

## “Limits of Liberalism” (2000)<sup>1</sup>

*Ruth Rosen*

Much to their amusement, men opened the July 1962 issue of *Esquire* magazine to discover that a middle-aged Caroline Kennedy had won the most recent presidential election. According to the story, crowds of women cheered as the youthful and charismatic politician assumed her fifth term in office. Apparently, when women usurped power in the early years of the twenty-first century, one of their first acts was to abolish the two-term presidency. Then, they rewrote history, substituting Eleanor Roosevelt for FDR. Nationwide, women fitted themselves with surgical skin grafts so that “men were no longer needed.” Now, the article reported, men crept cautiously around “women’s bars” from which they were legally excluded. They dressed decoratively, spoke softly, lest they displease women and incite their wrath and violent retribution.

This absurdist dystopian fantasy, meant to tickle men’s funny bones even as it struck a note of horror, appeared in *Esquire*’s special issue, “The American Woman.” To the proposition, “Women of America, Now is the time to Arise,” *Esquire* commissioned a “yes” and “no” response. Robert Arthur, who had written this presumably nightmarish satire, assumed that if women gained power, they would simply turn the tables on men and treat them as second-class citizens. Equality between men and women was, for him, unimaginable. Power existed for only one reason: to dominate others.

Not all men shared his anxiety about women’s changing lives. *Esquire*’s “yes” article, written by a self-described “unreconstructed male feminist,” argued that women deserved no less than full participation in American society. In fact, the *Esquire* issue reflected an existing ambivalence in the country at large. Much of American society still accepted the idea that “separate but equal” —while discredited as policy for the races—suited men’s and women’s separate social roles rather well. You could see it played out in the daily newspaper. In addition to sex-segregated “help wanted” classified ads, most papers buried any news about women, however political or scientific, in a special “women’s section.”

It surprised no one, then, when on December 15, 1961, the *Washington Post* tucked the historic news “JFK Seeks Equal Job Status for Women” between two other memorable events of the day: “First Lady Prefers Pastels” and “Skiers to Dance at Ball Tonight,” all of which appeared in its “For and About Women” section. The *New York Times* squeezed the same story between book reviews and its “Contract Bridge” column. What these stories reported was John F. Kennedy’s decision to create a Presidential Commission on the Status of Women.

When Kennedy won the presidential election of 1960, the very last thing on his mind was to serve as a midwife for the modern women’s movement. But decades before the phrase “gender gap” entered political discourse, the idea of a “women’s bloc” already worried politicians. Less than two months before the election, the *Saturday Evening Post* had interviewed women leaders in both parties and floated the unsettling idea that women might swing the election. Pleased to be

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth Rosen, “Limits of Liberalism,” Ch. 3 in *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women’s Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking, 2000), 63-93.

recognized, women in both parties argued that “there is no doubt that if women did vote as a solid bloc, they could swing the election. It is a matter of simple arithmetic: There are 3,500,000 more women than men of voting age—although all of them do not vote....If sex appeal, or appeal to housewifely prejudice or issues that would sway career women or college girls or club ladies were the determining factor, then women could carry any contest.” In the weeks before the election, women in the Democratic Party redoubled their efforts to reach female voters through breakfasts and “kaffe klatches.”

Kennedy, who only beat Richard Nixon by the slimmest of margins, knew how much women had helped him. Turning his eyes toward the future, he couldn’t ignore their growing disgruntlement. One indefatigable female party activist complained that women formed the “hard core” of political organizations but received little recognition for their efforts: “They work at the neighborhood level as block captains, poll watchers, checkers, election-day baby sitters and chauffeurs. They staff party and campaign headquarters. They get out the vote and raise funds....In short, woman power has the same untapped creative potential as atomic energy!”

Democratic women also complained about the “antediluvian male politicians” who “talk down” to the “dear little women” and “try to flatter their looks, rather than their aspirations.” “I get awfully tired,” explained a former leader of women in the Democratic party,

of being treated as if I were the English-speaking delegate from another planet....There are too many popular clichés about women. Why must we be typed as fluttery females or bespectacled battleaxes? The public image of women has reached an all-time low—not in fact, but in print. More of us are working, more of us hold better and more responsible positions than ever before—but you’d never know it if you had to depend for information on what you read about women. We are constantly pictured as a limp, indecisive lump, quivering with uncontrolled emotions....Let’s insist on speaking and acting as individuals who have a rightful place on the human planet.

Impatiently, these party activists waited for their political payback. But Kennedy disappointed them, offering very few women high-level positions. Margaret Price of Michigan, one of the few Democratic women who had any influence with Kennedy, flooded him with women’s résumés, but with little result. When Kennedy appointed no woman to his cabinet, the well-known journalist Doris Fleeson wrote in her *New York Post* column: “At this stage, it appears that for women, the New Frontiers are the old frontiers.” Veteran Democratic activist Emma Guffey Miller informed Kennedy that “It is a grievous disappointment to the women leaders and ardent workers that so few women have been named to worthwhile positions....As a woman of long political experience, I feel the situation has become serious and I hope whoever is responsible for it may be made to realize that the result may well be disastrous.” Depressed and disillusioned, another party activist predicted that fifty years would pass before the country elected a woman president. Yet another activist grimly joked—as it turned out, accurately—“Man will walk on the moon before there is a woman chief executive.”

## **A PRESIDENTIAL COMMISSION**

Esther Peterson, Kennedy's newly appointed head of the Women's Bureau, a division of the U.S. Labor Bureau, quickly mobilized a coalition of women in liberal and labor organizations to pressure Kennedy to create a special commission to explore women's status in the United States. Former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, a towering presence, visited the president "to express her concern over the failure of the New Frontier administration to recognize and utilize fully the talents of women." In the view of black activist and lawyer Pauli Murray, that conversation "was the catalytic event which signaled the rebirth of feminism in the U.S."

To Kennedy, a commission seemed a cheap political payoff, a way to reassure the American people that all was well, that women required no drastic or dramatic changes. By creating a commission, he also avoided the far more contentious alternative, that of supporting the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). After the suffrage amendment was ratified in 1920, Alice Paul, the leader of the National Woman's Party (NWP), submitted the ERA to Congress in 1923, and every year afterward. The members of the NWP, a conservative and relatively well-to-do group of women of means and professional women, sought formal equality with men and argued that a constitutional amendment was necessary to guarantee women's equality with men. With one fell swoop, they argued, the ERA could wipe out all state laws that discriminated against women.

But the amendment, which simply stated, "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex," stayed on the back burner, resisted by labor unions, who were afraid of losing protective legislation for working women. Ever since 1923, women activists remained deeply divided over the ERA, and not until 1970 did female labor and leftist activists give up their strong opposition to the ERA. In their view, protective legislation, which regulated the hours and conditions of women's work, had protected female laborers from extreme exploitation. If the ERA were passed, protective legislation would be eliminated and employers would be free to exploit women. Now Esther Peterson and other women in the Democratic Party, whose roots were in labor, pressed for a commission, rather than the president's support of the ERA. For Kennedy, it was a blessing; labor constituted an important part of his political base.

To justify a commission concerned with women's needs, Kennedy cast it as part of the post-Sputnik Cold War effort to free women's talents for public service. He appointed Eleanor Roosevelt as its chair and charged the commission to "make studies of all barriers to the full participation of women in our democracy."

