Gloria Steinem (1934–2026): The CIA, the Democratic Party and the politics of feminism

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Gloria Steinem, for half a century a public face of American feminism, died at her home in New York City on Wednesday, September 2, at the age of 92.

Steinem's death was quickly followed by praise from the media and political establishment. Barack Obama, who awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2013, declared that "as a writer, a speaker, an activist, she awakened a vast and often skeptical public." Hillary Clinton wrote that Steinem "pushed open doors not just for herself, but for literally millions of women behind her." From what passes for the other end of the Democratic Party's spectrum, Senator Bernie Sanders called her "a pioneer in the fight for women's rights" and New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani wrote that she "taught America that sexism is a symptom of a system that can be changed."

Amidst the endless tributes there is no significant analysis, let alone assessment, of Steinem's political history and role, which included work with the CIA, the Democratic Party and a decades-long position as an honorary chairperson of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA).

Steinem and the CIA

Steinem was born in Toledo, Ohio, in 1934, into a family made poor by the Depression. She studied government at Smith College, graduated in 1956, and spent two years in India on a fellowship. When she returned to the United States in 1958 her first job was as the paid co-director of an organization called the Independent Service for Information on the Vienna Youth Festival, later renamed the Independent Research Service.

The organization was launched in response to the Soviet-sponsored World Festival of Youth and Students, to be held in Vienna in the summer of 1959. According to Karen Paget's *Patriotic Betrayal* (2015), the most thorough study of the CIA's operations among American students, the Agency developed "ambitious goals to 'smash' the festival, 'take over' the left-wing American delegation, and, most important, identify and recruit friendly foreign nationals from Africa and Asia to tie them more closely to the West, a plan later approved by the U.S. National Security Council."

The Independent Service recruited roughly a hundred of the 350 Americans who went to Vienna, nearly all of whom knew nothing of the Agency's role. It produced "research papers" and press material, and at the festival itself a daily newspaper in six languages, which Steinem put out with Samuel Walker, Jr., a vice president of the Free Europe Press, operating behind a front company created for the purpose, and with Clay Felker, whom she recruited from *Esquire*.

The money came from the CIA, through the conduits the Agency used throughout the 1950s and 1960s to finance the National Student Association, the Congress for Cultural Freedom and the rest of what it called the "non-Communist left." Paget notes that Steinem drew on a "special account" managed by C. D. Jackson of Time Inc.—Eisenhower's chief psychological warfare adviser during the war, a founder of the CIA-financed Radio Free Europe, and by 1959 a speechwriter and consultant to the president—who helped her find the corporate sponsors that camouflaged the Agency's money.

Steinem received high marks for Vienna, and when the CIA prepared its counter-operation against the next festival, at Helsinki in 1962, she was asked to reprise the role and agreed.

Steinem knew where the money came from. Paget's account of her recruitment begins in New Delhi, where Steinem held a fellowship after graduating from Smith. Clive Gray, an American student official who had turned down an offer to join the CIA full-time, looked her up at the suggestion of his CIA case officer and submitted her name to Harry Lunn, a CIA agent then operating under Department of Defense cover.

In Paget's roster of the operation's participants Steinem is listed, without qualification, as "witting"—a term Paget defines by reference to the CIA's own glossary, in which an asset is "a person with a formal relationship characterized by a witting agreement and a degree of commitment and control and who provides information or services." Paget writes that Steinem "was one of the few women in the NSA-CIA club."

None of this was a secret after February 1967, when *Ramparts* magazine exposed the CIA's financing of the National Student Association and the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* traced the youth-festival operation to Steinem within days. Her response to the exposure was not the response of someone who had been used. She did not claim to have been deceived. She defended the Agency.

"Far from being shocked by this involvement," she told the *Times* in 1967, "I was happy to find some liberals in government in those days who were far-sighted and cared enough to get Americans of all political views to the festival." To *Newsweek*, she declared, "In the CIA, I finally found a group of people who understood how important it was to represent the diversity of our government's ideas at Communist festivals. If I had the choice, I would do it again."

This was 1967. The CIA Steinem found liberal and honorable had by then overthrown the governments of Iran and Guatemala, organized the Bay of Pigs invasion, assisted in the murder of Patrice Lumumba and in the Indonesian massacres of 1965–66, and was at that moment running the Phoenix assassination program in Vietnam. Steinem's defense of the CIA was a considered political position, and she held to it for the next fifty-nine years.

