

## Topic Page: [Schlafly, Phyllis \(1924 - 2016\)](#)

Summary Article: **SCHLAFLY, PHYLLIS**

From *Encyclopedia of U.S. Political History*

**born 1924**

### **Conservative Activist**

Activist Phyllis Schlafly, author of 20 books and founding president of the conservative organization Eagle Forum, became a household name in the 1970s when she waged a nationwide, grassroots campaign against the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA).

Although Schlafly's anti-ERA work has defined her career, her political life preceded her battle against the ERA and has continued in its aftermath. Since the 1950s, Schlafly has been writing and speaking about Communist threats, elite control of the Republican Party, nuclear strategy, an overweening central government, parents' rights, the common interests of conservative Roman Catholics and evangelical Protestants, the "activist" Warren and Burger courts, and the preservation of "natural" gender roles against two enemies: feminism and homosexuality. She has been active in Republican Party politics since 1946, serving as president of the Illinois Federation of Republican Women (1960-1964) and first vice president of the National Federation of Republican Women (1964-1967). Although Schlafly lost her two bids for Congress (1952, 1970), her impact on the G.O.P. and U.S. conservatism has been considerable. Indeed, the trajectory of Schlafly's own concerns, which began as strong and outspoken anticommunism and developed into a defense of "traditional" family values, mirror the trajectory of postwar conservatism itself. More than a "foot soldier," Schlafly—whom Betty Friedan famously called an "Aunt Tom" because she had allegedly betrayed her sex—has been a defining figure in U.S. conservatism.

Schlafly, whose maiden name was Phyllis MacAlpin Stewart, was born in 1924 in Saint Louis, Missouri, to a middle-class Catholic family that was struggling to maintain its standard of living in the midst of the Great Depression. Schlafly's father, John Bruce Stewart, had lost his job with Westinghouse and could not find another position. Her mother, the society-born, college-educated Odile "Dadie" Dodge Stewart, went to work to support the family. In part owing to her maternal grandparents' influence, the Stewarts' relative poverty did not prevent Phyllis from enjoying some aristocratic privileges; she made her debut into Saint Louis society in her late teens. Schlafly went on to earn her B.A. (1944) from Washington University, where she graduated Phi Beta Kappa; a master's degree from Harvard University (1945); and a doctorate from Washington University Law School (1978). She was married for 44 years to the attorney Fred Schlafly (until his death), with whom she had six children.

Schlafly's parents, though hit hard by the Depression, vehemently opposed the New Deal; a distrust of "big government" recurs throughout Schlafly's writings and speeches. Schlafly's first book, the self-published *A Choice Not an Echo* (1964), played two important roles in the development of the Republican Party. Because it urged the Republican grass roots to seize control from the hands of Northeastern elite "kingmakers," it is often credited with helping Barry Goldwater gain the presidential nomination in 1964. The book also galvanized the more conservative wing of the Republican Party against moderates who had controlled much of the party. The book sold more than 3 million copies. Goldwater, nevertheless, lost to Lyndon Baines Johnson in the regular election; the Republican Party

remained divided over his nomination for quite some time. But the party ultimately embraced many of Goldwater's principles, reflecting the shift that Schlafly instigated and helped to implement.

## RELATED ENTRIES

*This Volume*

Equal Rights Amendment



*Phyllis Schlafly (center right) protests against the Equal Rights Amendment in front of the White House on March 3, 1977. The national fight against ERA spearheaded by Schlafly awakened conservatives nationwide to their own political strength. (Bettmann/Corbis)*

During the 1970s, Schlafly found her next cause in opposing the widely popular ERA, which had been passed by Congress in 1972. By invoking the Constitution to wage a feminist campaign against gender roles, the ERA—according to Schlafly—represented a perfect storm of out-of-control government and feminist ideology. Conjuring up images of androgyny, unisex bathrooms, women in combat, and same-sex marriage, Schlafly argued that the ERA would undermine the United States and, ultimately, civilization itself. She mobilized the conservative grass roots in battleground states; in the end, only 35 of the necessary 38 states voted to ratify. Scholars have debated the extent to which Schlafly can be credited with the amendment's failure, but none disputes the extent to which it defined Schlafly herself. In the wake of a defeated ERA, conservatives began to realize their strength—a strength that would carry Ronald Reagan into the Oval Office in 1980.

Despite a robust professional life that she cultivated while raising six children, Schlafly still defends herself as "America's best-known advocate of the dignity and honor that we as a society owe to the role of full-time homemaker." Critics have long pointed out the irony of making a career of celebrating full-time homemaking, though Schlafly's devotees have seen no such contradiction. In order to inflame "women's libbers," Schlafly made a point of beginning many of her speeches by thanking her husband, Fred, for allowing her to be away from home.

Although best known for her anti-ERA work in the 1970s, Schlafly remains politically engaged in the

early twenty-first century. She continues to lecture on college campuses and still publishes *The Schlafly Report*, her monthly newsletter. Schlafly enjoyed renewed attention with the 2005 publication of Donald T. Critchlow's widely read book, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism*, and with the popularity of her disciple, conservative commentator Ann Coulter, who wrote the foreword to Schlafly's *Feminist Fantasies* (2003). Carol Felsenthal, Schlafly's first biographer, in 1981 dubbed her the "sweetheart of the silent majority." In the intervening years, Schlafly's constituents have grown from a "silent majority" to a force to be reckoned with. Whether they remain a majority is subject to debate, but they have certainly found their voice.

## Bibliography and Further Reading

Critchlow Donald, T. *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade*.

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007.

Eagle Forum. At <http://www.eagleforum.org> (accessed June 18, 2008).

Felsenthal, Carol. *The Sweetheart of the Silent Majority*. New York: Doubleday, 1981.

Mansbridge Jane, J. *Why We Lost the ERA*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986.

Schreiber, Ronee. *Righting Feminism: Conservative Women and American Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Jillian L. Locke

### APA

### Chicago

### Harvard

### MLA

---

Locke, J. L. (2010). Schlafly, Phyllis. In CQ Press (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of U.S. political history*. Washington, DC: CQ Press. Retrieved from [https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/schlafly\\_phyllis\\_1924](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/schlafly_phyllis_1924)

---



© 2010 CQ Press, A Division of SAGE



© 2010 CQ Press, A Division of SAGE

## APA

Locke, J. L. (2010). Schlafly, Phyllis. In CQ Press (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of U.S. political history*. Washington, DC: CQ Press. Retrieved from [https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/schlafly\\_phyllis\\_1924](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/schlafly_phyllis_1924)

## Chicago

Locke, Jillian L. "Schlafly, Phyllis." In *Encyclopedia of U.S. Political History*, edited by CQ Press. CQ Press, 2010. [https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/schlafly\\_phyllis\\_1924](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/schlafly_phyllis_1924)

## Harvard

Locke, J.L. (2010). Schlafly, Phyllis. In CQ Press (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of U.S. political history*. [Online]. Washington: CQ Press. Available from: [https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/schlafly\\_phyllis\\_1924](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/schlafly_phyllis_1924) [Accessed 16 October 2019].

## MLA

Locke, Jillian L. "Schlafly, Phyllis." *Encyclopedia of U.S. Political History*, edited by CQ Press, 1st edition, 2010. *Credo Reference*, [https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/schlafly\\_phyllis\\_1924](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/schlafly_phyllis_1924). Accessed 16 Oct. 2019.