

[daughters of the revolution]

Room of Her Own

Feminism's long journey from "Is this all?" to having it all to being liberated by less.

By Kara Hopkins

MODERN FEMINIST LORE dates its first chapter from 1963, when Betty Friedan found the original desperate housewives vacuuming their spotless ranch houses—in high heels, natch—and heard them asking, "Is this all?"

Hate Friedan if it suits—anyone who told Phyllis Schlafly, "I'd like to burn you at the stake," would have earned the Right's ire, absent the rest of her radical cargo. The feminist matriarch's early Marxist affiliations are well documented, and her *Feminine Mystique* ranked seventh on *Human Events'* list of the "most harmful books" of the last two centuries. But she tapped sufficient angst to sell three million copies and compel millions more American women to trade aprons for power suits and kitchens for corner offices. So swift was the sea change that their daughters would not ask "Is this all?" but "Can you have it all?"—and then wonder if they wanted it.

It's fashionable in the salons of the Right to dismiss the full freight of feminism without examining its manifest. With a flick of the pen, the whole movement can be blamed for "Ruining Our Schools, Families, Military, and Sports" as it is in the subtitle of Kate O'Beirne's new bestseller. But even so ham-fisted an indictment carries a concession: this was a revolution that left fingerprints on all spheres. To caricature it as the project of a handful of hags who struck out

on the dating market is to ignore the essential question of why feminism found such fertile soil. The debating ploy is as common as it is lazy: spotlight extremists as emblematic of the whole, for if one's opponent can be cast as moronic or malicious, what need for argument? But no club is that exclusive.

Feminism certainly wasn't. Following Friedan's death last month, on her 85th birthday, Germaine Greer waltzed over her grave, telling *The Guardian*, "Betty was disconcerted by lesbianism, leery of abortion and ultimately concerned for the men whose ancient privileges she feared were being eroded. ... The world will be a tamer place without her."

That ungracious obituary wouldn't have surprised Friedan, who admitted, "I'm at odds with the radical feminists because I'm not anti-marriage and anti-family. I always thought it was dangerous to go against the idea of the family. I don't even like the phrase 'women's liberation' because that idea of being set free from everything doesn't seem right to me." No boilerplate feminist, Friedan saw men as "fellow victims," not "the product of a damaged gene" (Greer) or "rapists, batterers, plunderers, killers" (Andrea Dworkin). She didn't share *Ms.* editor Robin Morgan's belief that marriage is a "slavery-like practice," arguing instead, "I believe in marriage. I think intimacy, bonding, and families have value."

That's not to say that Friedan should be remembered as some kind of closet conservative. She did, after all, jot the fateful initials NOW—later incarnated into the National Organization for Women—on a napkin and was instrumental in founding the National Abortion Rights Action League. She memorably called American homes "comfortable concentration camps," and despite pretty words for the nuclear family was unable to hold her own marriage together. Her children would recall eating TV dinners "way beyond the recommended limit."

Both sides of the political divide could, therefore, attack Friedan for ideological impurity, and with ample cause—best evidence that the movement her question sparked was never as monolithic as critics claim. Had it been as venomous as the extreme representatives, feminism could have gained no foothold in Middle America. Housewives didn't clamor to join Valerie Solanas's SCUM—Society for Cutting Up Men—which was never more than a treehouse club. Deeper social currents were at work, so that what might have receded into the realm of curious sociology—as Simone de Beauvoir's 1949 effort had—became instead a mainstream movement populated by millions of average women.

The project began innocently enough: when surveying her Smith College classmates for their 15-year reunion, Friedan

picked up a surprising thread—a “problem that had no name.” Behind their picket fences, these pert housewives were dissatisfied and isolated, medicating their boredom with redecorating projects and Chardonnay. “As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—‘Is this all?’” ran the opening lines of *The Feminine Mystique*.

