

Marsh Murdock and the “Wily Women” of Wichita

Domesticity Disputed in the Gilded Age

by Rebecca Edwards

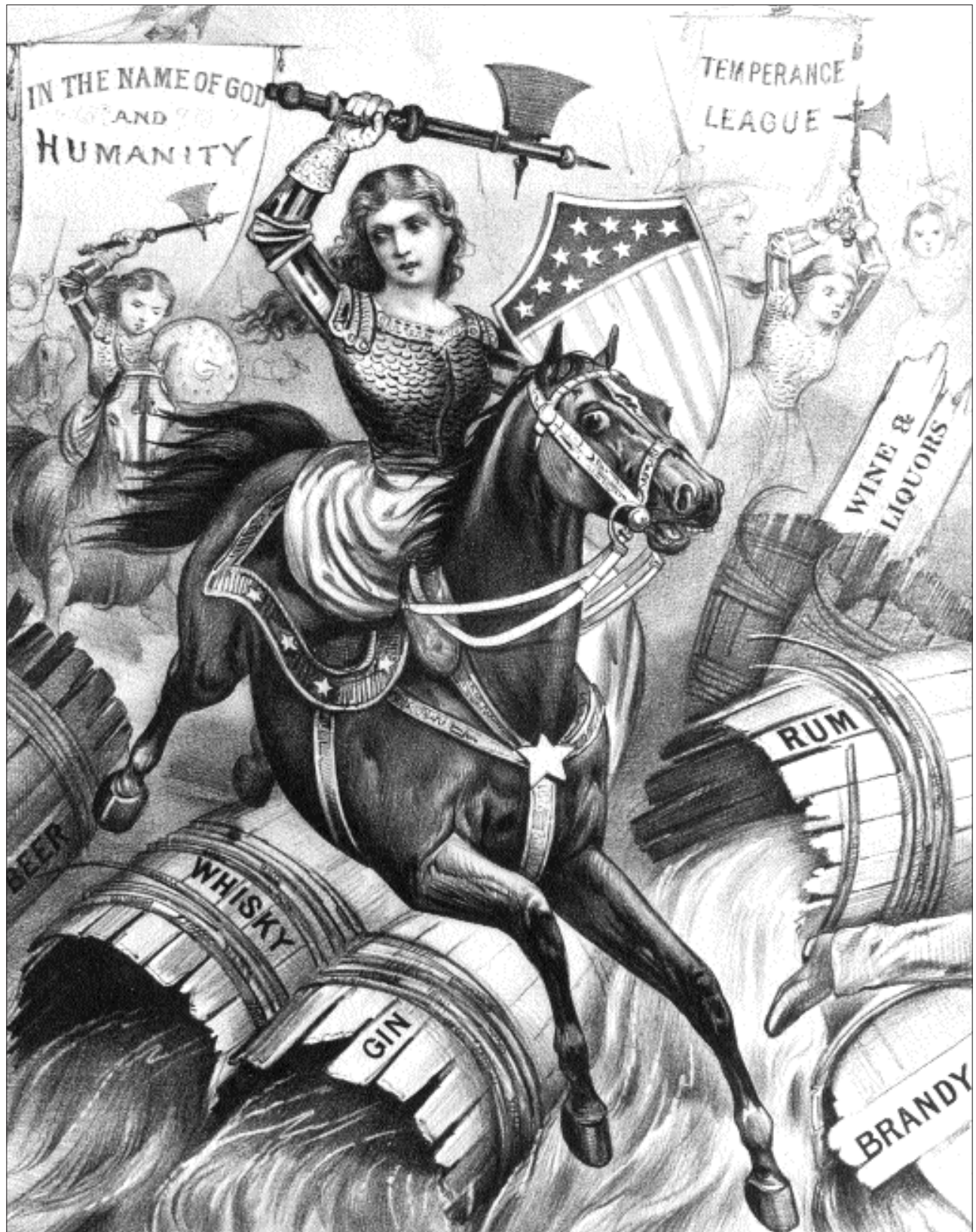
In 1887 Frances Willard, world-famous leader of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, hailed the state of Kansas for its progressive vision. Having passed legislation for prohibition of liquor and municipal woman suffrage, the Sunflower State was, Willard wrote, “away out on the picket line of progress, where mortal commonwealth has never gone before.” A few years later Populist orator and women’s rights advocate Mary Elizabeth Lease agreed. Kansans, she wrote, were “quick to adopt improvements, entertain new ideas, make sweeping and radical changes when needed.”¹ In explaining women’s successes in Kansas, Willard and Lease credited the work of unheralded thousands of Christian mothers and wives who had organized and asserted their right to a voice in public policy.

In Kansas, as elsewhere in the United States, “White Ribboners” and suffrage advocates won concrete victories during the Gilded Age. They also helped pave the way for later reforms, shaping state and national politics for decades after 1900. Thus, it is worth a closer examination of how they fared, not only at the state and national levels but locally, where the building blocks of the great reform movements of

