
Indiana's First Woman in Congress: Virginia E. Jenckes and the New Deal, 1932–1938

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In 1932 Virginia E. Jenckes of Terre Haute became the first woman ever elected to Congress from the state of Indiana. She was to win two more terms, serving for six years, a notable achievement since she was a New Deal Democrat from a conservative congressional district in a generally conservative state; in winning, she defeated a total of three incumbent congressmen. That she was a woman seems not to have been a major handicap, probably because she had been anticipated by a previous generation of women, especially in the Populist movement, who had combined crusades against purported enemies of the public good with eventually successful demands for women's right to participate in the political process.

Jenckes cannot be identified strongly with modern feminism, coming of age as she did after the triumph of women's suffrage and before the most recent phases of the feminist movement. As a woman politician, she was *sui generis*, the product of the special circumstances of western Indiana and the special times of the Great Depression. She did represent, however, an important American political tradition, one that could be summed up in her case by the glib but not inaccurate formula of populism, patriotism, and paranoia.

In describing her background Jenckes gave much attention to her pioneer ancestors but little to her own childhood. Born in Terre Haute in 1878, the daughter of druggist James E. Sommes, she was educated in Terre Haute schools, entering Wiley High School when she was eleven and finishing her education at Coates College in the city. She later said that she wanted to be a professional woman, a physician, but received no support for her dream. Eventually she married Ray Jenckes, a successful grain dealer some thirty-four years her senior.¹

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¹ Various details regarding Jenckes's life can be found in the following sources: (a) the transcript of an extended interview (with Thomas K. Krasean) that she gave in 1967 (Indiana State Library, Indianapolis), hereafter referred to as Jenckes, Interview (1967); (b) a one-page article by Judy Calvert, "A Woman in Congress," *Terre Haute Tribune-Star*, March 4, 1990; (c) an autobiographical sketch

Virginia Jenckes's public life began with the death of her husband in 1921, a change that left her with a young daughter, Virginia, and a large farm as well as her husband's grain business. Managing the farm soon made her aware of the problems common to Hoosier agriculture, especially the periodic flooding of the Wabash River. At one point in the 1920s, as she recalled, the river flooded nine times in fourteen months, causing millions of dollars in damage. When she and neighboring farm owners lost one fight against flooding, they formed the Wabash–Maumee Valley Improvement Association to lobby for public flood control measures, and Jenckes became its secretary. Within a short time the association had some ten thousand paid-up members, providing her with contacts throughout a large area of western Indiana.²

By the late 1920s Jenckes had become involved with Democratic party politics. In June, 1928, a Terre Haute newspaper published a photograph of her and another local woman Democrat standing beside an automobile with a large "AL SMITH" plate on its front; the two were headed to the Democratic national convention in Houston to lobby for the inclusion of a flood control plank in the party platform. In 1930 she considered running for Congress, but she was distracted by a major flood on the Wabash and contented herself with efforts to persuade women to get out to vote for the Democratic ticket.³ Two years later, when she did run, circumstances had shifted strongly in her favor.

By 1932 a deepening depression persuaded many voters that a change in representation was needed. Moreover, the state was forced by the loss of one of its congressional seats under the census of 1930 to remap its congressional districts; the result was a new Sixth Congressional District that stretched northward along the Wabash from Vigo County to Warren County. This change undoubtedly worked to Jenckes's advantage when she ran in the Democratic primary against the incumbent congressman, Courtland C. Gillen. Even though it was less than fifteen years since women had achieved the right to vote, there was no serious objection to her standing for Congress, in part because women had already gained some political prominence within the party; the vice-chairperson of the Vigo County Democratic Committee was Emma May, who herself ran in the primary for a state position.

Gillen's position was weakened not only by the reshuffling of his district and by changing times but by his identification with a failed and increasingly unpopular Prohibition. In contrast, Jenckes

prepared by Jenckes in 1933, Box 1, Virginia E. Jenckes Papers (Indiana State Library); (d) an obituary essay, *Terre Haute Tribune*, January 9, 1975.

² Jenckes, Interview (1967), 7-11; Jenckes, *Autobiographical Sketch* (1933); *Terre Haute Tribune*, June 22, 1928, March 17, 1932; *Shelbyville Democrat*, October 21, 22, 1930.

³ See note 2.

had long favored repeal of the Great Experiment on the grounds that it had denied Hoosier farmers an important market for their grain and produced what she saw as a catastrophic drop in grain prices. In 1932, in the face of collapsing farm incomes, her stand had much popular appeal, and she won the primary with a substantial majority. Gillen, who lived in Greencastle, blamed an unwanted endorsement by the Anti-Saloon League for his failure but accepted his defeat with some grace, calling Jenckes “a nice girl [she was then forty-four years old] and a scrappy scrapper.”⁴

