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Donald T. Critchlow: Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism

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Introduction

ONE OF THE most remarkable features of American politics in the late twentieth century is that while governmental responsibilities and obligations to its citizens increased, and democratic rights and civil protections were extended to new groups and classes of people, liberalism was perceived to be a failure. With this failure, many social commentators remarked on the electorate's notable shift to the right. This shift was far from universal; voters, largely in urban areas along the East and West coasts and in a few Midwestern industrial cities, erected impenetrable fortresses of support for liberal candidates. At the same time, much of the electorate simply did not vote, reflecting both apathy and a deep mistrust of the two major parties, political leaders, and political institutions. Yet, few doubt that a dramatic shift in American politics occurred over the last four decades of the twentieth century. This was evidenced in the increased number of voters willing to identify themselves as "conservative," by the takeover of the Republican party by the Right, and by the shifting of political debate to issues once considered the exclusive domain of the Right—fiscal responsibility, returning power to the states, peace through military strength, and the importance of individual responsibility in maintaining civil society. At the start of the twenty-first century, an undeniable sense prevailed among many observers of the American political scene that conservatism in America was ascendant and New Deal liberalism on the decline.

This turn in American politics was of historic proportions. The liberal vision, which had dominated American politics at least since the early twentieth century, appeared spent, exhausted by campus protests, urban riots, a war in Vietnam in the 1960s, inept political leadership in the 1970s, and anxious attempts to graft conservative rhetoric onto a hybrid liberalism in the 1990s. Long-time liberal fears that the American Right might gain political power had become reality. Conservatism had become a badge of respectability for many voters, while public officials were running away from the label "liberal." Whether middle-class Americans were actually more conservative in 2000 than they were in 1956 is debatable. What is important is that more Americans called themselves conservatives than did those who proclaimed themselves liberal. Furthermore, many of those calling themselves conservative

proudly declared themselves evangelical Christians or traditionalist Jews, Protestants, or Catholics. This was an extraordinary reversal from fifty years, or even thirty years, earlier when being called a conservative was an opprobrium often associated with “little old ladies in tennis shoes” searching for communists at their local school board meeting. By the twenty-first century, average Americans, blue collar and white collar workers, middle-class husbands and wives, white Southerners, and many college students across the country proudly proclaimed themselves to be conservative. Conservatism in the twenty-first century implied opposition to the status quo, rebellion against the establishment, a democratic faith in the people, and a deep suspicion of the wisdom of the liberal elites in government, the media, and academia. “I am a conservative,” the newly elected U.S. Senator Roger Jepsen declared in 1980, “because I am for change.”

This shift to the right was reflected in the transformation of the Republican party into a voice of conservatism. This transformation was neither inevitable nor smooth, but came through fierce factional and ideological warfare within the party as liberals, moderates, and pragmatists battled to defeat the GOP’s rightwing. At any number of times, the GOP Right looked as though it had been defeated for good. Following conservative Barry Goldwater’s defeat for the presidency in 1964, his followers were purged from party leadership. Richard Nixon’s election in 1968 did little to resuscitate the GOP Right, even though many conservatives had rallied to his campaign for the presidency. When Nixon left office in disgrace, the Republican Right was isolated and demoralized. Only the emergence of cultural issues—abortion, feminism, prayer-in-school, and homosexual rights—revived the Right, and in doing so, set the stage for Ronald Reagan, an avowed conservative, in 1980. The GOP became a party dominated by religious and cultural traditionalism, as evidenced by the party platforms of the 1980s. A survey of delegates attending the 1992 Republican National Convention found that “over 22 percent of the convention delegates identified themselves as fundamentalists, while 66 percent attended worship services regularly, and 52 percent were either members of or were sympathetic to the political movement known as the Christian Right.”¹

While the Democratic National Convention meeting in New York that same summer of 1992 nominated a Southern Baptist and a New Democrat centrist, William Clinton, the delegates attending the convention contrasted sharply with their Republican counterparts. Those

declaring themselves atheists, agnostics, or individuals not affiliated with any religion accounted for 19 percent of all delegates, while 55 percent of the delegates said they rarely attended worship services. The Democratic party had become a party of secular and religious progressives who, while not abandoning religious commitment, rejected the moral dictates of the orthodox camp. The divide between the two parties extends beyond political ideology to a deeper cultural and religious chasm that encourages heated partisanship and disallows easy political compromise. This religious and cultural divide emerged at a time when New Deal economic liberalism, the glue which had held the Democrats together since the 1930s, began to be repudiated by the American electorate.

