

## ONTO THE NATIONAL STAGE: CONGRESSWOMEN IN AN AGE OF NATIONAL CRISES, 1935–1954

### LESSON PLAN TWO



**RECOMMENDED GRADE LEVEL:** Grades 7 to 12



### OVERVIEW

This activity is designed to accompany the contextual essay “Onto the National Stage: Congresswomen in an Age of National Crisis, 1935–1954,” from the *Women in Congress* website, [history.house.gov/exhibition-and-publications/wic/women-in-congress/](https://history.house.gov/exhibition-and-publications/wic/women-in-congress/). Students have the opportunity to learn more about the women who served in Congress from 1935 to 1954. Students are encouraged to analyze the role women Representatives and Senators played in Congress during this era, as well as the ways in which they may have changed the institution.



### CURRICULUM CONNECTION

- U.S. History, American Government, Social Studies, Women’s History
- Great Depression, New Deal, World War II, Cold War, Women’s Rights Movement, Civil Rights Movement



### OBJECTIVES

1. Students should be able to identify the women who served in Congress from 1935 to 1954.
2. Students should be able to recognize the ways in which women won national elective office from 1935 to 1954.
3. Students should be able to identify important issues and trends surrounding the women who served in Congress from 1935 to 1954.



### LESSON PLAN

1. To help introduce students to the upcoming activity, lead a brief discussion using the questions below:
  - a. What were some of the important issues and events in America from 1935 to 1954?
  - b. If asked to describe an average Member of Congress (House or Senate) during this time period, how would you answer?
  - c. Have there been many women who have served in Congress? (Ask students to compile a quick list.)
2. Ask students to read the contextual essay “Onto the National Stage: Congresswomen in an Age of National Crises, 1935–1954,” either independently or in groups. Encourage students to take notes and to write down any unanswered questions they encounter during the reading.
3. Once students have completed the reading, have them answer the **Comprehension Questions**. Review the answers as a class.
4. After reviewing the answers to the **Comprehension Questions**, have students answer the **Critical Thinking Questions**. Review the answers as a class.
5. Choose one of the options listed under the category **Main Exercise** (Cooperative or Hypothetical). If necessary, students can use the online resources listed at the bottom of this page to complete the **Main Exercise**.
6. Time permitting, conduct one of the **Suggested Extended Activities**.



## COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS ON THE SURFACE

1. Who was the first woman elected to both the House and the Senate? In what years did she serve?
2. What made the career of Dixie Bibb Graves of Alabama unique?
3. What role did the “widow’s mandate” play during this era, in terms of providing a route for women into congressional office?
4. One scholar has described this time period as a “long apprenticeship” for women in Congress. Explain what you think this means.
5. What were some of the major legislative issues affecting women Members during this era?
6. How had women’s pre-congressional educational and previous political experience changed in relation to the pioneer generation?
7. Describe one instance in which Congresswomen differed over a bill or major national issue debated in Congress.



## CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS DIGGING DEEPER

1. How do you think World War II changed the role of women in politics?
2. Describe the debate about U.S. participation in World War II from both the isolationist and interventionist standpoint. Provide examples of Congresswomen who stood on opposite sides of this debate.
3. Did women Members of this era typically work within the prescribed traditions of Congress or did they challenge the system? Use evidence to support your answer.
4. Compare and contrast the congressional careers of any two women who served during this period. (Make sure to discuss tenure, legislation, committees, and basic background such as the district or the state in which each woman served.)
5. No longer viewed as media curiosities during this time period simply because of their gender, several Congresswomen gained wide media exposure as spokespersons for their parties. Provide two examples of this phenomenon.
6. How did women’s committee assignments change during this time period?
7. At one point during her brief tenure on the Capitol Hill, Senator Dixie Graves of Alabama remarked, “I’m supposed to be seen perhaps, but certainly not heard.” What does this statement reveal about that challenges women faced in Congress during this period?



## MAIN EXERCISE OPTION 1: COOPERATIVE

Students will be working in groups of 2–4 (depending upon class size). Each group will choose or be assigned a Congresswoman for the activity.

- a. Read the profile for the Congresswoman.
- b. Write down any important notes.
- c. Scenario: Students have been assigned the task of designing a museum exhibit to describe the life of Congresswoman \_\_\_\_\_. The exhibit will include information on all aspects of her life, but will focus on her congressional service.

What should be included:

- Original title of exhibit that helps explain her legacy
- 50-word exhibit label that summarizes congressional career
- Three artifacts chosen by you that best represent her legacy
- A creative teaching tool for museum visitors that covers the highlights of her career in Congress (committees, key legislation, state or district she represented, etc.)

### OPTION 2: HYPOTHETICAL

1. You are a newly elected Congresswoman during World War II, seeking a seat on a committee with oversight of some aspect of military or veterans' affairs. You must appeal to congressional leadership to award you such an assignment. What arguments might you use to persuade your colleagues?
2. You are a Congresswoman during the years immediately following World War II. Your district is urban, working class, and has a large portion of ethnic minorities. What are the issues that you might be likely to address in Congress? What programs might you support to advance the interests of your constituents?
3. You are a Congresswoman in the 1940s who has been asked by the congressional leadership to make a five-minute floor speech in which you must appeal to women to take a greater role in political life. How might you encourage women to participate? Draft a speech and deliver it to your class.

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### SUGGESTED EXTENDED ACTIVITIES

1. Design a timeline of significant events for the women of Congress who served during this era.
2. Track voting records of women Members on key issues of the period.
3. Write a 100-word obituary for one of the women Members.
4. Design a campaign button for a woman candidate for Congress during this period.
5. Draft language for a resolution sponsored by a Congresswoman in the 1940s on one of three fictional topics:
  - a. Allowing women to contribute to the war effort by participating in the military branches. Or, alternately, to call for the U.S. to abstain from intervention in World War II
  - b. Strengthening consumer rights laws.volunteer work prior to their graduation
  - c. Addressing (pro or con) postwar anticommunism in America



## ONLINE RESOURCES

### History, Art & Archives | U.S. House of Representatives

A collaborative project between the Office of the Historian and the Clerk of the House's Office of Art and Archives. Together, the offices serve as the House's institutional memory, and a resource for Members, staff, and the general public.

[history.house.gov](http://history.house.gov)

### Online *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*

Searchable database that contains biographical information on every person who served in Congress.

[bioguide.congress.gov](http://bioguide.congress.gov)

### Senate Historical Office

Includes information on the history and art of the U.S. Senate such as facts and milestones, historical statistics, featured biographies, and a photographic collection.

[senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/Senate\\_Historical\\_Office.htm](http://senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/Senate_Historical_Office.htm)

### Congress.gov | Library of Congress

Searchable database of congressional legislation from 1973 to present (bill text and roll call votes are available from 1989 to present).

[congress.gov](http://congress.gov)

### GPO Federal Digital System

Includes links for searchable databases of the *Congressional Record* and *House Journal* (1994 to present) as well as information on how to find the nearest federal depository library.

[gpo.gov/fdsys](http://gpo.gov/fdsys)