In the fall general election Jenckes ran a strong campaign against her Republican opponent, Fred S. Purnell of Attica, who was also an incumbent congressman (in a district lost in the reorganization). She pledged to support the national Democratic party’s promise to cut federal spending by 25 percent, adding that she also would work to remove the meddlesome presence of the federal bureaucracy from people’s lives. Overall, she called for “a new deal, common honesty in government, and an end of bureaucratic spending” as well as a program to eliminate what she saw as the twin evils afflicting local farmers, namely floods and Prohibition.⁵ Accompanied by her daughter, she roamed the district, giving some two hundred speeches in nearly every township in the ten-county area, the whole campaign costing, by her later estimate, a grand total of \$1,500. Shortly before the election she said, “I campaigned in my own auto and planned my own speeches. If I’m elected, I’ll continue to be my own boss.”⁶

Jenckes easily won the election, taking nearly 60 percent of the vote in populous Vigo County and carrying six of the other nine counties in the district. Her election evoked considerable attention, some of it from the national press, including the *New York Times*. In January, 1933, Minnie H. Williams of Massachusetts predicted that Jenckes would soon be a “woman of national interest,” and an Indianapolis man declared, “most of the women who have gone to Washington had neither your pep nor your brains, and you have in you to make a hit with the American people.” Conscious of the importance of her new role for women, she declared soon after election that she was determined to make “such a record that any member of my own sex will point with pride to the fact that a woman helped to solve the most difficult problems.”⁷

Not all went smoothly. On her first day in the House of Representatives Jenckes provoked a minor crisis by wearing her favorite

⁴ *Terre Haute Tribune*, May 1-5, 1932.

⁵ *Ibid.*, October 23–November 10, 1932.

⁶ *Ibid.*, November 8-10, 1932; Jenckes, Interview (1967), 20; Jenckes, Autobiographical Sketch (1933).

⁷ *Terre Haute Tribune*, November 9-11, 1932; Minnie H. Williams to Jenckes, January 31, 1933, Box 1, Jenckes Papers; Gavin L. Payne to Jenckes, March 14, 1933, *ibid.*; *New York Times*, November 11, 1934, section IV, p. 7.



Mrs. Virginia E. Jenckes

Democratic Candidate For

CONGRESS

Sixth District



over

**TWO-SIDED CAMPAIGN CARD FROM VIRGINIA E.
JENCKES'S FIRST ELECTION, 1932**

Mrs. Virginia E. Jenckes, of Terre Haute, Indiana, Democratic candidate for Congress, is a very highly respected business woman. She owns and personally oversees the farming of 1000 acres of land near Terre Haute. Her qualifications as a business woman cannot be questioned and her ability to serve the people of this district as a Member of Congress is above reproach. She will do all in her power to aid the farmer, the laborer and the business man from their present distress if she is elected.

Mrs. Jenckes' nomination came by personal effort and through the votes of the people who knew her and trusted in her ability to serve.

Mrs. Jenckes does not believe in the open saloon and never wants to see its return. Her position in favor of the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment is taken because she knows that conditions under the present rule are leading to disaster. She never drinks intoxicating liquors and never expects to.

She is a friend of the ex-service men and favors payment of the bonus.

If there ever was a time when a change is needed for the betterment of conditions and when the people need help and personal representation in Congress and in the nation, it is today.

A vote for Virginia E. Jenckes does not mean the return of the open saloon—it means the end of the bootlegging industry, better times for everyone and the return of the government to the common people.

over

red hat, unwittingly violating a House rule against wearing hats. On the whole, however, she won favorable notice both in Washington, D.C., and back home. In June, 1933, she attracted attention by flying back to Terre Haute to lend her support to the repeal of Prohibition, landing at the city's airport with Eleanor Roosevelt, who was flying on to California. Later, she was to say that the president's wife was "a peculiar person. I never liked her." On the other hand, she was charmed by the president himself and attempted to win his notice. In September, 1933, after seeing a picture of FDR seated at a desk on which an elephant stood, she sent him a little pottery rooster, declaring proudly that in the last election "the rooster had put the elephant out of business," a bit of partisan symbolism that won her some national attention.⁸

Jenckes planned to get her congressional career off to a fast start. In her campaign she had pledged to give her special attention to the relief of the depressed farmer in the conviction, as she put it later, that "no nation can be a great nation until that nation protects the producers of the food." Deciding that the problem was not overproduction but inadequate demand, she began to consult with experts on such matters as the use of cornstalks in the production of paper and on the mixture of grain alcohol with gasoline to produce motor fuel. In March, 1933, she attempted to organize "The National Committee for Development of Greater Use of Farm Products," declaring that she had "assurance of support from powerful national interests" and that the committee's work "will be a big thing for our Indiana farmers as well as corn farmers throughout America." Nothing came of this, however, because she could not persuade key people to serve on her committee.⁹

Jenckes's efforts to find new uses for agricultural commodities essentially ended at this point. She showed far greater persistence in her efforts to protect Wabash Valley farmers and other interests from the menace of flooding. In the summer of 1933 she began a push for an \$18,000,000 appropriation for flood control, telling President Roosevelt that the government "can make no greater contribution for the permanent Industrial Recovery of the State of Indiana." She backed her effort by getting her constituents to blitz the president with telegrams supporting flood control. In arguing the need for a federal program, she said that the local levee-building efforts of farmers like herself had been defeated because

⁸ Crawfordsville *Journal*, June 5, 1933; Jenckes, Interview (1967), 65; Jenckes to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, September 12, 1933, Box 1, Jenckes Papers; New York *Times*, September 19, 1933, p. 23.

