

[Phyllis Schlafly and *Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade*, Donald T. Critchlow, Princeton University Press, 422 pages]

Phyllis Schlafly: Conservatism's Founding Mother

By Gregory L. Schneider

IT IS AMAZING that academic historians, long interested in studying the impact of women on modern American life, have ignored arguably the most important woman in present-day American politics, Phyllis Schlafly. Then again, maybe it isn't so amazing, for Schlafly has fought valiantly over the course of a long career against feminism, and it is feminists who dominate academia and write women's history.

Donald Critchlow, a political historian at Saint Louis University, has shattered the historical barrier, providing a well written, impressively researched, and sympathetic study of the importance of grassroots activism in the formation of modern American conservatism. Critchlow shows how Schlafly, a dedicated Republican activist, used her talent to mobilize grassroots conservatives, the majority of them women, and how, in conjunction with intellectuals and politicians, she helped move the GOP to the Right. Those looking for a traditional biography of Schlafly will not find it here. Critchlow's book is mostly concerned with Schlafly's activist career. And it is a fascinating tale.

For younger readers, the name Phyllis Schlafly probably will not mean much, which is regrettable, for she is truly conservatism's founding mother. For those of us who grew up in the 1970s, she was everywhere, on talk shows, on the news, on William F. Buckley's *Firing Line*, in magazines. Most of what we saw or read about her was negative. She was standing in the way of progress, of the libera-

tion of women from patriarchal authority. She was traditional, believing that the Equal Rights Amendment portended a day when women could be drafted into the military, could serve in combat roles, and homosexuals could marry. Flash forward 30 years—was she wrong?

Her long career cannot be captured simply in a treatment of her opposition to the ERA, as famous as that made her. By the end of the ERA fight, Schlafly had been a conservative activist for close to 30 years, having run for Congress from her Alton, Illinois district, mobilized women against communism, headed up the National Federation of Republican Women (from which she was purged after 1964), served as a delegate to Republican national conventions, and written books like *A Choice, Not an Echo* and *The Gravediggers* (co-authored with Chester Ward), which combined sold three million copies in 1964. All the while, she remained a dedicated mother and spouse, bearing and rearing five children. During the ERA battle she would often anger her feminist opponents when she led off her talks saying, "I'd like to thank my husband for allowing me to speak here tonight."

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Critchlow's book is as much a history of the neglected grassroots activism that helped conservatives gain power in the 1980s as it is about Schlafly. Historians have turned their attention to conservatism in the past decade, and there are many valuable studies of specific organizations and biographies of individuals. Yet scholars still point to George H. Nash's magisterial 1976 work *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* as a model for the study of conservative history. Its portrait

of intellectuals shaping the movement has led historians to look for the rise of the Right among academics, journalists, and policy wonks.

Grassroots activism has remained an orphan in conservative history. There have been a few case studies of grassroots politics, such as Lisa McGirr's *Suburban Warriors*, about Orange County and the "little old women in tennis shoes" who made up the John Birch Society. But Critchlow's book, based on prodigious research in Schlafly's own papers, a huge collection kept in her Eagle Forum headquarters, as well as 60 additional archives, imparts a new dimension to our understanding of conservative politics—the long-term importance of grassroots organizing for the conservative revival. His book, while a study of one woman's fight for conservative causes, also offers an alternative approach to understanding the long sweep of conservative history.

Critchlow puts to rest a few myths about the development of the Right in postwar America. He challenges the arguments of liberal historians like Rick Perlstein and Dan T. Carter who view conservatism's development as a reaction to the civil-rights movement. Critchlow sets them straight. Anticom-

munist played the biggest role for the development of grassroots conservatism. "For anticommunist activists like Schlafly," Critchlow writes, "the struggle against communism dictated all aspects of political life from the local to the national level."

