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## WOMEN AT WAR: FEMINISTS AND ANTIFEMINIST CHRISTIANS IN THE 1970s

Leigh Ann Wheeler

**Kristen Swinth**, *Feminism's Forgotten Fight: The Unfinished Struggle for Work and Family*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018. 339 pp. Abbreviations, notes, figures, and index. \$35.00.

**Marjorie J. Spruill**, *Divided We Stand: The Battle Over Women's Rights and Family Values that Polarized America Politics*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017. 436 pp. Acknowledgments, notes, and index. \$33.00.

Born in 1967 into a Church of Christ family in Kansas, I would not hear the word feminism or the names of Betty Friedan or Gloria Steinem until college. But I knew that God hated “women’s libbers,” because they were ugly, hated kids, wanted to destroy my family, and thought my mom was a loser. My dad also assured us—my mom, two brothers, and me—that women’s libbers would rudely cut in front of you in line.

My mom, a mother of three without a college degree, was a housewife in the 1970s. I don’t know whether she had heard of feminism, Friedan, or Steinem. But she could not have known that “Battling Bella”—the flamboyantly feminist Congresswoman Bella Abzug—helped to pass more equitable divorce policies that would, by the 1980s, apply to her. Nor could she have anticipated that the term “displaced homemaker,” coined by feminist Tanya Melich in 1974, would describe her by the end of the decade. (p. 122)

And I did not know this: my blue-collar, fundamentalist Christian family occupied ground zero in the war over sex roles, work, and family that would define two antagonistic women’s movements and dramatically realign relations between Democrats and Republicans.

This history that I lived through in nearly complete ignorance is the subject of two fascinating new books that, together, show how mainstream women’s rights activists embraced family values but nevertheless became identified as the family’s number-one enemies. The story involves idealists and cynics, as well as celebrity activists, politicized homemakers, prominent politicians, first ladies, and even U.S. presidents. In the end, it shows us yet another phase of a

repeating modern narrative: expectations that women would unite aggravated differences between them, incited attacks among and between them, and invited sensationalist media coverage as well as cynical exploitation by politicians who transformed disagreements among women into polarizing wedge issues.

Professors of History Kristen Swinth and Marjorie Spruill approach their subjects with different questions. Swinth asks: Why are feminists blamed for "today's superwoman dilemma" (p. 2)? In other words, when women struggle to "have it all" with regard to career and family, but fail or feel dissatisfied with the result, why is feminism held accountable? By contrast, Marjorie Spruill aims to explain why, given that Republicans and Democrats both supported the modern women's rights movement in 1970, "by 1980, the GOP had sided with the...women's movement...that positioned family values in opposition to women's rights" (p. 2). The answers to both of these questions involve the "new postindustrial order" that made "wage work increasingly insecure and a 'family wage' for men increasingly rare" (Swinth, p. 4). Spruill describes the women's rights movement as "more a result than a cause" of these changes, while Swinth credits feminists with offering "the first viable alternative to the dominant gender and family arrangement" (Sпруill, pp. 71–2; Swinth, pp. 5, 10). Feminism provided a solution to the demise of the male breadwinner. But both authors are less interested in investigating this than in exploring the tangled relationships between women's rights and families' "needs."

In *Feminism's Forgotten Fight*, Swinth emphasizes that mainstream feminists did not simply adopt a male model of liberation—one that would free women of domestic responsibilities and the "having-it-all" juggling act that men escaped (p. 24). Swinth shows that from the first, feminists addressed "the very issues of work and family" that they have since been blamed for ignoring. (p. 2) She does so by bringing together a number of activist strands often treated separately by scholars, including activism around welfare rights, housework, childcare, and maternity. In the process, Swinth writes a history of feminism that is more diverse in terms of race and class than are many accounts.

Before feminists could begin to reimagine work and family roles, they reconceptualized womanhood and childbearing as separable from wifedom and childrearing, constructing a new female self, independent of men and motherhood, but capable of combining motherhood with paid employment. This project often played out differently for white women than for women of color. While white women redefined "domesticity as discrimination, not privilege," household workers and victims of racial discrimination could not help but consider domesticity a privilege they had been denied. (p. 23) Further, as Pulitzer-prize-winning novelist Toni Morrison pointed out, black women had "normalized working motherhood" long ago; it was the dignity and respect taken for granted by many white women that black women continued to demand (p. 41).

