

PHYLLIS SCHLAFLY'S "POSITIVE" FREEDOM: LIBERTY, LIBERATION, AND THE EQUAL RIGHTS AMENDMENT

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This article considers the rhetoric of Phyllis Schlafly and her STOP ERA movement. Despite the early success and broad popularity of the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s, Schlafly and her colleagues were able to prevent its ratification. In their many clashes with proponents of the women's liberation movement, these traditionalist women successfully appropriated and redeployed an ideographic argument that had been the province of their foes. Specifically, Schlafly claimed that traditional gender roles were freeing to women, ensuring their rights, while "liberation" could lead only to bondage. Drawing on the work of philosopher Isaiah Berlin, I argue that Schlafly's upbeat, "positive" campaign advanced a "positive" conception of freedom against the "negative" freedom proposed by second-wave feminists. The success of this effort demonstrates the utility of such arguments, especially in a nation that values freedom as both opportunity and exercise. I close by suggesting that Schlafly's rhetorical strategy has been embraced by subsequent conservative "culture war" movements, ensuring her legacy into the new millennium.

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On March 22, 1979, Phyllis Schlafly celebrated her victory over the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Joined by about 1,500 supporters in the ballroom of Washington's Shoreham-Americana Hotel, she reflected on the incredible events of the past seven years. "We are the most powerful, positive force in America today," she told an adoring crowd, "because we have been able to give the bureaucrats and the politicians a stunning defeat."¹ Decades later, these remarks retain a bewildering quality. A coalition of conservative women, standing in defense of patriarchy, had overcome the concerted efforts of countless "bureaucrats and politicians" to impose equal rights upon them.

Still, the defeat of the ERA *was* stunning, and the improbability of the failure was only compounded by the improbability of the resistance that engineered it. After all, *equal rights* constitutes a potent ideographic tandem, a policy outcome tailor-made for broad acceptance. In the early days, even Schlafly saw no reason to object. She told one biographer that, as of 1971, she was mostly indifferent to the Equal Rights Amendment. She "figured ERA was something between innocuous and mildly helpful." That year, when a friend asked her to take part in a debate on the subject, Schlafly declined. "I'm not interested in ERA," she said. "How about a debate on national defense?"² After repeated entreaties from friends and allies, however, Schlafly decided to research the amendment and soon chose to oppose it. She founded STOP ERA in October 1972, naming herself national chairman.

The decision proved consequential. Even with the amendment's broad popularity and bipartisan approval, STOP ERA quickly developed a powerful coalition, composed mostly of traditionalist women. Through letter-writing campaigns, phone calls, and media-savvy public activism, Schlafly's supporters successfully slowed, stopped and, in several cases, *reversed* the ERA's momentum.³ By 1978 it was clear that the remaining states would *not* ratify, and the 1982 extended deadline came and went without any further progress. Indeed, in one of the most striking upsets in American political history, Schlafly and her STOP ERA colleagues managed to halt the ratification of what had become, by the early 1970s, a largely uncontroversial amendment.⁴

That STOP ERA did stop the ERA is now old—and often forgotten—news. Despite the passing of decades, few social movement scholars have analyzed the rhetorical strategies that made this victory possible. Notable

exceptions include Sonja K. Foss and Martha Solomon, each of whom wrote about the movement while it was still in action. In her 1979 *Quarterly Journal of Speech* article, Solomon performed a mythic analysis of STOP ERA rhetoric, attributing the movement's success to its employment of a "formal archetypal pattern, the *mythoi* of the romantic quest."⁵ Through this myth, Solomon argued, STOP ERA rhetors successfully cast themselves as courageous heroes, striving against a villainous feminism on a journey toward fulfillment. Writing in the same issue, Foss bypassed an "argumentative perspective" in favor of an analysis that privileged "rhetorical vision," hoping to account for the two starkly different and competing "world views" generated by the rhetoric of the opposing sides. These perceptions, Foss argued, were powerful enough to overwhelm and obscure the actual arguments made for and against the ERA.⁶ In both analyses, arguments are upstaged by the stories the activists told—to themselves, to each other, and to a curious public.

The arguments were important, though, and many of them had to do with freedom. Proponents of the ERA were based within the women's liberation movement, pledging to liberate women from the restrictions imposed on them by patriarchal society. Inspired by Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, they sought the eradication of those gendered rules and norms that confined women to a life within the home. By contrast, opponents of the amendment defended traditional gender roles, arguing that such roles were based in the very nature of femininity. In this view, women were destined to be wives and mothers, and their domestic roles actually freed them from the drudgeries and dangers of the office, the factory, and the military, among other male-dominated venues. The long and protracted ERA fight brought these perspectives continually into collision. The resultant debate, ostensibly about womanhood, was necessarily also about the nature of freedom.

Drawing on the work of philosopher Isaiah Berlin, this article approaches the ERA debate from the perspective of freedom theory. Specifically, I argue that Phyllis Schlafly and the STOP ERA movement advanced a "positive" conception of freedom based in self-mastery and the overcoming of desire. At the same time, supporters of the amendment advanced a "negative" conception intent on removing restraints and opening new opportunities for women. Thus the central tension in the ERA debate may not have arisen between feminists who favored freedom and antifeminists

who did not. It may rather have constituted a disagreement about what freedom means, or *which* freedom is most congruent with American identity. Granting that each faction presented a vision of the future, doing so freely and in good faith, the public reception of each or either depended largely on the quality of presentation—on how effectively each group navigated the available means of persuasion. The outcome of the ERA fight indicates that a “positive” rhetoric is well suited to this task.

In the first section, I explain the positive-negative distinction, demonstrating how each conception was disclosed in the rhetoric of the competing sides. From there, I proceed into a two-part analytical section. First, I consider Schlafly’s newsletter, *The Phyllis Schlafly Report (PSR)*, analyzing how it drew upon past liberal tropes and thematized positive freedom in its anti-ERA arguments. Next, I consider Schlafly’s 1977 book, *The Power of the Positive Woman*. Declaring that “women’s lib” was a distinctly “negative” movement, Schlafly developed “positive womanhood” as a competing conception of personal autonomy—a conception that closely resembles Berlin’s “positive” conception of freedom. Here I argue that the similarity is more than superficial. In the concluding section, I suggest that the freedom framing of the ERA fight provides a helpful lens through which to view other late twentieth-century culture war battles. From the ERA forward, social issue debates have often hinged upon the contested nature of American ideographs—*freedom* and *rights* in particular.