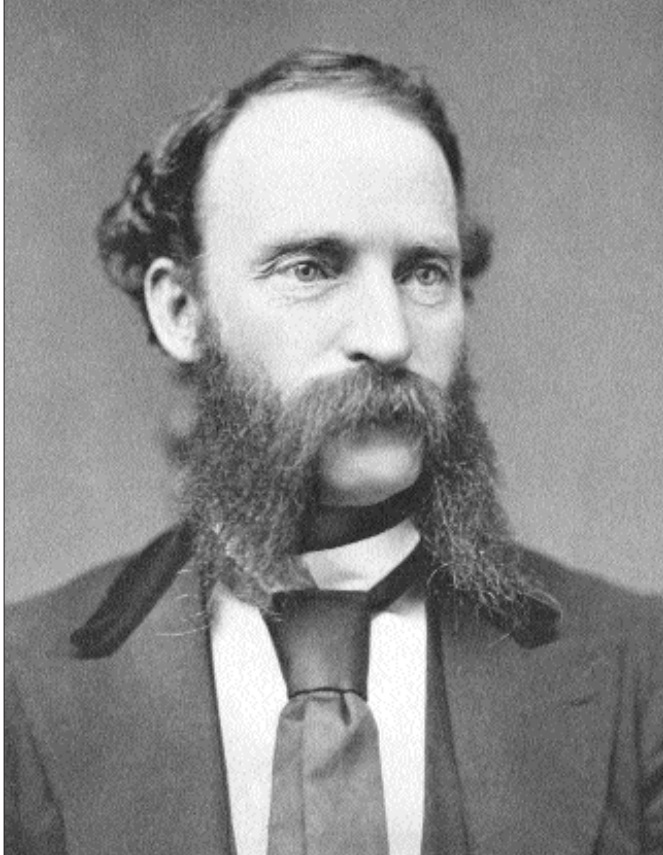
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1. Frances Willard quotation in Agnes D. Hayes, *The White Ribbon in the Sunflower State: A Biography of Courage and Conviction, 1878–1953* (Topeka: Woman’s Christian Temperance Union of Kansas, 1953), 15; Mary Elizabeth Lease quotation in “Do Kansas Women Want the Vote?” *Agora* 2 (January 1893): 197.



An 1874 illustration depicting crusaders for temperance.



Marshall Murdock, editor of the *Wichita Eagle*, was considered by many to be “the greatest town boomer and town builder the Middle West has ever known.”

the Gilded Age were assembled. The booming city of Wichita, Kansas, makes an excellent case study. In places such as Wichita during the 1880s, grassroots women’s movements arose amid controversy and stubborn opposition. Led and goaded by the editor of the *Wichita Eagle*, Wichita’s respectable citizens argued vigorously over women’s activities, both private and political. The arguments they deployed help explain why certain women became active in the public sphere and where and to what extent they found allies. They also tell us a great deal about Americans’ attitudes toward domesticity and marriage.

In the 1880s Wichita was a burgeoning frontier city, barely two decades old and growing through “enterprise and vim,” “boom and push.” As the depression of the 1870s lifted, the city’s population doubled in a few years. Multiple railroads served the local stockyards and other industries, and citizens enjoyed such up-to-date amenities as gaslight and streetcars. In December 1885 the business district switched on its first electric lamp. The pace of construction was so frantic that for a few months in 1887 the value of Wichita’s real estate transactions surpassed Chicago’s. Rapid growth encouraged new businesses to open almost weekly, attracting industrial workers, salesmen, lawyers, doctors, and teachers who hoped to find prosperity on the frontier. Churches and opera houses went up along the wide streets. Newspapers announced the meet-

ings of fraternal associations, women’s groups, and even a Wichita Yacht Club.²

Presiding over it all was Colonel Marshall Mortimer Murdock, editor of the *Wichita Daily Eagle* and one of the great town boosters of the nineteenth-century West. Murdock dubbed his city “Winning Wichita,” “Queen of the Prairies,” “Peerless Princess of the Plains,” “The Blooming, Booming Beauty,” and “Magical Mascot of the Meridian.” Few issues of the *Eagle* appeared without a comment on Wichita’s rapid expansion and its prospects for future greatness. The neighboring *Anthony Republican* observed that Colonel Murdock was “known far and wide as the great boom editor of Kansas.” Decades later another man remembered Murdock as a visionary who prophesied “the future glory of the hamlet with which he had cast his fortune.” To loyal admirers, Murdock became “the greatest town boomer and town builder the Middle West has ever known.”³

Murdock was born in 1837 in West Virginia, where his Scots-Irish father had married into the distinguished Pierpont family. When the Murdocks moved to Ohio young Marsh learned the printer’s trade, after which his father relocated to a farm in Bleeding Kansas to champion the abolition of slavery. After his father and older brothers enlisted in the Civil War, Marsh worked as a printer in Lawrence and then joined the Osage and Lyon County Militia, from which he obtained the military title he kept for the rest of his life. Soon after the war he married a young woman named Victoria Mayberry, moved to Burlingame, established the *Burlingame Chronicle*, and served for a few years as a Republican state legislator. When the Santa Fe railroad built toward Wichita in 1872, Murdock moved there and started the *Eagle*. By the 1880s he had built a powerful network of friends among railroad executives, businessmen, and Republican leaders throughout the state.⁴

2. For Wichita’s growth and amenities, see *Wichita Eagle*, January 5, May 16, December 19, 1885. “Boom and push” reprinted from *Detroit Herald*, with a list of Murdock’s nicknames for the city, *ibid.*, May 4, 1887. For additional nicknames, see *ibid.*, August 3, 1886.

3. *Anthony Republican* quotation in the *Wichita Eagle*, March 6, 1887. On Murdock as “the greatest town boomer” and on his life, see “Marshall M. Murdock” in William E. Connelley, *A Standard History of Kansas and Kansans*, vol. 3 (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., 1918), 1223–24; see also D. D. Leahy, “Colonel Marshall M. Murdock,” in *A History of Wichita and Sedgewick County, Kansas, Past and Present*, ed. O. H. Bentley (Chicago: C. F. Cooper and Co., 1910), 4885–88.