How had a small movement, consisting of a few conservative intellectuals and grassroots anticommunist activists in the 1950s, become so powerful as to radically change American politics in ways arguably comparable to Jacksonian democracy in the 1830s or the Republican party in the 1860s? What transpired in the last half century to change America as a beacon of liberalism at the end of World War II to a voice of conservatism as the century drew to a close? Why did liberalism come to be seen by so many Americans as a failed experiment by the end of the twentieth century, even though it had fulfilled its promise to create the modern welfare state in the 1930s, had created a new international order after World War II, and had extended new rights and civil liberties to Americans in the 1960s?

This book offers insight into this transformative upheaval in American politics through the political career of Phyllis Schlafly, whose involvement in the Republican Right began in the immediate aftermath of World War II and extended into the twenty-first century. Schlafly's political activities impart their own intrinsic interest, but the importance of Schlafly lies in what her career tells us about the remarkable changes that took place in the larger politics of the last half of the twentieth century. Never elected to political office, although she ran twice for Congress, Schlafly rose to prominence in conservative politics not as a philosopher or intellectual, but as an organizer. Her Eagle Forum, the organization she founded in the early 1970s, today claims a membership of 50,000 women who can be mobilized for conservative causes and candidates. Her career as an anticommunist crusader in the 1950s, her book *A Choice Not an Echo* that sold over three million copies in 1964 and helped secure Barry Goldwater's presidential nomination, her

campaign against the SALT Treaties and for American strategic superiority, her commitment to defeat the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), her two campaigns for Congress, and her leadership in the pro-family movement personified the rise of the Right in contemporary United States.

Schlafly is best known to those over the age of forty for her *A Choice Not an Echo* and her campaign to defeat ERA, which drew thousands of women into an antifeminist, pro-family crusade. Both these were catalysts that propelled a resurgent Right and made her a heroine of the Right. Since the 1960s she has been a regular radio and television commentator, beginning with her fifteen-minute Daughters of the American Revolution “America Wake Up” radio program. This was followed by her CBS Spectrum radio commentaries and televised debates (1973–78), her syndicated three-minute daily commentaries (1983–present), and live interviews on hundreds of television and radio programs. Her one-hour weekly live-broadcast is heard regularly on Christian radio today. Her *Phyllis Schlafly Report*, begun in 1967, is read by 30,000 subscribers for its essays on politics, education, national defense, feminism, the judiciary, and immigration. Through these activities Schlafly tapped into the anxieties of traditional-minded Middle Americans concerned about changing social and cultural mores in America. Schlafly helped organize the grassroots movement in churches and local communities that eventually became a major player in the Republican party. At the same time, these activities unleashed an intense and seemingly irrepressible culture war. The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 intensified debates over gender, abortion, and cultural issues, and, twenty-five years later, this debate is as vigorous as ever.

Schlafly’s life presents a fascinating story in itself, but her importance—at least for the purposes of this book—rests in what her political activities tell us about the transformation of the Republican party from moderate/liberal to conservative. (Readers interested in a more personal biography of her are referred to Carol Felsenthal, *The Sweetheart of the Silent Majority: The Biography of Phyllis Schlafly*, published in 1981.) Through her political career, three themes emerge. First, this study constructs an alternative narrative to other histories of the Republican Right in America. Previous studies have tended to assume a sequence of events that culminated with the election of Ronald Reagan. That linear story usually begins with a small number of conservative intellectuals who became prominent in the post–World War II period.

