

## The Crisis

Presidential Address to the National American Women's Suffrage Association  
by Carrie Chapman Catt, Atlantic City, NC 1916

1 I have taken for my subject, "The Crisis," because I believe that a crisis has come in our  
2 movement which, if recognized and the opportunity seized with vigor, enthusiasm, and will,  
3 means the final victory of our great cause in the very near future. I am aware that some  
4 suffragists do not share this belief; they see no signs nor symptoms today which were not  
5 present yesterday; no manifestations in the year 1916 which differ significantly from those  
6 in the year 1910. To them, the movement has been a steady, normal growth from the  
7 beginning and must so continue until the end. I can only defend my claim with the plea that  
8 it is better to imagine a crisis where none exists than to fail to recognize one when it comes;  
9 for a crisis is a culmination of events which calls for new considerations and new decisions.  
10 A failure to answer the call may mean an opportunity lost, a possible victory postponed.

11 The object of the life of an organized movement is to secure its aim. Necessarily, it must  
12 obey the law of evolution and pass through the stages of agitation and education and finally  
13 through the stage of realization. As one has put it: "A new idea floats in the air over the  
14 heads of the people and for a long, indefinite period evades their understanding but, by and  
15 by, when through familiarity, human vision grows clearer, it is caught out of the clouds and  
16 crystallized into law." Such a period comes to every movement and is its crisis. In my  
17 judgment, that crucial moment, bidding us to renewed consecration and redoubled activity,  
18 has come to our cause. I believe our victory hangs within our grasp, inviting us to pluck it  
19 out of the clouds and establish it among the good things of the world.

20 If this be true, the time is past when we should say: "Men and women of America, look  
21 upon that wonderful idea up there; see, one day it will come down." Instead, the time has  
22 come to shout aloud in every city, village, and hamlet, and in tones so clear and jubilant that  
23 they will reverberate from every mountain peak and echo from shore to shore: "The  
24 woman's Hour has struck." Suppose suffragists as a whole do not believe a crisis has come  
25 and do not extend their hands to grasp the victory, what will happen? Why, we shall all  
26 continue to work and our cause will continue to hang, waiting for those who possess a  
27 clearer vision and more daring enterprise. On the other hand, suppose we reach out with  
28 united earnestness and determination to grasp our victory while it still hangs a bit too high?  
29 Has any harm been done? None!

30 Therefore, fellow suffragists, I invite your attention to the signs which point to a crisis and  
31 your consideration of plans for turning the crisis into victory.

32 FIRST: We are passing through a world crisis. All thinkers of every land tell us so; and that  
33 nothing after the great war will be as it was before. Those who profess to know, claim that  
34 100 millions of dollars are being spent on the war every day and that 2 years of war have  
35 cost 50 billions of dollars or 10 times more than the total expense of the American Civil  
36 War. Our own country has sent 35 millions of dollars abroad for relief expenses. . . .

37 Women by the thousands have knocked at the doors of munition factories and, in the name  
38 of patriotism, have begged for the right to serve their country there. Their services were  
39 accepted with hesitation but the experiment once made, won reluctant but universal praise.  
40 An official statement recently issued in Great Britain announced that 660,000 women were  
41 engaged in making munitions in that country alone. In a recent convention of munition  
42 workers, composed of men and women, a resolution was unanimously passed informing the  
43 government that they would forego vacations and holidays until the authorities announced  
44 that their munition supplies were sufficient for the needs of the war and Great Britain  
45 pronounced the act the highest patriotism. Lord Derby addressed such a meeting and said,  
46 "When the history of the war is written, I wonder to whom the greatest credit will be given;  
47 to the men who went to fight or to the women who are working in a way that many people  
48 hardly believed that it was possible for them to work." . . .

49 On fields of battle, in regular and improvised hospitals, women have given tender and  
50 skilled care to the wounded and are credited with the restoration of life to many, heroism  
51 and self-sacrifice have been frankly acknowledged by all the governments; but their  
52 endurance, their skill, the practicality of their service, seem for the first time, to have been  
53 recognized by governments as "war power." So, thinking in war terms, great men have  
54 suddenly discovered that women are "war assets." Indeed, Europe is realizing, as it never  
55 did before, that women are holding together the civilization for which men are fighting. A  
56 great search-light has been thrown upon the business of nation-building and it has been  
57 demonstrated in every European land that it is a partnership with equal, but different  
58 responsibilities resting upon the two partners.

