



September 1982

Defeating the Era: A Right-Wing Mobilization of Women

Barbara Ehrenreich
New York Institute for the Humanities

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>

 Part of the [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#), [Politics and Social Change Commons](#), and the [Social Work Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ehrenreich, Barbara (1982) "Defeating the Era: A Right-Wing Mobilization of Women," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 3 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol9/iss3/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.



DEFEATING THE ERA: A RIGHT-WING
MOBILIZATION OF WOMEN*

Barbara Ehrenreich

Associate Fellow of the New York
Institute for the Humanities
Fellow at the Institute
for Policy Studies

In an irony that feminists and their liberal supporters have yet to fully grasp, the opponents of the Equal Rights Amendment celebrated its defeat as a "great victory for women" and as a "great achievement by women." The ERA had been a major--perhaps the major--goal of the American feminist movement for ten years. It would have rendered unconstitutional dozens of arcane state laws which limit women's property rights during and after marriage. It would have strengthened women's position as wage-earners--helping open up higher-paying, traditionally male jobs, and providing a wedge against all the subtle, informal mechanisms of wage discrimination. It would have, in symbolic fashion, finally given women recognition as full and equal citizens. Yet on June 30, 1982, it was defeated.

Most of the 1400 who celebrated the ERA's defeat in the grand ballroom of Washington's Shoreham Hotel on the evening of June 30, were in fact women. Many were middle-aged and middle-class, and seemed slightly out of place in floor-length pastel gowns which looked like they had done prior service in decades of Rotary Club balls; others had the confident look of Sun Belt wealth, their hair frosted, their skins tanned. Most of them had been foot soldiers in the campaign against the ERA, and had well-rehearsed reasons for their opposition. "Women have all the freedom they need already," said Lillian Smitherman from Winston-Salem, North Carolina, referring all further questions to her husband. "It would have de-sexed society," a stylish 34-year-old from Baltimore told me, "There would be unisex rest rooms." Another woman, who had flown to the event from Lake Oswego, Oregon, feared that sexual equality would legitimate "homosexual marriages," and that the homosexuals, thus encouraged, would start reproducing. A retired general averred that the ERA would require women to be drafted into combat duty. Several women said they feared "the destruction of the family" and one tired-looking woman from Boston believed the ERA would lead to a state of unisex anarchy in which "the difference between the sexes would be abolished by law."

Of all the fanciful arguments used against the ERA in the ten-year campaign for its passage, the most compelling one, and the one which probably did more than

*The author wishes to acknowledge the support of a Ford Foundation Grant for Non-Fiction Writers.

any other to mobilize the female opposition, was economic: that equality would take away "the rights women already have," that is, the "right to be a housewife." When organized opposition to the ERA surfaced at the beginning of 1973, it was with the stated concern that the ERA would "abrogate the laws that require men to support their families." And, apart from the lurid possibility of encountering men over mixed-sex urinals, it was this threat that inspired the thousands of women who showed up at state capitols throughout the country to lobby against the ERA and for "the preservation of the family." A pamphlet from the anti-ERA League of Housewives, an offshoot of the multi-issue antifeminist group which called itself, cheerfully, "Happiness of Womanhood," asserted that it is

the right of a woman to be a full-time wife and mother, and to have this right recognized by laws that obligate her husband to provide the primary financial support and a home for her and their children, both during their marriage and when she is a widow (O'Reilly, 1980: 189).

Mrs. Jacquie Davison, the founder of Happiness of Womanhood, was proud to state that her own husband provided not only for her personal needs, but also--evidently without legal compulsion--for her organizational expenses (New York Times, January 15, 1973).

The fact that there are no laws requiring husbands to buy life-insurance policies did not weaken the anti-ERA forces' insistence on women's "right" to lifelong support. Nor did the fact, only slightly less accessible to the casual student of the law, that those state laws that do name the husband as the primary provider have never been enforced to win a larger share of a husband's wage for any resident wife. The "rights" and "privileges" which the antifeminists believe are accorded to women by marriage are, at best, private arrangements reinforced by convention, at worst, comforting fantasies. In neither case are they threatened by legal injunctions against sex discrimination. What was at stake in the battle over the ERA was the legitimacy of women's claim on men's incomes and for this there was reason enough to fear--and to judge from the intensity of the opposition, fear enough to abandon reason.

If she read the antifeminist literature available to her, the average woman who lobbied against the ERA with offerings of home-baked bread or future votes was remarkably well-informed about at least one sociological datum, the divorce rate. If, in addition, she did some thinking about her own chances of making a living as a self-supporting wage-earner (and she would have to do this thinking on her own, because the antifeminist literature is studiously silent about women's collective disadvantage as wage-earners), she would have formed a terrifying sense of her own vulnerability. The slightest outward ripple from the sexual revolution or the human potential movement could be enough to dislodge a husband from his marriage and catapult his ex-wife into sudden, midlife downward mobility. Faced with such a possibility, a woman could, quite sensibly, decide that the feminist promise of eventual economic equality was so much pie in the sky. Better, perhaps, to check the forces that allow men to think they have no natural obligation to support women, and, one of these, clearly, was feminism itself.

