Wives, Mothers, and the Red Menace

Brennan, Mary

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Not content just to talk about the evils of communism, conservative anticomunist women across the country participated in various efforts to rid America of the evil forces that lurked within the nation’s borders. Some women acted in ways that defied conventional limits regarding female behavior. Others took a more traditional route. They joined clubs; they wrote letters, newsletters, books, and articles; they gave speeches and organized demonstrations. They even ran for public office. They seemed not to think twice about whether women should participate in the anticomunist crusade. In fact, the opposite appeared to be the case. Underlying the activities of most of these women was an urgent sense of responsibility. Joining the fight against communism seemed one more duty of good wives and mothers. If, in the process of combating this enemy, they ended up
expanding their overall political participation, that was a consequence most of them had not consciously anticipated or, for the most part, desired. They were just fulfilling what one Texas clubwoman called woman’s “special mission.” Women, she explained, were called “to do battle, continuously and evermore, with any power or influence which threatens the unity and perpetuity of this first of society’s institutions—the family in its home.”

Many right-wing anticommunist women translated their concern about the communist threat into worry about practical issues. Rather than focus exclusively on spies within the government leaking military secrets to the Russians, conservative women frequently concentrated on the impact communist agents had on community organizations such as school boards, libraries, and health care facilities. In addition, many women served as their families’ money managers and thus fretted about the Red influence on the economy as it related to their household budgets. In contrast, male anticommunists tended to look at the big picture, especially in regard to economic matters, rather than focus on bread-and-butter issues.

Actually, anticommunists in general tended to focus so intently on the menace of communism that they ignored the changing realities around them. Economic turmoil immediately after World War II, followed by unprecedented prosperity intermixed with periods of recession, confused people who had experienced the Great Depression. The plethora of consumer goods available enticed more women, eager to purchase those goods, into the workforce at the same time “everyone” assumed women were content to stay at home. Prosperity also fueled a rising Civil Rights Movement. Even the government seemed to acknowledge that changes needed to be made in this area of domestic policy. The 1954 Supreme Court verdict in Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas introduced a potential new level of federal involvement in local affairs. Similarly, President Dwight Eisenhower’s failure to “undo” the New Deal meant the government would continue to grow. Conservative to begin with, anticommunists would have disliked increased federal intervention and challenges to the social structure under any circumstances. The continued emphasis on the communist threat provided anticommunists with a simplistic way to understand the transformation of the world around them. Anything they disliked or found frightening could be blamed on the communist presence.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the American public became aware of the supposed danger of communism in the United States from a
variety of sources and events. Former communists, such as Whittaker Chambers and Elizabeth Bentley, who had found Jesus or grown disillusioned with the cause identified their previous associates and exposed the existence of a spy network within the United States. Responding to these allegations, members of the House and Senate held open hearings and called hundreds of witnesses. The resulting trials of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, Alger Hiss, and the Hollywood Ten seemed to confirm that a real problem existed. Further legitimizing this fear, President Harry Truman created a Loyalty Review Panel to check the backgrounds of all government employees. His attempt to wrest control of the spy issue from his political enemies seriously backfired, as Republicans used his own committee to prove the depth of the problem.³

Republicans succeeded in using the issue of domestic subversion as a springboard to political power. Wisconsin senator Joe McCarthy proved particularly adept at attacking Democrats and anyone else who opposed him, smearing them with the Red label. By the time Eisenhower won control of the White House, McCarthy had become a household name, and McCarthyism had come to symbolize a disregard for civil liberties in the quest to root out communism. Ike, who intensely disliked McCarthy and his methods, even allowed John Foster Dulles, his secretary of state, to purge overseas libraries of “un-American” material. Eisenhower also, however, worked behind the scenes to undermine McCarthy and the more extreme forms of anticommunism.⁴

By the mid-1950s, the intensity of the Red Scare had begun to dissipate. The end of the Korean War, the death of Stalin, the election of a Republican president, and the televised Army-McCarthy hearings combined to weaken the anticommunist hysteria of the early 1950s. The cause did not disappear entirely, however. Politicians continued to find it useful to imply that their opponents were “pink around the edges” well into the 1960s.

While government officials concentrated on communism’s political ramifications, many anticommunist crusaders were more concerned about its impact on their organizations, institutions, and way of life. In particular, true believers worried that Reds had already infiltrated community groups, influenced education, and undermined the free enterprise system.⁵ In his best-selling book Masters of Deceit, J. Edgar Hoover encouraged Americans to be vigilant in searching out communists in everyday life. “Concealed communists are found in
all fields,” he explained. Because “they are difficult to identify,” he warned, they “can operate freely” anywhere. He included frightening scenarios of a professor lecturing to his class or study group, all the while “subtly engender[ing] them] with communist doctrine.” businessmen took the opportunity to caution the American public about accepting unionism at face value. Seizing the moment, businesses launched an extensive propaganda campaign to teach employees and the community at large about the value of capitalism. For example, in the early 1950s the American Economic Foundation and the National Association of Manufacturers launched a major campaign in public schools. Modifying programs originally designed for employees, the groups taught high schoolers “How Our Business System Operates” and “How We Live in America.” In this way, businesses emphasized the connection between economic and political freedom.7

These educational programs were necessary, according to anticommunists, because Americans just did not seem to “get it.” Frustrated by what they perceived as the public’s ignorance of the continuing dangers of communism, they spent much time and effort trying to counteract the apathy. In Wisconsin, for example, anticommunists staged a much-publicized mock communist takeover of a town to show what would happen without proper vigilance. On both national and local levels, people organized parades, marches, and informational “schools” to rally public support for their cause. Anticommunists promoted vigilance by investigating local officials, church leaders, and librarians. They believed that even the slightest leftist tint could eventually bleed over until it had turned the whole community Red.8

For women anticommunists, domestic subversion posed a special challenge. Since they were supposed to worry about threats to the home and family, women assumed they should be involved in the hunt for spies and fellow travelers. Female anticommunists particularly saw threats to the local community as deserving their attention. Most male anticommunists agreed as long as women continued to frame their concerns in a feminine way. Men assumed that women anticommunists would be happy and satisfied doing the mundane and necessary work of fighting their domestic enemies. Most activists assumed a man would serve as a spokesperson and even the leader of a mixed-gender group.