⁹ Crawfordsville *Journal*, November 9, 1932; Jenckes to M. C. Eliot, February 11, 1933, to Otto P. Deluse, March 10, 1933, to Dr. O. R. Sweeney, April 6, 1933, and to Lyman J. Briggs, July 25, 1933, and memo of telephone conversation with Gavin L. Payne, March 10, 1933, Box 1, Jenckes Papers; Payne to Jenckes, March 14, 1933, and Otto P. Deluse to Jenckes, March 10, 1933, *ibid.*

no systematic effort had been made to control flood waters above their projects.¹⁰

Jenckes was able to persuade the Army Corps of Engineers to support a comprehensive plan of flood control for the Wabash and White rivers, a combined drainage area that she said included "22,000 square miles of the richest and most productive country in America." When in June the House began consideration of the appropriation for the Wabash region, it chose Jenckes to preside over the session. Eventually, after a disappointing defeat in the Senate, a bill containing the \$18,000,000 appropriation was enacted into law. By 1938, in her last term, Jenckes was attempting to use flood control as the basis for a new appropriation to improve navigation on the Wabash.¹¹

Jenckes's campaign for flood control was one of her various efforts to meet the needs of her constituents. Besides using her influence to get government money for the construction of post offices and other projects, she supported policies suited to the varied needs of people within her district. In 1933, for instance, she gave some special attention to veterans by fighting to have the Indiana contingent of the Bonus March on Washington provided with government housing and announcing that she favored government assistance for destitute and handicapped former soldiers. To protect the dairy industry she fought to retain a duty on imported coconut oil used in oleomargarine, and she also intervened to prevent the foreclosure of an Indiana farmer's mortgage by the Federal Land-Bank.¹²

Although Jenckes was particularly anxious to establish herself as a champion of agriculture, she also sought the support of organized labor, especially the railroad brotherhoods and the American Federation of Labor. Among other things she insisted that "Indiana mined coal" be used in federal relief work in the state. Since Vigo County had a substantial black minority, she gave some thought to them as well, citing as an example her effort to save a "colored" orphanage in Washington, D.C., as well as her support of programs which benefited all races. Overall, she promised to get "the story of our Sixth district before Congress, the terrible plight of

¹⁰ Jenckes to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, July 17, 1933, to James A. Farley, July 17, 1933, to Harold Ickes, July 24, 1933, and to Frances Perkins, August 28, 1933, *ibid.*

¹¹ *Congressional Record*, 74 Cong., 1 sess., 1935, LXXIX, pt. 4, p. 4185; *ibid.*, 75 Cong., 1 sess., 1937, LXXXI, pt. 7, p. 7243; *Terre Haute Tribune*, June 11, 1933, April 30, 1936; M. C. Tyler to Jenckes, October 13, 1938, Box 1, Jenckes Papers.

¹² *Congressional Record*, 73 Cong., 1 sess., 1933, LXXVII, pt. 3, pp. 3287-88; *ibid.*, 2 sess., 1934, LXXVIII, pt. 4, pp. 4185-86; Virginia E. Jenckes, "The AAA from the Viewpoint of a Farmer who is a member of Congress," undated speech, Box 3, Jenckes Papers; James T. Patterson, *Congressional Conservatism and the New Deal* (Lexington, Ky., 1967), 3-6.

our destitute veterans, the threatened loss of homes and farms, business and industry."¹³

During her three terms Jenckes was a loyal supporter of New Deal policies. She voted with the substantial majorities in the House of Representatives that passed bills for work relief, farm supports, public housing, organized labor, banking regulation, the Civilian Conservation Corps, Social Security, and other basic components of a "new deal" much different from the one she had favored in 1932. Generally, she was indistinguishable from the mass of Roosevelt Democrats, but a few of her votes signaled some special aspects of her future. In her first term, for instance, she voted against the majority for an investigation into the alleged immoralities of the motion picture industry and against subsidies for tobacco growers. Later, she joined with majorities in supporting bills to outlaw lynchings and to investigate sit-down strikes.¹⁴

By 1935 Jenckes had developed two themes that were to define the rest of her congressional career. The first was her self-identification as a champion of women's interests and as someone who could bring special feminine insights to national legislation. During her campaign for renomination in 1934, she had won the endorsement of the National Woman's party and, after her primary victory, she responded by observing that since women had helped her win she would especially work for them. In Congress she advocated complete political equality for women, including the opportunity to be president, and frequently reminded her colleagues that women were half of the American electorate. On a more personal level, during the summer of 1935 she protested strongly the removal from the House gallery of a spectator who was nursing her baby in public, joining with Senator Hattie Carroway of Arkansas to point out that Congress had no rule against the public nursing of babies.¹⁵

By later standards, though, Jenckes was not a radical feminist. She seems to have had no interest, for instance, in the Woman's Division of the Democratic National Committee, which under the lead of Molly Dewson lobbied for women's interests within the party. Generally, she stressed traditional gender distinctions, notably that women had long played a special role in civilization as

¹³ *Congressional Record*, 73 Cong., 1 sess., 1933, LXXVII, pt. 4, pp. 4093-94, pt. 6, p. 5688; *ibid.*, 2 sess., 1934, LXXVIII, pt. 10, pp. 10962-64; A. E. Gordon to Jenckes, May 10, 1934, Box 1, Jenckes Papers; Jenckes to Citizens of the Sixth Congressional District, October 26, 1934, *ibid.*; *Terre Haute Tribune*, October 16, 27, 28, 31, 1934.