Race-specific experiences troubled men's efforts to rethink fatherhood and also feminists' struggles to dismantle the male-breadwinner ideal. Even as some white men questioned masculine ideals, experimented with alternatives, and insisted on being treated as "More than Success Objects," many black men seethed at their inability to earn a family wage and laid claim to the revolutionary manhood central to Black Power. (p. 42) Moreover, when white and black men sought to be more involved fathers, the former but not the latter were deemed "overtly feminist." (p. 66)

Activism related to housework promised to merge the concerns of homemakers and domestic workers; both wanted housework to be treated as real work, skilled work, and compensated accordingly. Here, Swinth begins to call attention to feminist legislative victories, including laws that helped homemakers achieve greater financial independence, divorced women to receive benefits and property, and domestic workers to be paid at least the minimum wage.

Childcare offered another issue on which mothers of different races and classes could find common cause, but only in the face of conservative women who opposed them. Working mothers sought childcare; mothers on public assistance wanted to rear their own children; conservative women condemned them all—working mothers for not staying home with their kids and "welfare mothers" for refusing low-paid jobs that left their children untended. In response, President Richard Nixon's veto of the Comprehensive Child Development Act in 1971 and the failure of the Program for Better Jobs and Income under Jimmy Carter left employed mothers and those on public assistance without meaningful federal support. "Pro-family" antifeminists were increasingly setting the terms of national policy by recasting demands feminists made for their *own* families as hostile efforts to undermine "the family." By 1973, even progressives were beginning to raise concerns about the health of the American family. In fact, Senator Walter Mondale (D, MN) called for all proposed legislation to be accompanied by a "Family Impact Statement."

Feminist efforts to obtain legislative support for maternity (including pregnancy and motherhood) fared better, though advocates disagreed about whether benefits for pregnancy should parallel those for disability or occupy a new class of employment benefits altogether, one that recognized women's unique—and, indeed, socially beneficial—*abilities*. When, in 1972, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission declared discrimination against pregnant employees a violation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, feminists celebrated what many considered a "breathtaking," if incomplete, "cultural transformation." After all, laws against discrimination did not provide pregnant women and mothers with "full social benefits" (pp. 192–3).

In the end, Swinth demonstrates that feminists did not just tackle issues related to work and family; they also reinterpreted as promising, changes in the family that others saw as menacing. Of course, feminists wanted women

to "have it all," and they tried to make that possible not by adopting a male model, but by seeking broad cultural change and initiating legislation and policies that would reimagine the workplace and also recognize the economic value of domestic work by compensating it. "Feminists' greatest successes," Swinth concludes, "came when costs to society and to business were the least," making professional and/or white women the greatest direct beneficiaries. Even so, second-wave feminism produced broad social transformations that dramatically changed "how Americans think and act"—an outcome that signaled feminist progress even as it incited anti-feminist resistance (pp. 244–46).

As Marjorie Spruill shows in *Divided We Stand*, the 1970s saw the rise of not one, but two women's movements. The second emerged in direct and antagonistic reaction to the feminist or women's rights movement, and joined its issues with other conservative causes, including unilateralist opposition to the United Nations, localist hostility to federal power, capitalist distaste for communism, and a new "pro-family" fusion of Christianity and politics. Thanks largely to the strength of this conservative women's movement, by 1980 the Republican Party dropped its forty-year-long support for women's rights in general and the Equal Rights Amendment in particular.

*Divided We Stand* covers some common ground with *Feminism's Forgotten Fight*. Both books trace the consolidation of a "feminist establishment" able to obtain key government appointments, draft women's rights laws, and pressure Presidents Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Jimmy Carter to support the cause. Feminists around the world were also making waves; in 1972, the United Nations declared 1975 International Women's Year (IWY) and planned a major conference in Mexico City to promote women's rights globally. The Ford administration, eager to position the U.S. as an international leader on women's rights created its own IWY Commission staffed with members of the centrist "feminist establishment," and tasked it with identifying "remaining barriers to women's full and equal participation in American society" and with recommending measures government could take to remove them. Under legislation drafted by Bella Abzug, the Ford administration supported federally funded state and national IWY conferences so that women outside of government could participate in creating an action plan (pp. 54, 68).

Abzug's dream of inviting all women to a taxpayer-supported policy-making table was admirable in principle, but disastrous in practice. As Spruill shows, Abzug's strategy angered conservative women who resented that feminists dominated the IWY Commission, which was funded by taxes, and poised to push through policy that would affect family life. At the same time, these women were angered and politicized by the IWY strategy; it provided them with a public purpose and a megaphone. That most of these women were associated with churches made them easier to mobilize. Even those whose churches discouraged members from political activism—including Catholics,

the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and evangelicals, especially those in the Churches of Christ that considered “separation from politics [...] as part of its creed”—saw the IWY as threatening enough to warrant abandoning that tradition (p. 86).

