

Neoconservative Midge Decter's Antifeminism: A Potential Matrix for the Religious StopERA Movement (1970-1975)?

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ABSTRACT: This article proposes a comparison between the antifeminist arguments of Neoconservative intellectual Midge Decter at the beginning of the 1970s and those of Republican politician Phyllis Schlafly, as she headed the Stop Era movement (1972-1973). Introduced at first in 1923, then resubmitted in 1971, the Equal Rights Amendment's ratification would have enshrined a new amendment in the US Constitution, prohibiting any kind of gender discrimination in the country. Schlafly's campaign ultimately blocked the ERA'S ratification. This article seeks to show the potential influence of Decter on the building of religious right anti-feminist arguments during the Stop Era campaign through Phyllis Schlafly, as a tactical intermediary.

KEYWORDS: Women, Feminism, Antifeminism, 1970s, StopEra, Neoconservatism, Religious Right.

Introduction

Midge Decter (1927- 2022), born Midge Rosenthal in Saint Paul, Minnesota, was an American neoconservative journalist.¹ She was first married in 1947 to Moshe Decter (1921-2007)²—whose name she kept—and then in 1956 to Norman Podhoretz (born in 1930), who was for

¹ Her recent passing (2022) incited the writing of many obituaries. One such example is Douglas Martin, "Midge Decter, an Architect of Neoconservatism, Dies at 94," *The New York Times*, 9 May 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/09/books/midge-decter-dead.html>. Accessed 9 May 2024. See also her own son's eulogy: John Podhoretz, "A Son's Eulogy for Midge Decter (1927-2022)," *Commentary*, 12 May 2022, <https://www.commentary.org/john-podhoretz/son-eulogy-midge-decter/>. Accessed 9 May 2024.

² Decter served as executive secretary for the Conference on the Status of Soviet Jews and was director of research of the *American Jewish Congress*. He worked for Nativ, Lishkat Hakesher, and The Liaison Bureau, an Israeli liaison organization that maintained contact with Jews living in the Eastern Bloc during the Cold War and encouraged *Aliyah*, or immigration to Israel. After the collapse of the U.S.S.R., Decter worked as an editor of the *Near East Report*, and he served as an adviser to the Israeli Embassy in Washington.

35 years the editor of the monthly magazine, *Commentary* (1960-1995), an influential publication by the *American Jewish Committee*. With Donald Rumsfeld, Midge Decter co-chaired and was an Executive Director (1981-1991) of the think tank *Committee for the Free World*. She was a founding member of the think tank *Project for the New American Century* (PNAC), which was active between 1997 and 2006 under the supervision of William Kristol and Robert Kagan. PNAC's official task was to promote U.S. global leadership, based on the fundamental premise that American leadership was good for the world. This organization had a strong influence on senior U.S. government officials during President George W. Bush's two terms and had a significant impact on foreign policy, national security, and the decision to go to war in Iraq in the 2000s.

In addition to her political engagement in foreign affairs, Midge Decter furthered the cause against the feminist movement(s).³ She pointed out that feminism was a navel-gazing movement led by privileged women, who shunned their responsibilities as wives and mothers, and despised the great civilization that had given them so many advantages. This article examines her arguments at the beginning of the 1970s, to note that they correspond very closely to those of opponents to the Equal Rights Amendment, who were primarily religious conservative women.⁴ How could it be possible that Decter's arguments were used as a resource for a movement which foreshadowed the Christian Right, even though Decter gave no religious arguments in her antifeminism? Phyllis Schlafly could have been the intermediary.

Midge Decter's Indirect Influence on Blocking the ERA?

³ And later against gay rights, cf. her article, "Civil Unions: Compromise or Surrender," *Imprimis*, vol. 33, no. 11, Nov. 2004, <https://imprimis.hillsdale.edu/civil-unions-compromise-or-surrender/>. Accessed 9 May 2024.

