

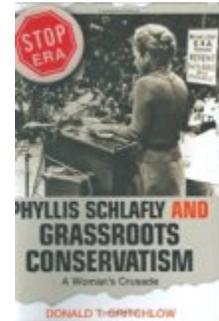
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Donald T. Critchlow. *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005. xi + 422 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-07002-5.

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Published on H-Pol (February, 2006)



Mrs. Republican

In this superbly researched work, Donald Critchlow explores the controversial career of Republican activist and anti-Equal Rights Amendment stalwart Phyllis Schlafly. Critchlow successfully connects Schlafly to the larger political landscape that this housewife-lawyer-writer blazed through from the 1950s to the present. The full story of Schlafly's life is well worth reading because she was emblematic of "grassroots conservatism"—a social movement of moral populists that "has transformed American politics" by making the Republican Party dominant in all three branches of government (p. ix). To understand the rise of the modern GOP, one needs to study the key role played by Schlafly and others in galvanizing a movement based on religious and cultural traditionalism. Furthermore, Schlafly's polarizing influence helped spark the "culture wars" that still rage over issues such as abortion, women's rights, education, and religion in the public square.

Critchlow's work reflects the recent turn to social histories of American conservatism, a departure from the early focus on conservatism as an intellectual movement. The classic work here, of course, is George Nash's *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America* (1976). Critchlow makes a strong case that the grassroots nature of conservative activism, as opposed to elite conservative thought, drove the Republican Party's turn to the Right in the 1950s and 1960s. Grassroots conservatives, particularly those in the Midwest, gravitated toward visceral "gut" issues such as opposition to communism and feminism. Laced with comments by Schlafly's followers, Critchlow's book reveals the passions of ordinary con-

servatives. He concludes that the social, rather than fiscal, strand of conservatism triumphed, partly because liberalism imploded, and partly because many women felt liberal policies threatened their families, churches, and schools. These women, Critchlow argues, were acting in the "moral republican" tradition, and in so doing became morally minded Republicans as well.

Critchlow begins with the conservative icon's early life and covers her career chronologically. Born to a devoutly Catholic family in St. Louis, Phyllis's parents raised their daughters to be ambitious. Reared by a strong, college-educated mother who worked during the Great Depression to keep the family intact, young Phyllis Stewart learned the value of family, motherhood, hard work, sacrifice, and education. As a young college student, Phyllis also worked full-time in a wartime factory. She was apolitical until she secured a job as a policy analyst with the American Enterprise Association, then the only conservative "think tank" in Washington. Steeped in conservative thought, she held the position for one year and never turned back after this. She returned to St. Louis, married attorney Fred Schlafly, moved to Alton, Illinois, and started a family. Fred furthered her political education by sharing his thoughts on the need for moral virtue as a bulwark against collectivism. This moral republicanism became the principle guiding Phyllis through fifty years of political action.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Schlafly was tirelessly active in Republican Party politics. She twice ran unsuccessfully for Congress, arguing each time that women had a duty to be politically active: "I think," she campaigned in 1952, "that women should get into politics and

do something about” the issues of the day. Two themes defined Schlafly and other Midwestern conservatives of this era: populist opposition to the Eastern establishment and staunch anti-communism. They were also fiercely loyal to the Republican Party, despite its constant betrayal of conservative candidates and principles. High taxes were a pocketbook issue for conservative Republicans, especially women, but the key issue was Communism. In popular brochures and books, Schlafly advocated a strong “America First” defense and criticized Korea and Vietnam as entangling wars designed by the Communists to weaken America’s defense. Shut out from the mainstream media, Schlafly and other grassroots anti-communists took to radio. Interestingly, while favoring a strong military, Schlafly “called for an end of the draft and the creation of a volunteer army” long before the antiwar movement of the 1960s made this a political necessity (p. 55). Consistent with her view of womanhood, Schlafly argued that the draft invaded the home by involuntarily taking men away from their families.

Contradicting other scholars who interpret grassroots conservatism as white racist “backlash,” Critchlow demonstrates that racial issues were not important to Midwestern conservatives. Keeping in line with the Republican Party platform, Schlafly was for civil rights legislation yet rarely discussed it. Communism and religion played much larger roles in Schlafly’s world. The slogan of grassroots conservatives might have been, “It’s Communism, Stupid!” In his early chapters, Critchlow illuminates the insular world of grassroots anti-communists, with their loose network of small and obscure organizations. Religious life became more ecumenical as Catholics and evangelical Protestants united to spread the anti-communist gospel. This early ecumenism echoed loudly in the ERA battle to come in the 1970s. One of the most remarkable achievements of grassroots conservatism, noted by Critchlow, is that Protestants and Catholics overcame age-old animosities to battle common enemies: Communists and liberals.

Schlafly and her fellow grassroots conservatives burst on the national scene in 1964, with the publication of her best-selling *A Choice Not an Echo* and the nomination of Barry Goldwater as the Republican candidate for president. *A Choice Not an Echo* blamed GOP “kingmakers” for selecting moderate-to-liberal candidates who pleased the Eastern elite but did not appeal to conservative Republicans. Although the book did not carry Goldwater to the White House, it helped to popularize conservative thought among “average Republicans” and “little old ladies in tennis shoes,” leading many to become active

locally (p. 128). After the election, Schlafly formed her Eagle Forum network to provide an alternative to the Establishment wing of the Republican Party.

