

### WALTER CRONKITE – IMAGE #34

The logic of liberation, which arose in the 1960s, helped accelerate the emergence of a powerful women's rights crusade that aggressively challenged the emphasis on domesticity that had been touted as the ideal during the 1950s. Like the New Left, this new brand of feminism – women's liberation – drew much of its inspiration and tactics from the civil rights movement and the antiwar movement. These feminists were primarily younger, college-educated women.

These new feminists had discovered that male leaders advocating civil rights and antiwar positions considered women little more than pretty helpers who typed memos and fetched coffee. Women who tried to raise feminist issues at civil rights and antiwar events were shouted off the platform with jeers, such as "Move on, little girl, we have more important issues to talk about here than women's liberation."

Fed up with second-class status, and well versed in the tactics of organization and protest, women radicals broke away and organized on their own. The women's liberation movement was loosely structured, comprising an alliance of collectives in New York, San Francisco, Boston, and other big cities and college towns. "Women's lib," as it was dubbed by a skeptical media, went public in September, 1968 at the Miss America pageant held in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Demonstrators carried posters of women's bodies labeled as slabs of beef – implying that society treated them as meat. Leaders of the women's liberation movement mirrored the identity politics of Black Power activists and the self-dramatization of the counterculture. These women sought an end to the denigration and exploitation of women. One women's liberationist manifesto read, "Sisterhood is powerful!" The national Women's Strike for Equality in August, 1970 brought hundreds of thousands of women into the streets of the nation's cities for marches and demonstrations.

The mainstream of the women's movement was led by Betty Friedan. Her immensely influential book, *The Feminist Mystique*, had been published in 1963. It had launched the new phase of female protest on a national level. Friedan was a Smith College graduate, who had married in 1947. During the 1950s, she had raised three children in a New York suburb. Politically active but socially domestic, she had mothered her children, pampered her husband, and "read *Vogue* under the hair dryer." Occasionally, she had done some freelance writing. In 1957 Friedan had conducted a poll of her fellow Smith alumnae and had discovered that, despite all the rhetoric about the happy suburban housewife during the 1950s, many were, in fact, miserable. This revelation led to more research, which culminated in the publication of her book.

Friedan wrote that women had actually lost ground during the years after World War II, when many left wartime assembly lines and settled down in suburbia. A propaganda campaign engineered by advertisers and women's magazines had encouraged them to do so by creating the "feminine mystique" of blissful domesticity. According to Friedan, this notion that women were "gaily content in a world of bedroom, kitchen, sex, babies, and home" thus served to imprison women. Friedan maintained that the American middle class home had become "a comfortable concentration camp" where women suffocated in an atmosphere of mindless consumption and affluent banality.

Friedan's book became an immediate best-seller and raised the consciousness of women who had long suffered from a feeling of being trapped in a rut with no way out. Friedan also discovered that there were far more women working outside the home than the pervasive "feminine mystique" suggested. Many of her correspondents were working women frustrated by the demands of holding "two full-time jobs instead of just one – underpaid clerical worker and unpaid housekeeper."

Such letters convinced Friedan that there was a movement waiting to be organized. In 1966 she and a small group of other spirited activists founded the National Organization for Women (NOW). It was soon regarded as the NAACP of the women's movement, and it grew rapidly. NOW initially sought to end discrimination in the workplace on the basis of gender. Then this organization spearheaded efforts to legalize abortion and to obtain federal and state support for child-care centers.

By 1970 new terms such as "sexism" and "male chauvinism" became part of the national vocabulary in the United States. As converts flooded in, the two branches of the women's movement began to converge. Radical women realized that key feminist goals – child care, equal pay, and reproduction rights – could best be achieved in the political arena. At the same time, more traditional activists, exemplified by Friedan, developed a broader view of women's oppression. They began to advocate that women required more than equal opportunity. The culture, which regarded women as nothing more than sexual objects and helpmates to men, had to change as well. Although still consisting largely of white and middle class women, feminists began to think of themselves as part of a broad social crusade.

