This book is gratefully dedicated to . . .

Letty Cottin Pogrebin, who went through boxes of past writing, sold a sampling to Holt, and thus forced me to work on this book; to Suzanne Braun Levine, who gave loving and time-consuming advice on what to keep and where to put it; to my editor, Jennifer Josephy, whose good judgment is matched only by her great patience; to Joanne Edgar, who has spent a dozen years encouraging me to make space for writing, even when I didn’t do it; to Robin Morgan, whose sisterly critiques I hope I never have to live without; to Robert Benton, whose long-ago listening to stories of a Toledo childhood helped show me that I needn’t pretend to be someone else to be a writer; to Clay Felker, who never cared what gender of journalist a newsworthy idea came from; to the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars at the Smithsonian Institution, whose fellowship provided time for much of the research herein; to Stan Pottinger for eight years of friendship, encouragement, and vitality; to Alice Walker for an honesty so strong that it lights an honest path for those around her; to Andrea Dworkin for an anger so righteous that it keeps others from confronting injustice without it; to Patricia Carbine, my friend and partner at Ms. magazine, who has given me and millions of others a forum for new ideas and dreams; to my father, Leo Steinem, who taught me to love and live with insecurity; to my mother, Ruth Nunevillier Steinem, who performed the miracle of loving others even when she could not love herself; and to all the courageous people I have met in twenty years of reporting and organizing—those women and men who dream of a justice that has yet to come and live on the edge of history.
secretary of the army, reports that even in the worst recruiting year of the volunteer era, the army was only sixteen thousand soldiers short of its goal. Without restrictive quotas, women would easily surpass that number. Saving men from the draft is not a bad offer. Women may be pardoned for our suspicions about why it is refused.

Why do the same right-wing forces that campaign for an equal-opportunity death penalty and oppose shelters for battered women, still insist on “protecting” women from military service in general and voluntary combat duty in particular? Margaret Mead and other anthropologists have conducted cross-cultural studies that show women to be just as fierce as men in self-defense. Women have fought in most wars that involved civilian populations and a few that sent us to the front lines. Even in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, some women have served in combat zones as nurses and communications officers. Apparently, we can be shot at—and occasionally killed. We’re just not supposed to shoot back.

No wonder there is a deep conviction among many women that this society just doesn’t want us to learn how to use force. What would happen if all the underpaid waitresses and rape victims and battered wives had a little military training? What if welfare mothers had learned the same skills that many poor men did in Vietnam? How would just your ordinary dependent wife change if she had been through a year or two of universal national service?

Perhaps what we need most is some organizing and a good lawsuit by women who want to volunteer for the military and for combat. After all, a point of feminism is the power to choose.

—1980, 1981

If Men Could Menstruate

Living in India made me understand that a white minority of the world has spent centuries convincing us into thinking a white skin makes people superior, even though the only thing it really does is make them more subject to ultraviolet rays and wrinkles.

Reading Freud made me just as skeptical about penis envy. The power of giving birth makes “womb envy” more logical, and an organ as external and unprotected as the penis makes men even more vulnerable indeed.

But listening recently to a woman describe the unexpected arrival of her menstrual period (a red stain had spread on her dress as she argued heatedly on the public stage) still made me cringe with embarrassment. That is, until she explained that, when finally informed in whispers of the obvious event, she had said to the all-male audience, “and you should be proud to have a menstruating woman on your stage. It’s probably the first real thing that’s happened to this group in years!”

Laughter—Relief. She had turned a negative into a positive. Somehow her story merged with India and Freud to make me finally understand the power of positive thinking. Whatever a “superior” group has will be used to justify its superiority, and whatever an “inferior” group has will be used to justify its plight. Black men were given poorly paid jobs because they were said to be “stronger” than white men, while all women were relegated to poorly paid jobs because they were said to be “weaker.” As the little boy said when asked if he wanted to be a lawyer like his mother, “Oh no, that’s women’s work.” Logic has nothing to do with oppression.
So what would happen if suddenly, magically, men could menstruate and women could not? Clearly, menstruation would become an enviable, boast-worthy, masculine event.

Men would brag about how long and how much. Young boys would talk about it as the envied beginning of manhood. Gifts, religious ceremonies, family dinners, and stag parties would mark the day.

To prevent monthly work loss among the powerful, Congress would fund a National Institute of Dysmenorrhea. Doctors would research little about heart attacks, from which men were hormonally protected, but everything about cramps.

Sanitary supplies would be federally funded and free. Of course, some men would still pay for the prestige of such commercial brands as Paul Newman Tampons, Muhammad Ali’s Rope-a-Dope Pads, John Wayne Maxi Pads, and Joe Namath Jock Shields—“For Those Light Bachelor Days.”