⁴ The renewed interest in the ERA amendment prompted by the fourth wave of feminism and the #MeToo movement has led to several recent publications on the subject, such as Hal Draper and Stephen F. Diamond, *The Hidden Story of The Equal Rights Amendment*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014; Jessica Neuwirth, *Equal Means Equal: Why A Time for an Equal Rights Amendment is Now*, The New Press, 2015; July C. Suk, *We The Women: The Unstoppable Mothers of Equal Rights Amendment*, Everand Electronic Editions, 2020.

Midge Decter wrote two books at the turn of the 1970s: *The Liberated Woman and Other Americans* (1970), a collection of essays written during the 1960s on the status of women, liberalism, and American identity, and then *The New Chastity and Other Arguments Against Women's Liberation* (1972). This second book was a complement to the article, "The Liberated Woman" she published in the magazine *Commentary* in 1970. It was a critique of Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) but coincided with Congress's passage of the Equal Rights Amendment at the end of March 1972.⁵

It does not seem to be a coincidence that Decter had recently attacked the women's movement and that the ERA was facing serious, but unexpected challenges. The ratification process collapsed because of the Stop ERA movement, an extraordinary counter-mobilization which reacted to two subsequent feminist protests that had promoted the ERA.⁶ Stop ERA eventually impeded the adoption of the amendment in fifteen states. It unexpectedly used Decter's antifeminist arguments. How did this happen?

Stop ERA emerged as a national campaign, supported by conservative and religious women, and led by the Republican, Catholic, journalist, and politician Phyllis Schlafly (1924-2016). Its task was clear: prevent the adoption of the ERA by mobilizing state legislatures in opposition to the amendment. Born in 1924 in St. Louis, Missouri, Schlafly was an excellent and ambitious student. She graduated from Washington University and then from Radcliffe College in Political Science (1945). She entered politics because of her strong anticommunist beliefs and became a researcher at the American Enterprise Association, a forerunner of the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, one of the most influential conservative think tanks since the Second World War. Schlafly broke through to the national scene in the 1960s,

⁵ The resolution was passed during the 92nd session of Congress by the House of Representatives on October 12, 1971 with 354 votes and by the Senate on March 2, 1972 with 82 votes. In both cases, it was voted on with a bipartisan majority. President Richard Nixon immediately signed it.

⁶ The first event took place in 1970. It was called the *Women's March for Equality* and was led by Gloria Steinem, Bella Abzug, and Betty Friedan who had co-founded the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966. The second one occurred in 1971, when Fannie Lou Hamer, Myrlie Evers, and House Representative Shirley Chisholm of the National Women's Political Caucus, and Democratic Representative Martha Griffiths of Michigan, along with NOW, pushed for the resolution of a constitutional amendment on equal rights.

with a stimulating best seller, *A Choice Not an Echo* (1964), which established her reputation within the Republican Party. By taking a stand in favor of Barry Goldwater on the Republican presidential ticket, she was credited with Goldwater's success in the Republican primaries. Her presence and speeches galvanized his Californian supporters against New York candidate, Nelson Rockefeller.⁷ In 1967, despite her influence, Schlafly lost the leadership race for the Federation of Republican Women. She began writing and distributing the *Phyllis Schlafly Report*, which was supported by Republican women's clubs and soon by specific Schlafly Clubs (Fesenthal 181-188).

Schlafly's patient lobbying paid off in February 1972 when she wrote a piece in the *Phyllis Schlafly Report* entitled "What's Wrong with 'Equal Rights' for Women?" She and her soon-to-be-formed Stop ERA network contacted thousands of Mormon, Baptist, Methodist, and Church of Christ women to influence legislatures in the Midwest, South, and West. It was the first time that a significant number of conservative and anti-feminist women came together to protest (Critchlow, 212). It was also the first time that a conservative mobilization had brought together a broad spectrum of religious denominations, suggesting that their promoters understood the strong potential of this kind of coalition. Strong action on the part of Schlafly and her team, combined with women activists' support for the Republican Party and the *Christian Voice* lobby, defeated the constitutional amendment declaring women's equality in less than two years, although many took its passage for granted in 1972.⁸ By 1975,

⁷ At the same time, Schlafly married and raised six children.

