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WHIPLASH →: A SECRET HISTORY OF WOMEN'S POLITICS

In 1982, when I was fifteen, I wrote an opinion piece for the newspaper at my public, single-sex high school in Baltimore. It opposed “gag rule” restrictions on teenage girls’ access to information about birth control and abortion, an early conflagration of President Reagan’s first term. I had no interest in birth control myself, or any reason to need it, as I had not so much as kissed a boy, but I allied myself wholeheartedly and fervently as a sexually naive fifteen year old with the idea that the fundamental political struggle of my life would, and already did, center on my right to “control my own body” in sexual relations and exercise choices about abortion.

How did I arrive at this feeling, or know this? My assertion of abortion as the right to control my own body and freedom of choice in personal matters has proven remarkably durable—or, more cynically, stagnant—over the decades. My rhetorical ensemble could just as easily appear in a 2007 direct-mail fundraising letter for a generic national abortion rights organization as it did in a piece by a neophyte high school girl in 1982.

Those arguments had a much broader domain than law or politics for me, and a profound emotional depth. Growing up in a liberal, humanist milieu in the first years of the assault on *Roe v. Wade* (1973) was to grow up anxiously, in fear that a part of your humanity could be stolen from you. I sometimes wonder if fervent supporters of the National Rifle Association do not feel the same way about their guns as I did about my uterus and my “Freedom of Choice”—terrified, endangered, frantically defensive against something being taken from them that, somehow, has come to define who they are as humans. Many feminists would argue that my incendiary feelings about abortion in 1982 have endured because of political natural selection—because the issue of reproductive freedom really is foundational to modern American feminism. The relationship between feminism and pro-choice politics enjoys an aura of inevitability. But the seamless political alloy of feminism and abortion rights was years in the making. In the 1970s, as the women’s movement grew, the fate of abortion in national feminist politics—agenda item or anchor?—still hung in the balance.

In November of 1977, Houston hosted what was hailed as perhaps the most diverse American political gathering in recent memory—aside from its almost complete absence of men. Two years earlier, feminist and activist Bella Abzug had introduced legislation to convene a national conference of American women to hammer out a broad agenda to remove lingering sexual inequalities.

Women went to Houston in a position of strength. In 1976, for the first time since they had won the vote, women had crystallized into a distinct voting bloc and created an electoral gender gap favoring the Democrats. Feminism had its voluble critics, of course,

but a vast majority of women—well over three-fourths, by most polls—expressed sympathy with feminism. Jane Fonda and Strom Thurmond had both supported the ERA as it won extremely lopsided majorities in Congress and seemed destined for rapid state ratification.

Sam Houston Arena felt like a political bazaar, with many articles of feminist faith and conviction on display. The conference “was like a supermarket checkout line from Anywhere USA . . . homemakers and nuns, teenagers and senior citizens, secretaries and farmers and lawyers” congenially rubbed elbows, to surprising and charming effect. Women with “Housewives for ERA” buttons chatted with African American women wearing “Jewish Women’s Caucus” buttons; “pro-life feminists” talked Social Security with trade unionists; “pro-feminist churchwomen” and NOW representatives shared meals and strategized. The Nation also saw great promise for feminism as a unifying left-liberal worldview. “The women’s movement has become a bridge between groups that represent very different social interests,” it reported from Houston. “Conservatives are right to view this as a threat.”

The Houston women’s conference had a daunting platform to approve, ranging from issues of inheritance tax to sexual violence to job discrimination. In the first day, conference leaders moved alphabetically and with frictionless ease through a series of consensus issues. A tougher debate loomed on the horizon with the R word—reproductive freedom, and abortion.

With abortion, conservative Phyllis Schlafly saw a galvanizing opportunity. Across town at the Astro Arena, over twelve thousand women from newly radicalized church groups were gathering for a “pro-family” counter-rally. Before the conference Schlafly and her troops had announced their intentions with a half-page ad in Houston newspapers showing a girl with bouquet in hand, saying, “Mommy, when I grow up, can I be a lesbian?” At the counter-rally they waved Bibles and American flags and carried large, handwritten signs with messages that reporter Anne Taylor Fleming found “disarming in their rawness.” Things like “God Is a Family Man,” and “I Was a Fetus Once.” Young mothers, “beatific with maternal and religious zeal,” were everywhere. Fleming saw their poorly dressed, “mostly overweight” husbands largely as accessories rather than masterminds, envious that they did not have a “direct line to the Lord through their wombs.” The New Right was homing in on its trump card—with women.

