

IN DEFENSE OF DIFFERENCE:  
PHYLLIS SCHLAFLY AND THE POLITICS OF PRIVILEGE  
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On March 7, 2025, *The New York Times* published a list of terms the Trump Administration flagged as part of the ‘woke’ agenda and, therefore, at odds with the Administration’s meritocratic approach to governing. To conservative America, ‘wokeness’ is most commonly defined as a left-wing preoccupation with identity politics that has bullied progressive orthodoxy, particularly regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, into institutions across the United States.<sup>1</sup> The Administration posits that DEI programs undermine the American ideal of success based on “individual merit, aptitude, hard work, and determination.”<sup>2</sup> For those who subscribe to this worldview, ‘woke’ initiatives create an identity-based spoils system—manufacturing preference predicated on race or sex—that conflicts with equal opportunity. This “war on woke” highlights a fundamental ideological divide in American politics centered around issues of opportunity, advantage, and privilege.<sup>3</sup>

On the second day of the Administration, President Trump signed an Executive Order titled “Ending Illegal Discrimination And Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity,” declaring DEI programs a violation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin. Aligned with this order, federal agencies received the aforementioned list of words with instructions to either eliminate them outright or, at a minimum, use them with extreme caution. The list spans an enormous breadth, from identification markers such as “female” and “Black” to phrases like “sense of belonging.”<sup>4</sup> While each of the 197 words on the list deserves consideration for why the Administration deems them

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<sup>1</sup> DEI’s roots lie in the mid-twentieth century civil rights movement and the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which laid the foundation for affirmative action and efforts to expand representation in historically exclusionary institutions.

<sup>2</sup> Executive Order 14173, “Ending Illegal Discrimination and Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity,” 90 Federal Register 8633 (January 31, 2025)

<sup>3</sup> The Civil Rights Act fractured the Democratic Party, alienating white Southern conservatives as the party aligned with a multiracial progressive base. Nixon’s 1968 campaign capitalized on this shift, reframing identity-conscious policies as threats to American meritocracy—a conservative stance that persists today.

<sup>4</sup> Karen Yourish et al., “The Words Federal Agencies Are Discouraged From Using Under Trump,” *The New York Times*, March 7, 2025, sec. U.S., <https://tinyurl.com/4vffhu6t>.

unacceptable, this paper focuses on one in particular: **privilege**.

Discourse around privilege grew in popularity in the late 1980s following the publication of Peggy McIntosh's *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack* (1989).<sup>5</sup> McIntosh conceptualized white privilege as “an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious.”<sup>6</sup> Her work popularized the idea that privilege operates invisibly and structurally, baked into everyday life in unacknowledged and unearned ways.<sup>7</sup>

The Trump Administration's ban on the federal use of the word *privilege* is a response to this strain of racial discourse, which confronts the inherent advantages conferred upon white individuals by the color of their skin. The Administration denounces white privilege as a “propaganda effort that teaches or suggests either (1) that the United States is an inherently racist or evil country or (2) that any race or ethnicity is inherently racist or evil.”<sup>8</sup> By banning the term, the Administration seeks to police its meaning and restrict its use, casting it as a buzzword behind so-called anti-white policies and DEI's identity-based spoils system. This stands in contrast with academic analyses that frame *white privilege* as a structural phenomenon—one that illuminates systemic disparity rather than assigning individual guilt.

As McIntosh's definition of privilege found its way into institutional and corporate DEI discourse, its emphasis on awareness often translated into a performative posture, particularly among white liberals. Naming privilege became a demonstration of moral consciousness, re-centering the white identity by shifting the conversation from structural critique to individual

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<sup>5</sup> Google Books Ngram Viewer, s.v. “white privilege,” accessed April 10, 2025, <https://books.google.com/ngrams>.

<sup>6</sup> Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” *Peace and Freedom Magazine*, 1989, <https://tinyurl.com/yckya5n5>.

<sup>7</sup> Through a series of “I can” statements, McIntosh exposed whiteness as a baseline for social legitimacy. Her list included examples like: “I can turn on the television... and see people of my race widely represented.” See McIntosh, *White Privilege*, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew S. Schwartz, “Trump Tells Agencies To End Trainings On ‘White Privilege’ And ‘Critical Race Theory,’” *NPR*, September 5, 2020, sec. Race, <https://tinyurl.com/bdfv8k97>.

confession. In this context, privilege becomes a personal burden rather than a collective imbalance to confront; this dynamic helps explain the present-day conservative backlash.

The federal ban on the use of the word “privilege” formalizes a long-standing conservative position that tacitly accepts privilege as a rightful inheritance. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines privilege as “a right, advantage, or immunity granted to or enjoyed by an individual... beyond the usual rights or advantages of others.”<sup>9</sup> Conservative rhetoric around privilege most often positions it as something “enjoyed by,” thus framing privilege as a natural condition. While to grant (or be granted) a privilege is to actively acknowledge and supply it, to enjoy a privilege is to receive it passively, often without acknowledgment. From this perspective, conservatives understand privilege as a birthright, not as a malleable social construct.

Privilege functions as political capital, transacted across the ideological spectrum. It is not merely a status, acknowledged in expressions like ‘I am privileged to be here today’ or conferred in phrases like ‘I grant you the privilege of speaking first.’ The power to name what constitutes privilege, to claim it as one’s birthright, or to bestow it upon others is central to understanding two competing visions of America. One vision, aligned with liberal ideology, understands privilege as a structural barrier to egalitarian ideals, prioritizing redistribution, recognition, and expanded access. The other, associated with conservative ideology, views privilege as an extension of inherent identity characteristics, reinforcing social and economic hierarchies that elevate white men. This conservative vision of America emphasizes inheritance, ownership, and natural order as key tenets of national identity.

