

# **Sex, Power, and Politics**

## **An Introduction to The Congresswomen by Jaime Virostko**

### **Part of History into Theater**

*“By this time, the flag is completely engulfed in flames, the stage filled with smoke. The men are turned toward it, making wild masturbation gestures.” -The Congresswoman, Scene 1*

So concludes the opening scene of *The Congresswoman*, by Jaime Virostko, a fantasia of sex, power, and wit, shot through with moments of humanity. The presence of women on the floor of Congress both enrages and arouses their male colleagues, who are rendered incompetent, with nothing to do but pleasure themselves as the world burns around them. This, the play argues, is what happens when women take positions of power.

*The Congresswomen* centers on a fictional encounter between Clare Boothe Luce and Helen Gahagan Douglas, two women whose terms in the US House of Representatives overlapped in the period from 1945-1947. They were both married to powerful men. Douglas to the movie star, Melvin and Luce, to the media mogul and founder of TIME INCORPORATED, Henry.

Douglas had a big career on Broadway but never made it in Hollywood film endeavors.

LUCE wrote 3 plays in the 1930's and they were all made into movies. KISS THE BOYS GOODBYE, THE WOMEN and MARGIN FOR ERROR.

Despite holding opposing political views, they had a great deal in common. They both had a background in theater, which helped prepare them for the campaign trail and for navigating the political landscape of Washington. They were both piercingly intelligent, savvy, and passionate about their work. They were also beautiful and sexually voracious in a society that expected women to be chaste and demure. The media depicted them as the sirens of a new era, luring men into bed and battle, a narrative which both objectified and empowered them. They were deeply conflicted and desperately lonely. They were, in short, women.

The goal of *History into Theater*, a multi-level media project, is to introduce readers to lesser-known historical figures who have had a profound impact on contemporary culture. Simultaneously, we aim to provide a platform for previously unpublished historical plays. This introduction will provide context and insight into one such play, *The Congresswomen*, a celebration of the lives of two women whose legacies continue to surprise and challenge us, as well as speak to the continued conflicts of contemporary society.

#### ***Sex and Power***

*“The Powder Room is sacred to the women and the men cannot penetrate it.” -  
The Congresswoman*

The majority of the play takes place in the powder room of a Washington hotel. Clare Boothe Luce surprises Helen Gahagan Douglas with her bawdy introduction.

CLARE: *I watched you this week, listening to Truman's 21 Point Reconversion Plan...and I thought, there is a woman with whom I could have a splendid conversation about sex.*

The great playwright, war correspondent, and politician wants to have some girl talk, and she has come to the right place. But, although she desires friendship with Douglas, first she must throw her off balance. By shocking Douglas with her candor, she gives herself the upper hand. In her biography, *The Price of Fame*, Sylvia Jukes Morris describes Luce's tendency to approach friendship this way:

“She had the gift- or curse- of instant intimacy, tending to unburden herself indiscriminately on strangers, regaling them with hilarious or tragic stories from her life, so that they soon came to feel they had known her always. But then they were puzzled when the solid relationship they thought they had established with her evaporated.”

Thus, the central premise of the play - a chance meeting in the Powder Room leading into an all-night gap fest and eventual sharing of souls - is not outside the realm of possibility for Clare. But a penchant for instantaneous intimacy is often coupled with a fear of genuine vulnerability, something Luce struggled with throughout her life. As soon as a friendship grew beyond her needs, she disappeared. As soon as a romantic relationship became serious to threaten her stable albeit unsatisfying marriage, it ended. She had few close friendships with women, so it is not difficult to imagine that she would yearn for this connection, the one-night-stand flavor of friendship. Fortunately for Clare, and for the play, Helen Gahagan Douglas was indeed another woman who understood the pleasures of sex. That, combined with their positions of power, made their very existences fodder for scandal.