The next day, back at the Sam Houston Arena, the main conference was moving anxiously toward the touchy agenda item of reproductive freedom. It was, by far, the most emotional issue at the conference, and for one of the few times during the three days, the atmosphere grew tense and fractious. Abortion lacked the moral legibility that other women’s issues enjoyed. Before the vote, Joan Gubbins, a leader of the hastily named “antis,” led a group of women with doleful expressions in a chorus of “God Bless America” and “All We Are Saying is Give Life a Chance,” while Gloria Steinem tentatively countered with a chant of what must have then still felt like a clever, new turn of phrase—“choice, choice, choice, choice.”

The pro-choice factions won this battle in a newly engaged war, as the abortion platform passed decisively—but not without a cost. Shaking and weeping, one antiabortion delegate told a reporter, “I never thought they would come to this. It’s murder.” Said another, “It will be old people next.” Even some feminists happy with the outcome of the abortion vote were uneasy about how it had come about, and how the majority had railroaded it through. Delegates from the business community with more bread and butter issues on their minds were left perplexed, too, that “the emotional issues had predominated.”

Still, this exposed division was for now a footnote to a larger story of consensus and a “rainbow of women,” as Time described, unified across creed and class. As a big-tent idea feminism had a lot to say about a lot of things, many of which women agreed on as a group—although abortion had been glaringly revealed nationally not to be one of those unifying issues.

Fleming came away reassured, and vaguely troubled by gathering political winds. She prophesied, “One felt absolutely in the mainstream—some mainstream, anyway—knowing all the while that there was another mainstream out there, the one I had seen in the Astro Arena, and that the two were destined to clash again and again.”

Fleming called it a gathering “civil war of women.”

Women who wept over the abortion provisions at the Houston conference appear in the aggregate across many broad-based social opinion surveys of the 1970s. The General Social Surveys (GSS), Gallup, Harris, and other national surveys from the mid-1970s onward revealed women to be more pro-life and socially conservative on this issue than men. A Gallup survey from March 1974 found that fifty-one percent of men and only forty-three percent of women favored the pro-choice position. Robert Shapiro concludes in a 2001 secondary analysis that women were consistently more “traditional” in their values toward abortion, and men “consistently more pro-choice” in the 1970s when the issue gained prominence. Researcher Catherine Bolzendahl also finds in a 2003 analysis of GSS data from the 1970s through the 1980s that men’s and women’s opinions on abortion differ only slightly. “Men always supported abortion more than women,” she finds, although the gap is not statistically significant.

Women also appear as the founders and leaders of several antiabortion organizations that predate or are concurrent with Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority, founded in 1979. They include the antiabortion rights group Life Advocates (1977), the American Life Lobby (1979), and the “pro-family alliance” (1979). Given the vehemence and diligence of women’s antiabortion and anti-ERA work, it is unwise to assume that these women were all deluded ventriloquists or alibis for the true believers—husbands and male leaders—behind the curtain of resurgent social conservatism. Women had their own consciences and principled convictions about abortion, even before it became a touchstone for male leaders of the New Right. In 1976 Ellen McCormack, a suburban New York housewife

and mother of four, competed for the Democratic presidential nomination as a single-issue, pro-life candidate, and qualified for Federal matching funds of \$134,739 for her campaign. Cheri Bowman, a thirty-year-old “smiling, blond mother of two” whose father-in-law invented bubble gum, delivered an antiabortion lecture and slide show in 1975 to the ladies’ auxiliary of a Roman Catholic Church in Stone Mountain, Georgia. Newsweek reported on the strange new phenomenon, describing Cheri’s “logical and low-keyed slide show” that nevertheless “left no emotional nerve untouched.”

