A WOMAN FOR ALL SEASONS:  
AN INTERVIEW WITH BETTY FRIEDAN

Philosopher and advocate for social change, Betty Friedan assesses our society’s present views and roles regarding women and aging. She presents some interesting ideas on how far we've come and how far she thinks we have to go.

Writer, teacher, and speaker Betty Friedan is in big demand these days. Universities, organizations—even the Clinton administration—want to learn from this thinker whose ideas have had a widespread impact on society.

Friedan is most famous for her 1963 book, *The Feminine Mystique*, which established her as the mother of the modern women's movement. Millions bought the book because it gave a name to the dissatisfaction women of Friedan's generation felt with the life they had been raised to live: to take care of their homes and families.

Now at age 72, Friedan has focused her attention on other "problems that have no names"—this time those affecting the aging. In her new book, *The Fountain of Age*, to be published in September 1993, Friedan seeks to redefine how people feel about growing older. She wants to "debunk the "dread mystique" of age and to provoke positive change in those living the years beyond 60.

Friedan has always been very active. In 1966, she co-founded and became the first president of the National Organization for Women. She has lectured all over the world and has contributed articles to *Atlantic Monthly, The New York Times, Cosmopolitan*, and many others. Her second book, *It Changed My Life, Writings on the Women's Movement*, was published in 1976. In 1982, she wrote *The Second Stage*, in which she spoke to career women about handling family, work, and a marriage.

The very issues Friedan addressed in *The Second Stage* sent feminism floundering during the 1980s. Women of the '80s were a generation removed from those of Friedan's era. Many now were excelling in careers, but they felt unfulfilled without families, or overwhelmed if they tried to have both.

In the '90s, feminism has gained new momentum and proved to be influential in the election of President Bill Clinton. There are, however, ideological differences among today's outspoken feminists. Friedan, for example, has been attacked for being too moderate.

Not much phases Friedan. In April, she had emergency open-heart surgery. Barely three weeks later, she granted this interview. The day after that, she was off to Miami to speak on a panel, followed by a busy schedule in preparation for the impending release of her new book.

Q: Regarding The Fountain of Age, are people changing the way they think about growing older?  
A: I've found that women and men are living in a new way. What we have is a new period of human life that people didn't have before. The years after 60 are uncharted territory. Some people are not living these years as exuberantly and freely as they could because of the old way of looking at age only as a problem. In my book, *The Feminine Mystique*, I talk about problems that have no name. In

Illustration: Barbara Baum, San Francisco
the new book, I look at older women and men, and I see strengths that have no name.

The whole society is in an obsession of denial and dread of age. They see age only in terms of obsolete images of its most pathological states. Women and men have to break through the narrow vision of the dread mystique of age. Many see age as a problem for society—as costly nursing homes, burdening Social Security, and Medicare. They don’t see these new years of human life as uncharted territory for human evolution.

Q: What needs to be done so that people can live better in these new years of life?
A: Society has to use the wisdom and the strengths that have no name, of people who have weathered those 50 years of early experience and have much to contribute. As it is, they are forced to retire, or they’re kind of made invisible by this dread mystique of age.

People also have to stop this desperate search to hold onto youth, whether cosmetically, through plastic surgery, or just mentally. If they don’t, they never will find the new strengths that have no name.

They’ve got to live these new years of life as a new stage of life, on its own terms, and this affects everything. Do we love the way we loved when we were 30 or do we not love at all? What is the different way of love? Do we have to work the way we worked when we were 40? Do we have to be consumed with power, ambition? Or do we acquiesce to an utter passivity and powerlessness? Is there a different kind of empowerment in age?

Q: Is this new phase of life a global phenomenon?
A: Of course. Globally, people are getting older and having new years of life. I am writing this book about the United States. But I wrote *The Feminine Mystique* about the United States. If there’s a proximity to truth, which I have, and a larger vision, which I have, the strengths of aging people in society will become clear, and it’s not just here. It will be global.