4. Connelley, *A Standard History of Kansas and Kansans*, 1223–24. On Murdock’s connections with such powerful figures as Jay Gould and U.S. Senator Preston B. Plumb, see Marshall Murdock correspondence, Victor Murdock Papers, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Murdock was an excellent example of the restless optimism of the post-Civil War West. He believed in Wichita's future and defended his city stoutly against easterners who thought it wild. Yet Wichita's social relationships, like its economic ones, remained unsettled in its early era of growth. The city's economy rested on the cattle trade, which brought rough cowboys into town. Respectable citizens condemned the presence of prostitution, gambling, and other unsavory trades. As late as the mid-1880s it was not unusual to hear gunfire at night. Locally, Wichita boosters lamented the bordellos and gambling houses, the violence, the dangerous feral dogs, and the dead hogs that lay rotting in the street. But when they addressed outsiders they emphasized their city's numerous banks, churches, schools, and genteel associations. Wichita's roughness required men like the *Eagle's* editor to vigilantly tend its reputation.⁵

In these years Wichita's middling and upper classes engaged in sharp debates over the much-desired attribute of "respectability." The conflict pitted Murdock, who never hesitated to cast himself as Wichita's spokesman and moral guardian, against a cadre of the city's progressive female reformers. Murdock dismissed his opponents as "those wily women," "bulldozing females," and on one memorable occasion, "that class of street and rostrum yawpers, those traipsing, pot-house Elm-Peelers, beside whose brazen cheeks those of a government mule are downy and soft." Wichita's independent-minded women did not back down in the face of such attacks. Many were wives of veterans and successful businessmen and some were accomplished professionals in their own right. Dr. Nannie Stephens, for example, had graduated from medical school in Pennsylvania and come west to set up practice.⁶ Such women's rejoinders to Colonel Murdock were creative and tart.

At stake were conflicting interpretations of a key principle of nineteenth-century American life, a set of ideas that historians have called domestic ideology. Domestic ideology was based on the belief that women were, by their essential nature, more chaste, moral, pious, and nurturing than men. According to this argument man was the natural breadwinner, while woman's highest calling was her devotion to family, church, and charity. Most of all, woman was

the sweet center of domestic life—in Marsh Murdock's rhapsodic words, a "petticoated angel." "When the husband gets torn up by care and trouble," Murdock wrote in the *Eagle*, "the heart he promised to protect becomes his protector. She sees the sunshine through the clouds. . . . She puts new life in his bosom, turns his gizzard into a heart and inspires him with new hope, strength and zeal to wrestle with life and its responsibilities."⁷

Statements such as these hinted at the personal significance of domestic ideology to men such as Colonel Murdock. Although we know little about his relationship with his wife, Victoria, one private reference to their marriage suggests the intensity with which Marsh Murdock desired to shelter women from the rough-and-tumble political world, and the links he drew between women's deference in the family and his own sense of honor. After Victoria heard a rumor (possibly true) that national Republican leaders had sent funds to her husband to set up the *Wichita Eagle*, Marsh Murdock wrote angrily to a friend that the rumor "is very trying and harrowing to the mind of a sensitive woman—especially to a wife who reposes so much confidence in her husband's honor as does my wife in me."⁸ Such statements circulated widely in post-Civil War America, both publicly and privately. Reading them, it is easy to reach the conclusion that domestic ideology was a set of fixed principles shared by most respectable citizens of the era. The ideal, however, was so vague and malleable that it justified irreconcilable points of view. Both women's rights advocates and their opponents in Wichita subscribed to it, but they adapted it to very different ends.

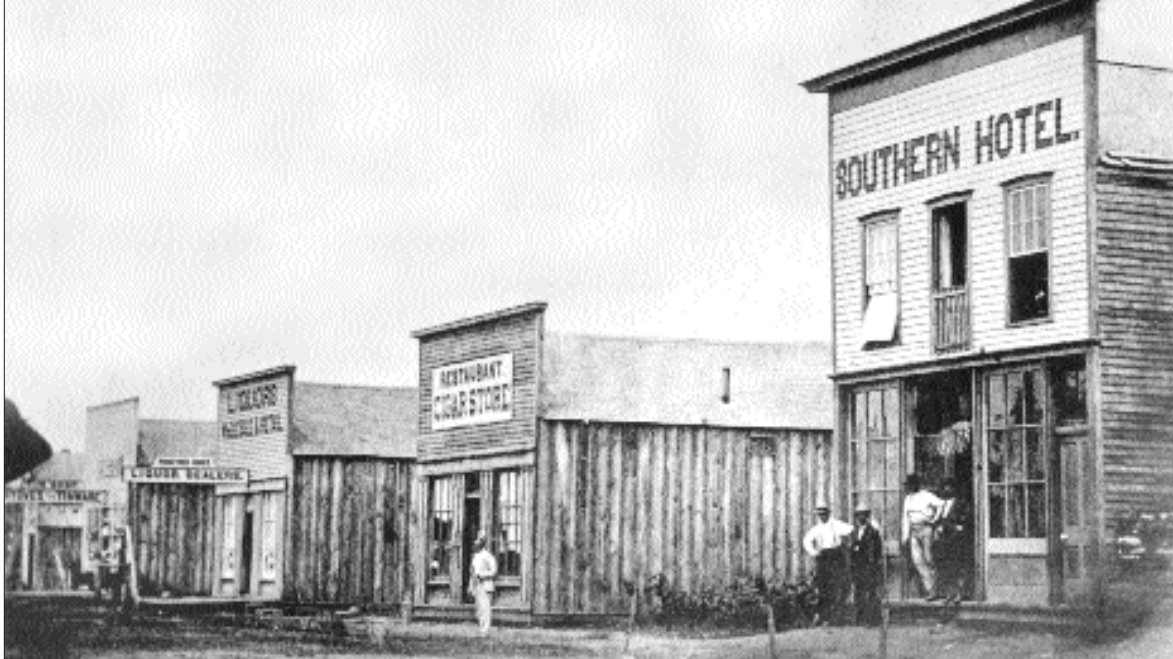
The organization that started all the trouble in Wichita, as in many other American cities and towns, was the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). The largest and most influential women's group of the post-Civil War era, the WCTU sought to end the manufac-

5. See H. Craig Miner, *Wichita: The Early Years, 1865–1880* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982). On "respectability" in towns such as Wichita, see C. Robert Haywood, *Victorian West: Class and Culture in Kansas Cattle Towns* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991).

