

What's Wrong with "Equal Rights" for Women?

The "women's lib" movement is *not* an honest effort to secure better jobs for women who want or need to work outside the home. This is just the superficial sweet-talk to win broad support for a radical "movement." Women's lib is a total assault on the role of the American woman as wife and mother, and on the family as the basic unit of society.

—PHYLLIS SCHLAFLY, *PHYLLIS SCHLAFLY REPORT*,

FEBRUARY 1972

The ascendance of the women's rights movement within the national governing establishment ignited a firestorm among women deeply invested in traditional women's roles. As feminists gained support and scored many victories, these women organized to make it clear that "women's libbers" did not speak for them.

In the 1960s, conservative women had watched the rise of the feminist movement with curiosity and concern. Like feminists, they were well aware of the rapid and far-reaching changes in American society that were affecting the lives of American women. But unlike feminists such as the members of the IWY National Commission, who viewed the changes as creating new opportunities and urged reform of laws and customs to fit "Today's Realities," conservative women perceived them—particularly the movement of women into the workforce—as losses for women, families, and society.¹

The women's rights movement was more a result than a cause of these changes. Many women—whether they were working to augment husbands' incomes, self-supporting, or seeking career satisfaction—had grown frustrated by the rampant gender discrimination they faced in their jobs and the lack of opportunities for advancement. These frustrations, plus the growing dissatisfaction of more affluent women who remained in the home but were unhappy with their circumscribed existence, fueled the ascendant women's movement.² Yet conservatives blamed feminists for encouraging the mass movement of women into the workforce as well as dissatisfaction among homemakers and a whole host of other social problems from rising divorce rates to juvenile delinquency, which they attributed to women's abandonment of traditional responsibilities.

Rosemary Thomson, one of the primary leaders of the women who organized to oppose feminism in the 1970s, blamed "women's libbers" for leading women astray at great cost to themselves, their families, and the nation. In her book, *The Price of LIBerty*, written just after the 1977 battle to control the IWY conferences, she discussed the rise of the women's movement and why and how "traditionally minded" women worked so hard to defeat it. Thomson recalled that, in the 1960s, growing weary of the "popular assertion that women's roles are changing," she and others began to ask "the burning question, *who* is changing women's roles?" Thomson placed the blame on misguided feminists, who led women astray by promising "liberation' from the plan God established for the family" with disastrous results. "The price of LIBerty," she wrote, "may be as costly as the one paid by our 'foremother' in the Garden of Eden."³

In the early 1970s, as all three branches of the federal government began to embrace the feminist message, critics of the women's rights movement were increasingly alarmed. Their alarm soon led to action. Conservative women mobilized to oppose continued concessions to feminists, to protest the growing influence of feminism and feminists within the government, and to offer an "alternative to 'women's lib.'"⁴

Thomson, a homemaker, mother of two sons, and former teacher from Morton, Illinois, expressed the frustrations of "traditionally minded" women. It was one thing, she said, to hear feminists trying to sell their message, but quite another thing to see so many women—and the government—buying it. For years "women's lib" had "fed American females this steady diet through education, women's magazines, television and movies:

women must work outside the home for pay, wives should be economically independent, divorce and 'living together' are acceptable. Children are burdensome so the Planned Parenthood Association teaches population control through contraceptives or abortion." Yet, Thomson recalled, in the 1960s few conservatives took the feminist movement seriously. "It was largely ignored by Christians, tolerantly joked about by average citizens."⁵

It was soon clear that "women's lib" was "not a laughing matter," Thomson stated. It "steamrolled into the '70s leaving in its wake burned bras, church veils, and sometimes husbands" as women fell victim to its false promises. "What young mother, wearied of diapers, toy-strewn floors, and lack of money did not read *The Feminine Mystique* in the 60s and exclaim, 'Betty Friedan understands me!'" "What middle-aged housewife, bored with an empty nest, did not theorize, 'Liberation must be the answer!'" To Thomson, a conservative Presbyterian, it seemed that everyone "not firmly grounded in Biblical principles" was accepting the notion "that women were oppressed by the facts of life, society and even the church." Intellectuals, educators, and even religious leaders were embracing the feminist message, along with "politicians who fancied expedient vote-getting."⁶

According to Thomson, Nixon's Task Force on Women's Rights and Responsibilities was the first clear signal that political leaders were "capitulating" to the demands of the feminist movement. The task force's report endorsed proposals that Thomson viewed as fundamental affronts to conservative beliefs. Afterward, conservative women began to pay more attention to the other federal and state commissions that had been established in the 1960s and were disturbed by what they found. In Thomson's words, "Without investigating the real motives of Women's Lib, Federal and state government dutifully doled out public funds to establish commissions on the status of women." To make matters worse, "instead of appointing ordinary homemakers and working women to assess their own concerns, female executives in government and politics were named." With the release of the task force's "little-heralded report," she wrote, it seemed clear that the "attack on family life and the traditional moral values of America's spiritual heritage had begun."⁷

To Thomson, the stream of congressional acts putting feminist proposals into practice offered additional proof that the American family was under assault from the federal government. In Thomson's estimation, passage of the Comprehensive Child Development Act of 1971 to establish publicly funded child care, was particularly sobering.⁸ While feminists hailed it as the first major effort since World War II to respond to the nation's child care needs,

she and other conservatives saw it as a horrifying first step on the slippery slope toward a godless government invasion of the family like that in the U.S.S.R. Opponents flooded President Nixon with letters of protest, pressuring Nixon—wavering on whether or not to sign the bill—to veto it. In his message justifying the veto, Nixon echoed their rhetoric, saying the bill threatened family stability by encouraging women to work outside the home and by committing “the vast moral authority of the National Government to the side of communal modes of child-rearing against the family-centered approach”—a “long leap into the dark.” The veto message, written by speechwriter Patrick Buchanan, who hoped to bury permanently the idea of a national child-care entitlement, was deliberately crafted to make supporting expanded child care politically dangerous.⁹

Few knew that a young woman, Connaught “Connie” Marshner, a conservative Catholic with firm convictions but little political experience, was behind the letter-writing campaign. Marshner would soon become a key figure and the highest ranking woman at the New Right think tank the Heritage Foundation, founded in 1973. But in 1971 she was a recent graduate of the University of South Carolina and an active member of the staunchly conservative Young Americans for Freedom (YAF), founded by William F. Buckley in 1960.