"Sisterhood," however, did not unite all women. Rather than joining white-led women's liberation organizations, African Americans and Latina women continued to work within the larger framework of the civil rights movement. New groups, such as the Combahee River Collective and the National Black Feminist Organization, arose to speak for the concerns of African American women. They criticized sexism but were reluctant to break completely with black men and the struggle for racial equality. Chicana feminists came from Roman Catholic backgrounds in which motherhood and family were held in high regard. Black and Chicana feminists embraced the larger movement for women's rights but carried on their own struggles to address specific needs in their communities.

One of the most significant elements of women's liberation was the emphasis on raising awareness about "sexual politics." Liberationists argued that, unless women had control over their own bodies, they could not freely shape their destinies. They campaigned for reproductive rights, especially access to abortion. They railed against a culture that blamed women in cases of sexual assault and turned a blind eye to sexual harassment in the workplace.

Meanwhile, opportunities for women expanded dramatically in higher education. Dozens of formerly all-male bastions such as Yale, Princeton, and the U.S. military academies admitted women undergraduates for the first time. Hundreds of colleges started women's studies programs. The proportion of women attending graduate and professional schools rose markedly.

Early in the 1970s Congress and the Supreme Court advanced the cause of sexual equality. With the adoption of Title IX of the Educational Amendments Act of 1972, Congress broadened the 1964 Civil Rights Act to include educational institutions, prohibiting colleges and universities that received federal funds from discriminating on the basis of gender. Those colleges and universities were directed to create and conduct "affirmative action" programs to ensure equal opportunity for women. By requiring comparable funding for sports programs, Title IX made women's athletics a real presence on college campuses.

Women also became increasingly visible in public life. Two Congresswomen from New York, Bella Abzug and Shirley Chisholm – both Democrats, joined Friedan and Gloria Steinem, the founder of *Ms.* magazine, to create the National Women's Political Caucus in 1971. Abzug and Chisholm allied with two other Democrat Congresswomen, Patsy Mink from Hawaii and Martha Griffiths from Michigan, to sponsor equal rights legislation. Congress authorized child-care tax deductions for working parents in 1972 and, two years later, passed the Equal Credit Opportunity Act, which enabled married women to get credit, including credit cards and mortgages, in their own names.

Buoyed by this flourishing of activism, the women's movement renewed the fight for an Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the U.S. Constitution. First introduced in 1923, the ERA stated that "Equality of rights under the law shall not be abridged by the United States or any State on the basis of sex." The amendment had been bottled up in a House Committee for almost half a century. Vocal congressional women found enthusiastic male allies – among both Democrats and Republicans. Congress adopted the amendment in 1972. Within just two years, 34 of the necessary 38 states had ratified it. The ERA appeared headed for adoption. One feminist stated, "If the 1960s belonged to the blacks, the next ten years are ours." But then, progress abruptly halted.

By end of the 1970s, continuing divisions between moderate and radical feminists within the women's movement, as well as the movement's failure to broaden its appeal to other traditional American women, caused reform efforts to stagnate. The Equal Rights Amendment, which had once seemed a straightforward assertion of equal opportunity and assured of ratification, was stymied in several state legislatures.

Credit for putting the brakes on ERA ratification went chiefly to Phyllis Schlafly – a remarkable female lawyer long active in conservative causes. Despite her own flourishing career, Schlafly advocated traditional roles for women. She proclaimed that the ERA would create an unnatural “unisex society,” with women drafted into the army and forced to use single-sex toilets. Abortion, she alleged, could never be prohibited by law. Led by Schlafly's organization, STOP ERA, thousands of women mobilized, showing up at statehouses with home-baked bread and apple pies. As labels on baked goods at one anti-ERA rally expressed it: “My heart and hand went into this dough. For the sake of the family please vote no.” It was a message that resonated widely, especially among those troubled by the rapid pace of social change. Despite a congressional extension of the normal time allowed for ratification, the ERA never was ratified. By 1982 the amendment had died – four states short of passage.

