

The American Pageant: A History of the Republic, 13th Ed., Advanced Placement Ed., David M. Kennedy, Lizabeth Cohen, and Thomas A. Bailey, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006. [10-12]

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Exploding employment opportunities for women in the 1950s unleashed a groundswell of social and psychological shocks that mounted to tidal-wave proportions in the decades that followed. From one perspective women's surge into the workplace was nothing new at all, but only a return to the days when the United States was an agricultural nation, and men and women alike toiled on the family farm. But the urban age was not the agricultural age, and women's new dual role as both workers and homemakers raised urgent questions about family life and about traditional definitions of gender differences.

Feminist Betty Friedan gave focus and fuel to women's feelings in 1963 when she published *The Feminine Mystique*, a runaway best seller and a classic of feminist protest literature that launched the modern women's movement. Friedan spoke in rousing accents to millions of able, educated women who applauded her indictment of the stifling boredom of suburban housewifery. Many of those women were already working for wages but they were also struggling against the guilt and frustration of leading an "unfeminine" life as defined by the postwar "cult of domesticity."

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Feminist Victories and Defeats

As the army limped home from Vietnam, there was little rejoicing on the college campuses, where demonstrators had once braved tear gas and billy clubs to denounce the war. The antiwar movement, like many of the other protest movements that convulsed the country in the 1960s, had long since splintered and stalled. One major exception to this pattern stood out: although they had their differences, American feminists showed vitality and momentum. They won legislative and judicial victories and provoked an intense rethinking of gender roles. (On the roots of this movement, see "Makers of America: The Feminists," pp. 958-959.)

Thousands of women marched in the Women's Stride for Equality on the fiftieth anniversary of woman suffrage in 1970. In 1972 Congress passed Title IX of the Education Amendments, prohibiting sex discrimination in any federally assisted educational program or activity. Perhaps this act's biggest impact was to create opportunities for girls' and women's athletics at schools and colleges, giving birth to a new "Title IX generation" that would reach maturity in the 1980s and 1990s and help professionalize women's sports as well. The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the Constitution won congressional approval in 1972. It declared, "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex." Twenty-eight states quickly ratified the amendment, first proposed by suffragists in 1923. Hopes rose that the ERA might soon become the law of the land.

Even the Supreme Court seemed to be on the movement's side. In *Reed v. Reed* (1971) and *Frontiero v. Richardson* (1973), the Court challenged sex discrimination in legislation and employment. And in the landmark case of *Roe v. Wade* (1973), the Court struck down laws prohibiting abortion, arguing that a woman's decision to terminate a pregnancy was protected by the constitutional right of privacy.

But the feminist movement soon faced a formidable backlash. In 1972 President Nixon vetoed a proposal to set up nationwide public day care, saying it would weaken the American family. Antifeminists blamed the women's movement for the rising divorce rate, which tripled between 1960 and 1976. And the Catholic Church and the religious right organized a powerful grassroots movement to oppose the legalization of abortion.

For many feminists the most bitter defeat was the death of the ERA. With

ratification by thirty-eight state legislatures, the amendment would have become part of the Constitution. Conservative spokeswoman Phyllis Schlafly led the campaign to stop the ERA. Its advocates she charged, were just "bitter women seeking a constitutional cure for their personal problems." In 1979 Congress extended the deadline for ratification, but ERA opponents dug in their heels. The amendment died in 1982, three states short of success.

(photo) The Abortion Wars. Pro-choice and pro-life demonstrators brandish their beliefs. By the end of the twentieth century, the debate over abortion had become the most morally charged and divisive issue in American society since the struggle over slavery in the nineteenth century.

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(photo) Anti-feminist Phyllis Schlafly (b. 1924). Schlafly traveled the country promoting her "STOP ERA" campaign. She argued that ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment would undermine the American family by violating "the right of a wife to be supported by her husband," requiring women to serve in combat, and legalizing homosexual marriages.

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The Feminists

A well-to-do housewife and mother of seven, Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902) was an unlikely revolutionary. Yet this founding mother of American feminism devoted seven decades of her life to the fight for women's rights.

Young Elizabeth Cady drew her inspiration from the fight against slavery. In 1840 she married fellow abolitionist Henry Stanton. Honeymooning in London, they attended the World Anti-Slavery Convention, where women were forced to sit in a screened-off balcony above the convention floor. This insult awakened Stanton to the cause that would occupy her life. With Lucretia Mott and other female abolitionists, Stanton went on to organize the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848. There she presented her Declaration of Sentiments, modeled on the Declaration of Independence and proclaiming that "all men and women are created equal." She demanded for women the right to own property, to enter the professions, and, most daring of all, to vote.