Marshner had just arrived in Washington, D.C. As she later recalled, unable to get a teaching position she accepted a job as secretary to the editor of the YAF magazine, the *New Guard*. Marshner learned of the Child Development Act when her boss gave it to her to type. Instead, she took it home and “wrote the fact sheet on it,” the “definitive analysis of what was wrong with it.” Through the YAF she had access to the addresses and technology newly assembled by Richard Viguerie, a pioneer in the use of direct mail for political fund-raising, and her critique was circulated widely. Marshner and her coworkers were astonished by its success.¹⁰

It took years, Connie Marshner later recalled, to figure out that “all over the country there were little clusters of evangelical and fundamentalist Moms’ groups” who were “unstructured” but “in touch with each other” and just beginning to be aware of the danger posed by feminism. The response to her call for action against the Child Development Act was a pathbreaking demonstration of the power direct public appeals could have on legislation. It foreshadowed the direct mail campaigns by Viguerie and others seeking to harness the latent power of social conservatives who were beneath the radar of national politicians and the press, and felt that no one cared about their views. It also foreshadowed the awakening of a second women’s movement

whose aim would be to protect "family values" rather than to push for women's rights.¹¹

Conservatives were comforted by the defeat of the Child Development Act. Yet as the 1972 election approached, Nixon again took action to appeal to feminists, one of the many feints to the left and center that outraged the far right in his party. What finally moved conservative women from anger to action was congressional approval of the Equal Rights Amendment, the proposed constitutional amendment that had languished in Congress for half a century and in 1972 appeared to be sweeping toward victory. These women were astounded and outraged that Congress had approved the amendment by overwhelming margins while rejecting the modifications proposed by conservative congressmen and senators to preserve traditional protections and exemptions for women, particularly requiring husbands to support their wives and excluding women from the draft.¹²

Thomson and other like-minded women concluded that the real goal of ERA proponents was a "radical restructuring of women's responsibilities."¹³ Instead of simply extending women's rights, feminists seemed intent on taking rights and privileges away. Clearly, defenders of traditional womanhood were going to have to organize, to compete with the highly visible and vocal feminists, and to "tell the truth to American men and women and legislators in fifty states" that the ERA was a colossal error made by politicians eager to satisfy a vocal minority by approving an amendment, the dangers of which they did not comprehend.¹⁴

In 1972, with states rushing to ratify, it appeared that the Equal Rights Amendment was unstoppable. The women's movement was powerful and entrenched. The ERA had the backing of most women's groups from the League of Women Voters to the Girl Scouts of America, not to mention professional organizations and labor unions. Many mainline religious denominations as well as the National Council of Churches had endorsed it. Polls showed strong support from men as well as women, and it was favored by the press.¹⁵

As conservative women organized to stop ERA ratification, however, they had several major advantages unknown or underappreciated by those who thought their quest impossible. In Phyllis Schlafly they had an experienced leader with uncommon organizing skills and a large network of admirers who were political activists and ready to respond to her call. In addition, large numbers of women not previously engaged in politics were

ripe for recruitment—and would enlist, armed with the conviction that they were on the right side of a religious crusade and had God on their side. The anti-ERA coalition would also have automatic advantages as opponents of a constitutional amendment, as amendments are, by design, difficult to win. To succeed, ERA supporters had to convince the majority of Americans of the amendment's merits and persuade three fourths of the states (thirty-eight) to ratify. However, ERA opponents, like defense attorneys, needed only to create reasonable doubt and defeat the amendment in one fourth of the states.

Exasperated ERA proponents dismissed Schlafly as just "a housewife from Illinois," a defender of yesteryear, presuming to speak for American womanhood with whom she was completely out of step. Senator Birch Bayh, one of the ERA's main champions in Congress, once complained that his television debate with this woman "who had absolutely no legal training, had had no legislative experience" but was "trying to tell women of the country what the ERA actually meant," made him want "to commit mayhem, live and in full color."¹⁶ Such comments would inspire Schlafly to enroll in law school at Washington University in 1975 in the midst of the ERA battle and graduate in 1978.

Phyllis Schlafly proudly personified the ideal traditional woman. The mother of six children, she was married to a wealthy, Harvard-trained lawyer who was proud of his smart and beautiful wife and supported her in every sense of the word. She played up her attractive, feminine image, boasting that she breast-fed the children, taught them to read before they started school, and could still fit into her wedding dress. Schlafly was always perfectly groomed with her blond hair done up in "a French twist," and wore dresses in pastel colors—never pants. Her critics considered her to be prim and old-fashioned; her admirers saw her as the embodiment of a lady.¹⁷

Schlafly had overcome tough circumstances in her early life in St. Louis. As a result of the Great Depression, her father, an engineer, lost his job and her mother worked as a librarian in an elite Catholic girls' school in order for her daughters to get a good education. During World War II, Phyllis paid for college by working at night as a gunner, test firing rifles in a munitions plant so she could attend classes at Washington University by day. Nonetheless she graduated Phi Beta Kappa after only three years and went on to earn a master's degree in political science from Radcliffe. After a brief stint in Washington working as an aide to a congressman, she returned to St. Louis and began writing a conservative newsletter for a local bank—work that impressed local attorney Fred Schlafly, who became her husband in