Helen Gahagan Douglas once described a woman in Congress as being “sufficiently odd to warrant a place in a zoo or museum.” Indeed, it was not uncommon for there to be whistles and catcalls each time the female members stepped onto the Congress floor. Rather than full members of the congressional body, they were seen as showgirls, there for eye candy and entertainment. In Greg Mitchell's account of Douglas' doomed senate run against Richard Nixon, he describes the prevailing attitude toward women in politics. “Even if a woman candidate was the political equal of a man, still a dubious assumption, she was *different*.” By the very nature of their womanhood, Douglas and Luce, as well as the eight other women in the House, were united and pitted against each other.

In virtually every other aspect, from politics to personal history, to how they saw fit to address the issue of gender, they were opposed. Luce was a conservative Republican who questioned many of feminism's presumptions, even as she bucked the stereotypes of her day. Douglas was a Democrat who flirted with socialism. The two could not have been more different in their respective approaches to the shared problem of their womanhood, and the stakes for each of

them were dire. Unlike male politicians, for whom second chances were possible, a woman might never recover from a political misstep, a fact of which both of them were acutely aware. As Kyle Palmer of the Los Angeles Times wrote, it wouldn't be too hard to "defeat (a) lady if he tried - in a political sense of course - to slap her around a bit." Eventually, both women would take and receive many political slaps.

### **Sex and Politics**

HELEN: *In addition to our admiration for President Roosevelt, we are of one philosophical mind and soul.*

CLARE: *Oh, I am fully aware that you are both unwavering New Dealers, right down to your bleeding liberal underwear!*

*-The Congresswomen*

Luce and Douglas were both beautiful in a time when a woman's worth was measured by her physical attraction. They also both chose to enter politics, a field dominated by men. Soon, a narrative formed attempting to meld their looks with their politics. "Soon reporters were calling them the glamour gals of their respective parties and portraying them as arch rivals. Gahagan called this talk 'nonsense and an insult to the American people.'" But the assessment wasn't *entirely* false. They were in no way personal enemies, but their politics could not have been farther apart. Luce was a former war correspondent, whose experience reporting behind the lines of WWII filled her with patriotic pride and an unflinching dedication to the American Cause. "She wanted German and Italian Fascism destroyed, Japanese expansionism brought to an end, and international Communism's threat to democracy curbed." Meanwhile Douglas had earned herself a reputation for associating with the most Left-wing fringes of the Democratic Party. Later on, Richard Nixon would use this reputation to crush her in the 1950 Senate race, even going so far as to accuse her of having Communist sympathies. While she denied any connection with the American Communist Party, she was destined to be yet another victim of the Red Scare. This account is well presented in the book, TRICKY DICK AND THE PINK LADY.

But all this was to happen after the events of this play. For now, Clare is more interested in Helen's relationship with then-Representative Lyndon Johnson, another passionate supporter of The New Deal and champion of Roosevelt. But their relationship seems to be something more than professional, as Helen has spent all night waiting for his arrival. Clare is not one to miss such a scintillating detail, but Helen isn't ready to give much away - not yet at least. This highlights a key difference in personality between the two women. Helen Gahagan Douglas tried, in spite of the limitations on her womanhood, to separate her private and political life. She wanted to separate her gender from her politics, asking, "Why all this emphasis on the sexes anyway, in a serious thing like the government?" Clare Boothe Luce believed that no such separation was possible. Gender was as relevant to her as it was to the men in Congress.

“Clare Boothe Luce was not a strict feminist. She had succeeded in a man’s world and believed that women were entitled to careers if they wanted them. But she was also an accomplished seductress, having married once, if not twice, for money, social position, and power.” Luce was highly sensitive to the fact that her gender could be used both to her advantage and to her disadvantage. She had no problem using her charm and beauty to beguile her male colleagues, but she refused to appear as a champion for women, believing that it would undermine her credibility. She was determined to keep other women at arm’s length. Douglas was the opposite; she wanted nothing more than to be a hero for women. In one incident, during a statement from Congresswoman Mary Norton about a fair-employment bill, a group of Southern Democrats escaped to a men’s-only meeting room off the man floor. Rather than allow another woman’s statement to go ignored, Douglas “rose, rushed to the men’s den, flung open the door, and exclaimed, ‘If you’d ever get on the side of God there isn’t anything we couldn’t do!’”