In 1963, the President's Commission on the Status of Women issued *The Presidential Report on American Women*. Not surprisingly, it mirrored the culture's ambivalence about women's proper place in society. The report reaffirmed their roles as wives, housekeepers, and rearers of children, while documenting the inequalities they faced as workers. Most of the tepid recommendations, as Betty Friedan later noted, were "duly buried in bureaucratic file drawers." The report, a thoroughly political and diluted document, avoided offending any group's sensibilities.

But the commission's report did reveal a great deal about women's place in the American imagination. Amplifying the concern of many social and cultural critics of the day, the report repeatedly decried "the erosion of American family life" and praised those wives and mothers

who were holding together the nation's transient families and communities. The report also sounded the alarm that working women would only contribute to the atomization of American social life. The famous anthropologist Margaret Mead even worried that the report had not sufficiently praised full-time mothers and wives and asked, "Who will be there to bandage the child's knee and listen to the husband's troubles and give the human element in the world?"

Here was a serious conundrum. If the nation's female talent were not deployed in universities and laboratories, the Cold War might be lost to a Communist empire that had no scruples about turning its women into workers and scientists, and sending its children to day care centers, as part of its plan to conquer the world. Yet, if American women did work outside the home, who would care for the children, the families, and the communities? This was a dilemma that would haunt the women's movement for decades.

Disappointing as the report may have been, the commission was still an historic convocation. As the first official body to study women's status, the commission collected immense amounts of data, most of which supported the complaints and problems reported by housewives and workers. Press coverage of the commission broke out of the ghetto of the women's section and made the front page of the *New York Times*. NBC's *Today* show broadcast a lively interview with Esther Peterson, the Associated Press ran a four-part series on the final report, and, in 1965, a book of its findings appeared. Most important of all, within a year of its publication, the national commission spawned dozens of state commissions (an idea promoted by Esther Peterson), and the government distributed eighty-three thousand copies of the commission's report, with its invaluable data on women's lives, which was quickly translated into Japanese, Swedish, and Italian. By 1967, all fifty states boasted such commissions.

Charged with collecting local data about women, the state commissions held an annual national conference at which they compared their information and discussed their recommendations for improving women's lives. By 1963, the lives of the women they studied had already changed greatly. Better contraception, more educational and economic opportunity, and the liberalization of attitudes toward divorce were altering a social landscape that had seemed engraved in cement. Later marriages, fewer children, rising divorce rates, and longer life spans meant that more women could expect to spend some part of their lives supporting their families or themselves. Trying to study modern women's status was like aiming at a moving target.

At about the time that the commission started its work, Congress began considering 432 pieces of legislation on women's rights that it would debate between 1960 and 1966—none of which would have appeared on the political agenda without the behind-the-scenes work of hundreds of political women. Activists pushed the Kennedy administration to respond to all kinds of grievances. In 1962, the president revised, by executive order, an 1870 law used to bar women from holding high-level federal positions. The Supreme Court also ruled that states could no longer ban the sale of contraception or exclude women from juries. Shepherded by the Women's Bureau and strongly supported by the United Auto Workers and other labor organizations, the Equal Pay Act was passed in 1963. The original intent—and wording of the bill—proposed equal pay for *comparable* work; the final act required only equal pay for equal [or the same] work. In the midst of jubilant celebration, some women activists knew that the law would have little impact on the vast majority of female workers. Few of them did "men's work";

they were part of a sex-segregated labor force that paid them “women’s wages” for “women’s work.” Nevertheless, an important principle had passed into law, and over the next decade, 171,000 employees would be awarded \$84 million for equal work done but not rewarded.

Who were these women who linked the suffrage generation to the generation of feminists emerging in the late 1960s? What kind of leadership and experience did they bring to this job? Who lobbied for the Equal Pay Act? And who used the President’s Commission as a way to launch a new women’s movement? Veterans in the Left, trade unions, the civil rights movement, and mainstream women’s organizations, which demonstrated extraordinary persistence and unflinching commitment, but have remained hidden in history. Most Americans, if they thought about them at all, probably imagined them to be white middle-class professional women. In fact, feminism was resurrected by women whose ideas had developed in a deeply radical milieu.

President Kennedy certainly never intended his presidential commission to turn into what Pauli Murray dubbed “the first high-level consciousness group.” But this is what happened. Among its members were leaders from Churchwomen United, the National Association of Catholic Women, the National Association of Jewish Women, the B’nai B’rith, the League of Women Voters, the American Association of University Women, the Business and Professional Women’s Clubs, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Teamsters, and the United Packinghouse Workers. There were also representatives of women in religious orders, professors in universities, schoolteachers, and those who had worked for child welfare, peace, and educational reform.

These leaders brought an incredible range of interests, experiences, and perspectives to the commission. Dorothy Haener, a tireless organizer of women in the United Auto Workers, argued ceaselessly for a higher minimum wage. (Haener later chaired NOW’s Task Force on Poverty, a fact that never received as much attention as NOW’s efforts to break the “glass ceiling” for professional women.) Addie Wyatt, an African-American leader of the United Packinghouse Workers of America and the NAACP, viewed the commission as a chance for working women to “raise our voice” on a national level and to gain a “sharper focus on women’s concerns.” She was also the first person to insist that women needed their own civil rights organization, modeled on the NAACP. Kay Clarenbach, chair of the Wisconsin State Commission, first president of the Association of State Commissions, and author of the first handbook for the state commissions, had been a professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin. Later, Clarenbach said that her experience on the commission “not only changed my life, it subsequently *became* my life!” Clarenbach eventually came to see her work in global terms. “Feminism,” she said, “is a vision of a different kind of society.”

A disproportionate number of these women came from the Midwest, rather than from either coast or Washington, D.C. The heartland, with its progressive political traditions and strong unions, had apparently provided women with greater opportunities to become effective organizers. Dubbed by some politicians the “Wisconsin Mafia,” these seasoned veterans transformed the role of the state commissions. Although they were only supposed to collect data and report on it, they quickly turned data into ammunition that could be used for lobbying legislatures. They wrote publications, researched the law, held conferences, and gave endless speeches. In a typical year, the indefatigable Kay Clarenbach gave forty speeches. In her view, they “laid the groundwork that was absolutely necessary” for changing women’s lives.

Everything is data, but data is not everything, as sociologist Pauline Bart has warned. To really learn about women's lives, these women would have to learn from one another. And so they did. What Kennedy could not have known was that when brought together, women tell each other stories about their lives. As these commission members began to share grievances and secrets, they began to discover exactly how ubiquitous was sex discrimination.

They also learned a great deal about the diversity of the female experience. Rural women taught urbanites who had never milked a cow about the isolation and precariousness of farm life. African-Americans tried to teach their white counterparts about how racism affected every aspect of their lives. Trade unionists described the conditions under which they worked to professional women. Lawyers and professors revealed, in turn, the kinds of discrimination and ridicule they encountered. Housewives tried to convince union activists and minority women that they, too, felt devalued as individuals. Gradually, they taught each other what women needed. Kay Clarenbach, for instance, recalled how Pauli Murray convinced her during an airplane trip why reproductive control of women's bodies was a precondition for women's other freedoms. Charlotte Bunch's articles—which other members gave her—helped her grasp, for the first time, the problems lesbians faced in society. Recalling those heady years, Clarenbach deadpanned, “Days when you don't learn something can be a drag.”

The cumulative impact of these conversations and revelations gave rise to a collective awareness that whatever women did, their work was devalued, and that most women—wherever they worked, whatever the color of their skin, whatever their ethnic or regional background—did not participate in the same educational, economic, or political worlds as their male counterparts.