Phyllis Schlafly, a longtime Republican activist and Catholic who cut her antifeminist teeth on opposition to *Roe v. Wade*, led a conservative coalition of historically hostile religious groups. They were able to work together, Spruill explains, because they feared feminism, secularism, and encroaching federal power more than they feared each other (p. 92).

This part of Spruill’s story took me by surprise. As a Church of Christ member in the 1970s, I took my Bible to school, invited my Baptist and Catholic friends to my church, and tried hard to convert them, because I knew that otherwise, their souls were damned to hell—like the millions of Chinese people whom I would never meet but about whom I worried and for whom I constantly prayed. So, when I learned that Churches of Christ had allowed—even pursued—inter-faith cooperation in order to defeat feminism in the 1970s, I was dumbfounded. I knew, of course, that my church equated feminism with devilry, but that it opposed feminism enough to take the unprecedented step of joining forces with “heretics” was a revelation (small “r”) to me.

Imagine my surprise, then, upon learning from Spruill’s book that the Churches of Christ alone “furnished 43 percent of anti-ERA activists in Oklahoma, 45.1 percent in North Carolina, and 59.7 percent in Texas” (p. 87). The much more numerous and activist Baptists didn’t come close. Even more incredible to me, the Churches of Christ produced their own media darling, Lottie Beth Hobbs, from Fort Worth, Texas, who founded the antifeminist organization, Women Who Want to be Women (WWWW). My church did not talk about Hobbs or WWWW in the 1970s, perhaps because these women’s activism—even though it aimed to defeat feminism—would not have been allowed by the elders of my ultra-conservative Kansas congregation. Indeed, I wonder, had my elementary-school-self known about Hobbs or even Schlafly, would I have been inspired by their public work as Christian women, by their public female *voices*? Would knowing about them have slowed or expedited my journey to becoming a feminist myself? Even now, I don’t know whether to be proud of Hobbs for violating the Church of Christ’s historical separation from politics and adamant insistence on women’s silence—or to rage against her for finding and using her voice only to subordinate women further.

Hobbs graduated in 1943 from Abilene Christian College in Texas, the same school my mom attended for a year or two in the 1960s, before leaving to marry my dad. Two decades later, Abilene Christian was one of the only schools that my divorced parents—who agreed on nothing but this—would support my attending. Too late—my feminist awakening had already begun, and I defied them both by using a music scholarship to attend Kansas State University. But

back to the inimitable Hobbs. Her flier, "Ladies Have You Heard?" explained to women that the ERA would destroy their families and ruin their lives. It went viral in a 'seventies kind of way, through church newsletters and small-town newspapers. Using the color pink as a calling card, Hobbs and the WWWW partnered with Mary Kay Cosmetics to raise money, lobby legislators, and warn about the evils of the ERA (p. 87).

Schlafly and Hobbs described the ERA as a constitutional amendment that would deny sex differences by treating women as if their bodies were no different from men's. The result, they argued, would destroy protections and respect for women's unique reproductive abilities. It would wreck marriages, families, and homes, because "your husband will be sharing sleeping quarters, restrooms, showers, and/or foxholes with women." In addition, "there would be no segregation of the sexes in prison, reform schools, public restrooms...public schools, college dormitories, and hospital rooms." Worse, the ERA might require religious institutions to provide women with equal access to clerical and other leadership positions (pp. 101-2).

It was Hobbs who came up with the idea of holding a "pro-family" rally to coincide with the IWY's 1977 National Women's conference in Houston, Texas. Schlafly opposed the idea, thinking that a counter-rally would not attract enough supporters to give it legitimacy. But Hobbs and others forged ahead, mobilizing their troops by spreading rumors that state IWY meetings welcomed "lurid lesbian activities, communist infiltration, and even witchcraft." Meanwhile, "pro-life" activists joined them out of fear that the ERA would write abortion rights into the U.S. Constitution (pp. 237-8.)

Even as conservatives claimed that the IWY aimed to destroy the family, feminists insisted that it actually supported homemakers and families by recognizing that "new conditions of life for women in American society required changes in policies." Overall, Spruill notes, "the conservatives' recommendations indicated that they shared many of the feminists' concerns while disagreeing about solutions." (p. 249) Women in both camps worried about portrayals of women in the media, quality of life issues for older women, and justice for victims of rape. But conservative women distinguished themselves by reinterpreting abortion as "killing a baby," lesbianism as "sexual perversion," "government welfare" as an impediment to opportunity, and "barriers" to women's equality as "safeguards" to protect women and families (pp. 257-59).

