

Resource:

Life Story: Phyllis Schlafly (1924-2016)



Activist Phyllis Schlafly wearing a “Stop ERA” badge, demonstrating with other women against the Equal Rights Amendment in front of the White House

Activist Phyllis Schlafly wearing a “Stop ERA” badge, demonstrating with other women against the Equal Rights Amendment in front of the White House, Washington, D.C. 1977. Warren K. Leffler / Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Washington D.C.

Phyllis Stewart was born in 1924 in St. Louis, Missouri. When Phyllis was six years old, her father lost his job at the start of the Great Depression. For several years, her mother supported the family by working as a librarian.

Phyllis was raised Roman Catholic and attended Catholic school. Her high grades earned her a scholarship to Maryville College, a women's college in St. Louis. She was frustrated that the classes were not challenging enough and transferred to Washington University of St. Louis after one year. Without a scholarship, Phyllis took a war job at a gun factory at night to help pay her tuition.

Phyllis completed a master's degree in political science at Harvard University. After graduation, she worked in Washington, D.C., as a researcher for a conservative think tank. She then returned to St. Louis and worked as a research librarian for a bank.

In 1949, Phyllis married Fred Schlafly. Fred was a wealthy and successful lawyer almost 15 years older than Phyllis. They moved to a large house in the St. Louis suburbs of Illinois where Phyllis raised their six children. Phyllis and Fred were very religious and believed that their faith required activism. They both participated in several anti-communist organizations and Catholic foundations.

In 1952, the Republican Party asked Fred to run for Congress. He declined, but Phyllis offered to run. Phyllis won the primary but lost in the general election. The day after her primary victory, she posed for pictures while cooking breakfast for her children. She wanted voters to know she was still a devoted housewife.

Phyllis soon took on a leadership role with the Daughters of the American Revolution in Illinois. She also served as president of the Illinois Federation of Republican Women. She traveled around the country, making speeches about the importance of family values, Christianity, and patriotism, and spoke out against communism. Phyllis also

hosted a radio show where she discussed national security, the threat of communism, and the dangers of the United Nations.

In 1964, Phyllis became the First Vice President of the National Federation of Republican Women. That same year, she supported the Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater. She wrote a book promoting his candidacy called *A Choice Not an Echo*. It sold over 600,000 copies in its first printing and made Phyllis Schlafly a nationally recognized name.

Although Phyllis's reputation was growing, not all Republicans agreed with her staunchly conservative views. Moderate Republicans were eager to gain control of the party to ensure presidential victory in 1968. As part of their plan, Phyllis was pushed out of her leadership role at the National Federation of Republican Women.

In response, Phyllis launched her own monthly newsletter, *The Phyllis Schlafly Report*. Through this publication, she shared her views and encouraged conservative Republicans to take action and resist more moderate leadership. By the early 1970s, she had over 35,000 subscribers.

In 1972, the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) was passed by Congress. Feminists celebrated this as a huge victory. Phyllis saw the amendment as a tremendous threat to conservative America and its values. Phyllis believed that American women enjoyed a privileged position. She was grateful that Americans valued the natural differences between men and women. She pointed out how women in communist countries like the USSR had gender equality. But such equality meant more working mothers and more children in government-provided childcare.

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Women are different from men . . . Men are philosophers, women are practical . . . Women don't take naturally to a search for the intangible and the abstract.

Phyllis's biggest argument against the ERA was that women should be in the home. In reality, Phyllis was so busy fighting against the ERA that she was rarely home herself. She claimed to be a typical housewife, but her schedule was anything but typical.

Phyllis formed STOP ERA, an organization focused on encouraging states not to ratify the amendment. Phyllis gained support from conservative women's organizations across the country. By 1973, 26 states had local chapters of STOP ERA. Phyllis was incredibly busy organizing meetings, rallies, and speeches. She also regularly appeared on television to debate ERA supporters.

Phyllis infuriated ERA supporters and feminists. Her arguments and perspective went against everything that they believed to be true. She regularly insulted them in her writings and interviews, which encouraged them to insult her right back. At times, they criticized her as inexperienced and unprofessional. Motivated by these criticisms, Phyllis enrolled in Washington University Law School in 1975. She graduated with a law degree in 1978.

In 1975, Phyllis folded STOP ERA into a larger organization, the Eagle Forum. Through the Eagle Forum, Phyllis expanded her messaging beyond opposition to the ERA, including issues around education, national defense, and nuclear arms.