1949. Before long they settled into a beautiful mansion in Alton, Illinois, a suburb across the river from St. Louis that eventually became command center for the conservative women's movement.¹⁸

For both Schlaflys, religion and politics went hand in hand. They were devout Catholics and fervent anticommunists, prominent within the Old Right in the politics of Cold War America. Fred was for years the president of the World Anti-Communist League. The Schlafly family established the Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation in honor of a Hungarian cardinal imprisoned for opposition to communism. Its purpose was to organize Catholics to resist the communist threat. Phyllis worked with her husband on these projects, including writing newsletters for the foundation.¹⁹

Both Fred and Phyllis spoke at Fred Schwarz's Anti-Communism Crusade programs and at the John Birch Society's God and Country rallies. Robert Welch, founder of the archconservative and secretive John Birch Society—widely denounced after Welch accused Dwight Eisenhower of being a communist—once described Phyllis as a loyal member of his organization. She always denied it, saying the JBS—which saw subversion from within the nation as the main way communism threatened the United States—did not share her commitment to a strong national defense. However, she shared many of its positions, including its opposition to the United Nations as a threat to American sovereignty and its opposition to New Deal programs and strong federal government in general.²⁰

In 1955, Phyllis Schlafly ran unsuccessfully for Congress. She ran and lost a second time in 1970, employing a slogan (ironically, also used by Bella Abzug): "A Woman's Place is in the House."²¹ Her active engagement in electoral politics while bearing and rearing six children seemed at odds with her emphasis on women devoting themselves to home and family and led some critics to call her a hypocrite.²² However, in her view, devotion to home and family and active participation in politics were not at all contradictory: she insisted that from the earliest days of the republic, women had carried tremendous responsibility for preservation of morality in government. Her admirers praised her for sacrificing precious family time for Christ's sake to promote righteousness in society and government and "preserve America for future generations." As Thomson stated in *The Price of LIBerty*, Schlafly's "untiring dedication to God, home and country" inspired thousands of other God-fearing women "to defend our faiths and our families."²³

In the 1950s, Schlafly was active in the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) and enjoyed working with these women who shared her Christian, patriotic, anti-communist, and anti-internationalist views. She

became an officer at the state level and then served five terms at the national level as the DAR's Chairman of National Defense. In the 1960s, she had her first experience as a media personality through her fifteen-minute DAR-sponsored radio program *Wake Up America*. Schlafly also served as president of the Illinois chapter of the National Federation of Republican Women and became one of the NFRW's most popular speakers, traveling all over the state and nation and developing a large following among conservatives, particularly in the West and South. In 1964, she became First Vice President of the NFRW, in line for the presidency.²⁴

Like many Republicans from the Midwest, Phyllis Schlafly resented the dominant position of the Eastern establishment "kingmakers." She despised Nelson Rockefeller. Her book, *A Choice Not an Echo*, played a key role in getting the GOP to choose Barry Goldwater over Rockefeller as the party's nominee for president in 1964. Three years after Goldwater was defeated in a landslide election, Rockefeller and many other liberal and moderate Republicans including Elly Peterson, George Romney, and NRC chairman Ray Bliss, eager to rein in her influence, blocked her ascension to the NFRW presidency.²⁵

In 1967, Schlafly lost to their handpicked candidate, Gladys O'Donnell, after a vicious, six-month-long contest that reflected the bitter struggle between GOP moderates and rightists in the late 1960s and rocked the party. The normally decorous NFRW conference—holding the first contested election in its long history—was packed with several times the usual number of delegates plus observers and the press, which described "riotous scenes of booing, weeping, and teeth gnashing." When the winner was declared, Schlafly—with three thousand livid supporters, some sobbing, some shaking their fists—walked out of the federation convention to a rump session in the hotel basement and started their own conservative movement outside the GOP—complete with a newspaper: the *Phyllis Schlafly Report*, and an Eagle Trust Fund to finance their work.²⁶

Ultimately, Schlafly's 1967 defeat paved the way for her political resurrection and a level of influence within her party and the nation beyond anything anyone could then have imagined. It left her with an embittered and impassioned following with enormous potential for expansion. The women who had backed her candidacy were furious that, as Schlafly put it, the "liberals are not even willing for our side to have anything at all—not even the crumb of a non-paid woman's position with practically no power." Many withdrew from the NFRW. Ronald Reagan's daughter Maureen Reagan Sills, who had supported Schlafly in this race but was friendly with

women in O'Donnell's camp, talked Schlafly and her followers out of starting a rival Republican women's club, insisting it would damage the party.²⁷

Instead, working through the *Phyllis Schlafly Report* and her extensive mailing list, Schlafly established an informal empire run from an office in her home. Her goal was to create what she called "an army of dedicated women wearing eagles as the symbol of American freedom," women with "a strong pro-American viewpoint," ready to fight for "morality in government, constitutional government, a strong national defense, and free enterprise."²⁸ That her growing network of conservatives was officially nonpartisan would put her in an excellent position to attract additional support among women who were increasingly disaffected with the policies of the national Democratic Party.