In the end, as Spruill shows, the IWY opened a huge rift between social conservatives and liberal feminists. The Republican Party aligned itself with the former, ending its decades-long support for women's rights in an effort to recruit opponents of abortion rights, the ERA, and the IWY. George H. W. Bush, a onetime ally of feminism, made an about-face on these issues in order to keep pace with transformations in the GOP. *Ms.* magazine described his actions as "one of the most dramatic and cynical policy reversals in modern

American politics." Meanwhile, Republican men saw feminism as a wedge issue that could "unite conservatives across class lines and break up the New Deal coalition." The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 solidified the GOP's new identity against feminism and for patriarchal families (p. 297).

Race also figured into the Republican Party's right-ward shift, inspired partly by feminist success in merging women's and "minority rights." Indeed, as Spruill shows, the GOP used references to the IWY in its appeals to "angry white conservatives" whose politics were motivated as much by racism as by sexism. In some ways, the feminist movement paved conservative women's entrée into public life. By creating openings in education, jobs, and politics that made room for "women of all political persuasions" to enter, feminists provided antifeminists with tools to create a movement of their own (pp. 229, 305–307, 317).

Spruill ends with pessimism about the present but hope for the future. President Barack Obama embraced feminists' insistence that "there was no contradiction between promoting women's rights and family values." (p. 314) But his election opened a Pandora's box of racial hatred and misogyny, and the GOP welcomed racism as a new recruiting opportunity; in 2016, it ran a candidate, Donald Trump, who embodied and defended racism and sexism, even as he flaunted behavior that violated basic Christian moral standards. Would his multiple divorces, extramarital affairs, public lies, and profane language prevent evangelicals and Catholics from supporting him? The ninety-two-year-old Schlafly shouted a resounding "No!" by reaching out to endorse Trump early in his campaign. Her support forecast the possibility that, once again, the Christian Right would prioritize its opposition to feminism above everything else. With Trump's election, Spruill concludes, a "conservative, anti-establishment movement that had been building since the 1970s" finally triumphed (p. 343).

Feminism became, in many respects, a victim of its own success. In the 1970s, anti-discrimination laws, federal funding, and international support all seemed poised to assure ongoing feminist progress into the 1980s. Instead, opponents mobilized to recast feminist demands as anti-family, anti-male, anti-child, and even anti-life. Even so, Spruill takes heart from "the fact that so many Americans, particularly young Americans, now embrace [feminist] ideas that had been considered so controversial back in 1977" (p. 344). As one who remembers how alien those ideas were and understands—indeed, experiences—how liberating they have been, Spruill can certainly count me among them.



After growing up in the Church of Christ, Leigh Ann Wheeler attended college at Kansas State University, where she earned a B.A. in History (1988) and went on to earn a Ph.D. in History from the University of Minnesota (1998). She has taught at several institutions, including Concordia College in Moorehead, Minnesota; Rollins College in Winterpark, Florida, and Bowling Green State University in Ohio. She is now a professor of History at Binghamton University in New York. She specializes in modern U.S. history, with a particular focus on women, sexuality, law, social movements (especially those that involve civil rights and civil liberties), and life stories. Professor Wheeler co-edited the *Journal of Women's History* (2009–2014) and served as a founding senior editor for the Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History (2015–2018). She is a member of the editorial board for the *Journal of American History*, a Distinguished Lecturer for the Organization of American Historians, and has published two books—*Against Obscenity: Reform and the Politics of Womanhood in America, 1873–1935* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004) and *How Sex Became a Civil Liberty* (Oxford University Press, 2013). Currently, she is writing the first biography of Anne Moody, a civil rights activist best known for writing *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968). Wheeler has taught Moody's memoir for the past 25 years and finds researching Moody's life the most meaningful work—aside from teaching—that she has undertaken to date. In addition to archival research, it involves conversations and relationships with Moody's friends, family, and neighbors; these are often moving and sometimes disturbing, and then there are the terrifying encounters with rattlesnakes in abandoned Mississippi cemeteries. Wheeler is grateful that a Public Scholar Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities allows her to focus on this book project during the 2019–2020 academic year. And she is extraordinarily proud of her current and former Ph.D. students who are writing histories of the U.S., women, and social movements that are moving the discipline and the field in exciting new directions.