

Movie Review Essay

Jane Kamensky

Mrs. America, created by Dahvi Waller. Dir. by Anna Boden, Ryan Fleck, Amma Asante, Laura de Clermont-Tonnerre, and Janicza Bravo. Prod. by Stacey Sher, Cate Blanchett, Ryan Fleck, Anna Boden, Coco Francini, Dahvi Waller, and Micah Schraft. Dirty Films and FX Productions. Originally aired April 15–May 27, 2020. 9 parts, 458 mins. (<https://www.fxnetworks.com/shows/mrs-america>)

Fashion bloggers love *Mrs. America*, the nine-part miniseries on the gender politics of the 1970s that dropped on Hulu in April 2020.¹ And for good reason: show runner Dahvi Waller, part of the *Mad Men* creative team during that show's glorious middle seasons, can feel and taste and even smell the United States at midcentury. With abundant visual source material to mine, Waller's *Mrs. America* speaks volumes through its fond use of period food, hair, and clothing. Had the series debuted at any time other than in the midst of a global pandemic, it would surely have launched a thousand twinsets and ten times as many pairs of aviator frames.

In *Mad Men*, centered on the world of image making, style is substance; headlines intrude only rarely. *Mrs. America* flips the telescope. Though in some ways a sequel to *Mad Men*—the clock starts in July 1971, at perhaps the very moment Don Draper got the inspiration for Coke's "Hilltop" television commercial, which debuted in November that year—*Mrs. America* places politics at the center rather than the edges of its characters' lives. It is ironic, then, that the fictional *Mad Men* is, in the end, so much truer as history.

Though it aims to be about many things, from the sexual revolution to the realignment of American politics, *Mrs. America* centers on the history of the equal rights amendment (ERA) between March 1972, when it rocketed out of the Senate on an affirmative vote of 84 to 8, and the landslide election of Ronald Reagan in November 1980. Waller cannot bear to take us all the way to 1982, when the ERA died, ignominiously, after a congressional extension that had allowed it to languish on life support for three years past its original 1979 sell-by date. In fact, the proposed amendment was in trouble as early as 1974. Thirty of the thirty-eight states necessary to enact the amendment had ratified by the end

Jane Kamensky is the Trumbull Professor of History at Harvard University and the Pforzheimer Foundation Director of the Schlesinger Library on the History of American Women.

¹ See, for example, "Mrs. America' Style: Phyllis Schlafly," *Tom + Lorenzo*, April 16, 2020, <https://tomandlorenzo.com/2020/04/mrs-america-phyllis/>.

of 1973, but only five did so in all the years thereafter, none of them after 1977. By 1978, five of those thirty-five had passed laws rescinding their approval, a move whose constitutional status is as questionable as the imposed and then revised ratification deadline.² *Mrs. America's* characters, of course, experience our history as their future. "We have seven years, but we'll get it done in one," Betty Friedan (brilliantly mimicked by Tracey Ullman) crows at the end of the first episode. This, then, is the setup, one with baked-in narrative tension: What the hell happened, and whodunnit?

As befits her medium and her movement, Waller roots the answers in character. In *Mrs. America* as in 1970s feminism, the personal is political and vice-versa. Each of the first seven episodes is named for an actor in the real-life drama and pegged around that character's biography, gesturing to larger historical themes along the way. In "Shirley" (episode 3), for example, Shirley Chisholm (played by Uzo Aduba) experiences the final stages of her pioneering 1972 campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination as a story of intimate betrayal, a chapter in the broader history of racism that infected both feminist and antifeminist organizations. "Jill" (episode 6), centers on National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC) founder Jill Ruckelshaus (Elizabeth Banks), whose marginalization within her own party illustrates the fate of the Rockefeller Republican swimming against the rising tide of a new Right. "Betty" (episode 4) dramatizes an aging Friedan who lurches between wistfulness and fury. The sheen of a fitted floral satin sheath sends her into a reverie, recalling her younger, more vital, more newsworthy self, shortly after publishing *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), silencing a skeptical Johnny Carson by repeating the word "orgasm" on national television. By 1973, poor Betty can't even captivate her blind date, who "hasn't called" and "wasn't my type," as she mutters. Feminism, too, has relegated her to the rearview. "I *am* the movement," Betty snarls at New York congresswoman Bella Abzug (Margo Martindale) in episode 2. "You wrote a book ten years ago," Bella sasses back, in Martindale's broad and distracting imitation of a New York accent. Bella gets her moment in the sun in episode 7, and her comeuppance in episode 9 ("Reagan"). Each of the title players shows us her big, big feelings as their character arcs, one by one, bend toward personal tragedy.