## **THE TURNING POINT, TITLE VII**

Nineteen sixty-three had been a banner year. The Equal Pay Act, the *Presidential Report on American Women*, and *The Feminine Mystique* all helped to publicize a growing sense of gender consciousness. The next year was no less momentous. After President Kennedy's assassination in November 1963, Congress began considering the comprehensive civil rights bill. Congressman “Judge” Howard Smith, the southern chairman of the House Rules Committee, offered an amendment to add “sex” to Title VII, the section of the bill that prohibited discrimination in employment on the basis of race, color, religion, or national origin by private employers. A longtime supporter of the Equal Rights Amendment, as well as an ardent segregationist, Smith saw his amendment as purely a win-win proposition. A prohibition on sex discrimination would give northern representatives a reason to vote against the act without facing the accusation of being racists. And if it passed, at least he wanted to be sure that “white women” would be the beneficiaries.

At first, Smith's colleagues did not even take the amendment seriously. In an excessive display of chivalric oratory, Smith regaled the House with a letter from a woman who complained of the paucity of men available as husbands. Playing for laughs, he asked the House to take these “real grievances” seriously. The House erupted in riotous laughter. Emmanuel Celler, the liberal New York chairman of the Judiciary Committee, added to the jocular spirit

when he announced that it was he—never his wife—who always had the last two words in his household, and those were “Yes, dear.”

When the laughter subsided, coalitions began forming for and against Smith’s amendment. Prodded by the Virginia members of the National Woman’s Party—never known for its progressive views on race—these women now turned to Smith as a natural ally. Democratic representative Edith Green, the sponsor of the 1963 Equal Pay Act, worried that the amendment would gather opposition to the civil rights bill and risk African-Americans’ chance to win their civil rights. She decided to vote against Smith’s amendment. On the other hand, yes votes came from those representatives who had decided that they would not endure another “Negro’s hour”—the post-Civil War moment when suffrage was granted to black men, but not to black or white women. Representative Martha Griffiths, a Republican who had long sought to include a prohibition on sex discrimination in the civil rights bill, helped forge a bizarre coalition of southern congressmen and their feminist supporters who seized the unexpected opportunity. The amendment passed.

Women activists immediately began a lobbying campaign to ensure passage of the entire bill itself. Betty Friedan, Martha Griffiths, Pauli Murray, members of the National Women’s Party, the Business and Professional Women’s Clubs, and dozens of other women’s organizations invaded legislators’ offices, warning of the consequences if they dared vote against half of their constituency. Supported by President Lyndon Johnson’s wife, Lady Bird, and various members of the administration, the Civil Rights Act of 1964—including Title VII—passed.

Nearly every American social movement can point to some specific legal victory that decisively raised their members’ sense of entitlement. For black Americans, it was *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, the 1954 Supreme Court ruling against “separate but equal” education. For the women’s movement, it was Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The legislation created a new agency, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), charged with investigating complaints of racial and sexual discrimination. But women quickly discovered that its director, Herman Edelsberg, considered sex discrimination a joke, or at least a distraction from the more important work of assisting black men. Edelsberg called Title VII “a fluke...conceived out of wedlock.” “There are people on this commission,” he informed the press, “who think that no man should be required to have a male secretary and I am one of them.” When it was signed into law at the White House ceremony, no women were present, and the *New York Times*’s account of the bill did not even mention that the new legislation prohibited sex discrimination in employment.

When someone at a White House Conference on Equal Opportunity openly wondered if Playboy clubs would now have to employ male “bunnies,” the press quickly picked up the joke and dubbed the sex amendment the “Bunny Law.” A *New York Times* editorial coyly suggested that

Federal officials...may find it would have been better if Congress had just abolished sex itself. Handyman must disappear from the language; he was pretty much a goner anyway, if you ever started looking for one in desperation. No more milkman, iceman, serviceman, foreman or pressman....The Rockettes may become bi-sexual, and a pity,

too...Bunny problem, indeed! This is revolution, chaos. You can't even safely advertise for a wife any more.

Title VII remained a joke. In August 1965, the EEOC shocked women activists when it ruled that sex-segregated help-wanted ads were perfectly legal. The *New Republic*, a liberal journal of opinion, agreed. "Why should a mischievous joke perpetrated on the floor of the House of Representatives be treated by a responsible administration body with this kind of seriousness?" The idea of banishing sex discrimination challenged deeply held ideas about gender and elicited much nervous ridicule. The *Wall Street Journal* asked its readers to imagine "a shapeless, knobby-kneed male 'bunny' serving drinks to a group of astonished businessmen or a 'matronly vice-president' lusting after her male secretary." What are we going to do now, asked a personnel officer of a large airline, "when a gal walks into our office, demands a job as an airline pilot and has the credentials to qualify?" In companies that traditionally hired only women, businessmen grew edgy. One manager of an electronics component company lamented, "I suppose we'll have to advertise for people with small, nimble fingers and hire the first male midget with unusual dexterity [who] shows up."

Even if the EEOC had taken sex discrimination seriously, Congress had severely limited its powers. The agency could only investigate individual complaints, issue findings, and seek voluntary settlements. If a company refused to concede race or sex discrimination, the EEOC had to persuade the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department to seek judicial enforcement. If the division refused, the complainant's only recourse was to file suit in federal court.

Nonetheless, by 1965, working women began flooding the EEOC with their grievances. In some parts of the country, nearly half the complaints came from working women who identified acts of discrimination. Shocked by the volume of these grievances, the EEOC nevertheless remained committed to monitoring only racial discrimination. Mired in the Vietnam War and unsettled by race riots in American cities, neither President Johnson nor Congress gave women's complaints any attention. On June 20, 1966, Representative Martha Griffiths, a tireless fighter for women's rights, denounced the EEOC for its "specious, negative, and arrogant" attitude toward sex discrimination. "I would remind them," she announced on the floor of Congress, "that they took an oath to uphold the law, not just the part of it that they are interested in."

No one seemed to care—except members of the state commissions who had convened for their third conference in Washington, D.C., ten days after Griffiths attacked the EEOC. Within their respective states, the commissions had supported more flexible working hours, the repeal of discriminatory laws, equal pay, and dozens of other "women's issues." The state commissions had also created a national network of women who, by gathering and sharing data about women in their respective states, had gained expert knowledge about women's subordinate status in American society. But by themselves, as delegates to the third conference on state commissions, they were almost powerless. As Betty Friedan later noted, "It is more than a historical fluke that the organization of the women's movement was ignited by that law, never meant to be enforced, against sex discrimination in employment."

## THE FOUNDING OF NOW

They did have one vital resource to call on—what Betty Friedan called “an underground feminist movement” that existed in the nation’s capital. Friedan was in constant contact with women who risked their government jobs to promote women’s issues in the nation’s capital. She credited women like “Catherine East of the Women’s Bureau of the Labor Department for spreading the feminist underground around Washington and acting as midwife to the women’s movement.” The network also included Esther Peterson; Mary Eastwood, a former member of the President’s Commission; EEOC commissioner Richard Graham; Sonia Pressman, an attorney in the EEOC; legal scholar Pauli Murray; and congresswoman Martha Griffiths. Frustrated by the government’s unwillingness to influence the EEOC and angered by the EEOC’s unwillingness to address sex discrimination—especially sex-segregated “want ads”—fifteen women finally agreed to meet one evening during the conference in Friedan’s hotel room to discuss the possibility of starting a new women’s organization.