In the early 1970s, as the last congressional debates on the ERA took place, Schlafly showed little interest. Her passion was national defense. An isolationist to the point that she opposed the Vietnam War as a communist diversionary tactic to induce the United States to spend on conventional weapons and neglect its nuclear arsenal, she devoted herself to writing books denouncing Nixon and Kissinger for capitulating to the Soviets and "Red China." But she said nothing about politicians pandering to the women's rights movement. Looking back, she said, "I figured ERA was something between innocuous and mildly helpful."²⁹

When it seemed that Congress was likely to endorse the Equal Rights Amendment without modifications to permit traditional protections and exemptions, other conservative women asked Schlafly to examine the issue. In December 1971, friends in Connecticut invited her to participate in a debate about the ERA. Schlafly demurred, saying she did not even know which side she was on, and suggested a focus on national defense. Her hosts, however, insisted on the ERA and sent materials for her to study.³⁰ Meanwhile a friend in Florida, Shirley Spellerberg, was urging Schlafly to come out against the ERA and finally managed to convince her. Rosemary Thomson saw it as an act of God. "When the Lord intervened," she wrote, "he acted not through a great statesman or famous writer or VIP" but instead chose Spellerberg, a "godly Christian woman in Miami, Florida, who had researched the legislative history of ERA" to persuade Schlafly of the ERA's "inherent dangers."³¹ Later, Spellerberg, the host of a conservative talk radio program called *Speak Out Miami*, lamented she had not been able

to recruit Schlafly earlier. "Phyllis and I could have stopped ERA while it was still in Congress," but "I just couldn't get her to move."³²

Once persuaded of the evils of the ERA, Schlafly took up the fight with a vengeance. In the February 1972 issue of the *Phyllis Schlafly Report* entitled "What's Wrong with 'Equal Rights' for Women?" she excoriated the ERA and its supporters. Schlafly's powerful polemic reflected the values that pervaded all issues of the *Phyllis Schlafly Report* including her religious and patriotic fervor, her nationalist and anti-communist convictions, and her admiration for the free enterprise system. It also reflected her own privileged existence and assumption that the life she lived was typical for American women.³³

Schlafly's opening statement and main point was this: "Of all the classes of people who ever lived, the American woman is the most privileged. We have the most rights and rewards, and the fewest duties." American women, she insisted, had "the immense good fortune to live in a civilization which respects the family as the basic unit of society." They were "the beneficiaries of a tradition of special respect for women which dates back from the Christian Age of Chivalry" when the "honor and respect paid to Mary, the Mother of Christ, resulted in all women, in effect, being put on a pedestal." Later, Schlafly's attacks on the ERA often featured statistics and opinions from constitutional experts. But this document was essentially a passionate defense of the ideal feminine role in the post-World War II United States.

The "great heroes of women's liberation" Schlafly insisted, were not "the straggly-haired women on television talk shows and picket lines" but men like Elias Howe, creator of the sewing machine; Clarence Birdseye, inventor of frozen food; Henry Ford, who mass-produced the automobile "to put it within the price-range of every American"; and Thomas Edison, "who brought the miracle of electricity to our homes . . . the equivalent, perhaps of a half-dozen household servants for every middle-class American women." As a result, she said, "household duties have been reduced to only a few hours a day, leaving the American woman with plenty of time to moonlight." She could take a full- or part-time job, or "indulge to her heart's content in a tremendous selection of interesting educational or cultural or homemaking activities."

Life for American women, Schlafly insisted, contrasted sharply with that of women in the U.S.S.R. There a woman was guaranteed "equal rights," but that meant being forced "to put her baby in a state-operated nursery or kindergarten so she can join the labor force" and "do the heavy, dirty work American women do not do," including mining coal, working in heavy construction, and laboring in the fields while the "men are still the bosses."

Schlafly decried the plethora of "aggressive females on television talk shows yapping about how mistreated American women are, suggesting that marriage has put us in some kind of 'slavery,' that housework is menial and degrading, and perish the thought—that women are discriminated against." Everywhere new women's liberation organizations were "popping up, agitating and demonstrating, serving demands on public officials, getting wide press coverage always, and purporting to speak for some 100,000,000 American women." In Schlafly's view, they had obtained the endorsement of so many women's organization by deliberate deception, claiming falsely that it would bring better jobs and pay without stating what women would sacrifice.

She singled out for special criticism the National Federation of Republican Women that under the leadership of her nemesis, Gladys O'Donnell, endorsed the ERA in 1971. That "tight little clique running things from the top," wrote Schlafly, presented speaker after speaker to promote the Equal Rights Amendment, but refused to give "equal rights" to "delegates who wished to speak against it." Then NFRW officers "published intemperate attacks" on Republican congressmen who wanted to exempt women from the draft or allow adoption of "reasonable" laws based on sex differences.³⁴

Schlafly's scornful, often sarcastic denunciation of ERA advocates in this edition of the *Phyllis Schlafly Report* set the tone for the campaign against the ERA that followed. *Ms.* magazine, "the most pretentious of the women's liberation magazines," she wrote, was full of "sharp-tongued, high-pitched whining complaints by unmarried women" who "view the home as a prison, and the wife and mother as a slave." In one article after another, she stated, *Ms.* praised women who refused to do dishes and laundry and proclaimed "how satisfying it is to be a lesbian."

Yet, when speaking to the public, Schlafly wrote, feminists sugarcoated their message in order to seem mainstream. Worst of all, they had convinced Congress they spoke for American womanhood and "that American women are downtrodden and unfairly treated"—a claim Schlafly denounced as "the fraud of the century." It was high time "to set the record straight." When "What's Wrong with 'Equal Rights' for Women?" went out to the five thousand *Phyllis Schlafly Report* subscribers, the effect was almost immediate.³⁵

On March 22, 1972, the Senate approved the ERA, states rushed to ratify, and ERA supporters were jubilant. Within seven days, seven states had

ratified. However, within that week, Schlafly supporters in Oklahoma who had read the February *Phyllis Schlafly Report* dealt the amendment its first defeat.³⁶

The Oklahoma senate had approved the ERA by a voice vote one day after it was sent to the states. When *Phyllis Schlafly Report* readers learned that the House was about to follow suit and ratify the ERA, they went into action. Armed with Schlafly's arguments, her supporters persuaded a friendly Republican legislator to keep the amendment in committee while they organized in opposition, liberally distributing copies of the February *Phyllis Schlafly Report*. At hastily organized hearings they made it clear large numbers of women in the state were opposed. Suggesting the amendment might have dangerous unintended consequences, they insisted it at least warranted careful study and that there was no rush to ratify as they could always approve it later if they chose. The House then rejected the ratification proposal by a margin of 52-36.³⁷