While there were certainly anti-Semites and racists on the Right, in the 1950s and 1960s when the civil-rights movement was at high tide, conservatives were more concerned about communism than race relations. "Southern anti-

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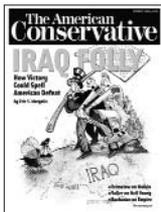
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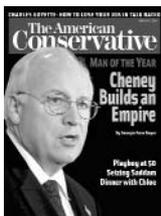
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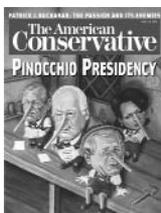


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Semitism and segregation were not integral to conservative thought in the South," Critchlow states, "nor were these prejudices closely associated with the Republican Party in the South." The GOP in the South "saw its first political inroads in the postwar era in white middle-class suburbs."

It is not surprising, therefore, that Schlafly and like-minded Christian middle-class white women were not chanting "we shall overcome" in Mississippi peace marches—nor should anything nefarious be inferred about them not doing so. Communism was their vital concern, and Schlafly dedicated her time and resources to exposing its threats. Not only did she write very readable books about Soviet defense policies and the USSR's growing missile strength—and concomitant American weakness—but she dedicated a syndicated radio program, "America, Wake Up" to the issue of communism.

What made Schlafly so appealing as a leader? Much of it was owed to a value system she learned early in life. She was imbued with a strong work ethic, a sense of serious purpose, and commitment to her Catholic faith. An intelligent and self-confident young woman, Schlafly attended Washington University in St. Louis during World War II, working at a nearby ordinance factory testing ammunition. She received a fellowship to attend Radcliffe for graduate school and took a job at the American Enterprise Association as a researcher. She returned to St. Louis and married Fred Schlafly, an attorney for manufacturer John Olin.

She became active in Republican politics, starting off as a party committee-woman and volunteering on behalf of the local GOP. Her first foray as a candidate, running for Congress from Illinois's 21st district against an entrenched Democratic political machine, allowed her to reach wider audiences where she honed her speaking style and skills as a debater. She lost the race but dedicated herself afterwards to conservative causes.

The publication of *A Choice, Not an Echo* in 1964 contributed greatly to the nomination of Barry Goldwater for president that year. It also made Schlafly a national celebrity. Critchlow conveys a humorous story that occurred on a plane trip to Vancouver. At a refueling stop in Seattle, the pilot announced that a crowd had gathered to greet one of the celebrities on board the plane. Comedian Bob Hope, who was traveling with the Schlaflys, got up to exit the plane, but the pilot told Hope to sit down. The crowd wanted Phyllis Schlafly. After the Goldwater debacle, she immersed herself into a study of defense issues and published several books with Admiral Chester Ward. She supported Richard Nixon for president in 1968, but like many conservatives she felt betrayed by Nixon's détente policies and his opening to communist China.

She became the feminist's *bête noire* as a result of her other political activities. Schlafly had always stressed the need for religion and politics to mix. This "moral populism," as Critchlow calls it, allowed her and like-minded women to do the work necessary both to preserve the moral order of Christianity and defend the nation from its enemies. During the 1960s, it appeared that liberalism was the enemy. Liberals were fighting wars in Southeast Asia—unlike many conservatives, Schlafly was not an enthusiastic supporter of the wars in Korea and Vietnam—expanding social spending, falling behind the Soviets in strategic weapons and, via the Supreme Court, threatening the basis of constitutional government.

A growing number of court decisions, especially *Roe v. Wade*, challenged traditional Christian values, and conservatives mobilized to fight the trend. Schlafly took the lead, publishing an attack on feminism in the February 1972 edition of *The Phyllis Schlafly Report* that began her crusade to stop the Equal Rights Amendment.

Almost single-handedly, with few politicians from the Republican Party supporting her—Critchlow documents how Gerald Ford's administration tried

Jazz Was Bechet's Crown

By Ralph de Toledano

THEY CAN DEFINE JAZZ. They can analyze it. But for those who made it—and for those who were so close that they thought they were making it—jazz was more than music. It was an expression and an explanation of life. Sidney Bechet, the titan among New Orleans reed men, called it “a kind of memory that wants to sing itself.” He never lost that memory, never in the six decades of his life. In *Treat It Gentle*, his dictated autobiography, he said:

All God's children got a crown. My race, their music—it's their way of showing you something. It's what they've got to make *them* happy. Somewhere, all God's children wear a crown. ... Oh, I can be mean. But not to the music. That's a thing you got to trust, you got to treat it gentle. The music, it's the road. You stop by the way, and you can't never be sure what you're going to find waiting. But the music itself, the road—it's the thing that brings you to everything else.