Waller gives the biggest real estate to Gloria Steinem (Rose Byrne) and the eponymous Mrs. America, Phyllis Schlafly, played by Cate Blanchett, not only the megastar of the series but also an executive producer.³ The protagonists' corners are clear from the start. Steinem, editor of *Ms.* magazine and a cofounder of the NWPC, is Our Hero. Schlafly, the grassroots conservative organizer whose Eagle Forum, STOP (Stop Taking Our Privileges)-ERA, and other closely allied antifeminist organizations halted the onrushing train of the amendment, is the prestige TV antihero, Don Draper with a French twist and pearls. In a western, they'd have sported white and black Stetsons. Here, they have different color palettes, with Schlafly in the coral and turquoise of Howard Johnson's, muted as if with a sepia wash, and Steinem in dayglo blue-filtered Kodachrome. In case you missed the memo that Schlafly represents The Past and Steinem The Future, our Gloria is several times shown striding, back-lit and in slight slow motion, while the grooviest cuts of an often-stellar soundtrack play in the background. The pair, who never meet in the course

² Jane J. Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA* (Chicago, 1986), 1–19; Marjorie J. Spruill, *Divided We Stand: The Battle over Women's Rights and Family Values That Polarized American Politics* (New York, 2017), 104.

³ Lesley Goldberg, "Cate Blanchett to Play Conservative Activist in FX Women's Rights Drama 'Mrs. America,'" *Hollywood Reporter*, Oct. 30, 2018, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/cate-blanchett-play-conservative-activist-fx-womens-rights-drama-mrs-america-1156204>.

of the drama, engross as much airtime as *Mrs. America*'s other stars combined. Both performances are meticulous, even uncanny, at the level of impersonation. Blanchett nails Schlafly's midwestern vowels and her fiery eyes, behind which the wheels of some strategy seem always to be whirring. Byrne's Steinem manages to preen and recede at the same time, as she seeks celebrity while flinching at it, both haunted and enabled by an abortion in her youth, as we learn in episode 2, and as the real-life Steinem has described in several memoirs.

Mrs. America excels at the decorative elements of these two central portraits and gets a lot of other small stuff right. Even Schlafly's daughter Anne Cori, the current chairman of Eagle Forum, who is justifiably dismayed with the overall thrust of the series, recognizes the home she grew up in. "The color of the tile in the kitchen is exactly how I remembered it," she told an interviewer for *Bustle*.⁴ Journalists have spilled a good deal of ink checking a level of truth that is less factual than factitious: Did the episode 5 "couples" debate between Fred and Phyllis Schlafly on the "anti" side and Brenda and Marc Feigen-Fasteau speaking for ratification actually happen? Yes—though not as Waller depicted it.⁵ Did Paul Manafort and Roger Stone really pigeonhole Schlafly at her 1979 celebration of the first expiration of ERA, as they do in episode 9? No, but they coulda, woulda, shoulda: Waller says that putting the two then-young political consultants in the frame "was a shorthand way to dramatize the parallels between the 1980 election and 2016."⁶

These small-bore accuracies might seem to attest that, as Waller explained to the *Los Angeles Times*, "Research is my jam." But what, precisely, does she mean by this claim? She and her staff have indeed discovered some period rarities; one of my Schlesinger Library colleagues noticed, for example, that episode 5 begins with a scene from feminist artist Judy Chicago's seldom-performed "Cock and Cunt Play" (created 1970–1972), a deep cut, to be sure. But mostly, Waller and her team have ransacked Marjorie Spruill's densely researched *Divided We Stand* (2017) for character, plot, scene, and pacing. The borrowing is uncomfortably extensive, including numerous lines that make their way into characters' mouths in *Mrs. America*. In at least one instance, Blanchett's Schlafly speaks sentences that could only have come from Spruill's text, since they derive from her 2005 interview with Schlafly, which remains in the possession of the author, who neither consulted with Waller's creative team nor licensed her work to them.⁷

⁴ Amanda Whiting, "Phyllis Schlafly's Daughter on What 'Mrs. America' Gets Right and Wrong about Her Mother," *Bustle*, April 15, 2020, <https://www.bustle.com/p/what-mrs-america-gets-wrong-about-phyllis-schlafly-according-to-her-daughter-22818083>.

