

Nation of Nations: A Narrative History of the American Republic, 3rd Ed., James West Davidson, William E. Gienapp, Christine Leigh Heyrman, Mark H. Lytle, and Michael B. Stoff, MA: McGraw-Hill, 1998. [13-]

[1138-1140]

Feminism

Organized struggle for women's rights and equality in the United States began before the Civil War. Sustained political efforts had won women the vote in 1920. But the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s began to push for equality in broader, deeper ways.

Writer Betty Friedan was one of the earliest to voice dissatisfaction with the cultural attitudes that flourished after World War II. Even though more women were entering the job market, the media routinely glorified housewives and homemakers, while discouraging those who aspired to independent careers. In *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) Friedan identified the "problem that has no name," a dispiriting boredom or emptiness in the midst of affluent lives. "Our culture does not permit women to accept or gratify their basic need to grow and fulfill their potentialities as human beings." *The Feminine Mystique* gave new life to the women's rights movement. The Commission on the Status of Women appointed by President Kennedy proposed the 1963 Equal Pay Act and helped add gender to the forms of discrimination outlawed by the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Women had also assumed an important role in both the civil rights and antiwar movements. They accounted for half the students who went south for the "Freedom Summers" in 1964 and 1965. Living with violence, assuming heavy responsibilities, they discovered new freedom and self-confidence.

Movement women also realized that they were themselves victims of systematic discrimination. Male reformers often limited them to behind-the-scenes services such as cooking, laundry, and fulfilling sexual needs. Casey Hayden, a veteran of SDS and SNCC, confronted the male leadership. The "assumptions of male superiority are as widespread... and every bit as crippling to the woman as the assumptions of white superiority are to the Negro," she wrote. By 1966 activist women were less willing to see their grievances eclipsed by other political constituencies. Friedan joined a group of 24 women and 2 men who formed the National Organization for Women (NOW). The new feminists sought to force the Johnson administration to take bolder action to eliminate discrimination in such areas as jobs and pay. When feminists argued that "sexism" was not qualitatively different from racism, Johnson accepted the argument and in 1967 included women as well as African Americans, Hispanics, and other minorities as groups covered by federal affirmative action programs.

Broader social trends established a receptive climate for the feminist appeal. After 1957 the birthrate began a rapid decline; improved methods of contraception, such as the birth control pill, permitted more sexual freedom and smaller family size. By 1970 more than 40 percent of all women, an unprecedented number, were employed outside the home. Education also spurred the shift from home to the job market and increased consciousness of women's issues. Higher educational levels allowed women to enter an economy oriented increasingly to white-collar service industries rather than blue-collar manufacturing.

As much as women sought liberation from old restrictions, their new circumstances raised problems. Men did not readily share traditional family responsibilities with working women; obligations of a job were added to domestic routines. Because women often took part-time jobs or jobs treated as "female" work, they earned far less than men. And though greater sexual freedom implied more gender equality, the media continued to promote the image of women as sex objects.

By 1970 feminists had captured the media's attention. Fifty thousand women participated in NOW's Strike for Equality Parade down New York's Fifth Avenue.

Television cameras zeroed in on signs with such slogans as "Don't Cook Dinner Starve a Rat Today." Some newscasters reported that marchers had burned their bras to protest sexual stereotyping. "Bra burners" became the media's condescending phrase used to deny credibility to militant feminists like Kate Millett, whose *Sexual Politics* (1970) condemned a male-dominated "patriarchal" society.

Equal Rights and Abortion

With its influence growing, the feminist movement sought to translate women's grievances into a political agenda. NOW members could agree in 1967 to a "Bill of Rights" that called for maternity leave for working mothers, federally supported day-care facilities, child care tax deductions, and equal education and job training. But they divided on two other issues: the passage of an Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution and a repeal of all state antiabortion laws.

At first, support seemed strong for an Equal Rights Amendment that would forbid all discrimination on the basis of gender. By the 1970s public opinion polls showed that even a majority of American men were sympathetic to the idea. In 1972 both the House and the Senate passed the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) virtually without opposition. Within a year 28 of the necessary 38 states had approved the ERA. It seemed only a matter of time before 10 more state legislatures would complete its ratification.

Many in the women's movement also applauded the Supreme Court's decision, in *Roe v. Wade* (1973), to strike down 46 state laws restricting a woman's access to abortion. In his opinion for the majority, Justice Harry Blackmun observed that a woman in the nineteenth century had "enjoyed a substantially broader right to terminate a pregnancy than she does in most states today." As legal abortion in the first three months of pregnancy became more readily available, the rate of maternal deaths from illegal operations, especially among minorities, declined.

But the early success of the Equal Rights Amendment and the feminist triumph in *Roe v. Wade* masked underlying divisions among women's groups. *Roe v. Wade* triggered a sharp backlash from many Catholics, Protestant fundamentalists, and socially conservative women. Their opposition inspired a crusade for a "right to life" amendment to the Constitution. A similar conservative reaction breathed new life into the "STOP ERA" crusade of Phyllis Schlafly, an Illinois political organizer. Although Schlafly was a professional working woman herself, she believed that women should embrace their traditional role as homemakers subordinate to their husbands. "Every change [that the ERA] requires will deprive women of a right, benefit, or exemption that they now enjoy," she argued.