So, it’s only natural that, finding themselves together in the sacred space of the Congressional Powder Room, they would each have different ideas about how to pass the time. In *The Congresswomen*, Helen Gahagan tries to keep the conversation away from sex and onto politics, even taking the opportunity to invite Luce to co-sign a nuclear energy bill. Luce, rejects the idea outright.

*CLARE: I can see it now! Broadway Dames put aside party to stand with mothers every where!...I don’t want to be pigeonholed and working with you - in any capacity - would be the fastest way to find myself labeled and dismissed.*

Clare felt no innate sisterly bond with other political women. Earlier in life, she had spent a mere ten days crusading for equal rights with Alice Paul and her National Woman’s Party. But she left in disgust when she discovered that some of her fellow campaigners were lesbians. She expected women to behave like women, even when circumstances required them to step up and lead. She even went so far as to assert that women had a biological need to procreate and nurture. No doubt this reactionary streak was disappointing to Douglas, who took a great deal of pride in her role as a barrier-breaker.

Perhaps the most striking example of the difference between their approach to femininity lies in their respective relationships with a man named Bernard Baruch. Baruch was a Wall Street speculator, political donor, and friend of FDR. He was known for making lavish political donations to women whom he found attractive. Although his politics differed from Luce’s, the two had a longstanding, sexually intense affair. What may well have begun as a simple case of sex for political favors, evolved into a relatively longstanding relationship with genuine enjoyment, if not affection, from both parties. He’s presented laviciously in *The Congresswomen*, licking his lips to prepare for oral sex.

*BERNARD: If you would be so kind, Ms. Clare to disrobe and lay yourself across this desk. The kitchen, I am afraid, is closed and your Big Daddy is starving*

Years later, when Helen Gahagan Douglas was in the throes of her brutal race against Richard Nixon, she was presented with an opportunity to meet Baruch herself. By now, she was being whalloped in the press and her campaign was starved for funds. There was no implication that she would be required to have sex with Baruch; a little flirting would have been enough. Nevertheless, Douglas refused to meet him, saying "It would be wonderful to get some money out of Bernie Baruch, but if it means I have to be present in order to get it, I am afraid it is out."

While this incident goes far to elucidate the differences in the two women's characters, it does little to explain *why* they were so different. Their divergent backgrounds shed important light on their differing perspectives. For Luce, early life was one of struggle. The best way for a woman to escape poverty, she learned, was through sex. Sex was the only power a woman had, and anyone who has felt true hunger is never too proud to use it. Douglas, in contrast, grew up privileged. She learned that life, though challenging at times, was full of possibility and that home would always be safe.

### **Early Life and Theatrical Success**

*"I don't know of any other member of Congress who spent their summer recess performing in Candida or any play for that matter!"*

-Helen, *The Congresswomen*

Clare Boothe was born in 1903 to unmarried parents in a then-undesirable section of New York's Upper West Side. Her father, Franklin Booth was a talented musician who was, like so many talented musicians, down on his luck and working as a part-time salesman. He was married to another woman - his second wife - when he met Anna Clara Schneider, who was beautiful and only half his age. They had two children together, but never married. The couple moved from Memphis to Nashville to Chicago chasing his music career, before Anna finally gave up and left him. Back in New York, she survived on the generosity of a series of wealthy lovers. "The most generous of her gentlemen callers was Joel Jacobs, a Jewish industrialist. He helped finance city apartments for her, as well as a summer house in Sound Beach, Connecticut, and paid the private school fees of both children." Thus, Clare entered into a life of relatively luxury, but not necessarily respectability. Observing her mother trade sex for stability informed her perception of human sexuality and the hypocritical aspects of high society morality. This served her both artistically and politically, at the great cost of her personal happiness. Her searing wit and cutting portrayals of society's upper echelons lead first lady Eleanor Roosevelt to declare she would one day be one of the greatest American playwrights, "when the bitterness of the experiences which she has evidently had are out of her system."