Women did not hesitate, however, to voice their sometimes very strong opinions on the subject. Mrs. M. Conan, an inveterate newsletter writer, put the matter bluntly. “America,” she wrote in 1947,
“is overrun with Russian spies.” She warned that while the president had knowingly appointed men with “Communistic leanings to most responsible positions,” his secretary of the treasury was handing currency plates to the Soviets. Democrats remained the focus of many anticommunist women who believed Republicans tended to be more aware of the sneaky nature of communists and their fellow travelers. Doloris Bridges resented Democrats who, she said, claimed to be anticommunists while they harbored all sorts of radical leftists. She cautioned her audiences not to be deceived by the mere appearance of anticommunism; communists, she implied, were not above infiltrating a good American anticommunist group and trying to destroy it from within. Slightly less than two years later, in another newsletter, a different, unnamed author went a step further. She warned that the entire two-party system had been undermined. Republicans, she stated, had become “dominated by the same evil forces” as the Democrats.⁹

Anticommunist women continued to voice concerns about communism throughout the 1950s even as others lost interest in the cause. Trying to shame men into action, members of the American Woman’s Party announced that “women have been forced to take the lead, in self-defense, after waiting for some group of men to act” against the Red threat within America. Their phrasing both reinforced the existing stereotype that men should be in charge and justified their breaking those limits. If the men would not take care of the situation, the women had no choice but to take over the fight. Similarly, New Mexico Women Speak, a privately published newsletter, warned that “AMERICA IS DOOMED UNLESS AMERICAN PEOPLE WAKE UP!” The editors admitted that discussing communism had come to “be regarded as a sort of treason to a peace-loving community.” Nevertheless, they believed it was imperative for all citizens to arm themselves with knowledge of the reality of the situation. Doloris Bridges took the issue a step further, stating that “subversive activities” had “engendered” the “growing lack of respect for those in authority.” “Diminishing the stature of Congress” as well as respect for American political institutions, she informed the Keene Woman’s Club in 1956, was a “favorite tool of the subversives.” If Americans did not prove vigilant, she implied, communists could easily undermine the American way of life.¹⁰

Many of these women feared it was already too late: communism-socialism had gained the foothold it needed to destroy America. The
Minute Women certainly believed this was true. They stated in one newsletter that Americans had “advanced so far down the road to Socialism” that they did not see how we could “reverse our course.” Finding the American practice of sending foreign aid to anticommunist crusaders abroad while letting communism “take root in our own country” hypocritical and foolish, the women warned that “the future looks dark.” Florence Dean Post, in a review of fellow anticommunist Jo Hindman’s book *Terrible 1313*, echoed those sentiments. Tracing the pattern back to the Wilson administration, Hindman warned that Americans had already been pushed far down the road toward collectivism. Hindman postulated that communists had sneakily fought to undermine political institutions from the federal level down through local governments.11

Who was to blame for this mess? Hindman divided responsibility evenly among all branches of the government. Executives of the American Woman’s Party accused politicians in general of “blundering into socialism.” Doloris Bridges criticized both the Supreme Court and Congress for playing a role in weakening the fight against communism at home. She acknowledged that Americans had learned to accept increased government regulation because of the “threat of totalitarian Communism.” In a commencement address to students at New England College, she warned that unless Americans “plan[ned] skillfully,” they would “plan freedom into the ash can.” Helen Payson Corson, a dedicated writer of letters to the editor and political information officer of Eastern Montgomery County [Pennsylvania] Republican Women, also found fault with congressional leaders who failed to see the danger in incremental losses of freedom. She argued that everyone had to protect their rights.12 These activist women challenged the American public, particularly women, to get involved and elect “persons of honesty and high integrity” to office. They believed this was the only way to keep creeping socialism at bay.13

In fact, one of the most consistent refrains among anticommunist women (besides “communism is evil”) was their encouragement of women to join their crusade. All women, anticommunists emphasized, needed to take action immediately; it was their responsibility to get involved. The Minute Women claimed that “it” (communist takeover) could “happen here” if Americans were too “smug.” The current level of resistance, they admonished, was “too little and many times too late.” “Wake up, women of America” they warned before offering the hope that “there may still be time, but none to spare!”
Doloris Bridges echoed this concern as she told her female audiences that they should “be constantly on guard” lest they allow themselves to be duped by enemies abroad or at home. Warning that there was “a constant subversive movement in this country,” Bridges encouraged the women she spoke with to “keep informed” about world events. Members of the American Woman’s Party (AWP), generally more vitriolic, repeated the mantra. Without immediate intervention by right-minded women, Americans risked “blundering into socialism.” Refusing to “give up what we prize the most,” members of AWP invited all women to join them in the quest to protect the “freedom, liberty and independence of these United States.”

Some female anticommunists blamed men for the danger in which Americans found themselves. As mentioned, AWP writers explained that women had taken the lead because they were tired of waiting for men to act. “The blunders of politicians,” they wrote, had led to the current state of affairs, adding that “stupidity is no excuse.” The AWP asked men to “work with us” if they wanted their rights “as free men” returned to them. In frustration, Elizabeth Churchill Brown sometimes agreed with the AWP. As she struggled to fight communist influences throughout the United States, she was astounded by how “inefficient [sic] some of the business men’s groups are.” She wrote one of her favorite correspondents that “many of the rich men are so utterly stupid when it comes to politics and the Communist conspiracy.” Brown spread her scorn around. A few years later, she wrote the same woman complaining about “our armed forces men” who were not “junta minded” enough for her.

Although the AWP and others implied that women must take up the slack from delinquent men, other female anticommunists argued that women had a duty to join the crusade against communism no matter what the circumstances. Congresswoman Bolton explained that “just being a woman [was] a responsibility” that necessitated involvement in the larger society. The editors of *New Mexico Women Speak* chided all women, who, they claimed, had “more time on their hands today than ever before,” for squandering this opportunity. “Are you doing something constructive for America?” they wondered. (Obviously, they assumed their readers were middle-class housewives rather than poor or working women who did not have the luxury of excess time.) Margaret Chase Smith told members of the American Woman’s Association that women were vitally important to the body politic. Unfortunately, she added, three major barriers discouraged women
from being politically active: “(1) underestimation and lack of realization of their latent power, (2) indifference to public life because of their admirable, understandable and traditional roles of homemakers, and (3) the opposition of men to women in public offices.” Women had to overcome these obstacles to protect the American way of life. During this dangerous time, women as well as men needed to be vigilant in protecting their beloved communities from destruction.\textsuperscript{16}

Taking their cue from earlier generations of activists, anticommunists found that one way to overcome the barriers Smith listed was to incorporate women’s role as homemaker into their call to participation. Earlier in the century, Jane Addams and other Progressive-era women reformers had argued that the male world of politics needed skills and talents only women possessed: an innate sense of morality combined with the ability to “clean things up.” These women used their knowledge of domestic chores to improve the living conditions of their neighbors around settlement houses and cloaked their challenges to government officials in feminine promises of “sweeping away corruption.” Both the abstract and the concrete housekeeping provided women with a nonthreatening route to political activism.\textsuperscript{17}

Postwar anticommunists utilized both the metaphorical and the real image of housework as a way to draw women into their movement. Turning housework into a political act showed women that they could participate in the fight against communism without leaving their homes and families. For example, in an article written for \textit{Ladies Home Journal}, Margaret Chase Smith asked women if they were “willing to get out [their] political broom and sweep clean?” Another activist, Leona Scannell, suggested that women lend a “hand to clean up this mess.” The Federal Civil Defense Administration (FCDA) encouraged women to dust their homes as a way to protect their families from the dangers of fallout.\textsuperscript{18} In all three instances, the boring, everyday chores of keeping house became invested with a greater significance. Sweeping, dusting, and general cleaning were transformed into political activities that would safeguard families from more than germs. Anticommunists used metaphors they knew women would understand and to which women could relate. At the same time, they implied subtle comparisons with the image of communist women who supposedly did not keep clean houses or do their own housework. Perhaps most important, the activists encouraged women to participate in their political activity, all the while reinforcing the stereotype of woman as housewife.
Women Arise

