Wives, Mothers, and the Red Menace

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The Cold War world might have been confusing and frightening, but American women eagerly took it upon themselves to calm the worries and take up the struggle to protect their loved ones from whatever enemies threatened them. Particularly remarkable were the actions and commitment of white, conservative, anticommunist women. These were the women who, theoretically, believed in the domestic ideal and espoused a role for women limited to home and family. Ironically, this very dedication to home and children was what led them to political involvement. Following in the footsteps of earlier generations of conservative women activists and echoing the refrains of right-wing women around the world, American women saw no contradiction between their involvement outside the home and their continued support of domesticity. Although their individual backgrounds and
life experiences differed, conservative female anticommunists shared a belief that the communist threat was so great that they must defy convention and work for its destruction. From their perspective the situation was simple—fight communism or risk your children’s lives and the American way of life.

These women activists did not spring up in a vacuum, however. Their actions resulted not only from the realities of the Cold War world in which they lived but also from the convergence of two other developing movements. First, these women benefited from the work of a significant number of right-wing women who had come before them. Working against suffrage; fighting communists, immigrants, and radicals during and following World War I; and protesting the changes wrought by the New Deal, earlier generations of women had laid the foundations on which Cold War women operated. Second, just as these women were mounting their campaigns against communism, conservatives of various persuasions were beginning to work together to create a viable political right-wing movement. Both of these factors created an atmosphere in which anticommunist women could more easily conduct their activities.

Conservative anticommunist women of the 1950s and 1960s repeated the refrains made common by their mothers and grandmothers, as well as their sisters in other countries. Emphasizing the importance of their role as wives and especially as mothers, women had fought against woman suffrage, immorality, urbanization, and all manner of liberal political reforms. Internationally, women had utilized similar rhetoric to explain their participation in fascist movements in Germany, Britain, and Chile. They sang the glories of mothers who stayed home and cared for their families even as they themselves left home to join the masculine world of politics. They rationalized that they were not contradicting themselves because their political activities were actually an extension of the maternal instincts to care for and protect their young. Frequently, they added that since women were, by their very nature, more moral than men, it was women’s responsibility to do whatever was necessary to preserve the home and family.¹

The connections between Cold War anticommunist women and their earlier sisters were not limited to similar rationalizations of their actions. Most significant, conservative women played a role, ignored by many scholars until recently, in the evolution of women’s political culture. Obviously, women suffragists, progressive women, and feminists pushed for women to be able to take part in the political process

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in a formal way. Their female opponents have usually been represented as the antagonists in this drama, the players who held back progress. Such analysis overlooks the reality that conservative women were, as historian Jane Jerome Camhi put it, “variations on a trend toward activism among women.” Both suffragists and anti-suffragists shared many characteristics in terms of background and actions; they differed, however, in the solutions they proposed to deal with existing problems. Suffragists argued that women’s direct participation in the political system would allow them to help alleviate the suffering of the poor and eliminate corruption in government; anti-suffragists warned that granting women the right to vote would undermine the patriarchal order and create more instability and corruption. Consequently, just as liberal feminists built on the foundations laid by suffragists and progressives, conservative anticommunists took advantage of the examples of their anti-suffragist sisters.

Anticommmunist women also benefited from the birth of a more organized and stable conservative movement. For years, men and women who believed in classical liberal economics as well as those who preached a traditionalist morality had claimed to be “conservative.” The inherent contradiction between a group that supported limited government and people who wanted government to impose a moral standard kept the two groups separate and “conservatives” politically divided and weak. Anticommmunism gave them common cause. Classical liberals despised the idea of a planned economy, while traditionalists feared the atheism inherent in communist ideology. In the face of an overwhelmingly dangerous enemy, conservatives of both varieties began to work together to defeat communism as well as any policies or politicians they perceived were leading them down a leftward path. One result of this development was the creation of a number of conservative organizations and publications. These periodicals provided interested anticommmunist women with a forum in which to discuss and promote their ideas.

These three situations—the Cold War, the historical pattern of conservative female activism, and the emergence of a viable conservative movement—provided a comfortable setting in which anticommmunist women could assert themselves. These circumstances still do not explain why some women became caught up in anticommmunist activity while others did not. Were these women housewives-turned-activists or career agitators who happened to have families? Were they forced into the political arena by their fear of communism, or did they
use anticommunism as a convenient opening for their political ambitions? The answer was obviously different for different women. Some activists, especially those who made something of a career of anticommunism, were ambitious women who used their belief in anticommunism as a lever to open opportunities that might not otherwise have existed. For other women, fear of communism led them to participate in political activity they might otherwise have avoided. Whether they remained active over a long period or became involved only in response to specific short-term fears probably depended on individual personalities and circumstances. Even if they went “back home,” their limited participation indicated the profound impact anticommunism had on society at the time.

An examination of earlier conservative women provides insight into potential motivations. Similar to the situation of the anti-suffragists and anti–New Deal activists of the 1930s, Cold War women found themselves in a transitional phase for their gender. Just as earlier women struggled to understand what their new voting power might mean for them, women emerging from World War II wondered how to reconcile their sometimes new middle-class status with the reality of their lives. All the propaganda told them that women stayed home and devoted themselves to their families, yet they saw the numbers of women who held jobs and participated in activities outside the home. In trying to understand exactly where women fit into the scheme of things, women found the anticommunist cause comforting. They could explore the potential of doing something more than housework while justifying it as an extension of their duty to family. Like their predecessors, their conservative cause provided them with a safe way of confronting other, more complicated issues in their environment. Just as the anti-suffragists saw their movement as a way of holding back the onslaught of modernization, urbanization, and immigration, Cold War women could attack communism rather than face the more difficult issues of racism, poverty, and the threat of nuclear annihilation. The simplicity of the dichotomy between communist and noncommunist seemed easier to confront than the reality of whether a black family should be allowed to move into their neighborhood. Blaming communists for everything removed the gray areas of modern life. Conspiracy theories are so popular because they offer simple solutions to complex problems.