TWO CONCEPTS OF FREEDOM

In Isaiah Berlin’s famous formulation, freedom has two key forms, the positive and the negative. Berlin conceptualized “negative” freedom in terms of noninterference, noting that an individual is free “to the degree to which no man or body of men interferes with [her] activity.”⁷ In an ideal world of total freedom, then, humans may live peacefully with no constraints whatsoever. Berlin noted, however, that a *real* world of total freedom would necessarily—and paradoxically—be a world of total *interference*. In his words, “it would entail a state in which all men could boundlessly interfere with all other men; and this kind of ‘natural’ freedom would lead to social chaos in which men’s minimum needs would not be satisfied; or else the liberties of the weak would be suppressed by the strong.”⁸ In a properly functioning society, therefore, acts of legitimate

interference curtail those of illegitimate interference in a way that creates freedom through selective restriction. By creating acceptable boundaries between individuals, freedom is offered a space within which to flourish. Much American political discourse concerns the extent to which state interference remains "legitimate," and negative liberty has enjoyed a sort of *de facto* prominence in American thought. Given their desire to be free from patriarchal forms of interference, women's liberationists may have privileged "negativity," though not necessarily in the sense Schlafly claimed.

The counterpart to freedom-as-noninterference is "positive" freedom, defined by Berlin as "the wish on the part of the individual to be [her] own master." This concept privileges responsibility and agency, often defined as *freedom to*, while negative freedom may be understood as *freedom from*. Another way to say this is that positive freedom is an *exercise* concept, while negative freedom is an *opportunity* concept. Under positive freedom, in Berlin's words, "I wish my life and decisions to depend on myself, not on external forces of whatever kind. I wish to be the instrument of my own, not of other men's, acts of will. I wish to be a subject, not an object; to be moved by reasons, by conscious purposes, which are my own, not by causes which affect me, as it were, from outside."⁹ In the pursuit of self-mastery, the adherent of positive freedom seeks her best self, attempting to dismiss all "enslaving" forces along the way, including those that come from *inside*, those that bind her "true" self to her "lower" self, usually through desire or base appetite. Extrapolated outward, positive freedom lends itself to social movements as collective bodies join together in pursuing and reinforcing a common ideal through set social practices and the regulation of group norms. For members of the STOP ERA movement, this conception of freedom disclosed itself in the desire to overcome selfish ambitions—for career, wealth, and independence—en route to a life of appropriate roles and relationships—primarily those of a wife and mother.

As should be clear from these definitions, positive freedom and negative freedom are not polar opposites. Indeed, they may coexist in a given rhetoric. Charles Taylor has argued, for instance, that a certain degree of self-mastery is requisite for negative freedom to exist. He employed the example of a traffic light to note that some modes of interference are levied for the good of individuals, and that acceptance of this interference is predicated upon an enlightened understanding of self-interest. As the example demonstrates, "the application even of our negative notion of free-

dom requires a background conception of what is significant, according to which some restrictions are seen to be without relevance for freedom altogether, and others are judged as being of greater and lesser importance.” Taylor has further suggested that the definition of negative freedom be amended to “the absence of internal or external obstacle[s] to what I truly or authentically want.”¹⁰

Still, truth and authenticity can be difficult to measure, especially when it comes to desire. Freedom theorists often discuss desire in terms of “orders,” with first-order desires referring to those things the subject wants here and now, and second-order desires referring back to desire itself—to those things one *desires to desire*. Someone who is addicted to nicotine, for instance, desires cigarettes. But if she is concerned about the consequences of smoking, she may also desire to quit. These two desires are in direct conflict and so cannot both be satisfied. Since the *desire to stop desiring* cigarettes is the greater—and healthier—of the two, the one that accords with the individual’s best interest, we may understand it as the earnest desire of the true or authentic self. If the individual wants to achieve this personal goal and so liberate herself, her primary obstacle is internal. For women, the question of authentic desire has often been bound up with questions of social construction and false consciousness. In the ERA debate, such questions were always hovering near the discursive surface.¹¹

Freedom is a complicated subject, and it is subject to complicated discussions. But it remains possible to acknowledge these complexities without abandoning the basic analytical frame. I am here suggesting that questions of freedom and desire are central to the ERA debate, and that the rhetoric of the competing movements may be aligned with these competing conceptions of freedom. Having long recognized and rejected the interferences of patriarchal culture, women’s liberationists worked to dismantle them. Their rhetoric disclosed an urgent, often radical commitment to the establishment and protection of women’s rights and freedoms, primarily conceived as the removal of unjust interference. Their brand of freedom was thus distinctly *negative*. By contrast, the STOP ERA movement consistently defended *positive* freedom, by which women freely chose the restraints incumbent upon a traditional lifestyle in the hope of developing into a true, authentic type of woman. Patriarchy provided a framework for orderly living, with clear precepts for good womanhood. If women were to be truly free as women, the argument went, they must aspire to a sort of assertive

patriarchal ideal. In mastering themselves and their baser—perhaps *feminist*—impulses, they would transcend the temptations of negative freedom en route to something of a higher order.

In the ERA ratification debate, two rival conceptions vied for the power to define freedom as the central American ideograph. To do this, they each situated themselves within established American traditions. Already 50 years into the extensive ERA struggle, they had a cache of resources at their disposal. In the next section, I consider how Schlafly drew upon these resources to craft her ever-positive opposition.

