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Betty Friedan, Who Ignited Cause in 'Feminine Mystique,' Dies at 85

By [MARGALIT FOX](#)

Betty Friedan, the feminist crusader and author whose searing first book, "[The Feminine Mystique](#)," ignited the contemporary women's movement in 1963 and as a result permanently transformed the social fabric of the United States and countries around the world, died yesterday, her 85th birthday, at her home in Washington.

The cause was congestive heart failure, said Emily Bazelon, a family spokeswoman.

With its impassioned yet clear-eyed analysis of the issues that affected women's lives in the decades after World War II — including enforced domesticity, limited career prospects and, as chronicled in later editions, the campaign for legalized abortion — "The Feminine Mystique" is widely regarded as one of the most influential nonfiction books of the 20th century. Published by W. W. Norton & Company, the book had sold more than three million copies by the year 2000 and has been translated into many languages.

"The Feminine Mystique" made Ms. Friedan world famous. It also made her one of the chief architects of the women's liberation movement of the late 1960's and afterward, a sweeping social upheaval that harked back to the suffrage campaigns of the turn of the century and would be called feminism's second wave.

In 1966, Ms. Friedan helped found the National Organization for Women, serving as its first president. In 1969, she was a founder of the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws, now known as Nara Pro-Choice America. With [Gloria Steinem](#), Bella Abzug and others, she founded the National Women's Political Caucus in 1971.

Though in later years, some feminists dismissed Ms. Friedan's work as outmoded, a great many aspects of modern life that seem routine today — from unisex Help Wanted ads to women in politics, medicine, the clergy and the military — are the direct result of the hard-won advances she helped women attain.

For decades a familiar presence on television and the lecture circuit, Ms. Friedan, with her short stature and deeply hooded eyes, looked for much of her adult life like a "combination of Hermione Gingold and Bette Davis," as Judy Klemesrud wrote in The New York Times Magazine in 1970.

A brilliant student who graduated summa cum laude from Smith College in 1942, Ms. Friedan trained as a psychologist but never pursued a career in the field. When she wrote "The Feminine Mystique," she was a suburban housewife and mother who supplemented her husband's income by writing freelance articles for women's magazines.

Though Ms. Friedan was not generally considered a lyrical stylist, "The Feminine Mystique," read today, is as mesmerizing as it was more than four decades ago:

"Gradually, without seeing it clearly for quite a while, I came to realize that something is very wrong with the way American women are trying to live their lives today," Ms. Friedan wrote in the opening line of the preface. "I sensed it first as a question mark in my own life, as a wife and mother of three small children, half-guiltily, and therefore half-heartedly, almost in spite of myself, using my abilities and education in work that took me away from home." [[Excerpt From The Feminine Mystique](#)]

The words have the hypnotic pull of a fairy tale, and for the next 400 pages, Ms. Friedan identifies, dissects and damningly indicts one of the most pervasive folk beliefs of postwar American life: the myth of suburban women's domestic fulfillment she came to call the feminine mystique.

Drawing on history, psychology, sociology and economics, as well as on interviews she conducted with women across the country, Ms. Friedan charted a gradual metamorphosis of the American woman from the independent, career-minded New Woman of the 1920's and 30's into the vacant, aproned housewife of the postwar years.

The portrait she painted was chilling. For a typical woman of the 1950's, even a college-educated one, life centered almost exclusively on chores and children. She cooked and baked and bandaged and chauffeured and laundered and sewed. She did the mopping and the marketing and took her husband's gray flannel suit to the cleaners. She was happy to keep his dinner warm till he came wearily home from downtown.

The life she led, if educators, psychologists and the mass media were to be believed, was the fulfillment of every women's most ardent dream. Yet she was unaccountably tired, impatient with the children, craving something that neither marital sex nor extramarital affairs could satisfy. Her thoughts sometimes turned to suicide. She consulted a spate of doctors and psychiatrists, who prescribed charity work, bowling and bridge. If those failed, there were always tranquilizers to get her through her busy day.