The best example of this glorification of housework can be seen in the actions of the FCDA. Created after World War II by the Truman administration, the FCDA was determined to turn the family into the frontline of defense against the communist menace. Many of the plans the FCDA made revolved around the housewife. She was the protector of the home; she was the one who stocked the pantry; she kept the house free of dirt, germs, and clutter; most important, she was the emotional center of the family, the spiritual leader. She would prove vital in helping individuals, the family, and the community survive a nuclear attack. To that end, FCDA officials worked hard to promote what historian Laura McEnaney called “atomic housewifery” through pamphlets, lectures, and magazine articles. According to this message, cleaning clutter would prepare the home for immediate evacuation, while dusting would free the home of possible radiation. Stocking the pantry and creating pleasant menus ensured that family members would thrive even if they had to live in a bomb shelter for a few days.¹⁹

Recognizing that he needed the cooperation of women, the president appointed a woman, Katherine Howard, to head the FCDA’s women’s division and enlisted the aid of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs (GFWC). Government officials got more than they bargained for, however, as FCDA planners tried to turn theory into reality. Clubwomen, having read the propaganda and heard the speeches of Howard and others, assumed that they should be involved in planning the next stages of development of a civil defense plan. When FCDA administrators appeared to ignore them, club presidents organized their memberships into letter-writing brigades, putting enough pressure on the administration to force a meeting. The FCDA and its parent organization, the National Security Resources Board, appointed a woman to serve as a liaison to the clubs and called a general information meeting to inform them of their actions and plans. According to McEnaney, this was not what the clubwomen wanted, and they demanded more input into FCDA policies. When that did not happen, they met on their own to devise their own recommendations. They refused, in McEnaney’s words, to allow “themselves and their contributions [to be] marginalized.”²⁰

Similarly, anticommunist leaders emphasized the importance of the housewives’ economic role, both as a means of fighting socialistic influences and as an indication of their power within their homes. Everyone, the anticommunists seemed to assume, knew the housewife’s most important role was managing the household budget.
Women Arise

Her abilities could make or break a family. Senator Smith, among numerous others, applauded this skill and challenged the government to follow the housewife’s example. In her *Ladies Home Journal* article, Smith explained that “it would be wonderful if the budget of the Government could more nearly resemble the housewife’s strict household budget.” Her comment put complicated economic matters in terms almost every woman could understand. Smith also implied that even a simple housewife had the requisite knowledge to protest action taken by the government.

Similarly, activists used women’s role as mothers to draw them into political participation. Just as those on the Left brought their children to peace rallies or exploited a grieving mother’s pain to build support for their cause, anticommunists played on the guilt and sympathy of mothers to entice women into their movement. Anticommunists argued that mothers were the foundation of a strong America. Several organizations created pamphlets purporting to speak for the children. One, produced by “Democrat and Republican Women United for MacArthur for President,” featured a somber mother cradling her child under the words “Our Country Needs Its Mother.” Another took this tactic further. The Maryland Chapter of the Minute Women of the U.S.A. sponsored a pamphlet titled “What Kind of Country Are You Leaving Us?” Written in the voice of a child, the text chastised readers for not doing more to preserve America. “We are smart enough,” the imaginary children chided, “to see what you are doing to the country in which we must grow up and support our family.” The pamphlet ended by asking, “aren’t you ashamed!” The obvious solution was to get involved in the fight.

Anticommunist activists proudly boasted of mothers who had already taken the plunge. New York state representative Katharine St. George applauded the wives and mothers working to fight “the enemies at home and abroad.” At the same time, she encouraged them to continue to “explain to those in your immediate circles” the severity of the situation. “You are the ones,” she challenged them, “who can do so much to influence” your families and friends to stand up for America in its time of trouble.

Further reinforcing mothers’ centrality to the cause, activists linked mothers’ “failures” to the weakening of the community and the spread of communism. In particular, they looked to working mothers as a group vulnerable to the Red influence. The Minute Women editorialized that “of course, they [communists and fellow travelers] want
us [women] to go to work so they can take over the indoctrination of our children—making them into one-worlders and zombies.” Even if children were not fully converted to communism, the absence of their working mothers would weaken society by encouraging juvenile delinquency. Frances Bolton saw the problem as much more insidious. Working mothers constituted only part of the problem. She felt there was too much emphasis on material goods and getting everything done quickly. Women had gotten away from the old ways, such as breastfeeding, and this had led to feeblemindedness and other forms of mental illness—weaknesses that made people vulnerable to communist influence.25

Mothers who lacked knowledge of the evils of communism were a particular concern for activists. They represented at least two problem areas. First, as Doloris Bridges put it, “how much respect would children have for an uninformed, inactive mother?” In the battle for children’s souls, the mother must lead the charge. If she failed to earn the respect of her own offspring, how could she hope to protect them from the dangers lurking behind communist propaganda? Second, women uneducated in the ways of communism were susceptible to Red lies. Especially during periods of hostility, mothers without facts might fall for a communist ploy as exemplified by the poem “To the Mothers of America.” According to the conservative newsletter Freedom Facts, the poem, published during the Korean conflict by the “communist press,” played on maternal fears with lines such as “O from whose living breast he fed, Look! Your only son is dead!” Obviously, according to anticommunists, the communists hoped the mothers of America would be so upset that they would demand an immediate cease-fire, allowing the forces of evil to win. Anticommunists hoped that by exposing the subliminal message behind the sentiment, they could protect American women from falling victim to the ploy.26

In their use of the images of housewife and mother, activists worked to convince women that they had not just the duty but also the necessary skills to participate in the crusade against communism. A woman who thought of herself as “only a housewife” might be reluctant to join the struggle, arguing that she lacked the time or the ability to do anything of value. Anticommunists would counter that she possessed two powerful weapons that required little time away from her family. The first was her pen. As earlier generations of conservative women activists had found, letter writing gave women committed to remaining in the domestic sphere a means of
contributing their ideas and support to various causes. Women’s organizations hammered home the importance of this tool. In a 1953 newsletter, the Minute Women leadership scolded any member who was not “writing at least two letters a week for the principles you believe in.” They had little tolerance for “citizens who believe in our form of government and want to keep it, but expect someone else to speak out for them.” Another women’s newsletter echoed the sentiments: “Mrs. America . . . what is your opinion? Write, wire, Your Voice in Congress must be heard!”

Elizabeth Churchill Brown was one activist who not only practiced letter writing but worked to convince other women of its value. Liz Brown wrote to everyone, from local and national politicians to world leaders to housewives, seeking advice on how to become active in the anticommunist cause. Recognizing that she risked “being labeled as a ‘letter writing mama,’” she forged ahead anyway, offering her mostly unsolicited advice and opinions on national and international issues. She wrote the publisher of Scripps-Howard Newspapers a “disagreeable” (her term) letter to ask him if it was his papers’ policy “to ridicule anyone attempting to expose the Communist conspiracy and defend their country.” She used her typewriter to lecture numerous congressmen and senators on their shortcomings in regard to the anticommunist cause. For example, she chastised John Marshall Butler for his actions following the 1950 Maryland campaign. Throughout 1963 and 1964, as Barry Goldwater prepared to run as the Republican presidential nominee, Liz wrote him at least six times, giving him advice on how to approach his campaign. Goldwater answered her letters personally, despite the fact that she told him not to take the time to write while he was in the midst of the campaign.