¹⁴ This classification of Jenckes as a New Deal Democrat is based on some fifty votes recorded in the *Congressional Record* on major issues in the 73th, 74th, and 75th congresses.

¹⁵ Alice Pound to Mrs. Hereford Dugan, May 1, 1934, Box 1, Jenckes Papers; Jenckes to the National Woman's party, May 10, 1934, *ibid.*; Jenckes to Harold Butcher, February 15, 1936, Box 2, *ibid.*



VIRGINIA E. JENCKES

[Text accompanying this International News photograph, dated December 8, 1934, indicated that Jenckes "wore this gold and silver gown representing bi-metallism at a costume party" given by Eleanor Roosevelt for the "forgotten wives" of officials attending the males-only annual Gridiron Dinner. This party was "strictly feminine and was the first costume party in the history of the White House." Of further interest, although not pointed out by the press, is the fact that Jenckes is holding the rooster symbol of the Democratic party that she gave to President Franklin D. Roosevelt soon after she arrived in Washington, D.C.]

Virginia E. Jenckes Papers, Indiana State Library,
Indianapolis.

spiritual influences and as “caretakers of the home.” In 1937, on the occasion of Susan B. Anthony’s birthday, she argued that women’s natural disposition for domestic roles gave them distinctive insights beneficial to public policy, including “an inborn instinct to judge value” (they were “natural shoppers”) in every kind of public activity from housing to national defense. In 1938, at the National Woman’s party convention, she said that women were less partisan than men and, having the vote, would no longer simply “hope for good government, they will vote for good government.”¹⁶

Jenckes used this view of women to support policies suited not only to them but to consumer and business interests. During her third term, for instance, she urged that the canning industry be exempted from legislation limiting working hours on the grounds that it was every woman’s interest to have the cheapest canned goods, and she opposed efforts to protect small retail stores from the competition of large retail chains on similar grounds. She made an especially notable effort to reduce taxes on cosmetics, arguing that cosmetics were not luxuries but necessities for many working women. She also warned her colleagues in Congress that women had started to cast more than 50 percent of the votes and that they voted “with a distinct idea of protecting their own pocketbooks.” Although she emphasized the theme of discrimination against women, she also mentioned that she, the daughter of a druggist, had been persuaded by members of the drug industry to support their campaign against cosmetic taxes.¹⁷

By the mid-1930s Jenckes’s advocacy of women’s interests was overshadowed by her involvements in the realm of fanatical patriotism. Like many others who had come of political age in the World War I era, she had an intense devotion to symbols of national loyalty and an equally intense suspicion of foreign radicalism. In 1935, for instance, she won national attention by complaining that no American flag had been flown in front of Washington’s Union Railroad Station for the previous ninety days, a “deplorable disregard of our national emblem.” A few months later she suggested that American international shortwave broadcasts be required to sign off with the “Star-Spangled Banner,” noting that other nations played their anthems and urging that Americans be given the same “big thrill” of hearing their anthem on the international airwaves.¹⁸

This disposition helped make Jenckes one of the most vocal opponents of Russian communism in the mid-1930s. Anticommun-

¹⁶ Susan Ware, *Partner and I: Molly Dewson, Feminism, and the New Deal* (New Haven, Conn., 1987), xi-xii; *Congressional Record*, 74 Cong., 2 sess., 1936, LXXX, pt. 3, p. 2512, pt. 8, pp. 8933-34; *New York Times*, October 8, 1938, p. 3.

¹⁷ *Congressional Record*, 75 Cong., 3 sess., 1938, LXXXIII, pt. 2, pp. 1996-97, pt. 3, p. 3204, pt. 10, Appendix, pp. 2035-36; *New York Times*, May 27, 1936, p. 34.

¹⁸ *New York Times*, April 2, 3, 1935, pp. 8, 10; *ibid.*, June 30, 1935, section X, p. 11.

nism was certainly not new to these times. Even in the early 1930s, when concern over the Great Depression had weakened the anti-red movement of earlier days, both the Radical Right and conservative business interests often attacked the New Deal as leaning toward Moscow, but these attacks came from outside the Democratic party. What was distinctive about Jenckes was that she was a Democrat who combined her anticommunism with support for the New Deal. This attitude can be traced back to her early days in Congress when in the spring of 1933 she intervened on the side of "right wing" members of the Veterans Bonus Army from Indiana, whom a Terre Haute newspaper described as being "bitter foes" of what they considered communist elements within the Bonus Army. Her work for those whom she considered the patriotic part of the Bonus Army won her support from veterans groups back home.¹⁹