Some of the women wondered whether they could even trust one another. For some, surfacing in any advocacy group for women was risky. Friedan later recalled how difficult it was for “women who didn’t know each other personally, who hadn’t yet acquired the trust we would later earn in action together.” The McCarthy period had left a legacy of fear, and many activists had learned to keep their silence on political issues. The discussion continued past midnight, interrupted by “ladylike rows,” and filled with suspicion and timidity. When the meeting ended, the group was still unable to agree on the nature of the new organization or whether there should even be one. Betty Friedan went to bed feeling the bitter taste of defeat. “I thought the battle was over before it had even begun, not realizing that the same fear and finally the daring necessary to act despite those fears were now under way in the others, just as in me.”

In fact, the struggle had just begun. At the conference the next day, a group of delegates presented a resolution insisting that the EEOC enforce Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. Conference officials, worried about pressuring the Johnson administration, refused to allow the resolution to come to a vote. The delegates, from various state commissions, grew furious. They were tired of talk; they wanted action.

At lunch, a group hastily gathered around two tables to discuss their next move. Time was running out, because, as Friedan later explained, “most of us had plane reservations that afternoon, when the conference ended, and had to get back in time to make dinner for their families.” In conspiratorial fashion, they whispered, passed around notes on paper napkins, and discussed forming a new organization. On one of those paper napkins, Friedan wrote down a name—the National Organization for Women. Its purpose, she scribbled, would be “to take the actions needed to bring women into the mainstream of American society, now” and to fight for “full equality for women, in full equal partnership with men.” As they left to catch their planes, the conspirators agreed to call a formal meeting to create the new organization that fall.

The founding of a feminist civil rights organization of some sort was probably inevitable. Women needed a nongovernmental organization that could pressure the government from outside, as an independent movement. But at the time it seemed an audacious act, frightening to many of its potential members. Alice Rossi, the distinguished sociologist, sent membership invitations to thirty or forty sociologists, but few chose to join.

By creating a feminist civil rights organization, NOW members did more than assert their independence from male-dominated liberal politics; they publicly acknowledged that liberal political culture was inadequate to address the reality of women's lives. By declaring their autonomy from a liberal government, they also freed themselves to consider the question of women's rights from a more radical perspective. "Everything was different," Friedan recalled. "The problems looked different, the definition of the problems, the solutions sought, once we dared to judge our conditions as women by that simple standard, the hallmark of American democracy—equality, no more, no less. As she drafted a "Statement of Purpose" for NOW, Friedan found herself "forced to spell out in my own mind the implications of 'equality for women.'" One thing was certain, "separate but equal" was out of the question. How should one define equality and liberty for modern women?

While Friedan deliberated, a growing public debate about women was stirring in the media and in the academy. Suddenly, all kinds of people seemed eager to break the spell of the feminine mystique. In 1964, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences helped recast the issue in intellectual terms by publishing a special issue on women in its prestigious journal *Daedalus*. Like the report of the President's Commission, the *Daedalus* collection reflected the cultural ambivalence of the period; it included articles that emphasized women's traditional role in the home and others that challenged received wisdom. Articles by such well-known scholars as Erik H. Erikson and Carl Degler would become classics—later to be embraced or attacked by feminists. The most startling of them, the one that would provide the greatest intellectual legitimacy for a women's movement, was Alice Rossi's article, titled "Equality Between the Sexes: An Immodest Proposal," that both shaped and reflected early feminists' ideas about gender.

A distinguished sociologist and educator, Rossi felt discouraged by the apathy of her female students, noting "there is no overt anti-feminism in our society in 1964, not because sex equality has been achieved, but because there is practically no feminist spark left among American women." Rossi directly attacked the fifties' obsession with sexual difference, and offered an alternative vision of gender equality—androgyny.

An androgynous conception of sex roles means that each sex will cultivate some of the characteristics usually associated with the other in traditional sex role definitions. This means that tenderness and expressiveness should be cultivated in boys and socially approved in men....It means that achievement, need, workmanship and constructive aggression should be cultivated in girls and approved in women.

Like de Beauvoir, Rossi argued that gender is an artificial construct of culture, adding only, "I shall leave to speculative discourse and future physiological research the question of what constitutes irreducible differences between the sexes." Though Rossi would later emphasize sex differences, rather than sameness in the 1970s, her "immodest proposal" in 1964 had an enormous impact on the rebirth of feminism. In the wake of the fifties, few women activists and intellectuals wanted to rest their case for equality on "sexual difference." For them, sexual difference reminded them of all the reasons why women had been excluded from political, economic, and social life. Rossi's emphasis on androgyny was far more appealing. If both

women and men could absorb each other's strongest traits, then they could make choices based on individual talent and temperament, rather than on one's sexual identity at birth.

Like most activists of the time, Friedan shunned arguments based on difference. "The time has come," she wrote, "to confront, with concrete actions, the conditions that now prevent women from enjoying the equality of opportunity and freedom of choice which is their right, as individual Americans, and as human beings." Friedan recognized American women's right to shape their own lives as well as their right to self-fulfillment. These values, she explained, were "simply the values of the American Revolution ...applied to women." "The logic," Friedan wrote, "was inexorable."

Once we broke through that feminine mystique and called ourselves human—no more, no less—surely we were entitled to the enjoyment of the values which were our American, democratic human right. All we had to do was really look at the concrete conditions of our daily life in the light of those lofty values of equality which are supposed to be every man's birthright—and we could immediately see how unfair, how oppressive, our situation was.

But that wasn't possible without challenging many fundamental aspects of liberal political culture. Women's rights, as it turned out, were not just another ingredient you could add and stir into the American Dream. The citizen whose rights the state protected had always been imagined as a man, and his biological and work lives were dramatically different from those experienced by a woman. The right to pursue happiness, for example, took on new meaning when it included a woman's right to control her own body and reproductive future. Equal opportunity meant something quite different when it involved sharing domestic work, ending sexual harassment in the workplace, and ending all forms of violence against women. When applied to women, individual rights, which most Americans considered the touchstone of American political culture, turned out to threaten men's authority in the family and challenge all kinds of social and cultural traditions. It was not at all clear—to many women and men—that these were "individual rights" that the state should consider protecting. For liberal political culture to recast the citizen as a woman and embrace fundamental economic and social transformations in the home and the workplace required nothing less than an expansion of the definition of democracy.

In 1966, the radicalism of this challenge to American political culture was not yet fully grasped by Betty Friedan, by young feminists in the women's liberation movement, nor even by their opponents. Although feminists would long debate whether to emphasize women's difference from or similarity to men, neither choice fully embraced the reality of women's lives. Women were both like and unlike men. Any society that didn't honor women's ability to bear and raise children was clearly violating their rights to fully participate in society. Any society that equated equality with women living as men could not be viewed as a genuine democracy. A true "gender democracy" would have to honor the life of the family as much as it honored the life of work. Men would no longer be the frame of reference. But nor would women. The revolutionary thrust of feminism required an extensive expansion of democracy at work, in the home, in public, in private. Nothing less would do.

On October 29, 1966, NOW convened its official founding conference in Washington, D.C. Of the three hundred women who became charter members, 120 came from the Midwest, which once again highlighted the indigenous female activism in this region of the nation. Of these three hundred members, only thirty could be present to adopt the “Statement of Purpose” and new bylaws. This small convocation elected Friedan its first president and former EEOC commissioners Aileen Hernandez and Richard Graham its vice presidents. NOW’s “Statement of Purpose” declared that women’s demands for equality were “part of the world-wide revolution of human rights now taking place within and beyond our national borders.” The writers were determined to avoid the kind of separatism just then emerging in black activist organizations, so the first sentence of the “Statement” began, “We men and women,” and called for “a fully equal partnership of the sexes....” It also enumerated the dramatic changes that had created the basis for a new surge of demands for women’s rights: an extended life span of seventy-five years and the development of technology that reduced the importance of muscular strength.