Ann Patterson, the leader of the Oklahoma ERA opponents, promptly contacted Schlafly, volunteering to call conservative women elsewhere using the *Phyllis Schlafly Report* contacts list and urge them to follow her state's example. Patterson then phoned women in twenty-eight states who leapt into action, and in each case managed to stop or slow down the ERA bandwagon. Schlafly quickly assumed command of this emerging grassroots effort, coordinating the efforts of the organizations opposing ratification, and creating new ones.³⁸

This was the beginning of the national effort by conservative women to block ERA ratification. The swift response to her call to arms and the success in Oklahoma convinced Schlafly she had an issue that would rally conservatives across the nation. What happened in Oklahoma suggested that in many states simply dispelling the illusion of consensus among women would be sufficient to delay ERA ratification as conservative women mounted a campaign to convince the public of its dangers.³⁹

Working with key lieutenants, Schlafly moved quickly to put together an effective fighting force of experienced activists with similar political and religious convictions and already connected through the *Phyllis Schlafly Report*. They were well trained. In the four years since the NFRW debacle, Schlafly had held annual "political-action leadership conferences" in St. Louis that attracted three to four hundred women from across the nation, most of them veterans of the NFRW battle. The conferences were meant to empower these women who were, as Schlafly told the press, no longer content to do the menial work in the party while "being told they have to accept the

candidate presented to them." The training was designed to help them fight liberal "Rockefeller Republicans" at the local level and keep them from controlling party meetings.⁴⁰

In July 1972, Schlafly assembled a small group of Illinois supporters at the O'Hare Airport to define their mission—a single-issue campaign to block ratification. They also chose a name—the National Committee to Stop ERA—and a symbol—a red stop sign. "Stop" was an acronym for "Stop Taking Our Privileges," which would be a main theme. Some proposed linking the ERA to other issues, such as fighting the UN or socialism, perhaps working through the American Conservative Union, an organization created by Goldwater supporters that has worked since his defeat to keep the conservative movement alive.⁴¹

Schlafly believed, however, that by focusing tightly on the social and legal implications of the ERA they could create a much broader coalition that included establishment Republicans and disgruntled Democrats.⁴² Men were allowed to join and were welcome—and would provide valuable assistance. But this would be primarily a fight led by women for women, an effort to convince male politicians that feminists did not speak for American women and that the ERA would hurt not help their sex.

In September 1972, Schlafly brought together in St. Louis a larger group of women to launch Stop-ERA and discuss strategy. From then on the annual fall training sessions focused on honing ERA opponents into an effective fighting force. Given packets of information on the ERA's history and its dangers to the family and the nation, participants prepared three-minute talks to use back home. By that time, five states—Oklahoma, Ohio, Illinois, Nevada, and Louisiana—had rejected ratification. Ann Patterson plus four other women who had led the successful anti-ERA battles testified about tactics that had worked for them.⁴³

By early 1973, Schlafly could proudly inform the *New York Times* that anti-ERA chapters had been organized in twenty-six states. Focused on the unratified states, Stop-ERA was best developed in the Midwest and the South. It was particularly strong in Arizona, Florida, Illinois, Louisiana, Missouri, Ohio, Oklahoma, and Virginia. With the exception of Ohio, none of them would ever ratify the ERA. The other states that did not ratify were Alabama, Georgia, North and South Carolina, Mississippi, Utah, and Nevada.⁴⁴

Schlafly personally selected women to be the "chairmen" of Stop-ERA chapters. In addition to her National Federation of Republican Women allies, she drew on contacts developed through the National Council of Catholic Women, the DAR, the Goldwater campaign, and right-wing politics. Ann

Patterson, a Republican, would head the anti-ERA effort in Oklahoma throughout the ten-year fight. Rosemary Thomson, a Republican and DAR member, became the Stop-ERA leader in Illinois. Schlafly's friend Shirley Spellerberg, also a Republican, became chairman of the Florida chapter of Stop-ERA. Kathryn Dunaway, who assumed leadership of Stop-ERA in Georgia, had worked with Schlafly since the Goldwater campaign and had been an ardent supporter during the NFRW fight. Dunaway was a DAR member, a fervent anti-communist, and bitter critic of the civil rights movement. Kathleen Teague, a YAF veteran active in the American Conservative Union and the anti-communist United States Council for World Freedom, led the Virginia Stop-ERA organization. Dorothy "Dot" Malone Slade of North Carolina, who knew Schlafly through the NFRW, became the indefatigable leader of Stop-ERA in her state.⁴⁵

Many prominent Stop-ERA leaders were members of right-wing groups, including the John Birch Society, which actively opposed the amendment and feminism. In the February 1973 JBS *Bulletin*, Robert Welch, the society's chairman and founder, urged members to "lunge in and help to relegate this subversive proposal to early and complete oblivion." As noted, Schlafly always denied membership and the JBS did not disclose members' names, but many of her followers acknowledged being current or former members and using JBS connections to recruit supporters.⁴⁶ North Carolina's Stop-ERA chairman, Dot Slade, was in the JBS and invited fellow Birchers to help her fight the ERA.⁴⁷ Beverly Findley who joined Ann Patterson in opposing the ERA in Oklahoma was a former member; she and Patterson worked with John Birch Society members in planning the anti-ERA hearings and enlisted members from JBS ranks.⁴⁸ JBS women in Utah had begun working against the ERA in December 1972 through a group they called HOTDOG, the acronym for Humanitarians Opposed to Degrading Our Girls, and were instant allies of Stop-ERA.⁴⁹ In many states, including Mississippi and Oklahoma, anti-ERA forces recruited through the state Farm Bureau, an organization that had a long-standing affinity with the John Birch Society at the national level.⁵⁰ Later, JBS publications featured anti-ERA articles by Schlafly and JBS leaders boasted of playing a major role in the ERA's defeat.⁵¹ In 1977, a spokesman for the society, John F. McManus, told the press that Birchers had been "in leadership positions in every state where the ERA was scotched."⁵²

