

PERSPECTIVES

By Vladimir Klimenko

WHEN NICARAGUAN Junta Coordinator Daniel Ortega told an enthusiastic Managua crowd on February 21 that general elections will be held on November 4, the anti-Sandinista opposition was caught off-guard. Realizing that it stands no chance of winning even one-third of the vote in an open contest against the FSLN, the right-wing alliance known as the *Coordinadora Democratica* (Democratic Coordinating Committee) opted for an abstentionist strategy in the hope of discrediting the revolutionary government.

Although the Sandinistas have promised to provide all competing parties with government subsidies, plus air time on state-run radio and television, the revolution's conservative critics immediately downplayed the significance of the FSLN's move towards institutionalizing democracy. Hours after Ortega's speech, Social Christian Party (PSC) President Julio Ramon Garcia attacked the Sandinistas for not having consulted the other parties on the provisions of the electoral law and another PSC leader told the right-wing daily *La Prensa* that there

was "nothing new to help create the necessary climate of confidence."

Minister of the Interior Tomas Borge, the oldest of the nine FSLN *comandantes*, told journalists that foreign observers would be welcome at any of the 5,000 polling stations around the country. "The problem is that some of these parties don't even have 5,000 supporters and are consequently afraid of appearing ridiculous in the elections."

A day after his speech, Ortega warned that "the United States is exercising pressures on the opposition groups in order that they not participate in the elections because its objective is to attempt to discredit and weaken the electoral process." The *Coordinadora's* response seemed to verify that observation: predictably critical but vague, its public declarations never specified what concessions the government could make in view of the present military crisis.

The elections.

Nicaragua's Council of State has been debating the electoral provisions for several months. At stake is the nation's presidency, vice-presidency (both for six-year terms) and the composition of a 90-member legislative body. Any party that qualifies to run candidates by obtaining 5,000 signatures will receive six

million cordobas (200,000 dollars at the parallel market rate). Weekly radio and TV spots will be available for parties to air their view.

The election announcement provoked splits among left and right groupings. The Liberal Independent Party (PLI) broke away from the FSLN-dominated Revolutionary Patriotic Front soon after Ortega's speech. PLI leaders said that their voice went unheard within bloc meetings. They also opposed a highly controversial government decision to give sixteen year-olds the right to vote.

While the movements of the *Coordinadora* groped for a common platform of abstention, smaller right-wing groups experienced serious internal conflicts. The center-right Liberal Constitutionalist Party lost its secretary-general, Julio Centeno, who resigned because his party refused to support the elections. The far-right Conservative Democratic Party (PCD) suffered a devastating split when the more reactionary faction failed to expel the majority from the party's offices. When the latter group reoccupied the building, PCD spokesman Enrique Sotelo accused the minority of "obeying slogans from abroad" and insisted that "we cannot be an illegal, clandestine party."

Many Nicaraguans foresaw that the U.S. would try to undermine the country's tenuous pluralism when Ronald Reagan assumed the presidency in 1981. "The United States wants to provoke a government crackdown," commented Danilo Aguirre, assistant editor of the pro-Sandinista *El Nuevo Diario*, three years ago. "They don't want pluralism to succeed here because then they can tell the rest of Latin America, 'Look, we told you that Nicaragua would become another Cuba.'"

"North Americans say that democracy equals elections," says Carlos Manuel Morales, a member of the FSLN's Central Committee. "We say that democracy is elections and much, much more." It is precisely this revolutionary component—the agrarian reform, the literacy campaign, anti-decapitalization laws and mass mobilizations—that precludes a rightist acceptance of democracy with these conditions.

Morales attacks the right for arguing that, historically, North Americans intervened because of a lack of elections. "Simultaneously they argue that the elections proposed by the Sandinistas do not inspire their confidence. They therefore pose the problem and the solution."

