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## The Feminine Mystique and Women's Equality -- 50 Years Later

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Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* -- published 50 years ago this week, on February 19, 1963 -- catalyzed the modern feminist movement, helped forever change Americans' attitudes about women's role in society, and catapulted its author into becoming an influential and controversial public figure. The book identified the "problem that has no name" -- which feminists later labeled "sexism." Three years later Friedan was instrumental in organizing the National Organization for Women (NOW) and other key groups that helped build the movement for women's equality.

*The Feminine Mystique* struck a nerve and quickly became a best-seller. It also became a manifesto for change, inspiring a new wave of women's rights activism that built on the women's suffrage activism of the early 1900s that won the right to vote. Friedan became a spokesperson for this "second wave" feminism.

Most Americans now accept as normal the once-radical ideas that Friedan and others espoused. Today most Americans, including men, believe that women should earn the same pay as men if they do the same job. Corporations, law firms, the media, universities, advertising, the military, sports, and other core institutions can no longer exercise blatant sex discrimination without facing scrutiny and the risk of protest and lawsuits. The Obama administration just lifted the ban on women in combat. Women are now running corporations, newspapers, magazines, and TV stations, universities, and major labor unions.

In 1960 only about six percent of medical students and four percent of law students were women. Today women comprise about half of all medical and law students and have a stronger foothold in other formerly all-male professions and occupations. Giving girls an equal opportunity to play competitive sports is now taken for granted, thanks to changing attitudes and Title IX, the federal anti-discrimination law passed in 1972. Employers now recognize the reality of sexual harassment, which did not even have a name until the 1970s. The right to have an abortion, legalized in the U.S. Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* ruling in 1973, is still under attack but remains the law. In 1963 there were few college courses or books on women's history, literature, or politics, and no women's studies programs; today they are part of the standard curriculum at most colleges and universities. More men in couples share housework and child rearing than was the case two or three decades ago.

When *The Feminine Mystique* was published, men's turnout at the polls exceeded that of women by five percent. Since 1980, women have consistently voted at higher rates than men, according to the Center on American Women in Politics at Rutgers University. The number of women elected to office at every level of government has spiraled. In 1963, there were two women in the US Senate and only 12 women in the House of Representatives. Today, 20 women serve in the Senate and 77 serve in the House. Similar shifts have occurred at the local and state levels. Although a rise in women's turnout has spurred these gains, men are now more willing to vote for women candidates than ever before. Having more women in elected office has made a difference in enacting laws that promote gender equality.

Ironically, because many "feminist" ideas are now taken for granted, few women today think of themselves as "feminists." According to a 2009 poll conducted by CBS News, only 24 percent of American women identify themselves as feminists. But once the word was defined as someone who believes in social, political, and economic equality of the sexes, the figure jumps to 65 percent.

Friedan -- who died in 2006 at age 85 -- would no doubt be proud of the progressive changes that her book and activism inspired, but she'd be the first to note that full women's equality has still not been achieved. For example, women represent only 3.6 percent of the CEOs of Fortune 500 corporations. Like 50 years ago, women today are more likely than men to be poor, and to be stuck in low-wage jobs. Although the gap has narrowed, women are still paid less than men doing the same jobs (except in unionized jobs in factories, stores, and professions like teaching).

Despite men's claims to share in housework and child-rearing, studies show that women still perform most of these tasks, including working mothers, who therefore continue to have two jobs, one of them unpaid. Few employers have "family friendly" policies that allow spouses -- or single parents -- more flexibility in arranging their work lives. The U.S. is one of the few affluent countries that does not require paid maternity leave, or provide universal child care or pre-school. Women are still more likely than men to be the victims of domestic violence at home and sexual harassment at work, despite advances in our awareness of these issues and legal penalties against perpetrators. Last week, the Senate voted to renew the Violence Against Women Act, first passed in 1994, but 22 Senators (all of them men) voted against it.

Friedan was born Bettye Naomi Goldstein in Peoria, Illinois in 1921, and was raised in a prosperous family with a nursemaid,

cook, and butler-chauffeur. Her father, Harry Goldstein, had emigrated from Russia to Peoria in his teens. He began selling buttons from a street-corner stand, which he gradually grew into a successful jewelry store. Her mother, Miriam, was the daughter of Jewish immigrants from Hungary. After graduating from Bradley College in Peoria, Bettye's mother started working as a reporter for the local newspaper. After she married, her husband insisted that she quit working and focus on being a housewife and mother. Miriam hosted bridge luncheons in their spacious home and was active as a volunteer in a variety of community activities, but she always resented having to give up her writing career.