Stop-ERA also attracted experienced activists from another far-right group, Women for Constitutional Government (WCG), whose membership overlapped with the John Birch Society. Founded in Mississippi during the

1962 crisis in which federal troops forced the University of Mississippi to admit African American James Meredith, the WCG quickly spread to other states. Believing it was a white woman's responsibility to "preserve the good life for her children," members pledged to work for "constitutional government, free enterprise, the Christian faith, racial self-respect, and national sovereignty." In the 1970s, the WCG was a national organization but strongest in the southern states.⁵³ WCG members played a key role in opposing the ERA in Mississippi, South Carolina, Georgia, and Texas. Carolyn Morgan, the Stop-ERA chairman in Mississippi, was a member, and Mary Cain, one of the WCG's founders and editor and publisher of its official newsletter, *The Woman Constitutionalist*, heaped praise on WCG members for helping suppress the ERA in the state. South Carolina's George Ann Pennebaker was at one time the national WCG president. The South Carolina chapter of WCG funded state legislator Norma Russell's participation in Schlafly's annual training camps in St. Louis.⁵⁴

Whether Schlafly knew about these Stop-ERA leaders' involvement in Women for Constitutional Government or knew anything about the organization is unclear. One biographer who had full access to her papers insisted that she and her associates in the anti-ERA movement "never had contact with the 'segregationist Right.'" She and her supporters claimed with pride that the anti-ERA movement drew support from African Americans including religious leaders in Chicago.⁵⁵

Schlafly did not shy away from reaching out to the former Alabama governor and defender of segregation, George Wallace, concerned that his 1968 endorsement of the ERA was undermining her efforts. At the urging of supporters in Alabama, she requested a meeting so she could personally convince him to retract, saying that his endorsement "made our task difficult." In a letter to his aide, she stated, "I KNOW he would NOT be for ERA in its PRESENT form after he hears the arguments." Shortly thereafter, Wallace appeared on *The Dick Cavett Show* and made it clear he no longer supported the amendment, and she withdrew her request.⁵⁶ The American Party, created to support his campaign for president in 1968, was part of the anti-ERA movement. Its 1972 platform stated: "Women of the American Party say 'NO' to this insidious socialistic plan to destroy the home, make women slaves of the government, and their children wards of the state."⁵⁷

The movement to stop ERA ratification could not have developed so quickly without this cadre of experienced activists—Schlafly's lieutenants—but it

also required foot soldiers. They were soon forthcoming as large numbers of women with conservative religious beliefs joined the fight. Many were younger women and most had little or no political experience. Some were fundamentalists whose religious beliefs—which included not only biblical literalism but separation from the corrupting influence of others outside their group—had kept them away from politics altogether.⁵⁸

This was particularly true in the South, a stronghold of evangelical and fundamentalist Protestantism. There, large numbers of religious conservatives mobilized against ratification, many of them through an organization called Women Who Want to Be Women (WWWW), which became a sister organization to Stop-ERA. Its founder, Lottie Beth Hobbs, a Church of Christ leader from Fort Worth, was crucial to the development of the conservative women's movement. Together with other Church of Christ women, particularly Shirley Curry and Tottie Ellis, both ministers' wives from Tennessee, and Beverly Findley of Oklahoma, Hobbs mobilized women from outside the orbit of Schlafly, a Catholic from the Midwest, and joined forces with Stop-ERA in 1975.⁵⁹

The WWWW began as an effort to get Texas to rescind its ratification of the ERA and quickly spread to other states, mostly within the region. Owing to years of work by the National Federation of Business and Professional Women (BPW), Texas had adopted a state equal rights amendment even before the ERA was sent to the states and was one of the earliest states to ratify. Despite strenuous efforts by the WWWW in 1975 and 1977, it remained the only state in the South that ratified but never rescinded. With a state ERA already in place, claims about the proposed national amendment's potential destructiveness seemed less credible. The WWWW played a major role in anti-ERA and rescission efforts in other states, however, including Tennessee, which voted to rescind in April 1974.⁶⁰

Through these campaigns Lottie Beth Hobbs and the WWWW mobilized thousands of previously apolitical women from evangelical and fundamentalist churches. As a Church of Christ member, Hobbs was herself new to politics: separation from politics was part of its creed. The daughter of a rancher and a teacher, she grew up in Abilene, Texas, attended Abilene Christian College, and after working in defense plants during World War II, supported herself by writing and distributing books for use in Bible classes. Hobbs was well-known and admired in Church of Christ circles, having published eight popular books. Though women in her denomination were not allowed to address mixed (male and female) Bible classes, she was much sought after as a speaker for women's Bible classes and conferences all over

the South. At one of these conferences, she saw a flyer on the ERA, read it as a direct attack on the way of life decreed by God, and put her career on hold to devote herself to the fight against ERA ratification.⁶¹

By many methods, but notably through a highly influential flyer "Ladies Have You Heard?" that became famous among conservative Christian women, Hobbs warned that the ERA would wreck their lives and ruin family life. The flyer, known as "The Pink Sheet" for the color of the paper, was distributed through church newsletters, printed in small-town papers, left in mailboxes and beauty shops. It spread like wildfire across Texas, Oklahoma, and other southern states.⁶²