FIGHTING FOR RIGHTS: THE PHYLLIS SCHLAFLY REPORT AND THE ERA'S LIBERAL LEGACY

First introduced to Congress in 1923, the Equal Rights Amendment was the brainchild of suffragist Alice Paul and her National Women's Party (NWP). It read, "Men and women shall have equal rights throughout the United States and in every place subject to its jurisdiction. Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation." Jane Mansbridge has noted that, though quickly contested, the first iteration of the ERA did not divide along partisan lines. Rather, it pitted women's rights activists against each other, drawing most opposition from the labor movement on the political left. Viewing the ERA as a threat to protective legislation that insulated working-class women from adverse work conditions, the labor movement challenged it immediately. When NWP leaders insisted that any sex-specific law was bound to "hurt women more than it could possibly help them," labor leaders drew attention to the obvious class differences that separated the two camps.¹² As Melinda Scott, an organizer from the United Textile Workers put it, the middle- and upper-class NWP "does not know what it is to work 10 or 12 hours a day in a factory; so they do not know what it means to lose an eight-hour-day or a nine-hour-day law. The working women do know."¹³ This class-based argument—predicated on the notion that women of means were insensitive or indifferent to the well-being of those without—would continue to define the struggle, in various forms, for the following 50 years.

In 1940, the ERA received an important political endorsement when the Republican Party placed the amendment in its official platform. The Democrats followed suit four years later, despite continued opposition from

labor. Though the ERA was introduced in the legislature year after year, it was continually allowed to languish in a procedural purgatory, unable to surmount strong working-class opposition. The dynamics of the debate remained gridlocked until the 1950s, when President Eisenhower formally acknowledged the ERA and began to promote “equality of rights” in his speeches.¹⁴ Even then, however, bipartisan support at the highest levels of government did not translate into tangible policy victories. As Gilbert Steiner has noted, those who believed the president to be in favor of the ERA and the Department of Labor to be opposed were “about one-quarter right.”¹⁵ Eisenhower was not particularly inclined to act on the amendment, and the Department of Labor avoided taking any concrete stand.

It was not until the 1960s, then, that the debate evolved in a notable way. When Congress passed Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, job discrimination on the basis of sex became officially illegal in the United States. Initially, this legislation had applied only to discrimination based on *race*, but a group of Southern congressmen included a ban on sex discrimination hoping to make the bill unpalatable to conservatives in the North. Sharon Whitney has written that, with the inclusion of women’s rights provisions, it was thought that “the bill would be such a joke it would fail.”¹⁶ When the tactic failed instead, sex protections arrived in the law practically by accident. As a consequence, the courts gradually began to interpret Title VII as an invalidation of the protective legislation that had fueled labor opposition to the ERA. Instead of stripping protections from women, however, this interpretation merely extended the same protections to men. With their primary concern rendered moot, labor organizations became increasingly accepting of the ERA, culminating in a formal American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) endorsement in 1973.

In 1970, the amendment finally got its first day in court. Encouraged by advocacy from the National Organization for Women and an official endorsement by the Department of Labor, Indiana Senator Birch Bayh called Senate hearings to discuss the issue. Meanwhile, Michigan Representative Martha Griffiths successfully cleared the ERA from the House Judiciary Committee, resulting in a prompt 350 to 15 House vote in favor. A sense of building momentum was tangible, but a few obstacles remained. The amendment’s wording was being continually revised in the Senate, as Bayh sought to anticipate and address the most pressing objections. Recognizing

the threat posed by the inclusion of women in the draft, he advocated a “flexible” wording that would allow for their exclusion. In this first revision, Bayh adopted the language of the Fourteenth Amendment, writing “Neither the United States nor any State shall, on account of sex, deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.”¹⁷ Consistent with their demands for full equality, women’s organizations objected to the change, and in 1971 the House again voted overwhelmingly to accept the original ERA, this time by a vote of 354 to 23. After a similar incident involving the “Wiggins amendment”—another attempt to exclude women from the draft—and the rejection of nine similar amendments by North Carolina Senator Sam Ervin, the Senate also passed the original wording in March of 1972, by a vote of 84 to 8. Now through Congress, the ERA’s three clauses read: “1) Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex, 2) The Congress shall have the power to enforce, by appropriate legislation, the provisions of this article, 3) This amendment shall take effect two years after the date of ratification.” When it went to the states, Janet K. Boles notes, the ERA did so with broad bipartisan support, and 24 states ratified the amendment within its first year of eligibility.¹⁸

The admittedly limited historical context presented above is necessary not because it demonstrates the rhetorical innovations Phyllis Schlafly brought to the ERA fight but because it demonstrates an obvious argumentative consistency.¹⁹ As labor opposition began to tailor off in the early 1970s, Schlafly’s opposition filled the gap cleanly, adopting a nearly identical position. Much like labor, she argued that the ERA would actually strip women of rights that they already held. And just as labor condemned the NWP for being out of touch with the needs of working-class women, Schlafly charged that ERA proponents valued a purely symbolic victory over and against the millions of women who stood to suffer as a result.²⁰ So while opposition to the ERA changed hands in the early 1970s, the central argument survived intact. In each case, the issue hinged upon *rights*.

When Schlafly entered the fray in 1972, she argued from the outset that, due to the “privileged” position of the American woman, any attempt to enforce a “doctrinaire equality” would necessarily result in the forfeiture of important rights and freedoms, rather than their acquisition.²¹ While proponents insisted that equality was necessary to raise women up to the prevailing standards of men, Schlafly countered that women were already