In contrast, Helen Gahagan was "raised in Park Slope, Brooklyn, in a prosperous Republican, and socially prominent Scotch-Irish family." Her father, a prominent civil engineer, was a devoted, honest, and generous man. He loved debating with his children, including his daughter, and he instilled a strong sense of moral discipline. When the rebellious Helen began

cutting classes at Barnard to audition for acting jobs, he was worried about her future prospects as an uneducated woman. But Helen insisted that a career in the theater was the only life for her, and he allowed her to try it. Fortunately for both of them, Helen was extremely talented.

Helen Gahagan became a Broadway star at only twenty-two, receiving rave reviews for both her beauty and her acting. Having been the center of attention in her own family, and the apple of her father's eye, the spotlight came easily to her - perhaps too easily. Helen Gahagan was restless and easily bored, soon growing tired of Broadway. She attempted a career in opera, where she achieved only moderate success. From there, she moved to film, and eventually back to Broadway. By the end of the 1920's, she was ready for a new career altogether.

Clare Boothe's path to the stage was less direct and certainly more challenging. She published *Stuffed Shirts*, her first collection of short stories, in 1931. This was the first window into her signature satirical style, mocking the upper class with searing intensity. Her first play, however, was a flop. *Abide With Me*, was far too earnest for her talents, an attempt at a marital love story from someone who clearly didn't believe in marital love. However, she quickly followed up with her greatest stage triumph, *The Women*. This groundbreaking satire featured a cast of 40 women who blast the men in their life with a bitterness that betrayed her true genius. Her personal experiences observing her mother's many relationships, always existing on the fringes of society, provided her with a unique ability to peer under the skirts, if you will, of the wealthiest women in New York. She followed her success with *Kiss the Boys Goodnight* and *Margin for Error*, which mocked Nazi ideology. Before long, she had moved on to writing for *Vogue* and editing for *Vanity Fair*. Hard work and a searing wit maintained her throughout her writing career and into Congress.

### **Sex and Marriage and Escaping All That**

*"Then, a few years into our marriage, a cold draft began to creep in. I found out that he was having an affair. He suggested that we divorce. I refused and...I supposed I closed off a part of myself, tight like a fist."*

*-Helen, The Congresswomen*

Helen Gahagan met Melvyn Douglas during a production of *Tonight or Never*, where their chemistry was so palpable that audience members commented, that they ought to get married right away, in order to avoid a scandal. By now, she was already past thirty and had a series of prior lovers, including the actor Tyrone Power Sr. Most of her friends and family assumed she would never marry or have children. After all, at the age of thirty she was virtually an old maid. However, Gahagan loved defying assumptions almost as much as she loved Melvyn. The two were engaged. Much against the custom of her time, Gahagan kept her maiden name, even offstage. She defiantly told a reporter that she would not be cooking and sewing for her husband. "Anybody can roast chicken... But I won't be that kind of wife... I'm going to be the most devoted, loving wife in the world, but never a housewife!"

Melvyn was Helen's first introduction to leftist politics. He was an intellectual and had once associated with socialist leader Eugene Debs. Prior to her marriage, Helen Gahagan considered herself conservative like her family. However, she soon became captivated with her husband's political activities. He was involved in several anti-fascist organizations in Hollywood, campaigned for Roosevelt, and took Helen along on tours of migrant workers camps. Helen's eyes were opened, for the first time, to a quality of life very different from the one she grew up with. When her characteristic restlessness arose once again, she knew exactly where to put her energy. Politics was her true love, and when she finally took to it, she quickly surpassed even the man who had brought her to it.

Luce's path to marriage was demonstrably different, having originally taken her mother's advice to marry the first wealthy man who showed interest in her. She had several love affairs in her early years, including a passionate teenage romance with an English Navy Officer named Julian Simpson. The two were deeply in love, but Luce turned down an offer of marriage because neither of them were wealthy. She eventually married George Tuttle Brokaw, an alcoholic millionaire twice her age. They had a very brief and extremely unhappy marriage that resulted in one child and a lot of alimony. She remained single through the publication of her first book up to her hiring at *Vanity Fair*.