In addition to the ERA, the women's movement had identified another major goal – winning reproductive rights. Activists pursued two tracks – legislative and judicial. Early in the 1960s abortion was illegal in virtually every state. A decade later, because of intensive lobbying by women's organizations, liberal clergy, and physicians, a handful of states – New York, Hawaii, California, and Colorado – adopted laws making legal abortions easier to obtain. Progress for abortionists after that, however, was slow, and women's advocates turned to the courts. There was reason for them to be optimistic. The U.S. Supreme Court had first addressed reproductive rights in a 1965 case – *Griswold v. Connecticut*. The decision of the Court was to strike down an 1879 state law prohibiting the possession of contraception as a violation of married couples' constitutional “right of privacy.” Following the logic articulated in *Griswold*, the Court gradually expanded the right of privacy in a series of cases in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Those cases culminated in the case of *Roe v. Wade* in 1973. In that landmark decision the Court nullified a Texas law that prohibited abortion under any circumstances, even when the woman's health was at risk. The Supreme Court laid out a new national standard. Abortions performed during the first trimester of pregnancy were protected by the right of privacy. At the time, and afterward, some legal authorities questioned whether the U.S. Constitution recognized any such privacy right and criticized the Court's seemingly arbitrary first-trimester time line. Nevertheless, the Supreme Court chose to move forward, transforming a traditionally state-regulated policy into a national, constitutionally protected right.

For the women's liberation movement, *Roe v. Wade* represented a triumph. However, the very success of NOW's efforts to change abortion laws generated a powerful reaction, especially among Roman Catholics, evangelical and fundamentalist Protestants, as well as conservatives generally, who mounted a potent "right-to-life" crusade. In their view, abortion was, unequivocally, murder. These Americans, represented by such groups as the National Right to Life Committee, did not believe that something they regarded as immoral and sinful could be the basis for women's equality. One Texas priest explained, "Traditional Catholics simply do not accept that abortion is a simple matter to be left between a woman and her doctor."

Women's rights advocates responded that illegal abortions – common prior to *Roe* – were often unsafe procedures, which resulted in physical harm to women and even death. *Roe* polarized what was already a sharply divided American public and mobilized conservatives to seek a Supreme Court reversal. Short of that, the conservatives pursued legislation that would strictly limit the conditions under which abortions could be performed. In 1976 they convinced Congress to deny Medicaid funds for abortions, an opening round in a campaign against the decision in *Roe v. Wade* that continues today.

During the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan had also gone on the offensive against feminism. He had cut welfare programs, which aggravated the "feminization" of poverty, and had opposed the Equal Rights Amendment and abortion on demand, as well as the idea of requiring equal pay for jobs of comparable worth, a practice that remained confined mainly to highly paid executives. Women critics were little mollified by his naming of the first female justice to the Supreme Court – Sandra Day O'Connor. Polls consistently reported a "gender gap" in opinion on Reagan, who had less support among women than among men.

But the success of the women's liberation movement seemed likely to endure despite setbacks and long after the militant rhetoric had evaporated. The political power of these women's groups was only partially mobilized in the 1970s. It had enormous potential for achieving social change. Moreover, women were assured a greater share of economic and political influence simply because of their growing presence in the labor force. In 1976 over half the married women in the United States and 90% of women college graduates were employed outside the home. One economist called this development "the single most outstanding phenomenon of this century." Many career women did not regard themselves as feminists. They took jobs because they and their families needed the money to survive or to achieve higher levels of material comfort. Whatever their motives, traditional gender roles and childbearing practices were being changed to accommodate the two-career family, which had replaced the established pattern of male breadwinner and female housekeeper as the new American norm. At the same time, the reality was that women liberationists did not comprise a monolithic group among women.