elevated *above* men in many respects, a position that aptly captures her confident contrarianism on the subject. In her first applicable *PSR*, from February 1972, Schlafly declared, “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.” This privileged condition was based on three important circumstances, Schlafly argued, starting with “the fact of life—which no legislation or agitation can erase—that women have babies and men don’t.” Because of this fact, “Our Judeo-Christian civilization has developed the law and custom that, since women must bear the physical consequences of the sex act, men must be required to bear the *other* consequences and pay in other ways.”²² Schlafly’s contention was based, in other words, upon the presumed reciprocity of functions between the sexes. Women must carry and raise the children, but men must provide for them, taking care to support and nurture their wives in various ways as well. The result is the family, a relational unit that serves the interest of its members while also structuring and maintaining the society to which it contributes. The second circumstance, linked to the first, was that women have been “the beneficiaries of a tradition of special respect for women which dates from the Christian Age of Chivalry. The honor and respect paid to Mary, the Mother of Christ, resulted in all women, in effect, being put on a pedestal.” For Schlafly, this “honor and respect” amounted to something more than a tip of the hat or an opened door. Chivalry meant the general deferral of men to women, in both daily life and national law. It meant reverent inclusion in the community and, importantly, safe *exclusion* from the most dangerous and demanding communal responsibilities. Lastly, adding to the security of family and the honor of chivalry, Schlafly cited the benefits of “free enterprise.” “The real liberation of women,” she explained, was “from the back-breaking drudgery of centuries,” thanks to “the American free enterprise system which stimulated inventive geniuses to pursue their talents.”²³ Unlike other nations, in which cultural norms demeaned women and primitive technologies burdened them, the United States offered women safety, respect, and relative leisure, as well as privileged social standing.²⁴ Women’s liberationists, spoiled by such comforts, demanded more, threatening to upset the entire structure in the process. “It’s time to set the record straight,” Schlafly wrote. “The claim that American women are downtrodden and unfairly treated is the fraud of the century. The truth is that American

women never had it so good. Why should we lower ourselves to 'equal rights' when we already have the status of special privilege?"²⁵

Though met with incredulity from ERA proponents, Schlafly's argument was well received by that portion of the population that revered the traditional family and—importantly—objected to the suggestion that women were oppressed within it. In April 1972, shortly after printing her first *PSR* on the amendment, Schlafly went on *The Phil Donahue Show* to make her case in person. At one point, objecting to Donahue's suggestion that women were currently "trapped in a house," Schlafly responded that "the house isn't trapping," before asking, "Are you trying to tell me that it's liberation for a woman to go out and sit at a typewriter all day, or stand in front of a factory machine all day, instead of being in her own home where she can plan her own hours?" The possibility of this work, or the comparable military labor, was not liberating in Schlafly's view. Rather, she insisted, "Liberation is in the home."²⁶ In the subsequent issue of her *Report*, she printed brief excerpts from the supportive letters she had received from fans. For instance:

"Just caught the Phil Donohue Show and thought—at last, here is a woman who is speaking for us women who are homemakers and who feel already very liberated. . . . You were a delight. Thanks."—F.G.

"What, if anything, can the many of us happily married (already liberated) women do to keep our rights from being taken away from us? I am anxious for your reply and am behind you 100%."—P.B.

"I saw you on the Phil Donahue Show today and all I can say is Hooray for you. I deeply resent a small bunch of women trying to free me when I have never been enslaved. . . . I believe life is what you make it."—R.P.²⁷

The letters reflect the resonance of Schlafly's message, particularly as it concerned the loss of women's rights and the unwarranted imposition of "liberation" on those who already believed themselves free. Also provocative was Schlafly's suggestion that liberation was being peddled by a relatively small group of women who claimed to speak for the rest. In a variation on the "silent majority" argument, Schlafly wrote, "If the women's libbers want to reject marriage and motherhood, it's a free country and that is their choice. But let's not permit these women's libbers to get away with pretending to speak for the rest of us. Let's not permit this tiny minority to degrade

the role that most women prefer. Let's not let these women's libbers deprive wives and mothers of the rights we now possess.”²⁸

By the end of her first year in the struggle, Schlafly had developed her rights argument into a laundry list of potential losses, stressing the importance of protecting vulnerable “privileges” while also maligning those who would sacrifice them. A brief summary of this view is offered in the closing lines of the December 1972 *PSR*, entitled “The Right to be a Woman.” Schlafly wrote:

[ERA] will take away from young girls their exemption from the draft and their legal protection against predatory males. It will take away from wives and mothers their right to be provided with a home and financial support by their husbands. It will take away from senior women their extra social security benefits. It will take away a woman's present *freedom of choice* to take a job—or to be a full-time wife and mother. In short, it will take away the right to be a woman.²⁹

The success of such “rights” arguments in maligning an amendment ostensibly dedicated to *creating and protecting* rights proved endlessly vexing to proponents, who frequently cited polling data to demonstrate that sizable majorities of Americans approved of the ERA. Hoping to account for this state of affairs, Mansbridge has suggested that the STOP ERA campaign was successful because it “shifted debate away from equal rights and focused it on the possibility that the ERA might bring substantive changes in women's roles and behavior.”³⁰ Another way to say this might include Schlafly's claim that “equal rights” was tantamount to a *loss of rights* insofar as women already enjoyed the *unequal* rights of a privileged class. Whatever allegiances they may have held to prominent liberal ideographs, most citizens were hesitant to see women compelled by law to change their daily practices. “Americans,” Mansbridge writes, “have always favored ‘rights’ in the abstract. The principle that government should not deny anyone ‘equal rights’ commands widespread approval. But citizens who approve this principle are often conservative in practice. They support the principle of ‘equal rights’ only insofar as they think it is compatible with the status quo.”³¹

The decision to approach STOP ERA rhetoric with a focus on liberal ideographs, then, is not arbitrarily made. The issue invites such a reading, as the term “Equal Rights” makes plain. But while the amendment's drafters

sought to link “equality” and “rights” into a unified term, the public discussion tended toward their division, with proponents hoping to institutionalize *equality* and opponents standing in defense of *rights*. Drawing on the above discussion of Berlin’s two concepts, I am arguing that a woman’s selection of one position or the other was largely dependent on which sort of freedom she was persuaded to endorse. Schlafly’s success testifies to the appeal of the *positive*. The next section explores this appeal in greater detail.