6. *Wichita Eagle*, March 18, February 17, 1887. Dr. Nannie Stephens was a graduate of the Women's Hospital Medical College, 1878. See F. F. Dickman, *Kansas Medical Directory* (Fort Scott, Kans.: Herald Job Printing, 1881).

7. On domestic ideology, see for example, Barbara Welter, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976); Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: 'Woman's Sphere' in New England, 1780–1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790–1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Barbara Epstein, *The Politics of Domesticity: Women, Evangelism, and Temperance in Nineteenth-Century America* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1981). On domesticity in the West, see for example, Sandra L. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800–1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982); Peggy Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1874–1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). Quotation in *Wichita Eagle*, November 17, 1886.

8. Quotation in Miner, *Wichita: The Early Years*, 72.



East Main Street in Wichita in 1871, a year before Murdock moved to the young and rough-hewn western town. Note, among the other businesses, the wholesale/retail liquor store.

ture and consumption of liquor. Its leaders described their work as “organized mother-love.” As one Wichita member wrote, the WCTU spoke on behalf of “the mothers and the little ones” who suffered abuse, neglect, and poverty at the hands of alcoholic men. In Kansas, which had passed a constitutional amendment for prohibition in 1880, the WCTU sought enforcement of a law that most cities—especially cowtowns such as Wichita—flagrantly ignored. Wichita’s WCTU was prominent and energetic: with more than one hundred active members by 1886, it was hailed by Kansas temperance leaders as “the banner Union of the State.”⁹

The WCTU agenda is apt to confuse Americans today, especially those who enjoy a drink before dinner and think of temperance activists as meddling busybodies. In fact, WCTU activities in the Gilded Age are not easy to categorize. Frances Willard, the organization’s dynamic national president, sympathized with the labor movement and eventually became a socialist. She persuaded untold thousands of Americans that women should have the right to vote. Willard urged local unions to “do everything,” and after a modest start in 1883 the Wichita WCTU followed her instructions. They conducted prayer meetings in the streets, raised money through pie socials and oyster suppers, and hosted lectures on a broad array of topics. Some members visited inmates at the county jail while others started Wichita’s first kindergarten. In winter they collected food and clothing for the destitute. Offering an alternative to the saloon, they opened a reading room and lunchroom serving hot homemade meals. By 1887 this had

9. On the WCTU generally, see Epstein, *The Politics of Domesticity*; Ruth Bordin, *Woman and Temperance: The Quest for Power and Liberty, 1873–1900*, 2d ed. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990). Woman’s Christian Temperance Union of Kansas, *Seventh Annual Meeting Minutes* (Fort Scott, Kans.: Monitor Steam Publishing, 1885), 43, 64; *ibid.*, *Eighth Annual Meeting Minutes* (1886), 64, 84; *ibid.*, *Ninth Annual Meeting Minutes* (1887), 68.

turned into a full-time shelter run by several employees, and the reading room’s one thousand volumes had become the Sedgwick County Library. At the same time union members fought illegal liquor sales by taking dealers to court. They lobbied in Topeka for new laws and better enforcement, and they supported such state WCTU projects as an institution for homeless pregnant girls.¹⁰

Such work was based on a vigorous interpretation of domestic ideology in which motherly Christian women assumed an array of social and political responsibilities. Not all local unions followed Willard’s counsel with such confidence, but in this as in other matters Wichita was on the cutting edge. The local union sponsored controversial guest lecturers such as Belva Lockwood, the first woman to practice law before the U.S. Supreme Court, who had recently run as a presidential candidate on the Equal Rights ticket. Wichita WCTU leaders soon became directly involved in the fight for woman suffrage; some supported the Prohibition Party, and by 1888 several ran for local offices.¹¹

The WCTU presented Marsh Murdock with a problem, and one more complex than he at first seemed to realize. Murdock’s first inclination was to endorse anything that brought Wichita credit, from a kindergarten to a new brick factory. When local philanthropists founded an institution of higher learning for women, Fairmount College, Murdock boasted of the prospects for this “Vassar of the West.” The civic activities of respectable women warmed his editorial heart. He depended on them, in fact, to address certain problems he thought should be solved in the private sphere. Just before Christmas in 1884 Murdock noted that

10. For Wichita Union activities, see Woman’s Christian Temperance Union of Kansas, *Seventh Annual Meeting Minutes*, 43, 64; *ibid.*, *Eighth Annual Meeting Minutes*, 64, 84; *ibid.*, *Ninth Annual Meeting Minutes*, 68; *Wichita Beacon*, December 1, 1884, *Wichita Eagle*, September 1, 1886.

11. *Wichita Eagle*, April 18, October 17, 1885; *Wichita Beacon*, September 28, November 16, 17, 1884, January 7, 1885.

Throughout the decades, as Murdock promoted his city as a “blooming, Booming Beauty,” Wichita grew from its coarse beginnings into a respectable, progressive metropolis. This photo, looking east on Douglas Avenue, was taken in 1908, the year Colonel Murdock died.



Wichita’s poor and unemployed were suffering from severe hunger and cold. He appealed to missionary societies, the WCTU, and other women’s groups to “realize what is before them this winter.” For its part the *Eagle* promised to advertise their meetings and report on everything they did. A member of the Union Army veterans’ association, the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), Murdock attended charity balls and other fund-raising events for the GAR Ladies’ Relief Corps, one of the most prominent women’s organizations helping the Wichita poor.¹²

Murdock, however, drew a sharp distinction between women’s benevolent work and their political advocacy. His temper was particularly short in 1884 when the Prohibitionist candidate for the U.S. presidency, former Kansas governor John St. John, drew off Republican votes and helped make Grover Cleveland the first Democratic president since the Civil War. The WCTU had played a key role in building the Prohibition movement, and many of its Wichita members supported the new party. After the election, pressed on whether the *Eagle* supported the WCTU, Murdock gave a decisive reply. “As an organization or ban to do deeds of charity, yes,” he wrote. “As a political machine, endorsing St. John or any other politician, no.”¹³