The right transmits its messages through *La Prensa*, the country's oldest daily newspaper. In a typical issue three or four front-page stories paraphrase the latest declarations of small right-wing parties. The paper frequently quotes individuals who say that there cannot be genuinely free elections until all Nicaraguans can return from exile—a reference to those who would face charges for associating with Somoza.

The opposition refuses to accept the legitimacy of elections as long as press restrictions continue. *La Prensa's* Horacio Ruis admits that "censorship was lessened last fall. It is interesting to note that this occurred immediately after the U.S. invasion of Grenada."

Nicaraguans who are less inclined to thank gunboat diplomacy believe that the Sandinistas relaxed press controls when they realized that last year's counterrevolutionary offensives failed to score military victories against the Sandinista People's Army and Militia forces. Several foreign journalists attribute this to increased sophistication on the part of Nelba Blandon, the young head of the Interior Ministry's Office of Communications.

A visit to *La Prensa's* editorial offices revealed that materials censored by the government are not rejected for their critical content as much as for their disruptive effect. Thus, headlines declaring, "Contras Announce Huge Exodus of Nicas to Honduras" or "Cordoba Falls to 140!" (on the black market) are cut while stories attacking the "Party-State," rationing, land expropriations, censorship, the draft and Cuba regularly get through.

Interior Minister Tomas Borge.

The Ministry also censors pieces that are deemed to be offensive. One example quoted Elliot Abrams, the State Department human rights official: "At least Somoza left the Miskitos alone." Advertising that commercializes traditional holidays (Mother's Day restaurant ads) or promotes sexism (bikini-clad blondes caressing Toyotas) fails to pass the censorship office for similar reasons.

Besides vigorously protesting censorship (mainly in the columns of *La Prensa*), the right emphatically opposed lowering the voting age. "Sixteen year-olds are technically adolescents," says the Conservative Democrat Clemente Guido. "Fighting or picking cotton does not make one old enough to vote."

The Sandinistas disagree completely and insist that Nicaraguan youth have earned the right to vote through massive sacrifices. The government cites demographic reality as another reason: most Nicaraguans are under 20. An important political factor lies beneath the debate; the younger the voters, the greater will be the FSLN's margin of victory.

Supporting the *Coordinadora's* anti-electoral project are two "free" trade union confederations. Their outspoken enmity toward the government contrasts sharply with their mild opposition to Somoza prior to 1979. One of these is an offspring of the American Institute for Free Labor Development—an AFL-CIO Cold War project with strong CIA ties. The other, known as the Nicaraguan Workers' Confederation (CTN) is affiliated with the Brussels-based World Confederation of Labor.

CTN chief Carlos Huembes says that "the leaders of the *Frente* are Marxist-Leninists and therefore cannot be democrats." He strongly condemns the 1981 Emergency Decree, which prohibited strikes, but when asked about the destabilization maneuvers that precipitated the law, he replies, "There are political positions, not labor ones."

An ingenuous comment? Unlikely, for Carlos Huembes also happens to be vice president of the *Coordinadora Democratica*.

Opposition strength.

Despite ongoing efforts to portray the Sandinistas as being undemocratic, the opposition has failed to gather momentum either internally or abroad. Prominent exiles such as Arturo Cruz, former ambassador to the United States, and millionaire ex-Junta member Alfonso Robelo have expressed interest in coming back to Nicaragua after the government declared that they were free to return home.

Several right-wing parties and *La Prensa* indicated that they might favor Cruz as a presidential candidate because of his good reputation. Cruz maintains that he will not be a candidate. Robelo, however, is widely believed to have presidential ambitions, a notion that led Tomas Borge to remark, "I'd like to be an astronaut too."

Cruz and other Costa Rican-based political exiles have distanced themselves from ARDE, the movement headed by Eden Pastora. The former Sandinista recently held joint strategy meetings in Guatemala City with ranking *somocistas* operating out of Honduras.