Clare met Henry Robinson Luce while working at *Vanity Fair*. He was owner and editor-in-chief of *Time* and *Life* magazines and already married with two children. But Clare had no fear of scandal and the two pursued their love affair with abandon. Luce soon left his wife and married Clare, a match they both sincerely believed would bring them happiness. But this happiness was not destined to last. "His (Harry's) frankly admitted problem was that having put her on a pedestal, he felt it was sacrilegious- at least according to his Presbyterian scruples- to have sex with someone so sanctified." Soon after their union ceased to be illicit, their sex life fizzled. Clare, who had come to expect sexual satisfaction more than happiness, never understood her husband's scruples. She describes her disappointment to Helen in the Powder Room this way:

CLARE: "Oh sweet angel!" he'd call out and bury his face in my breasts like a boy. I'd shout, "For God's sake Harry, just fuck me!!" It wasn't long into our marriage that he couldn't perform.

Once it became evident that her attempt at marital bliss had failed, she fell back on her old habits and beliefs of seeking male companionship elsewhere. Thus, began her storied career and legendary parade of sexual conquests. "Clare hankered for the intensity of her teenage romance... and was nostalgic about her later affair with Bernard Baruch... She had enjoyed a few European assignations with Joseph P. Kennedy... and was in the second year - mainly epistolary now - of her romance with General Charles Willoughby."

Clare had a romp with novelist Roald Dahl - known for classics such as *Matilda*, *The BFG*, and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. In the 1940's, Dahl, a former RAF fighter pilot, was working as a spy on US soil. He was part of a team sanctioned by Winston Churchill, that operated out of Rockefeller Center. It included David Ogilvy and the James Bond creator, Ian Fleming. They

were led by the shadowy Canadian millionaire, William Stevenson, portrayed by David Niven in the film, *A Man Called Intrepid*. They were tasked with getting America into WW 2. The beloved children's author was known for a bevy of sexual conquests, especially women connected to politics and large fortunes. He would play them for information during pillow-talk. Luce, however, proved to be too much for him. Dahl complained of being "worn out" by her sexual appetite, an incident which she brags about in the play:

CLAIRE: *Once, I locked him in my hotel room for thirty-six hours. By the time I was satisfied, his prick was sore, his tongue was sprained and he had to be put to stall wet."*

Truly, there was no match for Clare Boothe Luce in all of Washington.

Helen's marriage was happier than Luce's, but that isn't a particularly impressive standard. Melvyn Douglas soon came to resent his wife's political success, an unfortunate reality that put a damper on their sex life even as they continued to maintain a close friendship and a unified front. Unlike Luce, Helen had but one known affair. Her long-standing relationship with then-congressman Lyndon Johnson was in many ways the bedrock of her political career. He was not only a lover, but also a mentor, ally, and friend. One could argue that her relationship with Lyndon Johnson came to replace her marriage, at least while she was in Washington DC. In *The Congresswomen*, after Clare finally gets Helen to open up about her sex life, she describes her marriage in this way:

HELEN: *Melvyn brought Lyndon up, rather awkwardly when I saw him in New York last month. He was trying to catch the look on my face. He knows, but he didn't confront me. He seemed relieved, as if he felt less guilty about the times he has been unfaithful to me.*

CLARE: *I know that relief.*

Guilt and loneliness pursued both women throughout their lives. All of Clare's romances, even the most passionate, fizzled eventually and she stayed married to Harry until his death. Helen likewise stayed married, and her relationship with Johnson would one day rupture over her opposition to the Vietnam war. But that wouldn't be for several years. For now, we find them both in the midst of illicit romances, trying their best to keep it together amidst the endless pulls of motherhood, marriage, and country.