With the Republican Party dominating Kansas politics, Wichita’s WCTU supporters must have been amused to find themselves labeled a political machine. The larger problem for the *Eagle*, however, was how to distinguish “good” women from “bad” ones. A major difficulty arose, for example, over public speaking. Mary E. Lease, the Wichita temperance leader who later became a famous Populist orator, often recited temperance poems at WCTU soials, and the *Eagle* reported on these occasions with

approval. When Lease gave a patriotic address to a large crowd on Decoration Day at the cemetery, Murdock reprinted the full text with words of praise. When she lectured on “Ireland and Irishmen” as a benefit for the Catholic Church, Murdock responded with compliments, calling Lease “a brilliant woman” and declaring that Wichita had never enjoyed “a treat so rare, so delightfully descriptive, so touching in its pathos, so patriotic and poetical.” Even Lease’s endorsement of the Irish Land League—clearly a political cause—did not dampen the *Eagle’s* enthusiasm.¹⁴

On the other hand, Murdock was outraged when the WCTU brought Helen Gougar to speak at the county fair. Gougar was a Prohibitionist, and the *Eagle* editor attacked not only her opinions but her right to speak at all. “It is just that spectacle more than all other things—a woman out of her place—which prejudices so large a majority of men against woman suffrage,” Murdock wrote. “A woman subjecting herself to public gaze and criticism—to public life—means more to the average man than women as a rule can be made to understand. . . . He shrinks when the idea suggests itself that it might be his wife, mother, or daughter who would be addressing mixed crowds on the street corners.” Murdock added that “if we were her father, brother or husband, and it became necessary to harangue the boys by moonlight we would prefer doing it ourselves or hiring some third-rate office-seeker to do it while we went home to enjoy the presence that should be there, ever.”¹⁵

Although Gougar had already left town, Lease remonstrated with the *Eagle* on her behalf. “Now, Mr. Editor,” she wrote, “will you define what you mean by saying ‘a woman

12. *Wichita Eagle*, December 23, 1884, January 25, 1885; on Fairmount College, see *ibid.*, January 30, 1887.

13. *Ibid.*, November 29, 1884.

14. *Ibid.*, September 9, December 2, 1884, February 13, March 6, 1885, June 4, 1886. Quotation in *Sumner County Standard* (Wellington), May 30, 1885.

15. *Wichita Eagle*, October 3, 1884.



In 1887 Frances Willard, world-famous leader of the WCTU, hailed Kansas for its progressive vision. Having passed legislation for the prohibition of liquor and municipal woman suffrage, the state was, Willard wrote, "away out on the picket line of progress."

out of her place.' I throw down the gauntlet to you on this subject, and warn you to think well and deeply before you assign woman to any one particular sphere or limited place, in this busy age of the world's progress." This elicited from the colonel another manifesto on domestic ideology:

We count it a high privilege to be permitted to defend womanly women, and to praise ever the accomplishments of their hands and hearts, and to acknowledge their spiritual and refined superiority over man as the more perfect being of the two; but, when a woman unsexes herself and gets down to the grosser level of man, we never expect to stop to ask anybody's permission to treat her with any consideration we would not give the grosser animal.

Murdock added that Lease "is a refined lady of literary accomplishment and a poetic temperament, but neither she nor anyone else can make a defense in these columns—as we plainly said before—of any woman who prefers the hustings to her husband and children." The *Eagle* then declared the matter closed. Lease had to appeal to Captain W. S. White of the rival *Beacon*, who took the opportunity to annoy Murdock by publishing her second tart reply.¹⁶

16. *Ibid.*, October 4–5, 1884; *Wichita Beacon*, October 9, 1884.

Similar arguments broke out on other occasions, after visits by controversial women such as Belva Lockwood. One of the liveliest controversies involved not oratory, but motherhood. In early 1885 a man arrived at the WCTU lunchroom with a newborn infant and left it in the union's care. The *Eagle* immediately publicized the case, drawing on every Victorian stereotype of villainous manhood and victimized womanhood. Without much evidence, Murdock depicted the seduction of a "frail, wronged and destitute mother" who had been abandoned "out in the bleak prairie on one of those dreadful nights all alone." "Oh, it was pitiful," he continued, "a pale, delicate girl, refined, sensitive to a passionate degree, and inexperienced; father and mother both dead; . . . trying to flee from her impending shame." He described the infant boy as a "helpless little waif thus rudely thrown upon life." The conclusion was obvious: the WCTU should raise the child. Murdock printed various letters from Wichita men who agreed. One told the WCTU that if it did not keep the baby it should remove the word "Christian" from its name. William Hall offered one dollar per month for six months to help out. "Ladies, keep that baby," he wrote. The *Eagle* offered to solicit similar contributions from other businessmen.¹⁷

WCTU leaders received this advice with some irritation. One member wrote the *Eagle* that its editor was "misinformed as to the mother bringing [the baby] to the WCTU room; a man brought it there and left it." In response to Murdock's vision of abandonment on the "bleak prairie," she noted that the mother was a city girl who lived in Wichita. The union had "offered to clothe and keep [the mother] and give her a chance to either go to school or learn some trade, and she could keep the child or they would keep it, but she did not want the child. She said it would be better for it to have a home." The temperance woman thanked William Hall for offering a dollar for six months and conceded that if "everyone in the city who has the means would do as well it would certainly go a long way." But, she added, "What is one dollar a month toward the care of an infant? What are six months of an infant's life compared to the years that must elapse before it will be capable of taking care of itself?" She suggested three thousand dollars as a rough estimate of the total cost, and she noted that "although money is an essential, it is in reality but a small item in the proper bringing up of a child."¹⁸

17. On Lockwood, see *Wichita Eagle*, April 5–6, 1885; *Wichita Beacon*, April 8–11, 1885. On the abandoned baby, see *Wichita Eagle*, February 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 1885.