⁵ Cornelia Channing, "What's Fact and What's Fiction in *Mrs. America* Episode 5," *Slate*, April 29, 2020, <https://slate.com/culture/2020/04/mrs-america-episode-5-accuracy-brenda-couples-debate.html>; Christina Hoff Sommers, "Fact-Checking *Mrs. America*," *Washington Examiner*, June 4, 2020, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/christina-hoff-sommers-on-phyllis-schlafly-and-mrs-america>. *Slate* ran thirteen articles on *Mrs. America*, including seven "What's Fact and What's Fiction" pieces. The *Los Angeles Times* also ran at least six "What 'Mrs. America' Gets Right and Wrong" articles.

⁶ Cornelia Channing, "What's Fact and What's Fiction in the *Mrs. America* Finale," *Slate*, May 27, 2020, <https://slate.com/culture/2020/05/mrs-america-finale-accuracy-fact-fiction-reagan.html>.

⁷ Meredith Blake, "Want to Know More about the Real 'Mrs. America'? Here's Your Reading List," *Los Angeles Times*, April 22, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/tv/story/2020-04-22/mrs-america-phyllis-schlafly-reading-list>. "Cock and Cunt Play," *MIT Libraries*, <http://dome.mit.edu/handle/1721.3/2857>. Spruill, *Divided We Stand*. The dialogue based on Marjorie Spruill's interview is found on page 306, and in episode 7 of *Mrs. America*. I asked Spruill whether she had consulted with Dahvi Waller. E-mails between Jane Kamensky and Marjorie Spruill, Aug. 16, Aug. 17, Aug. 20, Aug. 21, Aug. 22, 2020 (in Jane Kamensky's possession). The degree of borrowing and the lack of credit is also noted in Samuel G. Freedman, "The Book behind the Cable Series

Yet Waller has not successfully borrowed from Spruill the thing that matters most: an analytical frame. Nine hours of viewing *Mrs. America* may occasionally delight and often transport you. But it will not educate you, or your students, about the core questions such a magical history tour should at least take a stab at answering: What did the forces arrayed against the equal rights amendment believe? Why, seemingly against all odds, did they prevail? And whose revolution was it, anyway?

On the STOP forces' belief system, the series comes up empty. Waller's Schlafly is plucked straight from the pages of *The Feminine Mystique*. Her brilliant mind is wasted at home. We are given to believe that her marriage—by all accounts joyful—hovered at the edge of violence. We are instructed that her maternal duties, to the six children Schlafly accounted the center of her life, were quietly outsourced, to a long-suffering sister-in-law Eleanor (Jeanne Tripplehorn), and to Willie Bea Reed (Novie Edwards), the African American housekeeper whom Blanchett's Schlafly stares straight through, in a subplot that wandered in from *The Help* (2011). The verdict on Schlafly's domesticity gets its *coup de grâce* in episode 9, with the intimation that she *did not even bake her own pies*.⁸

Suffering from the problem that has no name, this fictional Schlafly is motivated by a Nietzschean will to power. Having failed to achieve sufficient political clout through her early writings and two losing runs for Congress, she settles reluctantly for women's issues, served up to her on a platter by Alice Macray (Sarah Paulsen), a fictional character who does heavy narrative lifting in the show. Once she reads Friedan, Blanchett's Schlafly gets an idea, a wonderful, awful idea: here is the win she's been yearning for. She marshals the troops, other white, suburban housewives downtrodden enough to fight as much for as with Schlafly, who keeps them always in her shadow, and snappishly nudges them aside if ever they crowd her spotlight. Only Alice goes AWOL, in episode 8, "Houston," *Mrs. America's* climax and its nadir. At the federally funded National Women's Conference held there in November 1977, Alice breaks ranks, first accidentally—she is drunk, drugged, *go ask Alice!*—and then on purpose. By episode 9, she has experienced a full conversion, shedding the false consciousness of traditionalism for the true gospel of feminism. In this characterization, Waller echoes the perspective of the conference organizers, who imagined, Spruill writes, that the Houston proceedings would attract "conservative women—presumably alienated by fear, misinformation, and/or pressure from men—whose minds would be opened by the experience."⁹ Spruill knows how misguided that assumption was. Waller seems not to.