They prepared the ground for Goldwater's nomination in 1964, and although he was defeated, conservatives returned home to build an elaborate network of conservative organizations and programs. Conservatives endowed foundations such as the Bradley Foundation, the Olin Foundation, and the Richard and Helen DeVos Foundation; built policy centers such as the Heritage Foundation; and funded educational programs through such groups as the Institute for Humane Studies, the Liberty Fund, and the Intercollegiate Studies Institute. This network prepared the ground for Ronald Reagan's election in 1980.

The problem with linear history is that the conservative triumph was not a straight march from Point A to Point B, nor was the arrival at Point B at all certain. The history of the Republican Right as illustrated through the political career of Schlafly was an interrupted tale of fits and starts, in which conservatives were often defeated in political fights with the Left and within the Republican party. The history of the Republican Right is episodic, a dramatic story of defensive battles and losing campaigns—foot-soldiers driven by concerns about communism and the subversion of the American Republic, often isolated by charges of extremism. Defeated in the presidential election of 1964, purged from leadership positions in its aftermath, and then betrayed by Richard Nixon in the 1970s, conservatives were demoralized and uncertain of their future in the 1970s. Arguably, if Ronald Reagan had won the Republican nomination in 1976 against incumbent Gerald Ford, he would have been defeated by Jimmy Carter in the general election. Yet another setback would have been difficult for the Right to overcome. Conservatism as an ideology would have remained, but as a major political force it might have been spent. Of course, this is conjecture, but it makes the point that the triumph of the Republican Right was certainly not inevitable.

Until recently, much of the history of the conservative movement has focused largely on the conservative intellectuals and writers, while ignoring the importance of grassroots conservatism. Those histories portrayed a small group of writers and intellectuals, articulating an antistatist philosophy that deeply resonated with the republican tradition in America—its distrust of centralized government and political elites, and its fear of corruption. From these intellectual seeds, it was assumed that a grassroots political movement sprang forth, but nature knows that seed dropped on barren soil does not grow. A few fringe groups sprang up that were given to conspiratorial views of history,

which allowed liberals to hang extremist labels on the grassroots Right. Those groups were subsequently marginalized within the larger conservative movement.²

This study of the postwar Republican Right finds that the foundation of the Republican Right was laid in grassroots anticommunism that paralleled the development of an intellectual movement that sought to educate the general public, especially young people, about the principles of conservatism. At the same time, grassroots anticommunist organizations in the late 1950s educated large numbers of Americans through hundreds of often obscure publications, local seminars, lectures, film strips, study groups, and educational campaigns. Radio programs such as the Dan Smoot Report and the Manion Forum reached tens of thousands of listeners, while Dr. Fred C. Schwarz's Christian Anti-Communism Crusade organized training schools and rallies that attracted thousands of participants. These grassroots anticommunist activities were often conducted through local groups and organizations that were tied together only by their cause and by national speakers and writers who attended local events. Without belying the importance of intellectuals such as Friedrich von Hayek, Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, Ayn Rand, William F. Buckley, Jr., or Russell Kirk, grassroots activists were reading books such as Barry Goldwater's best-seller *The Conscience of a Conservative* (1960), John A. Stormer's *None Dare Call It Treason* (1964), Phyllis Schlafly's *A Choice Not an Echo* (1964), and eye-witness reports by ex-communists. Without intellectual foundations, the modern conservative movement might have gone the way of earlier grassroots movements that rebelled against the established order, for example, the Anti-Masons in the 1840s and the Populists in the 1890s. Yet without grassroots activists to give political substance and energy to conservative ideas, conservatism as political movement would have remained largely the province of a handful of writers. Schlafly's talent, in part, was her ability to translate conservative ideas to grassroots activists and motivate them to achieve political goals.³

The second theme emerges from the first: Conservative intellectuals and grassroots activists waged war on New Deal liberalism, but conservatism triumphed only when New Deal liberalism was perceived as a failure by the American people. Writing in 1959, William F. Buckley, Jr., the founding editor of the newly established *National Review*, declared, "We must bring down the thing called Liberalism, which is powerful, but decadent; and salvage a thing called conservatism, which is weak

but viable.”⁴ Through a well-organized grassroots campaign, conservatives were able to nominate Barry Goldwater as the Republican presidential candidate in 1964, but Goldwater’s subsequent overwhelming defeat, followed by factionalism within the Republican party kept conservatism weak and perhaps not viable, either.