NOW’s statement challenged American society to heed women’s grievances. One of those issues was that despite the optimistic social programs of Kennedy’s New Frontier and Johnson’s Great Society, the economic status of women had actually declined. By 1966, the wages of full-time year-round women workers averaged only 60 percent of those of men, a drop of 3.6 percent in a decade. Black women, burdened by the double discrimination of sex and race, earned even less. In addition, although 46.4 percent of American adult women now worked, 75 percent of them labored in routine clerical, sales, or factory jobs or as household workers, cleaning women, and hospital attendants.

In all the professions, women were also losing ground. Though they constituted 53 percent of the population, they represented less than 1 percent of federal judges, less than 4 percent of lawyers, and only 7 percent of doctors. In addition, since World War II, men had been replacing women in professions once considered “women’s fields”—as administrators of secondary and elementary schools, librarians, and social workers. This hidden and “dangerous decline,” NOW’s “Statement” declared, had to be “recognized and reversed by ‘the power of American law’ [and the] protection guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution to the civil rights of all individuals.” Token appointments were unacceptable; the government would have to stop discriminating against women in all areas of public life.

The “Statement” pointedly criticized the United States for lagging behind other industrialized countries in providing the kinds of social welfare—health care, child care, and pregnancy leave—that supported women’s domestic and work needs. Women “should not have to choose between family life and participation in industry or the professions.” Nor should “all normal women...retire from jobs or professions for ten or fifteen years, to devote their full time to raising children, only to reenter the job market at a relatively minor level.” The “Statement” questioned the “assumption that these problems are the unique responsibility of each individual woman, rather than a basic social dilemma which society must solve.”

Contrary to later accusations that feminists ignored the issue of child-rearing and denied women the choice of remaining full-time mothers, NOW’s “Statement” called for a nationwide network of child care centers, as well as national programs to provide retraining, after their children grew up, “for women who have chosen to care for their own children full-time.” The “Statement” also urged recasting traditional gender roles within marriage, proposing that “a true

partnership between the sexes demands a different concept of marriage, an equitable sharing of the responsibilities of home and children and of the economic burden of their support.”

During NOW’s first few years, the press gave the new organization only slightly more respect—and far less attention—than the sexier young women’s liberation movement that sprang to life in 1967. To report NOW’s first convention, the *New York Times* placed an article headlined “They Meet in Victorian Parlor to Demand ‘True Equality’” right beneath exciting new recipes for turkeys and stuffing. The *Washington Post* headlined its report “Neo-Suffragettes on the March: Mrs. Friedan Is Fighting for Women’s Equality NOW” and ran it next to an ad for a “fashion clearance” and below photographs of diplomatic wives greeting each another.

NOW also suffered from meager resources. For three years, the organization lacked an office of its own. Nevertheless, NOW members made do, much as those in the civil rights and students’ movements had, by borrowing any resources to which they had access. The new secretary-treasurer, Caroline Davis of the United Auto Workers, gave NOW a valuable “free ride” by allowing it to use the UAWs facilities—especially its precious WATS phone line, as well as copy and mimeograph machines. Betty Friedan’s apartment in New York City served as the center of policy-making and organization. Fearful of centralization, NOW quickly developed local chapters to counterbalance the power of a national headquarters. Local leadership identified their own priorities and projects, while the national leadership made policy and coordinated national actions.

With these slim resources, NOW plunged into action. Predictably, its first official act was to pressure the EEOC to prohibit segregated “help wanted” advertising. Such a division of ads, NOW argued, ensured that women would not be able to enter the higher-paid and more skilled occupations reserved for men. To dramatize the issue, NOW members picketed the *New York Times* in August 1967. In December, NOW declared a National Day of Demonstration against the EEOC, mobilizing women to picket local EEOC offices. After tipping off the television networks, small groups of NOW members, in an attempt to demonstrate the worthlessness of sex-segregated want ads, dumped bundles of newspapers in front of EEOC local offices. In August 1968, after years of protracted struggles with the government and the newspaper industry, the EEOC finally barred segregated want ads.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, NOW members—although mostly white and middle class—targeted the problems of ordinary working women, not those of professional women. The assault on segregated classified ads, for instance, benefited working women who wanted to enter the skilled blue collar jobs formerly designated as men’s work. NOW also waged a successful campaign against airlines that forced stewardesses to resign once they married or turned thirty-two. This requirement had produced windfall profits for the airlines that fired wave after wave of stewardesses, without having to give them raises, pensions, or Social Security payments. “Sex discrimination,” observed Friedan, “was big business.”

NOW next pressed the government, as well as federal contractors and subcontractors, to ban sex discrimination—again, something that did not particularly benefit professional women. In the fall of 1965, President Johnson had signed an Executive Order banning racial (but not sexual) discrimination in businesses and institutions that received funds from the government. Two years later, NOW leaders began lobbying President Johnson for similar treatment. He responded by adding “sex” to the new Executive Order. The results were far-reaching: any

university or company that received federal contracts now had to ensure fair employment to women as well as to racial minorities.

During its first year, NOW also pushed for enforcement of Title VII by the EEOC, so that minority women in federal poverty programs would get equal attention and so that child care expenses would be deductible. In its first court action, for which it established its Legal Defense Fund, NOW supported southern factory women who sued Colgate-Palmolive and Southern Bell Telephone for denying women jobs—an action that had been prohibited by state laws. All these campaigns were aimed at improving the lives of ordinary working women.

## EARLY RIFTS

NOW certainly experienced squabbles and factions among its members. Tensions between local chapters and national headquarters sometimes erupted into public fights. Political disagreements frequently hid personality clashes. But such tensions were inevitable. How could one organization represent the political and social needs of *all* women? At its 1967 convention, when NOW proposed a new Bill of Rights, the young organization faced the fragility of feminist solidarity. The Bill of Rights, presented to members for ratification, called for dramatic changes in American society. Although labor still opposed it, NOW members embraced the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution. To improve working women's lives, the Bill of Rights included enforcement of laws banning sex discrimination in employment, maternity leave, equality in Social Security benefits, tax deductions for home and child care expenses for working parents, and child care centers. In addition, it also included the demand for equal and unsegregated education, equal job training opportunities and allowances for women in poverty, and the right of women to control their reproductive lives.

Unanimous approval proved impossible. The Equal Rights Amendment immediately faced opposition from trade union women who wanted to extend protective legislation to men before they ended it for women. Their opponents argued that industry and business routinely used state protective laws to deny women workers promotions or overtime pay. Fighting sex discrimination case by case, state by state, could take another fifty years, whereas a constitutional amendment could wipe out institutional sex discrimination with one law. To women who enjoyed or aspired to professional status, the ERA seemed perfectly logical and necessary. In Betty Friedan's words, "It was a guarantee that would take precedence over those state laws now 'protecting' women from good jobs and pay, that could not be rescinded at a mere whim of Congress or state legislature. With it, the courts low and high, state or federal, could no longer rule that women were not 'persons' under the U.S. Constitution as they have done so frequently over the years."