Jenckes's hostility, however, grew more directly out of her work as a member of the House District of Columbia Committee, work which led her to suspect that subversive elements were gaining control of the Washington, D.C., Board of Education. During her second term she launched a furious attack on the board, declaring in February, 1936, that as an "American Mother," she was appealing "to every mother in the District of Columbia and throughout the Nation to open your eyes, become informed concerning the indoctrination of communism in the public schools of our Nation's Capital as well as the schools throughout America." In support of her warning she soon was condemning the board for supporting the repeal of a prohibition against the teaching of communism in the schools and for refusing to permit police observation of a character education class that she claimed was being taught "under the direction of a professor who was associated with the University of Moscow."²⁰

Although Jenckes took care to say, "I am not a 'red baiter,'" she believed that she had found a plot to subvert the American Way, one that involved the schools in "the use and distribution to children of books and references containing vile and filthy literature, and also literature which directly and indirectly taught and advocated communism." When pressed to substantiate her complaints, she charged that the board had allowed the circulation in the schools of the *Scholastic National High School Weekly*, one issue of which included a review of a book containing "filthy, lascivious, and irreligious utterances"; the book proved to be *Boy and Girl*

¹⁹ M. J. Heale, *American Anticommunism* (Baltimore, 1990), 103-12; *Congressional Record*, 73 Cong., 1 sess., 1933, LXXVII, pt. 3, pp. 3287-88.

²⁰ *Congressional Record*, 74 Cong., 2 sess., 1936, LXXX, pt. 10, pp. 10308-309; Jenckes, Statement to the Sub-Committee on Education of the District of Columbia Committee, February 25, 1936, Box 2, Jenckes Papers.

Tramps of America, which had been issued the year before by a reputable New York publisher.²¹

Jenckes's crusade against the Red Menace soon spread beyond the schools. As a member of the District Committee, she had also spotted what she believed was a radical plot to prevent the patriotic display of the American flag on public buildings in the nation's capital, and in early 1935 she urged Congress to pass legislation requiring that the flag be so displayed. Declaring that she was speaking on an issue "of most vital importance to every citizen of our Nation," she warned her colleagues that "the Star-Spangled Banner [is] removed by reason of vile propaganda," this by way of the design of recently constructed federal buildings that she said made it nearly impossible to display the flag. Eventually, as proof of her charge, she was to tell the Twelfth Women's Conference on National Defense in early 1937 that "there is a marked similarity of our new buildings on Pennsylvania Avenue and the buildings in Red Square, Moscow." Many years later she told an interviewer that the Russians offered "me two hundred thousand dollars and a free trip for myself and daughter to Russia if I stopped my fight against communism."²²

Jenckes thought that communism was spreading its poisons even in her own home town. In 1935 Terre Haute was paralyzed by a general strike, one of only a few total labor stoppages in American history. Many years later she said that she offered to return to her city to help mediate the dispute but that local bankers and employers "wouldn't let me." While the strike was soon crushed, it attracted the attention of the Communist party, which in 1936 sent its presidential candidate, Earl Browder, to Terre Haute, where he was promptly arrested for vagrancy and thrown into jail. The mayor had already warned that he would not permit a communist to speak in his city and "would go to any length to protect the lives and property" of citizens from the Red threat.²³

A year later Jenckes charged in a speech to the Daughters of the American Revolution—of which she was a member—that Browder had been sent by his party, "backed up with plenty of money," to defeat her for reelection. If that were the case, Red money at least did not speak loudly: not only did Jenckes easily win a third term in 1936 with a fifteen-thousand-vote majority over her opponent

²¹ *Congressional Record*, 74 Cong., 2 sess., 1936, LXXX, pt. 10, pp. 10308-309; *ibid.*, 75 Cong., 1 sess., 1937, LXXXI, pt. 1, p. 1161, pt. 2, pp. 2131-32.

²² *Ibid.*, 74 Cong., 1 sess., 1935, LXXIX, pt. 2, pp. 1761-62; *ibid.*, 75 Cong., 1 sess., Appendix, p. 86; Jenckes, Interview (1967), 49.

²³ Indiana American Legion, telegram to Jenckes, March 6, 1936, Thomas L. Blanton to Jenckes, April 24, 1936, Box 2, Jenckes Papers; Terre Haute *Spectator*, October 3, 1936; Jenckes, Interview (1967), 23.

but presidential candidate Browder polled a meager sixty-two votes in her entire congressional district.²⁴

Jenckes's patriotic crusade did not stop with communism. By 1937 she was convinced that Washington was, as she told Congress, "the hot bed of international propagandists." In November she repeated the charge before a national meeting of the Daughters of the American Revolution. In this case she gave special attention to the Japanese, who she warned had used their gift of cherry trees to open the way for their spies and propagandists: "If we Americans were alert in the maintenance of a true national defense, we would, through proper legal action, root up every Japanese cherry tree on Federal property, saw them up for firewood, and replant them with American cherry trees . . ."²⁵

Aside from the American Legion, people gave little attention to Jenckes's crusade until 1938 when the Sixth District chapter of the Indiana Federation of Clubs condemned her "proposal to slaughter the cherry trees" as ridiculous and as antagonistic to the newly fashionable interest in conservation. Jenckes bore this attack of local club women in silence, but when her cherry tree proposal was mildly ridiculed on national radio by a commentator, Boake Carter, she did not hesitate to blast away. In a congressional speech she attacked Carter personally (as "a Russian immigrant pretending to be of British birth") and then lashed out at the Federal Communications Commission for allowing him to use "the facilities of 59 broadcasting stations, which reach millions of people, in order that he might untruthfully distort and change the meaning of utterances of a regularly elected Member of our Nation's Congress."²⁶

