LET'S NOT FORGET THE LADIES OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

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Men of sense in all ages abhor those customs which treat us
only as the servants of your sex. . . . I desire you would remember
the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them. . . .

--Abigail Adams to her husband, March 31, 1776

I cannot say that I think you are very generous to the ladies; for, whilst
you are proclaiming peace and good-will to men, emancipating all nations,
you insist upon retaining an absolute power over wives.

--Abigail Adams to her husband, May 7, 1776

I believe that the two Howes [British generals] have not very great women for wives. A smart wife would have put Howe in possession of Philadelphia long ago.

John Adams to his wife, August 11, 1777

The women of the early American Republic were not allowed to vote or even to own property; indeed, they were the legal property of their husbands. Nevertheless, they did as much as the men to win independence from Great Britain.

Over the past decades feminist writers have brought long neglected facts to light, and now NPR's Cokie Roberts has weighed in with some stellar research in her two books *Founding Mothers*, covering the Revolution, and *Ladies of Liberty*, covering 1796 to 1825.

Roberts' family goes back to the founding of the nation. An ancestor William Claiborne was the first governor of Louisiana and also served in both houses of Congress. The seed for her two books germinated when she puzzled over the fact that she could find no mention of Governor Claiborne's wife.

Her father Hale Boggs served 13 terms in the House and became Democratic majority leader just before his death in 1972. His widow Lindy Boggs served seven terms in the House as Louisiana's first Congresswoman. She also served as ambassador to the Vatican during Bill Clinton's second term.

Today there is still is much debate about women in combat, but Roberts and other historians have found a number of women who were in the thick of fighting the British. As was the custom in those times, wives and children followed the troops into battle. In addition to their domestic duties, American women routinely cleaned and loaded muskets and artillery pieces.

On June 28, 1778, during the Battle of Monmouth, Mary Hays, even though much of her skirt had been shot off by a British cannon ball, took over the firing her wounded husband's artillery piece. After a long struggle for vindication, the State of Pennsylvania eventually gave Hays a military pension of $40 per year.

After her husband was killed at Fort Washington, Margaret Corbin took over his cannon, and, as Roberts describes, "fought bravely, sustaining three gunshot wounds, until the British took over the post." The Daughters of the American Revolution were successful in having Corbin reburied at West Point, the only Revolutionary War veteran to have attained that honor.

General George Washington was at his wit's end keeping discipline among his troops. He wrote memo after memo ordering the women and children to stay out of sight, but, as Roberts discovered, "the women weren't paying much attention to the good general." Washington was at least successful in keeping prostitutes away from his troops, much in contrast to the British who welcomed them into their camps.

Martha Washington also accompanied her husband into battle, staying with troops during the horrible winter in Valley Forge. She, too, did not stay out of sight, but she attended daily to the soldiers' needs. Some claim that many more would have deserted that winter had it not been for Martha's morale boosting visits. After the war she lobbied in Congress for better support for veterans.

Some American women were far ahead of their men without regard to the status of women and slaves. (Martha Washington was not among them.) Abigail Adams begged her husband not to put "such unlimited power into the hands of husbands," and warned him that such arbitrary power is a thing "very hard, very liable to be broken."

With regard to America's African slaves, Abigail, writing just before the signing of the Declaration of Independence, maintained the "liberty cannot be equally strong in the breasts of those who have been accustomed to deprive their fellow creatures of theirs. Of this I am certain that it is not founded upon that generous and Christian principle of doing to others as we would that others should do unto us."

In another letter to her husband, who appeared to share his wife's views on the topic, Abigail was even more forceful: slavery "always appeared a most iniquitous scheme to me--to fight ourselves for what we are daily robbing and plundering from those who have as good a right to freedom as we have. You know my mind on this subject."

During the Revolutionary War rebel women organized boycotts against British goods, and, 150 years before Gandhi, spun their own thread in defiance of Manchester cloth. Declaring that sugar and coffee are things "female part of the state are loathe to give up," Abigail Adams wrote her husband that about 100 irate women stormed the warehouse of a coffee dealer whom they claimed was hoarding

the precious commodity. She added that "a large concourse of men stood amazed, silent spectators of the whole transaction."

Dolley Madison, wife of President James Madison, was highly skilled in bringing Federalists and Republicans together at presidential dinners. As Roberts states: "It was at least as fiercely as partisan a time as it is now, and she just kept everybody from getting so furious with each other that they would just decamp completely."

Charles Pinckney, who lost to Madison in the 1808 election, declared that "I was beaten by Mr. and Mrs. Madison. I might have had a better chance if I had faced Mr. Madison alone." Later in the century historian James G. Blaine argued that had it not been for his wife, Madison would have lost his re-election bid in 1812 to Federalist candidate DeWitt Clinton.

One of Roberts' juiciest discoveries was in a letter by Louisa Catherine Adams, wife of John Quincy Adams. During the long debates about the Missouri Compromise, the good Congressmen managed to father 40 illegitimate children. Louisa Adams proposed that the philanderers donate their $2 per month pay raise to establish a Foundling Hospital for their ill begotten progeny.

As a mother of two writing in her home's playroom and emerging each night to cook dinner, Roberts said that she wrote her books with America's girls in mind. In the same NPR interview, she said that her research also allows us to "get to know the men better, because they are three dimensional when women are writing about them. They're not just bronze and marble."

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