Despite their affluence, the Goldsteins were never fully accepted into Peoria society. A small industrial city in central Illinois, Peoria was conservative, provincial, racially segregated, and rife with both subtle and overt forms of anti-semitism. As part of its resurgence in the Midwest, the Ku Klux Klan has active in Peoria in the 1920s and the sting of racism and anti-semitism was never far from the surface. Jews were banned from joining the prestigious Peoria Country Club. Bettye's father told her that Peoria's Christian business men and civic leaders refused to talk or socialize with him after business hours, a widespread phenomenon known as the "five o'clock shadow." Although Bettye had both Jewish and non-Jewish friends growing up, she was turned down for membership in a high school sorority because she was a Jew.

Reflecting on these experiences, Friedan noted, "I hated being different, an outsider." She recalled that her "passion against injustice... originated from my feelings of the injustice of anti-semitism."

Bettye's later views about bigotry toward women were shaped at a young age. At dinner, Bettye's father peppered her with questions about current events and literature. But her parents also worried that Bettye's intense interest in reading -- her friends called her "Bookworm" -- would be a social handicap, making her seem too intellectual and unfeminine. When she came home from the library loaded down with books, her father told her, "Five books at a time is enough. It doesn't look nice for a girl to be so bookish." After reading about Marie Curie, the French researcher who won Nobel Prizes in both physics and chemistry, Bettye considered pursuing a career in science, but a teacher warned her to lower her ambitions and to consider being a lab technician, receptionist, or nurse.

In high school, fueled by her brilliance, her ambition, her desire to fit in, as well as her sense of being a misfit, Bettye was both a rebel and a high achiever. She wrote for the school paper, composed poems and founded the literary magazine (which published articles on strikes and labor conflict occurring in the area), won a prize for an essay on the Constitution, recited the Gettysburg Address at a Memorial Day celebration, joined the debating society, acted in school plays, wrote articles about the growing threat of fascism in Europe, and graduated as one of the class valedictorians.

Her academic promise, leadership skills, and rebellious spirit blossomed when she arrived at Smith College in 1938, in the midst of the political ferment catalyzed by the Depression and the growing turmoil in Europe. Bettye was one of the few Jewish students at Smith, a college that attracted many upper-class women from socially prominent families. But some Smith professors challenged the students to challenge society's injustices, including their own economic and social advantages. Many radical and progressive speakers, including Labor Secretary Frances Perkins, pacifist A.J. Muste, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, upper-class leftist Corliss Lamont (head of Friends of the Soviet Union), and folklorist Alan Lomax visited Smith while Bettye was a student there.

Bettye majored in psychology, and as editor of the *Smith College Weekly*, she revitalized the paper from a bland publication filled with gossip and social news to a far more political outlet, the *Smith College Associate News (SCAN)*. She embraced radical ideas and the labor movement as an instrument for progressive change. When maids at the college went on strike, Bettye sympathetically covered the struggle in *SCAN*. Her editorials challenged her privileged classmates to wake up to issues of social justice, workers' rights, and fascism. The summer after her junior year, she spent eight weeks at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, a radical training center for activists, participating in a writing workshop and taking classes about unions and economics.

In 1942 she went to graduate school at University of California, Berkeley, and dropped the "e" at the end of her first name. She traveled in left-wing circles and joined a Marxist study group. But she later panicked at the implications of getting a Ph.D., imagining her future as a lonely spinster in academia. She gave up her scholarship.

Fleeing Berkeley, she moved to New York City's Greenwich Village in 1944. Her first job was as a reporter for the Federated Press, an agency that fed news stories to progressive publications and union newspapers. Her stories were popular and showed a talent for humanizing class, race, and women's issues. Her next job was with the *UE News*, the weekly paper of the progressive United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America, a left-wing union. In 1947 she married Carl Friedan, an actor and stage producer. The first of their three children was born the following year.

There was no significant feminist movement at the time, but the Communist Party and the unions in its orbit were among the few organizations concerned about what they called the "woman question." In 1946 they started the Congress of American Women to address issues facing working-class women. As a reporter for *UE News*, Friedan often wrote about women's issues, including a popular pamphlet, *UE Fights for Women Workers*, on corporate discrimination and on the special problems faced by black women workers. In 1952, when she became pregnant with her second son, Friedan left the *UE News*.