Preserving feminism’s footing in the political mainstream would have required maintaining the loyalty of increasingly socially and spiritually diverse women in the 1970s and early 1980s who were rethinking allegiances at the vector of abortion, which—to further complicate things—so often encrypted anxiety over ever-widening class and lifestyle divisions among women. (In 1976 the conservative journal *National Review* described abortion as a coded expression of “class warfare”—eventually to be recoded as cultural warfare).

Jane Broderick, a mother of eight, a “deeply religious” Catholic, and an abortion foe, identified herself as a feminist in 1977, but confessed that she felt “alienated from the movement at times,” both because of abortion and also, not unrelated, because she sensed a class condescension toward women such as herself who lived “small, trite, little lives” in American towns. Broderick had voted for the ERA, but she could “understand why” some of her “friends helped to defeat it,” she told *Ms. magazine*. Ann Giordano, a married clerical worker, also worried about feminism’s drift toward the preoccupations of the career woman and what she perceived to be a disdain for “hard hats.” But in 1976, she was opting to fight under the feminist banner and not against it. “People like [me] should get involved” in the women’s movement, she asserted. “If we just sit back and say, the hell with you, drop dead, we’ll never make [feminists] relate to our needs.”

Much of this unfolded as an intramural contest, not exclusively or even predominately as a war between the sexes. And it started as a crackling grassroots fire, fanned in no small measure by women (both major political parties treated abortion as a disruptive orphan issue in the mid- and late 1970s, one Reagan aide even claiming that it would “demean politics”).

Some women, like Giordano, who were disquieted over abortion and the continental drift between the career woman and the “hard hat,” fought to maintain a position in the feminist camp. Others staked out a new camp entirely. Growing antiabortion fervor was unifying the emerging New Right—and splintering the women’s movement. Women’s organizations had tactical decisions to make. Newsweek reported in 1976 that feminists were taking a cautious approach to pro-life agitation, perhaps in recognition of the acutely personal tenor of the discussion, and women’s nuanced feelings on the subject. They had yet to “jump into the fray” around abortion as energetically as their counterparts, although reproductive rights, certainly, had always been part of the feminist agenda.

The summer and fall of 1984 might well have been a point-of-no-return, “l’etat c’est moi” moment in the relationship between feminism and abortion rights—when the one idea annealed itself inviolably and irrevocably to the other.

The National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL) had reported over 123 incidents of harassment or violence at women’s clinics in 1983, and 1984 had started off unpromisingly. That summer antiabortion forces bombed clinics in Virginia, Maryland, Texas, California, Georgia, and other states.

Some astute feminists noted the disturbing trend toward defensiveness around abortion rights, a hyperbole exacerbated, doubtless, by the clinic violence. At the Planned Parenthood convention of 1984 columnist Ellen Goodman urged a more proactive, less reactive stance. “The right wing has gotten you almost punch drunk at times,” she told the crowd, “waiting for each new assault. . . . I’m not saying let up your guard. . . . But you could behave a little more like winners.”

That same year, in Washington, DC, feminist clout and dollars got funneled into abortion rights. Although at the grassroots women held conflicted or personally ambivalent views on abortion, the issue indisputably attracted donations. “It’s a paradox, and it’s unfortunate,” said Marie Bass, director of NARAL, in the fall of 1984, “but the more the devil breathes down your back, the more money you can raise sometimes.” These were the early years of a fulminate K Street lobbying juggernaut in Washington, and in 1984, feminists secured their sturdiest foothold in that world around abortion rights. Ellen Malcolm founded EMILY’s list (Early Money Is Like Yeast) to support pro-choice, female, Democratic candidates. EMILY’s list raised a staggering \$11 million for their candidates in 2004, according to IRS records, and in much the same fashion as the NRA, the only other PAC that could rival its fundraising success. Almost on its own, EMILY’s list has increased the number of pro-choice Democratic women legislators, from twelve at its founding to forty-three today. Despite this success, some Democratic strategists will occasionally, and secretly, grumble at EMILY’s tactics and its single-minded directive to promote female, pro-choice candidates when these criteria undermine other liberal candidates. “Typically, when you talk about EMILY’s list,” described pollster Ed Sarpolus to the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, “it’s all choice, choice, choice.”