Who were these conservative anticommunist women? We can begin with a few generalities. Most, though not all, were middle class,
married, white, reasonably intelligent, and well educated. Although politically active women were spread throughout the country, significant pockets of activists formed in the Southwest, which was growing tremendously during the postwar years. Many of these new arrivals had relocated from areas such as the Midwest or the South, where there was a long tradition of conservatism. As might be expected, these women’s husbands were part of a growing army of upwardly mobile white-collar workers, small businessmen, and professionals (doctors, lawyers, engineers) who enjoyed the benefits of an expansive economy. By and large, these men were also conservative—some active participants with their wives, others not. Many of the women had children, but most of the particularly active women either had older kids or no children. A very few had experimented with left-wing movements before “seeing the light” and moving to the other side. Few had outside jobs; most did conservative work as a hobby—although that word is misleading because it implies that they took their political activity lightly, which they did not. In fact, some were fairly ambitious and found anticommunism a useful path to political office. For others, activism grew out of anger over a particular incident and dissipated once that situation had been resolved. For others, the anticommunist crusade remained a lifelong vocation.\(^5\)

Identifying these women is easier than discovering their individual motivations for becoming activist anticommunists. Why did these women become anticommunists and political activists? Although the answer varied for each woman, understanding some of the commonalities provides a more complete analysis of their situation.

The reason women embraced the anticommunist cause appears deceptively simple. After all, almost all Americans embraced some form of anticommunism. Considering the political speeches, media reports, and religious proclamations constantly bombarding the American public with messages about the evils of communism, it would have been more peculiar if these women had rejected the concept. The women in this study, however, went beyond mere acceptance of the evils of communism; they saw it as a serious and immediate threat to their country and their way of life. They did not just pay lip service to the necessity of wiping out communists abroad; they tended to link the Red threat to domestic issues, equating communism with any form of liberalism or socialism and decrying federal government regulation in any form and on any level. For some of these women, any economic or political policy, any cultural practice, any social norm that diverged
from what they considered “the American way” could be perceived as communistic. Their anticomunism, then, often could not be separated from their conservatism. In fact, the two perspectives proved mutually reinforcing. The more conservative—either economically or morally—the woman, the greater her sense that communism threatened all she held dear. The more she feared communists, the more she wanted her government to do all it could to safeguard her way of life and the less willing she was to tolerate anything that provided an opening for communism. She missed the inherent contradiction between her philosophies: she demanded a limited government that actively worked to protect her from all forms of communism. She was willing to accept government intervention as long as it was connected to fighting communism.

The reason so many women embraced this conservative mindset has been the subject of recent study by a number of scholars. In analyzing right-wing American women, scholars such as Kim Nielsen, June Melby Benowitz, and Catherine Rymph have emphasized the centrality of gender to discussions of conservative ideologies and movements. Men frequently utilized contemporary assumptions about feminine and masculine traits to characterize their cause and their opponents. Moreover, protecting the status quo often meant maintaining existing gender relationships. For women, who remained excluded from exercising formal power even after they won suffrage, safeguarding their informal power became extremely important. Although, as historian Nielsen put it, women accepted “the rightness of patriarchy,” they did not “believe that it implied invisibility on the part of women.” In fact, they assumed they had a responsibility to defend the traditional system. Often, particularly early in the twentieth century, they appropriated the perception that women were morally superior to men to legitimize their involvement in political affairs. This connection between morality and political activism eventually fell out of favor with progressive women but remained, as Rymph argues, a tradition with Republican women and others on the Right. If men would not protect the existing order, these women asserted their right to do so. They felt the need to defend whatever avenues they could find to gain power. Additionally, because women remained outsiders to a large extent even after they gained suffrage, they had less need to compromise their principles for the sake of political expediency. They frequently felt they had nothing to lose by sticking to their ideals.
With these justifications supporting their beliefs, some women found concrete reasons to shift from having anticommunist sympathies to crusading for the cause. The motivators for each woman were as varied as the women themselves. Some came from families with traditions of political activism; others acted under the influence and encouragement of parents or husbands. Religious convictions drove some, while others reacted to a traumatic experience by getting involved with the fight against communism. Sometimes women joined a club in search of something to do and found themselves drawn into the political fray.

For women who fought on a local level, the driving force behind their involvement was more readily apparent. They believed there was a concrete threat to their children, families, and community. They felt they had to take action. As will be demonstrated in later chapters, women in communities across the country responded to perceived dangers from school officials and national and local politicians. Usually, the leaders of the anticommunist crusades had been politically active prior to whatever incident inspired the participation of a larger segment of the population. The bulk of women who temporarily laid aside their regular duties to attend meetings and demonstrations or write letters apparently returned to their normal lives. Historians have begun to discover similar examples all over the country. Like their more liberal sisters, conservative anticommunist women rose to meet a challenge to what they perceived to be a direct threat to their well-being.

The easiest way for women to get involved in a local crusade was to join a national organization with local affiliates. These groups had the advantage of a set infrastructure, experienced leaders, and an established reputation. Participation in such an enterprise educated women in various modes of political activity. The General Federation of Women’s Clubs and the Minute Women of America are two examples that represent the spectrum of anticommunist fervor.

The more moderate of the two organizations was the General Federation of Women’s Clubs (GFWC), founded in 1890. Since the early nineteenth century, a wide variety of clubs had served the educational, intellectual, and social needs of middle- and upper-class women. By the end of the century, however, a number of club leaders recognized that without more organization, each individual club would be “working on in its own rut . . . and well satisfied with small things.” These women founded the GFWC in hopes of creating
“a rallying center” for “consultation and comparison of methods,” as well as a “common fellowship and central bond of union.” Created during the Progressive era, the GFWC served as a means for women to become involved in the reform movements discussed by politicians and journalists. For women with political interests, clubs camouflaged female challenges to the masculine world of policy, government, and law. Men tended to underestimate the potential power of clubwomen and thus let the organizations do as they wished. Women activists took advantage of this benign neglect to push various causes and find new recruits among fellow club members. For women with no aspirations beyond being wives and mothers, clubs offered a way to expand their concept of “home” and broaden their activities. Raising funds for libraries or scholarships or protecting poor children gave such women an outlet that did not undermine their vision of who they were or what constituted acceptable behavior.