In some respects, Friedan's experience was similar to that of millions of women who had worked during World War II and were then encouraged -- by employers, the media, advertising, and government propaganda -- to return to "hearth and home" as mothers and housewives after men came home. Like many women in postwar America, Friedan volunteered for a variety of community activities, though some of hers were unconventional, such as participating in rent strikes. But frustrated by the fact that she was not contributing financially to the family or using her considerable professional talents, Friedan began a freelance writing career, mostly for women's magazines like *Cosmopolitan*.

*The Feminine Mystique* began as a simple survey. When Friedan was asked in 1957 to prepare an alumni questionnaire for

her fifteenth Smith College reunion, she jumped at the opportunity. She felt vaguely guilty as she worked on it, thinking of the academic star she had been and feeling she had not realized her potential. The survey that Friedan and two friends prepared included open-ended questions "that we had not asked ourselves out loud before," Friedan recalled. They asked about such topics as decision making in the family, hours of housework, feelings about being a mother, number of books read in a year, interests outside the home, and agreement, or not, with a husband's politics.

Two hundred women responded. Friedan found that the classmates who seemed most happy and fulfilled were those who did not conform to the "role of women" and that those who were most dispirited were traditional housewives.

In 1947 Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia Farnham published *Modern Women: The Lost Sex*, which argued that American women were overeducated and that this excess of education caused discontent and prevented females from "adjusting to their role as women." The book triggered considerable controversy in the postwar era.

Friedan hoped to use the Smith College alumni questionnaire as a starting point to write a magazine article refuting *Modern Women's* thesis. She drew on the survey to write an article for *McCall's* -- "Are Women Wasting Their Time in College?" -- but the magazine rejected it. When her agent sent it to another women's magazine, *Redbook*, a male editor sent it back saying that Friedan "must be going off her rocker. Only the most neurotic housewife will identify with this." No magazine would touch it.

Frustrated but confident that she was on to something important, she persevered despite the rejections from magazine editors. Friedan worked for five years to expand the article into a book.

As Friedan described in *The Feminine Mystique*, many women were not aware that other women shared similar frustrations. They experienced their unhappiness as a personal problem and blamed themselves for their misery, which Friedan called "the problem that has no name." Earlier books -- including Elizabeth Hawes's *Why Women Cry* (1943), Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (published in English in 1953), Mirra Komarovsky's *Women in the Modern World* (1953), and Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein's *Women's Two Roles* (1956) -- had diagnosed women's oppression and second-class status, but none of them tapped the vein of dissatisfaction in a way that *The Feminine Mystique* did. The book touched millions of women, aided by Friedan's accessible writing style and the luck of good timing.

The publisher, W.W. Norton, initially printed only 2,000 copies, but the book's sales exploded. *The Feminine Mystique* spent six weeks on the *New York Times* best-seller list. The first paperback printing sold 1.4 million copies. *McCall's* and *Ladies' Home Journal*, magazines with a combined readership of 36 million, published excerpts.

Though the analogy was certainly overwrought, Friedan argued that women were trapped by their domestic lives, that their existence was akin to a "comfortable concentration camp." Women became helpless, almost childlike, with no privacy, cut off from the outside world, doing soul-killing work. Friedan also exposed the myriad ways that advertisers, psychiatrists, educators, and newspapers patronized, exploited, and manipulated women.

Friedan's agenda for change in *The Feminine Mystique* was quite modest, especially for someone with her radical background. She wrote about the problem of workplace discrimination, but she barely mentioned the issues of childcare and maternity leave. The book had little to say about the problems confronting poor and working-class women or women of color -- issues she had written about for *Federated News* and the *UE News*. She mostly encouraged women to get an education and to prepare themselves for a career beyond housework. It was not until the late 1960s and early 1970s -- pushed by younger feminists who had been radicalized by the civil rights and New Left movements -- that Friedan embraced a wider and more progressive agenda: the right to an abortion, protection against sexual violence and domestic abuse, the criminalization of sexual harassment and rape, the demand for childcare centers, equality with men in terms of access to financial credit and other aspects of economic life.