In 1975, President Gerald Ford created the National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year (IWY). Congress allocated \$5 million to support the work of

the IWY Commission. The IWY Commission was in charge of organizing 50 state-level conferences culminating in the National Women's Conference in 1977. The participants at the national conference would create and approve a plan for policies regarding women. In 1976, newly elected President Jimmy Carter appointed former Democratic congresswoman Bella Abzug as chair of the IWY Commission.

Phyllis hated the entire idea of the IWY Commission. She believed that both President Ford and President Carter appointed liberals to the commission. She quickly mobilized conservative women to participate in the state conferences. Her hope was to stop any liberal agenda items from reaching the national conference. Conservative women made their voices heard at the state conferences. At times, arguments became heated. In some cases, physical fights erupted between feminists and anti-feminists. Conservatives only captured 20% of the seats for the National Women's Conference, but Phyllis saw this as a victory.

Phyllis and her colleagues organized their own event to counter the conference. The Pro-Life, Pro-Family Rally took place just five miles away from the National Women's Conference on the same weekend. Nearly 20,000 men, women, and children participated. Almost all of them were white.

The Pro-Life, Pro-Family rally included speeches, prayers, and music. Participants spoke out against the ERA, abortion, LGBTQ rights, and what they perceived to be society's assault on American values. It was almost the exact opposite of the agenda of the National Women's Conference.

The rally provided critical momentum for conservatives. President Carter received the plan created at the National Women's Conference in early 1978. Although he promised to take action quickly, conservative activists resisted his efforts. By 1979, President

Carter fired Bella Abzug from her leadership position and limited his commitment to women's rights. In 1980, he lost to Republican candidate Ronald Reagan in a landslide.

The original deadline to ratify the ERA was 1978. By then, only 35 of the required 38 states had ratified it. Congress extended the deadline to 1982, but no additional states voted in favor of the amendment. When the ERA was re-introduced to Congress in 1983, neither the House nor the Senate passed it. Many historians credit the efforts of STOP ERA for halting what seemed like an easy ratification process in the early 1970s.

Phyllis remained politically active for the rest of her life. She ran the Eagle Forum out of her suburban home and continued writing her monthly newsletter. In March 2016, she endorsed Donald Trump for president. Later that year, she died of cancer.

Vocabulary

- **abortion:** A procedure to end a pregnancy.
- **communism:** A political system in which all goods and items of value are collectively owned and distributed to citizens equally.
- **Daughters of the American Revolution:** A membership organization for women whose ancestors fought on the side of the patriots during the American Revolution.
- **Equal Rights Amendment (ERA):** A proposed amendment to the United States Constitution stating that rights may not be denied on the basis of a person's sex.
- **Federation of Republican Women:** An advocacy group for women who support the Republican party.
- **International Women's Year:** The United Nations named 1975 as International Women's Year. In response, nations around the world developed plans to honor and recognize women.

- **primary:** An election between candidates of the same party that determines which candidate will represent the party in the general (or main) election.
- **pro-life:** A term used by activists who oppose abortion.
- **think tank:** A group of experts who provide ideas and advice on political topics.

Discussion Questions

- How do you think Phyllis's childhood, education, and marriage shaped her life of activism?
- Why do you think so many people were drawn to Phyllis's newsletter and advocacy efforts? What does this tell you about the state of conservative politics in this era?
- Why did Phyllis oppose the ERA? What does her argument tell you about conservative values in the 1960s and 1970s?
- Why did Phyllis organize the Pro-Life, Pro-Family Rally in 1977? Do you think it was effective?

Suggested Activities

- Pair Phyllis's life story with that of Bella Abzug. Each woman's career culminated in leading a major political event in Houston in 1977. Invite students to look at the story of the ERA and the National Women's Conference from two perspectives.
- Read Phyllis's life story in conjunction with Gloria Steinem's testimony in favor of the ERA. Ask students to think about how these two perspectives on the ERA speak to one another. How do they think Gloria and Phyllis felt about one another?

- Phyllis and Betty Friedan had similar upbringings. Both women were born in the 1920s, attended women's colleges, and raised families in the suburbs. They also shared their ideas through writing. Invite students to pair these life stories and explore the range of perspectives in women's history of this era.
- Phyllis often argued that life in America would be too similar to life in the USSR if the ERA were passed. She was not the first person to compare the roles of women in those two countries. Connect her life story to the kitchen debate to learn more about how women's roles were linked to the Cold War.

Themes

**AMERICAN IDENTITY AND CITIZENSHIP; POWER AND POLITICS; ACTIVISM
AND SOCIAL CHANGE; DOMESTICITY AND FAMILY**