### **The Trials of Motherhood**

*"I deposited Ann with her grandmother time and again to go off on some frivolous pursuit. I stuck her in boarding schools because I was too busy to raise her."*

*-Clare, The Congresswomen*



The “frivolous pursuits” Clare mentions here involved reporting behind the lines of the Second World War and voting in Congress. But as fundamentally important as these duties were, they were irrelevant to what Clare considered the essential task of womanhood: raising your children.

Aside from physical beauty, a woman’s ability to create a warm, loving home was the primary indicator of her personal worth. While Helen Gahagan Douglas was more progressive than Clare in certain aspects, she also couldn’t shake the demands of motherhood. “She often packed her children off to school in the morning (after braiding her daughter’s hair), something few congressmen had to do.” On one occasion, Douglas reportedly left Congress early to pick up a pair of pajamas simply because her daughter had requested them. The girl was tired of all her clothes coming from catalogues, and demanded something that Helen picked herself. Rather than reprimanding her daughter, Helen obliged her. Clearly, the guilt of being a working mother was never far from her mind.

Clare, for her part, had a complicated relationship with her children. Ann adored her mother, who was everything she wished she could be: beautiful, witty, charming, and intelligent. Unfortunately, Ann took after her father in everything except his alcoholism. She was average looking, of average intelligence, with above average musical abilities. She did inherit her mother’s self-loathing, once stating, “I have none of Mother’s versatility or brains. I’m so mediocre it hurts and I get dumber (and less hair I might add) all the time.” Like Clare, Ann had a series of suitors as a young woman, but she wasn’t particularly taken with any of them. None measured up to her own mother’s lover, General Willoughby, with whom she was quite taken. Her feelings for Willoughby, however, were less romantic than evidence of a young woman starved for attention. The General responded to Ann’s letters, while Clare did not.

Ann Brokaw regularly wrote to Clare begging her to respond with news - any news - about her life. Eventually she would turn her frustration inward, writing, “Forgive all my stupid little letters in which I normally ask you to write me! Somehow I always forget how very busy you are... until I get a batch of clippings!” As with everyone she loved most, Clare pushed her daughter away. But despite her outward show of callousness, she loved her dearly. Her greatest flaw was a deep fear of vulnerability, of displaying softness. This failing would prove to be her greatest regret.

### **Tragedy and Regret**

*“If I had known I would have had her for such a short time, I would’ve said the hell with running for Congress and taking off to Europe to cover the war... I would’ve been with her, every second of every day until God took her from me.”*

*-Clare, The Congresswomen*

Clare Boothe Luce was almost as terrified of automobiles as she was of vulnerability. Having lost her mother in a car accident, she frequently warned Ann about the dangers of driving recklessly. In one of the few letters in which she reveals her true feelings for her daughter, she

wrote, "Please, please, please drive more carefully...It would be a stupid, meaningless world without my Annie in it." Only weeks later, Ann was flung from her friend's 1941 Mercury into a tree. There is always guilt when confronted with death. In *The Congresswomen* she tries to communicate her sense of personal responsibility to Helen.

CLARE: *Oh God! Another body mutilated on the tracks underneath Locomotive Clare. I should have stayed with Ann's father. I deserved a man like George Brokaw! I deserved to be knocked around!*

HELEN: *Clare, I don't believe your being nice or not nice in the past had anything to do with your daughter's death.*

Helen's response is as futile as it is reasonable. Logic has no place in the realm of grief.

As is often the case, this tragedy brought a temporary healing of the rift between Clare and Henry, who had been estranged for a year. Letters from this period show them using their old pet names for each other, an echo of earlier days when they were in love. Although Ann was not his daughter, Harry had loved her as such, and their grief over her loss was the one thing they shared. But this newfound closeness wasn't nearly enough to stave off Clare's crippling depression. Soon, she abandoned her personal appearance, which had always been a top priority. She struggled with eating, rapidly losing weight until she was frail and weak. While the closeness with Henry inevitably faded, the yawning dissatisfaction with her life remained. Before long, Clare fell back into her own patterns. Sex and politics would fill the void. They had to.