These competing visions of America come into direct conflict when applied to gender, where political ideologies clash over the meaning and value of traditional gender roles. While

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<sup>9</sup>Oxford English Dictionary, “Privilege, n.” (Oxford University Press, March 2025), Oxford English Dictionary, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2799259950>.

present-day discourse often centers on a conflict between biological sex and gender expression (as seen in debates around trans rights), this paper approaches gender through the economic and social roles assigned to cisgender men and women in the post-World War II United States. More specifically, this paper contends with *female privilege*: a form of gendered privilege that considers how patriarchy rewards women for performing traditional roles like motherhood by granting them symbolic status and moral authority, while ultimately reinforcing male dominance. Phyllis Schlafly, who led the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) through the STOP ERA (*Stop Taking Our Privileges*) grassroots movement, serves as the central figure through which this paper will examine how female privilege is articulated and defended by conservative white women.<sup>10</sup> White, middle-class homemakers like Schlafly are critical to conversations about privilege because of how they have historically functioned as markers of male status. As figures who both approximate power and enforce exclusion, white women occupy a contested space between liberal and conservative visions of American national identity—simultaneously benefiting from and upholding the very hierarchies that define them.

This thesis argues that privilege cannot exist without hierarchy and is, therefore, foundational to the core systems underpinning American democracy—namely, capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy. As an ideal, democracy is a government “by the people” committed to equality and inclusion. Yet, the historical and structural realities within the United States reveal a selective definition of who “the people” are. While democracy assumes the common person holds an equal stake and voice in the political system, American political history dictates that access to power has always been mediated by race, gender, and class.

Schlafly and the 1970s STOP ERA movement offer a critical case study in how

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<sup>10</sup> The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) is a constitutional amendment that would guarantee equal rights under the law for all people regardless of sex. The proposal was first introduced in 1923 and passed through Congress in 1972, however it failed to secure ratification by the required three-fourths of states before the 1982 deadline.

conservative white women rhetorically claim and institutionalize privilege in ways that maintain systems of power, casting patriarchal dependence as a patriotic duty. Through an analysis of Schlafly's STOP ERA campaign, this paper demonstrates how domesticity was constructed as a privileged status and wielded by a faction of "the people" (white, middle-class women), whose power and access to democracy have historically been contingent on their proximity to white men. In her defense of women's "special" status, Schlafly illustrates how the hierarchical systems of race, gender, and class work together to construct an American national identity predicated on economic ownership and white homogeneity. By framing domesticity as a form of ownership, STOP ERA enabled white, middle-class women to claim participation in the American tradition of freedom and citizenship, central tenets of civil society that had historically been reserved for property-owning white men.

Schlafly offers a lens to understand how STOP ERA's construction of female privilege reinforced a patriarchal understanding of who counts as "the people." What advocates of the ERA saw as gendered subordination (pay disparities, lack of access to credit without a husband's approval, and exclusion from specific jobs), Schlafly recast as markers of distinction divinely prescribed through a woman's role as a wife and mother.<sup>11</sup>

Building upon nineteenth-century separate spheres theorists such as Catharine Beecher, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Sarah Josepha Hale, Schlafly positioned the housewife as central to the nation itself. This paper demonstrates how Phyllis Schlafly's embrace of domestic, female privilege established boundaries of legitimate citizenship, positioning the home as the crucible of national identity and the white homemaker as its essential guardian. By focusing on American women who mirror Schlafly—white, middle-class homemakers—this analysis sheds light on the ideological foundations of today's debates over privilege, revealing how conservatives view it as

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<sup>11</sup> Carol Felsenthal, *The Sweetheart of the Silent Majority: The Biography of Phyllis Schlafly* (Doubleday, 1981).

an affirmation of the natural order, while progressives frame it as a structure of inequality.

To substantiate this argument, I first show how mid-twentieth-century ideologies of motherhood, deeply influenced by 1950s Cold War politics, shaped the cultural backlash of the 1960s and 1970s. This context situates Schlafly as a key figure whose conservatism was rooted in post-World War II ideals of family, gender, and national identity. I then analyze two of Schlafly's key texts: her 1972 Phyllis Schlafly Report, "What's Wrong with 'Equal Rights' for Women," and her 1977 speech to the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), "Power of the Positive Woman." The former of these texts is a seminal Schlafly work through which she first emerges as the ERA's primary opponent. The DAR speech, available in audio-visual format, offers unique insight into how Schlafly deployed the language of privilege, particularly through unscripted interactions with audience members, to cast female privilege as inherent. Through these texts, I explore how Schlafly redefined privilege by framing domesticity as both a source of power and a defense against ERA supporters, while also transforming it into a strategy for broader conservative politics. Finally, I conclude by considering how Schlafly's construction of female privilege informs political right-wing mobilizations, where motherhood and domesticity are weaponized to justify restrictions of rights and redefine who belongs in the American polity.

### **Postwar Politics**

There is a cyclical pattern in American history between women's wartime contributions and peacetime restrictions: in times of national crises, women are called upon to occupy public roles, only to be relegated back to the domestic sphere when 'normalcy' returns. During the American Revolution, women entered traditionally masculine spaces as men fought for independence. Once independence was secured, women returned to the domestic sphere where their relationship with political power was defined by the ideology of Republican Motherhood,

which emphasized women's role in shaping virtuous citizens and upholding the moral fabric of the new republic through their influence in the home.<sup>12</sup> Women's access to political influence was conditional and mediated by national needs. It is this dynamic of *conditionality* that Schlafly later exploited in her defense of domesticity as a privileged role rather than a subordinated one.

