DIVIDED

The Battle Over Women's Rights and Family Values That Polarized American Politics

WE STAND

Author of New Women of the New South

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Forty years ago, two women’s movements drew a line in the sand between liberals and conservatives. The legacy of that rift is still evident today in American politics and social policies.

Gloria Steinem was quoted in 2015 (in the New Yorker) as saying the National Women's Conference in 1977 “may take the prize as the most important event nobody knows about.” After the United Nations established International Women’s Year (I.WY) in 1975, Congress mandated and funded state conferences to elect delegates to attend the National Women’s Conference in Houston in 1977, where Bella Abzug, Gloria Steinem, and other feminists endorsed a platform supporting abortion rights, the Equal Rights Amendment, and gay rights. Across town, Phyllis Schlafly, Lottie Beth Hobbs, and the conservative women’s movement held a massive rally to protest federally funded feminism and launch a pro-family movement.

Divided We Stand explores the role social issues have played in politics by reprising the battle between feminists and their conservative challengers, leading to Democrats supporting women’s rights and Republicans casting themselves as the party of family values. As the 2016 presidential election made clear, the women’s rights movement and the conservative women’s movement have irrevocably affected the course of modern American politics. We cannot fully understand the present without appreciating the pivotal events that transpired in Houston and immediately thereafter.
"One future day when this country becomes a democracy, readers may find these struggles against patriarchy and racism—against the idea that even families must be hierarchies and even God must be a man—to be very odd indeed. But until that distant time, we will gain courage, knowledge, and tactics from reading about the historic National Women's Conference and the following decades of meetings, struggles, and campaigns that allowed women to decolonize our minds and begin to express ourselves as unique human beings." —GLORIA STEINEM

"Ably researched and aptly titled, Divided We Stand is must reading for anyone seeking to understand how gender politics became national politics. Spruill's accessible account of the conflicting goals pursued by the two women's movements reminds readers that gains in gender equality are seldom uncontested and require constant vigilance to sustain." —JANE SHERRON DE HART, CO-AUTHOR OF SEX, GENDER, AND THE POLITICS OF ERA

"Superbly researched and gracefully written, Divided We Stand is a compelling account of the last half century's struggles over the role of women and the nature of the family. At the same time, Marjorie Spruill shows how these issues have played a critical role in the growth of the conservative movement as they have moved to the center of American politics." —DAN T. CARTER, AUTHOR OF THE POLITICS OF RAGE: GEORGE WALLACE, THE ORIGINS OF THE NEW CONSERVATISM, AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF AMERICAN POLITICS

"[A] highly detailed but well-focused account . . . As women made staggering inroads into government agencies and other areas under the administrations of Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford (largely thanks to his wife, Betty), the anti-feminists staged a backlash by blocking the Comprehensive Child Development Act of 1971 (publicly funded child care) as the 'horrifying first step on the slippery slope toward a godless government intrusion of the family.' There are countless kernels of amazing achievement and courage throughout this jam-packed, engaging history." —KIRKUS REVIEWS [STARRED REVIEW]
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CHAPTER I

Four Days That Changed the World

For myself, Houston and all the events surrounding it have become a personal landmark in history; the sort of event one measures all other dates in life as being "before" or "after"... It raised hopes for a new openness and inclusiveness in national political events to come.

—GLORIA STEINEM, "AN INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT," WHAT WOMEN WANT, 1978

The weekend of November 18–21, 1977, in Houston was the decisive turning point in the war between Women's Lib and those who are Pro-Family. "Houston" was the "Midway" battle that determined which is the winning side.

—PHYLLIS SCHLAFLY, PHYLLIS SCHLAFLY REPORT, DECEMBER 1977

There were two women's movements in the 1970s: a women's rights movement that enjoyed tremendous success, especially early in the decade, and a conservative women's movement that formed in opposition and grew stronger as the decade continued. Each played an essential role in the making of modern American political culture.

Tensions between feminists and their conservative critics exploded in 1977 during a series of state and national conferences culminating in a National Women's Conference held late in the year in Houston, Texas. Known as the International Women's Year (I.W.Y) conferences, they were unique in American history as federally sponsored assemblies to which women were
CHAPTER 2

The Rise of the Feminist Establishment

We are changing the nature of political power in America. The movement of women to full equality is the largest movement for basic social and political change in this country... We are the best and the bravest. And what we didn't know five years ago we're learning fast... We have no right to fail our commitment to this moment, to ourselves, to the women who come after us.

—BETTY FRIEDAN, REMARKS TO THE FIRST NATIONAL WOMEN'S POLITICAL CAUCUS CONVENTION, FEBRUARY 1973

You know the strange thing? About ten years ago we were busily trying to persuade the world that there was a problem, that discrimination against women existed,” Kathryn “Kay” Clarenbach, executive director of the National Commission on the Observance of International Women’s Year, told columnist Ellen Goodman in November 1977. “Now, here we are, the establishment, being attacked by the radical right.” As they gathered in Houston for the National Women’s Conference, IWY leaders also found it strange to be denounced so vehemently as part of the political establishment when women were still severely underrepresented at all levels of government. After all, the whole point of their massive effort to unite women behind the National Plan of Action was to make women more of a force in American politics.

Nonetheless, by 1977, women’s rights advocates knew they had come a long way. In the early to mid-1970s, particularly, they made remarkable gains. Between 1970 and 1975, the number of women in elective office doubled.
EPILOGUE

A Nation Divided

The real significance of Houston was to bury the idea that so-called "women's issues" are a sideshow to the center-ring concerns of American politics.

—DAVID BRODER, WASHINGTON POST, 1977

What a difference a decade had made. In the early 1970s both Democrats and Republicans supported feminist goals, encouraged by the vociferousness of the women's rights movement and the quiescence of conservative women. By 1980 the two parties were lined up on opposite sides of a fierce battle between advocates of women's rights and family values, a battle that continues to divide the nation.

In the 1970s, from beachheads within Republican and Democratic administrations and in Congress, feminists urged politicians to revise laws and policies in keeping with changed circumstances and remove barriers to women's full and equal participation in American life. The strength of the antifeminist backlash that emerged by mid-decade was a testament to their success. The conservative women's movement was relatively small and composed largely of political novices. Yet it had an impact that belied its size, largely due to the experience and acumen of its leaders—most of them Republican activists who had been fighting, and losing, battles against moderates and liberals in their own party.

The 1977 International Women's Year conferences marked an important turning point in the history of these two women's movements and in the evolution of American political culture. IWY succeeded as feminists had
CHAPTER 1: FOUR DAYS THAT CHANGED THE WORLD