Schlafly’s work at the grassroots level paid off when Congress passed the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) in 1972 and sent it to the states for ratification. After thirty states ratified the amendment, Schlafly rallied opposition with her STOP-ERA organization. Defending women’s privileges and attacking the “radical” agenda of the pro-ERA forces, which included issues such as gay rights and abortion, Schlafly led a “woman’s crusade” that lit a fire under state legislators across the country. A harbinger of the Christian Right, the successful STOP-ERA movement gathered religious women and men together in common cause against feminism. In his chapter on the ERA, Critchlow spends considerable time analyzing the social dynamics behind the STOP-ERA movement, an analysis that is largely missing from the straight political history of earlier chapters. Here he hits his stride with a riveting social history of the Right’s revival. Without STOP-ERA, the amendment would have passed, but Critchlow notes that the condescending and hysterical antics of pro-ERA forces were equally devastating to their own cause.

The last chapter of Phyllis Schlafly sums up her political career since 1980. With the fall of Communism, Schlafly focused more on threats to family and religious values. In the role of elder stateswoman of the GOP, she remained active in turning the party into a perpetual campaign vehicle for traditional values. Win or lose, for better and worse, Republican presidential candidates have found that rhetoric that embraces social conservatism is easier to sell to the “grassroots” than cuts in Big Government that never happen.

There are limits to any case study. Critchlow concedes that “not all members of the Republican Right were religious and cultural traditionalists” (p. 10). The Midwestern conservatives that populated Schlafly’s world were different from the grassroots conservatives Lisa McGirr found a bastion of economic conservatism in Orange County, California.[1] Her crusading women also differed from the increasingly libertarian Young Americans for Freedom.[2] Business conservatives, managing large firms or small, also need further study. Schlafly also had a blind spot concerning civil rights; obsessed with foreign policy, she missed the boat on an issue that resulted in the near-total loss of black Republican votes, which were still important during the 1950s and early 1960s.

While carefully, and fairly, depicting the views of

Schlafly's opponents, Critchlow's narrative often reads from her point of view because he lets the voice of this grassroots conservative speak for itself. Nonetheless, he avoids the biographer's sin of associating too closely with his subject. Schlafly's opponents—feminists, in particular—are likely to squirm at his depiction of pro-ERA activists as inept tragicomic radicals who “just didn't get” the political system; yet there is truth to this characterization and he cites postmortems by thoughtful feminists echoing this theme.

There are occasional minor omissions. For example, in 1957, Schlafly invited former presidential candidate T. Coleman Andrews to speak at a local conservative club although he was “worried about receiving unfavorable publicity” (p. 69). Critchlow fails to give the reason for the controversy: Andrews ran on the States Rights ticket in 1956, sandwiched between Strom Thurmond (1948) and Orval Faubus (1960). Critchlow's oversights are few and far between and do not detract from the importance of the work.

Critchlow shows, but does not emphasize, the extent to which the Republican Party betrayed Schlafly and grassroots conservatives again and again. From Eisenhower's nomination over Taft in 1952 to the election of George Bush in 2004, the social conservative base has received little more than lip service—a fact evident throughout but without much comment until the final paragraph of the book. A richer analysis could explore how the social conservatives triumphed on single-interest causes such as the ERA or the Defense of Marriage Act, but were largely subsumed by party politics in other areas. “Stand by your Party” was Schlafly's hallmark, yet the Grand Old Party rarely stood with social conservatives. Indeed, the only authentic conservative president, Ronald Reagan, was much more interested in economic issues than the social agenda of Schlafly, et al. In short, the book could have been improved with a general analysis of the state of conservatism in the late twentieth century. Is it “dead” as argued by David Frum because social conservatives paved the way for the ultimate “triumph of politics,” pork barrel spending and “Big Government conser-

vatism”? [3]

Moreover, were Schlafly's victories mere detours in an elite-driven liberalization of social policy? After all, the ERA may be dead but its predicted consequences—feminization of the military, gay marriage, for example, have come to pass by other means. How did Schlafly feel about expending so much energy on a party that took her supporters for granted? Bitterness burst out in *A Choice Not an Echo* but did she doubt the GOP at other critical junctures? Or was she ever the steely party operative? If Schlafly had doubts they are either missing from her rich archive of personal papers, or she did not commit them to paper. However, there are hints throughout Critchlow's manuscript that Schlafly realized the need to keep one foot outside the Republican Party while remaining loyal to the GOP during elections. This tension between her own agenda and that of the Republican establishment might have come forth in oral interviews with Schlafly, which Critchlow decided not to conduct in order to maintain distance from his subject.

Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism is a tour de force. By situating an important political figure in a broader social movement, Critchlow contributes greatly to our understanding of American politics in the last half of the twentieth century. As literature on the conservative movement continues to flourish, inspired by works like this one, we should have a much better grasp of the Right-handed side of politics in the years to come.

Notes

[1]. Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

[2]. Gregory Schneider, *Cadres for Conservatism: Young Americans for Freedom and the Rise of the Contemporary Right* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

[3]. David Frum, *Dead Right* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1995).

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Citation: Jonathan J. Bean. Review of Critchlow, Donald T., *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. February, 2006.

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