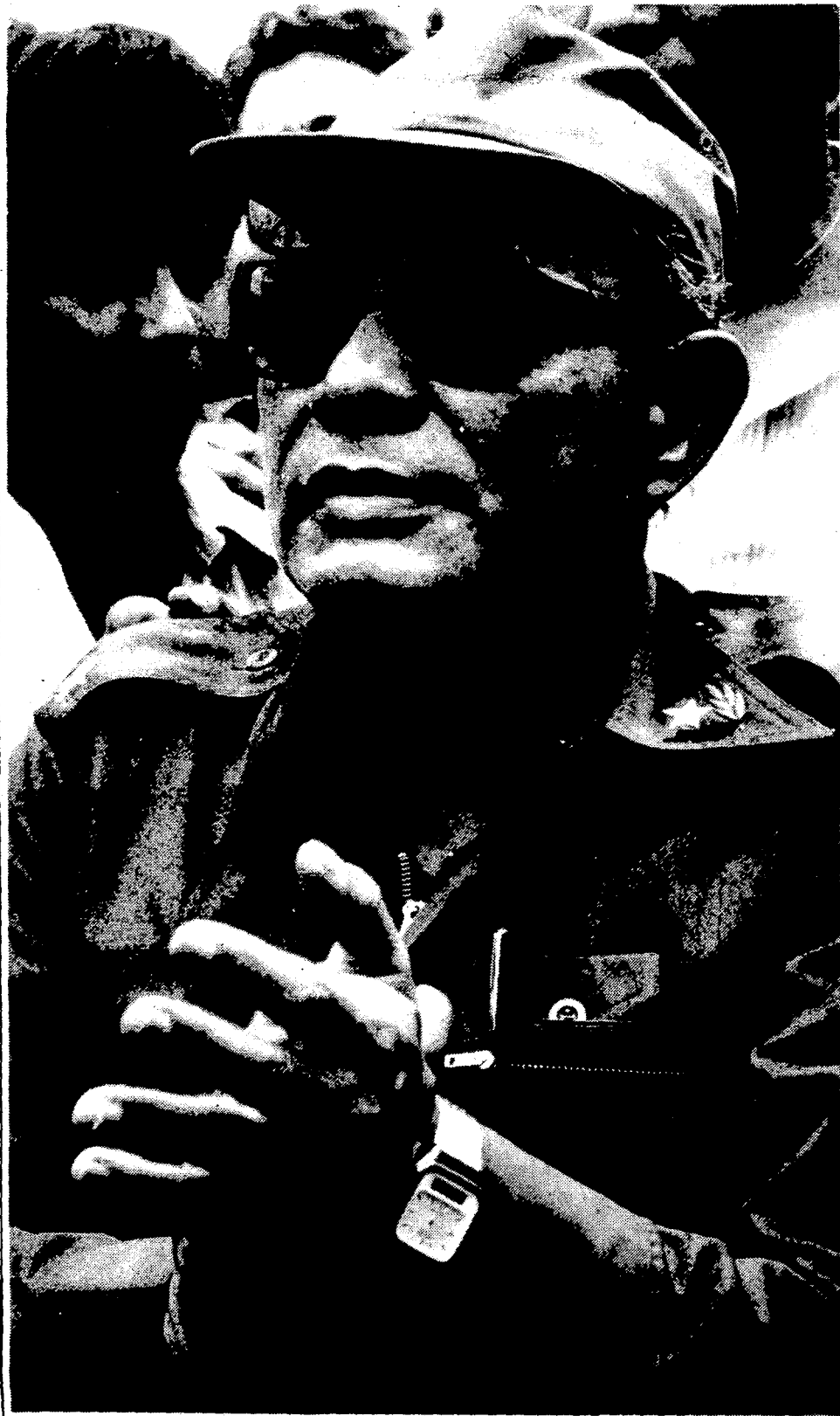
Few Nicaraguans expect the United States to invade directly until the outcome of Reagan's campaign in November. The Sandinistas moved up the date of the elections—postponed earlier until 1985—in order to minimize the chance of external disruption.

