

## *Political Cartoon Explanations*

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**By Rebekah Clark**

• LIFE •

Militants



AS THEY ARE



AS THEY THINK THEY ARE



Rodney Thomson  
with apologies to  
Orson Lowell

AS THEY APPEAR TO THE POLICE AND SHOPKEEPERS

Rodney Thomson. *Militants*. Cartoon. *Life Magazine*, volume 61, no. 1587, March 27, 1913.

## “Militants”

**Life Magazine, 1913** By employing persuasive techniques such as exaggeration, symbolism, analogy, labeling, and irony, this cartoon demonstrates ways that political cartoonists communicate their messages. Three sets of images illustrate contrasting portrayals of women’s rights advocates. Comparison of the sets uses irony to provide commentary about the true nature of suffragists.

The first set, captioned “As They Are,” includes exaggerated images of unattractive, unkempt, and masculine women wearing “Votes for Women” ribbons, indicating the cartoonist’s opinion that all women who support suffrage are “militants” who lack femininity, beauty, and decorum. The second set, labeled “As They Think They Are,” uses symbols to argue that suffragists possess an aggrandized self-image. The resolute and fiercely beautiful

warrior invokes iconic symbolism of Joan of Arc to portray suffragists as self-proclaimed heroines, saints, martyrs, and divinely-guided warriors fighting to save their people from oppressors. The adjacent symbol of the halo casts suffragists as angels, while the beaming light emanating from the next suffragist suggests enlightenment. The laurel wreath worn by the last suffragist in this set is an ancient symbol of victory, wisdom, and honor. (See “The Apotheosis of Liberty,” 1912, below). In stark contrast, the final set of images, labeled by the caption “As They Appear to the Police and Shopkeepers,” portrays suffragists as horned demons. By depicting these demons as most closely resembling the first set (militants “As They Are”), the cartoonist implies that the true nature of suffragists is much closer to the demonized version as viewed by opponents than it is to the beautiful and honorable self-image of suffragists.



## “Female Suffrage”

### **Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper,**

**1869** This political cartoon refers to the question of granting women’s suffrage in Utah Territory, a proposition that Congress was debating at that time. Many anti-polygamists argued that, if enfranchised, Utah women would vote for candidates who would end polygamy. Others, as depicted in this cartoon, warned that granting Utah women suffrage would create an even larger voting bloc to protect polygamy and other Mormon political agendas that they believed ran counter to American values.

The image depicts a stern and commanding Brigham Young marching to the voting polls followed by dozens of women carrying babies in one arm and electoral ballots in the other. The women, presumably Young’s wives, follow along in an unending stream

with a unified, political motive. The women carry a flag which prominently reads “Straight Dem Ticket,” indicating that if allowed to vote, Mormon women would follow the commands of Young and vote for the Democratic Party. In reality, the Democratic and Republican parties were not established in Utah until the late-1890s. While this “Straight Dem Ticket,” detail is thus historically inaccurate, it was an effective warning that resonated with the Republican majority in post-Civil War America. The caption, “Wouldn’t it put just a little too much power into the hands of Brigham Young, and his tribe?” provides a clear warning that women’s suffrage would only serve to strengthen the political power of Mormons in Utah. Reflecting the racially-charged views of the time, the term “tribe” further cast Mormons as “un-American” and the embodiment of “The Other.”





## “Washington D.C.”

### **Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper,**

**1871** This cartoon uses comparison to show that non-Utah suffragists at this time were sometimes portrayed in the national media as dignified and respectable women, while Utah suffragists were illustrated as victims or even slaves. Even though Utah women had obtained the vote and were proving themselves politically competent, the strong national bias against polygamy kept the media from depicting Utah as a positive example of progressivism.

The suffragists portrayed in this cartoon are gathered with congressmen who listen intently to the arguments read by a confident and respectable

female suffragist. The illustration’s caption reads: “Washington D.C.—The Judiciary Committee of the House of Representatives receiving a deputation of female suffragists, January 21—A lady delegate reading her account in favor of woman’s voting, on the basis of the fourteenth and fifteenth Constitutional amendments.” This cartoon is particularly notable for its depiction of suffragists who are stylish, dignified, empowered, and ladylike, and for its portrayal of important men respectfully giving attention to the arguments of the ladies. The arguments are depicted as valid and rational, as indicated by the caption asserting that they are based on the newly-passed constitutional amendments.



