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Cate Blanchett plays Phyllis Schlafly in "Mrs. America." (Kimberly Diehl/Fox Entertainment Group)



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In 1971, when the new television series "Mrs. America" begins, Phyllis Schlafly, played to perfection by Cate Blanchett, is at the top of her game.

With a graduate degree in government from Radcliffe College, a failed bid for Congress, ongoing anti-communist political activism, a best-selling book (*A Choice Not an Echo*, 1964), married to attorney Fred (John Slattery), and raising six children in Alton, Illinois, she's ready to run for office again. Her political ambitions, however, turn into organizing the STOP ERA movement to thwart the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment by the states in the 1970s.

Three of nine episodes of the new FX series became available on Hulu this week. Each deals with the ERA, women's liberation, abortion and politics from the conflicting perspectives of Schlafly and a leading woman (or man) of the times, including Gloria Steinem (Rose Byrne), Bella Abzug (Margo Martindale), and Shirley Chisolm (Uzo Aduba).

Episode 1 sets the table by introducing us to Phyllis and her family, including her sister-in-law Eleanor (Jeanne Tripplehorn). We not only learn Phyllis' backstory but see that she smiles through much of the issues the "women libbers" are against. For example, that only men could sign credit card applications, that men's needs come first, that sexual harassment and humiliation are normal in the political scene, and that husbands want their wives to stay home and raise children, "write books, give lectures" — but not run for Congress.

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Rose Byrne plays Gloria Steinem in "Mrs. America" (Kimberly Diehl/Fox Entertainment Group)

The first episode reveals the contradiction Phyllis is living. While she spouts American family values — meaning financially stable, white women should stay home, raise their babies and keep house — she does have an African American maid or two and does whatever she wants when it comes to furthering her political agenda. She does not seem to care much about women outside of her own social sphere, though she is as condescending to her sister as men are to her.

Schlafly was viscerally anti-communist, and the influence of her anti-communist stance should not be underestimated. In fact, the third episode ends with Schlafly making a loving visit to the bomb shelter in the basement of their family home in 1973. The threat was never far off, in her mind, including in the women's liberation movement.

Phyllis is very informed about nuclear arms and America's nuclear preparedness to counter threats from the U.S.S.R. In Washington to secure funding for her congressional campaign, she attends a meeting of influential lawmakers. After giving her very articulate input on the nuclear arms situation, a senator asks her to find pen and paper and take notes, thus silencing her.

But when she learns that the ERA is up for ratification by at least 38 states, she believes it is an even bigger threat to her conservative vision of America. She reads everything she can about it, including *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan, and concludes four things will happen if ratified: same-sex bathrooms, abortion on demand, loss of alimony in a divorce, and the draft for their daughters, even though the amendment says: "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex." No one can deny that Phyllis is the smartest person in any room, but she cannot see that she needs the ERA as much as anyone. Indeed, she lives her own version of it.



Phyllis Schlafly, wearing a "Stop ERA" badge, demonstrates with other women against the Equal Rights Amendment in front of the White House, Washington, D.C., Feb. 4, 1977. (Wikimedia Commons/Library of Congress/U.S. News & World Report/Warren K. Leffler)

Episode 2 is dedicated to the heroine of women's liberation, Gloria Steinem. She launches Ms. magazine and dedicates herself to making sure abortion is included in the Democratic Party's platform of the upcoming convention in Miami Beach. Not everyone agrees with her, and fissures occur in the women's liberation movement.

Phyllis, meanwhile, begins to organize against the ERA, using the Schlafly Report newsletter and Eagle Forum mailing list to spread her message. Rose Byrne plays a sympathetic version of Steinem, whose abortion in England when she was younger fuels her activism.

Episode 3 is about Shirley Chisolm, played with great passion by "Orange is the New Black" actress Uzo Aduba. While Chisolm is not against the ERA, she does everything she can to gain delegate votes at the upcoming Democratic convention to advance

the idea that a woman, a black woman, can be the president of the United States. The tension between the women's liberation group and Chisolm's team cost Chisolm much political capital. Of all the characters in the story so far, I like Aduba's compelling performance as Chisolm the best.