Steinem, Harrington and the "non-Communist left"

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The CIA's strategic project in the political and cultural Cold War was the construction of a "left" that was anti-communist, hostile to the Soviet Union, reconciled to American capitalism and to the global role of American imperialism—and that could therefore be deployed against the socialist and anti-imperialist sentiments of workers, students and intellectuals at home and abroad. Its recruits for this project were, overwhelmingly, ex-socialists who had made their peace with the State Department. This is why the question of whether Steinem "remained" a CIA agent is beside the point. What matters is the political project she was recruited to serve.

It is here that Steinem's biography intersects with the history of what is now the DSA. As early as the spring of 1959 Michael Harrington, who would found the DSA's predecessor organization fourteen years later, wrote to Steinem's office asking for help with a plane ticket to Vienna. The story is told in Maurice Isserman's biography of Harrington, *The Other American*, from Steinem's own letters.

Harrington suspected there was government money behind the Independent Service but assumed it came from the State Department, for which he had no objections. Steinem had him send a résumé to C. D. Jackson, and on June 1 wrote Jackson recommending Harrington as "one of the most prominent young Socialist leaders in this country," "far too identifiable to participate in the Festival officially," but "an excellent public speaker" who "has on many occasions been able to turn the tide in public meetings." It is the letter of a recruiter who understood exactly what a known socialist was worth to a CIA operation. The same letter recommended the young Zbigniew Brzezinski, who would later go on to direct, as President Jimmy Carter's national security adviser, the CIA-led intervention in Afghanistan in the late 1970s.

Harrington, however, withdrew from the plan to receive funding from Steinem's Independent Service. The leadership of the Young People's Socialist League, he recalled, decided the money was "too politically risky." He paid his own fare and in Vienna kept his distance, noting in *Commonweal* "the unseen hand of the American government" behind Steinem's delegation. She reported his withdrawal to Jackson and was, in Isserman's words, "obviously disappointed."

Harrington in 1959 was a leading figure in the tendency of Max Shachtman. A founder of American Trotskyism and a close collaborator of Leon Trotsky, Shachtman broke with Trotsky and the Fourth International in 1940, refusing to defend the Soviet Union against imperialism. From that break his trajectory ran steadily to the right. In 1961 he defended the Bay of Pigs invasion. He supported the war in Vietnam and ended as an adviser to AFL-CIO President George Meany.

1972 and the remaking of the Democratic Party

Steinem's path and Harrington's converged in 1972, inside a party that was itself being refashioned. By the end of the 1960s the Democratic Party was in crisis. The coalition assembled under Roosevelt had been shattered by the war in Vietnam, the urban rebellions, and the beginning of the strike wave that would run through the following decade. At Chicago in 1968 the party nominated Hubert Humphrey, the candidate of the war and of the AFL-CIO apparatus, while police clubbed antiwar demonstrators in the streets outside. What followed was not a turn to the left. It was a reorganization, in which the party set about replacing the base it was losing with constituencies defined by race and gender.

The George McGovern campaign, which Harrington and Steinem both supported in 1972, is generally presented as the high-water mark of the Democratic Party's "left." It was in fact the vehicle of this reorganization, and the beginning of the party's repudiation of any association with social reform. Under the delegate-selection rules adopted after the debacle of 1968, which set quotas for women, minorities and the young, the composition of the convention was transformed. The proportion of women delegates roughly tripled, that of black delegates nearly so, and that of delegates under thirty rose several times over.

Steinem's National Women's Political Caucus, founded in July 1971 with Bella Abzug, Betty Friedan and Shirley Chisholm for the express purpose of placing women in elected and appointed office, was one of the instruments of this reorganization. Steinem had worked in McGovern's brief 1968 campaign for the nomination as, in her words, "pamphlet writer, advance 'man,' fund raiser." In 1972 she ran as a Chisholm delegate and fought for an abortion plank on the convention floor.

The McGovern coalition lost 49 states. But it kept the party. Every Democratic administration since—Carter's deregulation, Clinton's destruction of welfare, Obama's bailout of the banks—has rested on the alliance of Wall Street with the "new strata" of 1972, through the promotion of identity politics.