Although the activities of individual clubs varied, membership in the organizations was fairly uniform. Most of the women were white, middle-class suburbanites whose husbands supported their families very comfortably. There were branches of the GFWC in rural areas, but their numbers were much smaller than those among their urban sisters. Citing the existence of the National Council of Negro Women, members of the GFWC saw no need to break the color line and integrate their clubs. In addition to race, class also distinguished the GFWC from other women’s affiliations, such as some religious and labor groups. GFWC members, particularly the leadership, tended to have more in common with women active in the Business and Professional Women’s Organization or the American Association of University Women. Although the latter groups tended to consist of “career” women as opposed to housewives, similar educational and class backgrounds linked the groups.

As might be expected, most women’s clubs engaged in community service projects that were not specifically political. For example, in 1948 the presidents of the New Hampshire clubs listed their accomplishments for Doloris Bridges, wife of New Hampshire senator Styles Bridges. They had planted trees, prepared hot school lunches, and raised money for scholarships, ball fields, and libraries. For many, their most political actions involved previewing movies coming to town or pressuring the town council about a variety of issues. Building on their long tradition of reform, many women’s clubs focused on community service projects or social service activities. Individual
women within these groups might become heavily involved in direct political action, but the clubs generally did not endorse or encourage partisan activity. During some club meetings, however, before the tea and cakes and after the reporting of the minutes, clubwomen listened to speeches that challenged them to become more politically aware and involved. As the Cold War climate chilled in the years following World War II, clubwomen joined the rest of America in becoming increasingly concerned about the communist threat at home and abroad. For many clubwomen the severity of the danger overshadowed their reform and service goals.

As a result, by the 1950s most clubwomen regarded involvement in what they called “public affairs” as one of their main functions. Proud of what they had accomplished in the fields of education and service, members expanded their goals to include “making their home towns better places in which to live and to rear their families.” Clubwomen approached this goal from several angles. First, they emphasized education—not just for their children but also for themselves. National leaders encouraged local chapters to host study clubs—what they called “the married woman’s university”—publish book lists, and invite political speakers to their meetings. They dedicated significant portions of their monthly newsletters to informational and editorial pieces on national and international political activity. Whether written by club members or guest editorialists, these pieces frequently reiterated the common view that communism threatened “not only our ideology of government, which provides freedom and economic security for our people,” but also “our religious way of life which Democracy has as its basic concept.”

Second, they created a special department to deal with international affairs as well as one to deal with “Americanism.” National club leaders challenged these divisions to organize the study clubs, bring in pertinent guest speakers, and help members sort through the information on the dangers of communism they received.

Although the GFWC abhorred communism and worried about the threat of socialism at home, the leadership, at least, rejected some of the more rabid views of other anticommunist organizations. For example, they seemed not to participate in the McCarthy-style witch hunts or share the “anything Russian is evil” mind-set exhibited by many of their contemporaries. In an interesting continuation of the legacy of progressive women such as Jane Addams, they repeatedly encouraged their members to learn about other cultures; they
also offered support to the United Nations and especially for the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO’s) educational efforts. The fact that rank-and-file members accepted their leaders’ moderate anticommunism was indicated by the latters’ continual reelection to office. Obviously, any member who felt her club was too liberal would simply leave and find an organization more suited to her political leanings.  

Women who wanted a more conservative organization might have opted for groups such as the Minute Women of America. Founded in 1949 by Suzanne Stevenson, the Minute Women of the USA quickly spread across the country. By 1952, Stevenson bragged that her original Connecticut-based group had grown to include chapters in twenty-seven states. The platform of the national committee was very general. Promising “to preserve, protect and promote the Constitution of the United States . . . and the freedom it guarantees to individual citizens,” Minute Women worked to “protect our country from Communism, Socialism, Fascism or collectivism in any form.” In response to what they perceived to be a malicious newspaper article, the Minute Women explained in their newsletter that their group constituted a “[c]rusade and not an organization.” New members paid a small fee and pledged only “to vote in every election.” Inspired by Stevenson and the Connecticut group, members of local chapters operated autonomously. This allowed women to focus on whatever problems seemed to threaten their particular neighborhood. To protect the organization, Minute Women were forbidden to “take action as a pressure group. They [were supposed to] act only as individuals.”

Even following these rules, however, Minute Women sometimes proved a formidable force. An article in their newsletter calling for letters to congressmen, the president, local school board members, or religious leaders could generate thousands of pieces of mail seemingly overnight. Moreover, because many Minute Women were housewives with school-age or older children, they had the time to attend meetings, ask questions, and research the backgrounds of individuals or books they found problematic. Rapid dissemination of information through a national network allowed concerned members to attend meetings or write protest letters armed with information. The Minute Women appeared to act as individuals rather than as an organization, but the results of their actions indicated the power of their cooperation and coordination.
In contrast, women active in the mainstream political parties wore their affiliation on their sleeves for everyone to see. In fact, in the postwar years, women worked very hard to increase their power and influence within both major parties. Although at first Democratic women seemed to make greater strides in gaining power within their organization, the Republicans began to catch up during the postwar period. For conservative, anticommunist women who felt much more at home with the GOP than with the New Deal Democrats, this was a godsend. With strong female leadership, women Republicans increased their presence at all levels of the GOP.\(^\text{19}\)

Similar to the party as a whole, however, female Republicans argued among themselves about the future of their party, the threat of communism in the nation, and the best ways for women to be active politically. Building on disagreements existing from the earliest days following suffrage, Republican women struggled to define their relationship with the men in their party. Women working in the Women’s Division of the GOP tended to be single career women who argued that the best way for women to gain influence and power within the party was to cooperate with the existing division of authority. They hoped this strategy would lead men to recognize that women deserved to be equal partners in party matters. To this end, they encouraged the largely middle-class, married members of the Republican women’s clubs to support whatever candidates the national or state parties nominated. Club members usually cooperated, willingly doing the party’s grunt work, knocking on doors, making phone calls, and mailing fliers.