*The Feminine Mystique* made Friedan a public figure and a person to be reckoned with. She was flooded with letters from women reporting that the book had opened their eyes about their own lives and had validated their dissatisfaction with the status quo. She was asked to speak at colleges, before women's groups, and elsewhere across the nation.

After the book came out, as Friedan was gaining a platform on TV and radio shows and on the lecture circuit, she described herself as an "educated housewife." As Daniel Horowitz noted in his 1998 biography, *Betty Friedan and the Making of the Feminine Mystique*, Friedan made no reference to her experience in the left-wing movements of the late 1930s through the early 1950s. Indeed, many other women with similar backgrounds (including Congresswoman Bella Abzug) -- women who played a key role in building the women's liberation movement and later in creating the new academic field of women's studies -- downplayed their past left-wing affiliations. Friedan believed that she and the book would have more credibility if she was seen as someone who shared the frustrations of other middle-class suburban women. In 1963 the hysteria of McCarthyism and the Red Scare were still a lingering force in American politics and culture, and Friedan understood that her past associations with Communist and radical groups could undermine her reputation and destroy her growing influence.

Moreover, Friedan wanted to do more than write about women's roles. She wanted to instigate real change, and that meant renewing her activist credentials. She quickly connected with a small network of liberal, professional women who were involved with the Presidential Commission on the Status of Women, which had been created in 1961 by John F. Kennedy at the suggestion of Eleanor Roosevelt. They talked about creating a women's version of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and in 1966 they formed NOW to lobby and organize for the civil rights of women. Friedan was elected president, a position she held until 1970. She became first media celebrity of the women's liberation movement and its de facto spokesperson.

Two years before NOW's founding, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination in employment on the bases of race, color, national origin, religion, and sex. Most members of Congress viewed the law primarily

in terms of race and hardly noticed that "sex" was included. For half a century, NOW and other feminist groups have used the law -- which established the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission -- to fight for women's equality at work.

Friedan could be difficult and antagonizing, and she clashed with many radical feminists, who viewed women's liberation as part of a wider movement to overthrow male-dominated corporate and political power structures. Friedan responded, somewhat disingenuously, that she simply wanted women's equality within the existing system. "Some people think I'm saying, 'Women of the world unite -- you have nothing to lose but your men,'" she told *Life* magazine in 1963. "It's not true. You have nothing to lose but your vacuum cleaners."

Some criticized NOW for being too focused on middle-class white women's concerns. At the same time, Friedan was also concerned that the women's movement would be identified as being dominated by so-called man-hating lesbians, a stereotype that was widespread at the time and that Friedan worried would undermine feminism's credibility. Although she later tempered her views on homosexuality, she never fully embraced gay rights as a key part of the feminist cause.

Friedan also co-founded the National Abortion Rights Action League (originally the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws) in 1969. The next year -- the fiftieth anniversary of the Nineteenth Amendment guaranteeing women the vote -- she helped organize the Women's Strike for Equality. In 1971, a year after the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment, Friedan joined Abzug, Gloria Steinem, Shirley Chisholm, and others to form the National Women's Political Caucus to encourage more women to participate in politics and run for office.

In 1972, Friedan ran unsuccessfully as a delegate to the Democratic Party convention, but showed up with a large contingent of feminists to support Chisholm's candidacy for President. Twelve years later she did get elected as a delegate to the Democratic National Convention, which picked Congresswoman Geraldine Ferraro as the first female Vice Presidential candidate representing a major American political party.

For the rest of her life, Friedan continued to write books, among them *The Second Stage* (1981), *The Fountain of Age* (1993), *Beyond Gender* (1997), and *Life So Far* (2000). In *Beyond Gender*, she worried that progressives had splintered into separate identity movements. She outlined an agenda for change that, ironically, was similar to the radical politics she had embraced in her younger years.

In a 1995 column in *Newsweek*, she wrote,

The problems in our fast-changing world require a new paradigm of social policy, transcending all "identity politics" -- women, blacks, gays, the disabled. Pursuing the separate interests of women isn't adequate and is even diversionary. Instead, there has to be some new vision of community. We need to reframe the concept of success. We need to campaign -- men and women, whites and blacks -- for a shorter workweek, a higher minimum wage, an end to the war against social-welfare programs. "Women's issues" are symptoms of problems that affect everyone.

Friedan may no longer be a household name, but thanks to *The Feminist Mystique* and the movement it spawned, her influence is evident in every American household, regardless if any members call themselves feminists.

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