“POSITIVE” WOMEN, “NEGATIVE” WOMEN

In 1977, Schlafly published *The Power of the Positive Woman*, a boundary-drawing work offering readers a stark contrast between a traditional, “positive” conception of womanhood and the radically “negative” version practiced by women’s liberationists. Central to her argument—and to the clash of polarized worldviews she described—was the biblically mandated premise that men and women have separate, preordained purposes in life. One type of woman accepts this reality, Schlafly argued, and the other does not. The Positive Woman, she wrote, “understands that men and women are different, and that those very differences provide the key to her success as a person and fulfillment as a woman.” Her liberationist counterpart, seeking to dispel all notions of gender difference, “is imprisoned by her own negative view of herself and of her place in the world around her.”³² Instead of “whining” about inequality and oppression, women are best served by an attitude that embraces opportunities and makes the most of every situation, always chasing a positive ideal. “One of the mistaken pieces of advice often given to young people is ‘be yourself,’” Schlafly wrote. “Don’t ‘be yourself.’ Be the person you would like to be.”³³

Fundamental to Schlafly’s construction was the suggestion that “liberation” is a misnomer in this sense, and that “women’s libbers” were actually *inhibiting* the freedom of American women while claiming to act in their interest. *Positive Woman*, in which Schlafly accumulated and arranged her PSR critiques into a coherent whole, pledged to demarcate the boundaries between the two factions while offering a “positive” vision for women, a traditional liberty to challenge radical liberation. In defending women’s “privilege,” she stressed the importance of those rights that guarantee each woman a safe space in which to pursue her best self—to be the person she would like to be. That Schlafly’s “positive” conception of womanhood shares a desig-

nation with Berlin's "positive" conception of liberty is, on the surface, coincidental. But on a deeper level, they share important characteristics.

In all of her descriptions of the Positive Woman, for instance, Schlafly was careful to emphasize confidence and optimism, a can-do attitude perfectly commensurate with what Berlin terms the wish "to be [her] own master."³⁴ The Positive Woman, Schlafly wrote, understands "that the world is her oyster," rejoicing in "the creative capability within her body and the power potential of her mind and spirit."³⁵ Empowered by advances in technology and various legislative victories, she enjoys "a near-infinite opportunity to control her own destiny, to reach new heights of achievement, and to motivate and influence others."³⁶ Always active, she is "too busy doing constructive work to brood over her own misfortunes, real though they may be." And though everyone has a variety of problems with which to contend, "the Positive Woman applies herself to the task of trying to solve them rather than trying to lay the blame on others."³⁷ If traditional gender dynamics direct her into particular roles, she does not object, because she "recognizes that there is a valid and enduring purpose" behind such roles, a purpose that sustains the family, the community, and ultimately, the nation.³⁸ Since Schlafly disputed the suggestion that women lacked *opportunity*, she built her vision on the importance of *exercise*, envisioning an ideal woman who finds herself in the contributions she makes. It is the concerted effort to embody this ideal that Solomon labels the "journey toward fulfillment," and the women's liberationists, as she notes, who create the "temptations" that put it all at risk.³⁹

The importance of temptation to Schlafly's construction is hard to overstate. If we understand positive womanhood as the conscious pursuit of a higher self—the self that, in Berlin's words, "calculates and aims at what will satisfy it in the long run"—then liberation assumes the role of the lower self, driven by "irrational impulse," "uncontrolled desires," and "the pursuit of immediate pleasures."⁴⁰ For Schlafly, liberation appealed to exactly these instincts, pledging to identify problems that are merely personal and attribute them to larger social forces. In this view, a woman who might previously have addressed her concerns directly instead comes to understand them as little more than cogs in "the big machine of establishment restraints and stereotypical injustice." Having listened to what Solomon terms "the siren call" of liberation, the woman becomes disempowered, viewing herself not as an autonomous agent but rather as "just another faceless victim of

society's oppression," living as a "nameless prisoner" behind walls too high to climb alone.⁴¹ By providing a large and malign scapegoat for women's problems, liberation offered a tantalizing abdication of personal responsibility, calling on women to rebel against their husbands, abandon their families, and pursue a life predicated on selfish desire alone. This is why, Schlafly argued, the only liberation women need is "liberation from the fallacious doctrines of women's liberation."⁴²

By publicly opposing and vilifying "women's lib" in this way, Schlafly further acknowledged Berlin's suggestion that the division of the individual is prone to expansion. "Presently," Berlin wrote, "the two selves may be represented as divided by an even larger gap: the real self may be conceived as something wider than the individual (as the term is normally understood), as a social 'whole' of which the individual is an element or aspect: a tribe, a race, a church, a state, the great society of the living and the dead and the yet unborn."⁴³ To this list we may add "a sex" to indicate competing perspectives as to what a woman *is* or what she should strive to be. By persuading women to accept traditional women's roles, Schlafly sought to influence the normative definition of womanhood itself. And since such important concepts have broad societal reach, the success or failure of such efforts is bound to affect other, equally important concepts. "Conceptions of freedom directly derive from views of what constitutes a self, a person, a man," Berlin wrote. "Enough manipulation with the definition of man, and freedom can be made to mean whatever the manipulator wishes."⁴⁴ To this we may substitute the definition of *woman* without any significant loss of meaning.

Berlin also notes that, once self-mastery becomes the deciding factor in the attainment of freedom, the adherent is likely to pursue one of two courses: self-abnegation, or self-realization. The second of these appears most congruent with Schlafly's position as she understood it. Since "the only true method of attaining freedom" is "by the use of critical reason," freedom is dependent upon a frank assessment of the facts on hand. Unlike negative liberty, which privileges "a field (ideally) without obstacles," self-realization acknowledges the obstacles inherent to realities and addresses them through "self-direction or self control."⁴⁵ Things are as they are, in other words, and the free individual adapts.