Republican Motherhood's ethos of conditional, mediated influence found fuller expression in the nineteenth-century ideology of separate spheres, most clearly articulated by Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe in *The American Woman's Home* (1869). Building on the moral authority afforded to women under Republican Motherhood, the Beecher sisters framed the domestic sphere as a site of civic importance where educating children, managing the household, and fostering Christian virtue were equal tasks to men's public service.<sup>13</sup> By reinforcing the private sphere as women's "natural" domain, the sisters justified women's exclusion from formal political life. Separate spheres ideology reinforced male dominance, positioning men as having spatial and temporal freedom while women's agency remained confined to moral authority rather than material power.

Separate spheres ideology, across both the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century models, worked to deny white women full access to American citizenship. While democracy is defined by popular sovereignty—the belief that power derives from the will of the people—this definition historically excluded women from political legitimacy. The United States did not begin to erode the gendered assumption that men were the default bearers of citizenship and public authority until the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920. Notably, this 'gendered

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<sup>12</sup> The ethos of the American Revolution centered on liberty, self-governance, and individual rights. Shaped by the Age of Enlightenment, the Revolution entrusted women with instilling these ideals—particularly in their sons—as they nurtured the next generation of citizens. See Rosemarie Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Catharine Esther Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman's Home: Or, Principles of Domestic Science; Being a Guide to the Formation and Maintenance of Economical, Healthful, Beautiful, and Christian Homes* (New York: J. B. Ford and company, 1872).

notion' was also inscribed by race, as women of color and Black men continued to face systemic barriers to voting long after the 19th Amendment's ratification.<sup>14</sup> Still, despite marginal political gains, the public sphere—and, by extension, white men—continue to assert themselves as the epitome of American national identity, just as they had during the American Revolution.

World War II drew women into public life at an unprecedented rate to support the war effort. Yet again, upon the war's end, women were relegated to the private sphere as the United States experienced an extreme realignment toward the nineteenth-century separate spheres ethos.<sup>15</sup> Government policies facilitated the reassertion of white male dominance by promoting suburban expansion and homeownership. Though race-neutral on paper, programs such as the GI Bill reinforced white male privilege under the guise of 'merit-based reward,' linking economic opportunity to military service while simultaneously denying Black veterans access to government-funded benefits like college assistance.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, across the country, redlining and discriminatory lending practices excluded families of color from the suburbs, reinforcing the nuclear family—the white breadwinner father who worked in the public sphere and the white mother who managed the domestic sphere—as both a cultural ideal and state-sponsored norm.

The onset of the Cold War reinforced the separate spheres ethos through the postwar ideology of "domestic containment."<sup>17</sup> Increased American religiosity reinforced this framework, cementing the white nuclear family as the most fundamental and immutable institution of society.<sup>18</sup> Unyielding in its moral opposition to "godless communists," domestic containment

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<sup>14</sup> Legal mechanisms such as literacy tests and poll taxes, alongside widespread intimidation and violence, continued to disenfranchise Black men and women of color well into the 20th century, particularly in the Jim Crow South.

<sup>15</sup> Michael C. C. Adams, *The Best War Ever: America and World War II* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 133. Adams discusses how popular culture framed victory as a return to 'normalcy': "Some jubilant day mother will stay home again, doing the job she likes best—making a home for you and daddy, when he gets back."

<sup>16</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (Basic Books, 1999), 10.

<sup>17</sup> The homefront counterpart to U.S. foreign policy, domestic containment posited that communist influence could be kept at bay if contained within a clearly defined sphere of influence. See May, *Homeward Bound*, 16 - 17.

<sup>18</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 29: "Church membership rose from 50 percent to 63 percent of the population (100 years earlier only 20 percent of all Americans belonged to churches)."

positioned the white family as its cornerstone and called on mothers to safeguard values and instill morals in defense of the home and, more broadly, the nation.<sup>19</sup>

However, as children born into the restrictive body politic of the 1950s came of age, they began to question and challenge the boundaries that had shaped their parents' lives, including prescribed gender roles. While resistance to gender constructs has always existed, from Judith Sargent Murray's early eighteenth-century advocacy for women's intellectual equality to the suffrage activists of the nineteenth-century, the 1960s stand alone as a cultural flashpoint: when major social movements of gender, race, and foreign policy converged to spark a reckoning with American national identity.

Betty Friedan's 1963 *The Feminine Mystique* catalyzed the formation of a pro-ERA feminist movement that challenged prevailing understandings of gender roles.<sup>20</sup> Friedan argued that "the chains that bind [the suburban housewife] in her trap are chains in her own mind and spirit. They are chains made up of mistaken ideas and misinterpreted facts, of incomplete truths and unreal choices."<sup>21</sup> The psychological and ideological boundaries tying women to the domestic sphere were artificially imposed by a Cold War containment ethos that clouded women's minds with the "mystique of feminine fulfillment."<sup>22</sup>

Not all women were eager to escape. Phyllis Schlafly celebrated what she saw as her role as the exalted mother, deeply motivated by her Christian framing of American society and commitment to exposing the dangers of Communism.<sup>23</sup> To Schlafly, homemaking was akin to serving on the frontlines against the deviant forces infiltrating American society—namely,

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<sup>19</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*. 29.

<sup>20</sup> The second wave feminist movement addressed gender equality in various social, cultural, and legal contexts, aiming to challenge and dismantle systemic discrimination against women. Key issues included workplace equality, reproductive rights, sexual liberation, and legal reforms concerning divorce, marital property, and domestic violence.

<sup>21</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1963), 31.

<sup>22</sup> Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*.

<sup>23</sup> Jane J. Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986).

feminism, secularism, and communism. This belief structure led her to seek to uphold the hierarchical systems that underpinned her conception of female privilege—capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy. The democratic ideal of equality held no weight for her: “Why should we lower ourselves to ‘equal rights’ when we already have the status of special privilege?”<sup>24</sup> In framing privilege as a “status,” Schlafly operated within the conservative language of inheritance; specifically, that privilege is a status conferred upon white men based on their born identity characteristics. Schlafly, inconsistent with the conservative belief that privilege is a passive enjoyment, rhetorically granted white women a position within the white, patriarchal natural order by framing domesticity as a privileged status. By servicing the nation rather than redefining it, female privilege operates within existing ideals of citizenship and societal influence that center white men.