"We know the United States will say, regardless of whether or not the right participates, that these are 'Communist elections,'" says the FSLN's Morales. "Therefore we are determined to have the best, most fair election possible."

With an eye on U.S. media coverage, the opposition groups are finding reasons to stay out of the race. Paradoxically, this path appears to guarantee their own demise as Nicaraguan citizens go to the polls in their country's first free election.

Vladimir Klimenko was in Nicaragua in February and March.

Nicaragua election divides opposition



More Work For Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave

By Ruth Schwartz Cowan
Basic Books, 257 pp.,
\$17.95

Never Done: A History of American Housework

By Susan Strasser
Pantheon, 365 pp.,
\$11.95

By Alice Kessler-Harris

Among the great unresolved issues faced by the contemporary women's movement, few seem more intractable than housework. Since the modern housewife emerged from the shadow of Victorian pieties about the importance of preserving the purity of the home, she has been mercilessly chained to her stove and her broom.

Not even her increased presence in the workforce has released her from primary responsibility for the home. As recent studies have shown, few men are willing to do more than occasionally "help out."

How should this seemingly unchangeable condition be viewed? Is it a necessary consequence of the patriarchal family, as argued in the early '70s? Is it a by-product of the sexual division of labor, reinforced by the demands of industrial life? Is it technologically determined?

Does the circumstance of housewifery, in short, dwell in some unmalleable sense of women's place? If so, only an overhaul of deeply rooted gender constraints would make change thinkable. Or, could it be rooted in the more recent past, a product of the combined forces of technology and ideology, and thus a potential field of struggle?

At last, two new books tackle this issue and suggest the possibility of change. A tribute to the supportive environment of the growing community of feminist scholars, both emerge from the State University of New York at Stonybrook, where Susan Strasser was once a student of Ruth Cowan.

Not surprisingly, the books share much in common. Dissatisfaction with women's present condition drives both authors to a detailed attempt at reconstructing the history of housework. Each book illuminates the changing tasks of women, both exemplifying and advancing the new social history—the search to reconstruct the daily lives of ordinary people.

Both authors credit new sources of energy (gas, then electricity) that emerged as a by-product of industrialization with creating major changes in household work. Cowan dates the transition at around 1860. Before that, she says, the work done in the household would have been familiar to anyone who had engaged in it in the preceding 200 years. Strasser, more conscious of the diffusion of technology than its invention, puts the date around the turn of the century.

Class differences.

Both recognize class differences as crucial to any assessment of change—in part because the chores of the 19th century middle-class housewife were in some measure accomplished by servants and in part because technology was distributed at rates roughly according to income. Thus some of the poorest families in rural areas lived into the 1950's

without benefit of technology others had long taken for granted.

The analytic concern of these books is different, however. So the reader who wants to understand why, despite labor-saving devices, women have remained tied to housework will profit by reading both. Cowan is concerned with what she describes early on as the incomplete industrialization of the household. Why, she asks, in the face of technology that has the potential not only for eliminating household labor but also for collectivizing it, is there now more not less work to be done at home? She offers a three-fold answer.

First, household technology developed out of the profit-making imperatives of those who produce it, not in response to the needs of people who work in the home. In Cowan's best-developed example, she shows how gas refrigeration, probably more efficient and certainly cheaper to operate than the now almost universal electric version, lost ground when undercapitalized companies fell victim to the money and marketing techniques of General Electric.

Second, because home equipment is not designed to maximize the efficiency of the homemaker (who is, after all, unpaid) but to appeal to her capacity to take care of her family more effectively, it often encourages housewives to raise their standards. Cowan, acknowledging the convenience of the bathroom with hot and cold running water and flush toilets, argues that its capacity to harbor germs of all

kinds required far more time in cleaning than did the outhouse that left germs safely out of doors.

