

Hollywood Rewrites History in Mrs. America

In an interview about her creation of FX's new Hulu miniseries, *Mrs. America*, Dahvi Waller [tells Esquire magazine](#) that the idea for the series was born out of her childhood home. As the daughter of a political scientist, she "grew up learning about America's politics and government" and developed a love for political dramas. Over time, however, she noticed that many political dramas revolved around men. "Women were either the wives or the victims," she says. "I became really interested in doing a series that centered on women."

In 2013, when producer Stacey Sher pitched Waller the idea to create a show about Phyllis Schlafly's campaign against the Equal Rights Amendment, Waller jumped at the chance. "Phyllis is a real anti-hero. I thought, *that's a great jumping-off point for creating a series*. I just really fell in love with that."

Mrs. America is about more than just the campaign against the ratification of the ERA, though. When the show premiered on April 15, it became clear that Waller and producers had pursued a daunting project: to present the arguments for and against the ERA through the lives of the women who had fought at the front lines of the political war surrounding the women's liberation movement – all in nine episodes. The experiences and perspectives of second-wave feminists like Gloria Steinem (Rose Byrne), Betty Friedan (Tracey Ullman), and Shirley Chisholm (Uzo Aduba) feature heavily. The perspective of conservative activist Phyllis Schlafly (Cate Blanchett) is featured as well, of course, albeit an inaccurate and hollowed-out version.

Regardless of its mischaracterizing historical inaccuracies, critics have largely praised *Mrs. America*. [BBC Culture](#) dubbed

[it a "smart tale,"](#) and [USA Today named it a "powerful drama."](#) "*Mrs. America* ... mines the past for conflicts and contradictions with contemporary relevance, splicing warm-hued archival footage with deeply researched scripts with a roving structure," [wrote one reviewer at *The Guardian*.](#) Is this account of the rise and fall of the ERA a "history lesson" [as *Vulture* would have it](#), or is it an embellished drama? *Mrs. America* is both.

Blanchett shines as a clever and cunning version of Schlafly. Perhaps one aspect of Schlafly that Blanchett and producers nail is her appearance and voice. Schlafly's elegant hairstyle and clothing were perfectly mirrored in Blanchett, according to Schlafly's niece. "It was very surreal to listen to Cate Blanchett," [Suzanne Venker](#), Schlafly's niece and popular commentator, told me in an interview. "She just did an amazing job on that front." Unfortunately, that's where the similarities end. "They showed Phyllis as very cold and calculating—very calculating—like she was conniving in figuring out how she was going to get power by using people around her, and it's so far from the truth it's ridiculous."

Throughout the first several episodes, viewers are led to believe that Schlafly's decision to take up the mantle in the fight against the ERA resulted primarily from a desire for selfish political gain. Schlafly is shown smugly dismissing her dowdy fellow STOP ERA campaigners as they negotiate which one of them should become the face of their movement. Show writers are so intent on vilifying Schlafly that they don't mind belittling one of the largest, female-driven grassroots campaigns ever to have been launched in the United States.

"I think the show is quite patronizing toward the women who volunteered for and followed my mother," Schlafly's daughter Anne Schlafly Cori told me. "I spent a great deal of time with the women who volunteered for and followed my mother, and some of them are still alive. It's important to recognize that rather than actually explore the women who followed my mother,

most of the characters that they have are manufactured fictional characters who never existed.”

In an [interview with *Extra*](#) about her portrayal of Schlafly, Blanchett said that “the thing that I found very curious is, what is it that’s so frightening and drastic about equality? I think that the series really does ask that.”

Throughout the show, writers relegate Schlafly’s perspective to little more than a foil to Waller’s heroines, and in the process, they bastardize it. Schlafly fought against the ERA, not because she balked at the idea of equality, but because she believed the Constitution *already* provided men and women with equal rights.

Furthermore, she believed that the ERA was a Trojan horse of an amendment that carried dangers which would snowball after ratification. What Schlafly opposed was the delineation of the sexes in the Constitution. Her war was not with women but with ideas.

“You’ll not find her anywhere in any of the archives, saying, ‘You should stay at home and have no other life besides being a wife and a mother.’ Never would she say it, never would she think it—never did she think it,” Venker said. “She believed in choice.”

Schlafly’s life was one of nuance and balance: She embraced her choice to enter the fray of politics while boldly championing the family. “I think we correctly tell [women] that the main fulfillment for most women is in the house,” [Schlafly told Phil Donahue in 1975](#). “When I look back on those years when I was doing the laundry and cooking and spending my evenings giving baths, those were happy years, and there isn’t anything I’m doing now that’s more exciting or more fulfilling than those lovely years when my children were very young.” Schlafly would have been the first to tell you that she believed a woman should have – and already had – the freedom to

choose between a life at home or a life in the workforce, and it was this choice that Schlafly defended. The standard feminist case against Schlafly is that she happened to prefer the home, and she believed most women do, too.

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