Q: At what point in its evolution do you see the global women’s movement?
A: The women’s movement is in society now. Everywhere. In America, you even make a mistake looking at the women’s movement in terms of the organizations that were the cutting edge of feminism in the ’70s and the ’80s. They’re alive and well and leading marches on the issues, but it’s far beyond that now. It’s in the whole society. The global women’s movement, therefore, is the women who are moving in business, in every profession, who are aware that there’s unfinished business of sex discrimination.

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Also, these women are more and more aware that they don’t have to do it like the men did. They can have a different style, or “a different voice,” as [feminist author] Carol Gilligan says.

Q: Is it your sense that the influence of women is on the upswing?
A: That’s the exciting part. Women are moving in great numbers into government and using their own voices. Three examples are Hillary Rodham Clinton, Donna Shalala [the new head of Health and Human Services], and Janet Reno [the new Attorney General]. It’s also happening in industry. Tosh [Patricia C.] Barron is president of the largest division of Xerox. Women like this are the different voice, the new style in management.

Q: What do they need to address first?
A: We have to restructure work. Work has been structured in terms of the men of the past, who had wives to take care of the details of life. Today, half of the work force is women. Forty percent of the students in medical school are women. The same is true of law school.

Flex time, therefore, needs to be instituted on a very large scale. Women must be able to choose to have children and also be able to advance in their professions. For that to happen, the new men must take a responsible share in child care. That will require flex time, too, if men also want to advance in their professions. With the new technology, it can be done.

Q: Given other items on the feminist agenda, are you encouraged so far by actions taken by the Clinton administration?
A: We got a big milestone this year. We finally got parental leave. But that’s minimal. We were the only industrial nation without policies of parental leave. Thank God that one of the first things Clinton did was take away the gag rule on abortion and sign the Parental Leave Bill. There are things like that that we’ve got to do.

Q: Can women feel secure in having legal access to abortion?
A: There are some groups that are trying to stop it, but that’s not going to happen. We’ll eventually bring in RU 486 [the French abortion pill]. Once that happens, it’s not going to be so easy to bomb every doctor’s office. So thank God we don’t have to spend year after year after year anymore marching to defend the right that we thought we’d won nearly 20 years ago.

Q: What do you think of Hillary Rodham Clinton?
A: I think she’s a wonderful role model for young women today. I also think—that I have some criticism of the administration—that Bill Clinton is a marvelous role model in marriage. He is someone that can live with, and be proud of, and even work in partnership with an equal wife.
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This is a great role model for marriages based on equality.

I think Hillary's doing a wonderful job on health care. She's a good lady.
I'm happy to see her in the White House. She represents the evolution of American women.

Q: What should be done to make sure that President Clinton lives up to his promises?

A: I'm not so much concerned with Clinton on women's rights. I think he's fully committed, and the agencies are full of people that are fully committed. That's not my concern.

My concern is what will happen to women if the economy goes down the drain. I support Clinton's economic package, and it bothers me that he has not been able to get it through Congress. I really am very irritated that some of the congressional leadership in my own party and the Republicans are sabotaging the economic program.

If our economy goes downhill, women's rights will really go downhill. They will lose women. It's as simple as that. If that happens, there goes the new voice and its influence on women's needs, which today are for jobs, health care, and restructured work.

Q: Are you involved in seeing that those goals are met?

A: I assembled some leading women figures to talk about women's concerns and what women need. We're going to have a second meeting at the Xerox conference center in Leesburg, Virginia. Then we hope we can meet with Clinton. I've already presented some concrete proposals about government policy. They could lead to an executive order mandating the offering of flex time and the restructuring of work, not only in the government, but in companies under government contract. I think this could be quite important.

The views and opinions expressed in this interview are those of Betty Friedan and do not necessarily represent those of the HEMISPHERES staff or its sponsors.