Although Goldwater answered Brown’s letters, he never followed any of her suggestions or even acknowledged their validity. Other correspondents ignored her no matter how many times she wrote. No doubt, Brown irritated many people with her letters, but most, after all, were politicians who had to keep their constituents happy. But their attitude toward her was different than the one they displayed toward other constituents. Butler did not have to see her; he could have ignored her or written a standard reply. Goldwater did not have to answer her mail personally. Obviously, these men felt they owed her some level of respect. Whatever the reason, many of Brown’s correspondents tolerated and humored her in a paternalistic manner. What was most apparent, however, was the limited amount of influ-
In her article “Women’s Place Is Under the Dome,” which appeared in *Human Events* in 1958, Liz urged women to educate themselves about the “‘great game of politics’ which must be played in the Capital,” to learn about the issues before Congress, and, most important, to write letters. Supremely confident that letters could affect policy makers, Liz encouraged women to organize their groups around this enterprise. By asking their representatives for information and sending back their own views, the women’s club members and legislators’ offices would learn about one another. Eventually, the “members of Congress will come to have a real respect for the work and the opinions of the club as a whole, to say nothing of its influence back home.” She prodded women to push their involvement further by personally lobbying legislators to vote the conservative line. Challenging them, Liz announced that it was “up to the women of America” to defeat the “men in the Kremlin.” “Now” [italics hers], she demanded, was “the time for all good women to come to the aid of their country.”

The women of the country seemed to respond. So many readers wrote to *Human Events* offering to subsidize distribution of the article to women’s organizations that the editors published a public notice about the costs and the efforts. Editor Frank Hanighen had orders for 6,000 reprints the first week; less than a month later, the number had climbed to 21,000. Other organizations and news journals took notice and asked Liz to do similar or follow-up features. Liz gloried in her success. She accepted speaking engagements and started thinking about founding her own group to channel the energy she had unleashed. Most important from her perspective, she believed all this support was “a good sign” for the future of the conservative movement because, as she wrote a friend, “I truly believe that on them [women] rests the hope of the world.”

The second weapon women could wield without much effort was their vote. Voting correctly, activists argued, was the most obvious and easiest way for women to work against communism. Margaret Chase Smith informed readers of *Ladies Home Journal* that “failing to vote” was “un-American” because it indicated a “refusal to fight for and protect the American way of life, the American home and the American family.” Both the GFWC and the Minute Women emphasized the importance of voting. Following the 1952 elections, Minute Women president Dorothy Frankton wrote her constituents, praising them
for what they had accomplished during the campaign. She cautioned them, however, not to rest on their laurels. Having elected men whom they believed understood the dangers of communism, Minute Women now needed to “redouble” their efforts to make sure the new officials did their jobs. “Alert, patriotic women can be a determining force in the future of America if they will but take the time to make their wishes known,” she wrote. The vitriolic American Woman’s Party stated the notion more bluntly: “Men have ruled for 2000 years and will surely now give the American women a chance. . . . We will do well to let this just and kind power have full sway in this crucial hour when it is so desperately needed.”

Leaders of women’s organizations were not the only ones to recognize the potential power of the female electorate. During the 1950s and 1960s, journalists, politicians, and activists frequently pointed out that women constituted a large voting bloc that could potentially control the outcome of an election. One ad claimed that “from 1948 to 1956, the number of women who exercised their right to vote increased by almost 40%.” In 1960, a Time author stated that women formed “the largest single element in the American electorate.” In 1966, while running for Congress, Doloris Bridges pointed out that 52 percent of all eligible voters were women. Female politicians and leaders often used such statistics to show women that they could make a difference. To encourage clubwomen, housewives, and mothers to exercise their franchise, activists pulled out the numbers to prove their point. They also took their voting responsibilities very seriously. Texas women, for example, garnered praise from their governor for their “untiring efforts” in helping turn out a record number of Texas voters in the 1952 election.

In addition to voting, women also felt more welcomed by the political parties. As discussed in Chapter 2, shifting economic and demographic circumstances following World War II created a large number of middle-class housewives with time on their hands. The Republican Party especially benefited from this female infiltration. According to historian Jo Freeman, “[P]artisan differences in class, education, and religion created a much bigger pool of women available to the Republican party than to the Democrats.” The traditionally working-class nature of the Democratic Party meant there were fewer Democratic women with the leisure time, educational background, and cultural impetus to volunteer for the party. As a result of their larger numbers, Republican women tended to be more organized and
therefore more successful at getting other Republican women to the polls. This helped the party on election day and continually replenished the supply of new volunteers.\(^37\)

The crusade against communism both helped to sustain and benefited from this pool of Republican women. Although most Americans professed to be anticommunists, the most zealous opponents of leftist ideas called the GOP their home. Moreover, because the danger from communism seemed so great, everyone, including those previously excused from political activities, was now expected to join the fray. This meant women could and should participate more fully in all aspects of party functions, since, to Republicans’ way of thinking, that would guarantee more soldiers for the fight. Activist anticommunist women thus found themselves appreciated and encouraged by their Republican colleagues. In addition, women dedicated to the crusade against communism welcomed the abilities and experience of Republican women volunteers who did not need to be educated about their right to participate in the political system. The relationship between the Republican Party and activist anticommunist women proved to be something of a vicious circle, with one spurring the other on to further action.

The increasing number of women involved in the political system encouraged female activists to believe it was time for women to take the ultimate step and run for office themselves. Representative Frances Bolton, one of only seven women who held a national office, told the audience at the Women’s Patriotic Conference on National Defense that women around the world were beginning to force their way into government. “Where,” she wondered, “are you all?” “Very much embarrassed” to learn about the greater number of female representatives in various European governments, Bolton challenged American women to “take the responsibility of tomorrow’s world.” Bolton’s colleague, Margaret Chase Smith, agreed that women needed to get involved, but she advised taking things slowly. She cautioned that women’s progress into the political realm required “unlimited courage and patient perseverance” on the part of female challengers. “It is true of any work or profession outside the home,” she explained, “that woman must be at least twice as good as a man in actual performance to get anywhere.”\(^38\) She believed women were up to the challenge, but she wanted them to know what they were up against.

Smith understood firsthand the challenges confronting women trying to break into national politics. Following her husband’s death
in 1940, she decided to run for his congressional seat. In fact, because of the timing, Margaret ended up having to run in three elections in her first year in office. First, she had to win a special election to fill her husband’s vacant term; a month later she had to run in the Republican primary for election to her own term; two months after that she faced her Democratic opponent in the general election. Eight years later, increasingly frustrated with her inability to advance in the House power structure, Smith took the unprecedented step of running for the Senate. No woman had ever won election to the Senate in her own right without first having been appointed to succeed her husband. Nevertheless, Smith became the first woman to win election in 1948.