From almost the beginning, New Orleans recognized his genius, as did others not of that germinal period when jazz scattered its seed. Go back to 1919, when Bechet was touring Europe with Will Marion Cook's band. Ernst Ansermet, the young Swiss conductor already famous for introducing Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du soldat*, heard him play. In the *Revue Romande*, he celebrated an “extraordinary clarinet virtuoso” whose improvisations were “admirable for their inventive richness, rhythmic strength, and daring innovation. Their form was as compelling, direct, forceful and relentless

to stop Schlafly, with Betty Ford playing the crucial role—Schlafly formed a new organization, STOP-ERA, to block passage of the amendment. The better-funded and better-organized feminists possessed almost every advantage from the start, but they lacked unity. Schlafly dominated STOP-ERA. She was the organization's national public face and vehicle for conveying the anti-feminist message. Supporting her were thousands of churchgoing women, united in their belief that ERA, *Roe*, and other feminist policies threatened the traditional values in which they believed. They had confidence that Schlafly could convey these ideas, and their faith in her proved well founded.

Both STOP-ERA and the National Organization for Women (NOW) had similar memberships. The majority of both organizations consisted of college graduates, and both groups had women of similar income levels. Feminists tended to be younger, and there was a prevalence of single and divorced women in NOW. But the fundamental distinction between the two organizations was religious. “A remarkable 98 percent of anti-ERA supporters,” Critchlow writes, “claimed church membership, while only 31 to 48 percent of pro-ERA supporters did.” It is not wrong to claim that STOP-ERA was the backbone of today's social conservative politics.

The pro-ERA forces had the media on their side, including women's magazines, celebrities such as Alan Alda, *Playboy* magazine—which the feminists played down—and the major television networks and newspapers. They were not unified politically, however. Some wanted to push for lesbian rights, others for gender equity, and still others for full equality with men on every level. Their divisions worked in favor of the determined Schlafly. In 1982, ERA's deadline for ratification expired before it could be approved by the needed 38 states.

For her role in stopping ERA, Schlafly drew the venom of feminists and the Left. To say she was hated is to put it mildly. She received reams of hate mail,

pornographic pictures, used sanitary napkins from screeching feminists incensed at her “treason.” Critchlow recounts this and more. Feminists developed a Schlafly voodoo doll, complete with pins. Betty Friedan famously said in a debate with Schlafly, “I'd like to burn you at the stake.”

One episode recounted by Critchlow involved the popular CBS show “Cagney and Lacey.” In a story that was to air a few days before the final expiration of ERA, the title characters guard an anti-feminist leader—whose mannerisms mimicked Schlafly's—against a threat on her life. Coming as it did only a few months after John Lennon's assassination, Schlafly supporters were exasperated and petitioned for the episode not to air. (It was aired a few months later.)

Since the ERA's defeat, Schlafly has lost a lot of public attention and exposure. But she continues to fight for her causes, believing that judges threaten democracy and constitutional government. (She wrote about this in *The Supremacists*, published in 2004.) She also has taken up the fight against trade agreements and against illegal immigration. She remains active, a vigorous octogenarian maintaining a crowded schedule that includes lecturing, hosting a weekly radio show, writing a column, and running her activist organization, Eagle Forum.

Critchlow captures Schlafly's importance for the conservative movement. Without activists like her, without their dedication and talent in mobilizing like-minded people, conservatism may not have made the inroads it has in American politics. In Critchlow's capable hands the story of grassroots organizing comes alive. The book is a splendid example of political history, telling the story of an important woman and the legacy she has left conservatism. ■

Gregory L. Schneider is associate professor of history at Emporia State University in Kansas. He has written and edited three books, most recently Equality, Decadence and Modernity: The Collected Essays of Stephen J. Tonsor.