Harrington arrived at the same destination by his own route. He split from the Shachtmanite rump of the Socialist Party in 1972—not over anti-communism, which he avowed to the end of his life, but over its conduct in the presidential election, when the SP effectively campaigned for Nixon. In 1973 he founded the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC). He described the role he wanted his movement to play as "a pro-American, Cold War, State Department kind of role," and its strategy as "the left wing of the possible," that is, whatever the Democratic Party and the ruling class would permit.

Steinem was already in the Socialist Party's orbit. In December 1970 she had debated Midge Decter, then an SP member, on the platform of the party's New York local. She joined DSOC around 1977 and in February 1979 was elected to its national board, alongside Irving Howe, Julian Bond and Bogdan Denitch. When DSOC merged with the New American Movement in 1982 to form the DSA, she went with it. She remained an honorary chair for the rest of her life.

***Ms.* magazine and the Redstockings affair**

A constituency had to be created before it could be delivered. In the years between Vienna and the founding of *Ms.* magazine in 1971, Steinem became a journalist, a Democratic Party operative and the public voice of a movement whose program she did more than anyone else to define. Her patron in these period was Clay Felker, whom she had recruited from *Esquire* to help produce the Vienna daily, and who brought her onto the founding staff of *New York* magazine in 1968 and funded the preview issue of *Ms.* at the end of 1971.

Her first feminist article, "After Black Power, Women's Liberation" (*New York*, April 1969), announced in its title that the women's movement was conceived from the outset as the next claimant in a sequence of identities. Marxism appears in the piece once, as a parenthesis, and is immediately turned on its head: "society can't be restructured until the relationship between the sexes is restructured." Sex before class, and the family before the mode of production. This was the theoretical content, such as it was, of the feminism Steinem promoted.

Ms. magazine, financed by Warner Communications and by the *Washington Post's* Katharine Graham, was the institutional expression of this politics. Steinem herself later explained how it worked. In a 1990 essay, "Sex, Lies and Advertising," she described advertisers demanding "complementary copy"—"articles that praise food/fashion/beauty subjects to 'support' and 'complement' food/fashion/beauty ads"—which the magazine agreed to. Poetry, fiction and children's stories were dropped

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because they attracted no advertising.

What the magazine sold to those advertisers, Steinem later recorded without embarrassment, was readers who were affluent and professional "leaders," and whose buying habits set national patterns. Steinem's essay is a description of the social layer the movement actually served.

In May 1975 Redstockings, a group that had emerged from the New Left, distributed at a New York journalists' convention a sixteen-page document on Steinem and the CIA. They showed that her own *Who's Who* entry, which in 1968 had given her Independent Research Service directorship as 1959–62 and listed her as a current board member, had by 1970 been trimmed to "1959–60," the board membership gone.

Against her 1967 statement that she had "never been asked to report on other Americans or assess foreign nationals," they produced the Service's own report on the Vienna festival, issued under her name, with 13 pages of biographies and political affiliations of foreign delegates. They traced the money behind *Ms.* and behind the Women's Action Alliance Steinem had founded in the same building: Warner, Graham, the Rockefeller Family Fund, the Carnegie Corporation, the Chase Manhattan Bank Foundation.

The Redstockings' own program shared with Steinem the premise that the division of humanity into men and women, not into classes, was the fundamental one. However, its revelations were a damning exposure not only of Steinem, but of an entire social and political layer. In January 1976 Random House bought the Redstockings' book, *Feminist Revolution*, which contained the chapter, after its own lawyers had cleared it. On March 15, 1976, the day the contract was signed, Steinem walked into the office of the president of Random House and handed him a letter from her attorney threatening a libel suit unless the chapter was removed. Letters from lawyers for *Ms.*, for Felker, for Warner Communications and for Katharine Graham followed. Random House published the book in 1978, labeled "abridged," with the chapter cut.

Identity politics, the DSA and the social content of feminism

Steinem went on to build a series of organizations, including the Women's Action Alliance, the Coalition of Labor Union Women (a creation of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, 1974), Choice USA, and the Women's Media Center. All had the common aim of promoting the Democratic Party. Her bestseller of 1992, *Revolution from Within: A Book of Self-Esteem*, marked where the trajectory led intellectually. "Without self-esteem," she wrote, "the only change is an exchange of masters; with it, there is no need for masters." The "revolution" was relocated inside the psyche of the comfortable individual.