Not surprisingly, Jenckes was an ardent supporter of J. Edgar Hoover and his Federal Bureau of Investigation. She urged Congress "to keep faith with American mothers, American parents, and American womanhood" by granting all the money that the FBI needed for its work, which she said included protecting "millions of young girls and women from the horrors of white slavery." In 1936, as part of what was described as a "whirl-wind effort" to suppress the criminal counterfeiting of medicinal drugs, this daughter of a druggist demanded what she called a "saber-toothed" law with which the FBI could "crush gangsters and racketeers" engaged in that dangerous business.²⁷

At the same time Jenckes also supported a strong military in all its branches as necessary for American security, declaring that

²⁴ *Congressional Record*, 75 Cong., 2 sess., 1937, LXXXII, pt. 3, Appendix, p. 538; *Terre Haute Spectator*, November 7, 1936.

²⁵ *Congressional Record*, 75 Cong., 1 sess., 1937, LXXXI, pt. 1, p. 1161; *ibid.*, 2 sess., 1937, LXXXII, pt. 3, Appendix, p. 537.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 3 sess., 1938, LXXXIII, pt. 9, Appendix, pp. 1005-1009; Isabell H. Stafford to Jenckes, January 12, 1938, Box 3, Jenckes Papers.

²⁷ *Congressional Record*, 75 Cong., 1 sess., 1937, LXXXI, pt. 3, pp. 2588-89; Jenckes to Harold Butcher, February 15, 1936, Box 2, Jenckes Papers.

in taking this position she was representing American women in general. She argued that a strong defense was the best way to keep the United States out of war, which she believed had a particularly harsh effect on wives and mothers. This led her to strong support of the defense policies of the Roosevelt administration. As early as January, 1936, she refused to give a speech at the Eleventh Woman's Patriotic Conference on National Defense because that organization had not rebuked a previous speaker for criticizing Roosevelt's defense program, a rebuke she thought necessary if women were "to assume the responsibility for the maintenance of American patriotic ideals." Two years later, in Congress, she opposed a proposal to require a popular referendum on any war measure on the grounds that while it was a noble idea it threatened to embarrass Roosevelt: "Let us stand by the President, and follow his divinely inspired leadership."²⁸

It is doubtful, however, that Jenckes would have eventually followed Roosevelt's "divinely inspired leadership" into support for Great Britain, Lend-Lease, and eventually war. Although she was active in condemning both communist Russia and militarist Japan, she took an isolationist view of Europe and said nothing about Nazi Germany, an attitude that showed little sympathy for America's old allies in World War I. In 1937 she made her first trip to Europe to represent the United States (along with three male United States senators) at the annual conference of the Inter-Parliamentary Union in Paris. As the first woman ever appointed to attend the conference, she declared it her special mission to "arouse the women in every Nation to become militant against war."²⁹ Despite this glint of internationalism, though, it was evident that Jenckes spoke primarily for American women, particularly for those who were basically isolationist-minded believers in America First.

Promising that the Americans would "always prevent" their nation from entering another conflict, Jenckes gave special attention to urging her foreign sisters to pressure their governments into paying what she estimated to be an eleven-billion-dollar debt that they owed the United States from World War I, governments that, she said, "were buying armaments while failing to pay." She did not appear to consider that what she condemned as a dangerous and selfish rearmament was being carried out by America's old allies to confront the new threat of Nazi Germany. After the conference Jenckes spent some time in Europe trying to persuade her sisters to back her debt demands. Upon her return to the United States, she declared, in 1938, that "the loss of these eleven billions of American

²⁸ *New York Times*, January 30, 1936, p. 13; *Congressional Record*, 75 Cong., 3 sess., 1938, LXXXIII, pt. 9, Appendix, p. 88.

²⁹ Jenckes, press release, August 24, 1937, Box 3, Jenckes Papers; *New York Times*, October 2, 1937, p. 3.

dollars brought on the depression in the United States.” The debt was thus an “unbearable tax” on Americans, and the money that should have been used to pay it off was being spent to prepare for another destructive war.³⁰

Jenckes’s crusades against alien enemies did not entirely distract her from trying to satisfy the more mundane expectations of her constituents. After two terms in office she could claim that she had fought not only for the interests of farmers like herself but also, increasingly, for the welfare of local workers. She pointed with pride to her efforts to provide work in her district through such federally funded construction projects as Terre Haute’s new city hall and through support for small, job-producing private industries such as the National Tile Company, for which she had obtained a federal loan.³¹

Such claims highlighted Jenckes’s basically conservative views of labor and welfare matters. In 1936 she told a British journalist: “I am opposed to the dole, and I am opposed to the permanent relief which will pauperize our workers. I believe that the federal government should stay out of industry and not compete with industry, but the federal government should make it possible to encourage industries.” To that end she proposed that the canning industry be exempted from wages and hours regulations in order to maintain jobs for canning workers, and she had also tried to eliminate an appropriation to buy labor-saving machines for the Social Security Board, declaring that “this detestable provision” would throw hundreds of needy government clerks out of work.³²