Of course life was never that tidy, and much of Friedan’s diagnosis was overdrawn. “What kind of a woman was she if she did not feel this mysterious fulfillment waxing the kitchen floor?” A perfectly normal one who doesn’t seek the answers to existential questions in linoleum, thanks. And being “a server of food and putter-on of pants and a bed maker” is not exactly the gulag. (It was later revealed that Friedan knew little of the domestic drudgery she bemoaned: she employed a maid.)

Still the message resonated, though many who took up the torch were animated by more radical tendencies. “Don’t get into the bra-burning, anti-man, politics-of-orgasm school,” Friedan warned college students in 1970. She would go on to write in *The Second Stage*, published in 1981, that her successors had fallen into a trap “which denied that core of women’s personhood that is fulfilled through love, nurture, home.” It was this voice—not strident talk of fish and bicycles—that lured most women into believing that they could tend both home and office with equal grace.

With the advent of mechanized housework, packaged food, and public education, there was less demand for that skill set known as the domestic arts. Historically the management of a household and the raising of children were highly regarded—and fully consuming. In 1869,

Catherine E. Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe could write in *The American Woman’s Home*, “It is the aim of this volume to elevate both the honor and the remuneration of all employments that sustain the many difficult and varied duties of the family state, and thus to render each department of woman’s profession as much desired and respected as the most honored professions of men.” But with modern conveniences came a premium on efficiency—the market’s gateway into the private sphere, where the feminine values of tranquility, well-being, tradition, and taste had previously held sway. As the custodians of daily ritual gave in to cheaper and faster, home became recalibrated by work metrics. Previous compensations—healthy children, a peaceful refuge for her husband, a gracious table for friends—turned meager. Those who had paid no attention when Beauvoir wrote, “Woman’s work within the home [is] not directly useful to society, produces nothing. It is subordinate, secondary, parasitic,” began to entertain doubts.

A simultaneous revolution was altering men. Not long before but an age away, Robert Wright could write in *Angel in the House* of women who “tame the animal in a man and rescue his spirit from the deadening world of work.” As work took over that domestic duty, taming the animal by shackling him to a desk and burying him in a pile of paper, the ancient masculine values—heroism, independence, honor—yielded to the bureaucratic machine, which harnessed the power of traditional feminine traits—harmony, teamwork, compliance—to create a docile workforce. With his chivalric impulse thus blunted, what man wouldn’t welcome relief from the breadwinner’s burden? In the place of the angel, Philip Wylie would write of a “huge class of idle, middle-aged women” who “raped” men by binding them to humdrum lives. Far from the conserva-

tive map of the battle, these men weren’t feminism’s antagonists—or even its targets.

Boredom more than fervor rallies the best revolutionaries, and the suburban ennui Friedan identified was real. American women were not so much oppressed as dislocated. Washing machines and self-cleaning ovens lengthened their days, while sprawl quarantined them from community. These deposed queens of the domestic hive weren’t plotting the overthrow of any patriarchy. They wanted to do valuable work, the determinants of which were already being renegotiated when feminism arrived on the scene.

Friedan wrote, “[V]acuuming the living room floor—with or without makeup—is not work that takes enough thought or energy to challenge any woman’s full capacity. ... Down through the ages man has known that he was set apart from other animals by his mind’s power to have an idea, a vision, and shape the future of it ... when he discovers and creates and shapes a future different from his past, he is a man, a human being.” The implication was that private work was intellectually barren, and because this role had traditionally fallen to women, they were being denied the humanizing rigors of the public domain. Women’s studies professor Linda Hirshman would go further: “The family—with its repetitious, socially invisible, physical tasks ... allows fewer opportunities for full human flourishing than public spheres like the market or the government. This less-flourishing sphere is not the natural or moral responsibility only of women. Therefore assigning it to women is unjust.” Of course this wasn’t true, for it supposes that men at work are developing life-altering technologies or untangling theoretical impossibilities rather than doodling their way through meetings or shoveling paperwork into bureaucracy’s

maw. Moreover, it overlooks the unique capacity of men to find fulfillment in provision and women in nurture—and the responsibility of both to tend their intellectual gardens by maintaining lives beyond the demands of home and work.