But that was not the view of labor. When the 1967 convention voted to endorse the ERA, Caroline Davis, respecting the UAW's wishes, resigned as NOW's secretary-treasurer, which caused the organization to lose its precious union mailing and printing resources. But just one year later, the UAW reversed its position and came out in favor of the ERA. Soon after, the entire American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL/CIO), recognizing the wisdom of extending protection to all workers, changed its position and also supported the

amendment. Many feminists breathed a sigh of relief. NOW and labor unions, part of the same political base, would not be locked in a political battle over the ERA.

A woman's right to an abortion created an even greater schism in NOW's ranks. Nevertheless, after extensive debate and some abstentions from Catholic sisters, this part of the Bill of Rights also passed. A few women, certain that such a controversial issue would offend potential sympathizers, left NOW to found the Women's Equity Action League (WEAL) in 1968. Dr. Elizabeth Boyer, the Ohio lawyer who led WEAL, targeted three areas of sex discrimination—employment, education, and de facto tax inequities. Described as “the far right wing of the women's Mafia,” WEAL cultivated a ladylike style to attract more conservative women to join the struggle for women's rights. One of WEAL's liveliest chapters, for example, blossomed in Iowa, where, according to Boyer, “you couldn't sell ‘women's liberation’ if you gold-plated it.”

The rights of lesbians—not included in the original document—proved to be another divisive issue, though one that only surfaced several years later, after the founding of the gay liberation movement. In 1969 and again in 1970, Betty Friedan had labeled lesbianism a “lavender menace” that threatened to taint the women's movement. Angry at being “purged” by her assaults, many lesbians left the organization. In 1971, after years of hiding in the organizational closet, the remaining lesbians demanded that NOW pass a resolution recognizing their civil rights. In response, NOW did so, declaring that a “woman's right to her own person includes the right to define and express her own sexuality and to choose her own lifestyle; therefore we acknowledge the oppression of lesbians as a legitimate concern of feminism.” In 1973, NOW established a Task Force on Sexuality and Lesbianism, and passed a resolution that, by defining homosexuality as a civil rights issue, repositioned the granting of rights to lesbianism and sexual preference as but another liberal extension of civil rights. It declared that the organization should “actively introduce and support civil rights legislation to end discrimination based on sexual orientation...in housing, employment, credit, finance, child custody, and public accommodation.”

Though NOW waged many of its high-profile battles in the courts, its members also educated, marched, picketed, and protested to publicize feminist issues. A broad range of national task forces publicized the need for more child care centers, the repeal of laws that prohibited abortion, more equitable tax and divorce laws, Social Security reform, nonsexist textbooks, and an end to sexual stereotypes in advertising and television programs. To advertising agencies that created insulting images of women, they presented their “barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen” award. On Mother's Day 1967, NOW attempted to organize demonstrations nationwide for “rights, not roses.” At the exact spot where a group of suffragists had chained themselves to a White House fence fifty years earlier, activists ceremoniously dumped a huge pile of aprons. Nothing reflected the rejection of the fifties housewife more starkly than that trash pile of aprons.

Many of NOW's public demonstrations targeted sex discrimination in public spaces. After a particularly “tedious lawyerish” discussion at a NOW national board meeting in New York City in 1968, a few members adjourned to the Men's Bar and Grill at the Hotel Biltmore to calm their nerves. There, the bartender informed them that he could not serve female customers. After alerting the media, twenty women moved to stage a sit-in at the bar. The bar decided to

close for twenty-four hours. But NOW members picketed anyway in full view of network cameras. To celebrate Valentine's Day in 1968, Betty Friedan led an invasion of the Oak Room at the Plaza Hotel in New York City. Soon afterward, New York feminists invaded that epitome of the male sanctuary, McSorley's Old Ale House. Such demonstrations had their cumulative impact. Gradually, individual states began banning sex discrimination in public accommodations.

A certain wilder spirit of protest began to enter NOW, thanks in part to younger women who by 1967 were creating loosely affiliated small groups collectively known as the women's liberation movement. Though NOW and women's liberation groups often joined forces for specific protests, efforts to form coalitions between the two branches of the movement frequently failed. The demons that haunted the daughters of the fifties never fully disappeared. Meredith Tax, an early activist, realized how much the female generation gap influenced the culture of the young women's liberation movement:

My friends and I thought of NOW as an organization for people our mother's age. We were movement girls, not career women; NOW's demands and organizational style weren't radical enough for us. We wanted to build a just society, not get a bigger slice of the pie. Besides, we were generational sectarians; we didn't trust anybody over thirty.

Influenced by the antihierarchical spirit of New Left groups, as well as by the theatrical thrust of the counterculture, the younger women's liberation movement was not particularly concerned with proving their respectability; on the contrary, they wanted to shake things up as much as possible.

Meanwhile, NOW officials became increasingly worried that the movement would appear too undisciplined or unrespectable. In March 1968, an article by Martha Lear on the new women's movement appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*. Its title, "The Second Feminist Wave," christened the movement with a name that connected it to "first wave" feminism in the suffrage movement. Lear's article also reported that some members were preparing a "black comedy" to dramatize the EEOC's reluctance to take sex discrimination seriously. Twelve women, dressed for cocktails, planned to crash an EEOC hearing, make a commotion, get thrown out and possibly arrested, and then meet with the press to explain their grievances. One of the large, home-lettered signs was to read, "A Chicken in Every Pot, a Whore in Every Home." After some deliberation, some NOW members, worried that the press might headline the demonstration as "Prostitutes Picket EEOC," decided on a different image: two secretaries chained to their typewriters.

The "Valerie Solanas affair" intensified some of the conflicts between older and younger feminists in New York's NOW, where tensions were already high. In 1968, a disturbed artist in New York's avant-garde art scene wrote—by herself—a document she called the "SCUM Manifesto," an acronym for the Society for Cutting Up Men. Her manifesto not only blamed men for every evil in the world, but also argued for their collective annihilation. Shortly afterward, Solanas shot and wounded pop artist Andy Warhol, whom she blamed for her own marginality. She was arraigned for attempted murder and consigned to psychiatric observation.

A few younger feminists turned Solanas into a cause célèbre; others viewed her as a disturbed woman in need of sisterly assistance. When Ti-Grace Atkinson, the president of New

York NOW, publicly appeared at Solanas's trial, some NOW members worried about being identified with "man-hating" women. NOW's board consisted of university professors and administrators, state and national labor union officers, local and federal government officials, business executives, physicians, and members of religious orders, all of whom were dedicated to preserving NOW's public reputation and credibility. Atkinson, already dissatisfied with what she considered NOW's "elitist" structure, then resigned to form her own organization, the October 17th Movement (named after the day she left), later renamed "The Feminists."

Collisions between the women's liberation movement and NOW were frequent and probably inevitable. In November 1969, a year not remembered for youthful deference, NOW attempted to gather disparate groups from the mushrooming women's movement at a Congress to Unite Women in New York City. For three days, over five hundred women from a wide range of groups and organizations debated feminist issues, but it was clear that the young women dominated the agenda and that their rebellious spirit ruled the meeting. Betty Friedan, for instance, would never have convened a workshop to discuss "whether women's liberation would end sex or make it better." As she later wrote:

I didn't think a thousand vibrators would make much difference—or that it mattered who was in the missionary position—if unequal power positions in real life weren't changed....It was the *economic* imbalance, the power imbalance in the world that subverted sex, or made sex itself into a power game where no one could win....I feel like a grim spoilsport sometimes, always insisting to my sisters in the movement on that dull economic basis that had to change for any woman to be able to enjoy her own sexuality, or to truly love anyone....It was so much easier and more fun just to talk about sex, vibrators, women, men, underneath or on top. But to extrapolate sexual joylessness and lonely need, masochism or cruelty as the permanent condition of women is in my opinion to give up the battle. This is the sexual pathology bred by our inequality and the reaction to it.