The WWW mobilized women from other conservative denominations as well. Some were Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians, but in the South there were many varieties of these churches—some much more conservative on women's issues than others—and women from these denominations could be found on both sides of the ERA question. For instance, Keller Bumgardner (later Barron), a League of Women Voters national officer from South Carolina who served as the LWV's representative on the board of ERAmerica as well as the cochair of a coalition supporting ratification in her state, was a Baptist. The largest group of Baptists, the massive Southern Baptist Convention, which later became a vital part of the burgeoning Religious Right, was in the early 1970s neutral on ratification. The WWW especially targeted members of fundamentalist churches that emphasized Biblical literalism, such as Assemblies of God, Bible Churches, Missionary Alliance, that "generally believe that women should not be ministers and that the man is Divinely ordained to be head of the family."⁶³

The Church of Christ was unequivocal in its position on women's roles, which was based on its interpretation of the Bible. Women were to be subordinate within the home and the church though they were not prohibited from holding positions of authority outside the church. Ultimately that single denomination furnished 43 percent of anti-ERA activists in Oklahoma, 45.1 percent in North Carolina, and 59.7 percent in Texas. In comparison, the same study showed that Baptists made up 9.2 percent of the "antis" in Texas, 36.4 percent in North Carolina, and 17 percent in Oklahoma, and that Methodists were 9.2 percent of antis in Texas, 9.1 percent in North Carolina, and 5 percent in Oklahoma. Church of Christ members also played a major role in Tennessee, Arkansas, and Florida.⁶⁴

The fact that Hobbs and the WWW, as well as other religious conservatives in the South, were willing to work with Schlafly against the ERA was crucial to the success of the anti-ERA movement. Though

Stop-ERA had no formal connection to the Catholic Church, her Catholicism was well-known, and could have limited her effectiveness in a region with large numbers of conservative Protestants long hostile to Catholics. Schlafly understood this and assiduously cultivated these connections, drawing Hobbs and other W W W W leaders into her network, emphasizing the commonalities in their Judeo-Christian beliefs about the roles of women and men in the family and society, and the need to work together against the feminist threat. Schlafly later recalled that, when they started out in 1972, her group was largely Catholic with some orthodox Jews, especially rabbis in Chicago who in those early years were very helpful. But "little by little we were bringing in the Protestant groups and by 1976 we just had a tremendous array of the different Protestant groups, all of them."⁶⁵

Schlafly also found support from another group with conservative views about gender roles and family life: the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS), or Mormons. Interestingly, it was not a foregone conclusion that Mormons would become a key part of the coalition fighting ratification of the ERA or the battle against feminist control of the IWY.⁶⁶

Mormon lawmakers supported the ERA in Congress and, when the amendment was sent to the states, contributed to ratification in Idaho, Colorado, California, and Hawaii. Even in Utah, the LDS stronghold, a 1972 poll of candidates running for the legislature showed that regardless of party a majority supported the ERA. The next year ratification failed by only eighteen votes and its sponsors included devout Mormons. In 1974, the church president declined to make a statement on the ERA because the church did not take stands on political issues. It was a point of pride for many in the state that Utah enfranchised women in the 1870s, one of only four states to do so in the nineteenth century. In the early 1970s, many in Utah, as in the rest of the nation, saw the ERA as a general statement of women's equality before the law. There were Mormon feminists just as there were Mormon liberals. Historically, unless the church took a position on an issue, individual Mormons were free to act on their own convictions.⁶⁷

ERA prospects in Utah changed dramatically, however, after Schlafly secured a meeting with Mormon leaders through one of her allies, Utah House of Representatives member Georgia Peterson. Schlafly convinced them the ERA threatened traditional gender roles and the patriarchal family. Later she recalled it had not been hard to do.⁶⁸ The male leadership of the LDS had recently shown signs of wanting to strengthen the political influence of church presidents as well as to rein in the Mormon women's organization the Relief Society, which had carried out charitable work

with considerable independence since its origins in the nineteenth century.⁶⁹ In addition, some top-ranking Mormon leaders, most notably Ezra Taft Benson, were staunchly antifeminist. Benson—secretary of Agriculture under Dwight Eisenhower and an early and influential member of the John Birch Society—believed the ERA would “weaken men.”⁷⁰

Prominent Mormon leaders met with Barbara Smith, the head of the Relief Society, and urged her to speak out against ratification. About the same time a *Church News* editorial denounced the amendment as “unnecessary,” “uncertain,” and “undesirable” and condemned it as a “unisex” law that failed to acknowledge that “men and women are different, made so by a Divine Creator.” After several church leaders issued statements opposing ratification, polls showed that support dropped rapidly. Several Mormon legislators withdrew their support and in 1974 the ratification bill was easily defeated.⁷¹

In 1976, the LDS officially declared the ERA to be “a moral issue,” stating that the amendment failed to recognize inherent emotional and biological differences between males and females, and might “stifle many God-given feminine instincts.” It was also a great threat to the “humankind’s basic institution.” The formal statement of the church declared: “WE RECOGNIZE men and women as equally important before the Lord, but with differences biologically, emotionally and in other ways. ERA, we believe, does not recognize these differences. There are better means for giving women, and men, the rights they deserve.”⁷²

This declaration was tremendously important. It meant full institutional involvement: all church members—not just legislators—were expected not only to oppose the ERA but also to do all in their power to secure its defeat. The LDS First Presidency instructed church members to “join actively with other citizens who share our concerns and who are engaged in working to reject this measure on the basis of its threat to the moral climate of the future.” The church also created and directed groups of Mormons who lobbied vigorously against the ERA in many states while following church instructions, to conceal any LDS connection. After 1976, Mormons would play a key role in the battles over the ERA not only in heavily Mormon Utah, Nevada, and Arizona, but throughout the United States, in most cases having an impact sharply disproportionate to their percentage within their state’s population. In Virginia, for instance, Mormons were less than 1 percent of the population but produced 85 percent of the letters received by state legislators. In retrospect, the ERA seems to have been a test case as church leaders tested their ability to mobilize and direct church members toward a political objective.⁷³

