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Define women's issues as part of America's national debate

Jeri Young



Feminism.

The very word strikes fear in many men's heart and confusion among women. Exactly what is "feminism" and who does it include have been hot topics of debate for the millions of women who worked to gain status.

As a black woman who minored in women's studies in college, feminism is a mystery to me. I have read most of the major works that have defined feminism, but I found I had little in common with the authors.

For me, "The Feminine Mystique," the first book defined as a feminist writing was, well, boring. I could not identify at all with Betty Friedan, its author.

Friedan, a housewife, had never worked outside her home, had never really made any decision on her own, so it seemed, and was so far removed from my reality that I could not understand her at all. She was to paraphrase "bored and unfulfilled."

In my introduction to women's studies, women all around me agreed with Friedan, identified with her and stated that she reminded them of their mothers or grandmothers.

I, on the other hand had no point of reference for her. My mother worked. My grandmother was a "housewife" in that she did not work for money outside of the home, but she raised 10 children and worked alongside my grandfather in the cotton fields. To my knowledge she was never bored nor did she lack fulfillment.

All the women I knew longed for what Friedan had. A husband who was able to support them, a nice home in the suburbs and material comforts. My own mother, after a long day of caring for the children of others, just wanted to rest her feet.

I was not really impressed by the imagery question either. By imagery, I am referring to the traditional portrayal of women in the media as sexual objects. I was subjected to slide after slide of skinny blond women in various poses. Once again I was bored. I agree that depictions of women are negative, but so few black women are depicted in major magazines that I just could not become energized to act.

For weeks after, I searched high and low for at least one black female cover model on a magazine other than Essence or Ebony. I found none.

For black women the issue is not the type of exposure, but the lack of exposure. For most black women, it would be a major coup to be considered beautiful enough by the mainstream media to be featured on a magazine cover.

There are many other such paradoxes within the feminist movement. Much ado is made of the poor treatment of white women through the ages. While I agree that white women have been mistreated and that they have been repressed and abused by men, black women as a whole had a difficult time understanding the oppression. What, many wonder, can compare to slavery? Black women were used as sexual toys and work horses. They were beaten, scorned and despite the common bond we shared with them, white women often abused the power they had over black women, an insult that black women will not soon forget.

Lately, there has been sort of a backlash. Women, including Friedan, have renounced feminism, because they found that it was not all that it was cracked up to be. They realized that it is not easy to work and care for a family.

Black women, had anyone asked, could have explained to them the difficulties of the working super mom. We have been "Super Women" since the inception of slavery.

Why, you may ask, if I don't understand so much of feminism, did I minor in women's studies. The answer is simple. As women, both white and black, become more of a force in American politics and business, we need one another as allies. Black women have long used groups to fight for their rights. Ida B. Wells and her crusade to end the lynching of black people. Sojourner Truth fought for black equality. Mary McLeod Bethune demanded equal educational opportunities for blacks. Angela Davis fought for an equal voice in the civil rights movement. Black women have a legacy, an underappreciated legacy, of social protest. Women's issues are just the latest struggle in a history of demanding rights.

There are also many issues that cut across racial boundaries. Reproductive freedom and affirmative action are intrinsic to the ongoing success of both groups. Also key to the survival of black women is equal pay for equal work and increased debate on the role of social services. Feminists have long argued that the current system of welfare is detrimental to women. The black family in the inner city is living proof of that.

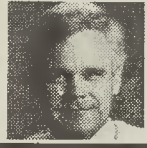
Black women need to make our voices heard amongst "feminists" in order to keep our issues at the forefront and to develop better dialogue between the two groups. There is a legacy of hurt and misunderstanding between black and white women that must be mended.

Black women also need to join together to support one another. Several years ago Alice Walker coined a term to describe black feminists. Rather than call us feminists, Walker suggested the term "womanish." Isn't that what most of us are?

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N.C. GOP presidential primary is a battleground after all

D.G. Martin



"The Maytag Primary." That is what North Carolina's great political cartoonist, Barbour, calls our upcoming May 7 presidential primary.

In case you haven't seen it, his cartoon shows a donkey and an elephant, sleeping at a work desk - like the Maytag repairman in the classic ads. The sign above their desk says "Media Registration - North Carolina Presidential Primary - May 7 (After It's All Over)."

Barbour's cartoon is right on target in one respect. The media has shown no interest in our presidential primary. And those of us who like to get attention from the presidential candidates have been disappointed. Their visits to us are few and far between. Instead, they have been in Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina, making promises to the folks in those states - forgetting about North Carolina.

All this has made some of us wonder why the General

Assembly did not listen to Rep. Steve Wood. He urged them to establish an early presidential primary for North Carolina. If he had gotten his way, the presidential candidates would be visiting us this month - at least a little bit.

Barbour's cartoon reflects the common judgment of most experts that by our May 7 primary, the contest for the presidential nomination will be "all over." I wonder.

