

Keep the 'Mystique' alive

By Susan Jacoby

HISTORY IS A terrible thing to waste. The recent obituaries for Betty Friedan, whose 1963 book, "The Feminine Mystique," revived an American feminism then thought to be extinct and unnecessary, were striking in their recognition of how much explanation is now required about the world before the women's movement.

Newspapers had to remind their readers that equal pay for equal work, sex-blind help-wanted ads, the right of pregnant women to keep their jobs, non-discriminatory admission standards for professional schools and many other matters of simple justice were considered not only controversial but radical proposals in the 1960s.

Younger readers were doubtless as incredulous at this news as my 23-year-old and 15-year-old nieces were when I recently told them about the essay I was required to write by the Washington Post's personnel department as part of my application for a reporting job in 1965. The topic, singularly inappropriate for a childless 19-year-old, was, "How I Plan to Combine Motherhood with a Career."

On one level, the ignorance of the young and the not-so-young — many people in their 40s also know little about what life was like when most forms of discrimination against women were perfectly legal — is a measure of how much has been accomplished. But on a deeper level, this ignorance endangers many feminist gains because it raises the real possibility that future generations will have to reinvent the wheel.

It has happened before. The first wave of American feminism, which began in 1848 with the Seneca Falls convention under the leadership of Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, was concerned with much more than obtaining the vote for women. Economic equality, educational equality and — most controversial of all — equality in religious institutions that had long preached the divinely ordained inferiority of women were part of the first feminist platform. As the century wore on, though, the more radical voices were stilled and the movement concentrated solely on suffrage.

Stanton, whose "The Woman's Bible" created as much of a sensation and a scandal in 1892 as Friedan's book did 71 years later, was written out (literally) of the women's movement because of her unorthodox views on religion. Her name did not return to history until the 1980s, with the research of a new generation of feminist scholars.

Friedan was the first 20th century feminist to restore the historical and cultural context lost for most of the century and to make the essential point that, if an entire group has a problem, the solution can never be purely personal.

I have always been grateful that I read "The Feminine Mystique" shortly before I went to Washington to interview with the Post. Before reading Friedan, I truly believed that barriers to women in journalism would not apply to me because all of those other women must have done something wrong to be stuck in what used to be called the "society section." Without the perspective provided by Friedan, I might have been surprised by the personnel director's insulting demand, lost my temper and lost the chance at a job. As it was, I bit my tongue, wrote the essay and told myself that I would become one of the women who would challenge the prejudices that denigrated all women.

Friedan's message about the cultural nature of women's subordination was not well received initially. In the New York Times Book Review in 1963, Lucy Freeman scolded Friedan for criticizing women's magazines and asked, "What is to stop a woman who is interested in national and international affairs from reading magazines that deal with those subjects? To paraphrase a famous line, 'The fault, dear Mrs. Friedan, is not in our culture, but in ourselves.'"

At Friedan's funeral in New York on Monday, her longtime friend, sociologist Amitai Etzioni, noted that his department at Columbia University did not have a single female professor in 1962. The few Barnard female students admitted to Columbia classes, Etzioni acknowledged honestly, knew that they were there on sufferance and "knew that they should not be heard too often."

This entire history is in urgent need of retelling today, at a time when other legacies of the movement — most notably legal abortion — are under assault. Historical amnesia, not the fundamentalist Christian right, is the true villain. Millions of young women and men today simply cannot imagine what life was like before Roe vs. Wade any more than they can imagine what it was like to be told "No Women Need Apply" at the door to graduate-school classrooms.

The obligation to retell the truth belongs to my generation, young enough to have reaped the benefits of the revolution begun by women now in their 70s and 80s. It is our moral duty to ensure that the history of our women's movement, unlike the history of 19th century feminism, does not perish from the consciousness of the next generation.

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