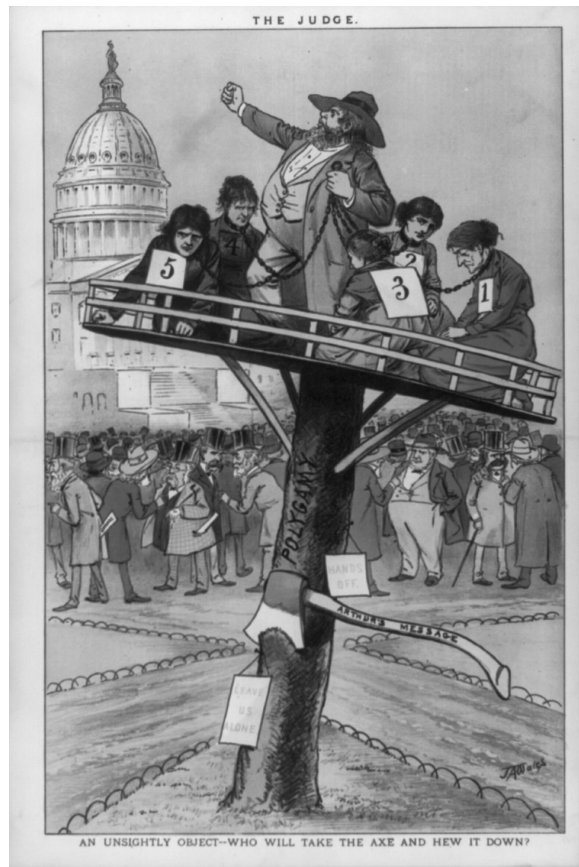
## *“The Mormon Octopus Enslaving the Women of Utah”*

### ***Polygamy: or, The Mysteries and Crimes of Mormonism, 1882***

The octopus inspired deep fear and revulsion in nineteenth-century Americans. This “monster” became a common image to villainize and de-humanize a political opponent or economic threat. The octopus image was frequently employed against Mormons in nineteenth-century propaganda to depict the maligned religion and its colonization of the West and practice of polygamy as an evil, insidious, and aggressive threat. By casting Mormonism as an evil threat seeking to extend its “tentacles” throughout the nation, anti-polygamists were able to push through anti-polygamy legislation in the 1880s.

Labeled with the caption, “The Mormon Octopus Enslaving the Women of Utah,” this cartoon plays

off of post-Civil War sentiment against slavery. Polygamy had been linked with slavery since the 1856 Republican platform denounced them both as the “twin relics of barbarism.” The octopus, depicted with the upper body of a man, stretches out from Salt Lake City with writhing tentacles seeking more female victims. Wrapped in coiled tentacles and unable to escape, the women are portrayed as beautiful but helpless victims caught in the grasp of the monster. This demonstrates the control and even enslavement that many believed the church imposed against women, both through polygamy as well as through controlling their political voice and votes. Appearing in the same year that the anti-polygamy Edmunds Act passed, this cartoon served as a fear-inducing warning to justify the disfranchisement imposed by the anti-polygamy legislation.



## “An Unsightly Object”

**The Judge, 1882** This cartoon bears the caption: “An Unsightly Object—Who Will Take an Axe and Hew It Down?” It portrays a Mormon man defiantly shaking his fist at Congress while standing on a platform labeled “Polygamy.” The man, shown as audacious and threatening, along with the signs labeled “Leave Us Alone” and “Hands Off,” are designed to be a depiction of the Mormon population as openly disobedient to governmental authority. He holds in his other hand chains that extend around the necks of five women who kneel around him. The women are portrayed as haggard, downtrodden, oppressed victims. They wear tags with numbers as if they are slaves to be sold. The scene is reminiscent of a slave auction, catering to the prevalent public attitude that polygamy was a form of mental and physical enslavement of women.