The conservative women of *Mrs. America* are mere reactionaries, with no generative ideas, only fear curdled into fury. Waller presents STOP's antifeminism as a dog's breakfast of red meat and fake news that not even its high priestess quite believes. Yet historians have argued for a generation that the beliefs and actions of women from the Midwest and the sun belt nursed the New Right from infancy to the juggernaut it is today.¹⁰

"Mrs. America," *Washington Post*, May 14, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/the-book-behind-mrs-america/2020/05/14/f03cb276-938e-11ea-91d7-cf4423d47683_story.html.

⁸ Willie Bea Reed in fact worked for the Schlafly family for a quarter century. Carol Felsenthal, *The Sweetheart of the Silent Majority: The Biography of Phyllis Schlafly* (Garden City, 1981), 123n. *The Help*, dir. Tate Taylor (DreamWorks, Reliance Film and Entertainment, 1492 Pictures, and Harbinger Pictures, 2011).

⁹ Spruill, *Divided We Stand*, 144.

¹⁰ For a primer on this work, see Kim Phillips-Fein, "Conservatism: A State of the Field," *Journal of American History*, 98 (Dec. 2011), 723–43.

Phyllis Schlafly did not want for ideas; like her opponents, she had principles as well as interests. Where Waller portrays Schlafly's antifeminism as a shallow, strategic sideshow, well outside her true passion for defense policy, Schlafly in fact saw communism and feminism as two sides of a single coin: totalizing secular faiths pitted against the American family. The Soviet constitution boasted an equal rights plank, the real Schlafly wrote in "What's Wrong with Equal Rights for Women," her first shot across the bow of the ratification campaign, printed in her newsletter in February 1972, before the amendment cleared the senate. "Equal rights' in the Soviet Union means that the Russian woman is *obliged* to put her baby in a state-operated nursery or kindergarten so she can join the labor force." There, her equal rights meant doing "the heavy, dirty work American women do not do." The ERA, like communism, would subordinate family to state in the name of mooting the differences between women and men. Though Schlafly applauded sex difference, she did not condone discrimination. "Most people mistakenly believe that 'equal rights' means simply 'equal pay for equal work,' and we are all in favor of this," she noted. Nor did she believe that women should be confined to the kitchen. Elsewhere, she wrote in favor of the opportunities women gained under Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and other legislation. She did not see her own education and vocational achievements as contrary to her family-first agenda. But she thought it radical and dangerous that the ERA would set the autonomous rights-bearing subject—a subject who had no sex, despite the fact that "women have babies and men don't"—over and above the family as "the basic unit of society."¹¹

Revising the basic unit of society did in fact lie at the core of many versions of women's rights thinking from the age of revolutions forward. By the early 1960s, at the dawn of the so-called second wave, feminists had injected into this individualist ideology a healthy dose of contempt for the conventional roles of wife and mother. Betty Friedan famously called suburban family life a "comfortable concentration camp" and compared the mental "deterioration" of thwarted housewives to that of Korean War POWs. No wonder Schlafly quickly discovered that feminist literature could serve as a potent recruiting tool. She reprinted thousands of copies of the National Organization for Women (NOW) 1973 pamphlet "Revolution: Tomorrow is NOW" for distribution to civilians and state legislators, many of whom had previously considered the ERA innocuous. The NOW manifesto declared that women's "voluntary activities"—in the kinds of faith and community groups where so many eventual STOP members had long been active—"serve to maintain woman's dependent and secondary status." "Community service is in essence housekeeping on a large scale," and thus "antithetical to the goals of the feminist movement" and "detrimental to the liberation of women." NOW would help women trapped in these roles to "raise [their] consciousness," the better to see the true "interests of women." The pamphlet also took aim at the conventions for female modesty imposed by some faith traditions, including Schlafly's Catholic Church. "Because the wearing of a head covering by women at religious services is a symbol of subjection in many churches," the pamphlet urged "all women" to "participate in a 'national unveiling,'" sending their discarded mantillas to NOW's religion task force chair, whose spring meeting would see them "all