In the ideology of American antifeminism, it is almost impossible to separate the distrust of men from the hatred of feminists, or to determine with certainty which is the prior impulse. There is a clear recognition that "men have rebelled," as anti-ERA leader Kathleen Teague puts it, and sometimes an acknowledgment that their rebellion has inspirational sources other than feminism. "The man is not responsible any more," observes Onalee McGraw, who is credited by the Conservative Digest with being a national pro-family leader. "It's the whole me--decade thing--humanistic psychology," she explained in an early 1982 interview, "and men are taking advantage of the situation." To antifeminists who focus on the issue of abortion, it is the possibility of sex without babies that has undermined male responsibility. After all, if pregnancy is "a woman's choice," as feminists insist, what's to prevent men from thinking that it's also a woman's responsibility? In a 1980 speech offered "in defense of the Christian family," anti-abortion leader Mrs. Randy Engel presented the view that, "men desire sex without responsibility. They become unmanly and frightened by the thought of having to assume economic responsibility for a family: they instinctively try to escape" (1980: 1).

But the antifeminist analysis of male irresponsibility stops short of questioning the structural insecurity of marriage. Distrust of men takes the socially more acceptable form of resentment directed at the would-be independent woman, who, in her selfishness, would undermine other women's fragile privileges. Thus behind every male rebel the antifeminists can point to a female instigator--to Mrs. Engel, it is the "emancipated, pill-popping" wife who deprives her husband of the chastening effect of frequent conception. Teague and McGraw blame organized feminism. The male rebellion has "victimized women," and "women's lib has to answer for it."

If men are rebelling in a way that hurts women, children and even unborn babies, then the women who abet them must be either traitors or fools. The genius of Phyllis Schlafly, chief organizer and ideologue of the anti-ERA movement, was to argue that feminists are both. In her book The Power of the Positive Woman, which is considerably milder in tone than her public utterances, she observes that "some ERA proponents argue that husbands support their wives only because of love, not because of the law." This, she quickly explains, is foolish romanticism, because love "is not apt to survive all those years 'for better or worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death we do part.'" Love is one thing; duty is another, and "duty is essential to marriage." "Furthermore," she warns, "the high divorce rate proves that many husbands have stopped loving their wives." If men have become less willing to volunteer their support, then it is hardly the time to relax the external constraints on them. "Should a husband have the legal right to stop supporting his faithful wife of twenty or thirty years by the simple expedient of saying, 'I don't love her anymore; I love a younger woman?'" Then, in a quick leap that obscures the fact that few men--except perhaps the wealthiest--are compelled to support their "faithful wives" for a moment longer than they are inclined to, she answers sternly: "Even though love may go out the window, the obligation should remain. ERA would eliminate that obligation" (1977: 76).

Feminists, too, addressed the situation of the financially dependent housewife, but it was the antifeminists who played on her sense of vulnerability. While the

feminist analysis spoke to the housewife's anger and frustration, the antifeminist analysis spoke to her fear--fear that she might, after all, be a parasite whose support rested on neither love nor accomplishment, but only "obligation." At bottom, the antifeminists accepted the most cynical masculine assessment of the heterosexual bond: that men are at best half-hearted participants in marriage and women are lucky to get them.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: ON BOOZE AND BALLOTS

The decade of the 1970s is not the first time that American women have rallied and organized against the threat of male irresponsibility. There was a similar movement in the late nineteenth century, which, like today's anti-ERA and anti-abortion movements, drew on a constituency of middle-class housewives. This was the temperance movement, which at its peak mobilized nearly 200,000 women into the Women's Christian Temperance Union's campaign to close saloons and outlaw all "ardent spirits." According to historian Barbara Epstein, few of the women who became temperance crusaders were in a position--socially or economically--to have had direct contact with the disruptive effects of drink; alcohol was a symbolic issue, like abortion or ERA, a vivid reminder of women's vulnerability within marriage. Epstein writes:

In nineteenth century America women--in some ways women of the middle strata specifically--were quite dependent upon marriage. Few women could find any alternative to it that would bring any degree of material or emotional security--or respectability....This meant that women's dependence upon men, their vulnerability to men, was extreme. The man that a woman married at twenty might turn out to be kind, responsible, and financially successful; or he might turn out to be a drunken brute and a failure at business. Talking about temperance was a way of talking about these issues without attacking men (temperance literature always blamed the alcohol, not the man) and without criticizing the structure of the family (which was much too dangerous--or simply unthinkable--at a time when for the vast majority of women, there was no realistic alternative) (1981b).

