The secretary of state is a woman. The presidents of Princeton and MIT, as well as the two senators from California, are female. Women command Navy warships, fly jets in combat, play professional basketball, head up Fortune 500 companies, govern states, administer cities, and direct big-city police forces. They're doctors, lawyers, scientists, university professors, ministers, rabbis (but not Roman Catholic priests—yet). It's far from inconceivable that the next president of the United States could be a woman. When you consider women's roles today compared with, say, 1960, when women were still virtually invisible in public life, it's hard not to believe that, to paraphrase the tagline from the old cigarette com-
mercial, we’ve come a long way, baby!

Indeed, casting an eye over the last four decades, you could be excused for assuming that the gender revolution is nearly won, and that women are approaching complete gender equality. But don’t begin basking in your victory just yet, ladies. Running beneath this unparalleled stream of progress has always been a darker, deeper undercurrent of backlash, a reactionary movement that has persistently tried to undo much that’s been accomplished over the last 40 years. Today this counterrevolutionary virus remains alive and well, and not only in the polemics of notorious right-wing, antifeminist types like Rush Limbaugh, Phyllis Schlafly, and Dr. Laura, but in a quieter, more treacherous stealth attack against women’s progress originating in presumably mainstream sources. Like the constant drip, drip, drip of a leaky faucet, the beat of retrenchment has been turning up everywhere in the popular media for the last few years. Consider the following:

A September 20, 2005, page-one story in The New York Times, “Many Women at Elite Colleges Set Career Path to Motherhood,” described—as if it were a national trend—a small group of women from elite colleges who declare that they don’t want careers, but want to marry affluent men so they can stay home in big houses and have babies. “Many” Ivy League women, reported the Times, “say they will happily play a traditional female role, with motherhood their main commitment.”

This repurposes Sylvia Ann Hewlett’s bestselling and much hyped 2002 book, Creating a Life: Professional Women and the Quest for Children, whose overwrought and empirically undersupported theme was that the more successful a woman was, the less likely she’d be to find a husband or bear a child, dooming her to a lonely, forlorn life at the top. Late last year, Kate O’Beirne, a Washington editor of the National Review, came out with a book whose title pretty much sums up the entire message of the antifeminist backlash: Women Who Make the World Worse: How Their Radical Feminist Assault Is Ruining Our Schools, Families, Military, and Sports. In another story that made front-page news, Harvard president Lawrence Summers suggested during a speech in early 2005 that women aren’t inherently suited to do math and science, implying that inborn sex differences—not discrimination or environmental factors—caused the pool of female scientists and mathematicians to be smaller than the male pool. On a similar note, British psychologists Paul Irving and Richard Lynn published the study “Sex Differences in Means and Variability on the Progressive Matrices in University Students” in the November 2005 issue of the British Journal of Psychology purporting to show that women have lower IQs than men. This helps explain, they write, “the greater numbers of men achieving distinctions of various kinds, such as chess grandmasters, Fields medalists for mathematics, Nobel prize-winners and the like.” Lynn had already courted controversy by arguing in print that white Europeans are more intelligent than African blacks, but not as intelligent as East Asians.

A bumper crop of books has sprouted in America like mushrooms in a damp cellar, all bearing variants of the same message: females are, by nature, so different from males that they might be different species, or at least inhabit different planets. The most popular titles belonging to this genre include John Gray’s Men Are from Mars and Women Are from Venus, Deborah Tannen’s You Just Don’t Understand, Michael Gurian’s The Wonder of Girls and The Wonder of Boys, and Steven Rhoads’s Taking Sex Differences Seriously. Other books propose antediluvian formulas of feminine self-abnegation and deference to men for catching and keeping a husband, like Dr. Laura’s megalith, The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands, Laura Doyle’s The Surrendered Wife, and The Rules, by Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider. These wildly popular books advising that women play hard to get to catch a husband and then completely defer to him after marriage are throwbacks to the era of Doris Day and Debbie Reynolds.

It’s become chic in many highbrow magazines to disparage feminism and to praise women’s domestic virtues. For example, Atlantic Monthly usually fea-
tures almost no women writing on serious issues, but did serve up an article in 2003 by contributing editor Caitlin Flanagan arguing that working women have lousy sex, and virtually claiming that she'd never disturb her husband's Saturday tennis game to ask him to help with the housework. Robert Wright, author of The Moral Animal, penned a piece published on November 28, 1994, in the The New Republic titled, "Feminists, Meet Mr. Darwin," arguing that feminism goes against human nature. When Patricia Gowaty, Marlene Zuk, and Anne Fausto-Sterling, three distinguished women scientists, wrote a rebuttal, the magazine declined to publish it. On April 2, 2000, the New York Times Magazine devoted a cover piece to culture critic Andrew Sullivan, who wrote that it was women's lack of testosterone, rather than discrimination, that accounted for their slow progress in the workplace.