Finally, Cowan writes that new technology often returns to the household tasks that were previously done outside the home. In the 19th century, for example, wherever there was a little discretionary income the wash was done by a laundress, or, later, sent out to a local power laundry. But the 20th century wash is most often easily and quickly handled by automatic equipment. Because it is done at home, it falls to the lot of the homemaker. Moreover, the home washer and dryer increase the likelihood that we will change clothing more often and are accompanied by complicated instructions about hot and cold water, ways of sorting items and kinds of soap to use. And worse, to purchase such products wives formerly outside the marketplace must earn an income, and so most women add wage-earning to the burden of responsibility for the household.

This well-intentioned argument is emotionally appealing, but in the end flawed. That the limits on available technology are to some extent the limits of a system that undervalues the unpaid work of the home and diverts it to its own purposes is an acceptable notion.

Yet those who do this work make choices. For many, especially poor women, technology offers a trade-off: work outside the house replaces some of the work within it. The lure of higher stan-

dards, ideological at root, allows much room for rebellion. Women are not simply the victims of technology and the dupes of advertising.

Cowan's perspective comes in part from studies by Joann Vanek and others done in the early '70s. These suggested that women were imprisoned by technology into serving their husbands and children more thoroughly and were thus spending more time at household tasks. But since then the women's movement has begun to spread alternative ideas among some women.

Household struggle.

Perhaps it is wishful thinking, but I prefer to believe that the new generation has turned the household into an arena of struggle. It is at least arguable that some part of the movement of women into paid labor reflects their desire to exploit the potential of available technology and to resist being exploited by it.

The combined tasks of household and paid work do make more work for mothers and non-mothers. And yet the possibility of doing two jobs also offers women a range of options that previously existed only for those with servants. The increased sum total of work inside and outside the household properly belongs at the door of social changes that have altered family life, economic expectations and job possibilities.

Strasser suggests that the issue has another dimension. Her dis-

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Gas refrigeration lost out to monied interests of G.E.

satisfaction with the present stems from the quality, not the quantity of household work. Although she and Cowan agree about how change occurred, she creates a more vivid portrait of its reception. For her, technology is the mechanism not the end of change, and the rich texture of the book comes from watching the way it diffuses and scatters into the crevices of every home.

Strasser carefully takes us through the major changes in energy provision and through each major set of tasks in which women engage. Cooking, cleaning, taking in boarders, laundry, sewing and consuming all warrant separate chapters. For each, she demonstrates the shifts over a period of years until near the end of the tale we recognize our own childhood. The method allows a broad look at the lives of a variety of women and suggests the uneven nature of household transformation.

