

# A desperate housewife took a stand

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**Betty Friedan led the charge for equality but also predicted a backlash against it, writes Anne Summers.**

At a small dinner in Sydney in the mid-1990s, the celebrated writer and feminist Betty Friedan, who died on Saturday, her 85th birthday, was asked how she characterised herself. She did not hesitate: "First, I am an American. Second, a Jew and thirdly, I am a woman."

It was a remarkable repositioning of self-perception and priorities from the woman whose book *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 changed the lives of millions of women around the world, but by then she had been largely spurned by the movement she helped found and had decided, or been forced, to move onto other issues.

*The Feminine Mystique* was the book that "pulled the trigger on history", according to *Future Shock* author Alvin Toffler. It was the book that lifted the veil on the misery of the legions of educated middle-class housewives in affluent mid-20th-century America whose failure to find fulfilment from shopping, cooking, chauffeuring, running a perfect house and trying to be a faultless wife made them feel guilty and depressed. It was, Friedan wrote, "the problem that has no name", so she set out to identify, document and name it. Her book sent shock waves around America and then much of the Western world. The perfect 1950s housewife, who is parodied with deadly accuracy by the character Bree van de Kamp in *Desperate Housewives*, was a seething mass of discontent who was, it turned out, more than ready to join the throngs storming the sexual barricades to form the second-wave feminist movement.

Friedan was always a political pragmatist who believed that equality issues such as job opportunities and remuneration and political representation were more relevant to women's lives than the cultural issues preferred by many more radical women. In 1966 she co-founded the National Organisation for Women (NOW), a women's rights lobby group, now 500,000 strong, which fought to end innumerable discriminatory practices.

But she also had to overcome other obstacles. There was that day in February 1969 when Friedan was due to lead a protest against the infamous barring of women from the Oak Room in New York's celebrated Plaza Hotel between noon and three each day, the time when business was then done. She called in to say she couldn't make it; she had a black eye and bruises all over her face, she told her aghast sisters. Her husband had given her a walloping - something she said he often did when she was due to face the media. A make-up artist covered the injuries, Friedan wore dark glasses, and the protest went

ahead. The Oak Room eventually allowed women to lunch in its hallowed sanctum. And Friedan divorced her husband.

Friedan became increasingly controversial within the women's movement. In 1969 she caused outrage for denouncing what she called "the lavender menace", the increasing number of lesbians within the movement who, she said, would alienate straight women. She stepped down as NOW president in 1970 but continued to be a forceful voice for equality. In 1981 she published *The Second Stage*, her blueprint for how women and men could live together in an equal world. But leaders like Gloria Steinem, with whom she maintained a celebrated and acrimonious feud, froze her out of the feminist mainstream. Friedan, a dumpy and raw-featured woman, was never a match for Steinem, whose sinewy glamour and catchy turn of phrase made her a media favourite. Nor did Friedan's famously brusque and peremptory manner make her an easy ally. Increasingly, she moved away from women's issues and in the 1990s when she visited Sydney as a guest of the state government, it was to talk about her new issue, getting older, and her engaging book on the subject, *The Fountain of Age*.

Friedan famously warned of a backlash against women's equality and, as with so many of her pronouncements, she has proved to be chillingly prescient. The *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd asks in her newly released *Are Men Necessary?:* "If we flash forward to 2030, will we see all those young women who thought trying to Have It All was a pointless slog, now middle-aged and stranded in suburbia, popping Ativan, struggling with rebellious teenagers, deserted by husbands for younger babes, unable to get back into a workforce they never tried to be part of?"

If this happens, says Dowd, these domestic robots will be "desperately seeking a new Betty Friedan".

The old one would be appalled.

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**Anne Summers, a former head of the Office of Status of Women, wrote the influential Australian feminist history *Damned Whores and God's Police*.**