This repetitive message comes wrapped in different packages. Sometimes, heavy hitters in the social sciences just dress up traditional biological determinism in 21st-century research terminology to make the case that women aren't meant for achievement by nature or their psyches. In his 2002 bestseller, The Blank Slate, for example, Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker writes that men are natural risk takers, but women "are more likely to choose administrative support jobs that offer lower pay in air-conditioned offices." And Charles Murray, coauthor of The Bell Curve, which caused a sensation in 1994 with its thesis that IQ and race were linked, wrote in "The Inequality Taboo," published in September 2005 in both Commentary magazine and the Wall Street Journal, that women can't think abstractly. "No woman has been a significant original thinker in any of the world's great philosophical traditions," he noted.

At other times, the message takes the presumably female-friendly form of postfeminist "essentialism," arguing that women are in their very essence compassionate, empathetic, cooperative, loving, and sensitive, while men are essentially competitive, assertive, independent, self-reliant, and thick-skinned. In Women's Ways of Knowing, Mary Belenky and her colleagues argue that while men are logical, women are "spiritual, relational, inclusive and credulous." And when they try to lead, they violate their essentially feminine nature. This argument oddly parallels that of perennial antifeminist bad boy George Gilder, who argues in his 1992 book, Men and Marriage, that women are psychologically and physiologically constructed to be home-based baby tenders and nurturers, while men are similarly driven by nature to be active, world-confronting go-getters, and we beseech the society that forgets these ineradicable gender distinctions!

It follows from this line of thought that because women are naturally so much better at relationships than men, they'll be happier and more capable in the domestic world than in the contentious, adversarial world of "serious work (the kind that men do). This line of thinking conjures up an eerie ghost of old Victorian ideology—which we once hoped had been completely discredited—that men and women were biologically destined to occupy completely different spheres: men brazen the competitive, rough-and-tumble public sphere of industry, commerce, advanced education, and government, while women, as "angels of the hearth," kept the private sphere of home and hearth a warm, safe haven for their returning warriors at day's end. In fact, the new gender essentialists even revive the old notion that it's women's job, as the "gentler sex," to civilize men, who otherwise would be too rude, crude, and barbaric for any decent human society.

Gendered Brains?
The reemerging "difference" ideology is perhaps most pernicious when it comes cloaked in scientific or scholarly research, making it all sound deeply grounded in objective reality. It's true that scientists have turned up some intriguing findings—from limited and preliminary studies of brain scans, sex-hormone influences, and psychological responses—that apparently reveal genuine anatomical and functional differences between the sexes.

But to make the breathtaking leap from a mixed and often speculative body of lab studies to the conclusion that men are physiologically equipped to make better pilots, engineers, and mathematicians and women to make better nurses, child-tenders, and care-takers is absurd. Unfortunately, the "difference" theorists take some psychological tests here, some brain scans there, a few studies of monkey behavior here, some research on male and female hormones there and construct elaborate air castles of theory about what men and women are really like and, more dangerously, how they should conduct their lives.

Take, for example psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen, an eminent British researcher on autism at Cambridge University and author of The Essential Difference: Men, Women and the Extreme Male Brain. According to Baron-Cohen, the male brain is "predominantly hardwired" for "systematizing, analyzing, exploring, constructing," while the female brain is similarly wired for "empathizing, mothers, making friends and gossiping." Imagine, he writes, elucidating further how women function, "that you not only see Jane's pain but you also automatically feel concern, wince, and feel a desire to run across and help alleviate her pain," suggesting that all-empathizing, all-the-time is the natural default position of the female brain. In short, men think, women feel your pain.

Autism, which occurs predominantly in boys, is an example of an "extreme male brain," Baron-Cohen postulates, a brain that's obsessive, systematizing to a fault, and lacking the "female" capacity for communication and connection. His thesis about autism may or may not prove valuable over time, but his vaulting leap from studies of autism to generalizations about the differences between men and women's brains is hardly enlightening about gender differences or helpful to women. His theories lead him to suggest that women are best suited for jobs as counselors, primary schoolteachers, nurses, caregivers, therapists, social workers, media-tors, group facilitators, or personnel staff. This sounds like a list a school guidance counselor might have come up with for an adolescent girl in 1955—
where are the female doctors, lawyers, entrepreneurs, scholars, scientists, architects? But, for that matter, where are the kind, loving, compassionate, nurturing men in this picture—all those millions of guys who somehow manage to carry on their systematizing careers while still being fully involved in their empathizing relationships with spouses, lovers, children, friends, and coworkers? And how does he account for the fact that so many men become therapists, teachers, social workers, mediators, guidance counselors, and nurses?