Phyllis, meanwhile, organizes and manages to block ratification of the ERA in Illinois in a very innovative way.



Uzo Aduba plays Shirley Chisholm in "Mrs. America." (Kimberly Diehl/Fox Entertainment Group)

"Mrs. America" is about a woman who is highly intelligent, well-educated, dedicated to her Catholic faith (though it is not mentioned much so far), and on a mission as if it came straight from God. She juggles all aspects of her life, but of course she has the freedom, means and hired help to do so. So far in the show, if she has any personal, inner challenges, they are not evident. Even though she often has a good excuse to grit her teeth when she faces sexual harassment or humiliation by men, she moves on, moves ahead, gaining political power without challenging the status quo that lets her do it.

Although I never met Phyllis when I lived and carried out our Pauline apostolate in St. Louis in the early 1980s, I met Eleanor Schlafly a few times. I don't think the series' research was very thorough because she is presented as a rather frumpy, disappointed and unfulfilled woman without a man to make her happy. The truth is, in 1971 she was already very active with the anti-communist Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation that she, Phyllis, Fred and a priest had founded in 1958 in St. Louis. She was just as passionate, intelligent, politically and religiously conservative, active, forceful, attractive and classy as her better known sister-in-law.

One of our sisters who met Phyllis a couple of times but knew Eleanor in the 1970s told me that she found Phyllis aloof and condescending, whereas Eleanor was stately, not a hair out of place, caring and friendly. I met Eleanor two or three times in the early '80s, and my impression was that she had a very strong personality, not the wimp we see in the first episodes.

Each episode opens with a frame stating: "This program is based on actual events that occurred during the political struggle and debate over the Equal Rights Amendment. Some characters in the program are fictional and some scenes and dialogue are invented for creative and storytelling purposes."

I think the series creator and head writer Dahvi Waller ("Mad Men," "Desperate Housewives") is creative and not so very objective about her subject. She seems to think Phyllis is a great subject, even comedic, who is misdirected in her views. Schlafly's willingness to subject herself to unpleasant and unsavory experiences while crusading so ardently for what amounts to the exact structures that allow for sexual harassment and white, male privilege — issues that the ERA could influence

for the better — makes Schlafly's ambitions appear ridiculous in a very subtle way. This isn't a negative thing per se. In fact, it makes good television. Schlafly comes off as a machine, a beautiful, ambitious machine, that to this point operates without introspection.



Phyllis Schlafly of Eagle Forum speaking at CPAC 2011 in Washington, D.C. (Wikimedia Commons/Gage Skidmore)

The final six episodes (that I have not yet screened) will focus on Betty Friedan; a debate between Phyllis, Fred and the feminist couple Brenda (Ari Graynor) and Marc Feugen Fasteau (Adam Brody); Jill Ruckelshaus (Elizabeth Banks), Bella Abzug, the National Women's Conference in Houston, and Schlafly's anti-feminist follow-up. The final episode is titled "Reagan."

Schlafly was an ardent supporter of Barry Goldwater in 1960, and some think her efforts to convince women to stay home over the years paved the way for Reagan's election, though initially she did not think he was conservative enough. Indeed, she hoped for a place in his administration.

Schlafly, who supported the religious right from its early days, at age 91, endorsed Donald Trump at a rally in St. Louis a few months before she died in 2016. I am not sure if these facts will be included in the series, but this endorsement demonstrates Schlafly's consistency throughout her life.

The series is about women and identifying, negotiating, taking and shaping personal, political, corporate, social and cultural power in American life. Schlafly is the opposite of a radical feminist, or even a Christian feminist. She wants to be a beautiful and powerful leader of women with all the power and influence that men have, so she can take her rightful place among *them*. This is the core conflict Schlafly brings to a series about herself.

I will say this, Schlafly is a rather fascinating figure, and I hope the series will invite all of us to consider and talk about what it means to be an authentic woman in our society today where equity between men and women is still a dream.

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