59 It is not, however, in direct war work alone that the latent possibilities of women have been  
60 made manifest. In all the belligerent lands, women have found their way to high posts of  
61 administration where no women would have been trusted two years ago and the testimony is  
62 overwhelming that they have filled their posts with entire satisfaction to the authorities.

63 They have dared to stand in pulpits (once too sacred to be touched by the unholy feet of a  
64 woman) and there, without protest, have appealed to the Father of All in behalf of their  
65 stricken lands. They have come out of the kitchen where there was too little to cook and  
66 have found a way to live by driving cabs, motors, and streetcars. Many a woman has turned  
67 her hungry children over to a neighbor and has gone forth to find food for both mothers and  
68 both families of children and has found it in strange places and occupations. Many a  
69 drawing-room has been closed and the maid who swept and dusted it is now cleaning streets  
70 that the health of the city may be conserved. Many a woman who never before slept in a bed  
71 of her own making, or ate food not prepared by paid labor, is now sole mistress of parlor and  
72 kitchen.

73 In all the warring countries, women are postmen [sic], porters, railway conductors, ticket,  
74 switch, and signal men. Conspicuous advertisements invite women to attend agricultural,  
75 milking, and motor-car schools. They are employed as police in Great Britain and women  
76 detectives have recently been taken on the government staff. In Berlin, there are over 3,000  
77 women streetcar conductors and 3,500 women are employed on the general railways. In  
78 every city and country, women are doing work for which they would have been considered  
79 incompetent two years ago.

80 The war will soon end and the armies will return to their native lands. To many a family, the  
81 men will never come back. The husband who returns to many a wife, will eat no bread the  
82 rest of his life save of her earning.

83 What then, will happen after the war? Will the widows left with families to support  
84 cheerfully leave their well-paid posts for those commanding lower wages? Not without  
85 protest! Will the wives who now must support crippled husbands give up their skilled work  
86 and take up the occupations which were open to them before the war? Will they resignedly  
87 say: "The woman who has a healthy husband who can earn for her, has a right to tea and  
88 raisin cake, but the woman who earns for herself and a husband who has given his all to his  
89 country, must be content with butterless bread?" Not without protest! On the contrary, the  
90 economic axiom, denied and evaded for centuries, will be blazoned on every factory,  
91 counting house, and shop: "Equal pay for equal work"; and common justice will slowly, but  
92 surely enforce that law. . . .

93 The male and female anti-suffragists of all lands will puff and blow at the economic change  
94 which will come to the women of Europe. They will declare it to be contrary to Nature and  
95 to God's plan and that somebody ought to do something about it. Suffragists will accept the

96 change as the inevitable outcome of an unprecedented world's cataclysm over which no  
97 human agency had any control and will trust in God to adjust the altered circumstances to  
98 the eternal evolution of human society. They will remember that in the long run, all things  
99 work together for good, for progress and for human weal. . . .

100 SECOND: As the most adamant rock gives way under the constant dripping of water, so  
101 the opposition to woman suffrage in our own country has slowly disintegrated before the  
102 increasing strength of our movement. . . .

103 The hands of many suffrage master-masons have long been stilled; the names of many who  
104 laid the stones have been forgotten. That does not matter. The main thing is that the edifice  
105 of woman's liberty nears completion. It is strong, indestructible. All honor to the thousands  
106 who have helped in the building.

107 The four Corner-stones of the foundations were laid long years ago. We read upon the first:  
108 "We demand for women education, for not a high school or college is open to her"; upon the  
109 second, "We demand for women religious liberty for in few churches is she permitted to  
110 pray or speak"; upon the third, "We demand for women the right to own property and an  
111 opportunity to earn an honest living. Only six, poorly-paid occupations are open to her, and  
112 if she is married, the wages she earns are not hers"; upon the fourth, "We demand political  
113 freedom and its symbol, the vote." . . .

114 And we who are the builders of 1916, do we see a crisis? Standing upon these planks which  
115 are stretched across the top-most peak of this edifice of woman's liberty, what shall we  
116 do? . . .