### **A Scandal of Ex-Privilege**

Phyllis Schlafly’s efforts to frame the containment of mothers within the domestic sphere as a privilege required careful ideological maneuvering. To do so, she mythologized the private sphere as a female-controlled domain with distinct advantages and positioned it as being under threat by the ERA’s promise to dissolve gender difference. This defense of difference reveals something deeper: privilege depends on the possibility of its loss. If difference collapses, so too do the hierarchical systems that confer privilege in the first place. Schlafly’s urgency to protect traditional gender roles thus destabilizes conservative ideals of inheritance and natural order by inadvertently affirming their vulnerability. In this way, Schlafly presents a paradox: even as she insists on the naturalness of women’s domestic role, her defensive posture reveals that privilege depends on its own precarity—and therefore, to some extent, artificial.

Existing scholarship on the separate spheres understands female difference as the power

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<sup>24</sup> Phyllis Schlafly, “What’s Wrong With ‘Equal Rights’ for Women?,” *The Phyllis Schlafly Report*, February 1972.

to shape the home. The home, in turn, infuses and bolsters “the public male arena of the market.”<sup>25</sup> The sentimental values associated with maternity (moral purity and selflessness), which legitimized women’s roles in civic life, also served to exclude them from formal participation in the public market.<sup>26</sup> Separate spheres ideology protects the mother and her ideals of selflessness and purity from the corruption of a capitalist public sphere that emphasizes individualism and ownership. Yet, with American citizenship intrinsically tied to economic power and upward mobility, the conservative impulse to “protect” women is really about preserving gender roles and maintaining control over national identity. Schlafly’s vision of the homemaker upholds a social order defined by white, patriarchal authority—an order increasingly challenged by civil rights and feminist demands for equality. These challenges exposed the constructed nature of privilege, its dependence on ideological boundaries and social reinforcement, revealing the fragility of the systems that have long defined American democracy.

Schlafly’s STOP ERA movement positioned white women as privileged by advancing what Lauren Berlant terms the “scandal of ex-privilege.”<sup>27</sup> Berlant’s work, which traces the rise of dominant conservative cultural politics in the 1970s, highlights how narratives of cultural trauma were weaponized to resist social change. The trauma underlying the 1970s scandal of ex-privilege was rooted in the civil rights movement of the 1960s and its critique of the social and economic hierarchies sustaining racial inequality. In his 1963 “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” Martin Luther King Jr. observed, “History is the long and tragic story of the fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily.”<sup>28</sup> He suggests privilege is constructed, and its power lies in the values individuals place on their own status in society. The

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<sup>25</sup> Amy Kaplan, “Manifest Domesticity,” *American Literature* 70, no. 3 (1998): 581–606, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2902710>, 581.

<sup>26</sup> Kaplan, “Manifest Domesticity,” 581.

<sup>27</sup> Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Duke University Press, 1997), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv120qtf2>.

<sup>28</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963, 2.

moral thing to do, according to King, is for privileged persons to “give up their unjust posture.”<sup>29</sup>

Unlike King, who spoke from a position of historical exclusion and marginalization, Schlafly positioned white women as already belonging within the privileged hierarchies that both civil rights and feminist activists attributed to white men. This framing allowed her to counter arguments about systemic power and inequality by wielding STOP ERA in defense of what she called the “equal rights of the homemaker.”<sup>30</sup> Cultural shifts in racial equality, sexual behavior, and gender formation challenged dominant identities that had previously operated as invisible norms. In Berlant’s terms, Schlafly’s white, middle-class homemaker was an “icon” whose privileged status had gone unnoticed—until it was called into question by liberal demands.

For Berlant, a scandal of ex-privilege is triggered by a change to the “political rules of social membership” that threatens the identities of those with iconic status.<sup>31</sup> Those at risk of losing this status become the “American ex-icon” and are forced to confront the non-inherent nature of their privilege. In “a desperate desire to return to an order of things deemed normal, an order of what was felt to be a general everyday intimacy that was sometimes called ‘the American way of life’” the ex-icon may express rage at those they see as responsible for rewriting the rules.<sup>32</sup> The scandal of ex-privilege describes a reactive response where “the American ex-icon denigrates the political present tense and incites nostalgia for the national world of its iconicity, setting up that lost world as a utopian horizon of political aspiration.”<sup>33</sup>

Schlafly’s campaign exemplifies this dynamic: STOP ERA framed the feminist challenge to patriarchy as an attack on the privileges of the white, female homemaker, and by extension, the natural order of American life. Female privilege, as Schlafly imagined it, depends on a unity

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<sup>29</sup> King Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” 2.

<sup>30</sup> “Phyllis Schlafly Debates Betty Friedan on ERA,” *Good Morning America*, January 28, 1976, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WncN6PWEMGo>, 4:43.

<sup>31</sup> Berlant, *The Queen of America*, 2.

<sup>32</sup> Berlant, *The Queen of America*, 2.

<sup>33</sup> Berlant, *The Queen of America*, 2.

between white men and white women. They are partners in the home and in public life, jointly shaping national identity through what Amy Kaplan calls *imperial domesticity*.

According to Kaplan, imperial domesticity is the unification of “men and women in a national domain... to generate notions of the foreign against which the nation can be imagined as home.”<sup>34</sup> Schlafly’s effort to unify white women with Berlant’s white male “American ex-icons”—those who long to return to the natural order of the nuclear family, where hierarchies remained unquestioned—is an example of imperial domesticity’s enduring appeal. While the 1970s context differs from Kaplan’s study of antebellum America, imperial domesticity remains part of a broader lineage of public-private, liberal-conservative conflict, one that battles to define the composition of American democracy.