During her Senate years, as the Cold War raged around the world, Smith struggled to establish herself as a moderate but firm anticom- munist. She could not, however, escape the prevailing gender stereotypes. In 1950, when Smith issued her Declaration of Conscience, she insisted that it attacked McCarthy’s tactics and not the principle of anticommunism. Her explanations fell on deaf ears. The speech earned her the enmity of more rabid right-wingers and allowed her political enemies to use her gender against her. For example, Elizabeth Churchill Brown, using conventional male rhetoric, wrote an article in The American Mercury that mocked Smith’s supposed tendency to have her “feelings hurt” too easily. As one of her biographers pointed out, Smith’s colleagues even attributed their inability to pigeonhole her ideologically to her gender. Everyone knew it was a woman’s prerogative to change her mind, after all. Following her own principles rather than the party line, Smith frustrated old-line conservatives with her willingness to support social welfare programs, while her dedication to large defense budgets worried liberals.

Smith was not the only woman candidate who struggled against gender stereotypes during the Cold War. Styles Bridges’s death in 1961 presented his wife, Doloris, with a unique opportunity. Doloris clearly wanted, and to a certain extent expected, New Hampshire governor Wesley Powell to appoint her to fill Styles’s vacant seat. When Powell appointed someone else, she decided to run against the new appointee in the upcoming election. Bridges spent much of her time convincing people with contradictory notions that she deserved the job because she had the right experience and that they should vote for her because she was Styles’s widow. Combining her own employment in government service with her years with Styles, Doloris claimed to have
twenty-five years’ experience in Washington. Moreover, as Bridges’s wife, Doloris carried “his respected name, which opens doors to those who can help our State and Nation.” Many people acknowledged that Doloris “had been the Senator’s closest confidante during most of his Washington career,” making her claims that she knew what he would or would not have done seem justified. Reporters pointed out that she was “considered politically astute.”

She was astute enough to associate herself continually with her husband’s name, record, and philosophy. In fact, Doloris’s platform closely resembled many of Styles’s views. Echoing Styles’s assertion that the fight against communism constituted a “third world war,” Doloris warned her constituents that America faced “the greatest challenge in its history—a fight with godless communism.” In dramatic tones, Doloris again attacked John F. Kennedy’s anticommunist stance. “This is your money, not his private fortune,” she told audiences, complaining that the United Nations was doling the money out to countries that had “consistently voted against us.” Moreover, the money was also going—“hold your breath, girls,” she warned—“to Cuba!”

Bridges’s gender also proved problematic for some of her constituents and colleagues. Although many people seemed to agree in principle with one supporter who believed the “women of New Hampshire” constituted the “solid backbone of the Republican Party,” they frequently had a difficult time adjusting to the reality of a woman running for office. They could not seem to get away from traditional stereotypes about women. Some newspaper editorials conceded that Bridges was “the most attractive of the candidates” but found her qualifications for the Senate “grossly” inadequate. Other reporters could not escape the image of women candidates strictly as wives. Columnist Drew Pearson’s article “The Influence of Women in U.S. Politics” characterized the women he mentioned as spoilers who threatened the power of several influential politicians. Marriage, he seemed to conclude, is the only way “women [should] influence politics and presidents.”

Newspaper publisher William Loeb, Bridges’s most fervent backer, seemed also to have a difficult time dealing with her gender. Early in the campaign he wrote to Margaret Chase Smith asking for advice. He explained to the senator that he had never had “the occasion to help a woman candidate for the Senate.” Smith did help in a limited way. She met privately with Bridges and offered “suggestions and advice”
for dealing with her situation. Loeb, however, could not forget that Bridges was a woman, commenting at various times that she should “trim her claws” or “keep her chemise on,” comments he obviously would not have made about a man. He also worried about her appearance, advising her to be “a little more dowdy” so as not to appear threatening to other women or sexually enticing to men. Declaring that the shorter skirts women were wearing were “ugly,” he warned Bridges that they were too distracting to men, who would think of her as “Legs Bridges,” something that “certainly wouldn’t help the campaign!” Still, he recognized that Bridges’s feminine charms could be an asset, especially when she spoke to important men who “liked women.”

When Doloris did not win her election, she did not give up on politics. Instead, she went on the offensive, demanding a recount of votes and charging her opponent with improper election practices. In 1966 she again ran for the Republican nomination to the Senate. Interestingly, in stark contrast to her 1962 campaign, this time she consciously used her gender. At a time when many middle- and upper-class white women were beginning to consider themselves oppressed, Bridges cited oppression of women in attacking her enemies. In the same year a group of liberal women created the National Organization for Women, Doloris attacked Lyndon Johnson’s Democratic administration for its “callous disregard for women.” Her willingness to shift with the times did not accomplish her goal. She still lost the nomination.

What is perhaps most interesting about these anticommunist women was not that they faced considerable problems running for office during the Cold War but that they kept trying. Although they recognized that they faced an uphill battle, they believed in their abilities and their right to do what they felt needed to be done. Phyllis Schlafly, another unsuccessful office seeker, explained it well in a letter to publisher Henry Regnery: “I apologize for the long delay, but I am sure you understand that I was busy trying to save the Republican Party.” These women felt compelled to enter political races to save their party and their country from what they perceived to be imminent danger. They understood the odds but willingly faced them anyway.

Whereas some women such as Smith, Bridges, and Schlafly braved the national political scene, practical issues inspired others to get involved. In particular, economic concerns motivated many. Mrs. Warren J. Le Vangin wrote to the editors of Newsweek in response to an
article on Margaret Chase Smith, commending them for presenting her “intelligent and common-sensed opinion.” Smith was “an ex-housewife,” who understood how frustrated women were with paying “more for items (from potatoes to sheets) than these items are worth.” From landlords to farmers to housewives, women across America complained about the state of the economy. The Minute Women listed the desire for “economy and efficiency in government” as one of their basic principles. Many Republican women spoke in general of the need for fair taxes (or no taxes), protection of free enterprise, and limitations on the rights of unions. They saw a direct connection between what they perceived to be increased socialism in government and poor performance in the economy. Thus, any economic problems they experienced could be blamed on communist forces.

Rather than discuss the economy in general, many newsletters and speechwriters focused on specific examples appropriate to their audiences. Mrs. M. Conan declared President Truman “most inhuman” for his willingness to continue rent control. Giving the normal pattern of criticism an unusual twist, Conan portrayed landlords affected by Truman’s policies as orphans and widows. Later in the year, her attention shifted to even more sinister plots. Since, she explained, the Soviets were “preparing for war,” Americans needed to stop “stripping” the country by destroying food and to increase production to stockpile food in preparation for the coming invasion. She had particularly harsh words for the “grower-hogs” who “would rather destroy their stuff than sell for lower prices.” Obviously, in her worldview, farmers were not part of the victimized class of landowners.

