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Interview

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"Betty Friedan"

Feminist Keeps a Sharp Eye on Her Movement and Mystique

BY ELAINE WOO

Her strike is halting, and her hearing isn't what it used to be. But if I [Betty Friedan] still has strangers stopping her in the street to tell her, "I've changed my life." Friedan launched the modern women's movement with her first book, "The Feminine Mystique," in which she identified "the problem that has no name": the alienation and frustration felt by a generation of women trapped by their traditional roles as wives and mothers.

The book catapulted Friedan from suburban anonymity to bestsellerdom at a moment when that would challenge society's notion about relationships, families, and work. She founded the National Organization for Women (NOW) and the National Political Caucus and led fights for women's equality through the 1960s and '70s. But Friedan often clashed with other prominent feminists, such as Gloria Steinem, and the two women had a falling-out.

In 1965, after she divorced her first husband, Friedan went on to write her second book, "The Second Stage." Friedan argued that the movement had created overworked "interwomen" and was turning off men. For this, she was denounced. Friedan was accused of "spilling out the stitches in her own handkerchief," journalist Susan Faludi wrote, but Friedan kept writing books, attaching her attention to the mythology of age and women's increasing prominence.

Last year, she was the subject of a new biographical film. "Betty Friedan: The Making of the Feminine Mystique," by David Hein, was released. The film, "The Second Stage," by Judith Hendersen. Unwilling to let events have the last word, Friedan put out her own novel last month, "Life Like This." In it, she describes her life as a friend and a life as a writer and her memories about marriage to David Friedan, the former advertising executive.

The mother of three and grandmother of nine divides her time between a well-furnished Washington apartment and a house in Sag Harbor, N.Y. A writing professor at Cornell University, Friedan currently directs a study of women, women's roles, supported by a $1 million grant from the Ford Foundation.

Her sharp edges still cut deep. On her West Coast publicity tour for her latest book, she walked out of a Bay Area radio interview because she thought the questions were immodest.

As a book tour, however, she refused to answer a question about whether she thought the movement was stupid. Friedan stopped off in Los Angeles a few days after she announced that 500,000 women descended on Washington for the Million Man March, she was interviewed at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel.

Q: Why did you write "The Second Stage," your second book?
A: As it was in the McCarthy era, didn't go around labeling my left wing background because it wouldn't have helped to organize the Women's Movement. On the other hand, I never looked at the other.

Q: So it's an attempt to correct your earlier portrayal in "The Feminine Mystique" of what a feminist might be?
A: Yes. It's a portrait of the movement and its many facets.

Q: When was the movement started?
A: The movement began in the late '60s, but it has never been described as a movement because, apparently, that's not the way one describes something.

Q: How is it different from there?
A: At first, it didn't exist. There, you see, the years passed, but the girls didn't. And a big difference seems to be the direction that was taken because, apparently, that's not the way one describes something.

Q: Was it in 1970 when you decided to write about the women's movement?
A: I think it was. It was about 1970 when we realized that the movement had never been described as a movement. I think we were surprised, didn't know what to do about it. The movement was dying. The movement was dying, but the movement was dying. The movement was dying.
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gist. I would have loved to go to law school. I'd be on the Supreme Court by now, maybe. I regret that I didn't have a better marriage. But, on the other hand, we have three wonderful kids. And I have nine gorgeous grandchildren. I always felt that my kids were the great bonus of my life.

Q: What worries you most about society today?
A: The culture of greed. The fact that there seem to be no values in our society—values more important than sheer material wealth.... I think we have a great need for purposes larger than ourselves. Also for a commitment to the ongoing evolution in society toward equality and freedom and human dignity for everybody. I don't see the next challenge—certainly not the next challenge that interests me—as involving women alone or even women via-a-via men. I think that we have to evolve to real purposes for the power and the wealth of this nation, as well as for our own lives, beyond just material things.

Q: In talking to today's youth, what is it that you would hope that they understand about you, about what you did and what you stand for?
A: Well, I thought once about what should be put on my gravestone: "She helped make women feel better about being women and therefore better able to freely and fully love men."

Q: You still stand by that?
A: Well, yeah, as far as it goes.... I think that the task is by no means finished. I don't want to make a new mystique of women's difference from men, but I think women have a closer, a more concrete sense of the values of life. There is some research that came out of Rutgers.... That said the addition of as few as two women to a state legislature began to change the agenda, and not just in the direction of women's rights but in the direction of the priorities of life for the young, for the old, for children. So I think that as women more and more begin to define our purposes and policies and programs, that there will be a more vivid focus on the quality of life.

Q: Recent polls show that Texas Gov. George W. Bush has the edge over Vice President Al Gore among women. What do you make of that?
A: Isn't that awful?

Q: Do you think that Gore is suffering from some fallout over the Monica Lewinsky scandal?
A: What is that? I can't stand the way you media people just trivialize everything. It's the campaign for the president of the United States.... What is your concern with some little twerp named Monica? What has she got to do with the presidential election? That just disgusts me.

Q: Hillary Clinton, in her New York Senate race, also has a problem with support among women, according to recent polls.
A: In the beginning, [women] might have resented her, superiority in a lot of things. She had a brilliant career of her own, and she certainly threw her weight as first lady. But up to now she's been supporting her husband's career. I think it's marvelous that she's striking out on her own. I think women will identify with her, Men, too.

Q: Do you think we're getting closer to having a woman president?
A: I hope it happens in my lifetime.