### **Women at War**

*We were a hair's breadth out of a Depression, Mrs. Luce, and wars are costly affairs.*  
*-Helen, The Congresswomen*

After her daughter's death, Clare Boothe Luce took another trip to the war front. While there, she met with wounded soldiers and began an affair with General Lucian K. Truscott, Jr. Their attraction was so instantaneous and intense that, when it was time for her to return to the United States, she asked if he could arrange for her to miss her flight. He could.

While her war-time romance was a welcome distraction, there were two events during her tour that made a far deeper impression, each a portent of things to come. The first was when Clare received the opportunity to sit in on an audience with Pope Pius XII. She was deeply impressed by this encounter. Afterward, "she chose not to accompany the delegation on a tour of the Sistine Chapel, and went instead to an orphanage where hundreds of young refugees were being housed by the Vatican." While there, she met an eight-year-old boy named Augusto. Still reeling from the loss of her daughter, her motherly instincts kicked in full-force and, for once in her life, she did not resist. She bought him new clothes, placed him in a fancy boarding school, and arranged for him to have music lessons. She would continue paying for his tuition and

board for the following decade. Whether conscious or not, her relationship with Augusto was an opportunity to try again at motherhood.

The second significant event took place on Christmas Day. By then, Clare and General Truscott were attached at the hip, and she had well overstayed any respectable explanation for her presence on the warfront. She asked Truscott to take her to the forwardmost posts where, as she described, *there is no Christmas*. They bypassed security lines and rode his jeep through the Futa Pass. There, she beheld a large congregation of GIs kneeling in the snow before a priest as he held the Eucharistic wafer high in the air. It was Christmas mass on the battle front. Clare, who was raised Protestant but had no particular religious devotion, found herself nevertheless floored by the sight. She later reported a spontaneous prayer running across her mind. "Dear Christ, have compassion on those kids... and if it's all the same to You, let me share their sacrifices." Clare found inspiration in these young soldiers, who somehow kept their faith despite the carnage surrounding them. She yearned to be like them. She returned home with a renewed commitment to the war effort and a seed planted in her heart.

While Clare Boothe Luce was having sexual and spiritual experiences on the front lines, Helen Gahagan Douglas was serving as the National Democratic committeewoman for California. While she remained active in her husband's various anti-fascism activities, she was fast becoming Eleanor Roosevelt's most important protegee. After an overnight stay at the White House, she returned to California as the First Lady's unofficial representative of The New Deal. While she supported the effort abroad, she focused her energies on the war at home. Poverty, inequality, and social injustice were her chief enemies. While popular at the time, her record during this period would be the primary stumbling block to her later political aspirations. Never mind that she was acting on the will of the President of the United States, her devotion to New Deal policies and her vocal support of Civil Rights would tie her irrevocably to Communism. This, despite the fact that her husband fought in the war.

Melvyn was drafted in 1942 and sent to India, leaving Helen alone for the first time in their marriage. Left to her own devices, she became even more politically active and, unsurprisingly, grew bored with her current role and wanted more. Soon, the Roosevelts were encouraging her to run for Congress. "FDR told Vice President Henry Wallace that he wanted Gahagan to offset the Republican congresswoman from Connecticut, Clare Boothe Luce, who also had a famous husband." And, so began the legendary, albeit contrived, rivalry. Douglas rented an apartment in the poor African American Watts neighborhood of LA to establish legal residency and won the election.

Douglas joined Congress in January of 1945, while her husband was still away at war. Comparisons to Luce were immediate, as were articles about her clothes and makeup. But her politics were not nearly as popular as her appearance. The wing where she had her office, along with several other progressive congressmen, became known as *Red Gulch*. Her personality was abrasive and, unlike Luce, she refused to use her feminine charm to ingratiate herself to anyone. On one incident, "She loudly hissed a colleague on the floor of the House -

the powerful John Rankin of Mississippi - when he blamed many U.S. casualties in World War II on the ineptitude of Negro soldiers.” The fact that she was right did little to abate the political backlash of daring to hiss a respected man. She failed to pass a single piece of legislation.