¹¹ Phyllis Schlafly, "What's Wrong with 'Equal Rights' for Women?," *Phyllis Schlafly Report*, 5 (Feb. 1972), esp. 3, 1. Emphasis in original. See also Spruill, *Divided We Stand*, 103.

publicly burned to protest the second-class status of women in all churches.” Millions of ordinary women who believed in their traditional roles, who didn’t feel deluded or deplorable, who didn’t want to break their chains or burn their bras, much less their communion veils, became, with the galvanizing force of Schlafly’s leadership, a potent bloc in a dawning political order.¹²

The best Waller’s heroines can marshal for women who believe what Schlafly believed is pity. An exchange in episode 2 captures the tone:

Friedan: “They’re not equipped to earn a living. They’re scared . . .”

Ruckleshaus: “We could all be a little more careful with our rhetoric. We do not want housewives thinking we’re against them.”

Brenda Feigen-Fasteau: “We *are* against them.”

Steinem: “Revolutions are messy. People get left behind. . . . How long do we give people to adapt to change? Or am I the only one who’s so fucking tired of waiting?”

Waller, Blanchett, and the rest of the *Mrs. America* production team are all clearly now, nearly a half century later, pretty fucking tired. But however exhausted by the fight, the series’ creators seem to have lost little of the moral confidence of feminists at the beginning of the ERA’s perilous journey through the disunited states. “She is *not* going to have the last word,” Steinem says of Schlafly near the end of the final episode. Last seen musing to herself about the long revolution, ten thousand years of patriarchy in the making, Steinem declares, “There can be no turning back.”

The absurd fate Waller’s team invents for Schlafly seals Steinem’s promise. In the end, we learn that Schlafly is not Don Draper, serene on his mountain top, sensing the Next Big Thing, but rather Don’s poor discarded wife, Betty, literally dead in *Mad Men*, figuratively so in *Mrs. America*. In the final scene, we see a silent Schlafly, denied the cabinet post we’re told she was gunning for all along, tied into her apron, caged in her kitchen, consigned to peel an eternity of apples, while a doleful folk anthem, “Little Weaver Bird,” plays: a dirge for a funeral of Waller’s own invention.¹³

Mrs. America to the contrary, Schlafly triumphed. The ERA died, the victim, as the Harvard University political scientist Jane Mansbridge makes clear in her brilliant post mortem, *Why We Lost the ERA* (1986), of a devastating “institutionalized deafness” that rendered activists on both sides incapable of “assimilating information about the struggle in which they were engaged.” Mansbridge urges feminists—in whose rank she counts herself—to ponder several difficult, even existential questions: “Was the struggle worth the enormous effort they poured into it? . . . Were any ‘mistakes’ made in the campaign from which all political activists can learn?” Her answers are nuanced and equivocal.¹⁴

¹² Reva B. Siegel, “The Nineteenth Amendment and the Democratization of the Family,” *Yale Law Journal Forum*, Jan. 20, 2020, pp. 450–95. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique: Annotated Text, Contexts, Scholarship* (New York, 2013), esp. 341–43. Phyllis Schlafly initially republished and distributed “Revolution” in pamphlet form. See Donald T. Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman’s Crusade* (Princeton, 2018), 229. She also reproduced it in its entirety in Phyllis Schlafly, *The Power of the Positive Woman* (New Rochelle, 1977), 182–214, esp. 188, 189, 207.

¹³ Schlafly, or at least some of her political allies, appears to have campaigned for a cabinet post or other official role in the Reagan administration. See Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism*, 276, 394n18; Spruill, *Divided We Stand*, 318; and Randall Balmer, “Pursuit of High Office,” *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 8, 2016, p. A13.

¹⁴ Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA*, 3, 187.

Waller feels no need to ask these questions. In the alternate universe of *Mrs. America*, the ERA is only “stopped”—in a deep sleep, like Snow White, waiting for Steinem’s kiss to awaken it. The closing titles tell us that three state legislatures have ratified the no-longer-pending amendment since 2017. We see stills of the Women’s March that January, and of congresswomen dressed in suffrage white two years later. “RESIST,” one marcher’s placard says. She glows with confidence that a sea of pink pussy hats shall set her free.