The situation changed during Eisenhower’s first term in office. Women’s Division leaders maintained their stance, but the clubwomen had become restive. According to one observer, the increasingly conservative women were frustrated with Eisenhower’s moderate brand of Republicanism. Many first became involved in political campaigns during the heady McCarthy days, and as one right-wing witness explained, they had “lost all their spirit of fight” in the face of Eisenhower’s Modern Republicanism. The observer’s husband met with the Rock Creek Republican Women’s Club and got “a real bang out of” the fact that they had settled for Eisenhower and Nixon as speakers when they really wanted to hear Barry Goldwater.\(^\text{20}\) In contrast to the professional career women of the Women’s Division, the clubwomen did not seek formal power. Instead, they accepted that male party leaders would make key policy decisions; the clubwomen
assumed, however, that they could decide whether to support those policies. When they did, they expected the male leaders to appreciate their contributions. When they disagreed with the party leadership, they felt it was their duty was to point out what they perceived to be errors. They did not depend on the party for a salary or for fulfillment of their ambitions. Like other conservative women, then, they felt free to follow principle rather than compromise.\textsuperscript{21}

Mainstream political parties were not the only organizations confronted by memberships who began to find existing structures and perspectives too moderate and confining. When conservative Phyllis Schlafly took over as State National Defense chair of the DAR in Illinois in 1957, for example, she used her position to expand her “little nucleus of conservatives” by encouraging other members of the organization to read the “right kind” of literature.\textsuperscript{22} Another group, All American Conferences to Combat Communism, served as a platform for groups not specifically tied to anticommunism, such as Business and Professional Women (BPW), to voice their position on the Red menace. Producing an issue of \textit{Freedom’s Facts} allowed the BPW women to establish their right-wing credentials and warn their membership of the specific threat communists posed to women’s groups.\textsuperscript{23} Even the American Association of University Women (AAUW) faced difficulties from members who questioned the motives of their leaders. One disgruntled member went so far as to resign from the organization and publicly accused the national AAUW office of “aid[ing] the Communist conspiracy.”\textsuperscript{24}

In addition, countless smaller groups formed across the country to focus on particular problems that concerned their members. Because these organizations tended to be local and were often temporary, their histories can be only partially reconstructed. Sometimes the existence of such a collection of women became apparent through others discussing them. For example, anticommunist activist Alfred Kohlberg wrote to Senator Joe McCarthy about “some ladies . . . who have been greatly stirred up lately” and asked McCarthy to address them. “Under the sponsorship of the Defenders of the Constitution, Inc.,” this group had already begun distributing McCarthy’s speeches at their meetings.\textsuperscript{25}

The plethora of women-sponsored and women-run newsletters provides another area for examining women’s motivations and beliefs at the grassroots level. Sometimes the sheets published the official views of a specific organization; often they appeared to represent
the opinion of a single woman who felt compelled to share her views with others. The fact that many of the papers were published for at least one year indicates a serious commitment to their production. For example, *Alerted Americans*, operated by Helen Corson, was first published in 1955 and still existed in 1964. The publications ranged from handwritten, typed, or mimeographed sheets to professionally printed newspapers. They were produced in all sections of the country and were read by unknown numbers of people. Although some of the newsletters were financed by their sponsoring organizations, many editors of smaller papers accepted advertisements or lamented that they operated on a shoestring budget. Some, such as *The Farmer’s Voice* and *Alerted Americans*, depended on subscriptions and contributions for their operating expenses. Florence Fowler Lyons, who produced a series of “Reports on UNESCO,” explained to fellow activist Elizabeth Brown that she was operating on “the very edge of total economic collapse.”

Among the newsletters was the previously mentioned *Freedom Facts*, published by the All American Conferences to Combat Communism, headquartered in Washington, D.C. This publication served as a platform from which various organizations (such as the BPW) could expose the evils of communism. In Pennsylvania, Helen Corson sold subscriptions to her *Alerted Americans* newsletter and had a mailing list of around 1,100 in 1958. In Florida, Bette Logan edited *The Spirit* as an outgrowth of Woman’s Right to Know, Inc., an organization of unknown size or influence. The Midwest contributed both *The Farmer’s Voice*, the work of Christiana Uhl of Wooster, Ohio, and periodic pamphlets from the American Woman’s Party of Detroit, Michigan. Mrs. M. Conan of Phoenix, Arizona, drew her own cartoons and sent out numerous copies of single-page news sheets titled *What Do You Think?* Meanwhile, *New Mexico Women Speak*, the work of Mrs. James Thorsen and Mrs. Reese P. Fullerton, encouraged readers to send “letters setting forth the happenings” in their areas and to buy new subscriptions.

Some of these women included explanations for their efforts. Christiana Uhl, who sent out *The Farmer’s Voice* in the mid- to late 1950s, explained her motivation for creating a newsletter. Although she thought of it as a “hobby,” she also saw it as a “reason to study and learn. It is an attempt to share my discoveries with you. It gives background facts you can use in understanding the community, the state, the nations and our world.” In typical 1950s female fashion, she
presented her political crusade as a harmless “hobby” that threatened no one. Others were less demure. The editors of *New Mexico Women Speak* proclaimed their “intent and purpose” to be “to defend and protect the Constitution of the United States.” Worried that people in New Mexico would “continue to be uninformed about, and apathetic to[,] the extent and progress of Communist infiltration into our government and life,” they took it upon themselves to try to “wake up” their state and country. Likewise, *The Spirit* took a strong stand on its purpose. In fact, the editors put their raison d’être on the last page of every issue. “We believe,” the editors wrote, “the American woman cherishes her Independence and her Liberty. We believe she will insist on preserving for her children the heritage of a Free America.”

Similarly, some anticommunist women worked to influence national policy. Like local activists, these women came from diverse backgrounds and met with varying degrees of success. Additionally, although they proudly claimed to be “anticommunist,” the intensity of their fear of communism differed, sometimes significantly. They also shared a certain anonymity despite their sometimes recognizable names.