117 Is the crisis real or imaginary? If it be real, it calls for action, bold, immediate and decisive.

118 Let us then take measure of our strength. Our cause has won the endorsement of all political  
119 parties. Every candidate for the presidency is a suffragist. It has won the endorsement of  
120 most churches; it has won the hearty approval of all great organizations of women. It was  
121 won the support of all reform movements; it has won the progressives of every variety. The  
122 majority of the press in most States is with us. Great men in every political party, church,  
123 and movement are with us. The names of the greatest men and women of art, science,  
124 literature and philosophy, reform, religion, and politics are on our lists. We have not won the  
125 reactionaries of any party, church, or society, and we never will. . . .

126 We have not won the ignorant and illiterate and we never can. They are too undeveloped  
127 mentally to understand that the institutions of today are not those of yesterday nor will be  
128 those of tomorrow.

129 We have not won the forces of evil and we never will. Evil has ever been timorous and  
130 suspicious of all change. It is an instinctive act of self-preservation which makes it fear and  
131 consequently oppose votes for women. As the Hon. Champ Clark said the other day: "Some  
132 good and intelligent people are opposed to woman suffrage; but all the ignorant and evil-  
133 minded are against it."

134 These three forces are the enemies of our cause.

135 Before the vote is won, there must and will be a gigantic final conflict between the forces of  
136 progress, righteousness, and democracy and the forces of ignorance, evil, and reaction. That  
137 struggle may be postponed, but it cannot be evaded or avoided. There is no question as to  
138 which side will be the victor.

139 Shall we play the coward, then, and leave the hard knocks for our daughters, or shall we  
140 throw ourselves into the fray, bare our own shoulders to the blows, and thus bequeath to  
141 them a politically liberated womanhood? We have taken note of our gains and of our  
142 resources! And they are all we could wish. Before the final struggle, we must take  
143 cognizance of our weaknesses. Are we prepared to grasp the victory? Alas, no! Our  
144 movement is like a great Niagara with a vast volume of water tumbling over its ledge but  
145 turning no wheel. Our organized machinery is set for the propagandistic stage and not for  
146 the seizure of victory. Our supporters are spreading the argument for our cause; they feel no  
147 sense of responsibility for the realization of our hopes. Our movement lacks cohesion,  
148 organization, unity, and consequent momentum.

149 Behind us, in front of us, everywhere about us are suffragists,—millions of them, but  
150 inactive and silent. They have been "agitated and educated" and are with us in belief. There  
151 are thousands of women who have at one time or another been members of our organization  
152 but they have dropped out because, to them, the movement seemed negative and pointless.  
153 Many have taken up other work whose results were more immediate. Philanthropy, charity,  
154 work for corrective laws of various kinds, temperance, relief for working women, and  
155 numberless similar public services have called them. Others have turned to the pleasanter  
156 avenues of clubwork, art, or literature.

157 There are thousands of other women who have never learned of the earlier struggles of our  
158 movement. They found doors of opportunity open to them on every side. They found well-  
159 paid posts awaiting the qualified woman and they have availed themselves of all these  
160 blessings; almost without exception they believe in the vote but they feel neither gratitude to  
161 those who opened the doors through which they have entered to economic liberty nor any  
162 sense of obligation to open other doors for those who come after.

163 . . . There are men, too, millions of them, waiting to be called. These men and women are  
164 our reserves. They are largely unorganized and untrained soldiers with little responsibility  
165 toward our movement. Yet these reserves must be mobilized. The final struggle needs their  
166 numbers and the momentum those numbers will bring. Were never another convert made,  
167 there are suffragists enough in this country, if combined, to make so irresistible a driving  
168 force that victory might be seized at once.

169 How can it be done? By a simple change of mental attitude. If we are to seize the victory,  
170 that change must take place in this hall, here and now!

171 The old belief, which has sustained suffragists in many an hour of discouragement, “woman  
172 suffrage is bound to come,” must give way to the new, “The Woman’s Hour has struck.”  
173 The long drawn out struggle, the cruel hostility which, for years, was arrayed against our  
174 cause, have accustomed suffragists to the idea of indefinite postponement but eventual  
175 victory. The slogan of a movement sets its pace. The old one counseled patience; it said,  
176 there is plenty of time; it pardoned sloth and half-hearted effort. It set the pace of an  
177 educational campaign. The “Woman’s Hour has struck” sets the pace of a crusade which  
178 will have its way. It says: “Awake, arise, my sisters, let your hearts be filled with joy,—the  
179 time of victory is here. Onward March. ” . . .