

Nation of Nations: A Narrative History of the American Republic, 5th Ed., James West Davidson, William E. Gienapp, Christine Leigh Heyrman, Mark H. Lytle, and Michael B. Stoff, NY: McGraw-Hill, 2005. [13-]

[1034-1038]

Feminism

The movement for women's rights and equality in the United States was not, of course, a creation of the 1960s. It began well before the Civil War, and the sustained political efforts of its supporters 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 first women to voice dissatisfaction with the cultural attitudes prevalent at midcentury. Even though more women were entering the job market, the media routinely glorified housewives and homemakers while discouraging those women 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 birth to a new 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 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 and assuming heavy responsibilities, these women 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 such as 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 daycare 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 participants 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 ERA 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.

The Legacy of Identity Politics

The identity politics of the late 1960s and early 1970s marked a beginning, not an end. Over the next decade, African Americans, Latinos, American Indians, Asian Americans, gays, and feminists would discover that many of the issues they raised remained unresolved. White males still earned more than women or minority men. A glass ceiling barred the path to the executive suites in most corporations, professions, and politics. Many laws and social customs favored white males. The military, for example, barred women from combat and gays altogether. Being labeled a feminist, a homosexual, or a social activist carried a stigma in many areas of American society. Conservatives continued to see identity politics as a threat to national unity.

All the same, political and social activism had brought a sense of empowerment to people who had long seen themselves as "other." By speaking up, they had

demonstrated how traditional ways of presenting American history and culture excluded the experience of the majority of Americans. They had opened doors to jobs, careers, and avenues of success previously closed to them. An increasing number of women and minorities won election to political office. Beyond that, identity politics forced the nation to see itself, not as Eurocentric, but as a multicultural society -- a nation of nations -- that struggled to reconcile separate with common identities, as it had since its founding two centuries earlier.

The End of an Era

Just as identity politics revealed the divisions in American society, so did the continuing debate over Vietnam. President Nixon was particularly frustrated because a settlement there still eluded him. The North Vietnamese refused any peace agreement that left the South Vietnamese government of General Nguyen Van Thieu in power. Nixon wanted to subdue his opponents through force but recognized that it would be political suicide to send back American troops. Instead, he ordered Haiphong harbor mined and blockaded in May 1972, along with a sustained bombing campaign. Then on December 18 the president launched an even greater wave of attacks, as American planes dropped more bombs on the North in 12 days than they had during the entire campaign from 1969 to 1971.

Once again, Kissinger returned to Paris, hoping that the combination of threats and conciliation would bring a settlement. Ironically, the Americans' ally, General Thieu, threw up the most stumbling blocks, for he was rightly convinced that his regime would not last once the United States departed. But in January 1973 a treaty was finally arranged, smoothed by Kissinger's promise of aid to the North Vietnamese to help in postwar reconstruction, as well as a secret pledge to Thieu to send troops again if they were needed. By March the last American units were home.

"The enemy must fight his battles... [in] protracted campaigns," wrote the Vietnamese strategist in 1284. For all concerned, the American phase of the Vietnam War had been a bloody, wearying conflict. Between 1961 and 1973 the war claimed 57,000 American lives and left more than 300,000 wounded. The cost to Southeast Asia in lives and destruction is almost impossible to calculate. More than a million Vietnamese soldiers and perhaps half a million civilians died. Some 6.5 million South Vietnamese became refugees, along with 3 million Cambodians and Laotians. Nixon claimed the "peace with honor" he had insisted on, but experienced observers predicted that South Vietnam's days were numbered. By any real measure of military success the Vietcong peasant guerrillas and their lightly armed North Vietnamese allies had held off -- and in that sense defeated -- the world's greatest military power. The fall of Saigon in 1975 would complete that defeat.

Truman may have started the United States down the road to Vietnam by promoting a doctrine of containment all around the globe. Certainly Eisenhower and Kennedy increased American involvement and Richard Nixon ended it. But fairly or not, Vietnam is remembered as Lyndon Johnson's war. He committed both the material and human resources of the United States to defeat communism in Southeast Asia. The decision to escalate eventually destroyed the political consensus that had unified Americans since the late 1940s. That consensus was built on two major assumptions. First, it assumed that the United States must bear the burden of containing communism around the world. Second, American leaders had believed that the prosperity generated by the American economy made it possible both to fight communism abroad and to solve major social problems at home.