18. *Wichita Eagle*, February 18, 1885.

Murdock, in response, accused the WCTU of abandoning the baby and renegeing on their responsibilities as Christian mothers. He continued to grumble even after he was informed that the baby was still in the WCTU's care. Union president Annie M. Taylor wrote another letter in her group's defense, and various male and female allies came to her aid. Captain White of the *Beacon*, for example, called the *Eagle's* attacks on the WCTU "unfair, ungallant, and full of characteristic gush," writing that "an apology is due." Murdock hardly apologized. Instead, he kept up his complaints against unmotherly women who preferred sponsoring lecturers to caring for helpless babes. Meanwhile, WCTU members scraped together funds, took care of the newborn at their homes, and eventually located an adoptive family.¹⁹

While debates over public speaking and motherhood waxed warm, Murdock and Wichita's progressive women clashed most fiercely on the question of woman suffrage. Following the WCTU's years of spectacular growth, Kansas suffragists launched an effective campaign in 1886 and 1887. Although Kansas women had voted in school elections since 1861, voters had defeated a referendum for full enfranchisement in 1867. This time around the Kansas Equal Suffrage Association set the more modest goal of winning municipal suffrage, which would allow women in cities and larger towns to vote on local offices. The state constitution allowed the legislature to pass such a measure, avoiding the need for a potentially disastrous public referendum. Republicans held tight control of the legislature in early 1887; facing a sophisticated lobbying campaign, they calculated that the measure would serve their interests, and the bill passed.²⁰

From the start of the campaign in mid-1886 until April 1887, when hundreds of Wichita women proudly went to the polls to vote for city officers, the *Eagle* was unreconciled. Murdock made a three-point attack on woman suffrage. First, he argued that women should not vote because

19. *Ibid.*, February 18, 1885; *Wichita Beacon*, February 16, 17, 1885. For later WCTU appeals, see *Wichita Eagle*, February 27, 1885; *Wichita New Republic*, March 12, 1885.

20. On the municipal suffrage campaign, see Michael Lewis Goldberg, *An Army of Women: Gender and Politics in Gilded Age Kansas* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 87–104. On suffrage campaigns in Kansas generally, and on women's officeholding, see Wilda M. Smith, "A Half Century of Struggle: Gaining Woman Suffrage in Kansas," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 4 (Summer 1981): 74–95; Lorraine A. Gehring, "Women Officeholders in Kansas, 1872–1912," *ibid.* 9 (Summer 1986) 48–57; Martha B. Caldwell, "The Woman Suffrage Campaign of 1912," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 12 (August 1943): 300–18.

PROGRAMME

FOR THE

Fourth Annual Convention

—OF THE—

KANSAS

Equal Suffrage Association,

—HELD IN—

NEWTON, KAS.,

OCTOBER 13, 14 AND 15,

1887.

You are Cordially Invited to Attend.

During 1886 and 1887 Kansas suffragists and the Kansas Equal Suffrage Association launched an effective campaign with a goal of winning municipal suffrage.

it was beyond their designated sphere. Referring over and over to traditional Christian doctrine, Murdock argued that the "designs of their Creator" placed women in the home rather than public life. Second, Murdock claimed that women did not want to vote, an argument that required him to distinguish constantly between true women and false ones. "The great majority of the women of Kansas," Murdock claimed, "the housekeepers, the mothers, wives and lovers, don't want to vote." As municipal election day approached in April 1887, he seems to have feared he was mistaken. For several weeks during the registration period, the *Eagle* urgently counseled Wichita's "good, quiet, home-loving wives and tender, loving mothers" to "ignore and if necessary sit down on or snub" any suffragist who tried to get them to vote. As women began to register by the dozens—eventually topping out at more than six hundred—Murdock claimed they had been coerced by "wily women" in the suffrage movement. "Seven out of the ten women who registered," he declared, "have been compelled to do so," although he never offered proof.²¹

21. On women's sphere, see *Wichita Eagle*, May 19, February 13, 1887. On women not wanting to vote, see *ibid.*, February 19, March 31, 1887. On registration for the municipal elections, see *ibid.*, March 13, 26, April 9, 1887.



Kansas temperance leader Mary Elizabeth Lease exchanged tart repartees with Murdock over the issue of a "woman's place" in worldly and political affairs.

Murdock expounded most eloquently on his third point: the damaging impact of woman suffrage on men. He believed women should "let home stand first before all other things," placing their obligations to husbands and children above their own interests. When the Supreme Court of Washington Territory struck down a woman suffrage law, Murdock predicted that the result would be "more happy husbands." When an irritated suffragist complained about the *Eagle's* intimidation of women who sought to register, Murdock urged her again not to vote, pleading that "if you have no love or respect for your husband, . . . do not forget your father." Suffrage, he argued in one editorial,

would destroy the distinction that holds man a worshipper at woman's shrine, in which . . . he finds his whole world of happiness centered. The "home life" constitutes all, everything. . . . This "home life" ideal is the incentive for which man struggles, for which he builds cities, constructs great enterprises of every conceivable character, and for which he even institutes and maintains governments. . . . Take the wife-life, take the mother-life from either the hut or the palace and the "home" is gone. Female suffrage proposes to take these lives from these homes, leaving them but a hollow mockery, for which men would not struggle even for an hour.

