

***The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society, Gary B. Nash, Julie Roy Jeffrey, John R. Howe, Peter J. Frederick, Allen F. Davis, and Allan M. Winkler, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1986. [13- ]***

[895-898]

### **Back to the Kitchen**

World War II had interrupted traditional patterns of behavior for both men and women. As servicemen went overseas, women left their homes to work. After 1945, there was a period of adjustment as the men returned. In the 1950s, traditional gender roles were reaffirmed although, paradoxically, more women entered the work force than ever before.

Men, of course, were expected to go to school and then find jobs to support their families. Viewing themselves as the primary breadwinners, they expected their jobs to be waiting for them after the war. For women, the situation was more difficult. Many had enjoyed working during the war and were reluctant to retreat to the home, although they were persistently encouraged by the government and their employers to do so. In 1947, Life magazine ran a long photo essay called "The American Woman's Dilemma." It argued that women were caught in a conflict between the traditional expectation to stay home and the desire to have a paid job. A 1946 Fortune poll also captured the discontent of some women. Asked whether they would prefer to be born again as men or women, 25 percent of the women asked said they would prefer to be men. That dissatisfaction was strongest among white, well-educated, middle-class women, which was understandable since black and lower-class white women were usually required by their families' economic circumstances to continue working outside the home.

By the 1950s, doubts and questions had been mostly suppressed. The baby boom increased average family size and made the decision to remain home easier. The flight to the suburbs gave women more to do, and they settled into the routines of redecorating their homes and gardens and transporting children to and from activities and schools.

In 1956, when Life produced a special issue on women, the message differed strikingly from that of nine years earlier. Profiling Marjorie Sutton, the magazine spoke of the "Busy Wife's Achievements" as "Home Manager, Mother, Hostess, and Useful Civic Worker." Married at 16, Marjorie was now busy with the PTA, Campfire Girls, and charity causes. She cooked and sewed for her family, which included four children, supported her husband by entertaining 1,500 guests a year, and worked out on the trampoline "to keep her size 12 figure."

Marjorie Sutton reflected the widespread social emphasis on marriage and home. Many women who went to college did so to find husbands; if this succeeded, they dropped out. Almost two-thirds of the women in college stopped before completing a degree, compared to less than half of the men. Women were expected to marry young, have children early, and support their husbands' careers. "Modern man needs an old-fashioned woman around the house," novelist Sloan Wilson asserted.

Despite the reaffirmation of the old ideology that a woman's place was in the home, the 1950s was a period of unnoticed but important change. Because the supply of single women workers was diminished by the low birthrate of the Depression years and by increased schooling and early marriage, older married women began entering the labor force in large numbers for the first time. In 1940, only 15 percent of American wives had jobs. By 1950, 21 percent were employed, and ten years later, the figure had risen to 30 percent. Moreover, married women now composed over half of all working women, a dramatic reversal of earlier patterns.

Although many working women were poor, divorced, or widowed, many came from the middle class. Their income helped their families acquire the desirable new products

that were badges of middle-class status. They stepped into the new jobs created by economic expansion. Women clustered in office, sales, and service positions, occupations already defined as female. They and their employers considered their work subordinate to their primary role as wives and mothers. Comparatively few entered professions where they would have challenged traditional notions of woman's place. As *Life* magazine pointed out in 1956, "Household skills take her into the garment trades; neat and personable, she becomes office worker and sales lady; patient and dextrous, she does well on competitive, detailed factory work; compassionate, she becomes teacher and nurse."

Black women worked as always, but after the war they often lost the jobs they had won during the conflict. As the total percentage of women in the Detroit automobile industry dropped from 25 to 7.5, for example, jobs for black women nearly disappeared. Their median income at the end of the 1940s was less than half that of white women. Nor did they obtain white-collar work so easily as white women. But during the 1950s, they succeeded both in moving into white-collar positions and improving their income. By 1960, more than a third of all black women had clerical, sales, service, or professional jobs, and their paychecks were 70 percent of those of white women.