⁸ As stipulated by Article 5 of the US Constitution, the amendment had to be ratified by three quarters of the states (i.e. 38 of them) to be definitively adopted. A particularity of the ERA was that it had a seven-year ratification deadline. The first deadline was 1979. It was then extended to 1982. No other states voted to ratify the ERA between 1979 and 1982. Because only 35 states had ratified the amendment before the deadline, the situation was left pending for years until three states ratified the ERA, because of the aforementioned fourth wave: Nevada in 2017, Illinois in 2018, and Virginia in 2020. There has been a legal and scholarly debate on the legality of the ERA's ratification certification, due to the deadline not being respected and the fact that, between 1982 and 2017, five states decided to rescind their ratification. As such, the Archivist of the United States and chief administrator of the National Archives and Records Administration has not yet taken the final ministerial step of publishing the ERA in the *Federal Register* with certification of its ratification as the 28th Amendment. When the 117th U.S. Congress convened in full on January 21, 2021, resolutions with bipartisan support were introduced to remove the time limit placed upon the ERA in 1972. The House voted in favor of the resolution by a majority of 222-

the Stop ERA movement became the Eagle Forum interest group and had a total of 50,000 members. It still exists.

The Stop Era movement started after 1972 Phyllis Schlafly's report. In this report, Schlafly's arguments were not religious, but very close to those articulated by Midge Decter in her articles and two books. How might a line be drawn between Schlafly, a Catholic conservative, and Decter, a Jewish, secular intellectual from New York? Decter had little to do with the world of conservative religious women. She never wrote anything on the immorality or sinfulness of abortion. She never used religious vocabulary about men's natural authority over women being given by God. By contrast, the conservative religious women who followed Schlafly staked their claims of antifeminism in traditionalist Christian values. Concerning the structure of Christian families, they readily took for granted the Pauline injunction: "But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God" (*RNJB*, 1 Cor. 11.3). In other words, Jesus's hierarchical authority over humankind was mirrored in the hierarchical structure of the couple, where husband has authority over wife. For example, the 1973 antifeminist best-seller by Marabel Morgan, *The Total Woman*, insisted on the idea that "God ordained man to be the head of the family, its president" (57). Morgan's advice to her female readers was therefore simple: "Your husband is what he is. Accept him as that... A Total Woman caters to her man's special quirks, whether it be in salads, sex, or sports" (60).

However, the Stop Era campaign, under Schlafly's leadership, did not use this kind of religious argument in its vigorous and successful public propaganda. Our hypothesis is, by comparing Decter's and Schlafly's assertions, that Schlafly had read Decter's writings on feminism and decided to endorse Decter's arguments as her own. It is a hypothesis that must be substantiated by archivist investigation. We merely emphasize the close arguments and the

204, but the Senate did not. In 2023, the Congressional Caucus for the Equal Rights Amendment was founded by House Democrats to break the deadlock.

rationality of using them. As Schlafly was herself an attorney trained in the political and legal systems of the U.S., she could have found these arguments very pertinent for her purposes. It is likely she envisioned the ERA's failure as a coup, to demonstrate her own leadership abilities, a role she had been denied by the Republican Party, despite all her efforts and talents, because she was a woman. Claiming that the ERA was wrong for America because nothing was forbidden to women in this country, was indeed a better way to legitimate her political prowess and engagement than the religiously ordered subordination of women (Coste 168). Given her background in research, Schlafly was also intellectually acquainted with the budding neoconservative milieu and its writings.