Like today's pro-family crusaders, the temperance activists saw themselves protecting "Christian values" and the sanctity of the home, as well, of course, as the security of women. The difference--and it is a decisive one--is that when women organized to protect their status as wives in the nineteenth century they had no trouble making common cause with the feminist movement of their time. The late nineteenth century suffrage movement was equally dedicated to "home values," including temperance, and proposed to use the vote only to extend such values into the untidy domain of civic life. Aside from favoring women's entry into professions which could be represented as extensions of motherhood (like social work), the mainstream suffrage movement did not question the division of the sexes into breadwinners and homemakers and took pains to demonstrate that the ballot would not

compromise women's ability to cook, sew or comfort her work-weary provider. So the temperance movement made common cause with the suffrage movement and vice versa, around a shared commitment to "Home Protection" and a perception that "whatever breaks down the home, hurts woman most, because she is most dependent upon home affections for her happiness" (Epstein, 1981b).

One hundred years later, feminism itself could be portrayed as one of those pernicious forces, replacing the demon rum, which "breaks down the home." Feminists have tended to see this as either a vicious distortion or a misperception based on the unfortunate overstatements of a radical minority. But in our time, it is mainstream feminism which has embraced the goal, symbolized by ERA, of financial independence for women. That goal was too radical for late nineteenth century feminism, and it has proved to be too radical for an influential minority of women in our own time. For insofar as financial independence is a legitimate and honorable status for some women, financial dependence becomes--unfortunately--less honorable for other women. In a battle over matters which are largely voluntary (like whether men should marry, remain married or share their earnings with their wives) cultural legitimacy is the paramount stake. By simply asserting women's right to enter the labor market on an equal footing with men, feminism undercut the dependent housewife's already tenuous "right" to be supported. If some women can "pull their own weight"--as a resentful husband or a female follower of Phyllis Schlafly might reason--then why shouldn't all of them?

So, in our time, the women who mobilized to "protect the family," the spiritual descendants of temperance activists, parted company with the granddaughters of the suffragists. Instead of there being one movement to represent women in a hostile and uncertain world, we have two--the feminist movement and the antifeminist movement. It is as if, facing the age-old insecurity of the family wage system, women chose opposite strategies: either to get out (figuratively speaking) and fight for equality of income and opportunity, or to stay home and attempt to bind men more tightly to them. From the vantage point of the antifeminists, the crime of feminism lay not in hating men, but in trusting them too well.

THE FAR RIGHT CONNECTION

But the twentieth century clash over women's rights--and men's obligations--involves much more than a strategic disagreement among women over the issue of economic security. The women quoted above as antifeminist leaders are also ranking functionaries in America's New Right, for whom the issues of marriage and male responsibility share space on a list which includes such concerns as the need to "re-arm" America, check the tyranny of big government, and impose the values of seventeenth century Puritanism on a sinfully errant mass culture. Onalee McGraw is a consultant to the right-wing Heritage Foundation, which is dedicated, among other things, to expanding U.S. military power, eliminating welfare and promoting nuclear power. Kathleen Teague is the executive director of the American Legislative Exchange Council, which is opposed to gun control, occupational health and safety regulations and the "abuses" of organized labor. Phyllis Schlafly, the

most prominent antifeminist organizer and spokeswoman, had been an activist on the far right for at least two decades before it re-emerged, with fresh aspirations for state power, as the New Right.

Whether Schlafly was a dues-paying member of the John Birch Society--a semi-secret right-wing organization notorious not only for its virulent anti-communism, but for its attacks on Republican stalwarts and its overt racism and anti-Semitism--has yet to be established. In 1960 Robert Welch praised her in the society's Bulletin as "a very loyal member of the John Birch Society." Later she denied membership, but it is a matter of public record that the society promoted (and in some cases distributed) her books and that she, in turn, spoke at Birch-sponsored events. It was this affiliation that crippled Schlafly's career as a mainstream Republican but which also, not entirely inadvertently, helped launch her as the nation's leading antifeminist. In November, 1972, both the Birch Society and Schlafly's newsletter flagged the ERA--which was at the time solidly backed by the Republican Party--as a major new political target, and within a few months, Phyllis Schlafly emerged as the leader of a national campaign to stop the ERA. The major themes of the right-wing assault on feminism were latent in far-right anti-Communist ideology before feminism reappeared as a political force in America. And the argument that clinched the anti-feminist effort--that women had to defend themselves in the face of male revolt--had been spelled out on the far right well before Phyllis Schlafly took it up.