After the abolition of slavery in the South, many Americans turned their efforts to the prohibition of polygamy in Utah, which they saw as subjugating women and as challenging governmental authority. United States President Chester Arthur responded to these concerns by condemning polygamy in each of his State of the Union addresses and calling upon Congress for more radical legislation. The cartoon depicts indecisive congressmen surrounding the “Unsightly Object” of the polygamy platform. The axe portrayed in the cartoon, wedged into the platform-bearing pole, is labeled “Arthur’s Message” to indicate the cartoonist’s support of President Arthur’s stand against polygamy. Not long after, President Arthur signed the Edmunds Anti-Polygamy Bill into law, which made polygamy a felony and prohibited polygamists from voting, holding public office, and serving on juries.



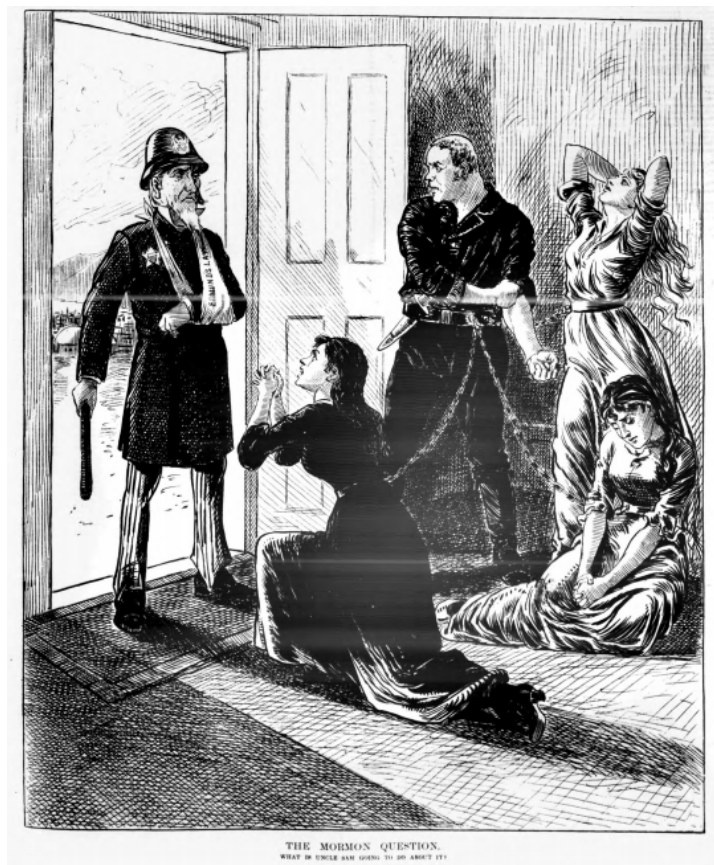


## “Great Sin of the Century”

**Daily Graphic, 1883** As was common with anti-Mormon propaganda, the beast in this political cartoon is portrayed as a domineering male figure while the women in the cartoon are depicted as helpless pleading victims. The bloodthirsty, hat-wearing vulture, labeled “Mormonism,” grasps two women tightly in its talons. Human bones are scattered around them as the vulture sits with a menacing stance on a ledge high above Uncle Sam. An axe and knife seem to have done little to deter the monster. Uncle Sam holds a short ladder which bears the label “Edmund’s Law,” referring to the 1882 anti-polygamy legislation that made polygamy a felony and took away the right of polygamists to

vote, hold office, and serve on juries. The caption quotes Uncle Sam: “I’ll have to get a longer ladder before I can do anything with that chap.”

The caption makes the cartoon’s meaning clear. The Edmunds Law was insufficient to reach the problem and to eradicate Mormonism and its practice of polygamy. The cartoon thus argues for increased legislative measures. Within a few years, Congress passed the more stringent Edmunds-Tucker Act, which disfranchised all women in Utah Territory, unincorporated the LDS Church, and seized the church’s property. This bill proved to be effective in ending Mormon polygamy, but it sacrificed the voting power of Utah women in the process.