True, “choice” proliferated with mystifying speed and ubiquity on bumper stickers, buttons, tote bags, umbrellas, and in the media in the mid-1980s. Each side had branded the issue. The term never galvanized me, personally—and still does not. It pairs the rhetorically puny with the politically monumental. On the one hand “choice” describes the sweater table at the Gap, or a toothpaste aisle in a supermarket; on the other hand “choice” describes the prime directive that feminists and social liberals have taken thousands of political casualties to defend. A sense of proportion is lacking, and “choice” seems, still, a coy and ashamed designation (In 2003, NARAL airbrushed its flagship issue from its name, rechristening itself “Pro Choice America,” which prompted the National Right to Life Committee to call abortion “the choice that dare not speak its name”).

As abortion evolved into the anchor of feminism in national politics, it became harder to discern it as one of the most internally divisive issues among women themselves, some of whom in the 1970s had called themselves feminists. The escalating and deforming violence against clinics did not help. Battle lines hardened, subtlety and nuance faded into stances and caricature, a bunker mentality settled in. Terrorism hurts its immediate circle of victims and it also does damage to political curiosity and suppleness. It discredits, or at least marginalizes, the ambivalent and irresolute. The heat of arson attacks on health clinics soldered choice and feminism together—as the one went, so would the other.

Some time in the late 1980s I stopped listening to or even really seeing people who did not share my views on abortion. I am not sure if that was a cocooning act inspired by political boredom or self-protection, but other women made the same decision. Surely, some women in my acquaintance in college and graduate school, however blue state they were, must have held their own conflicted or even oppositional views on abortion. But, if so, they relegated those views to their own political closets. I reflexively flipped off the television when a story of abortion rolled around. My boyfriend colluded to prescreen the news for me. “You don’t want to hear this,” he would warn, or, “Don’t read this article.” Pro-lifers protesting outside of New Haven’s Planned Parenthood clinic elicited no more agitation or interest for me than the blur of a familiar roadside bulletin board.

Did I stop listening or looking because it hurt too much to see this, or because it bored me too much to see it? My reaction makes me think that there was something sturdily impacted and perilously brittle at the same time about my heartfelt pro-choice position—it was so elementally strong a point that feminists did not break ranks on it, yet so frail that a trespassing idea or conversation about subtlety, doubt, misgivings, or compromise imperiled it and threatened to send feminist consciousness and bona fides crumbling down in a heap.

A feminist battle against conservative men intent on controlling my body felt all but preordained then. But this is how it looks to me now: a more complicated moment, in which an erstwhile intellectually diverse women’s movement built a foundation on a fault line, a major stress point among women. Peculiarly, feminist organizations that advocate for women grew to fight for and against women’s convictions when they prioritized the defense of Roe.

As pro-life and pro-choice factions staged their stances in mainstream political culture, the quieter “civil war among women” continued to wax politically, hidden in plain sight. But it was the master plot of backlash that would scaffold popular understanding of women’s politics. In 1991, the alliance of feminism and choice had hit a Sargasso Sea of rhetorical stagnation. I had read at least three eulogies to the dead women’s movement that year—news of its death exaggerated each time. What had happened to the once-mainstream cause? Harvard-educated journalist Susan Faludi had at least one answer to the feminist implosion. She had just published her revelatory blockbuster, *Backlash*. With

virtuoso reportage, Faludi explained that the timeless battle of the sexes persisted in an “undeclared war against women” by largely male conservative leaders and institutions to roll back American women’s gains.

Backlash was a thrilling, consequential, and affirming moment for me and my cohort. Faludi’s logic and bold, synthetic sweep set a backbeat for subsequent feminist interpretations of the culture war. With a keen journalist’s sensibility, Faludi gave a name to an incandescent hostility toward feminism that ambitious women had already sensed around the peripheries of their lives, and she was so meticulous in her research that her argument achieved an engulfing persuasiveness.

But on the twenty-fifth anniversary of Roe v. Wade, Father Peter Pilsner, a teacher at the Bronx’s Cardinal Spellman High School, delivered a consoling homily to his congregation that revealed a glimpse of another battle altogether. Noting that today, at the roughly thirty-five hundred pro-life pregnancy centers across the country, all but a handful of the twenty to one hundred volunteers at each are women, he concluded confidently that “women have become the leaders of the pro-life movement,” which “is becoming a new women’s movement.” This conclusion astonished and blindsided me. A new women’s movement defined by the antiabortion agenda against which the putative women’s movement has battled for decades with such stamina and devotion? Perhaps feminists had two, arguably distinct foes to contend with: whiplash →, an inner collision among women, as well as backlash, a war against women by conservative patriarchs.