Women Enjoy the Same Rights as Men in the U.S but Feminism Makes Them Believe Otherwise

The "Movement," a word Midge Decter systematically used to refer to feminism, made women believe that they were not free. This was false according to Decter. She wrote extensively about this in *The Liberated Woman*. This is also what Schlafly wrote in her 1972 newsletter: feminism infantilized women by making them believe that they were victims of a system, whereas everything was open to them in American society, if they wanted it. Feminism made women "enemies" of the only society that was the most favorable to them and weaponized women to destroy this protective frame. In *The New Chastity*, Decter described the women's movement as reminiscent of the student movements of the early 1960s, a sort of "terrorized refusal to be embroiled in the biological chain of birth, growth, and death. (Women) are asking, in other words, to remain children" (56). The women's movement was described as the product of emotional and intellectual laziness, masquerading as a "passion for social justice" and its effect, if allowed to pursue its course, would be that all people, "men, women and babes in arms, live to reap the whirlwind" (57). Decter denounced feminist movements as both counter-productive and disingenuous; she praised the stability of the American system in the face of efforts to subvert it by "glamorous swashbucklers among the heralds of racial revolution; students; women" (58).

This posture encapsulates Decter's ideological position. She blamed feminists for not recognizing the great freedom that existed for women in the United States. Compared to elsewhere in the world, this freedom was tangible both legally and culturally. Using an old rhetorical tradition employed by antisuffragist women of the nineteenth century like Catharine Beecher and Eliza Farnham, Decter criticized them for using what amounted, in her eyes, to an ideological generalization of the systemic subordination of women in the workplace and in society, in general. Decter denied the systemic character of subordination as ideological, as her critics accused her of idealizing American women's fate because of her own privileged position. Decter, not only sociologically, but legally as well, rejected the premise of the sociological misfortune of women. And she did so, partly because the (feminist) "Movement's" explanation of patriarchy and dominance-subordination relationships at work in Western laws, cultures, and gender relations, seemed to be highly infused with Marxist ideology.⁹ For Decter, American women benefited significantly, like men, from the advantages of the freedom and security achieved by their democratic and Lockean American Constitution. In *The New Chastity*, Decter held that the women's liberation movement did not embody a new wave of demands for equal rights, nor was it "the sign of a desire for freedom" (60). Rather, she interpreted it as a demonstration of immaturity that women protested, failing to recognize the rights and freedoms they already enjoyed (61).

Schlafly, in her 1972 article, entitled "What's Wrong with 'Equal Rights' for Women?" followed Decter's assertion that American rights and freedoms were indistinctly granted to men and women. In her imaginative description of the young American girl and her troubling discovery of feminism, Schlafly presented the American girl as pampered from birth, as protected in childhood by a benevolent educational system that favored, above all, her development. The American teenager was free to move around and to drive "her" car. As a young adult, she was

⁹ Friedrich Engels (*The Origins of The Family, Private Property and The State*, 1884) and Simone de Beauvoir (*Le Deuxième Sexe*, 1949) argued that monotheistic patriarchy permeated the entire history of the West. Erich Newman (*The Fear of Feminine and Other Essays*, 1975) argued that patriarchy was directly connected to slavish and exploitative economies and cultures.

free to study, to work, and to marry. Schlafly abundantly illustrated these assertions and those that followed in her 1977 book *The Power of The Positive Woman*. A point of contrast can be seen in that Decter added to these freedoms and protections the freedom to divorce, if wanted, and the seemingly obvious fact that young American women benefited from sexual freedom. They had the ability to control their fertility and to have an abortion. Having an abortion, in Decter's description of this young American woman's world, seemed to be easily accessible, despite the extensive legal barriers that still existed at the beginning of the 1970s. Of course, Schlafly did not use these arguments about sexual freedom and abortion to advance her vision of freedoms afforded to women and girls at that time.