Four years later in 1968, America appeared to many on both the Left and the Right to be a nation in inner turmoil—economic, spiritual, and cultural. The nation had become mired in an interminable war in Vietnam, torn apart by internal dissent and racial violence, its economy bloated with inflation, and its military power and prestige in the world in decline. Liberalism took much of the blame. By the 1970s, liberalism fell into further disrepute for not upholding values of responsibility for one’s actions: that work is better than public assistance, that having children in marriage is better than out-of-wedlock, and that freedom and authority are not opposite values. “Liberal” became a label to be avoided. Running for the presidency in 1988, Michael Dukakis was branded with the “L” word and it cost him the election. Liberal had become a tarnished word to many Democratic politicians by 1992.

Perhaps this caricature of liberals was unfair, but liberalism was increasingly placed on the defensive. Liberal Democrats continued to control Congress, and the Democratic party elected two presidents to office after 1968, but both Jimmy Carter in 1976 and Bill Clinton in 1992 and 1996 ran as centrists. The last liberal elected to the presidency was forty years ago, Lyndon Johnson in 1964. Liberalism appeared to become little more than a boiling cauldron of identity politics that pandered to the jealousies of ethnic and minority groups. Liberal candidates were elected to local and state office, but by the late 1960s liberalism as an intellectual force was placed on the defensive and appeared to have run out of fresh ideas, living on by wrapping itself in the legacy of the New Deal of the 1930s. Only then, as economic liberalism declined, did conservatism as an ideology and a movement become a powerful force in American politics.

The final theme in this study is the importance of women in the emergence of the grassroots Right, and the unique sensibility that they brought to the movement. Of course, men played an important role as leaders and grassroots activists, but women were especially important in organizations such as the National Federation of Republican Women and the Daughters of the American Revolution, organizations in which Phyllis Schlafly held high office. The discovery of conservative,

antifeminist women has attracted serious attention by scholars, and this study could not have been written without the rich literature that has developed in this area. This is not a study of gender politics, but gender played an essential role in the triumph of the Right. While recognizing the importance of women in the conservative movement, this study is primarily concerned about the political effects of grassroots conservatism on American politics in general. In understanding the motivation of the grassroots Right and the individuals involved, I came to the conclusion that sociological interpretation based on status anxiety, gender privilege, class interest, or misplaced maternalism was inadequate to explain the grassroots Right, especially the women of the Right.

Instead, this study places the women of the Right within a deeply rooted ideological sensibility that combines a libertarian espousal of the virtues of small government and individual responsibility with a faith in traditional values and divine moral authority. These two strains—libertarianism and religious traditionalism—were embodied in a sentiment that created an uneasy, and even at times a volatile, tension. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, this sentiment found expression in a religious morality and political outlook that abhorred the excesses of the French Revolution, moral decay in antebellum politics, and, later, intemperance in late nineteenth-century society. In the twentieth century, this sentiment, although not clearly articulated in a systematic political ideology, resisted the secularization of society with its reliance on expertise, government bureaucracy, and commitment to progress through centralized government. By synchronizing religion and politics, this moral sensibility assumed that free government rested upon a moral or religious citizenry whose principal civil responsibility was the protection of public virtue. The sensibility upheld the belief that ultimately republican government rested on moral foundations that, if eroded, would lead to the collapse of the polity.⁵

This view of the world assumed that the American republic was founded on God's grace and flourished with His blessing. Although opponents charged evangelical and traditional Christians with wanting to erect a theocratic state, this sensibility adhered to deeply held republican values. Indeed, some within this tradition went so far as to claim that the Israelite theocratic state was actually a republic. For example, writing in 1892, two Presbyterian theologians, Rev. John Hall and Rev. William E. Moore declared, "The Christian Church in its earliest

organization was a republic. Its rulers under Christ were the elders of the people of God. The doctrine, like the polity, is drawn from the Bible. There is no necessary connection between government by chosen representation and the doctrines of grace; but the affinity between them is so close that, given one, we naturally expect the other.”⁶