In “Manifest Domesticity,” Kaplan reconsiders the foundations of the separate spheres ideology through a revisionist reading of nineteenth-century feminist literature, challenging static understandings of domesticity. She reveals a fluid and active terrain in which women participate in the reproduction of nationalist ideology through their engagement with “the foreign.”<sup>35</sup> Schlafly’s rhetoric, much like the women Kaplan describes, situates white, middle-class homemakers within the domestic sphere as active participants in the national project—albeit one that seeks to preserve traditional gender roles and resist progressive social change, as described by Berlant’s scandal of ex-privilege.

Female privilege grants women entry into masculine spaces of hierarchy, allowing them to participate in the national project of defending and defining American identity. Schlafly’s rhetoric asserts that citizenship is conditional, dependent on proximity to power and the patriarchal structures that sustain it. Moreover, Schlafly defines progressive ideology as

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<sup>34</sup> Kaplan, “Manifest Domesticity,” 582.

<sup>35</sup> Kaplan, “Manifest Domesticity,” 582.

“foreign” and therefore incompatible with American identity. By doing so, she aligns both national and domestic identity with what Berlant calls *iconicity*—a rigid, idealized image of identity rooted in dominance and exclusion. Schlafly’s politics aimed to protect this image, even if it meant marginalizing classes of women who fell outside of it, particularly those who were nonwhite, poor, or working-class.

Using these frameworks to understand Schlafly’s view of domesticity and its role in American life, the remainder of this paper will examine reports, speeches, and the STOP ERA public campaign to illustrate how Schlafly’s deployment of female privilege asserted a conservative conception of American democracy that emphasizes inheritance, ownership, and natural order.

### **A Myth of Maternal Agency**

Before Phyllis Schlafly, opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment was weak and unorganized. Schlafly herself dismissed the ERA as “something between innocuous and mildly helpful.”<sup>36</sup> That was before everything changed. In February 1972, Schlafly’s monthly newsletter, *The Phyllis Schlafly Report*, detoured from its typical Cold War commentary and published the four-page polemic, “What’s Wrong with Equal Rights for Women.” This essay became the foundation upon which she built the STOP ERA movement.<sup>37</sup>

In her February 1972 newsletter, Schlafly began with a provocative claim: “Of all classes of people who have ever lived, the American woman is the most privileged. We have the most rights and rewards and the fewest duties. Our unique status is the result of a fortunate combination of circumstances.”<sup>38</sup> The white, middle-class suburban woman’s “unique status,”

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<sup>36</sup> Felsenthal, *The Sweetheart of the Silent Majority*, 240.

<sup>37</sup> Phyllis Schlafly, “Equal Rights’ for Women: Wrong Then, Wrong Now,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 8, 2007, <https://www.latimes.com/la-op-schafly8apr08-story.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Phyllis Schlafly, “What’s Wrong With ‘Equal Rights’ for Women?,” *The Phyllis Schlafly Report*, February 1972.

she argued, is not the result of social or economic factors, but instead it is rooted in biology: “the fact that women, not men, have babies is not the fault of selfish and domineering men, or of the establishment, or of any clique of conspirators who want to oppress women.”<sup>39</sup> For Schlafly, white female privilege was the result of women’s biological role in reproduction.

Schlafly invoked privilege as a set of inherited traits, predicated on the anatomical differences between the male and female reproductive systems. She attributed these differences to an act of God, arguing that women are not victims of patriarchal conspiracy, but rather vessels of human continuity. This construction of privilege is central to her defense of traditional gender roles and the larger societal systems that sustain gender dominance. By positioning women’s reproductive roles as a divinely inscribed privilege, Schlafly wields the conservative logic used to justify hierarchies despite America’s egalitarian democratic ideals.

Moreover, the context in which Schlafly frames the relationship between men, women, and reproduction further reveals her fervent protection of the patriarchy. According to Schlafly, “women must bear the physical consequences of the sex act,” while men are tasked with providing physical security, financial support, and adhering to a code of chivalrous behavior that benefits and protects women and their children.<sup>40</sup> Common understandings of the patriarchy view it as a system that enforces gender difference, facilitating male privilege by positioning men to dominate the public sphere due to their inherited traits, such as physical strength and lack of reproductive responsibility. In contrast, women remain subordinate and marginalized with limited access to power. Schlafly sees the separation of the public and private spheres not as a sign of male domination, but as a consequence of men’s lack of a womb. Absolving men from the guilt of privilege, Schlafly grants women special status and positions the homemaker as

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<sup>39</sup> Phyllis Schlafly, “What’s Wrong With ‘Equal Rights’ for Women?,” 1.

<sup>40</sup> Phyllis Schlafly, “What’s Wrong With ‘Equal Rights’ for Women?,” 1.

guarantor of the social hierarchies that centralize men and support American national identity.

This inversion of gender discourse is central to Schlafly's construction of female privilege because it reinforces the conservative notion that privilege is conferred through what one inherently possesses when another lacks the very same thing: a penis versus no penis, white skin versus non-white skin. This idea echoes the broader *scandal of ex-privilege*, in which white men, who control and define the American national identity, became newly aware of difference as something politically potent, particularly through the rise of Black identity during the civil rights movement.<sup>41</sup> Here, difference is not a general absence or loss (white versus non-white), but a direct counterpoint (white versus Black). The civil rights movement did not simply challenge white male privilege; it made it visible and therefore vulnerable, revealing that privilege is contingent on the threat of its loss.