## *“The Mormon Question”*

**Daily Graphic, 1883** This political cartoon similarly contains commentary on the 1882 Edmunds Anti-Polygamy Act. It depicts Uncle Sam in police uniform, wearing a sling with the label “Edmunds Law,” implying that the United States was in fact weakened, rather than strengthened, by the 1882 legislation. Uncle Sam stands at an open door, facing an armed Mormon man chained to three enslaved wives. The man is rolling up his sleeve and making a fist, threatening to strike Uncle Sam who has one of his hands tied. The three wives are portrayed as despairing, pleading for help, or too downtrodden

to resist enslavement. The caption reads: “The Mormon Question: What is Uncle Sam Going to Do About It?” The cartoonist challenges Congress to go further than the Edmunds Act to combat the Mormon threat. It portrays suspicions that Mormons, like the Confederacy, were attempting to form their own sovereign country in the Mountain West to protect a way of life repugnant to the rest of the nation. Like other anti-Mormon propaganda of its time, this cartoon uses imagery of slavery, violence, and defiance against the nation to resonate with the deep fears of another insurrection in post-Civil War America.



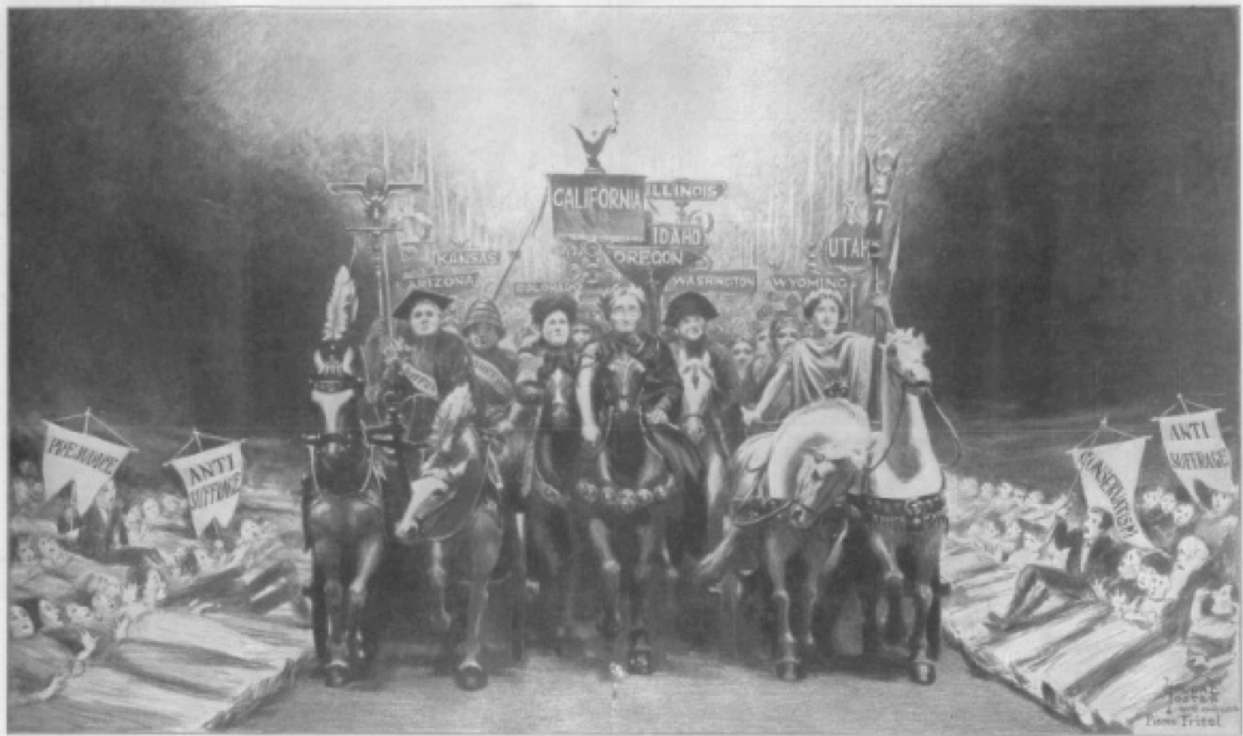


## “The Apotheosis of Liberty”

**Washington Post, 1896** This cartoon, celebrating the annual convention of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, is titled “The Apotheosis of Liberty.” It is an allusion to the “Apotheosis of Washington” fresco painted in the dome of the rotunda of the U. S. Capitol Building, completed at the end of the Civil War in 1865. In this cartoon, Utah is depicted, along with Wyoming, as one of the angelic maidens flanking George Washington and the national suffrage leaders. Utah’s inclusion is indicative of the changed status Utah achieved both in the national media and the national suffrage movement once the LDS Church officially disavowed polygamy in 1890 and achieved statehood—including women’s suffrage—in 1896. No longer tarnished by polygamy, Utah was able to take its rightful place as an example of successful women’s suffrage, used by women’s rights advocates to demonstrate the expansion of liberty.

The term “apotheosis” refers to the exaltation,

deification, or climax of something, in this case liberty. In the cartoon, national suffrage leaders Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony sit on either side of George Washington, allegorically represented as figures from classical mythology. Reminiscent of the Goddess of Liberty in the original fresco, Stanton holds her Woman’s Bible in one hand and a bundle of rods surrounding an axe in the other. This bundle is one of the oldest Greek symbols, called a fasces, and is frequently associated with female deities to represent power, authority, and strength through unity—an appropriate message for the newly-combined national suffrage organization. Anthony, portrayed as the winged Goddess of Victory from the original painting, symbolizes the victory of suffrage by sounding a trumpet, wearing a crown of laurel leaves, and waving a palm frond. Although the suffrage movement was still twenty-four years away from achieving national victory, this cartoon shows an optimism sparked by Utah’s entrance into the Union as the third suffrage state.



