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Who Is the Most Important Woman in American History?

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A fair person would say that depends on the criteria used to evaluate. If electoral politics is the field of play, then many possibilities come immediately to mind. Recently, former U.S. Sen. Margaret Chase Smith (R-Maine) has been mentioned for her courage in confronting the vile Sen. Joseph McCarthy (R-Wis.) in the 1950s. Smith's courage and integrity contrast sharply with the

cowering timidity of today's formerly ethical Republicans cowering before the Trumpian MAGA-ites.

Among many other candidates one finds Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Harriet Tubman, Clara Barton, Nellie Bly, Eleanor Roosevelt, Rosa Parks, Jessie Benton Fremont, Ida B. Wells, Marguerite Higgins, Margaret Sanger, Sandra Day O'Connor, Hillary Clinton, Dorothy Day, Jane Addams, Pauli Murray, Nancy Pelosi, Condoleezza Rice, and, as a representative of the selfless nuns who built hospitals, schools, and social service agencies throughout the United States, I'd also include Sister Frances Xavier Cabrini (Mother Cabrini).

It really comes down to criteria. Regardless of field of endeavor, my standard is both comprehensive and simple. It asks a basic question: Who, because of the actions she took and the quality of the life she led, improved the lives of the greatest number of their fellow Americans? Who, because of what she did, created opportunities for others to follow?

In sum, which woman in American history had the greatest positive impact on American society and improved the lives of the greatest number of people?

Clearly, the women listed above, and others not listed, made epochal contributions to American culture. Bout the cumulative impact of one other woman changed American society.

America is different today because of what she did – the lives of untold people, women in particular, are better because of what she did.

Who is this woman who sometimes appears to be hiding in plain sight?

Who is this woman whose name almost everyone knows, but relatively few can say in any detail what she did to make America a better, more inclusive society.

Who is the most important woman in American history?

Susan B. Anthony.

I'll try to defend that assertion by looking at Anthony's life through three lenses, illustrating each with experiences and events in Anthony's life. The three lenses are: 1) her Quaker heritage and the moral foundation it provided her; 2) her leadership qualities; and 3) her total – one might say "fanatical" in the most positive sense of that word – dedication to her cause and how she exemplifies the three phases and the three types of leaders necessary to create any mass movement Eric Hoffer detailed in his ***The True Believer***.

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What is meant by Anthony's "Quaker heritage"?

Quakers, or the Religious Society of Friends, are a Christian group that emerged in the 17th century. The key Quaker values include simplicity, peace, integrity, community, equality, and stewardship. Quakers practice a simple lifestyle; they avoid extravagance and focus on what is essential. Known for their commitment to pacifism, Quakers oppose all forms of violence and war. They advocate for peaceful resolutions to conflicts, which leads to their nonviolent approach in seeking social reform. Honesty and truthfulness are core Quaker beliefs. Quakers, like Anthony, emphasized living in accordance with one's values and principles. For Anthony, her Quaker-inspired integrity guided her unwavering commitment to social justice.

Among Quakers, their sense of community fosters collaboration and mutual support. In this spirit of unity, Quakers create communities of concern to address social issues. They are joiners and organizers, two of Anthony's essential characteristics. Maybe the most significant Quaker value is their belief in the inherent worth and equality of all people. In the 19th century, this belief in equality drove Quaker involvement in abolitionism, temperance, and women's rights. Quakers believe in being good stewards of the Earth and its resources. It inspired, at least in part, their advocacy for temperance, because they viewed excessive alcohol consumption as harmful to individuals and society. In Anthony's time, these essential Quaker values translated into their efforts to address social injustices. Quakers were not only prominent, but they also led the movements addressing the three great issues of the mid-19th century: abolitionism, temperance, and women's rights.

With that very brief sketch of Quaker values providing context, how did Susan B. Anthony's Quaker heritage – her moral foundation – influence and shape her quest for women's rights?

She became an abolitionist at an early age. She distributed her first abolitionist pamphlets when she was only 17. Campaigning vigorously against slavery, she collaborated with other abolitionists. This experience honed her skills in organizing, public speaking, and advocacy. The Quaker emphasis on stewardship led Anthony to the temperance movement. Viewing alcohol as a source of social ills, she believed that temperance would lead to greater moral and social stability. Working in temperance organizations, she saw how women – wives and daughters – were victimized in families with a drunkard husband and father. This recognition, in turn, led her to promoting women's rights, because her Quaker-influenced belief in equality taught her the wife and daughter had the same rights as the husband and father. Believing in the

equality of the sexes, seeing how women were constrained and discriminated against by the onerous laws of coverture, she came to believe that women needed the power to control their own lives. And, she reasoned, in America power comes from the ballot. She realized that women needed the vote to influence public policy on issues affecting their lives. Thus, a suffragist was born.