As visionaries of a radically different future for women, early feminists encountered a mountain of hostility and tasted bitter disappointment. Stanton failed in her struggle to have women included in the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which granted African Americans equal citizenship. She died before seeing her dream of woman suffrage realized in the Nineteenth Amendment (1920). Yet by imagining women's emancipation as an expansion of America's founding principles of citizenship, Stanton charted a path that other feminists would follow a century later.

Historians use the terms "first wave" and "second wave" to distinguish the women's movement of the nineteenth century from that of the late twentieth century. The woman most often credited with launching the "second wave" is Betty Friedan (b. 1921). Growing up in Peoria, Illinois, Friedan had seen her mother grow bitter over sacrificing a journalism career to raise her family. Friedan, a suburban housewife, went on to write the 1963 best seller *The Feminine Mystique*, exposing the quiet desperation of millions of housewives trapped in the "comfortable concentration camp" of the suburban home. The book struck a resonant chord and catapulted its author onto the national stage. In 1966 Friedan co founded the National Organization for Women (NOW), the chief political arm of second-wave feminism.

Just as first-wave feminism grew out of abolitionism, the second wave drew ideas, leaders, and tactics from the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Civil rights workers and feminists alike focused on equal rights. NOW campaigned vigorously for an Equal Rights Amendment that in 1982 fell just three states short of ratification.

Second-wave feminism also had an avowedly radical wing, supported by younger women who were eager to challenge almost every traditional male and female gender

role and to take the feminist cause to the streets. Among these women was Robin Morgan (b. 1941). As a college student in the 1960s, Morgan was active in civil rights organizations like the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Civil rights activism provided Morgan with a model for crusading against social injustice. It also exposed her to the same sexism that plagued society at large. Women in the movement who protested against gender discrimination met ridicule, as in SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael's famous retort, "The only position for women in SNCC is prone." Morgan went on to found WITCH (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell), made famous by its protest at the 1968 Miss America pageant in Atlantic City, New Jersey. There demonstrators crowned a sheep Miss America and threw symbols of women's oppression -- bras, girdles, dishcloths -- into trash cans. (Contrary to news stories, they did not burn the bras.)

As the contrast between WITCH and NOW suggests, second-wave feminism was a remarkably diverse movement. Feminists in the late twentieth century disagreed over many issues -- from pornography and marriage to how much to expect from government, capitalism, and men. Some feminists placed a priority on gender equality -- for example, full female service in the military. Others defended a feminism of gender difference -- such as maternity leave and other special protections for women in the workplace.

Still, beyond these differences feminists had much in common. Most advocated a woman's right to choose in the battle over abortion rights. Most regarded the law as the key weapon against gender discrimination. By century's end radical and moderate feminists alike could take pride in a host of achievements that had changed the landscape of gender relations beyond what most people could have imagined at midcentury. Yet, like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, second-wave feminists also shared the burden of understanding that the goals of genuine equality would take more than a lifetime to achieve.

(photo) Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902) and Two of Her Sons, 1848 In the same year, Stanton delivered her Declaration of Sentiments to the first Woman's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York. Modeled on the Declaration of Independence, it demanded equal political and social rights for women -- issues that were still contentious a century and a half later.

(photo) Marching for Women's Rights, 1977. A multi-ethnic and multi-racial group of women, accompanied by noted "second-wave" feminists Bella Abzug (in hat) and Betty Friedan (far right), helped to carry a torch from Seneca Falls, New York, birthplace of the feminist movement, to Houston, Texas, site of the National Women's Conference.
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The Feminist Revolution

All Americans were caught up in the great economic changes of the late twentieth century, but no group was more profoundly affected than women. When the century opened, women made up about 20 percent of all workers. Over the next five decades, they increased their presence in the labor force at a fairly steady rate, except for a temporary spurt during World War II. Then, beginning in the 1950s, women's entry into the workplace accelerated dramatically. By the 1990s nearly half of all workers were women, and the majority of working-age women held jobs outside the home. Most astonishing was the upsurge in employment among mothers. In 1950 nearly 90 percent of mothers with children under the age of six did not work for pay. But half a century later, a majority of women with children as young as one year old were wage earners. Women now brought home the bacon and then cooked it, too.