Despite the mixed character of women's experience, society at large continued to view women in traditional ways. The belief that women's main role was still at home justified paying them low wages and denying them promotions. Adlai Stevenson, Democratic presidential candidate in 1952 and 1956, defined their role in politics by telling a group of women that "the assignment for you, as wives and mothers, you can do in the living room with a baby in your lap or in the kitchen with a can opener in your hand." As in much of the nineteenth century, a woman was "to influence man and boy" in her "humble role of housewife."

Pediatrician Benjamin Spock agreed. In his enormously popular *Baby and Child Care* (1946), responsible more than any other book for the child-rearing patterns of the postwar generation, he advised mothers to stay at home with their children and not to work if they wanted to raise stable and secure youngsters.

Movies seized on popular stereotypes and dramatized them. Doris Day, with her charm and clean appearance, was a favorite heroine. In movie after movie, she showed how an attractive woman who played her cards right could land her man -- the assumed goal of every woman.

Sexuality was a troublesome if compelling topic in the postwar years. In 1948, Alfred C. Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* was published. Kinsey was an Indiana University zoologist who had previously studied the gall wasp. When asked to teach a course on marriage problems, he found little published material about human sexual activity and decided to collect his own. He compiled case histories of 5,300 white males, analyzed their personal backgrounds, and recorded patterns of sexual behavior.

Kinsey shocked the country with his statistics on premarital, extramarital, and otherwise illicit sexual activity. Sixty-seven percent of all males who went to college, he concluded, had engaged in sexual intercourse before marriage; 84 percent of those who went to high school but not beyond had done the same. Thirty-seven percent of the total male population had experienced some kind of overt homosexual activity. One out of every six farm boys in America had copulated with animals. Kinsey published a companion volume, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953), that detailed many of the same sexual patterns. Although many denounced the books, both sold widely, for they opened the door to a subject that had previously been considered taboo.

Such interest in sexuality appeared in the fascination with sex goddesses like Marilyn Monroe. With her blonde hair, breathy voice, and raw sexuality, she seemed to personify the forbidden side of the good life and became one of Hollywood's most popular stars. The images such film goddesses presented corresponded to male fantasies of women. As for these men's wives, they were expected to manage their suburban homes

and to be cheerful and willing objects of their husbands' desire.  
(photo) Sex goddesses of the screen -- such as Marilyn Monroe, shown here in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* -- represented the fantasies of American males in the family-oriented 1950s.  
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### **THE CLIMAX OF SOCIAL REFORM**

The turbulent 1960s had spawned an assortment of movements and groups. In the troubled 1970s, they continued to grow, although they were often affected by the uncertain economy.

#### **Feminism at High Tide**

In 1971, Helen Reddy expressed the energy of the woman's movement in a song called "I Am Woman":

I am woman, hear me roar  
In numbers too big to ignore  
And I know too much to go back and pretend  
'Cause I've heard it all before  
And I've been down there on the floor,  
No one's ever gonna keep me down again.  
Oh, yes, I am wise  
But it's wisdom born of pain.  
Yes, I've paid the price  
But look how much I gained.  
If I have to  
I can do anything.  
I am strong,  
I am invincible,  
I am woman.

Only a few years before, in 1962, a Gallup poll revealed that a majority of women did not believe that American women suffered discrimination. The facts, however, told a different story, for even though more women were working, they did not receive equal pay for equal work. In 1977, the working woman earned 57 percent of what her male counterpart did; in 1939, she had earned 61 percent. Moreover, employers systematically excluded women from many positions. Most still held "female" jobs in the clerical, sales, and service sectors.

The confrontations of the 1960s began to alter that state of affairs as well as the perception of women's role. In the early 1970s, a survey noted that in a two-year period, the number of college students who felt that women were oppressed had doubled, and the numbers continued to rise. Whereas in 1970 a survey of first-year college students showed that men interested in such fields as business, medicine, engineering, and law outnumbered women eight to one, in 1975 the ratio had dropped to three to one. The proportion of women beginning law school quadrupled between 1969 and 1973.