Schlafly found a way to circumvent the risk of retaliation and gain political power through existing social hierarchies. By appealing to the American housewife with language of distinction, Schlafly rooted female privilege in the homemaker's role in defining the boundaries of the nation, protecting white men and whiteness from foreign invasion. Unlike the ERA movement, which Schlafly argued would dismantle government-recognized gender differences, Schlafly's conception of female privilege did not threaten white male privilege. According to Schlafly, "Under present American laws, the man is always required to support his wife and each child... Why should women abandon these good laws—by trading them for something so nebulous and uncertain as 'the direction of the Court'?"<sup>42</sup> Schlafly viewed the homemaker's exalted status as the best outcome for women and saw no need for radical constitutional change.

Schlafly's report subversively distanced the white homemaker from other marginalized

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<sup>41</sup> Berlant, *The Queen of America*, 2.

<sup>42</sup> Schlafly, "What's Wrong With 'Equal Rights' for Women?," 2.

groups and positioned the housewife as a key figure in the conservative resurgence that sought to reassert “states’ rights” as a means of enforcing conformity to the white male-defined “American way of life.”<sup>43</sup> For example, Schlafly’s report points to technological advancements, such as the invention of frozen foods, sewing machines, electricity, and automobiles, that allowed women “freedom from the slavery of standing in line for daily food” and gifting the equivalent of “half-dozen household servants for every middle-class American woman.”<sup>44</sup> By invoking slavery rhetoric—used six times throughout the report—Schlafly reinforces the racial hierarchies that define American national identity. The white middle-class housewife becomes the *master* of the home, a position of ownership and privilege that is traditionally reserved for white men. Through this lens, Schlafly rhetorically maneuvered the white housewife to a position of full citizenship in an American nation whose capitalist foundations inscribe property ownership as one of the ultimate markers of freedom.

However, the white housewife can only feign a sense of belonging. Her role is relational: a status defined in relation to her husband. To this end, Schlafly undermines her idealized construction of maternal authority by honoring four male “inventive geniuses” as the true heroes of women’s liberation.<sup>45</sup> This concession to the white male functions in two ways: it explicitly ties the woman’s domestic agency to the public labor of men and it constructs an ideal of female privilege that was gifted to the female bourgeoisie, suggesting that women’s control of the home is not just a result of a divinely-inherited womb but also of male creation.

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<sup>43</sup> Southern conservative activists aligned with the anti-ERA movement in part because its emphasis on gender roles and family values resonated with broader states’ rights advocacy. Just as Schlafly argued that women’s privileges were best protected within the existing social order, states’ rights advocates contended that individual states should have the power to define the boundaries of citizenship and social policy. Both movements framed federal intervention as a threat to traditional structures, reinforcing a vision of national belonging that prioritized local control over universal rights. For more on the role of subversive racist messaging within STOP ERA, see: Robin M. Morris, *Goldwater Girls to Reagan Women: Gender, Georgia, and the Growth of the New Right, Since 1970 : Histories of Contemporary America* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2022).

<sup>44</sup> Schlafly, “What’s Wrong With ‘Equal Rights’ for Women?,” 2.

<sup>45</sup> Schlafly, “What’s Wrong With ‘Equal Rights’ for Women?,” 2.

Schlafly's argument against the ERA hinges on a fundamental tension between equality and privilege. In conservative ideology, the inheritance of privilege is presented as a form of equality. The status quo—the differences imposed by inherited traits, granted by God—is seen as the existing and immutable measure of distinction between different races, economic classes, and genders. Those who view privilege as inherent and natural do not see it as a comparative advantage, but instead as a manifestation of a social order that grants certain individuals special status based on their position within the system.

At the heart of Schlafly's rejection of the ERA is a deeper conflict that reflects the broader liberal-conservative divide in American democracy: whether equality can be actively achieved through social intervention or whether it is fixed, immutable, and divinely ordained. Schlafly firmly opposed the ERA's social intervention, suggesting that the promise of equality requires a loss of privilege: "We do not want to trade our birthright of the special privileges of the American woman—for the mess of pottage called the Equal Rights Amendment."<sup>46</sup> Privilege is contingent on loss, and a loss of privilege is a step closer to equality. Framing privilege as a birthright suggests that conservatives understand equality not as a universal principle, but rather as a measurement toward an ideal: the white, male breadwinner and female homemaker. If one does not measure up to this ideal, then equality, in its traditional understanding as a state of sameness, cannot be attained. Any challenge to the status quo threatens the inherent privileges that sustain the system. Equality is confronted with the ultimate obstacle to achieving true democratic egalitarianism—in the words of Martin Luther King Jr., "privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily."<sup>47</sup>

Schlafly's 1972 critique of the ERA was more than a rejection of "equal rights" and the

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<sup>46</sup> Schlafly "What's Wrong With 'Equal Rights' for Women?," 4.

<sup>47</sup> King Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," 2.

feminist movement; it marked the beginning of a career dedicated to politicizing domesticity in favor of sustaining the privileges of white womanhood. By 1977, Phyllis Schlafly had expanded on these ideas in her book, *The Power of the Positive Woman*, which biographer Carol Felsenthal characterizes as “a mix of Schlafly’s advice on ‘How to Be a Happy Housewife,’ and her seemingly endless parade of arguments against the ERA.”<sup>48</sup> The book’s publication turned Schlafly’s national STOP ERA campaign into a book tour. While addressing the Cincinnati chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), Schlafly gave a book talk and then engaged with the audience. These unscripted moments give us a more nuanced understanding of how Schlafly’s views on equality were influenced by the “cultural trauma” experienced as a result of the ERA’s supposed elimination of female privilege.