Beginning in the 1960s, many all-male strongholds, including Yale, Princeton, West Point, and even, belatedly, southern military academies like the Citadel and Virginia Military Institute, opened their doors to women. By the opening of the new century, women were piloting airliners, orbiting the earth, governing states and cities, and writing Supreme Court decisions.

Yet despite these gains, many feminists remained frustrated. Women continued to receive lower wages -- an average of 77 cents on the dollar in 2002 compared with men doing the same full-time work -- and they tended to concentrate in a few low-prestige, low-paying occupations (the "pink-collar ghetto"). Although they made up more than half the population, women in 2002 accounted for only 29 percent of lawyers and judges (up from 5 percent in 1970) and 25 percent of physicians (up from 10 percent in 1970). Overt sexual discrimination explained some of this occupational segregation, but most of it seemed attributable to the greater burdens of parenthood on women than on men. Women were far more likely than men to interrupt their careers to bear and raise children, and even to choose less demanding career paths to allow for fulfilling those traditional roles. Discrimination and a focus on children also helped account for the persistence of a "gender gap" in national elections. Women continued to vote in greater numbers than men for Democratic candidates, who were often perceived as being more willing to favor government support for health and child care, education, and job equality, as well as being more vigilant to protect abortion rights.

As the revolution in women's status rolled on in the 2000s, men's lives changed as well. Some employers provided paternity leave in addition to maternity leave, in recognition of the shared obligations of the two-worker household. More men assumed traditional female responsibilities such as cooking, laundry, and child care. Recognizing the new realities of the modern American household, Congress passed a Family Leave Bill in 1993, mandating job protection for working fathers as well as mothers who needed to take time off from work for family-related reasons.

(photo) Women's World: Something Old, Something New. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, revolutionary changes in the economy and in social values had opened new career possibilities to women, while not fully relieving them of their traditional duties as mothers and homemakers. Dramatic changes in race relations and the redefinition of gender roles at the end of the twentieth century transformed even tradition-bound institutions like the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York, as this gathering of cadets suggests. Women's athletics came into their own in the wake of the feminist revolution. In 1999 the U.S. Women's World Cup Soccer Team brought home the trophy to a nation suddenly enthralled with women's soccer.

(picture) The Justice Is a Lady, 1981. "Well, it's about time." Herblock hails Sandra Day O'Connor's appointment to the Supreme Court.

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New Families and Old

The nuclear family, once prized as the foundation of society and the nursery of the Republic, suffered heavy blows in modern America. By the 1990s one out of every two marriages ended in divorce. Seven times more children were affected by divorce than at the beginning of the century. Kids who commuted between separated parents were commonplace. The 1950s ideal of a family with two parents, only one of whom worked, was now a virtually useless way to picture the typical American household.

Traditional families were not only falling apart at an alarming rate but were also increasingly slow to form in the first place. The proportion of adults living alone tripled in the four decades after 1950, and by the 1990s nearly one-third of women aged twenty-five to twenty-nine had never married. In the 1960s, 5 percent of all births were to unmarried women, but three decades later one out of four white babies, one out of three Latino babies, and two out of three African American babies were born to single mothers. Every fourth child in America was growing up in a household that lacked two parents. The collapse of the traditional family contributed heavily to the pauperization of many women and children, as single parents (usually mothers) struggled to keep their households economically afloat. Single parenthood outstripped race and ethnicity as the most telling predictor of poverty in America.

Child-rearing, the family's foremost function, was being increasingly assigned to

"parent-substitutes" at day-care centers or schools -- or to television, the modern age's "electronic baby-sitter." Estimates were that the average child by age sixteen had watched up to fifteen thousand hours of TV -- more time than was spent in the classroom. Parental anxieties multiplied with the advent of the Internet -- an electronic cornucopia where youngsters could "surf" through poetry and problem sets as well as pornography.

But if the traditional family was increasingly rare, the family itself remained a bedrock of American society in the early twenty-first century, as viable families now assumed a variety of forms. Children in households led by a single parent, stepparent, or grandparent, as well as children with gay or lesbian parents, encountered a degree of acceptance that would have been unimaginable a generation earlier. Even the notion of gay marriage, which emerged as a major public controversy when the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled it legal in 2003, signaled that the idea of marriage retained its luster. Teenage pregnancy, a key source of single parenthood, was also on the decline after the mid-1990s. Even divorce rates appeared to ebb a bit, or at least stabilize, with four divorces per thousand people in 2001, down from five per thousand in 1985. The family was not evaporating, but evolving into multiple forms.

(picture) The Modern Family Tree. High divorce rates and the increasing numbers of "blended families" in modern American society could often be confusing.