Such a prospect led Murdock to construct truly lurid scenarios of doom. As Wichita women began to hold educational meetings on voting procedures, the *Eagle* envisioned "cackles and broomsticks" and foresaw "tearing down altars, . . . the fun of a Nero who fiddled with glee in the glare of the flames which reduced to ashes the triumphs of ages."²²

Many fellow editors twitted Murdock for such views, especially after municipal suffrage passed and did not bring the predicted catastrophe. One editor dubbed Murdock "the most disgruntled man in Kansas," while even the conservative *Topeka Daily Capital* dismissed "Marsh Murdock's ravings against woman's suffrage." Murdock gave such critics room in the *Eagle* to castigate him as thoroughly as he did them. One man wrote in to upbraid Murdock for his "silly whims" about women. "Men vote because they know their personal and aggregate needs and interests," he stated. "Please show me where the female is shut out on this count." A woman named Clara H. submitted a poem calling Murdock "The Rip Van Winkle of Wichita." Another unflattering comment emanated from the Equal Suffrage Association of Salina. After Murdock excoriated Salina women for hosting a mock political convention, one member brought down the house with a poem about the Wichita "Seagull":

Have you heard the Murdock "Sea Gull"
Send forth its wail of woe?
Fearing, trembling, sighing, wishing
For the days of long ago,
When the women all kept silent
On the question of reform,
Never asking for a ballot;
Never daring men to scorn....
Never holding mock conventions
That of all things is the worst,
That's the straw that kills the Camel,
Makes the Murdock 'Sea Gull' burst
Into loud and fearful screeching
Wails of sorrow and of woe
For the women who Kept Silent
In the days of long ago.

Murdock had the humor to reprint this under the headline, "That's Good; Do it Some More." He also published copious letters from his own allies, who argued that proper domesticity required the maintenance of male political power.

22. *Ibid.*, October 13, 1886, February 10, 1887, April 6, 9, 1887, March 23, 1887.

“Woman’s influence, when it is properly bestowed, is the sweetest, purest thing we have on earth,” wrote one reader, “but when she makes a politician of herself she becomes ‘one of us,’ and that influence is gone.” An antisuffrage woman instructed suffragists to “go home and attend to home duties” since “their husbands and brothers will protect their interests” at the polls.²³

Faced with such arguments, suffragists responded that voting did not “unsex” women as Murdock and his allies claimed. “My wife is as good a housekeeper as ever passed the boundaries of Sedgwick County,” asserted one man indignantly, “yet she quietly, dispassionately believes it would be for the benefit of the body politic if women had the franchise.” Feigning curiosity, a suffragist asked to be introduced to one of those terrible women the *Eagle* was denouncing. “If you know any particulars of a woman having ‘unsexed herself,’” she wrote, “do let us know. What did she do? How did she act? Did she dress the same as usual? Tell us all about it.” Dr. Nannie Stephens defended herself effectively after Murdock criticized “conspicuous” women for traveling to Topeka to lobby for the suffrage bill. “Personally I had no desire to make myself ‘conspicuous,’” Stephens wrote. “I went from a sense of duty and with the consent of my husband. I paid my own expenses and consider it beyond the limits of courtesy or gentlemanly manners for even an editor to dictate to me what I should or should not have done.”²⁴

Stephens reminded Murdock of his effusive praise for Wichita society women (including his wife, Victoria) who spent the hot months of each year in the East:

Every summer the wives of many of our families desert their homes, their husbands and sons for weeks and months, and no editor takes the liberty to criticize any one of them publicly and say “her place is at home.” But as soon as any one of them dares leave for three whole days and happens to believe in Equal Suffrage then the storm cloud of fury descends. . . . If we had gone for the purpose of attending a ball, a concert, an opera, or any society affair, Colonel Murdock . . . would have taken pleasure in giving personal notice of the trip and complimented the toilet of each.

23. *Ibid.*, February 19, March 26, 1887. Quotations in *Topeka Daily Capital*. For pro-suffrage arguments and satires, see *Wichita Eagle*, February 27, March 17, 1887, May 11, 1889. For letters from allies, see *ibid.*, March 17, 1887, April 29, 1885.

24. *Wichita Eagle*, February 16, 27, March 1, 1887.

Murdock apologized, saying that this letter “pinched where and when not expected.” His criticism, he wrote, had not applied to Stephens or any “Wichita woman whom we believe to be good and pure in spite of this horrible political nightmare.” Over and over, Murdock struggled to differentiate respectable Wichita ladies, most of whom he knew personally, from “that class of street and rostrum yawpers” who had “invaded” the political sphere. After the municipal suffrage bill passed, Murdock claimed only bad women and prostitutes would vote. After the first election in which women voted, he reported that female voters in Medicine Lodge and Leavenworth had engaged in “disgraceful” brawls, while one suffragist had traipsed around in a man’s overcoat. Suffragists refuted such charges. A pro-suffrage man from Medicine Lodge wrote to defend his town’s honor, branding the *Eagle’s* report “a lie from beginning to end.”²⁵

In the suffrage campaign and other controversies, both Murdock and his opponents employed versions of domestic ideology. To Murdock, women’s first obligations were as wives and mothers and any political activity undermined those roles. Above all else he sought to preserve men’s public power, casting women as helpmeets who inspired men’s deeds and exercised gentle “influence” but held no power in their own right. Wichita temperance and suffrage advocates also adhered to domestic ideology: none denied that women could and should be wives, mothers, and housekeepers, and most celebrated these roles. In fact, they argued that such duties required women to speak in public, lobby, and vote. Poverty, alcoholism, illiteracy, and disease—not to mention the plight of abandoned children—were problems that impacted the home and impaired women’s effectiveness as wives and mothers. Men such as Murdock, in fact, opened the door to this interpretation when they publicly urged respectable women to care for the hungry and homeless, substituting women’s charitable activities for public services. Both Murdock and the WCTU were in the business of “home protection,” the very goal that set them at odds.

Within the two camps were many variations and nuances: some reformers worked for married women’s property rights but not for suffrage, some WCTU members believed women should vote only on temperance questions, and some loyal Republican women—often praised by Murdock—believed they should support their party vig-

25. *Ibid.*, February 16, 17, April 8, 12, May 13, 17, 1887.

"For God and Home and Native Land"



Kansas Woman's Christian
Temperance Union

This pamphlet of the Kansas WCTU supports the idea of domesticity but clearly states that the home would be better protected by two voters instead of one.