On the first evening, a group of women from Boston's Female Liberation took the stage and formed a semicircle around one woman who proceeded to cut off the luxurious long hair of another. Wearing short hair, the women explained to the audience, was a rejection of the conventional feminine image cultivated by society. The audience was electrified. Some women shouted that they shouldn't cut their hair, that long hair was lovely and countercultural. Other women denounced the image of the long-haired, hip, radical, movement "chick."

Betty Friedan looked on with horror. To her, the hair-cutting demonstration perfectly captured the differences that separated NOW from the women's liberation movement. To Friedan, as to most other NOW members, the highest priority was to change social policy and to eliminate legal sex discrimination. After women gained economic independence, NOW members reasoned, they would have the power to make changes in their private lives as well.

To older women, transforming oneself was not, by itself, a political act. Friedan loathed "the abusive language and style of some of the women, their sexual shock tactics and [their] man-hating, down-with-motherhood stance." Their message, she argued, "was to *make yourself ugly*, to stop shaving under your arms, to stop wearing makeup or pretty dresses—any skirts at

all.” Whether liberals or Marxists, older women viewed politics as a disciplined activity; one changed the system from within in order to give women choices about how to live their lives.

Despite NOW’s determination to maintain its respectability, the women’s liberation movement continually nudged the organization in new directions. Initially, NOW scorned the idea of consciousness-raising, arguing that feminism was about action, not talking. But as new women entered the organization, unfamiliar with politics of any sort, let alone feminism, older members discovered that “rap groups” helped such novices “catch up” on movement issues.

The truth is, both branches of the movement were essential. NOW activists promoted leadership and the organizing skills that made them effective lobbyists, organizers, and strategists. They also provided the modern women’s movement with the staying power it needed to withstand backlash after backlash. Although they didn’t always agree—Kay Clarenbach, for instance, recalled that at early NOW meetings, the “decibel level in sessions became unbelievable”—they somehow figured out how to keep NOW alive as a national feminist organization. Some younger liberationists characterized NOW as “liberal” or “reformist,” an organization that merely wanted a piece of the pie, rather than entirely new ingredients. But it is much too simple to categorize these two branches of the new women’s movement as liberal versus radical, or legislative versus revolutionary. NOW’s struggle for equal opportunity, especially in employment and education, required a collective solution to individual women’s problems. Nor could all members of the organized women’s rights movement be described as simply “liberals.” Betty Friedan, Bella Abzug, Pauli Murray, Gerda Lerner, Addie Wyatt, and Esther Peterson, for example, were among those whose activism in the labor and civil rights movements brought a working-class and race-conscious perspective to the women’s movement.

Young feminists contributed something equally important—a radical critique of patriarchal culture, visions of alternative lifestyles, and the unmasking of the hidden injuries women had suffered. Although they generally chose to work outside established institutions, they created a network of alternative, grassroots, self-help, nonprofit services—rape crisis centers and battered women’s shelters, for example—that eventually became established institutions themselves. Sometimes the injuries these younger women unmasked changed laws; sometimes NOW’s legislative efforts altered the nation’s consciousness. In many ways, the differences were really about the targets and the style in which the struggle was waged. At times, ideological or generational differences bitterly divided feminists, but neither branch of the movement, by itself, could have brought about the staggering changes that swept through American culture during the remaining decades of the twentieth century.

To impatient young women, NOW members often seemed stuffy and stolid. They voted; they elected leaders; they even paid dues. Rather than staying up all night seeking consensus, they relied on Robert’s Rules of Order. But young women weren’t the only ones who knew how to have fun. In her memoir, *It Changed My Life*, Betty Friedan described a gala celebration in 1973 to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the publication of *The Feminine Mystique*.

A dramatic celebration of our herstory closed with the song “I Am Woman”; suddenly women got out of their seats and started dancing around the hotel ballroom, joining hands in a circle that got larger and larger until maybe a thousand of us were dancing and singing: “There is nothing I can’t do....No price too great to pay...I am strong...I am

invincible....I am woman.” It was a spontaneous, beautiful expression of the exhilaration we all felt in those years, women really moving as women.

By the mid-1970s, the challenge to traditional liberalism, waged by attorneys and activists through commissions, class action suits, hearings, and protests, had achieved a stunning series of successes. As the scholar and activist Cynthia Harrison observed:

They had produced legislation mandating equal treatment for women in education and in credit, eliminating criminal penalties for abortion, changing prejudicial rape laws, banning discrimination against pregnant women, equalizing property distribution at divorce, and offering tax credits for childcare.

The momentum of the women’s movement seemed unstoppable. Exploiting its conservative image, WEAL waged an aggressive campaign against American university policies in 1969. Within a year, WEAL filed complaints against more than three hundred colleges and universities, including every medical school in the nation. In 1970, NOW filed a blanket complaint against thirteen hundred corporations that received federal funds, forcing them to give back pay to hundreds of women workers. In the same year, NOW documented Judge Harold Carswell’s record of discrimination and helped to derail his nomination to the Supreme Court. In 1971, over three hundred women met in Washington, D.C., to found the National Women’s Political Caucus, whose goal was “to awaken, organize and assert the vast political power represented by women.” Early members included Bella Abzug, Shirley Chisholm, Betty Friedan, Liz Carpenter, and Gloria Steinem. Within a few years, the NWPC had active local caucuses in every state and began fielding female candidates for political office.

In 1972, Congress quickly passed the Equal Rights Amendment and sent it to the states for what many assumed would be a quick ratification. In the same year, Congress passed Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which denied funds for men’s sports unless an equal amount were provided for girls’ and women’s sports, a piece of legislation that instantly altered women’s relationship to athletics and sports. In the same year, *Ms.* magazine made its debut; women for the first time became floor reporters at political conventions; the Equal Pay Act was extended to cover administrative, executive, and professional personnel; NOW and the Urban League filed a class action suit against General Mills for sex and race discrimination; NOW initiated action against sexism in elementary-school textbooks with *Dick and Jane as Victims*; and women theologians called for the “castration of sexist religions” at the largest and most prestigious gathering of biblical scholars in history.

One year later, in 1973, the Supreme Court ruled in *Roe v. Wade* that abortion was constitutionally protected by a woman’s right to privacy; Billie Jean King beat Bobby Riggs in a much-hyped “Battle of the Sexes” tennis game; AT&T signed the largest job sex discrimination settlement—\$38 million—in the nation’s history; the U.S. Printing Office agreed to accept “Ms.” as an optional title for women; the Bank of California settled a lawsuit by NOW and minority groups who had charged sex and race discrimination; NOW organized an International Feminist Planning Conference in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which three hundred women from twenty-seven countries attended; a New Jersey court ruled that the state Little League must admit

girls; and Helen Reddy won a Grammy Award for the hit record “I Am Woman,” an explicitly feminist song that became the unofficial anthem of the women’s movement.

In 1974, approximately one thousand colleges and universities offered women’s studies courses; the steel industry settled a sex discrimination suit that gave \$56 million in back pay and wage adjustments to 386,000 women workers; Congress passed the Equal Credit Opportunity Act, which allowed married women, for the first time, to obtain credit in their own names, and the Educational Equity Act, designed to eliminate sexist curricula and achieve equity for all students regardless of sex; and Helen Thomas, after covering Washington for thirty years, became the first woman to be named a White House reporter.

