
”Turning Feminist Rhetoric on its Head: Phyllis Schlafly, The Phyllis Schlafly Report, and Gender Essentialism”

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Abstract

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A Catholic mother of five trained as a lawyer, Phyllis Schlafly (1924 – 2016) was a prominent figure of the conservative movement, a staunch proponent of family values and a committed grassroots activist. While she had been involved on several battlefronts-fighting against communist subversion at every level of the US government, working towards repositioning the Republican Party along strictly conservative lines, and endeavoring to influence the decision-making process at the RNC-she was particularly successful in mobilizing the support of conservative grassroots activists.

Her most outstanding feat in this realm is undoubtedly her tireless effort to derail the ratification process of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) in the 1970s. Voted by the two chambers of Congress in late 1971 and early 1972, the ERA was supposed to undergo a smooth ratification process, with 31 out of the necessary 38 states having approved the amendment by early 1973. Bringing together concerned women as well as religious ministers, Schlafly launched STOP ERA, a movement designed to apply popular pressure on state assemblies and deter lawmakers from ratifying the amendment, which successfully brought the ratification process to a halt.

After tracing Schlafly’s failed attempts at influencing the political process from within-examining her congressional run in 1952 and her candidacy for president of the National Federation of Republican Women in 1967-this presentation analyzes Schlafly’s two-prong strategy to thwart the ratification of ERA between 1972 and 1982. First, drawing on Miller (2015), it shows how such a strategy recalibrated gender essentialism in order to frame the rights acquired during the late 1960s as ”negative freedom”, while framing the privileges afforded by womanhood as ”positive freedom”, a phenomenon most visible in the monthly *The Phyllis Schlafly Report*. Second, it argues that the success of STOP ERA was in large part due to Schlafly’s capacity to bring together individuals regardless of their religious affiliation. In so doing, she inaugurated the concept of ”co-belligerence” later advocated by evangelical apologist Reverend Francis Schaeffer in 1975 when he urged evangelical Christians to join forces with believers from other denominations in the fight against secularism.

SOURCES

*Speaker

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