Catholic women were divided on the ERA and could be found playing active roles on both sides. The church hierarchy took no official position. Catholic ERA supporters founded the ad hoc group Catholic Women for the ERA in 1974, and there were even nuns' organizations actively supporting ratification. However, some bishops spoke out against it and most of the major Catholic lay organizations including the massive National Council of Catholic Women, in which Schlafly had long been active, were firmly opposed and were influential in the defeat of the ERA in Illinois, Missouri, and Florida.⁷⁴

These religious conservatives—evangelical and fundamentalist Protestants, conservative Catholics, and to a lesser extent Orthodox Jews who insisted on sharp divisions in the roles of men and women and feared government intervention—were the main force behind the battle against the ERA.⁷⁵

Religion was at the core of the anti-ERA movement. Though it was not as clear to observers in the 1970s as it was later to scholars, active participation in churches was the greatest common denominator among ERA opponents and a far greater indicator than class or levels of education. The majority of women on both sides were white and middle class. Support for the ERA was strongest among women who were highly educated, but many ERA opponents had college educations. The ERA had strong support from women who were married but working outside the home, divorced women, and young single women. Most anti-ERA activists were married women, but many of them had jobs. But when it came to church membership, the differences were striking: 98 percent of anti-ERA activists claimed membership in churches in contrast to 31–48 percent of pro-ERA activists.⁷⁶ Moreover, in terms of statistics, it appeared that the religious left was in decline while the Religious Right was on the rise. Whereas the 1960s had seen active involvement of liberal religious groups in movements seeking political reforms, throughout the 1970s religious groups with moderate or liberal positions on gender equality were losing support, while Catholics, Mormons, and evangelical and fundamentalist Protestant groups were rapidly increasing in numbers.⁷⁷

Women from these conservative Protestant denominations and the LDS, though often new to politics, were especially valuable allies as they were already organized and could be readily mobilized. For example, when Beverly Findley, the main WWW leader in Oklahoma, was asked how she got the organization off to such a successful start, she said it was “really

very simple. I just notified the people I worshipped with. They are the people that think the way I do, and I knew they would be likely to feel the same as I did."⁷⁸ Because of her church's tradition of separation of church and state, many churches in her denomination would not even announce a meeting at services, but Findley and others commonly circulated church newsletters that spread the word about the anti-ERA effort quite effectively.

Some of these women faced opposition to their political involvement from their pastors, fellow church members, and husbands, but they won support by arguing that the threat to church and family was sufficiently high to justify at least a short-term commitment to political activism—a regrettable but necessary sacrifice. Thomson's *Price of LIBerty* contained many such stories, notably Shirley Curry's account of how her minister husband, despite their belief in "God's plan for wives submitting to their husbands," urged her to take action rather than just "wring her hands" and complain about "terrible effects of ERA." "Shirley," he suggested, "why don't you do something? Perhaps, like Queen Esther, you have been called to the kingdom for such a time as this." Sharing her concern, he "respected her unselfishness" and not only tolerated but encouraged her "outside the home" activity. Defense of traditional women's roles seemed to require deviation from them, at least temporarily.⁷⁹

As for Mormons, they were organized hierarchically and geographically into "stakes" and "wards" through which messages from church leaders were communicated. All women eighteen and older were automatically enrolled in the Relief Society, which in addition to its charitable work was supposed to organize and teach women to prepare for eternal life. Unique features of Mormon theology related to the afterlife meant that Mormons, particularly the women who did most of the work in opposing the ERA, would have seen their efforts as enhancing prospects for reaching "exaltation," the highest sphere of a multitiered kingdom of heaven, as well as demonstrating to other church members that they were headed for that eternal reward.⁸⁰

The sense of working for a righteous cause was empowering. Ironically, so was political inexperience. Unlike seasoned political activists who knew how difficult it was to change the direction of government policy, these newcomers were not easily discouraged. Besides, they were convinced that God was on their side. As Findley put it, "They're not just fighting us, they're fighting God!"⁸¹

Yet long-standing mutual antagonism between these groups of religious conservatives made it challenging for them to work together. Fundamentalists

in the anti-ERA coalition had a deep-seated antipathy toward Catholics, did not recognize Mormons as Christians, and were deeply hostile to Jews. Each group saw itself as the true religion. In many cases, religious beliefs required that members save others by converting them. In the past such beliefs had worked against interfaith cooperation (risky, among other reasons, as it created opportunities for “poaching”) and most of these groups had scorned the ecumenical movement that in previous decades had swept through many mainstream religious denominations.⁸²

However, one of Schlafly’s key strengths as an organizer—crucial to the success of the anti-ERA movement—was an extraordinary ability to unite in a coalition religious conservatives from groups hostile to one another. She accomplished this by emphasizing their common belief in the primacy of divinely created gender roles and familial structure while respecting denominational differences. For instance, at her annual training sessions in St. Louis, one of the few times representatives of the disparate parts of the coalition came together, she arranged separate religious services to meet the needs of women whose creed forbade worshipping together with people from other faiths. Schlafly later explained how she managed to get Protestants of all denominations and Catholics, Mormons, and Orthodox Jews to work together: “At our meetings, I taught them that, although they might be sitting next to someone who might not be saved, we could nevertheless work together on behalf of a political/social goal we all shared.” They needed to “be nice to each other and work together.” It was “the policy of my organization, and it was very successful.”⁸³

For the most part, the various groups worked in a coordinated fashion rather than by blending. Being part of the coalition meant coordinating attacks on the enemy rather than joining forces and, under Schlafly’s leadership, they were well coordinated indeed. It helped greatly that for the first time in American history, leaders from these previously hostile religious groups seemed to fear encroaching secularism and the threat posed by feminism more than they feared one another.⁸⁴