In the last two decades of her life, as the Democratic Party abandoned even the pretense of social reform and turned to race and gender as its principal means of mobilization, Steinem sided ever more openly and directly with its most reactionary factions and served in particular as a booster for Hillary Clinton.

In February 2016, with Bernie Sanders drawing the overwhelming support of young people, and young women in particular, against Clinton, Steinem told Bill Maher's audience: "When you're young, you're thinking, 'Where are the boys? The boys are with Bernie.'" The same weekend Madeleine Albright, Clinton's former secretary of state, told a rally that "there's a special place in hell for women who don't help each other."

The DSA declared itself "very disappointed" in Steinem's positions and insisted that her views "do not reflect those of the DSA leadership." But it did not remove her as honorary chair. The organization was at that moment throwing itself into the Sanders campaign in order to bring a radicalizing generation back into the Democratic Party—the work Steinem had been doing, with a different constituency, since 1971.

Jacobin, the magazine of the DSA milieu, responded to her death with a defense of that record. Steinem's work for the CIA, the historian Daniel Geary writes, "was hardly admirable, but it's not like she was planning the Bay of Pigs invasion." She is "best understood as a left-liberal who sought transformative reforms within existing institutions," "a vital broker" who "connected social movements to mainstream political institutions." Her critics err, Geary concludes, by "dividing everyone into the 'establishment' and 'the radicals,' while ignoring the broad space in between."

The Agency's youth operations and its invasion planners were divisions of one apparatus, directed against a single enemy: socialist and anti-imperialist opposition to American capitalism, at home and abroad. As for the "broad space in between," where movements of social protest are brokered into subordination to the institutions of the American state—that is the space the DSA exists to occupy. Geary has given an accurate description of it.

The feminism Steinem personified did not emerge from the struggles of working-class women—the strikes of the textile and garment workers, the fight for the eight-hour day. It arose within the postwar expansion of the professional middle class, out of the demand of its female members for an equal share of its privileges, and it was sponsored, promoted and financed at every stage by the institutions of American liberalism. Its political role, from the National Women's Political Caucus to the Clinton campaigns, was to divide the working class along the lines of gender and to channel the aspirations of working women into the political system that has presided over the immiseration of the great majority of them.

The democratic demands that the media tributes associate with Steinem—equal pay, child care, the right to abortion, divorce and access to contraception—were raised first by the socialist movement, and Marxists have fought for them from the beginning. Feminism is something else: the claim that women constitute a social group with common interests across classes, to be represented by a movement of women.

"Most of those bourgeois women who act like lionesses in the struggle against 'male prerogatives,'" the great Marxist Rosa Luxemburg declared in May 1912, in words that could be said, changing what needs to be changed, of Steinem, "would trot like docile lambs in the camp of conservative and clerical reaction if they had suffrage." The women of the propertied classes, she said, "will always fanatically defend the exploitation and enslavement of the working people by which they indirectly receive the means for their socially useless existence." Against them she counterposed the standpoint of the working class: "The current mass struggle for women's political rights is only an expression and a part of the proletariat's general struggle for liberation."

The various demands of the feminist movement that could be met without touching capitalist property—access to the professions, to management, to office—were met. Those that required social expenditure were abandoned. The Comprehensive Child Development Act of 1971, which would have created a national system of child care, was vetoed by Nixon that December and has never been revived by any Democratic administration in the 55 years since. The right to abortion, entrusted to the Democratic Party and the courts, was repealed in 2022 by the fascists and reactionaries that have been installed in highest judicial body.

A handful of women sit in the boardrooms, while they make up a quarter of the Senate and four out of nine on the Supreme Court (as against the all-male court which issued the *Roe v. Wade* decision). Tens of millions of women work for wages that do not cover rent, without child care, without health care and without secure hours. These are the conditions over which the party Steinem served has presided.

That the entire Democratic Party, from Clinton to Mamdani, joined in her eulogy this week is fitting. She was one of them. The emancipation of

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the working class, including working class women, requires precisely what Steinem’s career was devoted to opposing: the political independence of the working class from the Democratic Party, and the struggle for socialism.

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