Baron-Cohen draws his conclusions about this great divide between systematizing male brains and empathizing female brains on a mix of anecdotes, clinical cases, some psychological tests, a few limited studies on the effects of male and female hormones in fetuses and infants, and a single study of day-old infants conducted in his lab. Notwithstanding this less-than-overwhelming evidence, he’s become something of a media darling. He was on the cover of Newsweek on August 14, 1995. The BBC documentary “Secrets of the Sexes: Are Men and Women’s Brains Wired Differently?”, which aired in July 2005, focused on his work. On August 8, 2005, The New York Times op-ed piece “The Male Condition” referred to his work, and the Guardian of London wrote about it in an article titled “How Male or Female Is Your Brain?”

Michael Gurian, a therapist and bestselling author of 20 books, including The Wonder of Boys and The Wonder of Girls, runs an institute teaching that boys and girls are so different from each other neurobiologically that both sexes require their own separate, gender-tailored educational program. Like Baron-Cohen, Gurian is quoted widely in the media and appears often on TV and radio as a gender expert. He presents as irrefutable scientific “facts” that females “are less able to separate emotion from reason” and more likely to pursue a comfortable, unthreatening environment than boys; that estrogen lowers “self-assertion” and “self-reliance,” while “higher than normal estrogen levels produce . . . intellectual disadvantages”; that high levels of testosterone give boys the advantage over girls in math, spatial reasoning, focus, and single-mindedness; that because women didn’t hunt in primitival times, their brains didn’t evolve in ways that equip them to be engineers or scientists; and that too much ambition will make girls miserable—they’ll be happier and more in tune with nature pursuing intimacy and attachment.

To the extent that such ideas are taken seriously by the public, it doesn’t bode well for the 46 percent of women in the American labor force. If what these men say is true and women’s feminine brains just aren’t up to much beyond caretaking, why would American citizens support more legislation backing women’s equal access to good jobs, professional careers, and fair pay?

But how much of this presumably scientific “evidence” for the massive brain differences between men and women is solid and how much simply bogus? At Cambridge Maternity Hospital in 2001,
Baron-Cohen conducted a study of 102
day-old boys that purported to show
that baby boys looked longer at mobiles and
baby girls looked longer at human
faces. This, he claims, validates the
notion that male brains are suited for
spatial abilities, math, and understand-
ing systems, while female brains are nat-
urally geared to interpersonal relation-
ships. Although his findings became
something of a media hit, their real
import is less than astonishing. In a
forthcoming journal article, cognitive
psychologist and infant-cognition ex-
pert Elizabeth Spelke, codirector of
Harvard's Mind, Brain and Behavior
Interfaculty Initiative, writes that this
study is so flawed as to be almost mean-
ingless. The experiment lacked crucial
controls against experimenter bias, nor
was it ever published in a peer-reviewed
journal or replicated elsewhere. Female
and male infants were propped up in a
parent's lap and shown, side by side, an
active person and an inanimate object.
Since newborns can't hold their heads
up independently, their visual prefer-
ces would still have been determined
by the way their parents held them.
And what about that female
"empathizing" brain—the idea that
women are just inherently more caring
and tuned in to relationships than
men? Psychologist and ethicist Carol
Gilligan, now a professor at New York
University, gave this idea powerful trac-
tion with her 1982 book In a Different
Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's
Development, which has become almost
an iconic guide to what's been called
"difference" feminism. Gilligan's ideas
have had an enormous impact on the
fields of psychology, ethics, education,
law, and women's studies, but she's
always had her share of critics arguing
vehemently that her studies don't stand
up to rigorous scrutiny—they're tiny,
have no control groups, and other
researchers haven't been able to repli-
cate her findings.
Now a new study finds that women
don't have any particular advantage in
qualities of empathy, understanding, or
compassion. David Skuse, professor of
Behavioural and Brain Sciences at
London's Institute of Child Health,
reported in 2005 that new research
casts doubt on the notion that girls
have a large advantage over boys in per-
sonal relationships. This research, pub-
lished in the United Kingdom's Journal
of Applied Statistics in 2005, and reported
by BBC news in "How Boys Miss
Teacher's Reprimand," aired on August
8, 2005, also raises serious doubts about
Baron-Cohen's theory that girls and
boys are born with very different brains,
suiting them for different roles in life.
Describing his study of differences on
social intelligence between boys and
girls, Skuse said that if Baron-Cohen's
theory were right, girls should be sig-
ificantly better than boys at recogniz-
ing emotion. At 6, girls were indeed
better than boys in this area, with 70
percent of boys performing worse than
the average for the girls. But by age 17,
boys had closed the gap and were very
similar to girls—the overlap between
the sexes in the ability to recognize
emotion was better than 90 percent.

