

Betty Friedan (February 4, 1921 – February 4, 2006)

One of the most famous American feminists of the twentieth century, Betty Friedan first attracted national attention as the author of the 1963 bestseller, *The Feminine Mystique*. A scorching indictment of the post-World War II domestic ideal and its narrow conception of womanhood, the book is widely credited with inaugurating a new wave of feminist activism. Friedan went on to play a key role in founding several influential feminist organizations that remain active to the present day, including NOW (the National Organization of Women), NARAL (the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws) and the National Women's Political Caucus. Often described by scholars as a "liberal" feminist to differentiate her from her more radical counterparts, Friedan believed in fostering a broad-based movement that focused primarily on securing economic and political equality for women.

Born on February 4, 1921, in Peoria, Illinois, Bettye Goldstein (she would later drop the "e") was the oldest child of Harry Goldstein, a Jewish immigrant from Kiev, and his much younger, American-born wife, Miriam Horowitz. When Betty and her two younger siblings were children, Harry's successful jewelry business afforded the family an affluent lifestyle, complete with a nursemaid, cook, and a butler/chauffer. Yet despite their wealth, the family experienced anti-Semitism in the form of social exclusions and sleights. They were barred from joining the town's most exclusive country club, and Friedan was rejected from a high school sorority due primarily to "being Jewish"—an experience that helped to cement her identification as an "outsider" and to fuel her passion for social justice.

A strained relationship with her mother also cast a shadow over Friedan's formative years. According to her first-born, Miriam badgered her children, belittled her husband, and suffered from bouts of colitis that left her bedridden and "screaming in pain." Friedan later came to believe that much of her mother's unhappiness, and even her physical ailments, stemmed from the lack of a meaningful outlet for her talents and energy. These convictions regarding her mother's thwarted ambition and its negative effects on the entire family would strongly inform Friedan's critical depiction of suburban womanhood in *The Feminine Mystique*.

In 1938, Friedan entered Smith College, where she came into her own. She excelled academically, revamped and edited the school newspaper, and grew increasingly interested in radical politics. In 1941, she attended a summer course at Highlander Folk School in Tennessee—which served as a training grounds for labor and civil rights activists—and supported a strike by Smith College's domestic workers. After graduating *summa cum laude* with a degree in psychology, she entered a graduate program in psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, where she studied with Erik Erikson, among others. After a year, however, she declined a prestigious graduate fellowship and moved back to New York, taking a job as a journalist for the United Federated News, a labor syndicate. In 1946 she was hired to write for the *UE News*, the official organ of the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America, one of the nation's most radical unions. Historian David Horowitz, who first drew attention to the significance of Friedan's engagement with the labor movement, has argued that her work "placed her in the most progressive and controversial reaches of the American left."

In 1947, Friedan entered into what would be a tempestuous and at times even violent twenty-two-year marriage with Carl Friedan, a theater producer who later became an advertising executive. Between 1948 and 1956 she gave birth to three children. As a mother, Friedan was in some ways typical of highly educated, middle-class women of the time. She avidly read Dr. Spock and insisted on breastfeeding, despite a lack of support from hospital personnel. But unlike most of her peers, Friedan also worked outside the home, even when her children were quite young—a fact she later obscured when describing the origins of *The Feminine Mystique*. When she became pregnant the second time, the *UE News* fired her. In her memoir, Friedan recalled feeling angry but also relieved, "because all those negative books and magazine articles about 'career women' were beginning to get to me." Yet soon after she had "dispensed with the nursemaid," she grew depressed and suffered a recurrence of severe asthma, an ailment that had plagued her since childhood.

Friedan's profound unhappiness eventually led her to enter therapy with the psychoanalyst William Menaker. Although she would trenchantly critique popularized Freudianism in *The Feminine Mystique*, her own experiences with psychoanalytic therapy in the 1950s actually proved quite liberating. Rather than pathologizing her ambitions,

Menaker asked her why she confined herself to "playing the role" of suburban housewife." Before her second child had reached his first birthday, Friedan had hired a maid to come three days a week, allowing her to begin a new career as a freelance journalist. Her experience with Menaker proved so positive, in fact, that she approached him several years later, after receiving the contract for what would become *The Feminine Mystique*. Believing that his expertise would lend her work "more authority," Friedan proposed that they collaborate. Had her editor not nixed the idea, the name of an authorizing "eminent male psychoanalyst" might therefore have graced the cover of *The Feminine Mystique*—a mindboggling notion, given the book's ultimate trajectory.