Yet by attaching to existing currents and packing enough truth around a lie, feminists were able to persuade women of their degradation. Home had changed. Hearth had cooled. That diagnosis was not wrong, but the cure has nearly killed the patient, for it missed an essential truth that Friedan understood: “that core of women’s personhood that is fulfilled through love, nurture, home.” Women didn’t need to take their rightful half of the world by acting like men; they already had it simply by being women. In this, feminism pitched its battle not against men but against women. As Christopher Lasch noted in *Women and*

cific help-wanted ads are museum pieces, and pay differentials result primarily from voluntary detours from the career track. In a recent column, Susan Jacoby recalled applying for a reporting job at the *Washington Post* in 1965 and being asked to write an essay on “How I Plan to Combine Motherhood with a Career.” That’s probably actionable now.

But darker trends also attend, and while it would be difficult to trace causal lines, not all can be coincidental. With the combined work hours for professional couples with children under 18 rising to 91 hours per week, how could marriages go unaffected? The American divorce rate is nearly twice what it was in 1960, and women pay the highest price with 40 percent of divorced mothers ending up in poverty. In a controversial *Newsweek* article published in November 1990, entitled “The Failure of Femi-

1970. As Elizabeth Warren and Amelia Warren Tyagi reveal in *The Two-Income Trap*, “once they have paid the mortgage, the car payments, the taxes, the health-insurance, and the day-care bills, today’s dual-income families have less discretionary income ... than the single income family of a generation ago. ... Mothers now work two jobs, at home and at the office. And yet they have less cash on hand.”

But that is not even the highest cost. The dearest toll is incalculable but evident to anyone who has watched a young mother en route to daycare, cellphone jangling, briefcase gaping, while she wrangles the toddler smearing Pop-Tart on her suit and the wailing infant who started commuting at six weeks. Hers is desperation deeper than any ’60s housewife. For the draw and demands of home didn’t vanish because working women began giving at the office. They still mop the floors—at midnight. There’s an early AM scene in Allison Pearson’s silly-sad novel *I Don’t Know How She Does It* in which narrator Kate Reddy, just returned from a business trip, pounds purchased pies with a rolling pin so they will look homemade for her daughter’s school party, then hides the boxes so her nanny can’t expose her domestic duplicity to the “Mother Superiors.”

Having it all meant doing it all, for natural law cannot be vetoed: the social structure couldn’t change enough to override the intrinsic divide between private and public spheres or ignore the sexes’ yen to find more satisfaction in one than the other. Much as they pretended to be men at work, women were still mothers and wives and began to view the diminishment of these roles with some sense of loss. Equality had extracted a measure of femininity, not because women were wearing gray flannel but because, as Bette Davis confessed in “All About Eve”: “The things

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the Common Life, “A feminist movement that respected the achievements of women in the past would not disparage housework, motherhood or unpaid civic and neighborly services. It would not make a paycheck the only symbol of accomplishment. ... It would insist that people need self-respecting honorable callings, not glamorous careers that carry high salaries but take them away from their families.”

And it’s not as if women didn’t work outside of the home before they read *The Feminine Mystique*. In 1967, 41 percent of mothers worked. But today 72 percent do—and regularly spend their off hours clicking away at BlackBerry and taking cellphone calls.

That investment has yielded dividends: maternity leave is standard, college admissions favor women, sex-spe-

nism,” Kay Ebeling confessed, “In 1973, I left what could have been a perfectly good marriage, taking with me a child in diapers, a 10-year-old Plymouth and Volume 1, Number One of *Ms. Magazine*. I was convinced I could make it on my own. In the last 15 years my ex has married or lived with a succession of women. As he gets older, his women stay in their 20s. Meanwhile, I’ve stayed unattached. He drives a BMW. I ride buses.”