**"Shall a Mother Hesitate to Ask That
the Home Be Protected by Two
Votes Instead of One."**

In the fight for Civic Rightness the women of Kansas have been at the fore and have uniformly been on the right side. ¶ The saloon and the entire liquor traffic are the enemy of the home. It is unanimously conceded that the Prohibition of the liquor traffic has been and is an inestimable boon to the state of Kansas,

rously without seeking the franchise. Thus the idea of domesticity could be molded to serve the self-interest of various advocates. Suffrage was the most direct source of conflict because it offered women equal political rights, and to men such as Marsh Murdock this threatened to destroy the entire system. Both implicitly and explicitly, Murdock's editorials defended male authority over women. Yet Murdock sincerely believed it was his job to protect "womanly" women from having to venture into the public sphere. In doing so he deliberately spoke on behalf of all women and presumed he had the right to dismiss any woman who disagreed. It was this assumption that made his views maddening to advocates of women's rights.

In the long run the suffragists won and Murdock lost, but it was a long and painful campaign. A year after the municipal suffrage victory, Mary Lease ran for county superintendent of schools, apparently becoming the first woman nominated for office in Sedgwick County. Delegates to the local Prohibitionist convention chose her, in part, because they knew the choice would infuriate their old enemy at the *Eagle*. By 1889 women were running for the Wichita school board. Like Lease they met defeat, but they saw themselves as part of a wider movement all over Kansas in which women campaigned to be school superintendents, registers of deeds, and even mayors. After the election one of the Wichita school board candidates, Fanny Blair Miller, wrote in an optimistic vein to thank those who

had helped. "Temporary defeat is nothing," she declared, explaining that "every reform in its incipiency meets with discouragements. The civilization of today is only the result of successive and successful reforms of the past." Miller envisioned a day when full suffrage would triumph in Kansas, women would hold as many offices as men, and even Marsh Murdock would support the cause.

And then—and then—listen, oh, ye gods! and ye vaults of azure. . . . —Then will the editor of the *Eagle* stand at the helm and ably edit a twenty-four page, ten-column woman's rights tribune. He will allow no anti-suffragists space in its columns. . . . If they are urgent and persistent he will call them "busy-bodies," "cranks," "short-haired yawpers," "snaggle-toothed Janes," and other similar affectionate epithets. But when the suffragists appeal to him he shall call them "dear angels" and "sweet partners of our lives" [and] tell them that they are bright, beautiful and progressive.

Having suffered Murdock's criticisms in the past, Miller ended with a plea: "Mr. Editor, you will please consider this article complete without an editorial appendix." For once, Marsh obliged.²⁶

Miller's vision of future triumph partly came true. Although suffragists met defeat in an 1894 referendum for full suffrage, by that decade women had become active and visible in the new People's Party; in some cities Republican women were serving as mayors and city council members, and by 1912 well over a hundred Kansas women had held local offices. Partisan divisions, a severe economic depression, and the triumph of conservatism in the late 1890s delayed victory for almost two decades. The Kansas Equal Suffrage Association was almost moribund for a decade, but a new generation of Kansas women at last secured suffrage in 1912.²⁷

26. *Ibid.*, March 19, May 9, 1889. On Kansas women's increasing success in electoral campaigns, see Gehring, "Women Officeholders in Kansas." On other developments in suffrage and women's rights in Kansas during the 1890s, see Goldberg, *An Army of Women*; Rebecca Edwards, *Angels in the Machinery: Gender in American Party Politics from the Civil War to the Progressive Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

27. Gehring, "Women Officeholders in Kansas," 56; Smith, "A Half Century of Struggle"; Caldwell, "The Woman Suffrage Campaign of 1912."

Despite Fanny Blair Miller's hopes, women won without assistance from the *Wichita Eagle*. Colonel Murdock did not live to see the horror of full woman suffrage enacted. He died in 1908, and in 1912, ironically, his wife, Victoria, had become the proprietor of his old paper. Her influence was nominal, however: the Murdock's son Marcellus worked as business manager and D. D. Leahy as editor. True to the views of his deceased employer and friend, Leahy gave no support to the referendum, apparently seeking to ignore it as best he could. The statewide result was 175,246 votes for women's enfranchisement and 159,197 against. Afterward the *Eagle* offered only this grudging comment: "The woman suffrage amendment has carried by a safe majority, but not in as big a ratio as supporters of the movement were claiming yesterday." To the end, the *Eagle* frowned on women's expanding roles in the political sphere.²⁸

Although domestic ideology had lost some of its hold on the American mind by 1912, it had been a powerful factor for the first post-Civil War generations, serving as an impetus for conservatism as well as change. Both temperance and suffrage leaders and their arch-foe at the *Eagle* believed passionately in women's moral superiority to men, their fitness for the work of charity and nurture, and their responsibility for guiding and uplifting society. In practice, however, these shared beliefs resulted in few points of agreement. Domestic ideology could inform the belief that women had no political rights, and it could equally inform the belief that they did. The conflict in Wichita showed how loose and unstable the concept could be. Although domestic ideology was central to nineteenth-century Americans' beliefs about re-

28. Leahy, "Colonel Marshall M. Murdock," 483; Caldwell, "The Woman Suffrage Campaign of 1912," 314; *Wichita Eagle*, November 2, 4, 6, 1889.



Undoubtedly Murdock would have applauded this depiction of the "ideal woman" in her appropriate sphere, tending to home, husband, and family—an illustration appearing in the 1882 publication *Our Deportment*, which addressed the manners and conduct of ladies of refined society.

spectability, Christianity, and men's and women's proper roles, the controversy that raged between Marsh Murdock and Wichita's wily women reminds us to pay close attention to divergent interpretations of that ideology. Only in doing so can we appreciate its contradictory legacies in American society and politics today. 