In 1938 Jenckes submitted to Congress a petition from local craft workers urging that the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the federal make-work agency, be barred from construction projects in order to prevent its cheap labor from competing with the building trades. The WPA, she told her colleagues, represented one line of federal relief efforts, a line “directed by social workers who are trained in giving away other people’s money” whereas she stood for the other line that tried to get workers off the relief roles and back into productive employments: “The time has now come when all relief agencies should begin to think of returning all of our unemployed to permanent jobs rather than be a continued burden on the taxpayers by permanently keeping our unemployed on a relief basis.”³³

³⁰ Report of speech before the Inter-Parliamentary Union, September 22, 1934, Box 3, Jenckes Papers; *New York Times*, October 2, 1937, p. 3; *Congressional Record*, 75 Cong., 3 sess., 1938, LXXXIII, pt. 9, Appendix, p. 88.

³¹ Jenckes to Harold Butcher, February 15, 1936, Box 2, Jenckes Papers; *Terre Haute Tribune*, April 32, 1936.

³² Jenckes to Harold Butcher, February 15, 1936, Box 2, Jenckes Papers; *Congressional Record*, 75 Cong., 1 sess., 1937, LXXXI, pt. 1, p. 808; *ibid.*, 3 sess., 1938, LXXXIII, pt. 10, Appendix, pp. 2035-36.

³³ *Congressional Record*, 75 Cong., 3 sess., 1938, LXXXIII, pt. 10, Appendix, pp. 2061, 1472.

In such ways Jenckes generally reflected her district's underlying conservatism, a conservatism that dreamed of individualism and scorned dependence on government. She was not conservative enough, however, to forestall her defeat in 1938 for a fourth term in Congress. Two years before she had run an exceptionally strong campaign to win a third term. Besides identifying with Roosevelt's New Deal, she had campaigned as a defender of "Americanism," pointing to her efforts to have the flag placed on public buildings and "to stamp communism from American life." Among the groups to which she appealed for support was the Indiana Brewers Association, which she reminded of her work for the repeal of Prohibition and urged "to call upon every worker and every voter" to support her campaign.³⁴

Such efforts proved to be unnecessary since Jenckes was one of numerous Democrats who benefited from Roosevelt's landslide victory over Alfred E. Landon in the presidential election, a victory that helped elect Democrats to eleven of Indiana's twelve seats in Congress. Although she ran a few hundred votes behind the president, she swamped her Republican opponent, Noble J. Johnson (who also resided in Terre Haute) by a nearly two-to-one majority. Immediately after the election, she telegraphed the president: "I have been re-elected by a very large majority, despite the opposition of a group of selfish interests who while praising my service to the district, decreed that Virginia was to be defeated in order that their representative might go to the Congress to harass Roosevelt."³⁵

The victory in 1936, however, had a bitter taste. A few weeks before the election, her daughter and only child, Virginia, died in her early twenties from tuberculosis. Especially since Virginia had been her close companion in her earlier campaigns, this loss took much of the heart out of Jenckes's interest in politics. Moreover, she had made enemies within her own party, reportedly calling some state leaders "a bunch of yellow bellies" at a party meeting held in French Lick soon after the election; she was later to complain that Governor Paul V. McNutt tried to "read me out of the party." And there were signs of discontent among some of the chairmen of county Democratic organizations in her district; eventually she decided

³⁴ Terre Haute *Tribune*, May 4, 6, October 21, November 1, 1936; Virginia E. Jenckes Committee to Earl Jones, April 19, 1936, and to the Working Members of the Virginia E. Jenckes Committee, April 20, 1936, Box 2, Jenckes Papers; Jenckes to Harold Feightner, October 9, 1936, and to Members of the Virginia E. Jenckes Club, October 28, 1936, *ibid.*

³⁵ Terre Haute *Spectator*, November 7, 1936; Jenckes, telegram to President Roosevelt, November 4, 1936, Box 2, Jenckes Papers; James Philip Fadely, "Editors, Whistle Stops, and Elephants: The Presidential Campaign of 1936 in Indiana," *Indiana Magazine of History*, LXXXV (June, 1989), 126, 136.

that she lost in 1938 because politicians in Terre Haute “took the ballots out of the box.”³⁶

Beyond these factors Jenckes also encountered opposition from the WPA in her district, in part because of her criticisms of it but also because in the rural counties direction of the WPA work force had fallen under the influence of Republican foremen. This fact probably helped inspire her to complain after the election that the Roosevelt administration had unwisely allowed the appointment of Republicans to important patronage positions, thereby giving these “political termites” the opportunity to work against Democratic candidates. When it came to such matters, she was a strongly partisan Democrat who had convinced herself, as she once told a group of women, that “we women owe our right of suffrage [*sic*] to the Democratic party.”³⁷

