

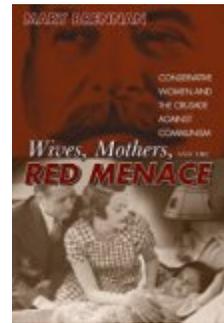


Mary C. Brennan. *Wives, Mothers, and the Red Menace: Conservative Women and the Crusade against Communism*. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2008. xi + 197 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87081-885-1.

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Women and Conservative Activism in the United States

Mary C. Brennan's book on anticommunist female activists will please instructors of history and political science courses who are searching for conservative voices to add to the canon of scholarship on U.S. women's activism. Along with Kim E. Nielsen's *Un-American Womanhood: Antiradicalism, Antifeminism, and the First Red Scare* (2001), Brennan's book adds to recent studies of conservative female activists and of the gendered aspects of twentieth-century conservatism. Like Elaine Tyler May's *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (1988), Brennan's study situates anticommunism not in the seat of government but within the American family.

Brennan searched the Right Wing Collection of the University of Iowa Libraries to find individual and organizational records of the activists who inform her work. She explores the ideological and practical reasons behind primarily white, middle-class women's anticommunist activity, and includes profiles of individual female activists, such as Margaret Chase Smith, Phyllis Schlafly, and Elizabeth Churchill Brown. Brennan discusses the strategies activists utilized to mobilize other women to join the crusade, and examines the intersections between gender, sexuality, and anticommunist rhetoric and action. Her work explores the roles female activists played alongside male anticommunists (most often as wives of politicians), and in female-only organizations, such as the Minute Women of America and the American Women's Party.

Wives, Mothers, and the Red Menace emphasizes women's indebtedness to previous activists, liberal and conservative. Although anticommunist crusaders developed a sturdy right-wing ideology that differed from their liberal predecessors, Brennan situates their ideas and strategies within the history of female activism. She cites Catharine Beecher's redefinition of child rearing and housekeeping as avenues to supporting nineteenth-century American values, settlement house workers' roles as caretakers of larger communities in the Progressive Era, and anti-suffragist and antiradical activists during the first Red Scare. Like their foremothers, she maintains, female conservatives of the Cold War era saw their activism as an extension of their domestic roles and duties. Anticommunist women's successes were due, in part, to their ability to "assure their male colleagues that they wanted nothing more than the end of communism" (p. 9).

Their discourse was often less than circumspect, however. The fine line Republican anticommunist women trod was revealed in starkest terms when they spoke out publicly against powerful politicians involved in high-stakes campaigns. Brennan cites several incidents of such behavior, but perhaps Doloris Bridges, wife of Republican Senator Styles Bridges of New Hampshire, paid the highest price for her brashness. Bridges delivered a speech in which she accused the Democratic presidential candidate John F. Kennedy of absenting himself from the Senate when anticommunist legislation

reached the Senate floor. Kennedy supporters immediately accused his opponent Richard M. Nixon of orchestrating Doloris Bridges's comments (or, more precisely, they accused him of "hiding behind a woman's skirts" [p. 144]). The Democrats effectively turned Bridges's charge of "softness" back on the Republicans. Some of Bridges's supporters took the same approach by accusing the Democrats of fighting with women rather than with communists; fellow anticommunists thus had no compunction about belittling Bridges and other female anticommunists for the sake of making a political point. Political wrangling in both parties over which candidate was the manlier man effectively obliterated Bridges's work of bringing in more women to support the anticommunist cause.

Brennan argues that anticommunist women accepted men's diminishment of their activism because they felt that their cause was more important than their individual efforts. In addition, their own anticommunist rhetoric reinforced traditional roles for men and women as a tool

with which to fight communist infiltration. The irony, as Brennan points out, is that anticommunist women encouraged other females to participate in the crusade (to realize their "latent power") at the grassroots level, even though this took them out of the domesticity that they claimed constituted women's proper realm (p. 92). (In addition, they berated communist women for their supposed shabby housekeeping habits.)

As Brennan demonstrates, despite the irony inherent in their position, it was the very nature of the Cold War and the historical precedent of conservative female activism that allowed for women's successful expansion of anticommunism into a much broader, all-encompassing campaign. This book will help libraries (and instructors' syllabi) strike a better balance between the history of liberal feminism and conservative female activism in the United States. I hope that in the future we can expect scholars to explore nonwhite, working-class women's conservative activism as well.

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