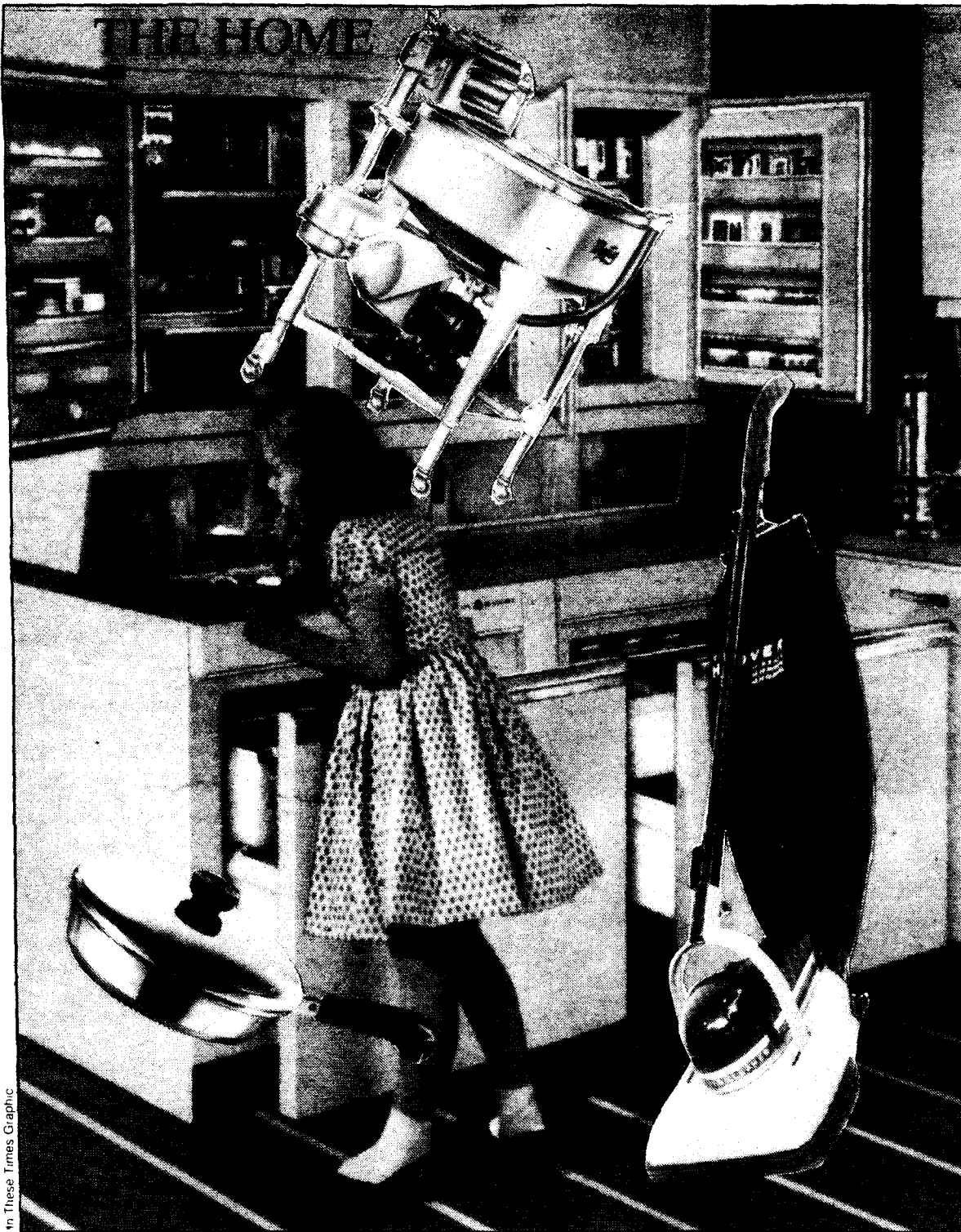
She reveals the positive as well as the negative side of innovation. After hearing of an appliance that reduced work, women of all classes rushed to buy it as soon as their means would allow. This accounts, for example, for the rapid dissemination of the electric iron after the turn of the century.

According to Strasser, most women believed that the unregulated iron without thermostatic controls (which were not invented until 1927) was superior to the series of heavy irons that had to be heated and reheated on the stove. Did the iron then produce more work? Remembering Cowan's argument, I wondered if it would not encourage women to iron extra items of clothing. (We all remember the days in which men's underwear were ironed.) But in my own life, I've chosen to buy synthetic fabrics not available to my mother's generation, and rarely touch an iron.

Strasser suggests the potential freedom inherent in such technological advances as well as in prepared foods and convenience products. But in a curious final chapter she seems to indicate that they are somehow responsible for weakening the affectional ties that have held households together. It is as though too much work has been removed from the home. In a sense, she's right. The technological innovation that has made running a household comparatively simple also makes it possible for people to live alone and care for their homes while they earn their livings, something no colonial farmer could have done. The resultant loneliness leads Strasser to think about collectivizing some household activities. Cowan comes to the same conclusions by another route.

At the heart of both books lies a resonant acknowledgement of a changing process. If Cowan proposes that we have allowed technology to control us and Strasser affirms our inability to take control over it, then both conclusions suggest that there is nothing unchanging about housework. To reverse the tide requires first a clear understanding of the overlay between ideology and technology and then a hard look at political solutions.

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*Alice Kessler-Harris' latest book is **Out to Work: A History of Wage-earning Women in the United States**, published by Oxford.*



Endless housework