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**U.S. Women Deserve a Federal Public Holiday | COMMENTARY**

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The United States currently celebrates eleven permanent legal public holidays, if you include the quadrennial celebration of Inauguration Day. None of these holidays was created to celebrate women’s achievements (not even Labor Day, which was designated a federal holiday in 1894, when less than 20% of the workforce was female).

With the investiture of a record number of women serving in the 117th Congress and the country’s first female vice president, there is no better time to cement our recognition of female achievement in the federal calendar than now.

Past efforts to acknowledge women’s contributions to the country have fallen embarrassingly short. To date, the most significant federal act recognizing women has been President Nixon’s 1972 “proclamation” at the request of Congress of “Women’s Rights Day,” following the famous Women’s Strike for Equality. In close second is the congressional designation in 1981, and subsequent presidential proclamations, declaring a “Women’s History Week” and eventually designating the month of March as “Women’s History Month” to broadly celebrate achievements of women in United States history.

That was 40 years ago. Since then, neither Congress nor the president has expressed interest in granting women their own public holiday. Legislators have instead on rare occasion sought smaller wins for women — re-purposing already-designated holidays or asking for additional proclamations.

These small attempts to honor women have gone nowhere. In 1993, U.S. Rep. Maxine Waters of California presented legislation requesting the president to issue a proclamation commemorating International Women’s Day. It died in committee. In 2007, 2009 and 2011, Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney of New York presented similar legislation asking for Susan B. Anthony to be added to the list of individuals whose birthdays are celebrated on Presidents Day. That legislation also died in committee.

Even when they succeed, these half measures, such as “Women’s History Month” and “Women’s Rights Day,” lack the national recognition, reflection and respect of a permanent federal holiday. Public holidays are literally etched in Americans’ psyche, appearing on published calendars everywhere. They allow 2.1 million federal employees and several million others whose offices follow the federal calendar, to spend time with their loved ones and, one hopes, take a moment to think about the reasons for that reprieve.

Federal public holidays also project our values to foreign allies, letting them know those causes most important to us. The United States holds itself out as a beacon of equality and democracy. If the rest of the world is to believe this, the United States must practice what it preaches.

But perhaps most simply, women have earned a federal holiday. Women have contributed to the national defense effort during every major war, helped expand our economy and advanced our nation’s literary and artistic heritage. Their contributions have been doubly commendable because they have made these strides while fighting to secure equal rights under the law and equal stature in the eyes of their male peers. All Americans, regardless of gender, should recognize, support and cherish that shared history.

Congress could embrace International Women’s Day on March 8 as a general day of celebrating advances in women’s rights. It’s now a recognized holiday by the United Nations and over 20 other countries, though not by the one from which the idea sprang: ours. The Socialist Party of America started National Women’s Day in 1909, after thousands of women marched for better working conditions and higher wages in New York City; it was the model for the international version, created in 1910.

We could elevate to national stature Equal Pay Day, which aims to educate people on the persistence of the gender wage gap. Or we could elevate Women’s Equality Day (Aug. 26) and celebrate the enactment of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1919, which gave women the right to vote 143 years after Jefferson first wrote — with careful meaning — “All men are created equal.”

We could remember the birthdays of key leaders in the women’s suffrage movement like Susan B. Anthony (Feb. 15), Lucretia Mott (Jan. 3), Elizabeth Cady Stanton (Nov. 12) or Ida B. Wells (July 16). These women were all ahead of their time — politically active, unafraid to be on the wrong side of the law to be on the right side of history.

Congress’ failure to recognize women’s achievements is a relic of an unequal past. Congress should act today, buoyed by the groundswell of support for the women’s movement, the #MeToo era and the growing number of women serving in all branches of government. As our first female vice president has said, as inspiration for young women and girls everywhere, “You’re going to walk into many rooms in your life and career where you may be the only one who looks like you or who has had the experiences you’ve had. But you remember that when you are in those rooms, you are not alone. We are all in that room with you applauding you on.”

Congress, it’s time for you to use your voice. Show these women, girls and everyone who values America as a society of equals one more first — a federal public holiday celebrating a woman.

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