Anticommunist women active on the national level have been neglected by scholars for several overlapping reasons. First, many were married to famous (or infamous, depending on one’s perspective) men who cast a large shadow. Many people, including historians, have assumed that as good wives, they were merely supporting their husbands’ careers. From such a perspective, there would appear to be nothing to study. Moreover, the wives themselves frequently encouraged this impression by frequently referring to their spouses or refusing to take credit for their own actions, ideas, and writings. Second, with few exceptions, women active on a national level willingly stayed in the background and let the men do the talking and take the credit for their work. Some women wanted to run for political office and wield the power that went with political positions; however, most conservative women chose to influence events from behind the scenes. As mere wives of “important men,” women often left less detailed and less organized collections of papers for historians to examine. Either they or later archivists did not see the need to retain their letters and speeches. Finally, since most of these women were responsible for running households and raising children, they did not have the time or perhaps the inclination to keep a journal explaining
their motivations and beliefs. Like many historical actors, their lives must be reconstructed backward from speeches, letters, newspaper articles, and the words of others. For this reason, the availability of source material guided my selection of the important female figures of national stature who appear in my study.30

The backgrounds of various women active on the national level indicate the variety of experiences that could have led them to espouse conservative anticommunism as well as the range of fervor with which they approached the cause. Unfortunately, because few of these women left introspective diaries, we have no definitive proof of what led them to embrace anticommunist activity. Instead, we can only surmise their reasoning based on what we can determine about their lives. Even that can be challenging, however, since women activists frequently undervalued their own importance. An examination of a few case studies will reveal the possibilities as well as the limitations of a historical investigation into the activities of prominent anticommunist women.

Of all my examples, Margaret Chase Smith left the fullest records, held the most power, and was the most moderate in her beliefs. Ironically, she also represents a more average American than many of the others. Coming from a simple background, nothing in her early life seems significant enough to have caused her particularly to fear communism. Instead, like most Americans, Smith learned to see communism as a serious threat in the years after World War II, based on information coming out of Washington. Perhaps because there was no dominant psychological or political motivation behind her anticommunism, she tended to be more temperate in her views than many other prominent anticommunist women.

Born in Skowhegan, Maine, to a working-class family with deep roots in the community, Margaret Chase appeared destined for an ordinary life. But early on there were hints that something more lay beneath the surface. She played a key role in her high school basketball team winning a state championship, in the process discovering her addiction not just to victory but also to the thrill of competition. The only experience that rivaled the thrill of that victory was her senior trip to Washington, D.C. Chase left Maine for the first time and realized that there was an exciting world to conquer. This realization increased her frustration as she tried her hand at teaching right after high school. Bored, lonely, and away from family and friends, she soon moved back to Skowhegan and away from the classroom. Instead
of remaining a teacher, Chase became a businesswoman. Working her way up through various organizations, including the telephone company, a newspaper, and a mill, Chase pushed herself to meet the challenges presented by her male bosses.31

Like many single working women in the 1920s, Chase enjoyed a wide network of female acquaintances, some social and others professional. Through these social clubs, such as Sorosis, and more serious organizations, such as the BPW, Chase learned that she was a good leader and that she enjoyed both the responsibility and the challenges leadership offered. Her years with the BPW, including one term as state president, reintroduced two themes from her high school years: the thrill of challenge and the chance to travel beyond Maine. Chase learned two crucial skills from her club activities as well: how to defy convention without threatening those who were traditional-minded and how to recognize the potential political power these organizations had. Moreover, her years in these organizations taught her some political skills and helped her make a statewide name for herself.32

Her private life revealed a proper young lady who managed to challenge convention without permanently damaging her reputation. While still in her teens and working as a switchboard operator, she began a relationship with Clyde Smith, one of the wealthiest and best-connected men in town. From the beginning, rumors surrounded the relationship. Clyde was divorced, twenty-one years older than Margaret, and a former state representative and ex-sheriff. Margaret was still in high school when she and her parents began taking rides with Clyde in his car, a novelty in Skowhegan. Over the next several years their relationship continued amid rumors of Clyde seeing other women and the couple’s impropriety. In 1930, when Margaret was thirty-three, the couple married. She continued working for six months and then quit to become a full-time homemaker. Margaret’s respect for housewives perhaps originated during the early years of her marriage as she struggled to learn to cook and clean and care for a husband.33

Smith did not remain a housewife, however. Her husband’s political ambitions provided her with the opportunity to continue her earlier lessons in the art of politics. As he ran for various state offices she traveled with him, learning the ins and outs of campaigning. When he won election to the House of Representatives, she became his office manager. As her husband’s health declined, she assumed more and more of his duties. When he died, she successfully ran for
his seat in Congress, a position she held until 1948 when she won election to the U.S. Senate. As a senator, Smith used her influence to stand firm against communist encroachment abroad without losing sight of concerns about civil liberties at home.\(^{34}\)

If Smith represents everywoman USA, who had a healthy yet controlled concern about communism, Jean Kerr McCarthy represents the everywoman whose fears turned her into a zealot. Unfortunately, McCarthy left many fewer papers to help us understand the source of the intensity of her views. Although her anticommunism seemed to predate her introduction to Joe McCarthy, his influence and the success of his political campaign against communists cannot be discounted as factors in her continuing obsession.

Born in 1924, Jean Fraser Kerr was the only child of Scottish immigrants who came to the United States in the early twentieth century. Her father was a builder who ran a successful business in the Washington, D.C., area. From all indications, Kerr had a normal, happy childhood. After high school, she worked for three years in an advertising agency before leaving for college. After entering George Washington University (GWU) in 1944, she joined a sorority and participated in various extracurricular activities. Both her good looks and her intelligence set her apart from her peers. While at GWU and, later, at Northwestern University, Kerr won various beauty queen awards. In 1946 her essay “The Promotion of Peace among the Nations of the World” won GWU’s Alexander Wilbourne Weddell Award. Her classmates described her as “bright” but aloof. A little older than the average university student, she kept to herself. Although her sorority sisters thought she was “a good catch,” she seldom dated. Her intense interest in politics led her to work part-time for the Senate War Investigating Committee and then for Republican senator Albert W. Hawkes of New Jersey.\(^{35}\) In 1947, while still a student, Kerr stopped by Wisconsin senator Joseph McCarthy’s office to visit a friend. According to various stories, he tried not only to hire her but also to date her. She declined both invitations until after her graduation in 1948, when she joined his staff as a research assistant.\(^{36}\) She also began an on-again/off-again relationship with McCarthy that culminated in their marriage in 1954.\(^{37}\)