It's true that well over 60 percent of the Republican delegate will be chosen in March alone - including those selected in the blockbuster states of California, Texas, New York, and Florida. When you add those to the delegates selected last month and to be selected in early April there won't be many delegates left to select by the time May 7 rolls around. But there are two big reasons why I think North Carolina may turn out to be a battleground state after all.

Here they are:

1. At least three Republican candidates - maybe four - have enough staying power to get them to May 7.

Steve Forbes, who would have been gone if he didn't have money, has money. He is gathering followers. And he is having the time of his life. So he is not going to quit no matter how often he loses. Since he is picking up delegates at almost every stop, he can see the possibility of being a big player at the convention - even though he can't win the nomination.

Patrick Buchanan has shown that his campaign can run without all that much money. His ideas are catching on, too. And he is having a better time than Forbes. He wants to have more fun at the convention. So he will be gathering delegates all the way to the end.

Bob Dole is taking his bumps. Others might have quit after getting so banged up. But he is no quitter. He is the only prominent candidate who could hold the whole party together. He will do better in the March primaries. But even if he doesn't, I think he is in it to the end.

Lamar Alexander might

stick it out, too. Money will be a big problem for him. Still, he might be a lot of people's second choice. If the convention deadlocked, and he had a few delegates, he might just...

Well the hope of some kind of a surprise might keep him from quitting even after the money runs out. If at least three of these guys hang on until May, probably none of them will have won enough delegates to lock up the nomination. And they will be looking for a place to fight it out one more time.

2. North Carolina will have the stage to itself during April and early May.

After the Kansas and Minnesota primaries on April 2, there are no more contests until May 7, when North Carolina, the District of Columbia and Indiana vote. So those three places will get the candidates' full attention for more than a month. Get ready. Tell that Maytag repairman to wake up. There might be a lot of action in North Carolina after all.

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OH SAY CAN HE SEE...

When being black isn't enough

By Sylvia Perry

NATIONAL NEWSPAPER PUBLISHERS ASSOCIATION

What makes you Black? Is it your skin tone? Behavior? Attire? Language? Neighborhood? Hairstyle? Use of language? So many participants contribute to define society's meaning of what it means to be Black.

I've often heard people say someone acts "Black" or "White" without ever giving it a second thought. But now, I must. I'm getting too old to let those kind of things get past me without acknowledging the premise behind them.

When I was younger, black kids were always asking me what I was, what I was mixed with and if my mother was white? All kinds of crazy stuff. The answers were always the same: I was black, mixed with nothing else and my mother was black too. It's as if being black wasn't enough and everyone needed that extra oomph to make them unique. I've never felt that way because being black was always enough.

Isn't it funny when we meet other (obviously black) people and the subject of heritage comes up. "My culture is a mixture of German, Irish, Cherokee, Italian and British." I find myself wanting to ask them if there aren't any

African, Jamaican, Spanish or any people of dark descent from which they got their hue. But protocol forces me to keep my mouth shut. Often when you hear certain countries discussed, they're never considered to be African. Especially the country of Egypt. I wonder when the racists made their remarks about sending African Americans back to Africa with the rest of the baboons and heathens, if they meant to also include those like their beauty queen Elizabeth Taylor who decades ago portrayed the Egyptian queen Cleopatra in cinema?

My question is why do we always have to prove ourselves to be black and parallel? Why are some ashamed of it?

We search constantly for ways to become more ethnic or to become better assimilated. Isn't there someplace in between called Black Americans? The afros couldn't get big enough, the jheri-curly were never long enough, the earrings weren't big enough, there was never enough gold

to wear nor enough teeth to put them on. On the same foot, we can't ever seem to move far enough away to forget the neighborhood we came from; get that hair to have just the right swing or play that golf just right. It's never enough.

The struggle between these two extremes lies at the opposite end of our society. Some compelling force would like us to choose a side and work it to the fullest, but it's not necessary. We all have the ability to be our own person and make the decisions necessary to make it work. Ever heard of "working the system"?

I frequently struggle with the medium in which I would like to fit. I want to be able to socialize with everyone and be so knowledgeable that I can discuss everything from the latest tennis championship to the major underlying premise of warring African nations. Yet I don't want to forget how it feels to eat Black Eye peas on New Year's Day and go to a reunion where everyone you see is a cousin. The purgatory between the two can be trying. You can either choose a

side to live on, or the best alternative; rising above both sides and live the best of both worlds. Now that's living. Black Americans who have succeeded in business and government are often criticized for not being "Black enough" or forgetting where they came from. I don't think they're forgetting or being too white; they've simply crossed the waters and are living the life they lead and are accountable to.

If you were able to live the best of both worlds, you would be able to be comfortable and accepted wherever you go and having the means to take you there. It's that walk from the White House to Harlem to Miami's South Beach and all the way up to Compton, Calif. If you can walk that mile, then you're living the life. The person who feels as comfortable in Chez Francais as they do in the House of Pork has got it made. Someone in that position has the ability to control his/her life, because he/she can control their surroundings. And he who has the power to control the environment around him has the power to control the world.

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