A Nebraska housewife with a Ph.D. in anthropology whom Ms. Friedan interviewed told her:

"A film made of any typical morning in my house would look like an old Marx Brothers comedy. I wash the dishes, rush the older children off to school, dash out in the yard to cultivate the chrysanthemums, run back in to make a phone call about a committee meeting, help the youngest child build a blockhouse, spend fifteen minutes skimming the newspapers so I can be well-informed, then scamper down to the washing machines where my thrice-weekly laundry includes enough clothes to keep a primitive village going for an entire year. By noon I'm ready for a padded cell. Very little of what I've done has been really necessary or important. Outside pressures lash me though the day. Yet I look upon myself as one of the more relaxed housewives in the neighborhood."

"The Feminine Mystique" began as a survey Ms. Friedan conducted in 1957 for the 15th reunion of her graduating class at Smith. It was intended to refute a prevailing postwar myth: that higher education kept women from adapting to their roles as wives and mothers. Judging from her own capable life, Ms. Friedan expected her classmates to describe theirs as similarly well adjusted. But what she discovered in the women's responses was something far more complex, and more troubling — a "nameless, aching dissatisfaction" that she would famously call "the problem that has no name."

When Ms. Friedan sent the same questionnaire to graduates of Radcliffe and other colleges, and later interviewed scores of women personally, the results were the same. The women's answers gave her the seeds of her book. They also forced her to confront the painful limitations of her own suburban idyll.

Bettye Naomi Goldstein was born on Feb. 4, 1921, in Peoria, Ill. Her father, Harry, was an immigrant from Russia who parlayed a street-corner collar-button business into a prosperous downtown jewelry store. Her gifted, imperious mother, Miriam, had been the editor of the women's page of the local newspaper before giving up her job for marriage and children. Only years later, when she was writing "The Feminine Mystique," did Ms. Friedan come to see her mother's cold, critical demeanor as masking a deep bitterness at giving up the work she loved.

Growing up brainy, Jewish, outspoken and, by the standards of the time, unlovely, Bettye was ostracized. She was barred from the fashionable sororities at her Peoria high school and rarely asked on dates. It was an experience, she would later say, that made her identify with people on the margins of society.

At Smith, she blossomed. For the first time, she could be as smart as she wanted, as impassioned as she wanted and as loud as she wanted, and for four happy years she was all those things. Betty received her bachelor's degree in 1942 — by that time she had dropped the final "e," which she considered an affectation of her mother's — and accepted a fellowship to the University of California, Berkeley, for graduate work in psychology.

At Berkeley, she studied with the renowned psychologist Erik Erikson, among others. She won a second fellowship, even more prestigious than the first, that would allow her to continue for a doctorate. But she was dating a young physicist who felt threatened by her success. He pressured her to turn down the fellowship, and she did, an experience she would later recount frequently in interviews. She also turned down the physicist, returning home to Peoria before moving to Greenwich Village in New York.

There, Ms. Friedan worked as an editor at The Federated Press, a small news service that provided stories to labor newspapers nationwide. In 1946, she took a job as a reporter with U. E. News, the weekly publication of the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America.

In 1947, she married Carl Friedan, a theater director who later became an advertising executive. They started a family and moved to a rambling Victorian house in suburban Rockland County, N.Y.

Ms. Friedan, whose marriage would end in divorce in 1969, is survived by their three children, Daniel Friedan of Princeton, N.J.; Emily Friedan of Buffalo; and Jonathan Friedan of Philadelphia; a brother, Harry Goldstein, of Palm Springs, Calif., and Purchase, N.Y.; a sister, Amy Adams, of Chapel Hill, N.C., and nine grandchildren.

"The Feminine Mystique" had the misfortune to appear during a newspaper printers' strike. The reviews that appeared afterward ran the gamut from bewildered to outraged to cautiously laudatory. Some critics also felt that Ms. Friedan had insufficiently acknowledged her debt to Simone de Beauvoir, whose 1949 book, "The Second Sex," dealt with many of the same issues.