Jenckes’s defeat for reelection, however, owed far less to the manipulations of politicians or anyone else than to general trends. Most basic was the fact that west central Indiana outside of Terre Haute was normally heavily Republican. Months before the election the Terre Haute *Spectator* had observed that in 1936, even with the Roosevelt landslide, Jenckes’s opponent had carried five counties in the district and had estimated that the district was normally Republican overall by at least fifteen thousand votes. Whatever the accuracy of this arithmetic, the Sixth Congressional District, like many other congressional districts in the state and nation, was ripe for a reaction against the New Deal. In support of Jenckes’s opponent, Noble J. Johnson, the Republicans mounted a strong campaign against the Roosevelt administration, urging voters (in a rare reference to gender) to “send a MAN to Congress, who will be YOUR representative and not the willing tool of the most powerful political machine America has ever known.”³⁸

It was evident that Jenckes faced a close race. The Roosevelt administration, anxious to maintain its strength in Congress, sent some of its most influential spokesmen, including Speaker of the House William B. Bankhead, to Indiana to support her. The net effect of such efforts, however, appears to have been to reinforce Republican charges that she was simply a rubber stamp for the New Deal. When the November ballots were counted, she carried Vigo County by nearly six thousand votes but lost all the agricul-

³⁶ New York *Times*, September 19, 1936, p. 17; Memorandum, September 16, 1936, Box 2, Jenckes Papers; Jenckes to Catherine M. Fee, December 5, 1936, *ibid.*; Attica *Ledger-Tribune*, December 1, 1936; Terre Haute *Spectator*, November 14, 1936; Jenckes, Interview (1967), 16, 73.

³⁷ Milton Petel to Jenckes, November 12, December 16, 1938, Box 3, Jenckes Papers; Joe Hoopingarner to Jenckes, December 16, 1938, *ibid.*; Alden H. Baker to Jenckes, December 17, 1938, *ibid.*; Jenckes, “Address to the National Democratic League,” *ibid.*; *Congressional Record*, 75 Cong., 1 sess., 1937, LXXXI, pt. 10, Appendix, p. 1566.

³⁸ Terre Haute *Spectator*, January 1, October 15, November 5, 1938.

tural counties and the election. Statewide, as historian James H. Madison has pointed out, the election was a “disaster” for the Democratic party and administration, with more than half of the Democrats elected to Congress in 1936 being rejected. Nationally, Jenckes was one of seventy House Democrats defeated for reelection, a loss that brought New Deal legislation to a virtual halt.³⁹

Jenckes said that she did not contest the election because “if I raise a rumpus they will say women can’t take defeat. I’m not going to hurt other women by weeping now.” Perhaps her refusal had some effect, since, when her victorious opponent retired from Congress in 1948, her old congressional district elected to replace him with Mrs. Cecil M. Harden, a conservative Republican who won several consecutive terms. Whatever, Jenckes had plainly lost the election and, despite rumors that she was planning a comeback, was satisfied not to return to Congress. During her three terms she had become attached to Washington, D.C., and had moved her home there from Terre Haute after the death of her daughter. Like many other defeated members of Congress, she tried to get a government appointment, hinting in a letter to President Roosevelt in the summer of 1939 that, as “your loyal supporter,” she hoped to be given a “useful place” in government. Although nothing came of this, she stayed in Washington, living for many years on Kalorama Road in the city.⁴⁰

Besides her income from substantial properties in the Terre Haute area, Jenckes may have benefited from work as a lobbyist for various groups including the Red Cross and the Catholic church (a cousin was a member of the Sisters of Providence headquartered at St. Mary-of-the-Woods College within her former district). As a Red Cross volunteer, she worked in the first blood bank in America. In 1956 she became involved with the cause of Hungarian freedom when she helped five priests, who had escaped from Hungary, to gain admittance to the United States; for a time she served as a conduit between Hungarian Freedom Fighters and the American government. Finally, after she had reached ninety years of age, she returned to Indiana, first (in 1969) to Indianapolis and then (in 1971) to Terre Haute. In 1975 she died in a Terre Haute nursing home at the age of ninety-seven.⁴¹

³⁹ *Ibid.*, October 15, 29, 1938; *Terre Haute Tribune*, October 30, November 4, 5, 10, 1938; James H. Madison, *Indiana through Tradition and Change: A History of the Hoosier State and Its People, 1920–1945* (Indianapolis, 1982), 148; Patterson, *Congressional Conservatism*, 289–90.

⁴⁰ Calvert, “A Woman in Congress”; Jenckes obituary, *Terre Haute Tribune*, January 9, 1975; Jenckes to President Roosevelt, August 2, 1939, Box 3, Jenckes Papers; Jenckes, “Address at a Dinner for Jennings Randolph,” March 21, 1939, *ibid.*; *Terre Haute Spectator*, December 16, 1939.

⁴¹ Calvert, “A Woman in Congress”; Jenckes obituary, *Terre Haute Tribune*, January 9, 1975.

When Jenckes was ninety, she responded to an interviewer's question as to what she thought Americans should do by declaring that they should "get back to the Ten Commandments" and that especially they should honor their country, which she proclaimed the greatest in the world.⁴² It was an appropriate response from someone who, in her extreme and often irrational anticommunism, can be said to have been a Cold War warrior even before, officially, there was a Cold War.

⁴²Jenckes, Interview (1967), 87.