The feminization of social conservatism may have happened—and be happening still—most dramatically through the warhorse pro-life movement and the question of abortion that divided the mainstream women’s movement in the 1970s. Here, women who declare themselves “Jugglers for Jesus,” as author Alan Wolfe describes, keep the movement humming at the grassroots. In her study of American fundamentalism Betty DeBerg found that many churches assign to women sole dominion over sections of the church’s work—chiefly, the pro-life agenda. Women are prominently listed and in many cases fill most of the leadership positions in state and county chapters of the National Right to Life Committee today, as even a cursory browse through their web pages reveals. Apparently, behind every great (conservative) man, there is a woman doing the heavy lifting to move the agenda forward.

Because the fates of choice and feminism have been largely inseparable for so long—certainly since the mid-1980s—the weakness of one becomes the weakness of another. Cast in one light, the backlash by the male New Right undermined feminists, which undermined the choice agenda, and so much more. Cast in another, equally true light, whiplash →, the civil war of women themselves over abortion, attenuated the grassroots resonance of feminism for women, which in turn attenuated its capacity to defend the choice agenda.

As they say, women are from Venus, and women are from Mars.

On the desk in my office I have a framed cover of a pulp paperback published in 1970 that delighted me when I unearthed it in a used book store in graduate school, as I was writing a dissertation in women's history. It is called *The Feminists*, and the cover gravely intones of a dystopic world in "1992," when "The Feminists rule the world, and top dog is a bitch!" The cover features a stern, vaguely Soviet, tie-wearing woman, a cross between a harried flight attendant and a traffic cop, with a finger pointing menacingly at the reader. The cover text promises a vivid chronicle of that "final battle of the sexes!"

I also have in my office *Voices from Women's Liberation*, a frail paperback also published in 1970. It is an invaluable compendium of second-wave feminist writings, edited by Leslie Tanner. Had its manifestos and agendas come to pass I would be leading a very different life today in a country unrecognizable to itself. I would be sending my young children to "free, non-compulsory public childcare" available from infancy, "24 hours a day," or to public schools "extended to include all children from birth." At those schools, free of academic "tracking" by sex, my daughters would participate fully in "vocational courses" previously monopolized by boys, and enjoy "free self-defense instruction for females of all ages," in consideration of the "heinous crimes by men against thousands of females each year." At my professional job my male and female colleagues would be using "flextime," widely-available "part-time employment opportunities" for women, and "paid maternity leave" to balance their work and family opportunities equally and humanely.

If I opted not to work I would have access to "pay for housewives" and a just portion of my husband's retirement and Social Security benefits, in recognition that childrearing and the maintenance of a household is, indeed, work. If, alas, my marriage failed, I would have access to a national "divorce referral service." After the divorce I might rehabilitate myself in a "transitional commune" for displaced homemakers. Finally, the "small but intimate tyranny" of leg shaving would have long given way to the age of the female "hirsute living happily with the hairless."

Neither the utopia nor the dystopia came to pass, unsurprisingly, but things could have broken differently. What happened to the big ideas that inspired such dystopic loathing and utopian hope? What if big-tent feminism hadn't gotten eclipsed by the choice agenda?

Feminism used to have a lot to say about many things; now, in national politics, at least, it seems to have one thing to say about one thing—and that one thing, choice, has exacted a large cost, not only to liberal politics and the Democratic party, but to feminism itself. Perhaps it was necessarily so, a battle for the soul of the feminist cause, and the conceptual *sine qua non* (control over our bodies through choice) upon which all other feminist wisdom balances. But perhaps it was accidentally so—and that should create some basis for hope about feminism's future as a unifying, big-tent idea in a potential post-Roe era.