Now, the question arises, where did all of that come from?

It came from her family! [1]

The second oldest of eight children, Anthony grew up in a Quaker family. She developed a strong moral compass early in life. Born on Feb. 15, 1820, in Adams, Massachusetts, she was the daughter of Lucy Read Anthony and Daniel Anthony. Established Quakers in the Adams community, the Anthonys instilled in their daughter the values of temperance, equality, and respect for others. Since women were permitted to speak in a Quaker meeting, from early in her life Susan learned the equality of the sexes.

She also acquired her sense of social justice from her parents. They instilled in their children a spirit of self-reliance. They ensured their children, both girls and boys, were educated, which defied the 19th century norm that restricted education only to boys. Susan's parents, for example, sent her to a Quaker boarding school in Philadelphia. Raised in a quiet home, where equality between the sexes was the norm, where her parents showed deep respect for one another, and, where their children were given equal opportunities, Susan developed a strong social conscience.

After a serious financial downturn in the late-1830s devastated her father's businesses, Anthony left the Philadelphia boarding school and moved with the family to Rochester, New York. In Rochester, a hotbed of temperance and abolitionist activism, the Anthony home frequently hosted meetings. Convening two weeks after the legendary first women's rights movement meeting at Seneca Falls, New York in 1848, a second women's rights convention was held in Rochester. Attending the meeting were Anthony's parents and her sister Mary. They each signed the Seneca Falls convention's ***Declaration of Sentiments*** demanding equal rights for women.

Working in Canajoharie, New York, as a teacher, Anthony missed both meetings. Not yet a women's rights activist, her belief in equality was tested when she realized the male teachers were paid more than her for the same work. It did, however, plant the seed that bloomed into activism. Later she would tell Nellie Bly in an interview for the ***New York World***, "I think the first seed for thought was planted during my early days as a teacher. I saw the injustice of paying

stupid men double and triple women's wages for teaching merely because they were men." [2]

Returning to Rochester after the academy Canajoharie closed, for several years Anthony managed the family farm while at the same time becoming more and more involved in reform work – temperance and abolitionism. Eventually, it became her full-time profession as she earned her living from the speeches and lectures she gave across the country.

The key takeaways from Susan B. Anthony's childhood and early adult life are the deep work ethic instilled in her by her parents and the moral foundation she received from her Quaker heritage. She believed in the equality of all – as she said, "When our platform becomes too narrow for people of all creeds and of no creeds, I myself shall not stand upon it." [3]

She believed in the dignity of all people and in the equality of the sexes because that is what she learned at home and at Quaker meetings. She also believed that if you want something, you must have the courage to seek it and you must have the strength to endure the inevitable hardships that will follow.

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How did Susan B. Anthony exhibit leadership?

What leadership qualities did she possess?

In essence, what is a leader?

There are no simple answers to these questions: what is a leader, what do leaders do, how do leaders do what they do, and how important is leadership?

I'll answer that last question – how important is leadership?

Leadership is everything; leadership is everything and never more evident than in its absence.

Leadership is everything.

Everything.

What do leaders do?

According to John Kotter in "What Leaders Really Do": leaders set direction, align people, and motivate and inspire. [4] In short, leaders set direction, get

people organized in pursuit of a common goal, and then inspire and motivate them to keep on task by appealing to their needs, values, and emotions.

After almost 50 years in leadership positions and having also studied and taught leadership, I've developed my own theory of leadership, which combines two things: Leadership's Foundation Characteristics and my own Four Cardinal Leadership Principles.

Leadership's Foundation Characteristics are optimism and vision.

What do I mean by "optimism"? One of my favorite leadership quotes comes from Malcolm Forbes, founder of Forbes magazine.

Forbes said, "There is no such thing as a problem; there are only opportunities in disguise."

There is no such thing as a problem.

There are only challenges to solve revealing the elusive, hidden opportunity. Susan B. Anthony demonstrated this spirit on numerous occasions, this spirit of optimism, this spirit of old-fashioned American "can-do-ism," but maybe never so memorably as in her last speech before a women's group when she said, while the 19th Amendment was still off somewhere in the future: "Failure is impossible." [5]

She said that in March 1906 at a celebration of her birthday –her 86th birthday – in Washington, D.C. Weak and ill, she still found the strength to attend the meeting and demand women's right to vote. She died shortly after on March 13 at her home in Rochester.

"Failure is impossible" became the motto – the spiritual theme – of the entire women's movement.