In the middle ground stood women (and a considerable number of men) who wanted to use the political system, rather than a constitutional amendment, to correct the most glaring inequalities between the sexes. Within a year after Congress passed the ERA, the National Women's Political Caucus conceded that the momentum to ratify was waning. Although Congress in 1979 extended the deadline for state legislatures to act for another three years, it became clear that the amendment would fail. Determined feminists vowed to continue the fight, but they, too, had discovered the limits of the era.

The Activist Legacy

To say that the organized environmental, consumer, and feminist movements lost ground after the early 1970s is not to say that they failed. Rather, each crusade fell short in its effort to forge a consensus. There would be no new ecological consciousness, no consumer-directed economy, and no absolute gender equality. Indeed, none of the movements could ever agree just what those ideas would mean in practice.

Even so, the United States was left after the early 1970s with an abiding concern for ecology, consumer rights, and the blatant and subtle forms of sexism. Advocates of reform had learned to use the media, to lobby politicians, to fight in the courts, and to organize. Older organizations like the National Audubon Society and League of Women Voters had been revitalized. New organizations like NOW and Friends of the Earth had

become part of the political infrastructure. Within government the Environmental Protection Agency, the Federal Trade Commission, and other agencies had been given a mandate to enforce the court decisions and laws that reformers had won. In that way the advocates of reform breathed renewed life into the activist tradition of progressivism and the New Deal.

(photo)Ms. magazine, edited by feminist Gloria Steinem, gave the women's movement a means to reach a broader audience. The cover of the first issue, published in 1972, uses the image of a many-armed Hindu goddess to satirize the multiple roles of the modern housewife.

[1168-1170]

THE CONSERVATIVE REBELLION

In 1964 conservative candidate Barry Goldwater had proclaimed on billboards across America: "In Your Heart You Know He's Right." Beneath one of the billboards an unknown Democratic wag unfurled his own banner: "Yes -- Extreme Right." In 1964 most citizens voted with the wag, perceiving Goldwater's platform as too conservative, too extreme, too dangerous for the times.

By 1980 rising prices, energy shortages, and similar economic uncertainties fed a growing resistance to a liberal agenda. Hard-pressed workers resented increased competition from minorities, especially those supported by affirmative action quotas and government programs. Citizens resisted the demands for higher taxes to support social welfare spending. The traditional family, too, seemed under siege as divorce rates and births to single mothers soared. Increasingly the political agenda was determined by those who wanted to restore a strong family, traditional religious values, patriotism, and limited government.

Born Again

At one center of the conservative rebellion was the call for a revival of religion. That call came most insistently from white Protestant evangelicals. Fundamentalist Protestants had since the 1920s increasingly separated themselves from the older, more liberal denominations. In the decades after World War II their membership grew dramatically -- anywhere from 400 to 700 percent, compared with less than 90 percent for mainline denominations. By the 1980s they had become a significant third force in Christian America, after Roman Catholics and traditional Protestants. The election of Jimmy Carter, himself a born-again Christian, reflected their newfound visibility.

Like fundamentalists of the 1920s, the evangelicals of the 1980s resisted the trend toward more secular values, especially in education. They pressed states and the federal government to adopt a "school prayer" amendment allowing officially sanctioned prayer in classrooms. They urged the teaching of "Creationism" as an acceptable alternative to Darwinian evolution. Frustrated with public schools, they created private Christian academies to insulate their children from the influence of "secular humanism." They condemned modernist notions of a materially determined world in which all truths were relative and in which circumstances rather than absolute moral precepts determined ethical behavior.

Although evangelicals denounced the modern media as secular agencies, they eagerly used broadcast technology to sell their message. Cable and satellite broadcasting allowed "televangelists" to reach national audiences. The Reverend Pat Robertson, the son of a Virginia politician, introduced his "700 Club" over the Christian Broadcast Network from Virginia Beach, Virginia. His success inspired a "700 Club" regular, Jim Bakker, to launch a spin-off program called the "Praise the Lord Club" -- PTL for short. Within a few years PTL had the largest audience of any daily show in the world. The content was Pentecostal in background: gospel singing, fervent sermons, faith healing, and speaking in tongues. The format, however, imitated that of sophisticated network "talk shows," including Bakker's Christian monologue, testimonials from celebrity guests, and musical entertainment.

It was the Reverend Jerry Falwell who first made the step from religious to political activism. In 1979 he formed the Moral Majority, Inc., an organization to attract campaign contributions and examine candidates around the country on issues important to Christians. America, Falwell proclaimed, possessed "more God-fearing citizens per capita than any other nation on earth." Using computerized mailing lists to identify donors and target audiences, the Moral Majority sent out more than a billion pieces of mail during the 1980 election.

(photo) During the late 1970s and the 1980s conservatives increasingly spoke out against abortion and in favor of the right to life for unborn children. Adopting the tactics of protest and civil disobedience once common to radicals in the 1960s, they clash here with pro-choice demonstrators outside Faneuil Hall in Boston.

(photo) The Reverend Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority attempted to apply religious convictions in the political arena. Falwell actively supported Ronald Reagan's military buildup and political candidates who shared the Moral Majority's social agenda, including opposition to abortion.