Several publications helped to spread the ideas of the women's movement. Gloria Steinem, author of a regular political column in *New York* magazine, first thought of herself as a professional journalist with no particular interest in women's affairs. "I certainly didn't understand that women were an 'out' group," she noted, "and I would even insist that I wasn't discriminated against as a woman." While working on a story about abortion, however, she began to realize that discrimination took many forms. She realized she "had been unable to get an apartment because, the reasoning was, a single woman wasn't financially responsible -- and if she was responsible, she was probably a prostitute." Steinem began writing more about women, and in 1971 she banded together with several other women to found a new magazine. *Ms.* succeeded beyond their wildest dreams and reached a wide audience of women who were not members of feminist organizations. In the first eight days, the 300,000 copies of the preview issue sold out.

By 1973, there were almost 200,000 subscribers. Most of them were under 35, had graduated from college, and were working in professional, managerial, or technical jobs.

Other publications also publicized the issues and concerns of the women's movement. The New Woman's Survival Catalogue provided useful advice to women readers. Our Bodies, Ourselves, a handbook published by a woman's health collective, encouraged women to understand and control their bodies; it sold 850,000 copies between 1971 and 1976.

These new books and magazines differed radically from older women's magazines like Good Housekeeping and Ladies' Home Journal. Those publications aimed at women at home and focused on their domestic interests, needs, and sometimes fantasies. Ms., on the other hand, dealt with abortion, and provided a forum for the discussion of important feminist issues.

Despite certain shared interests, women's struggle for equality was decentralized, diffuse, and often internally divided. As Time magazine pointed out in 1972, "The aims of the movement range from the modest, sensible amelioration of the female condition to extreme and revolutionary visions." Groups like NOW pressed for equal employment opportunities, child-care centers, and abortion reform. Women both in and out of NOW who were concerned with legal reforms worked for congressional passage, then ratification, of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the Constitution. Passed by Congress in 1972, it stated simply, "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex." Thirty of the required 38 states quickly ratified it, a few others followed, and for a time final approval seemed imminent.

Other feminist groups adopted more radical positions. Legal changes were not enough, they argued. Fundamental changes in sexual identity were needed to end male domination and social exploitation. Shulamith Firestone, a former member of the New Left, explained in *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) the necessity of a new society in which women were freed "from the tyranny of their reproductive biology by every means available." Moreover, traditional gender and family roles must be discarded and "the childbearing and childrearing role [diffused] to the society as a whole, men as well as women." Other socialist feminists claimed that it was not enough to strike out at male domination, for capitalist society itself was responsible for women's plight. Only through the process of revolution could women be free.

Moderates and radicals alike generated opposition. Gloria Steinem was often ridiculed. One man, she recalled, approached her on the street and said, "I have ten women employees and I pay them a third of what I pay men, and if I had to pay them more, I'd fire them. What do you think of that?" Nixon himself sided with the traditionalists when in 1971 he vetoed an appropriation for day-care centers with the argument that they undermined the sanctity of the family. He insisted that "the vast moral authority of national government... must be... consciously designed to cement the family in its rightful position as the keystone of our civilization."

Women themselves resisted feminism for many reasons. Many felt the women's movement was contemptuous of women who stayed at home to perform all the tasks that had traditionally been expected of them. Marabel Morgan was one who still insisted that the woman had a place at home by her husband's side. The wife of a Florida attorney, she argued that "it is only when a woman surrenders her life to her husband, reveres and worships him, and is willing to serve him, that she becomes really beautiful to him." In her book *The Total Woman* (1973) she counseled others to follow the 4A approach: accept, admire, adapt, appreciate. She suggested ways of meeting a husband at the door and cited approvingly the case of one woman who "welcomed her husband home in black mesh stockings, high heels, and an apron. That's all." Everything was designed to move from "fizzle to sizzle," and substantial numbers of women wanted to hear the message. As of 1975, some 500,000 copies of the hardcover

volume had been sold before a paperback version appeared.

In the realm of politics, Phyllis Schlafly headed a nationwide campaign to block ratification of the ERA. Author of several books, including one strongly supporting the conservative presidential candidate Barry Goldwater a decade before, she was both vigorous and articulate. On the ERA she was adamant: "It won't do anything to help women, and it will take away from women the rights they already have, such as the right of a wife to be supported by her husband, the right of a woman to be exempted from military combat, and the right, if you wanted it, to go to a single-sex college." The ERA, she predicted, would lead to the establishment of coed bathrooms, the elimination of alimony, and the legalization of homosexual marriage.