Interestingly, government intervention in local and family matters also bothered successful chicken farmer Christiana Uhl, producer of The Farmer’s Voice, a newsletter she ran as a “hobby.” Determined to discover what was “happening to our freedoms which God gave us,” Uhl used her newsletter to discuss agricultural legislation, taxes, profit margins, and the price of farm products. She was particularly concerned about the increased regulation farmers faced. She saw this as part of a larger problem involving government waste of taxpayers’ money. In fact, she frequently published stories designed to show the evils of government taxation. In November 1958, she reported the actions of women in response to the government’s seizure of a farmer’s tractors for his failure to comply with government policy. The women “held up a bed sheet with lettering done with lip stick reading ‘This is Communism in Action.’” Justifying the women’s protest, she
explained that “Social Security and the Wheat law are both Marxist laws which do not belong in a Christian Civilization.”

In another story, Uhl implied that government agencies were under the influence of foreign powers and specifically threatened women. Titling the story “Six Men Try to Scare Women,” Uhl described Social Security officials, “some apparently foreigners,” who had threatened to jail an Amish farmer for failure to pay a sixty-seven-dollar debt. According to the account, the “snarling” men “became angry and milled around the house most of the day” until they “way-laid” the farmer and grabbed his horse. These stories frightened readers by purporting to show evidence that communism had made inroads into the U.S. government. The incidents described showed readers that the threat from communism-socialism was not just an abstract ideological-political question for intellectuals and politicians; it was a danger to their very livelihood.

More than just farmers needed to be afraid, according to these anti-communist women. Doloris Bridges told a newspaper reporter that housewives were struggling to make ends meet. “Respectable, proud, working Americans” could not afford the “fantastic food prices,” she explained; meat had become a luxury in which they could not indulge. Why was this happening? The U.S. government, according to Bridges, had become more concerned about the welfare of the rest of the world than with that of its own citizens. She argued that dedicated Americans deserved to be “the first consideration.” Helen Corson also indicted the government for the economic problems Americans faced. She broadened the scope of the danger, however, by showing upper-middle-class professionals how they were affected. In a speech to the Conshohocken Rotary Club, she blamed inflation and taxes for taking money out of the pockets of hardworking Americans. “Extravagances and waste in Federal Government” intensified the situation. Both women implied that the real culprit in the economic difficulties regular Americans faced was the leftward swing of government policy. A return to “true American principles,” always vaguely defined, would solve the problems.

Warnings about the economic situation continued through the 1960s. Doloris Bridges, in her 1966 Senate campaign, explained that “the government may not have to worry about balancing its budget, but housewives do. . . . They know bread and butter costs are getting out of hand.” Taking advantage of the periods of recession and inflation that undermined the overall prosperity of those years, anticom-
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Communist women hammered away at their audiences’ worries, always connecting the problems with leftist policies. This proved an effective strategy for a number of reasons. Speaking to people who had experienced the Great Depression, the women found an audience easily incited by threats of an impending economic crisis. In addition, the focus on monetary issues made their arguments appealing to women across the socioeconomic spectrum. Both working-class and suburban women worried about the stability of their living situations; middle-class women wanted to “keep up with the Joneses,” and working-class women desired middle-class status. Poor women, who desperately needed economic assistance, were beyond the scope of the anticommunists’ concern. In addition, many of the activists were fiscal conservatives who disliked the New Deal and resented Eisenhower’s continuation of its policies throughout the 1950s.

Finally, speaking of issues such as grocery shopping and household budgeting made the anticommunists’ argument more accessible, especially to female audiences. Women who might otherwise not have cared about communism or creeping socialism paid attention to discussions of their economic future. A worldwide international conspiracy probably interested them less than their own struggle to maintain a household. If someone had an explanation for why this seemed so much harder than it had been for earlier generations, some women felt they should listen. The home was their domain.

The trick for politicians was to turn that worry and frustration into action. Smith, Bridges, and members of the American Woman’s Party expected and hoped women would put their practical wisdom to use for the good of the country. As Smith repeatedly told audiences, “[T]here has been too little of the home in the Government and too much government in the home” (italics hers). The way to fix the problem was for women to become more actively involved in politics. The leaders of the American Woman’s Party agreed. Men, they wrote into their platform, would “profit by woman’s acceptance of her political responsibilities.” Again, the argument worked two ways. Inciting women to political action based on their experience with household budgeting did more than gather votes for those politicians; it also reinforced the idea that women could and should get involved in politics without abdicating their positions as wives and mothers. Everyone, it seemed, would be well served.

Businessmen of America, who also recognized the power women held over the purse strings, vigorously supported this plan. In the
1950s world, men earned the money and women spent it. Since many purchases revolved around the family and the home, most men and women saw this consumer role as an extension of housewifely duties. An advertisement for S&H Green Stamps explained that “[l]ike every other American woman [your wife] is constantly on the alert for any idea, product or service that will improve her family’s well-being.” The ad further stated that a woman’s “interest in good government [was] a reflection of her concern for her family.” Being a good consumer, then, meant that women made their families’ lives more comfortable while also protecting them from the evils of the world. J. Warren Kinsman, a manager for DuPont, bluntly told his female audience that they were “managers of destiny . . . perfectly positioned to fight socialism.” They could do this by teaching their children “the values of individualism and of personal freedom.” They could teach these lessons even as they shopped. Once again, the housewife’s importance as both home manager and political activist was intertwined.60

In addition to fears about communist influence on the economy, anticommunist women were particularly worried that the U.S. public education system provided an opening for communism to seize hold of the United States. They believed young children’s minds were vulnerable to communist lies and manipulation. Youngsters must be protected from anything or anyone who might confuse them and make them question the American way of life. Many conservatives feared the schools’ growing influence on their children. They looked nostalgically back to the days of “the little red schoolhouse” without seeing the limitations of that era. Ignoring the class and racial biases of those “golden days” (most of which continued to exist), they talked of the importance of parental control over their children. They feared that a publicly funded and controlled education system would indoctrinate their children with “progressive” ideas, which parents did not like. Conservatives feared sex education would be in and school prayer would be out. Communists and progressives, anticommunists warned, could use classroom time to undermine American principles by turning children into little socialist automatons.61

As a result, anticommunists attacked public education from numerous angles. Starting at the top, some anticommunists scrutinized school board members to ascertain their loyalty to U.S. principles. In cities such as Houston, Texas, school board elections turned into bitter battles over “creeping socialism,” since the board made crucial financial decisions that determined the tenor of the entire school system. In
1952, the election of four school board members almost eclipsed the presidential election in generating voter interest. Although complicated by other factors such as the division of power within the school administration and pressure from local business leaders who wanted to retain their influence over the board, Red Scare issues dominated the campaign. Conservatives accused liberals of allowing “progressive educational” ideas into the schools and contaminating Houston children with anti-American rhetoric. They also worried that liberals welcomed federal monies, and thus federal interference, in what conservatives believed should be local educational policy. Liberals pointed out the dangers of blind loyalty and overzealous patriotism, all the while trying to defend their reputations and protect the school’s curriculum from too much censorship. In the end, the people of Houston elected two conservatives and two liberals to the vacant seats. As historian Don Carleton explained in his book on the subject, the results indicated that Houston’s grassroots population seemed less affected by the Red Scare than did the power elite who manipulated it to their benefit.