Even families that remain intact are learning a cold economic lesson: the second salary that was once something between a political statement and a rainy-day fund is becoming increasingly necessary. In a devil’s bargain, women have sacrificed their freedom and domestic satisfaction while median household income has remained unchanged in constant dollars since

you drop on your way up the ladder so you can move faster, you forget you'll need them again when you get back to being a woman. ... And in the last analysis nothing's any good unless you can look up just before dinner or turn around in bed and there he is. Without that, you're not a woman. You're something with a French provincial office or a book full of clippings."

Backlash would be too strong a word, for what came next has been less a broad reversal than a smattering of individual decisions that together suggest a shift. In October 2003, the *New York Times Magazine* published Lisa Belkin's "The Opt-Out Revolution." "Why don't women run the world?" she asked. "Maybe it's because they don't want to." Much like Friedan a generation before, Belkin looked at her fellow Princeton alumnae and found an unexpected pattern. "I know that's very un-p.c., but I like life's rhythms when I'm nurturing a child," a lawyer become stay-at-home mom admitted. "Women today, if we think about feminism at all, we see it as a battle fought for 'the choice.' For us, the freedom to work if we want to work is the feminist strain in our lives," another career girl turned mother told her.

This "choice feminism" infuriated radicals who retorted that the persistence of "gendered roles" presented a false choice, however much empowerment rhetoric a woman packed around her decision. "'Choice feminism' claims that staying home with the kids is just one more feminist option. Funny that most men rarely make the same 'choice.' Exactly what kind of choice is that?" Linda Hirshman asked in the December issue of *The American Prospect*. (Ironically, after years of using "choice" as their euphemism for abortion when they didn't view all options as equally acceptable, feminists were caught short when women who weren't advancing their agenda began using the word literally.)

The reaction revealed how far feminism had become removed from ordinary women. There had always been a totalitarian element that was less interested in individual freedom than social revolution—the notion that a woman shouldn't have the option to work outside of the home but rather the obligation. Simone de Beauvoir had written, "No woman should be authorized to stay at home and raise her children. ... Women should not have that choice, precisely because if there is such a choice, too many women will make that one." Yet her strain never found a popular audience—the *Second Sex* author famously threw Friedan's *Second Stage* across a room. (Interviewed about the book, Friedan told the *New York Times*, "Some militants repudiated all the parts of the personhood of women that have been and are still expressed in family, home and love. In trying to ape men's lives, they have truncated themselves away from grounding experiences.")

The average Janes with whom feminism first found mass appeal seem to be testing a new movement. Census figures reveal that the rate of working

Critics contend that the phenomenon is confined to a small group of affluent white women, which doesn't reverse the trend line but does reveal a poignant truth. If those who can afford it want to stay home with their children, those who cannot afford it likely do as well—and they no longer have the choice their mothers did. Warren and Tyagi write, "When millions of mothers entered the workforce, they ratcheted up the price of a middle-class life for everyone, including families that wanted to keep Mom at home. A generation ago, a single bread-winner who worked diligently and spent carefully could assure his family a comfortable position in the middle class. But the frenzied bidding wars, fueled by families with two incomes, changed the game for single-income families as well, pushing them down the economic ladder."

It is here that feminism may prove most cruel, for if the '60s found women languishing in their dollhouses—though scarcely barred from the workforce—the new century finds them no more fulfilled than their mothers but far less free.

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mothers with children under age one has dropped to 53 percent from a high of 59 percent—the first decline since the indicator debuted in 1976 at 31 percent. While scarcely a revolution, the trend prompted *Business Week* to run "Goodbye Boss Lady, Hello Soccer Mom," and *Time* to devote a cover story to "The Case for Staying Home." Maureen Dowd, far more kitten than tiger, wrote in her widely noted *Are Men Necessary?* "Four decades after feminism blossomed in a giddy wave of bra barbecues, birth-control pills and unisex clothes, the ideal of having it all is a risible cliché."

