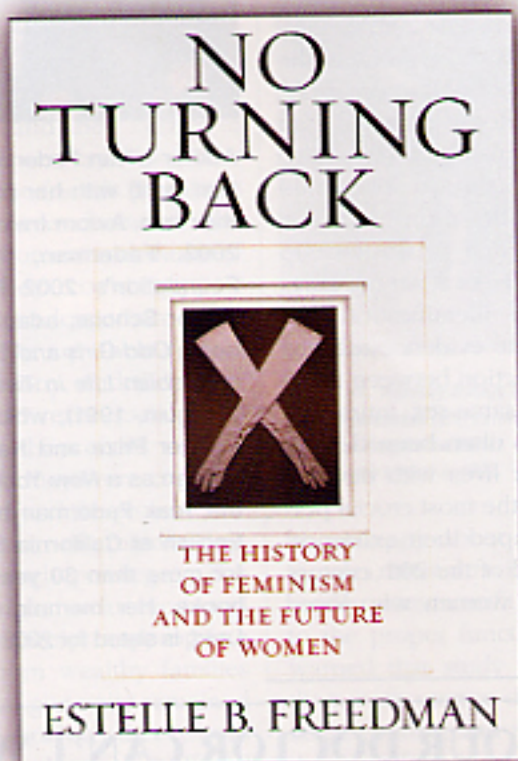


By Jackie Zakrewsky

## No Turning Back

Here is the book I wish every member of Congress would read: *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women* (Ballantine, 2002) by Estelle B. Freedman. It'll reassure our Capitol Hill allies that, despite a tortuous and an often-lonely road, they're on the right path. It may convince those other policy-makers, the majority, that women are anything but a narrow interest group.



**Estelle Freedman, a Stanford University history professor and co-founder of the school's feminist studies program, offers a sweeping historical view (without sacrificing depth) of the emergence and impact of feminisms, particularly in the United States. Yes, that's "feminism" in the plural. One suspects that *Feminisms* would be in the book's title if Freedman had had her way. (Publishers usually control titles.)**

One more thing about that title: *No Turning Back* may sound like a rallying cry,

but it's really a statement of fact borne out by the overwhelming evidence Freedman presents. There will be no turning back because feminism is pervasive, tied to so many issues in so many countries—from the fight for equity in industrialized nations to the struggle for food, health care, and education in developing countries. This multiplicity of issues globally contributes to Freedman's notion that feminism is rightly plural.

Freedman excels at showing how interconnected civil rights issues are—history notwithstanding. Witness the deep divide between some key abolitionists and women's rights leaders in the 19th century: "Most abolitionists did not want to dilute their movement by adding women's rights," notes Freedman.

Later, suffragists didn't take on the issue of racial injustice and, in fact, often reflected the nation's segregated state. When women finally won the right to vote with the 1920 ratification of the 19th Amendment, writes Freedman, "Jim Crow legislation effectively disenfranchised most black women, along with black men, in southern states."

Freedman covers such troubling aspects in the history of women's activism without leading us to discount our foremothers altogether. We come to recognize their legacy in all its richness and imperfection—and (we hope) learn from it.

Freedman also ably covers thorny theoretical issues that lie at the heart of feminist strategy. Should we strive for equality (getting the same rights and privileges as men) or stress our difference? Women are not the same as men, but too much emphasis on

our difference leads to a reductive focus on women's reproductive capacity. Feminist strategy today balances the two views—to see women as different but equal.

Another particularly fascinating aspect is Freedman's discussion of how capitalism and democracy—keystones of U.S. society and much touted worldwide as the key to progress—contributed to strengthening patriarchy and delimiting women's roles. Inevitably perhaps, capitalism and fledgling democratic ideals also gave rise to women's activism. "When women's economic dependence in the family deepened and new ideas questioned inequality, the stage was set for feminist politics," writes Freedman.

What activists may find especially empowering is that feminism doesn't depend on great leaders. Sure, Freedman mentions well-known figures like Susan B. Anthony and Gloria Steinem. But the author recognizes that it's the actions of many women on many fronts that have led to vast improvements in women's lives—from the right to vote to the establishment of rape crisis centers. The media may have its darlings (and punching bags), but all of us make history. ■

—Jackie Zakrewsky is a freelance writer in Silver Spring, Maryland.

## Turning to the author

Stanford University history professor Estelle B. Freedman, author of *No Turning Back* and an AAUW member-at-large, recently took time out for an e-mail interview with AAUW Outlook. Excerpts follow.



**On being praised for her objectivity and her lack of stridency:**

I have two problems with the opposition of "strident"—meaning harsh or shrill—and "objective." The first is the way it discred-

its any kind of passion—anger or outrage, for example—and the second is the assumption that one can be neutral about injustice. As long as I have been a feminist, I have been passionate about women's equality.

When I was younger and first realized the persistence of injustice (whether racial or sexual), I was pretty angry; I'm sure I made people uncomfortable at times by naming the problem. But I've also been deeply intellectually interested in understanding injustice and I increasingly tried to ground my passion by studying the origins of inequality and the strategies for combating it.

I believe that knowledge gives us power, and that the more power (understanding) we have, the less harshly we need to proclaim our insights and the more generous we can be in appreciating the social forces that have created individual behaviors that may offend us.

In short, anger can fuel our inquiries, but insight and compassion go a long way toward reaching others.

**On a feminist future:** My understanding of history leads me to believe that the older forms of patriarchy cannot survive in a democratic and economically interdependent world, and my survey of current organizing shows that women throughout the world are finding ways to gain authority. I know, however, that only with constant vigilance will we build on the historical momentum I describe in the book. A feminist future is not guaranteed unless we learn from past strengths and past mistakes and unless we support the broader movements for democratization and economic justice throughout the world.

**On AAUW:** AAUW was critical to my career at two points. First, around 1982, when I was in the process of filing a sex discrimination grievance at work, I learned that AAUW was creating a legal advocacy project that I could apply to for support if I had to go to court. Although I won my grievance and tenure without going to court, knowing that the organization was raising funds to help academic sex discrimination cases was very heartening for me.

A few years later, a Foundation fellowship helped me take a year off to draft my second book, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*. I had never had the luxury of a full year to write before, and it propelled my work enormously. ■

—J.Z.