The following year tensions escalated as anticommunists, with the Minute Women in the lead, succeeded in ousting Deputy School Superintendent George Ebey. Ebey proved the perfect target for anticommunists in Houston. A graduate of Columbia University’s Teachers’ College, Ebey was, in anticommunists’ view, therefore connected to the “progressive education” taught there. A New Deal Democrat, he had supported Roosevelt throughout the 1930s. A believer in racial equality, he had insisted that the California chapter of the American Veterans’ Committee, which he chaired, sponsor a “racial and religious cooperation week” and lobby for an end to discrimination in public housing. Ebey’s background set off countless alarm bells among anticommunist Houstonians, including the Minute Women. He appeared to represent everything they hated in the postwar world, everything they believed threatened their way of life. He would teach, they feared, liberal, communistic ideas to their children and force good white children to go to school with black youngsters. Furthermore, he was an outsider, from New York and California of all places, who would not understand the Texas way of doing things. From their perspective, he had to be eliminated.

Working with other right-wing forces in Houston, the Minute Women investigated Ebey’s career before he moved to Texas and scrutinized his every action once he settled in the Lone Star State. Not
surprisingly, since they were willing to accept innuendo and hearsay as truth, they found what they were looking for. Ebey did believe in racial integration in the schools (although he never promoted that idea in Houston), he did try to introduce new ideas into the school system, and he had been a New Deal Democrat. The Minute Women grabbed their pens and mounted an intensive letter-writing campaign to newspaper editors, legislators, and, especially, school board members. When the board met to vote on Ebey’s contract renewal, the Minute Women were there en masse ready to clap or boo as warranted. Under intense pressure, the board decided not to renew Ebey’s contract. With considerable help from the Minute Women, Red Scare forces succeeded in running an able administrator out of town.\textsuperscript{63}

Even as the Red Scare ebbed and Americans appeared less consumed by threats of the communist menace, conservative anticommunist men and women continued their crusade. For example, in 1961 a group of anticommunists in southern California organized a recall election of a school board trustee they found objectionable. The trouble had begun when the man in question invited a member of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) to speak in his backyard. Recognizing that the ACLU did not condone the activities of many anticommunist investigations, including McCarthy’s, anticommunists saw this as evidence of the trustee’s own leftist ideas. Organizing a grassroots campaign, they succeeded in forcing his ouster. Women again played an essential role in this effort. They held informational meetings in their homes, went door to door with petitions, and prepared numerous handbills to distribute. Although their names did not appear in newspapers as spokespersons, their participation proved crucial.\textsuperscript{64}

Other anticommunists turned their attention to the teachers and librarians who influenced what children heard and read. Teachers found themselves under intense scrutiny as parents and community members worried that educators might use their influence to introduce “dangerous” ideas to their pupils. For many anticommunists, any book, lecture, or curriculum that criticized the United States in any way or that portrayed the Soviets or Chinese in a positive light was subversive. Teachers who refused to kowtow to external or internal examinations of their backgrounds or classes frequently paid a steep price. In New York City alone, 400 teachers lost their jobs during the 1950s as a result of security issues. Dismissals occurred throughout the country, in areas from Philadelphia to Los Angeles. University profes-
sors as well felt the pressure to follow the American line unquestioningly or risk losing their tenure.65

Librarians also came under close watch. Controversy divided a quiet Pennsylvania community when a Quaker-controlled library refused to fire a librarian who had appeared before the Senate Subcommittee on Internal Security. Mary Knowles, the librarian in question, first appeared before the committee in 1953. FBI mole Herbert Philbrick identified Knowles as a party member who had been secretary of a school assumed to be associated with communism. After Knowles took the Fifth Amendment during her hearing, her current employer, the Merrill Memorial Library in Massachusetts, fired her. The library committee that operated the William Jeannes Memorial Library in Plymouth Meeting, Pennsylvania, hired her, first on a temporary and later on a permanent basis. Despite considerable controversy, the library committee refused to fire her. For its stand, the library received a $5,000 grant from the Fund for the Republic. Because of disagreements within the community, the money remained in an escrow account for years. Eventually, the Senate committee recalled Knowles; again, she refused to name names. This time they cited her for contempt of Congress, and a judge sentenced her to 120 days in jail.66

Throughout the controversy, anticommunist women worked actively to force her dismissal. Mrs. Philip Corson, as she signed her materials, led the way. As part of her “Citizens for Philbrick” campaign, she sent out flyers and pamphlets explaining the story again and again to the citizens of her community, as well as to interested parties around the country. She almost always emphasized that the majority of both the Quaker community, which had sponsored the library, and the larger group of non-Quakers living in the area did not support Knowles. Although she understood that the original hiring of this “5th Amendment User” had resulted from committee members’ ignorance of “communist double dealing and trickery,” she nevertheless believed they had been “unwittingly reckless and unmindful of the public welfare” in allowing Knowles to continue in the position. She followed a two-prong strategy to eliminate Knowles. First, she sent copies of letters, newspaper editorials, and pamphlets to a wide range of people who belonged to the conservative group Alerted Americans. She encouraged the members to read the material before passing it on to someone else.67

Her second line of attack involved a letter-writing campaign. Not trusting her readers to write the letters themselves, she made it easy
for them. She wrote the note and left a blank place for them to sign. She even included a dotted line showing them where to detach the letter and send it off. The letters would eventually wind up in places ranging from the office of the Society of Friends in Plymouth Meeting to the attorney general of the United States. When Knowles was sentenced to jail, Corson wrote to the local paper. Even though she had achieved her goal, Corson issued a warning about all the talk of “so-called ‘civil liberties or rights.’” This false concern, she explained, was “secretly directed” by the communists “with the deliberate intention of creating dissension and strife” among Americans.68

If anticommunists were worried about librarians and teachers, it followed that they would also investigate the reading material available to young people and their elders. Recognizing the potential of the written word to challenge people’s perspective, many anticommunists rid libraries of any book that did not follow their narrow view of acceptable material. As one activist put it, “Books are to be feared! They have caused revolutions in both past and recent history.”69 Books promoting communism and socialism obviously came under attack. Anticommunists wanted to expunge from libraries anything written by someone they suspected of leftist leanings as well as books that encouraged questioning of American policy or challenged the “grand narrative” of U.S. history. Novels and monographs that cast Christianity in a bad light were also declared off-limits. Book banners scanned libraries across the country and throughout the world. Joe McCarthy held hearings to investigate the Overseas Library Program and sent two of his most trusted aides to examine the contents of American-sponsored libraries in Europe. Roy Cohn and David Schine visited libraries and searched for objectionable books, which McCarthy then pressured the State Department to remove from the shelves. Across the country, other would-be investigators followed his example.70

In Marin County, California, a housewife led a crusade to rid the local school of books she and other anticommunists found objectionable. Discovering that the book list circulated by English teachers at Drake High School contained some authors she found suspicious, Anne Smart sprang into action. She began by more closely examining the list. She found twenty-four authors who had been named by state or federal agencies as communists or members of communist-front organizations. To analyze the situation further, she visited the school library to see if she could check out the books. In the process, she randomly pulled off the shelves other books that shocked her further.
She went “looking for anti-government material” and found “filth and immorality.” Because she believed it would be a waste of time to contact the school board directly, she made her accusations public in a letter to the local newspaper. When the school board still did not act, she contacted the local district attorney who presented the matter to the Marin County grand jury. The jury did not act on the case to her satisfaction, so she decided “that a little public noise might be helpful.” Consequently, she sent copies of her own newsletter, the Leader Sheet, to over 200 community leaders.  