I confess that I am apprehensive but also curious to see where feminism would go without Roe, its anchor. Its core insight—that sex matters in social relations, as historian Nancy Cott has written, that gender roles organize our worlds and perceptions, for both women and men, and can impede liberty or our full humanity—is more relevant than ever, nationally and especially in a global context. Cutting-edge women’s organizations today that defy obdurate political alliances hint at a Post-Roe feminism that might be more about stewardship and caretaking than choice. Post-Roe feminism might be more about connections, social obligations, and commitment than the atomizing rhetoric of individual rights, or even the right to privacy, as is clear with organizations such as Leftout. Post-Roe feminism might return to a strength of mainstream feminism—economic security—and have more to say about work and life balance and Social Security than abortion, a focus of the Families and Work Institute and the Older Women’s League (OWL), today. In all communities, every day, feminist-inspired grassroots organizations do work that resonates with women across the abortion chasm, but they get nowhere near the attention in the media or the rhetorical prominence that they deserve. And campaigns for abortion rights would most likely find their rhetorical and political courage again, and find ways to rearticulate choice as a universally important and relevant imperative of liberty of conscience, something that has sacred value for all Americans who hope to live in a religiously tolerant democracy.

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NOTES

This essay does not claim to review the substantial body of work on public opinion and polling about abortion policies in the U.S. However, in addition to the studies cited in the text, several studies have informed and influenced my opinions on the topic that are not directly referenced in this essay.

Research suggests that opinions about abortion rights have not changed that much from the 1970s to the present, despite the visibility and strategic centrality of abortion politics on the national stage. Bolzendahl finds that while attitudes toward sex, marriage, and family have tended to liberalize over time, the one exception to this trend is abortion opinion, which has remained flat. See also Cynthia H. Deitch’s “Ideology and Opposition to Abortion: Trends in Public Opinion, 1972–1980” and “The Courts, Interest Groups and Public Opinion about Abortion,” by Christopher Wlezian and Malcolm Goggin, which notes stability in opinions about abortion policies, despite the growing political polarization of the issue.

Second, women in the aggregate are not more pro-choice than men, according to several national surveys. In fact, although the difference tends not to be statistically significant, national surveys have found men to be more pro-choice in their orientation than women

in the formative years of the 1970s, especially. Shapiro finds women in the GSS data to be more conservative on this particular social issue than men, although women tend to be more “liberal” on other social issues than men. Bolzendahl finds that men have always favored abortion more than women, albeit slightly. Eric Uslaner and Ronald E. Weber present data from Gallup that compare opinions from November 1969 to March of 1974. Forty percent of both men and women in November 1969 claimed to be pro-choice toward legalized abortion; in March 1974, in contrast, fifty-one percent of men identified as pro-choice, and only forty-three percent of women. In the interim survey of November 1972, men’s pro-choice percentage had climbed nine points, from forty to forty-nine percent, while women’s had changed by four percentage points, from forty to forty-four percent. Lucky M. Tedrow and E.R. Mahoney also find that in 1972 and in 1976, “males were more approving of abortion than females,” with 1976 showing an increase in approval for males. See also S. A. Moldanado. Insofar as there was a gender gap in opinions about abortion, it was a counterintuitive one: more men than women favored the pro-choice position in the critical years of the 1970s.

The pattern of little or no significant differences by sex largely holds true today. A characteristic poll from SurveyUSA, September 2005, usefully presented state-by-state data by sex, and shows that in all but eleven states, men’s and women’s opinions on abortion are largely identical; in ten states, more women than men self-identify as “pro-life.” Factors such as regular attendance at church, education, and, especially, women’s participation in the workforce and high income are strong predictors of opinion on abortion policies, which suggests that opinions may be more similar by class than by sex. Larry Bumpass, in “The Measurements of Public Opinion on Abortion: The Effects of Survey Design,” summarizes some of these variables.

In contrast to abortion, some of the stronger gender gap political issues—those where men and women as groups differ—seem to form around issues related to violence, the military, the death penalty, and what Shapiro calls “compassion issues” linked to social welfare. Harvard scholar Pippa Norris finds that the gender gap in voting preferences is not as novel, or extreme, as media coverage would lead us to believe. There is nevertheless a difference in male and female opinion that informs voting decisions. Norris finds in the research that it is most plausible to summarize that “men and women differ most consistently on issues related to the use of force and violence,” defense spending, the military, gun control, and the death penalty.

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