community formerly denied the vote received it.

Perhaps this is why, when I consider the fact of Trump's systematic disempowerment of women, what concerns me more than the actions of a single administration is that many have seemed to accept their own disempowerment with apathy. For example, though the numbers suggest that the percentage of women elected and working within the government seemed to remain [steady](#)—without much change toward or away from greater gender parity—in fact, [fewer women](#) both ran and won elected seats in our government compared to 2022.

[To date](#), women only make up 28 percent of Congress, 33 percent of all elected officials within state legislatures, and 33 percent of the [Presidential cabinet](#) (with only [one](#) woman of color among the 8 female Trump/Vance cabinet-level appointees).

Amid this climate of open mistrust of women leaders, the most important action women can take to ensure our ongoing political empowerment is to use our power. Small and large actions add up. Using our political power could look like encouraging senators to make [the Equal Rights Amendment](#) law, amending our constitution to include a statement that affirms the total equality of citizens of every sex. Women can run for [local office](#). Or we can encourage other women we know to run. Or we can volunteer for a local woman's campaign.

The point is, we must [not obey](#) in advance. Yes, we can anticipate the whims of an authoritarian government. But I hope we will not give away our democratic rights and privileges without a fight. Adopt the catch phrase of another suffragette, Susan B. Anthony: "Resistance to tyranny is obedience to God." I'm resisting as if my faith

depended upon it. Protest may be costly, but it's cheaper than the alternative.