Two Steps Forward and One Step Back – The Impact of Conflicts and Wars on the Women’s Movement

Video Transcript

It is hard to imagine how any major conflict in America – from the American Revolution through those in the 21st century – could fail to impact American society and the nation. In fact, they always do, often in unexpected ways. Even though women’s contributions to society at any given time are equal to, although often different from, men’s contributions, they are often excluded from history books. As we examine how military conflicts have affected the development of American society, we will see how women’s roles in the wars changed the course of each conflict and sent ripple effects through America as it emerged from each war.

For example, women played a significant role in the Civil War. They served as nurses and medical support staff on the battlefield and in the hospitals. Due the work of Florence Nightingale during the Crimean War, the stage was set for women to provide direct medical care, serve as hospital administrators, and offer comfort to the wounded and dying. Although the exact number of women who took on these war-time responsibilities is not known, between 5,000 and 10,000 women offered their services. For the first two years of the war, the introduction of females into a male medical system was its own civil war. Eventually these women, and the work they did, began to shift the traditional ideas of women’s roles in medicine and in society.

During World War I, women moved into the factories and other traditionally male dominated work-places to replace the men who were going off to war. Women took over jobs in areas normally reserved for men – working in construction and transportation as well as war production. They expanded past the traditional teaching and domestic work into clerical positions, sales, and garment and textile factories. Even though the advances were, for the
most part, reversed when the “boys” came home, all was not lost. Pointing to these experiences, the suffrage movement gained momentum and the 19th Amendment was ratified – allowing women to vote – in 1920.

World War II also had a significant impact on women in society, as, once again, women moved in to competently perform jobs many people thought were inappropriate or beyond a woman’s ability. Once again, as the war ended, the men came home and many women were pushed back to their old lives. However, society's stereotypes about what women could and could not (or should and should not) do were changing and the Second Wave of Feminism would soon sweep across American society.

Over and over, throughout our history as a country, the roles and responsibilities taken by (or thrust upon) women during war time have ultimately changed women’s roles in peacetime.

During the American Revolution, women’s status in society and the roles they were able to assume began to move in a new direction due to their participation in the resistance and how unexpectedly vital and important to the Revolution’s success the colonial women were.

About this transcript:

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