

Faludi gives differing views on career women



**Backlash:
The Undeclared War
Against American
Women**
by
Susan Faludi

Crown Publishers, © 1991
460 pages
Hardcover price: \$24

★★★★

● - Show it away, ●● - a real disappointment,
●●● - worth the time, ●●●● - a real page-turner

In the mid-1980s, news features, advice books and women's health manuals began to spread the word that career women, while increasingly more successful in the workplace, were actually suffering in their private lives.

Several mental health studies proclaimed a rise in depression cases among baby-boom-aged women. Therapists and journalists soon came up with an explanation — women's liberation. The theory claimed that without the feminist movement, women would still be at home with their children, feeling healthier and calmer.

But when *Wall Street Journal* reporter Susan Faludi investigated the claim for her new book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, she discovered it misrepresented women's lives.

In fact, Faludi found a study which proclaimed it was poor employment rather than satisfying work that was the leading cause of mental distress among single women. "Whether they are professional or blue-collar workers, working women experience less depression than housewives, and the more challenging the career, the better their mental and physical health," she writes.

A Pulitzer Prize winner, Faludi's excellent reporting skills provide a gripping account of journalists, film makers and conservatives' apparent attempts to squelch the women's movement once and for all.

Faludi is not trying to assert the existence of a conspiracy. Instead she says, "The press didn't set out with this, or any other intention; like any large institution, its movements aren't premeditated or programmatic, just grossly susceptible to the prevailing political currents."

Her thesis is, "this counter assault is largely insidious: in a kind of pop-culture version of the Big Lie, it stands the truth boldly on its head and pro-

claims that the very steps that have elevated women's position have actually led to their downfall."

Sound a little extreme? Maybe, but Faludi's meticulously documented 400-plus page analysis of society's backlash may prove to be as thought provoking in this generation as Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* was in the 1960s.

Just read the evidence. Another media trend story she examines focused on America's alleged man shortage. The 1986 Associate Press-distributed story, which based its findings on an unpublished Harvard-Yale study, claimed that women who put schooling and careers before their wedding date are going to have a harder time getting married.

The study, which was printed repeatedly during the year, asserted that women over the age of 30 have only a 20 percent chance of ever getting married. Eventually, *Newsweek* even claimed that a woman over 40 had a better chance of being shot by a terrorist than finding a husband.

Faludi discovered that the facts were a bit different. A subsequent Census Bureau study, which received little media attention, found errors in the research methods of the Harvard and Yale professors and revealed that women over 40 actually had a 23 times better

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— Susan Faludi,
author of *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*

chance of marriage than the previous study had asserted.

On TV, Faludi calls the 1987-1988 season "the backlash's high watermark." Only three of the 22 new primetime dramas featured female leads, and only two were adults.

Faludi criticizes the film industry for producing too many movies like *Working Girl*, in which "an aspiring secretary with a child's voice rises up the business ladder and gets the man, but she achieves both goals by playing the daffy and dependent girl." (The book

came out before *Thelma and Louise*.)

Unfortunately, Faludi's book is not flawless. She tends to leave out evidence that doesn't prove her point. For example, Faludi slams *Thirtysomething* for making Hope a homemaker goddess, but she neglects to mention that Hope considers leaving Michael in the last episode.

Faludi lists many examples of films portraying women in a negative light, but she doesn't write about the female warrior heroine in *Alien* or the strong female lawyer in *Class Action*.

However, Faludi still makes an intriguing case. Right here on campus, "feminism" is a dirty word to many students. Women who declare they are feminist are often labeled as man-haters or complainers even when they are simply promoting equal rights in the workplace.

At the very least, Faludi's book should provide an excellent source of topics for discussion. And maybe it will encourage more women to see the feminist movement as an important part of the present rather than a phenomenon that ended in the 1970s.

By Lisa Millegan
Emerald Associate Editor

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