Like all great leaders, Anthony seized the moment. Still fighting at the end, at the meeting where she spoke her famous line, she expressed frustration and anger at President Theodore Roosevelt, who had congratulated her and wished her Happy Birthday. She said, "I wish the men would do something besides extend congratulations. I have asked President Roosevelt to push the matter of a constitutional amendment allowing suffrage to women by a recommendation to Congress. I would rather have him say a word to Congress for the cause than to praise me endlessly." [6]

Then she ended, as all great leaders do, by remembering those who had helped her, saying, "There have been others also just as true and devoted to the cause –

I wish I could name every one – but with such women consecrating their lives, *failure is impossible*." [7]

Leaders must also have vision. In the context of leadership, what does vision mean? It means the ability to think about or plan the future with imagination and wisdom.

What was Susan B. Anthony's vision? She said it in many ways.

A sample of Anthony's vision statements includes:

"Men their rights and nothing more; women their rights and nothing less." [8]

"We ask justice, we ask equality, we ask that all the civil and political rights that belong to citizens of the United States, be guaranteed to us and our daughters forever." [9]

"There shall never be another season of silence until women have the same rights men have on this green earth." [10]

True to her Quaker heritage, she demanded equality and nothing more; she demanded justice and full civil rights for women; and she promised to fight for it until the end.

What about my Four Cardinal Principles of Leadership? They are:

1. *Nothing* happens until *someone makes it happen – leader know thyself*.

2. No one does anything alone – *it's all about the team*.

3. It's amazing what you can accomplish *if you don't care who gets the credit*.

4. *A leader must be a risk taker* – must possess ingenuity and openness to new ideas.

"Nothing happens until someone makes it happen" – leaders are difference makers. They make a difference – how? By engaging in a process of continuous learning – learning about both themselves and the world around them. Leaders learn about themselves by reflecting on their own experience to discover what they do well and what they could do better.

Anthony demonstrated this quality in her personal letters and diaries, autobiographical writings, speeches, public statements, collaboration with others, in particular Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and her own critiques of the women's movement she may not have started but which she made a success. Regarding the challenges of advocacy, of always being on the front lines, in a letter to Stanton, she said, "I believe the sacrifices are worth it if we can secure justice for women."

Anthony also understood the second cardinal principle, that no one does anything alone. It's all about the team. Remember a leader's primary job is to organize and inspire followers. Without followers, one isn't a leader. It's a statement so obvious it's frequently overlooked.

Anthony understood it perfectly.

She also understood that you build teams by sharing the praise, as she did in her last speech, but also by demonstrating that she didn't care who got the credit as long as the goal was reached. She understood teamwork. As she said to one of her closest associates, Matilda Joslyn Gage, "Our strength lies in our unity."

Difference maker … learner … team builder … sharer of the praise.

Anthony did all of this.

But she also understood that leaders must be risk takers.

I don't know if she ever saw a baseball game, but she would have understood the admonition that you can't steal second base and keep your foot on first. She also understood Shakespeare's insightful line, "Our doubts are traitors that cause us to lose the good we oft might win by fearing to attempt."

When did Susan B. Anthony demonstrate courage?

The better question is "When didn't she?"

There are numerous examples of her courage: from the time at a New York State Teachers conference when she was told the women were there to listen and learn, not to speak, and she responded by leading the women out of the meeting, across the street to another venue where they formed their own association to petition the state legislature; to the time after the Civil War when she risked scuttling the women's movement by refusing to have the quest for female suffrage defer to the cause of Black male suffrage – she wanted the right to vote for all men and women; to the time in 1872 when, using the 14th Amendment's citizenship clause as her rationale, she persuaded the records clerks in Rochester

to let her vote, only to be arrested for illegal voting. She was tried, found guilty and then refused to pay the $100 fine; to, well, to any of many instances.

But the thing that illustrates her courage and the veracity of Eric Hoffer's observation that for any mass movement to survive there must be at least one dedicated individual whose passion for the cause approaches *fanaticism* – in the positive sense of the word meaning unflinching and complete enthusiasm – is Anthony's utter fearlessness, her indomitableness as she traveled the entire country preaching the good news of women's rights to both friendly and hostile audiences.

Note the cliché: "Winners never quit, and quitters never win." Persistence is successful leaders' most important attribute: they never quit. Anthony, despite hostile males pelting her with eggs and trying to hoot her down as she spoke, never flinched nor ever quit.

She persisted.

She would go anywhere and everywhere to spread the message of women's rights.

