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Betty Friedan

Few individuals played as important a role in the 1960s rise of the feminist movement as did Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and cofounder of the National Organization for Women (NOW).

Friedan was born Bettye Naomi Goldstein in Peoria, Illinois on February 4, 1921. At Smith College, she majored in psychology, edited the college newspaper, and helped found the Smith literary magazine. In 1942, after graduating summa cum laude with a bachelor of arts degree, she studied for a year as a psychology research fellow at the University of California at Berkeley. After deciding not to pursue a doctorate in psychology, she moved to New York and earned a living as a reporter for a news service. In 1947, she married Carl Friedman, an advertising executive who later changed the name to Friedan.



Friedan wanted to continue working as a reporter while raising her children, but that scenario proved impossible. When she gave birth to her first child in 1948, she was granted a maternity leave. However, on her request for a second maternity leave five years later, she was fired and replaced by a man. At the time, she did not mind losing her job because it meant that she could concentrate her energy on raising her three children. Later in life, she attributed to the incident the awakening of her consciousness to the unfair choice that women were forced to make between a family and a career, while men could have both.

Friedan found life as a full-time suburban housewife intellectually demeaning and emotionally unsatisfying. The next eight years were "schizophrenic years of trying to be a kind of woman I wasn't, of too many lonesome, boring, wasted hours . . .," she said in an interview. In 1957, while conducting a questionnaire survey of her Smith class, she discovered that many of her classmates felt the same emptiness about suburban living that she did. When those preliminary results were corroborated by a more detailed and broader survey of women who graduated from other colleges, she concluded that she had discovered a social phenomenon. The widespread interest aroused by an article titled "Women Are People Too!" published in the September 1960 issue of *Good Housekeeping* convinced her to delve further. The result was her writing of *The Feminine Mystique*, perhaps the single most popular treatise of the modern feminist movement.

In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan identified a feeling of discontent among American women with a lifestyle that consisted fully of being a housewife, a mother, and a consumer. The depression that she claimed afflicted so many college-educated, middle-class, white women arose, she decided, because they had neglected their own development in order to further the development of their husbands and children. Well-educated women had done so because they had accepted a view that women should expect development by men rather than by women.

That "feminine mystique" or what Friedan called "the problem that has no name" had led women to deny their own aspirations, to conceal their abilities, and to submerge their true identities for the sake of familial harmony. It was time, she argued, for women to stop being an oppressed majority and to dismiss the feminine mystique—to

embrace a new feminine lifestyle based on valuing a career outside of the home as of equal importance to their husbands' careers. Women should no longer accept being secretaries and not executives, nurses and not doctors, church workers and not ministers.

The Feminine Mystique aroused a storm of controversy. Many women did not agree with Friedan's characterization of their lives as unsatisfying. Friedan eloquently defended her position and became a celebrity. She accepted teaching positions at New York University and the New School for Social Research and used her access to the media to espouse feminist political activism.

In 1966, inspired by the civil rights movement, Friedan cofounded NOW and became its first president. In addition to seeking full workplace equality for women through education, legislation, and court action, NOW also worked for the establishment of child care centers and paid maternity leave, the legalization of abortion, the guarantee of a woman's right to return to her job after childbirth, and the addition of an amendment to the U.S. Constitution prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sex (the Equal Rights Amendment). While Friedan was gaining increased notoriety in the burgeoning feminist movement, her marriage to her husband disintegrated. In 1969, she and her husband divorced.

In 1970, Friedan declined to run for reelection as NOW president because she felt the organization had become too preoccupied with what she considered to be inappropriate and radical goals like excluding men as members and securing equal rights for lesbians.

Friedan's insistence during the 1970s that the woman's movement needed to avoid alienating moderates with attacks on the sanctity of the family angered many young feminist radicals. She stuck to her guns, and in her 1981 book, *The Second Stage*, she argued that "for us [the founding mothers of NOW] equality and the personhood of women never meant destruction of the family, repudiation of marriage and motherhood, or implacable sexual war with men."

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Friedan remained an active advocate for women's rights in the Democratic Party while pursuing her career as a writer and college teacher. After helping to found the National Abortion Rights Action League, Friedan joined with other well-known feminists in 1971 to found the National Women's Political Caucus. In 1976, she played a major role in persuading the Democratic Party to establish the policy of reserving 50% of its delegate slots for women. In 1975, 1980, and 1985, Friedan took part in the International Women's Conferences sponsored by the United Nations.

In 1988, Friedan became a distinguished visiting journalism professor at the University of Southern California and its Institute for the Study of Women and Men. She also began an affiliation with USC's Andrus Gerontology Center that reflected her concern with the need to eliminate the demeaning aspects of growing old in America. Her 1993 book, *The Fountain of Age*, Friedan yet again stirred controversy this time about issues of aging similar to that surrounding *The Feminine Mystique* about the issues of feminism. The problem, according to Friedan, was that, although only about 5% of people over 65 are in nursing homes and fewer than 10% ever will be, age is seen by media, doctors, politicians, and academics, as a "problem" and a time of decline. Her memoir, *Life So Far*, was released in 2000 to critical acclaim.

Friedan died of congestive heart failure on February 4, 2006 in Washington, D.C. She was 85 years old.