Statistical surveys would show that men did better in sports and won more Olympic medals during their periods.

Generals, right-wing politicians, and religious fundamentalists would cite menstruation (“men-struation”) as proof that only men could serve God and country in combat (“You have to give blood to take blood”), occupy high political office (“Can women be properly fierce without a monthly cycle governed by the planet Mars?”), be priests, ministers, God Himself (“He gave this blood for our sins”), or rabbis (“Without a monthly purge of impurities, women are unclean”).

Male liberals or radicals, however, would insist that women are equal, just different; and that any woman could join their ranks if only she were willing to recognize the primacy of menstrual rights (“Everything else is a single issue”) or self-inflict a major wound every month (“You must give blood for the revolution”).

Street guys would invent slang (“He’s a three-pad man”) and “give fives” on the corner with some exchange like, “Man, you lookin’ good!” “Yeah, man, I’m on the rag!”

TV shows would treat the subject openly. (Happy Days: Richie and Potsie try to convince Fonzie that he is still “The Fonz,” though he has missed two periods in a row. Hill Street Blues: The whole precinct hits the same cycle.) So would newspapers. (Summer shark scare threatens menstruating men. Judge cites monthly in pardoning rapist.) And so would movies. (Newman and Redford in Blood Brothers!)

Men would convince women that sex was more pleasurable at “that time of the month.” Lesbians would be said to fear blood and therefore life itself, though all they needed was a good menstruating man.

Medical schools would limit women’s entry (“they might faint at the sight of blood”).

Of course, intellectuals would offer the most moral and logical arguments. Without that biological gift for measuring the cycles of the moon and planets, how could a woman master any discipline that demanded a sense of time, space, mathematics—or the ability to measure anything at all? In philosophy and religion, how could women compensate for being disconnected from the rhythm of the universe? Or for their lack of symbolic death and resurrection every month?

Menopause would be celebrated as a positive event, the symbol that men had accumulated enough years of cyclical wisdom to need no more.

Liberal males in every field would try to be kind. The fact that “these people” have no gift for measuring life, the liberals would explain, should be punishment enough.

And how would women be trained to react? One can imagine right-wing women agreeing to all these arguments with a staunch and smiling masochism. (“The ERA would force housewives to wound themselves every month”: Phyllis Schlafly. “Your husband’s blood is as sacred as that of Jesus—and so sexy, too!”: Marabel Morgan.) Reformers and Queen Bees would adjust their lives to the cycles of the men around them. Feminists would explain endlessly that men, too, needed to be liberated from the false idea of Martian aggressiveness, just as women needed to escape the bonds of “menses-envy.” Radical feminists would add that the oppression of the nonmenstrual was the pattern for all other oppressions. (“Vampires were our first freedom fighters!”) Cultural feminists would exalt a female bloodless imagery in art and literature. Socialist feminists would insist that, once capitalism and imperialism were overthrown, women would menstruate, too. (“If women aren’t yet menstruating in Russia,” they would explain, “it’s only because true socialism can’t exist within capitalist encirclement.”)

In short, we would discover, as we should already guess, that logic is...
in the eye of the logician. (For instance, here's an idea for theorists and logicians: If women are supposed to be less rational and more emotional at the beginning of our menstrual cycle when the female hormone is at its lowest level, then why isn't it logical to say that, in those few days, women behave the most like the way men behave all month long? I leave further improvisations up to you.)*

The truth is that, if men could menstruate, the power justifications would go on and on.

If we let them.

—1978

Far from the Opposite Shore

DEPTH-SOUNDING I

In the peace movement and feminist surge of the early 1970s, Bella Abzug is elected to Congress. She advances the issues of women and other powerless groups, is the first member of Congress to call for the impeachment of President Nixon, becomes respected for her lawyerly skill in writing legislation and researching little-used shortcuts in congressional procedure, and is elected by her peers, after only two terms in the House of Representatives, as one of its three "most influential" members. In 1976, she dares to become the first woman to run for the Senate from New York, loses by a very small margin, and the following year, becomes the first woman to run on a major party ticket for mayor of New York City.

Is she commended for the courage it takes to leave a safe seat in Congress and be a "first" in tough races? Is she praised for having raised more political money—largely through small donations at that—than any other woman (and many men) in American history? Does she at least get sympathy for expending all that life energy, and losing? Definitely not. She is condemned by supposedly pro-feminist liberals as being "too aggressive" or "abrasive," and by a right-wing media campaign that labels her "anti-family," "pro-Communist," and "Queen of the Pervers." As a result, even her effort to regain a House seat is destroyed: a white, male, Republican millionaire is elected in her stead. In the press, and

*With thanks to Stan Pottinger for many of the improvisations already here.