Women, she argued, already had legal backing enough for their rights.

Despite the counterattacks, the women's movement flourished in the 1970s. But like other earlier attempts to change the status of women, it was fueled largely by the grievances of middle-class women. Focusing on issues of interest to them, the movement often ignored the special problems of black and white working-class women. As one black woman told Betty Friedan, "We don't want anything to do with that feminist bag." Most black women found race a far more compelling problem than gender. Black women, Friedan was told, wanted "black men to get ahead." Nor did the feminists' emphasis on the satisfaction of working outside the home make much sense to white workingclass women who could only expect dull, monotonous, and poorly paid jobs if they went to work. They preferred to stay at home if they could.

(photo) Our Bodies, Ourselves and Ms. magazine were among the publications spawned by the women's movement to give women greater control over various aspects of their lives.

(graph) Women College Graduates, 1940-1980. Source: U.S. Department of Commerce.

(graph) Married Women in the Work Force, 1950-1980. Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

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### **Growing Up**

In the mid-1970s, the birthrate began to rise after 18 years of decline. Demographers viewed the increase as part of a long-term trend. The Census Bureau estimated that there would be 4 million births in 1983, compared to 3.1 million in 1975.

In an era of economic austerity, new children sometimes posed problems for their families. An extra mouth to feed could make a difference to a family on the fringe. The arrival of children often required new decisions about the relationship between family and career. Women entering the work force with long-range employment commitments had to juggle work and home schedules and find adequate childcare facilities.

The rising divorce rate also affected children. By 1980, the divorce rate had reached a historic peak. In that year, the courts granted nearly 1.2 million divorces, the highest total in the nation's history. For each 1,000 marriages, 490 divorces occurred, up from 328 per 1,000 in 1970 and 258 per 1,000 in 1960. Many splits involved fights over the young.

In the past, divorced mothers had almost always gained custody over the children, but now husbands increasingly asserted their parental rights. Sometimes the struggles became angry and intense. In 1977, Diane and James Tilden fought over their 10-year-old son Jimmy. A New York judge gave James custody, except in the summer. When he handed over his son to his ex-wife, James was concerned, and with good reason, for she promptly disappeared. He found her in Florida, but a judge there gave her custody of the boy. James then smuggled his son back to New York and successfully appealed the Florida case. Finally he had complete custody -- and \$34,000 in legal fees. Jimmy had become a pawn in a larger game.

Runaways also became a problem. According to some estimates, more than a million children between the ages of 10 and 17 were on the run. They left home for various

reasons. Some were driven out. Others were victims of physical abuse. Still others fled violent arguments or other recession-induced strains in family life. Many returned home within a few days. Some, however, remained on city streets. In 1974, Congress passed a Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, which established telephone hot lines and temporary shelters. But the shelters served only 45,000 youths a year, leaving countless others without help.

Even more ominous was the rising death rate among the young. The Public Health Service reported in 1982 that the death rate for most Americans had dropped significantly over a 30-year period, but the rate for those between 15 and 24 rose steadily after 1976. Automobile accidents, murders, and suicides caused three out of four deaths for that group.

### **Growing Old**

As concern with the problems of the young increased, awareness of the plight of the old also grew. Elderly people made up the fastest-growing age group in modern America. Between 1900 and 1980, when the population of the country tripled, the number of people over 65 rose eight fold. In the 1970s alone, Americans over 75 grew by more than 37 percent. Underlying the rapid increase was the steady advance in medical care, which in the twentieth century had increased life expectancy from 47 to 73 years. Americans watched Bob Hope celebrate his eightieth birthday, George Burns, approaching 90, continue to act, and Ronald Reagan, over 70, govern the country. They became aware of what columnist Max Lerner called "the aging revolution," which promised to become the most lasting of all of the twentieth-century social changes.

The elderly raised new issues in a nation suffering economic stagnation. Many wanted to continue working and resented mandatory retirement rules that drove them from their jobs. Pleading their cause was Representative Claude Pepper of Florida, the octogenarian head of the House Select Committee on Aging, who declared, "I am like an old hickory tree. The older I get, the tougher I get." Legislation in 1978 raised the mandatory retirement age from 65 to 70. That helped older workers but decreased employment opportunities for younger workers seeking jobs.