But the first course—which Berlin also terms "the retreat to the inner citadel"—complicates Schlafly's picture. It occurs when the individual seeks

to master her desires by limiting them to attainable goals. “I must liberate myself from desires that I know I cannot realize,” Berlin wrote. “I choose to avoid defeat and waste, and therefore decide to strive for nothing that I cannot be sure to obtain.”⁴⁶ Essentially a breed of asceticism, self-abnegation is the opposite of negative liberty: instead of demanding the freedom to do whatever one wants, one chooses to want only that which she already has freedom to do. Internally consistent, this understanding of freedom remains problematic, and the self-negating qualities of Schlafly’s rhetoric exposed themselves to criticism. Such a critique is evident in Solomon’s treatment when she cites the inherent “fatalism” of STOP ERA arguments. Indeed, Solomon writes, “the group’s fatalistic philosophy is based on a pessimistic evaluation of many dimensions of women’s abilities. The group admits inequities and immutable differences but urges women to be positive about their potential given these inescapable limitations.”⁴⁷ Foss, too, notes the “self-denigrating” theme in STOP ERA speech, through which homemakers are portrayed as “helpless and incapable of functioning outside of the home.”⁴⁸ So it is that Schlafly’s Positive Woman, choosing freedom within societal constraints, may be more closely defined by constraints than by freedom. Berlin indicates as much when he writes, “Those who are wedded to the ‘negative’ concept of freedom may perhaps be forgiven if they think that self-abnegation is not the only method of overcoming obstacles; that it is also possible to do so by removing them.”⁴⁹

The “realism” inherent to both approaches privileges a reigning standard of rationality, by which social conditions may be universally assessed and agreed upon. Indeed, much of Schlafly’s rhetorical appeal was based upon her ability to wield common sense, making the candid observations about men and women that liberationists were either too deluded or too stubborn to acknowledge. Since Schlafly promoted her view as the *rational* one, the distinctly “negative” liberationist view was cast as *irrational*. And since rationality itself presumes a common standard by which human actions may be judged, those disagreeing with Schlafly were portrayed as being more than merely mistaken. They were *wrong*, and in being wrong, they were also a threat. In this attitude we may identify glimpses of Berlin’s gravest concern about positive liberty: the imposition of self-mastery upon those who haven’t offered their consent. In promoting positive liberty, Berlin writes, “how am I to treat recalcitrant human beings?” His answer:

I must, if I can, impose my will on them too, “mould” them to my pattern, cast parts for them in my play. But will this not mean that I alone am free, while they are slaves? They will be so if my plan has nothing to do with their wishes or values, only with my own. But if my plan is fully rational, it will allow for the full development of their “true” natures, the realization of their capacities for rational decisions “for making the best of themselves”—as a part of the realization of my own “true” self.⁵⁰

In this line of thought Berlin identified the gradual transformation of a liberal ideal into a decidedly *illiberal* threat—the *rationalization* of coercion in the name of freedom. When such thinking yields coercive action, such thinkers inevitably adopt a paternalistic tone, noting that the rules “only seem irksome to those whose reason is dormant, who do not understand the true ‘needs’ of their own ‘real’ selves.”⁵¹ Even when not stated explicitly, we can identify this tone in Schlafly’s rhetoric, as in her recurring habit of placing words in the Positive Woman’s mouth, telling us what she “believes,” “thinks,” or “knows.”⁵² In this way, Schlafly stood behind her feminine archetype, allowing it to deliver her message and presenting readers with a harsh contrast in the process: be a rational woman and adopt my views; or be a deviant, irrational, and think for yourself. The “rationalist argument,” Berlin writes, “with its assumption of the single true solution, has led by steps which, if not logically valid, are historically and psychologically intelligible, from an ethical doctrine of individual responsibility and individual self-protection to an authoritarian state obedient to the directives of an élite of Platonic guardians.”⁵³ If not overt, the trappings of such a transition are nonetheless present in the rigid boundaries of Schlafly’s positivity.

In making this connection, of course, one runs the risk of hyperbole. Berlin wrote about positive liberty during the height of the Cold War, and his concern about the slide from freedom to despotism is weightier in that context. But it is not outrageous to identify a similar impulse in Schlafly’s vision of womanhood, or in her campaign to see it enforced. The same is true for practically any orthodox position, in that each insists upon a universal and unchanging standard of conduct, such that dissenters must be irrational, or selfishly defiant, and either way, dangerous. Whenever a movement pledges to impose such a standard, citizens should proceed with caution.

Schlafly's defenders would no doubt argue that characterizing her views as promoting positive liberty in a coercive sense is unfair, as her movement sought specifically to *oppose* new government regulation, rather than *impose* it. Her position on the ERA consistently advocated limited legislative solutions to particular inequalities, as against a blanket amendment subject to interpretation, fraught with unforeseen consequences, and defying easy removal. These points are well taken. My intent is simply to observe that her activism was based on a very doctrinaire understanding of womanhood and the rights it ought to be afforded, prompting her to vilify and malign anyone who disagreed. Her work constituted a concerted effort to defend and enforce restrictive *hegemonic* rules, despite her opposition to further governmental ones. It is not unimaginable that women's liberationism could also be branded as a movement toward coercive self-mastery, as could any number of others. The implications of such a movement are equally troubling regardless of who champions them. But it is the ease with which such thinking assimilates with and binds itself to American liberal idealism that warrants our attention—and our concern. Schlafly's critics were attentive and concerned, and their attacks on STOP ERA frequently thematized the brand of implicit coercive force discussed here. Prominent among them was the suggestion that Schlafly and her followers were merely tools of the patriarchy, undeniably passionate in their efforts but yet not free.

CONCLUSION

On March 22, 2007, 28 years to the day after her ERA funeral service, Phyllis Schlafly took the stage in Fort Lauderdale, Florida to address the annual Reclaiming America for Christ conference. Her speech, titled "Doing the Impossible: Defeating the ERA," reflected upon the decade she spent campaigning to halt ratification of the ERA. As her title suggests, Schlafly framed the campaign as an underdog story with an empowering moral. In her words, the fight proved that "it is possible for the people to defeat the entire political and media establishment and to win despite incredible odds."⁵⁴ Beaming throughout the address, and frequently interrupted by applause, Schlafly exuded the confidence of a winner.