Smart’s strategy worked, although she was not completely satisfied with the result. The grand jury heard the case and issued a report. The Special School Committee of the grand jury accepted that most of the books on Smart’s list had little scholastic value and “were definitely placed in our school libraries to plant seeds of communism in the minds of our children.” Although Smart found the committee’s agreement with her gratifying, the recommendation to “kick the responsibility upstairs” frustrated her. The jury decided that the blame for the situation rested beyond the school board at the state level, where the reading lists for all the schools were decided. The school trustees further infuriated her by allowing some of the books to remain on the list. She was determined, however, to continue the fight. She felt it was her responsibility to make the elected officials do their jobs and prevent communism from taking hold.  

Several years later she was still searching for the source of the list. She remained chagrined that her “hard earned tax money” was being spent so that children could have “the privilege of reading filthy obscene books.” She wanted to “teach our boys and girls . . . what our American culture is all about and then present the best in foreign culture.” Smart and others like her across the country saw no good coming from denigrating anything about America. Doing so, in their view, would only open the door to seeds of doubt and then to communism.  

Finally, some anticommunists looked on a broader level at national organizations and the media, which they felt led parents and children astray. Distrusting outsiders in general, anticommunist activists feared the national boards of even such homey institutions as the PTA had been subverted by communistic ideas. Numerous newsletters throughout the 1950s and early 1960s warned parents of the dangers hidden in the bulletins and directives issued by the PTA’s National Congress. One appalled parent argued that some of the material distributed by the
PTA would turn readers into “suitable citizen[s] for atheistic Communism’s world government.” Another activist called the PTA information kits “Brainwash Study groups” and applauded her community’s ability to ignore the “[r]ules laid down by the National Congress.” Others charged that the national PTA officers’ “unorthodox and high-handed management . . . Socialist orientation in domestic and foreign affairs, and the hypocrisy of hiding PTA’s political motives under the caption ‘child welfare’” threatened to ruin the entire organization.74

To counter this threat, anticommunist leaders encouraged parents, and members of the community in general, to become more actively involved in their schools. Bella Dodd, a “truly reformed communist,” according to Helen Corson of Alerted Americans, warned members of the Barren Hill, Pennsylvania, PTA that “Communists have infiltrated education at all levels.” The solution, she told the parents, was to rely more on “local common sense than on advice from the top.” In other words, parents had to be responsible for their children’s education and guard against insidious influences even in the classroom. The Minute Women agreed. In their national newsletter they reprinted an article by John Crippen, praising his town’s success in avoiding struggles with the school board. He explained that the parents “met frequently with our educators”; thus, all were of the same mind-set. He announced that “the National Education Association and many of its departments stand indicted in the court of public opinion.” He implied that only the efforts of individuals acting within their communities could stall the spread of socialism.75 Audrey Plowden, a contributor to The Spirit, also agreed. She encouraged parents to “start your own educational program at home.” This would “counteract or neutralize the liberal education” promulgated by the public schools and turn children into mini-anticommunist crusaders. “Consider the odds,” she wrote. “One teacher, 10 informed conservatives. . . . Start today to turn the tide through the leaders of tomorrow, our children.”76

Worries about the state of education troubled both male and female anticommunists. Both genders participated in efforts to retain control of their children’s education and to keep progressive and communistic ideas away from the schools. Sometimes men organized and led the crusades; sometimes women did. Women played a crucial role in the education struggles in Houston, Los Angeles, and other areas. Their strength could be measured by the level of fear they aroused. In both cities, conservative groups succeeded in unseating school officials accused of having leftist ties. These victories galvanized activists
to make further attacks on teachers, newspapers, and local politicians. No one in Houston or Los Angeles doubted that these women had power. Similarly, no one seemed to doubt that they had any right to be involved in this issue.

Obviously, then, female anticommunists actively participated in the battle against the encroachment of communism at home. Believing wholeheartedly in the cause, they searched for any evidence that communists might be making headway in undermining the American way of life. They appeared not to recognize any areas as off-limits to their investigation. Like their male colleagues, they looked for Red influences in politics, economics, education, entertainment, and the arts. They might have deferred to men as spokespersons or leaders, but they also assumed that their own actions played an important role in protecting their homes and families.

Male anticommunists seemed to appreciate women’s efforts for the cause. They welcomed female help in letter writing, organizing petitions, hosting fund-raisers and educational meetings, showing up at protests and demonstrations, and performing clerical duties. They sometimes condescendingly acknowledged that women’s participation was essential to keep the communists away. Usually, they praised women’s actions but described the women themselves as housewives or household managers or mothers. In some ways, they appeared to treat women as one more tool to be used in the crusade against communism.

What neither the men nor the women seemed to see was that women’s actions shaped the way anticommunism was perceived by the general public. Through their newsletters, club memberships, rallies, and letter drives, anticommunist women succeeded in educating and then mobilizing large numbers of previously inactive citizens. Their persistence transformed suburban housewives into political operatives. They might have willingly deferred to male politicians on occasion, but in their everyday activities women made the key decisions. Club presidents and advisory boards decided on speakers and projects; individual women mounted campaigns and led letter drives to remove individuals they found suspicious. They might have appeared to accept the domestic ideal, but their actions redefined it at every turn.

In encouraging women to join their political effort, activist women utilized anticommunist rhetoric to explain many of the social challenges of the day. It was far easier for many middle-class white
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Americans to think of the emerging Civil Rights Movement in terms of communist subversion than to acknowledge the persistence of racism. The ramifications of middle-class women choosing to work to increase their families’ consumption of material goods appeared too frightening and far-reaching for a society that professed to hold to an ideal of female domesticity. It was better to blame the communists for seducing women into the workforce. Fearful of an education system that might invite students to challenge the existing value structure, Americans saw the Red menace rather than intellectual enlightenment. Conservative Republicans in particular found this strategy useful in their quest to gain political power. Democrats and even moderate Republicans, they argued, were, perhaps unconsciously, allowing communistic-socialistic influences to transform the U.S. government from its Christian, democratic roots into a sinister clone of the Soviet Union. Obviously, right-wingers emphasized, these fellow travelers must be stopped.

Using anticommunism to further a broader right-wing agenda proved an effective tool for conservative anticommmunist women. Since the American public saw communism as a great evil, they accepted women’s participation in the fight to stop it. If, then, communism posed not just a political challenge but a social one as well, this expanded the area of women’s political involvement. Women could become more embedded in the political system in ways that seemed “normal” to the vast majority of the public. Additionally, women’s efforts helped expose the U.S. electorate to the goals and rhetoric of the broader conservative movement. Women became key players in the evolution of the Right.