The right had of course always been committed to upholding the trinity of "God, Flag and Family" (the title of the Birch Society's annual public rallies), with family defined as the union of a strong and reliable male with a fecund and patriotically self-sacrificing female. In the calculus of the right, flag and family have never been independent variables: A threat to one is a threat to the other. Communism would abolish the family, and conversely, any loosening of traditional sex roles would weaken our defenses against Communism. So you did not have to believe in the natural inferiority of women, or in the necessity of their confinement to the high-tech purdah of American middle-class kitchens, to see that there was something menacing about feminism. When the far right first caught sight of the women's movement, they saw--predictably--red. It was obvious, for example, to Birch Society commentator Alan Stang that the feminists who demonstrated at the 1969 Miss America Pageant were Communists, not only because of their ties to the New Left (which were easy enough to uncover), but because of their sinister insistence on day care for children. This was a dead giveaway of the feminists' ulterior motive: the collectivization of society and the enslavement of everybody by a totalitarian communist government.

The simple, obvious point of course is that the conspirators aren't just trying to destroy the family. They are also trying to take control of American children, who would be the cannon fodder in the total dictatorship they are trying to impose (Stang, 1969: 39).

It was well within the parameters of old-fashioned anticommunist paranoia to see feminism as a threat to the American way of life. What was more innovative was

to present feminism as a threat to women, and this argument--which established the basis for the anti-ERA fight--was laid out in John Birch Society literature in 1970, two years before the ERA became a national issue. The article was entitled "Women's Lib: They're Spoiling Eve's Great Con." It starts from the feminist premise that women can do anything men can do. The trick was to make men believe otherwise--that women are weak and helpless--and this was "the biggest Con Game, and the most ancient, which one section of humanity has ever imposed on another, since Eve invented it." What the poor victims derived from being conned was not clear, for, with the least stirring of female independence "the boys would catch on and demand liberation for themselves. Which is exactly the calamity these rampant females in the 'Liberation Movement' are going to precipitate" [her emphasis]. Only the illusion of feminine helplessness kept men in their place, and the illusion was wearing thin:

I fear that men are beginning to suspect that we women conned them through the centuries. I fear they are asking themselves--to women's terrible hurt--why they should support an able-bodied woman who can earn a good living too, and why should a man give his ex-wife alimony and child-support checks, when she is just as capable, if not more so, of rolling up her sleeves and getting on the 8:30 bus of a morning for an arduous day in the factory or office? (Caldwell, 1970: 27)

To protect herself in the face of imminent, if not ongoing, male rebellion, a woman "should refrain from going out into the market places with mediocre abilities." For, "once she has earned a paycheck...she is practically doomed." The woman who had proved her wage-earning ability would only attract "the weak sisters among the men, who subconsciously realized that here was a girl who would earn a living for them." For the women whose premarital existence was tainted by the experience of paid employment, the only hope lay in persuading men that this lapse had only been "a stop-gap before marriage," and in swearing, "Never again to earn money outside the home...Never again to be independent. In short, she should play the Big Con Game with her husband as shrewd and intelligent women have done for centuries" (Caldwell, 1970: 27).

The right's appeal to women, like its appeal to men, is class specific: directed to the woman who is a member of the middle or upper-middle class and whose membership depends on a contractual relationship with a man of that class. For the affluent male (and, indirectly, his wife) the right has always offered a program of economic self-interest: lower taxes, fewer regulatory obstacles to the predatory conduct of business, measures to restrict the perceived tyranny of labor, etc. The inspiration which helped transform the "old right," as represented by the John Birch Society, to the "New Right," as represented by Schlafly's STOP-ERA and a host of single-issue organizations with "pro-family" sympathies, lay in the realization that it was possible to appeal directly to affluent, but dependent women. The feminist movement, which looked from the right like a vast mobilization of women on the left, provided an example of what women could do as a political force. And women's sense of economic insecurity provided the anxiety around which to mobilize. For the affluent man, the right offered a way to hold onto his class privileges in the face

of encroaching communists, criminals, workers, etc. For the affluent women, the right offered a way to hold on to a man.

REFERENCES

- Caldwell, Taylor
1970 "Women's lib: They're spoiling Eve's great con." *American Opinion* 13 (8): 27-34.
- Engel, Randy
1980 "The family under seige." *American Life Lobby* 1 (Fall): 1.
- Epstein, Barbara
1981a *The Politics of Domesticity*. New York: Columbia University Press.
1981b "Woman's temperance, home protection, and proto-feminism in late nineteenth century America." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians.
- O'Reilly, Jane
1980 *The Girl I Left Behind*. New York: Macmillan.
- Schlafly, Phyllis
1977 *The Power of the Positive Woman*. New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House.
- Stang, Alan
1969 "War on women: They're saying Miss America is a fascist." *American Opinion* 12 (11): 39-48.