Generational resentment over jobs was compounded by the knotty problems faced by the social security system established a half century before. As more and more Americans retired, the system could not generate sufficient revenue to make the payments due without assistance from the general governmental fund. In the early 1980s, it appeared that the entire system might collapse. A temporary solution, in part involving higher taxes for those still employed and a later age for qualifying for benefits, rescued the fund, but other hard decisions for the future were postponed.

At an intensely personal level, American families faced difficult decisions about how to care for older parents who could no longer care for themselves. In the past, the elderly might naturally have come into their children's homes, but attitudes and family patterns had changed. Children were fewer than in earlier generations, and as women gravitated to jobs outside, they were less able to assist in the home care of an elderly parent. Retirement villages and nursing homes provided two alternatives, but the decision to place a parent under institutional care was often excruciating.

Margaret Stump, an occupational therapist from Tenafly, New Jersey, agonized over such a decision. For six years she flew to Lima, Ohio, every three months to see her mother, who was over 90 years old. Finally she decided to bring her to a New Jersey nursing home. "I felt that she'd be better once she got to a home," Margaret recalled. "But I knew she wanted to be in her own house. It was a very difficult decision. I had to wait until I thought she wouldn't know where she was."

[983-986]

### **THE CONTINUING STRUGGLE FOR EQUALITY**

In the 1970s and 1980s, women, blacks, Hispanic-Americans, and Native Americans continued their struggle for equal opportunity and treatment. But the pace of change

slowed as the economic climate made many Americans, convinced that enough had been done already for these groups, less sympathetic to reform.

### **Consolidating Feminist Gains**

In general, liberals applauded the accomplishments of the women's movement. Betty Friedan, whose book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) had helped mobilize a pervasive discontent two decades before, admitted in 1983:

I am still awed by the revolution that book helped spark.... I keep being surprised, as the changes the women's movement set in motion continue to play themselves out in our lives -- the enormous and mundane, subtle and not so subtle, delightful, painful, immediate, far-reaching, paradoxical, inexorable and probably irreversible changes in women's lives -- and in men's.

Changes had indeed occurred. Affirmative action had made jobs for women more accessible. Women made tremendous gains in such diverse fields as coal mining, where the percentage of women rose from 0.001 to 11.4 between 1973 and 1979, and banking, where the percentage increased from 18 to 34 in the ten years after 1970. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 45 percent of mothers with preschool children held jobs away from home in 1980. That figure was four times greater than it had been 30 years before. More day-care centers existed, although not nearly enough to meet the need; they allowed women greater flexibility in finding work. At the same time, fathers were playing a greater role in their children's lives.

Legal changes brought women more benefits and opportunities. Title 9 of the Education Amendments of 1972, which barred gender bias in federally assisted education activities and programs, stimulated colleges to admit far more women to law, medical, dental, and business schools and to drop nepotism restrictions that kept husbands and wives from teaching at the same schools. The same measure changed the nature of intercollegiate athletics. Big Ten schools, which spent millions of dollars on men's programs, in 1974 spent an average of \$3,500 a year on women's sports. That was no longer legal, and while complete equity remained a distant goal, women's athletics benefited. By 1980, 30 percent of the participants in intercollegiate athletics were women, compared to 15 percent before Title 9 had become law.

In politics women also made important strides forward. Jane Byrne succeeded Richard Daley as Chicago's mayor, and women also won mayoral races in Houston, Honolulu, and San Francisco. In 1981, President Ronald Reagan appointed Sandra Day O'Connor as the first woman Supreme Court justice, and in 1984, Geraldine Ferraro, a Democratic member of Congress, became the first woman vice-presidential candidate for a major party. Far more women were elected to state legislatures and to Congress. As women began to win elective office, political analysts noted that women voters began to show distinctive voting behavior. In the election of 1980, analysts observed a "gender gap": For the first time, women were voting significantly differently from men. Men supported Ronald Reagan by a margin of 56 to 36. Women, alarmed by his hard-line foreign policy and opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment, voted for him by a much smaller margin of 46 to 45.