Douglas did succeed in making small strides toward Civil Rights within the limits of Capitol Hill. She was the first white member of Congress to hire a black secretary, a young woman named Juanita Terry. She also succeeded in integrating the House cafeteria. But these moves were largely symbolic and to some degree condescending. They had no impact on the lived realities of black Americans. In *The Congresswoman*, Clare blasts her with her signature vitriol.

CLARE: *Why Miss Helen, you white folks is so wise and those lynchin's don't hurt a bit.*

### **Faith and Redemption**

*Do you honestly believe that God requires you to give up being a woman?*

*-Helen, The Congresswomen*

The most surprising turn in the life of Clare Booth Luce wasn't a sexual conquest or a political takedown. It was her sudden and, to those around her, inexplicable, conversion to Catholicism.

Clare experienced recurring bouts of depression after Ann's death. She was also haunted by her experiences on the warfront, “the Japanese air attacks on Chungking, the horrific sight of dead babies ‘bobbing like apples’ in a Mandalay moat, the head of an old Englishwoman protruding from a pile of V-2 wreckage... and skeletal figures wandering dazed and aimless about Buchenwald.” She struggled with insomnia, spending many nights alone pacing her dark room. On one such night, she happened to pick up a letter from a Jesuit priest with whom she had been exchanging letters for years. (He had first written to her to applaud her work with war orphans.) On a whim, she called him and, although it was the middle of the night, he picked up. Father Edward Wiatrak, S.J. knew he was in way over his head, but he also knew who could help: Monsignor Fulton J. Sheen.

Fulton Sheen was a few years off from becoming a household name, but he already had a sizable radio audience among American Catholics. Clare had never heard of him. Still, she agreed to meet and was impressed to find that Monsignor Sheen met her questions, fears, and anger with an unflinching empathy. He walked her through the Catechism of the Catholic Church, using something akin to the Socratic method, eventually leading Clare to accept the faith. Describing these conversations years later, Cardinal Sheen recalled, “No man could go to Clare and argue her into the faith. God had to knock her over.”

Clare understood the consequences such a conversion would have on her life. Catholicism was still extremely unpopular in political circles, despite being the largest denomination in the United States. Meanwhile her husband detested Catholicism. Far from repairing damage done from her

previous infidelities, her newfound faith was a further rift in their marriage. But Clare wasn't joining the Church to save her marriage. She was doing it to save herself.

### **Sex and Power - Another Round Please**

*You helped me a great deal tonight, for which I am grateful, Mrs. Douglas. Perhaps we can stop by Lyndon's apartment on the way home. We can throw rocks at his bedroom window to see if he'll come out to play.*

*-Clare, The Congresswomen*

Clare Boothe Luce's political career ended with her conversion, but she continued to write for the rest of her life. Helen Gahagan Douglas would remain in Congress until 1950, when her ill-fated run for Senate would end with her reputation demolished by Richard Nixon. Both women would return to the theater for a time. But their legacies would extend far beyond their individual achievements.

They entered politics at a time when doing so was in and of itself a political statement. While they differed in political philosophy, they were united in a shared vision of the future where options for women were abundant and gender was not an impediment to success. That future has not yet come. Women still make up less than a quarter of Congress. When working similar roles, they make 85 cents for every dollar made by a man. They are still forced to choose between motherhood and career, with inevitable negative consequences if they dare attempt to do both.

As a country, we are more divided than ever. We are no longer able to look past our differences to see how our shared experiences have shaped us. Or perhaps, we never were. The McCarthy era especially demonstrates an intolerance and fear of opposing political ideologies. Today, it is once again frighteningly common for political rivals to prosecute or remove one another from positions. Conversations such as this one, that reach beyond ideology to touch human experience, remain elusive.

Will it ever be possible to meet one another face-to-face in the open air or will such meetings forever be confined to the sacred Powder Room?