Dowd writes, "Many women I know, who once disdained their mothers' lifestyles, no longer see those lives as tedious or indulgent. Now they look back with a tad of longing. Wouldn't it be pleasant to while away time playing bridge and tennis and lunching with girlfriends and eating shrimp cocktails?" Their mothers were of course more likely to iron shirts than nibble shrimp, but in this case the gloss matters more than the history. The modern fantasy of the independent woman is "Stepford," not "Wall Street"—and Dowd wasn't cast as a Taliban sympathizer for noting feminism's failure.

Publications make a ritual of printing the movement's obituary, and vultures descend from both Left and Right, though they generally pick at a caricature rather than a carcass. The Left looks through a revisionist lens and recalls feminism as a Marxist project aimed at overwhelming capitalist gender roles yet fails to admit that average women signed on to no such crusade. They were disappointed not because feminism failed to make them equal, but because in so doing it made them less female.

The Right, on the other hand, reduced feminism to a war against men—which could never have enlisted the majority of women into its ranks—and then declared victory in a fight that never was, without admitting that as conservatives they might have borne some responsibility for the sanctity of the domestic tradition.

Where does this leave women? In an experiential rather than an ideological place that only 40 years of wilderness wandering could locate. It's certainly imperfect. Many have no choice but to work—this was true in 1963 as well. But whatever wistfulness those housewives felt as their husbands headed out for the office now belongs to the past. They have been there—and back. Some have chosen high-powered careers, grateful that they can be CEOs as well as their secretaries, but they do so acknowledging that they won't have it all. Still others have decided that whatever social stigma now attached to full-time motherhood is offset by witnessing their children's first steps.

"The end of our exploring," T.S. Elliot wrote, "will be to arrive at where we started, and to know the place for the first time." In that, much as it has cost us, feminism has succeeded. Women no longer have to lie awake nights wondering "Is this all?" They have tried to have it all—and decided they are more liberated by less. ■

Insecurity With Insolvency

The president's National Security Strategy is vague on fiscal details and ignores geopolitical realities.

By Andrew J. Bacevich

TAKEN AT FACE VALUE as an actual blueprint for policy, President Bush's new National Security Strategy, which appeared last month, flunks. It fails because it disregards the first principle of strategy: the imperative of balancing means and ends. The president's latest effort to define America's purpose in the world comes chockfull of declarations, exhortations, and gaseous generalities, many of them lifted from the 2002 version of this document. But this 49-page report, which is almost entirely devoid of facts, never bothers to consider how we got into our current mess in the first place or how we're going to pay for the "Long War" that the president has contrived as the best way to get us out.

I don't mean to give the impression that the document is entirely lacking in specifics. Careful readers will learn here that the administration has launched a three-year, \$900 million initiative to provide clean drinking water to impoverished Africans. To "undertake transformational change" in the developing world, it is also contributing \$1.5 billion to the Millennium Challenge Corporation. And it's kicking in \$1.2 billion for the effort to reduce the incidence of malaria worldwide. What the National Security Strategy does not note is that the combined spending on all of these worthy programs equals the amount we're pouring down the rat hole known as Iraq every two weeks. In fact, anyone interested in the current or projected

costs of the Iraq War, or of the Afghan War for that matter, will have to look elsewhere. The strategists inhabiting the White House do not bother themselves with such trivialities.

War costs are not the only figures that this document delicately overlooks. Readers of the National Security Strategy will find no mention of U.S. government indebtedness, currently hovering above \$8.3 trillion, including an increase of \$1.1 trillion since the Republican Party gained control of the executive and legislative branches in 2001. Similarly, the authors of this document offer no data on U.S. trade relations, although last year's current accounts deficit topped \$800 billion, over 7 percent of the nation's GDP. The numbers for 2006 promise to be worse still, but you won't learn that from White House strategists. Although balancing the federal budget once ranked as a core Republican value—remember Ike's promise of "security with solvency"?—the Bush team does not trouble itself with such irksome details. The National Security Strategy is silent on the size of the federal deficit, which last year came in at a whopping \$427 billion.

Now that President Bush has acknowledged the country's addiction to oil, one might imagine that trends in U.S. petroleum imports or data on domestic oil reserves would figure as matters of strategic interest. The president's top national-security thinkers