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"CONQUERORS"

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## *"Conquerors"*

**Woman's Journal, 1912** Following the 1896 granting of suffrage to women in Utah and then Idaho, the national movement went for more than thirteen years without major suffrage victories. Between 1910 and 1912, however, five more states granted suffrage. In 1912, Theodore Roosevelt's Progressive Party was the first national party to include women's suffrage in its platform. As momentum began to grow in the national suffrage movement, leaders became more optimistic, as illustrated in this cartoon.

The cartoon depicts a suffrage parade, a bold tactic adopted by American suffragists beginning in 1910 to publicize their cause. This parade, however, is represented as a victory march featuring all the

suffrage states in a procession of women on horses, casting aside opposing groups of onlookers labeled "Anti-Suffrage," "Conservatism," and "Prejudice." In honor of its early enfranchisement of women, Utah is given a position of importance as one of the leaders of the suffrage procession. Portrayed as classically beautiful and clothed in the gown of a Greek goddess, the female representation of Utah is prominently placed on a white horse directly to the right of the leader. Other symbols include the laurel leaves worn by the central suffragist leading the procession, indicating victory, as well as the square graduation cap worn by the suffragist on the far left, symbolizing superiority, intelligence, and achievement.



## *“Meanwhile the ladies have been having a perfectly lovely time”*

**The Judge, 1913** In this final cartoon, all traces of the former prejudice against Utah suffragists have disappeared, and Utah is portrayed as one of the dignified Western state hostesses welcoming the new wave of states into their suffrage tea party. With a friendly whisper between the portrayal of Washington State and the depiction of Utah, Utah is shown to be on friendly and equal footing with the other suffrage states. The caption reads: “Meanwhile the ladies have been having a perfectly lovely time.”

The cartoon’s use of the word “ladies” to describe the women, including Utah suffragists, implies respectability and honor. It stands in stark contrast to the portrayals of Utah women in the late-nineteenth century anti-polygamy propaganda cartoons. The end of polygamy and Utah suffragists’ continued commitment to the national suffrage movement had by this time earned them an uncontested place of honor as one of the original states to grant women’s suffrage.