The product of her labor was a positive rhetoric based in positive liberty. Schlafly's rhetoric gave a sense of purpose to her followers, encouraging them to maintain their traditional roles while empowering them to political

engagement, all within a revised traditionalism that allowed for concerted political action. Theirs was a patriarchal discourse, blending self-reliant masculine ideals with polished femininity, and persuading Americans through perfect makeup and apple pie. Schlafly's Positive Women assured the nation that they would do their part, fulfilling their roles as wives and mothers, and always with a smile. The effectiveness of this upbeat campaign was amplified through the vilification of the feminist other. If Schlafly's negative portrayal of feminist forces was not stark enough, she heightened its effect by impugning their motives en masse. Not only were feminists lonely, embittered, androgynous, and unhappy, but their movement was also propelled by a consumptive selfishness, a "whining" cry for attention that would rather make a scene than a contribution, would rather have a career than a baby. So concerned were they with scoring political points that they did not even care if their achievements ultimately made life worse for the women they claimed to represent. Faced with a choice between the two, state governments increasingly sided with the positive alternative—with tradition, optimism, and strong public relations. It is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that STOP ERA sold patriarchal norms to the voters the way advertisers sell products.

It must be noted, however, that positive liberty comes with certain risks, especially when it is marketed as liberty writ large. For Isaiah Berlin, the proponents of positive liberty—who may not even self-identify as such—are the types who believe they know what is best. In his words, they differentiate between the self and the "true self," between the acting individual and the individual as she *would act* if only she knew more, or had more discipline, or something else. While positive liberty is typically born as an individual tendency—as a decision to overcome *my* personal demons and become *my* best possible self—it quickly transitions into a collectivist mode.⁵⁵ The introspective individual who has overcome her private temptations, weaknesses, and lusts now hopes to offer this same freedom to others, helping them to overcome their base natures, whether they want her help or not. After all, she reasons, their reluctance to change is simply more evidence of a lack of self-mastery. Whenever freedom is measured by such fluid metrics, there is a risk that the variable terms of true self-ness will interfere in the lives of individuals. Betty Friedan, reflecting on the "hatred" she sensed behind the sweet smiles of her opponents, may have caught a glimpse of this tendency.⁵⁶

Launched in 1972, just months before the Supreme Court ruling in *Roe v. Wade*, Schlafly's STOP ERA campaign provided a template for conservative social activism, a template that would be broadly embraced in the decades of culture warfare that followed. Closely aligned with orthodox modes of Christianity, conservative movements increasingly appropriated negative liberal ideographs and reinflected them in *positive* ways more conducive to their political efforts. Antiabortion activists stood in defense of a "Right to Life." Proponents of creation science demanded "Academic Freedom." More recently, antigay and anticontraception rhetors have embraced "Religious Liberty" as their call to arms. Consistent with popular notions of "Christian Freedom," these ideographic arguments image an American freedom predicated on overcoming a basically sinful nature, allowing for the necessary imposition of Christian righteousness on a fallen world.⁵⁷ In this understanding, negative freedom appeals to first-order desire, the desire of the flesh. By contrast, positive freedom appeals to second-order desire, encouraging humans to transcend their sinful nature into a higher, truer, more authentic set of aims. Though never cited explicitly by its proponents, adherence to positive liberty is evident throughout conservative Christian movements. Whether they know it or not, these are all indebted to Phyllis Schlafly and her crusade against feminism.

As Bonnie Dow notes, "the implicit argument that sexism must not exist if even one woman denies that it does" is prevalent in discourses that oppose feminist goals.⁵⁸ Phyllis Schlafly and STOP ERA became the perfect embodiment of this claim, championing tradition to the unequivocal detriment of feminism as a whole. In Schlafly's vision, marriage and family were understood as givens, and the employed Positive Woman would "establish a set of priorities under which business or professional demands must always give way to home and family whenever there is a conflict."⁵⁹ In working to create opportunities for women outside of the home, feminists never attempted to respond in kind—to deny wife- and motherhood to those women who willingly chose them. In this sense, Schlafly's rhetoric, while empowering to those who embraced it, exhibited the coercive traits that Berlin sensed and feared. And while her stance was engineered to mirror feminist positions in most respects, it went beyond them in this. The success of Schlafly's rhetoric is undeniable. Coupled with its popular reception among certain groups of women, it may even demand consideration as an adversarial brand of feminism. But this is only true insofar as the rhetoric

of Positive Womanhood represents the interests of those who subscribe willingly to it. As soon as it breaches those borders, impinging upon the rights or interests of other women, it ceases to be a "positive" force and adopts the coercive ethos of patriarchy. The same is true—more generally speaking—whenever a religiously infused positive liberty enters the secular realm of *American* liberty, passing quietly without distinction.⁶⁰

NOTES

1. Quoted in Carol Felsenthal, *The Sweetheart of the Silent Majority* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 276. The Equal Rights Amendment passed both houses of Congress in 1972 and was then sent to the states for ratification. Proponents and opponents of the amendment campaigned throughout the allotted seven-year ratification period. Though 35 states had approved the amendment by 1977, it failed to secure the 38 states required for ratification. In 1978, with the deadline looming, supporters managed to secure a three-year extension period, moving the deadline from March 22, 1979 to June 30, 1982. But both dates would pass without the necessary support.
2. Felsenthal, *Sweetheart*, 240.
3. Five states (Idaho, Kentucky, Nebraska, Tennessee, and South Dakota) ratified the ERA between 1972 and 1973 only to later rescind their ratifications. The rescissions were met with controversy, as critics claimed that the practice was unconstitutional. See "Rescinding of E.R.A. is Term'd Illegal," *New York Times*, November 11, 1975, 67.
4. The claim that the ERA was *ever* uncontroversial may be itself controversial. Here I simply refer to the fact—often cited by Schlafly—that the amendment enjoyed the support of both political parties; both houses of Congress; Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Carter; and a majority of the states.
5. Martha Solomon, "The 'Positive Woman's' Journey: A Mythic Analysis of STOP ERA," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 65 (1979): 262. See also "The Rhetoric of STOP ERA: Fatalistic Reaffirmation," *Southern Speech Communication Journal* 44 (1978): 42–59; and "Stopping ERA: A Pyrrhic Victory," *Communication Quarterly* 31 (1983): 109–17.
6. Sonja K. Foss, "Equal Rights Amendment Controversy: Two Worlds in Conflict," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 65 (1979): 275.
7. Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 122.
8. Berlin, *Four Essays*, 123.
9. Berlin, *Four Essays*, 131.
10. Charles Taylor, "What's Wrong with Negative Liberty?" in *The Idea of Freedom*, ed. Alan Ryan (London: Oxford University Press, 1979), 183, 187.