Kerr’s responsibilities in McCarthy’s office quickly expanded beyond just research. Joe particularly valued Jean’s writing skills. She worked on several booklets he published, including a compilation of his most repeated charges titled *McCarthyism, the Fight for America*.\(^{38}\) Although she insisted that McCarthy’s preoccupation with the commu-
nist threat had nothing to do with her, her interest in anticommunism certainly reinforced Joe’s attitudes. Always interested in politics, Jean was fascinated by the Hiss case and eagerly shared her opinions with others. Her knowledge of and dedication to the cause cannot be overlooked as a factor in influencing the senator when he began to search for a new issue in the fall of 1949. Kerr did not push McCarthy into the anticommunist crusade—he did not take up the cause until almost a year after she started working for him—but her strong opinions helped keep him aware of the topic. The more he worked for the cause, the more power she gained in his office. Although Joe’s oldest friends doubted that she forced him into anything he did not want to do, they nevertheless acknowledge that her presence contributed to the ease with which he moved into the field.39

Like Jean McCarthy, many activist women had husbands who reinforced their anticommunist inclinations. In some cases, women with latent political ambitions married men who provided them with an entrée to the world of politics and encouraged their participation. These women must have had some buried interests or ambition, however, since not all wives of powerful men eagerly and enthusiastically jumped on the anticommunist bandwagon.

Both Elizabeth Churchill Brown and Doloris Thauwald Bridges owed their presence on the national political stage to their husbands. Born in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1908, Elizabeth Churchill lived in the privileged world of high society. On her father’s side, she was descended from pioneer New England families; her mother’s ancestors included both English nobility and prominent families of colonial Virginia. Her grandfather had been a surgeon major in the Confederate Army. Sometime during her youth the family moved to New York, where the young Elizabeth enrolled in Rye Seminary before attending the Spence School in New York and Oldfields School in Maryland.40 With her education completed in 1926, Churchill spent her time attending balls, visiting friends, and eventually getting a job. During many summers she and her mother traveled to Newport, Rhode Island, to escape the heat before returning to the city. During the winter months, numerous social activities—balls, parties, teas—consumed her time. Even as the country settled into the Depression during the 1930s and unemployment reached epic proportions, Churchill found a job as society editor for the New York Evening Journal. Interestingly, throughout this period one popular theme for fashionable parties was Imperial Russia. Touting the grandeur of Tsarist Russia, these fetes
exposed the breadth of the division between the partygoers’ lives and those of the majority of Americans. In addition, the emphasis on pre-communist Russia displayed upper-class Americans’ displeasure with the Soviet Union.

In 1939, Elizabeth Churchill married Thomas Stonborough, a descendant of the founder of the Austro-Hungarian steel industry. Stonborough had a doctorate from the University of Vienna and worked for a firm on the New York Stock Exchange. The young couple continued to participate in the social scene, including attending dances sponsored by Republican organizations. In 1941, however, Stonborough rented an apartment by himself in New York. The following year, Elizabeth Stonborough took a job as the Washington, D.C., representative for *Town and Country* magazine. At some point during this time, the couple divorced. Reassuming her maiden name, Churchill never publicly mentioned her first marriage.

Years later, in her prologue to her book about Joe McCarthy, she summarized her life. Interestingly, she began not with her childhood or her first marriage, which she completely ignored, but with her introduction to political life in Washington. She did not acknowledge the significant role her upper-class background played in her willingness to fling herself into the conservative anticommunist world.

In her autobiographical prologue, the young, naive Elizabeth “Liz” Churchill, actually a thirty-three-year-old divorcée, said she decided to move to Washington, D.C., because it “was a city of trees and flowers.” The fact that it pulsed with political activity did not hurt. The new arrival became a Washington correspondent for, in her words, “the hoity-toity Town and Country [sic] magazine.” “The shenanigans of high officials and the social didos of their wives” provided her with plenty to write about and introduced her to life in the nation’s capital. During this time, she later claimed, “the meaning of the political intrigues by politicians and statesmen in high places and power entirely escaped me.” Interestingly, Brown’s autobiography evidenced not only her willingness to edit her life story but also her skillful manipulation of gendered language and imagery to suit her purpose. She could sound as cold and calculating as any schoolmaster or play an ignorant, flighty little woman with equal ease.

Her life changed when she met the man who would become her second husband, Constantine “Connie” Brown. Like Liz, Connie, as his friends called him, was a journalist, although he had much more experience than she did. He had parlayed a small inheritance into a
European education, earning a Ph.D. from the University of Berlin. His reports from behind enemy lines during World War I caught the attention of American editors, and he became a celebrated foreign correspondent. Eventually, he returned to the States and ended up writing a syndicated column on political and international events. Well respected by people of all ideological stripes, Connie was, in Liz’s words, “intimately acquainted . . . with the . . . unrehearsed and spontaneous drama” unfolding in Washington. Liz was enthralled, and they were married in 1949. She found numerous opportunities to explore her “new” interest in politics as she served as her husband’s secretary, editor, and agent. In addition, she continued her own writing career, with numerous articles and several book projects.

Another politically ambitious, although much less successful, woman spent her early years halfway across the country. Born in St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1916, Doloris Thauwald probably grew up in relative comfort as the daughter of a doctor. She attended the University of Minnesota during the Depression years and graduated in 1935. Thauwald then joined the growing number of single women confronting a depressed job market. The economic turmoil of the 1930s created both crisis and opportunity for women seeking employment. On the one hand, employers tended to give jobs to men who needed, in the accepted view of the day, to support their families. On the other hand, desperate times forced many women into the role of breadwinner and in some ways encouraged acceptance of working women. Moreover, gender segregation in the workplace meant employers and male workers were reluctant to take women’s jobs. Women like Doloris thus continued the trend toward increased numbers of women in wage labor. Perhaps through her father’s influence, she went to work in Midway Hospital in St. Paul for three years before going to Washington.

