

An Open Letter to the University Community from the University Committee on Women

As we have followed the development of the controversy over Carrie Chapman Catt Hall, our committee, like the campus as a whole, has been divided. Many believe that the name should remain on the building because of the important work Mrs. Catt did to procure women's right to vote. Others among us believe that the name should be removed because of racist and xenophobic statements made by Mrs. Catt. The large majority of us, however, are divided within ourselves -- so proud to finally have a large building on this campus named after a woman, an alumna who worked for woman suffrage and world peace -- so heartbroken to recognize that this same woman used political strategies based on racist attitudes.

While women of all races have reason to thank Carrie Chapman Catt for the work she did to make it possible for women to participate in the political process of this country, students, staff and faculty have reason to be angry and hurt that these issues were not fully explored and discussed at the time of the building dedication, or earlier.

The University Committee on Women believes strongly that the building carrying the Catt name must also carry recognition and acknowledgment of the pain caused by racist rhetoric and actions. Those who come to this campus in the future need to know that the harm caused by racism was recognized by those who named the building, even if that recognition came late. Because of this, we endorse the proposal made by Uche Nnadi, that a permanent plaque be mounted in a prominent place in Catt Hall. We recommend text along the following lines, as developed by Uche, opening with a quotation from an African-American suffrage activist such as Ida B. Wells:

Iowa State University recognizes that many prominent leaders of the women's suffrage movement, including Carrie Chapman Catt, used country of origin, class, ethnicity, race and religion to exploit ignorance in their quest to ratify the woman's right to vote. This is a painful fact of history.

Political strategies that manipulate our fears continue today. For tomorrow, let us dedicate ourselves to combat the political rhetoric that manipulates us through our fears of those different from ourselves.

We believe that the controversy surrounding Catt Hall is less about Carrie Chapman Catt than it is about the atmosphere students, faculty and staff of color face every day at Iowa State. Therefore, when we request that the university administration place this plaque in Catt Hall, it is as a starting point only. Much more must be done to make this campus welcoming and responsive to people of color, and we call upon university administrators to commit themselves to specific actions that will allow Iowa State to reach this goal.

cc: Dean Elizabeth Hoffman
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