So many successes in so few years. Yet, the speed of change masked a strong strain of resistance that grew alongside the women’s movement. Signs of an instant backlash appeared everywhere. After the election of Richard Nixon in 1968, legal challenges met stiffer resistance from a Republican administration. It was not until 1970, for example, that the Justice Department actually pressed its first sex discrimination case. In 1970, former vice president Hubert Humphrey’s personal physician, Dr. Edgar Berman, sparked a fierce national debate when he announced that women were unfit for the presidency because they might be “subject to curious mental aberrations.” In the same year, the Catholic Church established the National Right to Life Committee to block liberalization of abortion laws; Billy Graham called feminism “an echo of our overall philosophy of permissiveness”; a group of women in Kingman, Arizona, organized Happiness of Womanhood (HOW), which soon affiliated with the League of Housewives.

The next year, the women’s movement suffered one of its most significant defeats. A coalition of feminists and child care advocates had lobbied and nurtured the Comprehensive Child Development Act of 1971, which would have provided child care for all women. Feminists wept with joy when the legislation survived both houses of Congress and was finally passed. But their victory was short-lived. President Richard Nixon vetoed the act and Congress, heavily lobbied by right-wing opponents, failed to override the veto. In his veto message, written by Pat Buchanan, Nixon described it as “the most radical piece of legislation to emerge from the 93rd Congress,” and said it would “commit the vast moral authority of the national government to the side of communal approaches to child-rearing” and “would lead to the Sovietization of American children.” It would take years before politicians dared touch the issue of child care again.

In 1972, Phyllis Schlafly attacked the ERA and formed a new organization, Stop ERA; Midge Decter, a neoconservative and wife of conservative Norman Podhoretz, published a diatribe against the feminist movement in a book entitled *The New Chastity and Other Arguments Against Women’s Liberation*; and North Carolina voters sent conservative Jesse Helms to the U.S. Senate. By 1973, the EEOC had a backlog of sixty-five thousand uninvestigated complaints; the National Committee for a Human Life Amendment had begun to lobby for a law that would overturn *Roe v. Wade*; the Society for a Christian Commonwealth, a conservative Catholic lay group, called for the excommunication of Justice William Brennan, Jr., for his pro-choice view in the Supreme Court decision; Joseph Coors, looking for a way to fund his conservative political agenda, established the Heritage Foundation, which would become the “think tank” of the Reagan administration—and funded a legal network for the radical Right to protect business and industry from what they termed costly government regulations, such as affirmative action; eighty-six hundred delegates to the Southern Baptist Convention passed a

resolution affirming male superiority; Jesse Helms introduced an amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act that prohibited the use of funds for abortion services or research and for abortifacient drugs and devices, which unanimously passed in a Senate that had no female members; and George Gilder published *Sexual Suicide*, a sustained argument against the women's movement.

In 1974, the first "March for Life" took place; Coors funded Paul Weyrich to organize the Committee for the Survival of a Free Congress and Richard Viguerie became the organization's direct mail fund-raiser; militant antifeminists stormed the Michigan House demanding that they rescind the ERA; and the National Conservative Political Action Committee (NCPAC), which became the Right's major tool to oppose feminism, was established and headed by John T. Dolan, a former member of the conservative group Young Americans for Freedom. The next year, Phyllis Schlafly organized the Eagle Forum as "the alternative to women's lib." The race had begun; the antifeminist backlash had as much momentum as the women's movement. Who would emerge the victor was not at all certain.

## **WOMEN'S STRIKE FOR EQUALITY**

For some of that backlash, Betty Friedan believed, the media was responsible. Journalists of all sorts were "still treating the women's movement as a joke." As a result, "Women feared identifying themselves as feminists or with the movement at all. We needed an action to show them—and ourselves—how powerful we were. I sensed that the women 'out there' were ready to move in far greater numbers than even we realized."

To commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the ratification of the women's suffrage amendment (August 26, 1920), Friedan called for a national "Women's Strike for Equality." Although she hoped that women would abstain from their usual work, Friedan viewed the strike as a symbolic gesture. Word went out that local chapters should decide how to participate in the "strike." After considerable squabbling, feminists finally agreed upon three central demands: the right to abortion, the right to child care, and equal opportunity in employment and education. (Radical feminists, however, carried banners demanding "free abortion on demand and 24-hour child care centers.")

Here, then, were the core demands of the feminist revolution in 1970. Riding high on a string of legal victories and widely publicized demonstrations, for twenty-four hours feminists laid aside their factional differences and mounted the largest women's demonstrations held since the suffrage movement. In cities and towns across the country, women marched, picketed, protested, held teach-ins and rallies, and produced skits and plays. Some women actually refused to work. A common poster urged, "Don't Cook Dinner—Starve a Rat Today." Another reminded women, "Don't Iron While the Strike is Hot."

On Boston Commons, some feminists distributed contraceptive foam and whistled at and taunted construction workers. At the *Washington Post*, women held a teach-in; in Rochester, New York, feminists smashed teacups to protest a lack of female participation in government; in Dayton, Ohio, two hundred women listened to talks by welfare women and hospital union members; in New York City, women built a makeshift child care center on the grounds of City

Hall, draped an enormous banner “Women of the World Unite” over the Statue of Liberty, and invaded advertising agencies with medals inscribed, “This ad insults women.”

It was an unforgettable day. One twenty-four-year-old woman who didn’t consider herself a feminist brought her child to work and was promptly fired. She called NOW and one hundred women marched and picketed until her company rehired her. A female reporter decided to wear a brown and white button that simply read, “Women-Strike, Aug. 26th.” After waiters refused to serve her, she ended her newspaper story with these words: “I’ll tell you, wearing this little button really has been an eye-opener.” The media mostly highlighted the march and rally held in New York City. Linking arms, a huge crowd of women (anywhere from ten thousand to fifty thousand, depending on whether your source was the police, the *New York Times*, or rally organizers) marched down Fifth Avenue, banners and posters bobbing above radiant faces. Radical feminists, high-school girls, mothers with strollers, suburban matrons, domestics, and office workers joined elderly suffragists dressed in traditional white to follow the same route taken by first-wave feminists over half a century earlier.

Extensive media coverage informed a nation still reeling from black power, the counterculture, and the antiwar movement that the fledgling movement for women’s rights and women’s liberation was not a passing fad. (The media also felt compelled to report that Betty Friedan arrived late, after having her hair “done.”) In the aftermath of the march, a CBS News poll found that four out of five people over eighteen had read or heard about women’s liberation.

The 1970 Women’s Strike was a stunning success. In the months to come, NOW’s ranks swelled by 50 percent. Many feminists remembered the day as a peak experience in their lives. Across the nation, feminists in coastal cities, as well as those in the heartland, no longer felt isolated. Unity, if only achieved for a day, filled participants with exhilaration. For a brief moment, the banners “Sisterhood Is Powerful” and “Women of the World Unite” seemed to describe the future. At the end of the day’s whirlwind events, Betty Friedan’s keynote speech solemnly expressed the spiritual transformation many women experienced that day:

In the religion of my ancestors, there was a prayer that Jewish men said every morning. They prayed, “Thank thee, Lord, that I was not born a woman.” Today I feel, feel for the first time, feel absolutely sure that all women are going to be able to say, as I say tonight: “Thank thee, Lord, that I was born a woman, for this day.”