It took Friedan five years to research and write *The Feminine Mystique*. When published in 1963, the book's popular success was immediate and phenomenal: it spent six weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list, and sales of the first paperback printing eventually reached 1.4 million. While today the book is associated with sparking a new phase of feminist activism, its appeal actually lay less in Friedan's somewhat blurry vision of the future than in her sharp assessment of the present and the recent past. With the end of World War II, she argued, a whole generation of American women, weary of economic hardship and war, had made a "mistaken choice." Turning their backs on the hard-won achievements of an earlier generation of suffragists and feminists, they had abandoned educational and career ambitions and plunged headlong into early marriage and motherhood, producing an extraordinary baby boom. Social scientists and psychological experts, popular writers, and advertisers fueled these trends by propagating the belief that well-adjusted women derived fulfillment only through motherhood and domesticity. This was the spurious ideology—the "feminine mystique"—that Friedan sought to demolish. Women caught in its throes, she argued, suffered from "the problem with no name"—a pervasive sense of purposelessness that manifested itself in any number of ways, as crushing ennui, alcoholism, overbearing mothering, insatiable sexual desire, even mental illness and suicide.

Even as Friedan condemned certain experts, she also appropriated the theories of others to validate her findings; the book, which has numerous footnotes, reads like a cross between academic treatise and journalistic exposé. Her views are particularly indebted to the works of psychoanalysts Erik Erikson and Abraham Maslow, who respectively

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introduced the concepts of "identity crisis" and "self-actualization." "It is my thesis," she argued, "that the core of the problem for women today is...a problem of identity—a stunting or evasion of growth that is perpetuated by the feminine mystique." To become a "self-actualized" woman who attained fulfillment and growth as an individual, one had to break free of the culture's narrow definition of womanhood. By identifying "the problem with no name" and exposing its emotional toll, Friedan captured the attention of thousands of women, many of whom expressed profound gratitude and relief to know that they were not alone in feeling trapped by domesticity.

In retrospect, it is easy to identify shortcomings in Friedan's work. By conflating "American women" with suburban wives and mothers, she implied that all the nation's women were white and middle class. As feminist theorist bell hooks later pointed out, she wrote as if working-class women and women of color "did not exist." Given Friedan's prior work on labor issues, this myopia is hard to explain. Her analysis is also marred by Cold War homophobia and mother-blaming; she warned that insufficiently occupied and overbearing mothers were to blame for "the homosexuality that is spreading like a murky fog over the American scene." Finally, she portrayed the suburban housewives she hoped to liberate in strikingly harsh terms that offended and alienated many readers. Indeed, just as one can see intimations of a new feminist movement in the letters from Friedan's fans, so can one see the sentiments that would eventually give rise to the New Right in the letters from her critics, who viewed her work as belittling the contributions of American mothers and wives.

Surprisingly, *The Feminine Mystique* offered little in the way of a policy-oriented agenda. Friedan looked forward to a time when women would demand "maternity leaves or even maternity sabbaticals, professionally run nurseries, and other changes...that may be necessary;" she also called for a government program similar to the GI Bill to help homemakers who wanted to return to school. But the final chapter of *The Feminine Mystique* mainly featured stories of remarkable women who had managed to pursue fulfilling careers without forgoing marriage and motherhood. Entitled "A New Life Plan," it appeared to suggest that individual women could simply choose to reject society's definition of femininity and forge a different, more rewarding path for themselves through individual choice and willpower alone.

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Within three years of publishing *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan had moved in a decidedly more political direction. In 1966, she became the first president of NOW, formed to serve as an "NAACP for women." Along with lawyer Pauli Murray, Friedan coauthored the organization's Statement of Purpose—a powerful manifesto that in some ways echoes *The Feminine Mystique*. But it also signaled a departure with its use of the new term "sex discrimination" and its explicit rejection of the notion that the difficulties women experienced combining work and domestic responsibilities were "the unique responsibility of each individual" to resolve.

By the late 1970s, however, Friedan had distanced herself from the feminist movement, frustrated with those who sought to emphasize issues related to sexuality and violence, such as rape, pornography, sexual harassment, and domestic abuse. In 1981, soon after the election of Ronald Reagan, she published *The Second Stage*, written in part as a last-ditch attempt to rally support for the Equal Rights Amendment. Here, Friedan argued that the "first stage" of the feminist movement—the fight for equal opportunities in the workplace—had basically been won. Yet as many women had discovered, "The equality we fought for isn't livable, isn't workable, isn't comfortable in the terms that structured our battle." Because Friedan declared victory prematurely while continuing to employ a universalizing "we," most feminists dismissed the book as a disappointing retreat. Yet it was prescient in some respects, for the concerns she raised about the difficulties of combining work and motherhood have only grown more pronounced over time.

In the decades that followed, Friedan published *The Foundation of Age*, a book about aging and age discrimination, as well as her memoir, *Life So Far*. She died on February 4, 2006, her eighty-fifth birthday. Given the remarkable timing, it is tempting to imagine that, even in death, she managed to exert her indomitable will, departing on her own terms.

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