Writing in The New York Times Book Review in April 1963, Lucy Freeman called "The Feminine Mystique" a "highly readable, provocative book," but went on to question its basic premise, writing, of Ms. Friedan:

"Sweeping generalities, in which this book necessarily abounds, may hold a certain amount of truth but often obscure the deeper issues. It is superficial to blame the 'culture' and its handmaidens, the women's magazines, as she does. 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.' "[\[Read the review.\]](#)

Among readers, however, the response to the book was so overwhelming that Ms. Friedan realized she needed more than words to address the condition of women's lives. After moving back to Manhattan with her family, she determined to start a progressive organization that would be the equivalent, as she often said, of an N.A.A.C.P. for women.

In 1966, Ms. Friedan and a group of colleagues founded the National Organization for Women. She was its president until 1970.

One of NOW's most visible public actions was the Women's Strike for Equality, held on Aug. 26, 1970, in New York and in cities around the country. In New York, tens of thousands of woman marched down Fifth Avenue, with Ms. Friedan in the lead. (Before the march, she made a point of lunching at Whyte's, a downtown restaurant formerly open to men only.)

Carrying signs and banners ("Don't Cook Dinner — Starve a Rat Tonight!" "Don't Iron While the Strike Is Hot"), women of all ages, along with a number of sympathetic men, marched joyfully down the street to cheering crowds. The march ended with a rally in Bryant Park, behind the New York Public Library, with passionate speeches by Ms. Friedan, Ms. Steinem, Ms. Abzug and Kate Millett.

Not all of Ms. Friedan's ventures were as successful. The First Women's Bank and Trust Company, which she helped found in 1973, is no longer in business. Nor were even her indomitable presence and relentless energy enough to secure passage of the Equal Rights Amendment.

Though widely respected as a modern-day heroine, Ms. Friedan was by no means universally beloved, even — or perhaps especially — by members of the women's movement. She was famously abrasive. She could be thin-skinned and imperious, subject to screaming fits of temperament.

In the 1970's and afterward, some feminists criticized Ms. Friedan for focusing almost exclusively on the concerns of middle-class married white women and ignoring those of minorities, lesbians and the poor. Some called her retrograde for insisting that women could, and should, live in collaborative partnership with men.

Ms. Friedan's private life was also famously stormy. In her recent memoir, ["Life So Far"](#) (Simon & Schuster, 2000), she accused her husband of being physically abusive during their marriage, writing that he sometimes gave her black eyes, which she concealed with make-up at public events and on television.

Mr. Friedan, who died in December, repeatedly denied the accusations. In an interview with Time magazine in 2000, shortly after the memoir's publication, he called Ms. Friedan's account a "complete fabrication." He added: "I am the innocent victim of a drive-by shooting by a reckless driver savagely aiming at the whole male gender."

Ms. Friedan's other books include ["It Changed My Life: Writings on the Women's Movement"](#) (Random House, 1976); ["The Second Stage"](#) (Summit, 1981); and ["The Fountain of Age"](#) (Simon & Schuster, 1993).

The recipient of many awards and honorary degrees, she was a visiting professor at universities around the country, among them Columbia, Temple and the University of Southern California. In recent years, Ms. Friedan was associated with the Institute for Women and Work at Cornell University.

Despite all of her later achievements, Ms. Friedan would be forever known as the suburban housewife who started a revolution with "The Feminine Mystique." Rarely has a single book been responsible for such sweeping, tumultuous and continuing social transformation.

The new society Ms. Friedan proposed, founded on the notion that men and women were created equal, represented such a drastic upending of the prevailing social norms that over the years to come, she would be forced to explain her position again and again.

"Some people think I'm saying, 'Women of the world unite — you have nothing to lose but your men,' " she told Life magazine in 1963. "It's not true. You have nothing to lose but your vacuum cleaners."