11. The complaint that STOP ERA represented the worst of women's false consciousness was routinely and forcefully made. See Andrea Dworkin, *Right-Wing Women* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1982).
12. *S. J. Res. 21* and *H. J. Res. 75*, 68th Cong., 1st sess., (1923), quoted in Jane J. Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 8.
13. Quoted in Gilbert Y. Steiner, *Constitutional Inequality* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1985), 7.
14. See, for instance, "Address in Madison Square Garden, NY, October 25, 1956," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1956* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1958), 1020.
15. Steiner, *Constitutional Inequality*, 11.
16. Sharon Whitney, *The Equal Rights Amendment: The History and the Movement* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1984), 19.
17. See U.S. Const. Amend. XIV, S1. U.S. Congress. *Congressional Record*. 91st Cong., 2nd sess., 1970. Vol. 116, pt. 27, quoted in Mansbridge, *Why We Lost*, 11.
18. Janet K. Boles, *The Politics of the Equal Rights Amendment: Conflict and the Decision Process* (New York: Longman, 1979), 2-4.
19. Readers may also notice the likeness between Schlafly's anti-ERA rhetoric and earlier American rhetorics pertinent to women's rights. These include arguments made by proponents of the "Woman's Sphere," "Republican Motherhood," and antisuffragists, among others. See also Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Women's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977); Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women in Antebellum Reform* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 2000); and Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (New York: Norton, 1980).
20. Ironically, Schlafly's claim that women liberationists were out of touch with the common woman was frequently redeployed by women liberationists against *her*. The cognitive dissonance inherent to a traditionalist homemaker who ran a national organization, traveled all over the country, wrote books, gave speeches, and twice ran for public office, all while encouraging women to *remain within the home*, was too rich to ignore.
21. STOP ERA also served as an acronym for "Stop Taking Our Privileges."
22. Phyllis Schlafly, "What's Wrong with 'Equal Rights' for Women?" *Phyllis Schlafly Report*, February 1972.
23. Schlafly, "What's Wrong?"
24. Another very common complaint about Schlafly's rhetoric was that it assumed all women were as comfortably situated as she. Schlafly frequently referenced loving

husbands, safe and secure home environments, convenient appliances, and healthy, adoring children as though they were a given for all women. In doing so, she ignored the reality that, for many women, working outside of the home was a matter of survival rather than personal fulfillment.

25. Schlafly, "What's Wrong?"
26. *The Phil Donahue Show*, April 19, 1972.
27. Phyllis Schlafly, "The Fraud Called the Equal Rights Amendment," *Phyllis Schlafly Report*, May 1972.
28. Schlafly, "What's Wrong?"
29. Phyllis Schlafly, "The Right to be a Woman," *Phyllis Schlafly Report*, December 1972.
30. Mansbridge, *Why We Lost*, 20.
31. Mansbridge, *Why We Lost*, 26.
32. Phyllis Schlafly, *The Power of the Positive Woman* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1977), 11.
33. Schlafly, *Positive Woman*, 57–58.
34. Berlin, *Four Essays*, 131.
35. Schlafly, *Positive Woman*, 11.
36. Schlafly, *Positive Woman*, 29.
37. Schlafly, *Positive Woman*, 63.
38. Schlafly, *Positive Woman*, 50.
39. Solomon, "Positive Woman's Journey," 263, 264.
40. Berlin, *Four Essays*, 132.
41. Schlafly, *Positive Woman*, 9.
42. Schlafly, *Positive Woman*, 63.
43. Berlin, *Four Essays*, 132.
44. Berlin, *Four Essays*, 134.
45. Berlin, *Four Essays*, 141, 144.
46. Berlin, *Four Essays*, 135.
47. Solomon, "Positive Woman's Journey," 264.
48. Foss, "Equal Rights," 286, 285.
49. Berlin, *Four Essays*, 140.
50. Berlin, *Four Essays*, 146–47.
51. Berlin, *Four Essays*, 147.
52. See, for instance, Schlafly, *Positive Woman*, 21–25.
53. Berlin, *Four Essays*, 152.
54. Phyllis Schlafly, Doing the Impossible: Defeating the ERA (speech, Reclaiming America for Christ annual conference, Fort Lauderdale, FL, March 22, 2007. Video of this

speech is distributed on DVD by Eagle Forum and as an accompaniment to Phyllis Schlafly, *Feminist Fantasies* (Dallas, TX: Spence Publishing Company, 2003). Also available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VLMICpeZBXg> (accessed May 1, 2014).

55. Berlin, *Four Essays*, 147. For a compelling defense of *individual* positive liberty, see John Christman, "Liberalism and Individual Positive Freedom," *Ethics* 101 (1991): 343–59.
56. Betty Friedan, *Life So Far: A Memoir* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 218–19.
57. See Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, ed. Mark D. Tranvik (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008).
58. Bonnie Dow, "Feminism, Miss America, and Media Mythology," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 6 (2003): 128.
59. Schlafly, *Power of the Positive Woman*, 45.
60. In conversation with the author, Schlafly declared that she has always considered herself a *political* figure, rather than a religious one. In her words, "I use 'God' the way the Declaration of Independence does." Author interview, January 10, 2012, Eagle Forum Archives, St. Louis, MO. But her written works betray this claim, providing many examples in which God is referenced much more specifically. That those references could remain merely political in her mind only reinforces the point that American ideals and Christian ideals have been thoroughly and effortlessly blended in her rhetoric. That they were so well received by so many demonstrates the pervasive reach of what Robert Bellah has called America's "Civil Religion." See Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96 (1967): 1–21.

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