By the late twentieth century, this kind of theological discussion became less prevalent, but this view that Judeo-Christian morality provided the foundation of the American republic remained. At the root of the anti-communism, anti-feminism, and pro-family movements in post-World War II America remained a conviction that the nation must not stray from its religious foundations and values lest society collapse into anarchy. As sociologist Rebecca Klatch summarizes this view, “While America was founded with God’s grace and has flourished with His blessing, an historical shift has occurred that threatens America’s standing. Of chief concern, America has moved away from God. Pleasure and prosperity have replaced biblical principles as the priority of the nation. . . . the moral absolutes that govern the nation are in disarray.”⁷

This moral republican sentiment, while not leading every evangelical and traditional-minded Christian and Jew into active politics, nonetheless inspired many to become politically involved throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Religious republican values were not necessarily associated with any particular political party, and at times, these sentiments manifested strikingly illiberal tendencies apparent to contemporaries and later historians. In the nineteenth century, for example, this moral republicanism found expression in nativist anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic political movements. Still, the fear that the nation was in moral decline persisted in the twentieth century and ultimately drew evangelical Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Mormons together. A precarious alliance between these religious traditions gave a potent political impetus to grassroots conservatism in the late twentieth century.

Once on the fringe of American politics, the grassroots Right entered into American politics with a suddenness and force that stunned both the Left and the Republican establishment. When the Right gained control of the Republican party, its opponents were frightened and angered by this movement that left the politics of old in ruins. The mentality of the Republican Right seemed unfathomable to those who believed that social justice, social equality, and social progress were attainable

through the action of state power. Of course, not all members of the Republican Right were religious and cultural traditionalists. Some were motivated by secular beliefs in small government, opposition to welfare liberalism, equal opportunity rather than preferential rights, and a strong national defense. The mindset of the Right that spoke of the fundamental right to life of the fetus, biblical teachings about the proper family structure and sexual relations, the sin of homosexuality, and the need to restore prayer in school was so removed from the modern sensibilities that it appeared nearly incognizable to many on the Left. They spoke a different language, understood the world differently, and brought different cultural values and social visions to the political arena.

This book seeks to understand the Republican Right by placing its emergence within a political context of the day. To accomplish this, I entered into the world of the grassroots Right through an extensive reading of private correspondence, speeches, leaflets, pamphlets, newspapers, and books. I also benefited from access to Phyllis Schlafly's extensive archives at the headquarters of the Eagle Forum and her personal papers. These unpublished sources and archival records were supplemented through research in many other archives, including papers of her opponents, as well as other conservatives. In addition, I undertook research in pertinent presidential libraries and the collections of major political leaders of the twentieth century.

Phyllis Schlafly granted me access to her papers with the understanding that this book was not to be an authorized account of her political career, and that I would bring the critical skills of a professional, independent-minded historian to this project. I relied primarily on printed and archival sources for this book, using only a handful of interviews. I wanted this book to be history, not journalism. On a few occasions when I was working in the archives at the Eagle Forum headquarters, I caught Schlafly unannounced with a specific document and found that it triggered memories that she relayed to me, often with great excitement. Following these conversations, I immediately typed my notes from memory for later use.

What emerged from this research was a political world quite remote from my own experiences. In writing about this world, I sought to capture the outlook of the grassroots Right, while representing it accurately. At the same time, I placed the Republican Right in a critical perspective by relating how differently its opponents saw events. In doing this,

I hope I convey the high drama of a political contest that so profoundly transformed American politics in the last half of the twentieth century. I leave the reader to judge whether I have succeeded in my purpose, with the caveat made by eighteenth-century historian and philosopher David Hume that authors will also be judged by “the few [who are] apt to form to themselves systems of their own, which they resolve not to relinquish.”⁸ This is what makes writing and reading history so rewarding.