

***Nation of Nations: A Narrative History of the American Republic, 6th Ed., James West Davidson, Brian DeLay, Christine Leigh Heyrman, Mark H. Lytle, and Michael B. Stoff, NY: McGraw-Hill, 2008. [13- ]***

[905-906]

**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 protested that "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. Then 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 enforce the gender equality provisions of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. 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 feminism. 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.

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 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. 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.

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 end the campaign for ERA failed, also because many women (and a considerable number of men) wanted to use the political system, rather than a constitutional amendment, to correct the most glaring inequalities between the sexes.

(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 house wife.

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### **The Legacy of Identity and Value Politics**

Earth Day did not signal a consensus on an environmental ethic. Nor could Ralph Nader persuade Congress that the country needed a new agency to represent the interests of consumers. President Nixon, for one, was not willing to impose regulations that stifled growth, especially when facing a troubled economy. Radical activists "aren't really one damn bit interested in safety or clean air," he commented to one industry group. "What they are interested in is destroying the system." If he faced "a flat choice between jobs and smoke," nature would be the loser.

Nixon's political instincts were shrewd. Both the 1968 and 1972 presidential elections revealed a shift in political power toward the southern and western rims of the United States where traditional values flourished and where whites, in the wake of the civil rights revolution, were deserting the Democrats in droves. These were the voters Nixon courted, in what he sometimes referred to as his "southern strategy" to replace the old New Deal coalition with a new Republican majority. To many of the president's supporters it seemed as if the consensus of the 1950s was being ripped apart. By the early 1970s his silent majority had wearied of the demands of angry minorities and protestors. Like the president, they worried more about job security than clean air and water. As one bumper sticker declared, "Out of work? Hungry? Eat an environmentalist."

The president sought to channel a similar backlash against identity politics. Conservatives opposed many of the remedies proposed by the movement, such as the

Equal Rights Amendment, integration of private clubs, and use of quotas for hiring and college admissions. They argued that merit, not race or gender, should determine an individual's opportunities. Furthermore, white males and ethnic groups such as Italian and Polish Americans resented government programs for minorities that worked to their disadvantage. Quotas to hire black police, for example, took jobs away from qualified whites. Ethnic identity organizations such as the Italian American Civil Rights League spoke out against affirmative action for minorities.

Even critics could not deny that political and social activists had brought a sense of empowerment to people who had long seen themselves as "other." The reforms of the 1960s opened doors to jobs, careers, and avenues of success previously closed to all but white males. But a pluralistic approach to equality also tended to fragment rather than unify the nation. It divided liberals from activists further to the left and signaled that reform had reached its high-water mark, even as white men continued to earn more than women or minorities. The road to equality-whether in the workplace, schools, or even the bedroom-remained a fault line along which the nation would divide.  
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### **The Conservative Rebellion**

In California, Howard Jarvis, a retired Mormon businessman, had for years promoted tax-cutting referenda on the state ballot. While those measures failed to attract widespread support, Jarvis's efforts to reduce property taxes did. In the case of property taxes, the issue was equity, not simply lower taxes. Small homeowners often paid taxes at much higher rates than large property owners and businesses that received breaks from friendly and often corrupt tax assessors. Hence, the extremely conservative Jarvis began to frame his antigovernment agenda in populist terms: his supporters, he claimed, were the small interests and individuals: teachers, blue-collar workers, and "a great number of Negroes." His group, the United Organizations of Taxpayers (UOT) received no money from oil companies, bankers, land speculators, or insurance companies.

### **Tax Revolt**

By the late 1970s California was ripe for the Jarvis rebellion. Inflation imposed a crushing burden on middle and lower class homeowners. At the same time their taxes rose steadily. One woman complained to California Governor Jerry Brown that her hopes to live in a house mortgage free were not possible, "because our government won't let this happen." An old radical and union organizer described state politicians and bureaucrats as "those leeches who must have more and more taxes." Such mounting anger helped UOT collect 1.25 million signatures to place Proposition 13 on the ballot in 1978. Opponents warned that the loss of revenue would force school closings, job losses, and reduced police and fire protection.

Proposition 13 succeeded because it offered homeowners immediate relief. It cut property taxes 57 percent and made it difficult for the state and local legislatures to raise taxes in the future. Significantly, the proposition gained support from voters of all income levels and from liberals and conservatives. Only African Americans and public employees opposed the measure, since both those groups depended heavily on public sector jobs. Californians, who paid 50 percent more in property taxes in 1978 than did citizens of any other state, only a year later paid taxes 35 percent below the national average.