Remember, this was the 19th century. There were no interstate highways, no airplanes, no Ubers – only rail trains belching coal smoke, wagons and stagecoaches, ferries, and horsedrawn carriages and sleighs. If there were hotels, they were frequently dirty and dingy with lousy food. Only she knew how many miserable meals she ate. And, of course, as a woman frequently traveling alone, who knew what other indignities she endured traveling from one town to another before she arrived safely at the homes or inns of supporters.

While in her 70s in the 1890s, she spent eight months in California giving as many as two to three speeches a day! About the entire scope of Anthony's dogged persistence amid the challenges of 19th century travel, Nina Martyris, in a wonderful 2018 NPR program, said:

> Less well known is the grueling physical hardship she endured in her long and tireless quest to get women the right to vote. For 45 years, Anthony traveled relentlessly, giving close to a hundred anti-slavery and woman's suffrage speeches a year. This meant that she quite literally lived on the road – travelling through snowstorms and blizzards by train, wagon, boat, skiff, and sleigh. She stumped her way through New York, Kansas, Nebraska, Iowa, Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois, Nevada, Oregon, Washington, California and even – against the advice of other suffragists – 'polygamous Utah.' Often the only woman in the room, she spoke at any public venue that opened its doors to her – from … churches and saloons

to teachers' institutes, railroad depots, abandoned barracks and tobacco factories. Once, she even lectured from atop a lumber wagon." [11]

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Susan B. Anthony not only persisted against all obstacles, but by the end of the 19th century she had created the New Woman – educated and working in the professions. She'd become a legend who had seen, in her words, that "the world has never witnessed a greater revolution than in the sphere of woman during this 50 years." [12] While she'd have never claimed to have done it alone, she was the difference-maker, the leader, who made it happen.

She also built organizations that would outlive her. As she grew older, she recruited a cadre of young women who she trained to succeed her so that the movement she had dedicated her life to would continue long after she was gone. She called these young feminists her "nieces." They called her "Aunt Susan." More importantly, "nieces," like Carrie Chapman Catt and Anna Howard Shaw, ensured the work continued.

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And now, as the first quarter of the 21st century ends with culture warriors of the right and left threatening to tear American society apart, one of the flash points of our culture war-scarred times is the reactionary right-wing attempt to roll back the progress that women, inspired by Susan B. Anthony, have made in the 118 years since she died. Now America needs her great-great-great-great nieces to be difference-makers heeding the internet meme that exhorts:

Susan B. Anthony – the most important woman in American history.

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Photo Credit

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"Susan B. Anthony on the Occasion of her 80th Birthday (detail).jpg" at **Wikimedia Commons** available at File:Susan B. Anthony on the Occasion of her 80th Birthday (detail).jpg - Wikimedia Commons accessed June 9, 2024.

End Notes

1. The brief biographical details of Anthony's early life are from a mash-up of sources, including *"Susan B. Anthony"* by Biography.com Editors and Tyler Piccotti at **Biography.Com** available at Susan B. Anthony: Biography, Suffragist, Abolitionist; *"Susan B. Anthony,"* Ed. Nancy Hayward, **National Women's History Museum** (2018) available at Susan B. Anthony | National Women's History Museum (womenshistory.org); *"Susan B. Anthony: American suffragist,"* **Britannica** available at Susan B. Anthony | Biography, Accomplishments, Dollar, Suffrage, & Facts | Britannica; and *"Susan B. Anthony"* at **Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia** available at Susan B. Anthony - Wikipedia all accessed June 9, 2024.
2. Sherr, Lynn. **Failure Is Impossible: Susan B. Anthony in Her Own Words** (New York: Times Books, A Division of Random House, 1995), p. 225.
3. Ibid., p. 256.
4. Kotter, John, *"What Do Leaders Really Do?,"* **Harvard Business Review** (December 2001) available at What Leaders Really Do (hbr.org) accessed June 9, 2024.
5. Sherr, p. xiii.
6. Ibid., p.324.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., p. 199.
9. Anthony, Susan B., *"Declaration of Rights of the Women of the United States – July 4, 1876"* at **Iowa State University Archives of Women's Political Communication** available at Declaration of Rights of the Women of the United States – July 4, 1876 | Archives of Women's Political Communication (iastate.edu) accessed June 9, 2024.

10. *"Susan B. Anthony Quotes" at **AZ Quotes** available at* TOP 25 QUOTES BY SUSAN B. ANTHONY (of 154) | A-Z Quotes (azquotes.com) *accessed June 9, 2024.*
11. Martyris, Nina, *"On the Road to Women's Rights, Susan B. Anthony Stomached Plenty of Bad Food,"* **NPR: The Salt** available at On The Road To Women's Rights, Susan B. Anthony Stomached Plenty Of Bad Food : The Salt : NPR accessed June 9, 2024.
12. Sherr, p. xxvi.

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