As tensions mounted in Europe and Asia, job opportunities abounded in the nation’s capital, and Thauwald joined the swell of applicants. American entry into World War II had dramatically increased the need for women workers, as the government expanded its bureaucracy to prepare to fight the enemies. When the Pentagon opened in 1942, officials needed 35,000 office workers; many of the jobs were clerical, acceptable work even for young ladies. Pay was relatively good, especially compared with salaries back in the Midwest. Then there was the prestige of working for the government and living in glamorous, if terribly overcrowded, Washington, D.C.
According to an interview conducted years later, Thauwald was not certain she wanted to remain in Washington, so she took only short-term jobs, working for numerous agencies—including the Internal Revenue Department, the Communications Commission, the Department of Agriculture, and the Maritime Commission—before settling in as an administrative assistant in the World Trade Division of the State Department.48

Despite her success as an independent woman, Thauwald willingly moved into a more traditional role when the opportunity presented itself. At a dinner party she met New Hampshire senator Styles Bridges, an increasingly powerful man and a very eligible bachelor in Washington. Thauwald approached her relationship with the senator seriously; before the wedding she “oriented herself” to New Hampshire politics and people. Although some Senate wives chose to remain behind-the-scenes, immersed in private life, Doloris recognized that marriage to Styles provided the possibility of an active political life. She leaped at the chance.49

Although the newlywed Doloris moved into the postwar domestic realm, her interest in politics triumphed over her interest in housework. Styles clearly expected Doloris to play a role in his political as well as his private life, which explains her trip to New Hampshire to meet both his family and his constituents. Soon after their marriage he gave her books on poultry and dairying, key industries among his constituents. Drawing on her previous job experience, he turned to her for help with navigating Washington bureaucracy when his aides were not around. He encouraged her to read about the issues of the day.50 Soon, she felt ready to share her knowledge with other people. Very early in her marriage a college club asked her to give a speech. With her husband’s encouragement, she accepted the invitation. She decided that she would “talk about what [her] husband was doing” and set out to do research. She ended up with a “13-page, 45-minute speech” that “went over very well.” As she became more comfortable, she stopped writing speeches beforehand and just spoke from notes. Still, she worked hard to “check [her] facts and figures and be absolutely accurate.”51

In fact, speaking before groups in New Hampshire became one of her favorite and most important duties. Organizing her time efficiently, she was careful not to interfere with her husband’s schedule or disrupt his routine. She also made it a practice only to speak to women’s groups. Feeling it was “overdoing it talking to both [men
and women],” she explained to one club president that she found mixed audiences a “little disconcerting.”52 The reasons for this apparently self-imposed rule remain murky. By all accounts, Doloris Bridges exuded charm and vitality. Various audiences responded well to her speeches and applauded her style. Her letters do not indicate that she suffered from stage fright. Moreover, other evidence suggests that Bridges was no retiring wallflower. She once left an important reception because she felt she had been snubbed by the woman in charge. Another time she led the fight to return Pentagon funding to a charitable agency. Obviously willing to speak with men when it was necessary for her cause or when it seemed appropriate, Bridges must have felt it was not her place to speak before mixed groups. Perhaps she recognized that a growing audience of women needed politically knowledgeable women as role models.53

Some women’s motivation for political activism stemmed from personal experience. Phyllis Stewart, for example, credited her Roman Catholic background and staunchly Republican parents with creating a solidly conservative foundation upon which she could build. Although they suffered during the Depression after her father lost his job, the Stewarts remained adamantly opposed to the New Deal. Her family did not actively participate in politics, but conversations around the dinner table surely shaped young Phyllis’s views on government. After obtaining a Catholic school education, she enrolled in Washington University for her undergraduate degree before heading to Radcliffe for a master’s degree in political science. She hoped to land a government job but ended up at the American Enterprise Association, a conservative think tank. Her experiences there focused her opinions and intensified her tendencies toward right-wing thinking. With her newly honed conservative ideals, Stewart moved back to St. Louis. She set the pattern for the rest of her life by sharing her ideas with others through speeches, newsletters, and, eventually, political activism. After she married fellow conservative Fred Schlafly in 1949, she moved to Illinois and continued her activities there.54 She first tried to work through existing institutions, including the Republican Party. In fact, Schlafly played a crucial role in the previously mentioned disagreement among women in the GOP. That fight built in intensity throughout the 1950s and culminated in Schlafly’s attempt to become chair of the National Federation of Republican Women’s Clubs in the mid-1960s. Her defeat convinced many conservative women, including Schlafly, that they would have to move outside the party
and create their own organizations to continue their anticommunist work.55

Like Schlafly, Freda Utley was driven to fight communism. Her motivation, however, the most clearly articulated and understandable of that of any of the women discussed here, came from her personal experience with communism. In many ways, Utley’s life mirrored that of a number of male activists. Born in Manchester, England, in 1898, she explained in her autobiography that she “came to communism . . . by a happy childhood, a socialist father, and a Continental education.” She attended boarding schools in Switzerland and England, absorbing her parents’ left-wing, internationalist values during holidays and summer vacations. When her family’s fortune disappeared, she found a job but continued her involvement with liberal and socialist groups. Utley also found the time and the money to attend the London School of Economics, earning a master’s degree. She joined the British Communist Party in 1928; married Arcadi Berdichevsky, a Russian intellectual; traveled with him to Japan and China; and eventually moved with him to the Soviet Union.56 Despite the warnings of friends and relatives, Utley believed socialism could achieve great things in Moscow.

Her years in the USSR, however, transformed her from a devout communist into a dedicated anticommunist. Witnessing firsthand the corruption of party officials, the starving masses of workers and farmers, and the abandonment of Marxist ideals by government officials, Utley became increasingly disillusioned with the party. Still, she and her husband continued to try to make a life for themselves and their young son in Moscow. Utley believed her foreignness (these were Popular Front days, and the Soviets wanted to cultivate the British), her poor Russian-language skills (which, she explained, “saved me from the necessity of making speeches at meetings”), and her established credentials as an author protected her, even as Stalin’s purges wiped out hundreds of her co-workers.57 Her husband had no such protections. In 1936, with no apparent warning, the police arrested him as a Trotskyite and sent him to a gulag. She never heard from him again. Only years later would she learn that he had been executed in 1938.58

Frustrated, angry, and fearing for her child’s safety, Utley went back to England with her son. To support her small family, she worked for the *Manchester Guardian* as a foreign correspondent in Japan and later in China. In 1939 she moved to the United States, where she
continued her writing.\textsuperscript{59} Throughout the 1940s and 1950s Utley wrote three books analyzing the West’s failures in China; one examining pre– and post–World War II Germany; another warning that the Middle East was the communists’ next target; and finally her autobiography, tracing her shift from socialism to communism to vehement anticommunism.\textsuperscript{60} She continued to work as a freelance writer, a researcher, and a guest speaker.