Liberal dreams died with Vietnam, too. The war in Southeast Asia shattered the optimism of the early 1960s: the belief that the world could be remade with the help of enough brilliant intellectuals or enough federal programs. The war also eroded the prosperity upon which the optimism of the postwar era had rested. After 1973 the economy slid into a long recession that forced Americans to recognize they had entered

an era of limits both at home and abroad. Lyndon Johnson, who sought to preserve both liberal dreams and the cold war consensus, died on January 22, 1973, one day before the American war in Vietnam ended.

(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.

[1076-1078]

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.

The United States was not the only nation to experience a resurgence of political conservatism, nationalism, and religious revival. The year before Ronald Reagan became president, Great Britain chose Margaret Thatcher as its first woman prime minister. Under her conservative leadership, "Thatcherism" became a synonym for cutting social programs, downsizing government, and privatizing state-controlled industries. Even within the Soviet bloc, rumblings could be felt as more citizens turned to religion after becoming disillusioned with the Communist system. In China, the successors to revolutionary leader Mao Zedong introduced market capitalism into the economy during the 1980s.

In some regions the conservative revival reflected a questioning of the liberal values that emerged from Europe's eighteenth-century Enlightenment. That era's faith in the rational spirit of science and technology had dominated Western thought for 200 years. Increasingly, Fundamentalists were demanding that traditional religion become the center of public life. The student radicals in Iran who seized the American embassy feared that Western ideas would destroy their Islamic faith. They saw the theocracy of the Ayatollah Khomeini as a way to rid Iran of Western secularism. In Israel, religious conservatives became a political force as they too resisted secular trends in their society. And as we shall see, leadership of the Roman Catholic Church fell to Pope John Paul II, who rejected calls to liberalize doctrine on such issues as birth control, abortion, and the acceptance of female priests.

Born Again

Thus the call for a revival of religion loomed large in the conservative rebellion. 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. Some pressed states and the

federal government to adopt a "school prayer" amendment allowing officially sanctioned prayer in classrooms. Others urged the teaching of "Creationism" as an acceptable alternative to Darwinian evolution. Frustrated with public schools, some parents 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.

Like Aimee Semple McPherson in the 1920s (see pp. 784-785), evangelicals denounced the modern media as secular agencies, but 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 an unborn fetus. 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.

[1118-1119]

Conservatives and the Feminist Agenda

Conservatives aimed some of their most bitter barbs at Hillary Clinton. Throughout her career she had supported liberal causes disdained by most conservatives, including the Children's Defense Fund, the American Bar Association's commission on women, and educational reform in Arkansas. Hillary Clinton also used her influence to promote opportunity for women and to draw attention to feminist issues. Bill Clinton shared many of his wife's concerns. During the election he told voters that he had "learned that building up women does not diminish men." In that spirit he appointed Ruth Bader Ginsburg to the Supreme Court and three women to his cabinet, including Janet Reno as attorney general. In 1997 he named Madeleine Albright as the first female secretary of state.

Both Clintons had supported a woman's right to control her decisions on reproduction, an issue that remained hotly contested during the 1990s. Because antiabortion conservatives had been unable to secure the repeal of Roe v. Wade, they sought to limit its application as much as possible by proposing to make illegal a procedure they referred to as "partial birth" late-term abortion. Doctors seldom performed the procedure and did so only to save a mother's life. Twice President Clinton vetoed bills that would criminalize the procedure.

More problematic for feminists was the legacy of the Supreme Court decision in the 1991 case of UAW v. Johnson Controls. Since Muller v. Oregon in 1908 (page 716), the Court had declared laws constitutional that gave women special protection based on their biological differences from men. Using this standard, Johnson Controls had

established a policy of not hiring women workers to manufacture batteries, because the lead fumes in the workplace might damage a pregnant woman's unborn fetus. The workers' union challenged the policy, noting that fertile men who faced reproductive risks in the workplace were not restricted. The Court agreed with the union, ruling that the emphasis on biological differences denied women an "equal employment opportunity." Justice Harry Blackmun wrote that a woman's decision as to whether her "reproductive role is more important to herself and her family than her economic role" was one for her to make on her own.

Many feminists hailed the decision as a step toward workplace equality. Feminist scholar Cynthia Daniels saw it as more ambiguous. Should laws recognize biological difference, or should they uphold equality? As Daniels argued, "To ignore difference is to risk placing women in a workplace designed by and for men, with all of its hazards and lack of concern for the preservation of life and health." Yet rules that recognized difference had in the past reinforced "those assumptions and economic structures which form the foundation of women's inequality." Throughout the 1990s feminists struggled with how to balance gender neutrality with gender justice. "For some, feminism necessarily means the promotion of equality between men and women," historian Elizabeth Fox Genovese wrote. "For others, it just as necessarily means the celebration of differences between women and men."