The tax rebellion quickly spread across the nation. The New York Times likened it to "a modern Boston Tea Party." Over the next four years 12 states passed similar resolutions, while many legislatures cut public spending and taxes, hoping to avoid the voters' wrath. Even in Massachusetts, where government programs were generally popular, voters capped local property taxes and prevented future increases of more than 2V2 percent, no matter how much inflation rose or the population grew. The only state to support the liberal George McGovern in 1972 voted narrowly for Ronald Reagan in

1980. After 1975, Americans no longer embraced the liberal consensus that professional expertise in the service of government could solve the nation's problems and promote progress.

### **The Diverse Evangelical World**

But the conservative rebellion was not merely the child of a faltering economy, stagnating wages, and a resistance to paying taxes. The social ferment of the 1960s had taken its toll on spiritual life and on the churches. During that decade mainline Protestant churches struggled over how their religious beliefs should engage with civil rights the war in Vietnam, issues of sex and gender, and more liberated lifestyles. As congregations moved to embrace more liberal definitions of faith, many Protestants found themselves yearning for a more traditional religious experience. Protestants moved in large numbers from long established denominations such as Presbyterians and Congregationalists to evangelical churches. By the mid-1980s, some 36 percent of Americans described themselves as "born again." Similar trends occurred among Catholics and Jews, many of whom also resisted the liberalization of their faith.

The growing evangelical movement encompassed a diverse range of religious practices and beliefs. Fundamentalists rejected the liberal Protestant move toward interpreting scripture figuratively and in light of rigorous historical scholarship. Their showdown with the teaching of evolution during the 1925 Scopes trial (see pages 709-711) made clear fundamentalists' unwillingness to accept a secular view of the world. In the decades following Scopes, many of these believers retreated from a society that they viewed as both corrupt and corrupting, waiting for the imminent return of Christ.

Where fundamentalists found the spirit of Christ alive in the Bible but faint in the modern world, pentecostals believed that modern worshippers still had access to Christ's spiritual gifts. The presence of the Holy Spirit within marked a holy Christian, a presence often revealed by glossolalia, or speaking in tongues. The laying on of hands or faith healing was another spiritual gift. Charismatics shared with Pentecostals the faith in spiritual gifts, but they usually associated themselves with non-Pentecostal churches.

Even though sects such as the Southern Baptists and Assemblies of God attracted large national memberships, the real focus among evangelicals was local, centered in church communities. Such congregations insisted that salvation came through a spiritual rebirth (being "born again") after a person had acknowledged sinfulness and embraced Christ's atonement. Evangelical tradition encouraged proselytizing by the faithful, often in the form of revivals and spiritual awakenings. Finally, most evangelicals anticipated the rapture, when Christ would return to transport true believers into his Father's kingdom. These shared beliefs, when combined with a commitment to piety, put evangelicals squarely at odds with modern society. They imposed a strict personal morality, often insisted on the central role of fathers in the family, and in some churches forbade such worldly evils as dancing, cosmetics, movies, gambling, and premarital sex.

Though evangelicals condemned much of modern culture, many preachers advocated a "prosperity theology" that encouraged economic success. They also used the media to spread the word, none more effectively than did Virginia-based Pat Robertson, the son of a Virginia politician. Robertson, a magnetic Southern Baptist, used cable and satellite broadcasts to expand the Christian Broadcast Network into a media empire. His 700 Club reached an audience of millions and inspired his colleague Jim Bakker to launch the even more popular Praise the Lord Club -- PTL for short. Although the content featured gospel singing, fervent preaching, faith healing, and speaking in tongues, the format mirrored that of major network talk shows, opening with a Christian monologue, conversations with celebrity guests, and musical entertainment.

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(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, in this photograph they clash with pro-choice demonstrators outside Faneuil Hall in Boston. [968-969]

### **Women's Issues in the Clinton Years**

"Building up women does not diminish men," Bill Clinton had insisted during the 1992 election campaign. In that spirit he appointed Ruth Bader Ginsburg to the Supreme Court and three women to his Cabinet, including Janet Reno as his attorney general. Giving his wife Hillary Clinton a prominent role in the administration also underscored Clinton's interest in advancing the goals of feminists.

Both Clintons supported a woman's right to control decisions on reproduction, on which conservatives challenged them. With the Supreme Court still unwilling to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, prolife advocates sought to limit the decision's application as much as possible. They proposed to make illegal a late-term procedure known as "partial birth" 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 (see page 636) 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 she could make on her own.

Many feminists hailed the decision as a step toward workplace equality. Others saw it as more ambiguous. Should laws recognize biological difference, or should they uphold equality? Was it "equal treatment" to order women into a workplace that had been designed by and for men, with little regard for safety standards or a woman's health? Feminists continued to debate 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."