Do the Math
When Larry Summers made his infa-
rous remark that women are absent
from high academic posts in math and
science possibly because they're innate-
ly less suited to these pursuits than
men, he ignited a furious media fire-
fight between political pundits and talk-
ing heads. Why did he make these
remarks? His career gives no suggest-
ion that he's a sexist. But the idea that
women's brains aren't built to with-
stand the rigorous of tough disciplines has
seeped insidiously into the cultural zeit-
gen over the past few years, and appar-
ently seeped into the brain of Harvard's
president. Since then, he's apologized
for his remarks, admitted he got the sci-
cence wrong, and resigned from his
position, but the damage has been
done. How many media reports fol-
lowed up the initial brouhaha with
news that the research actually shows
men and women are more alike than
different, even in mathematical abili-
ties? And how many parents, guidance
counselors, teachers, and parents with
Summers's words lodged in their sub-
conscious will steer girls away from
math and science?
In fact, good research today finds the
differences between men and women
in math are very small. Psychologist
Janet Hyde of the University of
Wisconsin, for example, shows in a meta-
analyses of the math scores of four mil-
lion students published in 1990 in the
Psychological Bulletin that there are
inconsequential differences: boys out-
performed girls in 51 percent of the
studies, girls outperformed boys in 43
percent, and there was no gender dif-
fERENCE in 5 percent. Psychologist
Diane Halpern of Claremont McKenna
College, president of the American
Psychological Association, examined
hundreds of studies purportedly
demonstrating substantial sex differ-
ences in math and cognitive abilities for
her 2000 book, Sex Differences in
Cognitive Abilities. She also found only
trivial differences.

Some (among them Gurian) argue
that male hormones give men an
inborn advantage at math. Since these
hormones kick in at puberty, we should
see a striking difference in boys' and
girls' math scores at this time. In a study
published in the December 2001 issue
of Social Forces, socioligists Erin Leehy
and Guang Guo of the University of
North Carolina–Chapel Hill followed
20,000 4- to 18-year-olds to track specif-
ic math abilities, including such "typi-
cally" male talents as reasoning skills
and geometry. "Based on prior litera-
ture," they noted, "we expected large
gender differences to emerge as early
as junior high school." But it didn't
happen: they found that the trajecto-
ries of male and female math scores are
nearly identical across the age range.

Bestsellers on Gender
Myths
Even more dangerous than presumably
respectable research produced by scien-
tists like Baron-Cohen are the hugely
successful, generally nonscientific best-
sellers by "difference" authors that help
confirm gender stereotypes among mil-
ions of people and go on to shape
underlying social attitudes. John Gray,
author of Men Are from Mars, Women Are
from Venus has become a virtual market-
ing industry, offering books, tapes,
videos, games, diet and exercise advice,
relationship courses, workshops, refer-
als to "Mars/Venus" coaches and coun-
selors, and a dating service. This might
not be a problem if the books and other
Continued on page 72
Looking Ahead

We aren’t suggesting that there are no differences between men and women in physiology, psychology, life experiences, vulnerability to disease, and so forth. No one thinks that the sexes are exactly the same. But what the differences really mean is still unknown, and how we understand the nature of the differences is crucial to how we think about ourselves, how we raise our children, and how we handle ourselves in our work. We’ve seen how stereotyped ideas can creep into our schools, our workplaces, and our expectations of each other. And assuming that the media’s endorsement of difference doesn’t reinforce gender inequality is as naive as believing that “separate but equal” actually guaranteed educational equality to black students before Brown v. Board of Education.

In fact, there’s far more similarity than difference between men and women. While it’s true that brain scans show some differences between boys and girls, says David Sadker, education professor at American University, in the September 19, 2005, issue of Newsweek, no one is exactly sure what those differences mean, and they’re dwarfed by brain differences within each gender. “If you want to make schools a better place,” adds Sadker, “you have to strive to see kids as individuals.”

The effort to understand men and women by any one narrative—whether genes, drives, brains, early socialization, biblical imperative, or political ideology—is doomed to fail. We’re far too complicated for that. Seeing men and women as more alike than different enables everybody to take maximum advantage of the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead, and to confront the future unencumbered by the myths and stereotypes of the past.

Rosalind Barnett, Ph.D., and Caryl Rivers, Ph.D. are the authors of Same Difference: How Gender Myths Are Hurting Our Relationships, Our Children and Our Jobs. Barnett is senior scientist at the Women’s Studies Research Center at Brandeis University. Rivers is a professor of journalism at Boston University. Contact: rbarnett@brandeis.edu.

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