

# Power Feminism, the Media and Government

Fire With Fire:

The New Female Power and How It Will Change the 21st Century

Naomi Wolf

Random House. 373 Pages. \$21.

BY JACK KAMMER

There is much for the egalitarian mind to like about "Fire With Fire," but the admirable parts of Naomi Wolf's new book make the less commendable sections all the more disappointing.

The author displays courage and candor in expressing sentiments she surely knew would bring stinging reproach from her feminist allies. She speaks lovingly of male energy and sexuality. She challenges the duplicity of some feminist tactics. She offers a sincere and thoughtful acknowledgment of the difficulties of the abortion issue.

Perhaps the most admirable part of "Fire With Fire" is its analysis of "victim feminism." Wolf paints a grim picture of a rape crisis center she served as a volunteer. With purposely bare walls, intentionally glaring, shadeless light bulbs and devoutly depressed staff, the agency is Wolf's potent metaphor for the ideology that insists the movement for women's equality must be gaunt, pathetic and joyless. Her antidote for this "hierarchy of miserable saintliness" is "power feminism"—robust, creative and fun.

Such freshness raises the anticipation that Wolf might provide a breakthrough in feminist thought. But that hope is dashed by her stale analyses of male power in government and the media.

To support her presumably straightforward claim that "the mainstream media leave out women in general, and the women's movement in particular," Wolf cites the Journal Graphics 1992 index of public affairs programming. "The entire category for women....," she tells us, "took up 12 pages—one page *less* [her emphasis] than the amount of space

devoted to the single category 'H. Ross Perot.'" Apparently she thinks that eccentric Texas billionaires running for president fairly represent "men" as a basis for comparison with "women." On the other hand, perhaps she chose purposefully not to disclose that the actual category "men" occupies only three pages in that same Journal Graphics list.

Furthermore, while complaining of men's "75-25 advantage in the struggle for recognition in the press," Wolf never considers the likely possibility that female journalists and women in the news speak of women's issues far more often than prominent males give voice to the concerns of their gender. Can there be any doubt that Ellen Goodman does more for women's issues in a week than David Broder, George Will and William Safire do for men's gender-based concerns in a year?

The closest Wolf comes to offering a plan for dealing with the media is to urge, "If you don't like your group's image in the media, decide on another image and seize control of the means of producing it." The implicit element of the plan is that the seizing must be done by feminist journalists who are committed more to feminism than to journalism. "[W]hen enough women are in place and the winds shift," she says approvingly, "we see that women do indeed promote their own interests." Ordinary female journalists, on the other hand, will not serve Wolf's purposes because, as she acknowledges, they don't cite female sources any more frequently than male writers do.

Her analysis of government is similarly shallow. Like most feminist rhetoricians, she points to the number of



men in Congress and concludes that males have too much political power. But this is like counting women in supermarkets and deciding they have too much food. The last thing traditional women think about having for dinner is what they themselves want; they are far more concerned about fulfilling the appetites and nutritional requirements of the people they love. So it is with men in government. Whether liberal or conservative, they are traditional in the important sense that they have had to break no new gender ground to be where they are, and the last thing on their minds is what they or other men want or need "as men." (Does Wolf believe that Congress is pursuing a "masculist" legislative agenda? If it were, would research into breast cancer be budgeted at \$8,639 for each of the U.S.'s 46,300 annual deaths from that malady,

while each of 35,000 yearly prostate cancer fatalities warrants only \$1,114? Moreover, would Congress be able to look at the monumental fact that men have seven years less life than women and still fret about a "crisis in women's health"?)

Indeed, Wolf spends considerable time helping us look through the eyes of young women at the heavy burdens and scant rewards of political power. She asserts repeatedly that "the female psyche...harbors great ambivalence about claiming power." Her point here is to urge women to overcome their reluctance to enter politics, yet she attributes women's failure to rise to the opportunity not to women's own cost/benefit analysis, but rather to a vague notion of "the opposition," which she describes as "those men and male-dominated institutions that are actively resisting women's advancement."

After listening to Wolf's timid young women fretting that running for political office is "just not worth it" because of the contention and public criticism entailed, it seems unfair, to say the least, to blame men for women's absence from the trenches. And since Wolf herself acknowledges that "generations of female college students opt for humanities studies that guarantee them the lowest professional salaries while 80 percent to 90 percent of undergraduates in the high-paying hard science, engineering, and math fields are male," it makes even less sense to blame men for the earnings gap.

But blame she does. And vengeance she seeks. Female fantasies of retaliation and retribution against men constitute one of Wolf's major themes. "Looking at how easy it is for women to treat men in cruel ways is oddly liberating," she says.

Wolf's delight in retaliation fantasies is childish, a point she unwittingly makes abundantly clear in her discussion of how little girls lust for power before they are told that "being nice" and "being popular" are more important. Her interviewees speak of childhood "fantasies of being rulers, queens and empresses; memories of harboring grudges and wishes for retaliation that had elements of cruelty and domination." Wolf

reports that "Many women remember being convinced in girlhood that they were secretly descended from royal blood, and would soon be revealed in all their aristocratic splendor to abash those who had humiliated them." It is here that she inadvertently shows the connection between immaturity and "power feminist" certitude: "Every molecule of the child seeks every pleasure. She is sensuous, grasping, self-absorbed, fierce, greedy, megalomaniacal, and utterly certain that she is entitled to have her ego, her power, and her way."

Wolf urges women to seize their power and pursue their interests as a majoritarian voting bloc. She stipulates the need for "absolute fairness to men, ... consciousness of women's own capacity for oppressive deeds, and ... a cogent set of ethics," but she seems unable to suggest a code of principles more influential than her repeated phrase "more for women"—with women as the sole and self-absorbed arbiters of what they should take and how much is enough.

It seems necessary to ask how "power feminists" like Wolf can be trusted to

put aside their fantasies of revenge and govern fairly for both genders. After all, Wolf acknowledges that "girls do not learn from their societies what fairness or victory feel like....In contrast to the ethos of boys' sports teams, girls' social organization is profoundly subjective and undemocratic."

Moreover, we should ponder whether, for instance, the Senate would be more or less balanced between women and men if it comprised 50 traditional males like the ones who are there now and 50 "power feminists" like Naomi Wolf.

Some feminists, believing they have been treated like children by that ubiquitous and all-purpose bugaboo "the patriarchy," apparently feel justified in acting like children—and therefore have a lot to learn about the responsible, selfless use of power. ■

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*Jack Kammer's first book, "Good Will Toward Men: Women Talk Candidly About the Balance of Power Between the Sexes," was published in February by St. Martin's Press.*

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