

August 13, 2013

## Feminism Gets Presidential Seal of Approval

Posted: 08/09/2013 1:25 pm

Like

649 people like this. Be the first of your friends.



93 Share

25 Tweet

0

### Get Politics Newsletters:

Enter email

One hundred years ago, suffragists Alice Paul and Inez Milholland led 8,000 protesters (mostly women) in a march on Washington, D.C. -- the day before the inauguration of Woodrow Wilson -- in the spirit of having the audacity to demand women be given the right to vote, many of them physically beaten by mobs of men, including some police. It is only fitting that one hundred years after that iconic event, Gloria Steinem, the most well-known American feminist activist, has been selected by the White House to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

The award, considered the highest honor a civilian can receive (alongside the Congressional Gold Medal), has no rigid set of criteria; it is annually bestowed on the whim of the president and recommendations submitted to their office.

Fifteen other Americans will also be honored, including Oprah Winfrey and Bill Clinton, but what makes Steinem's selection notable is how, by extension, the movement she has helped lead over the past four decades will be honored.

By perception of the general American public, Steinem is still the face of the feminist movement, regardless its dramatic growth in diversity of scholarship and advocacy since she emerged in the public consciousness. Feminism, despite the rather uninformed criticisms against it ranging from Rush Limbaugh to Katy Perry, will be honored by the world's most powerful leader with this country's highest civilian honor on a very public stage.

Steinem can remember the moment her lifelong journey in women's rights advocacy began. In 1969, she had been assigned to cover an abortion speak-out in a church basement in the Village for *New York Magazine*. She would later write, "There was something about seeing women tell the truth about their lives in public, and seeing women take seriously something that only happens to women." She described it as a "big click" and on that day, began her life as a feminist activist.

Growth of the movement -- and Steinem's public stature -- came quick: co-founding *Ms.* in 1972, the first feminist-themed magazine (an initial print-run of 300,000 copies selling out in three days), testifying before the Senate and lobbying for the Equal Rights Amendment (passed by Congress that same year but not yet ratified), and co-founding several organizations over the years, including Choice USA in 1992, among many, many other accomplishments.

She has also been a strong advocate for people of color, the LGBT community, animal rights, and opposition to American military operations in Vietnam and the Middle East.

Amid the often chaotic activity of her advocacy work, she also survived breast cancer in the mid-80s.

But even after considering her lengthy, stellar resume, perhaps her greatest accomplishment has been giving feminism a powerful, media-savvy voice for decades in a national environment that has often responded to women's rights with skepticism

and derision. And it's paid off: this year, for the first time, a poll found 55 percent of American women consider themselves feminists. Just as heartening, 30 percent of men polled identified as feminists. Most importantly, this cut across lines of race and even political affiliation; 38 percent of Republican women polled stated they are feminists.

And after serving as a prominent activist over the span of eight presidential administrations, she shows no signs of lowering her voice or shortening her stride. In February, she was prominently featured in the three-hour PBS documentary *MAKERS: Women Who Make America*. In April, she appeared on Nick News to have an open discussion on feminism with a small group of teens.

Her insistence on being accessible to the masses in communicating the importance of women's rights for the benefit of all people has been crucial to its mainstream appeal. Despite the ridiculous attacks against feminism based on the beliefs that it promotes the superiority of women (wrong), seeks to marginalize or breed hatred of men (absolutely wrong), and is pejoratively linked to lesbians (dead wrong and homophobic), Steinem has remained a calm and steady but powerful voice throughout and inspired succeeding generations to vocalize support for women's rights, including this author.

I like to imagine what those women marching one hundred years ago must have thought. Did they believe they would see a woman in Congress in their lifetime? A woman on the Supreme Court? A broad array of rights that went far beyond suffrage? I certainly doubt it.

But despite that, they still marched for the future of women, not knowing what progress they would have the pleasure of witnessing. They marched for their daughters (and for that matter, their sons).

Later this year, a short walk away from the grounds of that march, the President will honor Gloria Steinem (and feminism) in a powerful manner. It is a long-due victory, but it does not atone for the inequality women still face. And for that and Alice Paul and Inez Milholland and Gloria Steinem and bell hooks and our children, we shall continue to march.

**Follow Charles Clymer on Twitter: [www.twitter.com/cmcllymer](http://www.twitter.com/cmcllymer)**