

Mary K. Bonsteel Tachau Essay

Hadley Hendrick

Mary Tachau did not believe in half-measures, or it would seem from her biography [1]. Born in Cleveland, Ohio, she got her Bachelor of the Arts at Oberlin College, went on to get her Masters at the University of Louisville, and finally got her PhD from the University of Kentucky [1]. Each of those degrees was in history, yet she did not limit herself to only studying the past. The same year that she got her degree at U.K., she was lobbying Kentucky legislators in support of the women's movement, and legal protection for United States citizens regardless of sex or age [5]. Not content to merely advocate for female leaders, she became one herself. She became the first female chair of the History Department at U of L in 1974, first female chair of the University's faculty senate, was on the board for the Kentucky chapter of the ACLU, and served in the Kentucky Legislative Action for Women organization, among other achievements [1]. I highlight these specific moments in her life because they not only show how diverse Tachau's interests were, but how deep she was willing to go in each one. Her work ended in 1990 with her death at age 64, but it would never be finished. Tachau serves as an inspiration for feminists to this day, and even if they do not know her name, they know her legacy. In the following pages, I will talk about the issues most important to Mary Tachau, what she did to further them, and how we can build on her progress to help our new generation, and the ones that will come after it.

As a Constitutional historian, Mary Tachau involved herself most heavily in using legislation to correct the problems of the past. She advocated for and proposed laws that would ensure specific standards that she saw as essential to equality in the United States. First and foremost, Mary Tachau fought for the rights of women in a country that had only given them the

right to vote 6 years before she was born. She outlines most of these issues in the prospectus for a book she intended to write a year before her death [3]. Tachau saw a significant discrepancy in the way women and men were treated in the workforce. Drawing on her own experiences growing up just after World War II, Tachau did not believe in a separation of labor based on sex. Building on this, Tachau worked at the University of Louisville to encourage diversity among the student body. She not only oversaw significant gains in female enrollment at U of L, but advocated for increased accessibility to students from traditionally excluded groups, including minorities and those from lower economic backgrounds [2]. This increase in education and work exposure would lead to, in her eyes, a closing of the pay gap between men and women, and increased representation of women in industries traditionally reserved for men. In order for these women to be able to focus on these issues, however, she also saw that they needed more control over their own bodies [3]. This was achieved by their increased access to birth control, both in and out of marriage. The remarkable thing about Tachau's mind is that she did not seem to see these issues as separate. She saw overlapping causes and effects between all of them, so that you could not isolate a single solution, but had to address the entire system head on.

Tachau was not content to only stop at women's rights, however. She saw inequality as a multi-headed beast that could only be addressed in its totality. Inherent in women's access to the workforce and higher education was the ability for all women to have that access [3]. Poverty was a major contributor to women not attending college, and the inability for women to have birth control stopped them from starting careers, should they have children instead. Tachau wanted to fight the forces of poverty by giving women of lower incomes the ability to pursue opportunity where they could find it. Of course, I would be remiss to forget Tachau's involvement in the Civil Rights movement as well. Not only was she a member of the ACLU,

but she also saw parallels between the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, the anti-slavery movement of the century before, and the feminist movements that were their contemporaries [1].

A parallel that can be drawn today between the latest wave of feminism and movements like Black Lives Matter. Tachau did not live long enough to see feminism take on the significant role it has in public discourse, especially in the past year. At the same time, one of the cornerstones of this new conversation is incorporating voices that had previously been sidelined into the movement. Mary Tachau was fighting for a broadened perspective, one that included discourse on class and race, decades earlier, but it was not an idea in vogue during her time. Still, Tachau's belief in feminism for all women has influenced a new generation of activists who embrace intersectionality.

This is not to say that Tachau thought of everything. She fought to include women of color, women of age, and women of all economic backgrounds in the feminist movement, but there are issues today that were not even on the public radar back then [5]. Over the past few years, the recognition of transgender women as "real" women has become what some believe to be a controversial issue. I strongly believe that Tachau would be on the side of transgender women, fighting to amplify their voices among the crowd. I bring this up to say that Tachau was a visionary of her time, and her ideas were years ahead of her contemporaries. We should take the things she fought her entire life for -- things like economic opportunity for all women, providing equal access to higher education, giving women agency over their bodies, and closing the wage gap, to mention a few -- and build on them. As times change, so too does our awareness of the problems facing women, or even our definition of who "women" are. Mary Tachau is a cornerstone of what the feminist movement has become, and it would be a disservice to her memory to not take her ideas even farther.

One way we can do this is in how we mark the achievements of the feminist movement. Mary Tachau worked during a time when legal protection against sex-based discrimination was not guaranteed to all people. As evidenced by her correspondence with various individuals in 1972, Tachau believed in legislative action to protect the rights of women [1]. As a Constitutional historian, this makes sense. Tachau wanted the status of women as equal citizens to be protected under the law, so that no new voices could silence theirs. Her results in this effort are the bedrock for all feminist movements that have come since. Even when we lack specific laws protecting women, such as laws mandating equal pay for equal work, legislative action to address those problems would be a fundamental necessity to moving forward. Having said that, it is also incredibly important that we not stop at the letter of the law.

Mary Tachau changed laws, and now it is important for us to change minds. One of the problems I face in my daily life is the stigma against “feminism.” When some people talk about the women’s rights movement, or women in general, they have negative connotations. It is important for the next step in feminism to be a concentration on changing the public attitudes of our cause. Even if we had a law guaranteeing women equal pay for equal work, there exists an attitude that women are incapable of doing equal work. You have to look no farther than the 2016 Presidential election to see the ways in which womanhood can still be seen as a handicap. Beyond just negatively affecting our views of women themselves, we have to show people that women’s issues are incredibly important and need to be taken seriously. One of the two major candidates for the Presidency admitted to having groped women without their permission, objectified women on a constant basis, and ridiculed women for nothing other than being female. That candidate won. Backlash from women’s rights organizations did effectively nothing to change the climate of the conversation, even if they left politics entirely out of the equation.

When a massive women's rights protest was organized on the day of the President's inauguration, the news cycle forgot it almost immediately afterward.

Women's issues are still not taken seriously in our country. Even while we are busy incorporating the struggles of women of color, transgender women, women of poverty, and any countless number of overlapping problems that women face every day, we do not have the widespread respect that our movement deserves. We would not even be having this conversation if Mary Tachau had not done the work she had, because there would be no legal basis for any of my arguments here. Mary Tachau fought for the legal equality of women, but now we have to fight for our social equality, too.

Mary Tachau did a lot. That is an understatement to say the least. Tachau was not only a feminist, but a scholar. She was a trailblazer and a helping hand. She fought for the rights of all women, regardless of where they came from. Tachau's work is fundamental to the women's rights movement, and it is a shame that she does not get put aside Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Stanton, or Betty Friedan, who she mentions in her Prospectus [3]. It is our duty as women to spread awareness for the amazing work that she accomplished during her lifetime, and to build on it. Feminism is a struggle that has come a long way, and if Mary Tachau were alive today, I am sure she would agree it still has a long way to go.

Works Cited

1. "Introduction and Biography." *Women's Manuscript Collections Project*, Dec. 1996.
Mary Katherine Bonsteel Tachau Papers.
2. Nolan, Irene. "Courier Journal." *Courier Journal*.
3. Tachau, Mary K. "Prospectus ."
4. Tachau, Mary K. Received by Earl, 21 Nov. 1972.
5. Tachau, Mary K. Received by Senator Georgia Davis, Kentucky General Assembly, 10 Feb. 1972, Frankfort, Kentucky.