Early in her DAR speech, Schlafly invokes identity as a site of cultural crisis, asserting, “We talk about the younger generation searching for their identity; if they don’t even know whether they are boys or girls, they are really going to have a hard time.”<sup>49</sup> If children, the future of the nation, are experiencing uncertainty, Schlafly suggests, this instability will translate into national decline. She goes on to further conflate the personal with the political, positioning the mother, the primary figure in child-rearing, as responsible for preserving traditional identity formation. These children, in turn, will serve the systems of privilege that underpin American democracy. Moreover, Schlafly ties national stability to the sanctity of the gender binary—what she frames as a “clarity of difference.” In doing this, she positions progressive challenges to rigid gender roles as an attack on the delineation that provides women with their special status. Schlafly posits that if fluid and dynamic conceptions of gender replace the male-female binary, society would be subject to myriad variations of identity characteristics, rendering traditional

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<sup>48</sup> Felsenthal, *The Sweetheart of the Silent Majority*, 1.

<sup>49</sup> Phyllis Schlafly, “Power of the Positive Woman” (Daughters of the American Revolution, Cincinnati, Ohio, November 14, 1977), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMoE0QXPjp0>, 15:54

differences obsolete and, with it, privilege.

A compelling moment in Schlafly's DAR event is when a young white man—the only one identifiable in the crowd, and a material manifestation of the standard against which female privilege is defined—rises to the microphone: “As a younger person who is looking forward to getting married sometime in the future, I would like you to give a few words of advice to a future wife if she is looking on as I'm sure she would be.”<sup>50</sup> Schlafly reassures his future wife:

I do think homemaking is a very fulfilling career for a woman... You can have it any way you want. You shouldn't cry around and claim that it is discrimination when you've got the opportunity to do it any way you want... As a young man, you should find out what her aspirations are before you get locked in.<sup>51</sup>

Here, Schlafly professionalizes homemaking—positioning domestic labor as a legitimate vocation rather than an imposed gender role. In doing this, Schlafly neutralizes critiques of domestic labor's devaluation, reinforcing the position that women do not need the promise of equal opportunity because they already wield economic and social power. Women are privileged. Yet this assertion of domestic authority is deceptive. Schlafly's advice, “to find out” his future wife's aspirations before getting “locked-in,” ultimately confers male authority. She reassures the white man's status, implying women's choices remain subject to male approval.

Another crucial element of the DAR speech is how Schlafly frames adherence to gender roles as a personal choice. In doing so, she shifts the burden of inequality onto women themselves—absolving white men of the need to rethink their systems of social dominance—suggesting that those who feel limited lack the will or ingenuity to take advantage of their “particular mix of handicaps and assets that each of us come into this life with.”<sup>52</sup> This not only delegitimizes ERA activism but also advances the claim that true power lies in women's

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<sup>50</sup> Schlafly, “Power of the Positive Woman,” 46:08.

<sup>51</sup> Schlafly, “Power of the Positive Woman,” 46:35.

<sup>52</sup> Schlafly, “Power of the Positive Woman,” 15:00

ability to navigate the existing system rather than challenge it. Schlafly communicates to the housewife that operating within white men's social order is in her best interests. She does not seek to limit women's participation in public life; instead, she argues that women's current level of participation is sufficient and, more importantly, is exercised in ways that do not threaten male authority.

At the core of Schlafly's construction of female privilege lies a quest for national belonging, one that is central to the conservative resurgence of the 1970s. Schlafly advocates for the preservation of difference, ensuring the maintenance of the natural order and, with it, the perpetuation of privilege. In this framework, women's roles are dictated at all levels—biological, moral, and divine. The boundaries of white womanhood, as defined by Schlafly, are constructed by a conservative vision of the American nation predicated on racialized and gendered differences. Exclusivity and comparison uphold inheritance, ownership, and natural order.

The 1970s conservative backlash against progressive cultural change sought to reassert a discriminatory vision of American national identity, tying citizenship to the nuclear family and rhetoric of "states' rights." Ronald Reagan's election in 1980 codified this vision, transforming it into the Republican Party's actionable political platform. A platform that, to this day, reinforces traditional gender roles, idealizes domesticity, and upholds the white nuclear family as the cornerstone of American identity.

### **Who Is America For**

Before Phyllis Schlafly and her 1972 report, the ERA had enjoyed strong bipartisan support. Even prominent conservatives, such as President Richard Nixon, endorsed and supported its passage through Congress. Ultimately, STOP ERA's widespread national mobilization fundamentally reshaped the political landscape, galvanizing opposition at all levels

of government. By 1980, the GOP removed support for the ERA from their party platform, marking the full ideological embrace of Schlafly, STOP ERA, and the conservative understanding of female privilege that continues to shape GOP rhetoric today.<sup>53</sup>

Much like Schlafly, Reagan, in his role as Governor of California, initially expressed support for the ERA, calling it “morally unassailable.”<sup>54</sup> However, as Reagan began to consider a run for the presidency, he focused on the electoral potential of the Christian Right, whose religious vision of society aligned closely with Schlafly’s. By November 1975, Reagan had not only reversed his position but began to mirror STOP ERA’s rhetoric, stating, “I think that [the ERA] opens a Pandora’s Box, and could in fact militate against the very things women are asking for... [the ERA could be] used to deny women many of the advantages they now have.”<sup>55</sup> This warning draws on similar language from Schlafly’s 1972 Report, in which she warned that the “passage of the Equal Rights Amendment would open up *a Pandora’s Box* [emphasis added] of trouble for women.”<sup>56</sup>

Reagan’s positional shift reflects Schlafly’s ability to harness mounting conservative anxiety about how progressive cultural movements challenged the boundaries that upheld white male dominance. Connecting to racialized anxieties by likening the ERA’s potential impact to the Civil Rights Act’s integration of bathrooms, STOP ERA argued that just as racial integration eliminated segregated restrooms, the ERA would dismantle sex-segregated spaces, forcing women into unsafe and unfamiliar environments.<sup>57</sup> The ERA became synonymous with federal intrusion into previously ‘protected’ spaces. Passage of the ERA would eliminate the selective

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<sup>53</sup> Warren Weaver, “G.O.P Platform Votes To Abandon Rights Amendment,” *The New York Times*, July 10, 1980. <https://tinyurl.com/3cenkvf4>.