In 1982, a film about a man who dressed as a woman to get a job became one of the major hits of the season. *Tootsie*, starring Dustin Hoffman, was a funny film with a serious side. Posing as Dorothy Michaels, Michael Dorsey, a rather unpleasant man, challenged sexual harassment, argued with the male chauvinists at work, and became a real battler for women's rights. In the process, Dorothy came across as a much nicer person than Michael had ever been. When he finally reverted to being himself, Betty Friedan noted, "the sensitivity he acquired, sharing woman's experience, made him a much better, stronger, more tender man."

In the tenth anniversary issue of *Ms.* magazine, in 1982, founding editor Gloria Steinem noted the differences a decade had made. "Now, we have words like 'sexual harassment' and 'battered women,'" she wrote. "Ten years ago, it was just called 'life.'"

Other examples followed: "Now, rape is defined as a crime of violence -- and victims are less likely to be raped again by the law." Perhaps best of all: "Now, we are becoming the men we wanted to marry. Ten years ago, we were trained to marry a doctor, not be one."

Yet old problems persisted. Perhaps the most troubling involved continuing wage differentials between women and men. In 1982, full-time working women earned an average of 62 cents for every dollar earned by men. Though new opportunities were opening up, most women remained in waitressing, nursing, secretarial, or light industry jobs -- the so-called pink-collar positions that paid poorly. Arguments that women should receive equal pay for equal work now led to demands for equal pay for different jobs of similar value. Comparable-worth cases began to work their way through the courts. The issue surfaced, too, in the campaign of 1984, though without any agreement on the question.

The women's rights movement, in its long history, had never been unified, and in the decade 1974 to 1984 women continued to debate their roles and rights. Despite changes in their portrayal by the media, a subtle sex-appeal image remained. Ellen Goodman took exception to an advertisement showing the Maidenform woman as a doctor. "There she was," Goodman wrote, "hair tied back primly, medical chart in her left hand, pen in her right hand, long white jacket over her shoulders, exposing her lacy magenta bra and panties." There she was, according to the caption, "making the rounds in her elegant Delectables." Goodman was disgusted, for, she observed, "I always thought she was a candidate for a cold, not a medical degree." More troubling was the implication that the doctor "is revealed in the flesh, to be -- yes, indeed -- just another woman insecure about her femininity, just another woman in search of sex appeal, just another woman who needs 'silky satin tricot with antique lace scalloping.'"

Women who applauded when the Supreme Court legalized abortion in 1973 discovered that the question of abortion remained very much alive. The number of abortions increased dramatically in the decade after the decision. By some estimates there were 10 million lawful abortions, or one for every three births. In response, "pro-life" forces mobilized as never before. Nellie Gray organized a march on Washington every January 22 to call attention to the anniversary of the Roe v. Wade decision. "It's murder, pure and simple," she said. "Abortion means killing babies." Opponents lobbied to cut off federal funds that allowed the poor to obtain the abortions the better off could pay for themselves; they insisted that abortions should be performed in hospitals and not in less expensive clinics; and they worked to reverse the original decision itself. Though the Supreme Court, which included the first woman in its history, reaffirmed its judgment in 1983, the pro-life movement was not deterred.

Agitation over the ERA also became more intense. Ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment had been taken for granted after its favorable vote in Congress in 1972, so much so that no ratification strategy was thought necessary. Within a few years, 35 states had agreed to the measure, but then the momentum disappeared. Even with an extension in the deadline granted in 1979, the amendment could not win the necessary 38-state support. Phyllis Schlafly and others continued their highly effective opposition campaign, gaining the assistance of women who felt threatened by the changes occurring and men, particularly in state legislatures, who had long been uncomfortable with the women's movement. By mid-1982, the ERA was dead.

Although women could savor their gains, some worried that complacency was setting in. Many young women who enjoyed the fruits of the movement avoided the feminist label and shunned involvement in militant campaigns. Others remained active, convinced that only with continued pressure would women achieve full equality.

(graph) Changes in Female Employment, 1940-1980. Percent of all employed women. Source: Oppenheimer, *The Female Labor Force in the United States*, 1976.

(photo) Disappointment and frustration cloud the faces of Chicago mayor Jane Byrne and NOW president Eleanor Smeal as the Illinois state legislature, despite a massive



rally, fails to ratify the ERA in 1982.