Despite the prolific output from her typewriter, her accepted scholarly credentials, and her proven research abilities, Utley spent most of these years living on the edge of bankruptcy. She blamed the unpopularity of her views for her financial troubles. As she explained in her later memoirs, she was a communist before it was popular to be one, and she turned anticomunist as the British and Americans were allying themselves with the Soviets. By the time other Americans began to share her fears of communism, she had been shouting at them for almost a decade. Moreover, because she had started out as an idealist who believed in socialism and communism on a philosophical level, she had little patience with zealots who “confused the quest for social justice with Communist treason.”\textsuperscript{61} Nevertheless, like Margaret Chase Smith, Utley did not let her hatred of the Soviets blind her to the dangers of rabid anticomunism.

Using the lives of these women activists as examples, a number of comparisons can be made. First, with the exception of Brown and Utley, all of the women came from middle-class or even working-class backgrounds. The Depression hurt the families of Schlafly and Smith, but Bridges, McCarthy, and Brown seem to have felt few of its effects. Even Schlafly and Smith, however, did not seem to have experienced true financial hardship. Utley suffered later in her life as she struggled to support her son as a single mother. The fathers of most of these women were small businessmen or white-collar workers. Smith’s father, a sometimes barber, earned the most sporadic income. As a result, Smith’s mother worked at various odd jobs to help support the family. The Depression forced Schlafly’s mother into similar circumstances.

The women were all well educated; all of them, except Smith, attended college. Two, Schlafly and Utley, had graduate degrees. Most expressed interest in political issues while in school. Schlafly and Utley had degrees in political science, while McCarthy’s was in history. Despite her lack of higher education, Smith saw herself as a student of life and quickly absorbed whatever information came her
way. She gained much of her political knowledge while helping her husband run his campaigns and, later, his congressional office.

With the notable exception of Utley, whose parents were avowedly left wing, all of these women were raised in families and communities with traditionally conservative values. Specific information about the political leanings of Brown’s parents is elusive, but their upper-class lifestyle, interest in Tsarist Russia, and comfortable bank account all fit the image of a traditional Republican couple. Brown’s marriage to a conservative European businessman and their involvement with the local Republican Party suggest the same. Similarly, there is scant evidence concerning Jean McCarthy’s parents except their immigration records and release papers from the Royal Air Force following her father’s service during World War I. Although their immigrant background might have made them likely to vote Democratic, the father’s successful business may have pushed them into the Republican ranks. The same need to protect business interests that may have motivated Mr. Kerr’s conservatism might also have influenced Bridges’s doctor father to adopt right-wing views. Smith, on the surface, appears the exception to this rule. Her family struggled the most economically and remained blue collar. For her, the key factor might have been the traditionally Republican nature of her home state of Maine, as well as her mother and grandfather’s Catholicism. An emphasis on religion certainly played a role in Schlafly’s conservatism. Unlike Smith, Schlafly remained active in religious affairs and intertwined her political and spiritual beliefs throughout her lifetime.

Although Utley presents a contrast to the other women, her transition to conservatism was in many ways equally normal. Like fellow former leftist anticommunists Whittaker Chambers and Elizabeth Bentley, Utley first joined the Left out of idealism and conviction, only to become disillusioned, bitter, and angry. She experienced Soviet communism firsthand and decided that it was not what she had expected. Even before her husband was arrested and sent away, she had turned against the party. Her reversal was complete by 1950 when, as a naturalized American citizen, she testified against Owen Lattimore before the House Un-American Activities Committee.62

All the women had complicated relationships with the men in their lives. McCarthy, Bridges, and Brown were married to powerful, important men who gave them access to national audiences and introduced them to national political figures. Evidence indicates that all three were politically knowledgeable and ambitious even before they
met their husbands. Although they deferred to their husbands, they all played crucial roles in maintaining their spouses’ power and position. Conversely, Utley and Smith were widows whose husbands had played a role in their political education. Although neither remarried, both still depended on the advice (in the case of Smith) and financial help (in the case of Utley) of different men. Schlafly’s husband was also a conservative activist, although he never became as famous as his wife. He encouraged and worked with her on numerous occasions.

Finally, all of these women were, in one way or another, politically ambitious. Smith was the most successful, winning election to the House of Representatives and then the Senate. Both Bridges and Schlafly campaigned for office but did not win. When Joe McCarthy died, some urged Jean to take over his Senate seat. She refused, citing her new baby as the reason. She steadfastly clung to her position as McCarthy’s widow, however, and continued to try to control his legacy and image. Brown and Utley used their writings and speeches to educate men and women about the evils of communism.

Despite their different backgrounds and circumstances, anticommunism enabled all these women to involve themselves in their nation’s political life. Although one could classify almost all of them as career women, they portrayed themselves, at some point, as wives and mothers fighting for an important cause. In their view, they were housewives with political interests, despite having careers as well as families. Utley and Smith, the two who seemed to violate convention the most, rarely admitted at the time that any challenges they faced resulted from their gender. Instead, Utley blamed her political views, which she argued were always out of sync with the rest of society, and Smith cited the fact that she was the only female senator rather than the fact that she was a woman. Smith seemed to think that if she had been one a few, rather than the sole, female senators, the men would have treated her no differently than they treated one another. These women’s conservatism would not allow them to admit that they wanted more than society allowed. Anticommunist activity permitted them to become public figures without disturbing their own or anyone else’s worldview. In addition, compared to women working for more liberal causes, such as civil rights for minorities or the Equal Rights Amendment, these women seemed “safe” to conventional-minded Americans. The Cold War, then, did more than just terrify some women; it provided them with a respectable way out of the house.
Their backgrounds also prepared them to speak knowledgeably about the political and diplomatic ramifications of the Cold War. Their education, access to powerful national figures, and experiences created the potential for them to contribute to the ongoing debate about the communist threat. Their ambition compelled them not to remain silent. Only their gender kept them from being recognized as valuable additions to the movement.