<sup>54</sup> “Statement, Ronald Reagan on the Equal Rights Amendment” (April 14, 1972), <https://tinyurl.com/23jpkwa>.

<sup>55</sup> “Rep. Hager Raps Reagan on ERA,” January 28, 1976, Ron Nessen Papers, Box 39, Folder “Reagan-Women,” Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, <https://tinyurl.com/mrdysfut>.

<sup>56</sup> Schlafly, “What’s Wrong With ‘Equal Rights’ for Women?,” 1.

<sup>57</sup> This comparison deliberately played on the recent memory of civil rights battles in the South, where bathroom integration had been a particularly contentious flashpoint. See: Morris, *Goldwater Girls to Reagan Women*, 102.

inscriptions of the border: the restroom, the home, and the nation. The conservative rejection of progressive calls for gender and racial equality reveals a selective approach to federal intervention, where concerns about safety and privacy mask more profound contradictions about who deserves protection and why. Privilege, in this framework, is acceptable only when it upholds a white, middle-class domesticity that serves the patriarchal systems governing the American way of life.

Schlafly's transformation of the housewife from a private domestic position to a bulwark of American national identity created common ground between previously disconnected conservative constituencies. Evangelical Christians were drawn to her defense of divinely ordained gender roles and the sanctity of the traditional family. Economic conservatives aligned with her argument that the nuclear family, with its clear division of labor and naturalized inequalities, represented the most efficient economic unit.<sup>58</sup> National security hawks would have appreciated Schlafly's roots in domestic containment ideologies and anti-Communism, which reinforced domesticity as a process creating what is "foreign," serving to expel "savagery" from the nation's borders.<sup>59</sup>

Ultimately, Schlafly built this coalition by reversing Betty Friedan's feminist critique of the prevailing hierarchical systems that privilege white men. By framing women's domestic roles as female privilege—a divine birthright rather than a punitive limitation—Schlafly gave white, middle-class homemakers a powerful rationale for political mobilization and conservative alignment. Schlafly's STOP ERA allowed white women to engage in public political activism without scapegoating white men; thus, she sustains existing hierarchies while granting the homemaker symbolic power.

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<sup>58</sup> Phyllis Schlafly, "The Right To Be a Woman," *The Phyllis Schlafly Report*, November 1972.

<sup>59</sup> Kaplan, "Manifest Domesticity," 582.

To protect female privilege, Schlafly worked to preserve the economic and social binaries that differentiated the roles of men and women in American society. Moreover, by positioning progressive challenges to the binary as an existential threat to the hierarchical systems that inscribe American national identity itself, STOP ERA institutionalized female privilege as a cornerstone of conservative governance. This ideology has continued to inform the Trump Administration's vehement and often violent opposition to anything it prescribes as 'Other.' The white male American president sits at the apex of power, defining and measuring social adherence to American identity through his authority as the ultimate national icon.

The ideological divide over privilege is rooted in fundamentally different visions of American identity—one that treats privilege as a divinely ordained birthright, and another that views it as a barrier to democratic equality. This paper expands academic discourse on privilege by demonstrating its dual function: not only as a progressive tool for critique but also as a conservative strategy for reinforcing hierarchy and asserting belonging. Through Phyllis Schlafly's anti-ERA rhetoric, privilege emerges as something to be defended—a reward for fulfilling one's natural role within the exclusionary systems that define democratic participation.

Schlafly's legacy laid the ideological groundwork for today's conservative politics, where figures like Donald Trump have taken up the mantle of policing identity and reasserting a selective vision of national belonging. President Trump's first administration followed the election of the nation's first Black president—a moment that redefined national identity and disrupted the continuity of homogenous white male leadership. A Black man as the measure of social legitimacy destabilized existing hierarchies and triggered a scandal of ex-privilege, prompting reactionary forces to reassert dominance. The Trump Administration, therefore, operated as an exclusionary campaign—not only rejecting critiques of systemic inequality but

branding those critiques themselves as un-American. Rather than treating privilege as a passive or invisible condition, Trump's rhetoric positioned it as a rightful status under threat. In doing so, his administration institutionalized Schlafly's project: transforming the home into a battleground for national identity, recasting mothers and homemakers as guardians of tradition, and defining Americanness through exclusion.

Schlafly's conservative white woman has traded autonomy for protection, positioning herself as an indispensable yet dependent figure within a national order defined by white male dominance. Her so-called maternal agency is an illusion—one that obscures her role in preserving systems of exclusion while shielding her from their most violent edges. Privilege, then, is not merely a condition but a political technology: it delineates who is protected, who is expendable, and who must conform to belong. Schlafly's rhetoric—and Trump's perpetuation of its core logic—reveals that privilege is not antithetical to American democracy as it exists, but foundational to it.

Privilege is dependent on difference, but it cannot be simply understood as an individual's advantage. It is a complex system that sustains national mythologies by distributing protection and vulnerability unequally across different bodies. However, to 'take away' privileges contradicts the American promise of ownership and independence. To dismantle privilege would undermine the principles of autonomy that liberal individualism claims to uphold. This tension continues to resonate in contemporary political discourse, where challenges to the established hierarchies of patriarchy, capitalism, and white supremacy are framed as domestic destabilizers. Until the promise of equality reckons with the defense of difference, claimed by conservative ideology as birthright and celebrated by liberal ideology as inclusion, the question remains not just what privilege is, but **who America is for**.

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