In 1974, Susan Grossman Alexander described Decter's secular defense of women's rights as oblivious to women's conditions. According to her, Decter—and then Schlafly after her—reduced her analysis of women's lives by restricting her discussion to two categories: middle-class, married women and middle-class, young, unmarried women. Decter would have shown no interest in older, unmarried women and their problems, nor did she exhibit real concern for poor women of any age. This oversight would have been the result of her assuming, along with many others, that the women's movement had been spearheaded by middle-class women, so it could be attacked as a middle-class movement which ignored the concerns of non-middle-class women. But Decter specifically described feminism as a white middle-class product, unable to help lower-class women of color. The struggle against restrictive abortion laws, a fight which many middle-class women took up, could not be a central issue for Decter, as she assumed that middle-class women had the means to have abortions and never felt the harshness of the laws restricting it to the same extent that poor women of color did. Thinking thus, Decter presented the unequal burden of restrictive abortion laws on poor women of color as part of a double level of discrimination that white women did not experience.

Women Have a Privileged Position in American Society: Protecting Their Maternal Role as Pillars of the Family

According to Schlafly's newsletter, the most "basic unit of society" is the family (89) in which women, as those who bear babies, are the most important members. Thus, men have put

them “on a pedestal” (90). The “superiority” of women results from this biological and historical evolution. Schlafly describes women as essentially nurturers in need of economic support and protection while raising their children. She wrote:

Our Judeo-Christian civilization has developed the law and custom that, since women bear the physical consequences of the sex act, men must be required to pay in other ways. These laws and customs decree that a man must carry his share, by physical protection and financial support of his children and of the woman who bears his children. (89)

These ideas can be found verbatim in Decter’s writings. Decter asserted that women received the outstanding treatment they deserved in American society, as she summarized in a later article:

Marriage and the family are institutions answering primarily to the needs of women and invented for their benefit. It is in their nature to be monogamous, and to need protection and defense and support for themselves and their children. In exchange, they agree to supply men with the comforts of the home: a place to be oneself, to hide from the pressures of the world outside, some easy companionship, children with which to claim the future, and forgiveness for weakness. It’s actually, when you think of it, a pretty good deal all around. (“Again, The American Family” 134)

Decter seemed deliberately to ignore not only the true rigor of the social norms, but also the role of the law in the traditional treatment of women, when, at the same time in the U.S., women striving for equal rights and freedom had increasingly turned to the laws and courts, with considerable success, to achieve better treatment. With respect to marriage, Decter proclaimed that it was an institution entered “for the sake of bringing a much-needed fixity and security to its female member” (“Again. The American Family” 133) and she puzzled over the characterization of marriage by the Women's Liberation movement as “the very model of exploitation of women by men” (134).¹⁰ But what about legal practices concerning civil

¹⁰ Decter went a long way toward explaining the reasons for such a characterization, in an earlier passage of her 1972 book, where she noted the “alteration” wrought in a woman's life by marriage: “She is now ...defined by the fact that she is a wife” (131). At the same time, “[t]his will not at all be true of her husband.... A husband is an incidental thing to be... She is his, but he is not her’s [sic] in anything like the same way.” Why such disparity? “For one thing,” wrote Decter, “she takes his name” (132). Moreover, “she will be expected to fit her own professional life, if she has one, as well as her social behavior to his needs

marriage, like the wife taking her husband's surname or place of residence? It was because of the pressure women, who had been disadvantaged by legally sanctioned biases, were exerting on American jurisdictions and state legislatures that they eventually examined the relevant laws and worked to correct them after 1971.¹¹ For example, in 1973, California enacted a law to enable married women to establish residences apart from their husbands, thereby allowing them to qualify for reduced tuition and fee requirements at state colleges and universities.

Even if one does accept Decter's argument that, under the rule of American law, women "marry freely and of their own volition"—rather than because society had "in a number of ways trapped them into it," which was the general position of the women's movement at the time—it does not necessarily follow that women were, for that reason, "concerned with pleasing their husbands" (*The New Chastity* 135). Concerning the "support and protection" expected and received by wives upon marriage, Decter based her claims on the ideal rather than reality. Statistics on desertion and other kinds of unwillingness to provide either economic security or care and love would have demonstrated that marriage was not always the protective umbrella that Decter described. She would have demanded that the American law treat married men who evaded their financial duties towards their wives and families harsher.

Women Are Privileged Because They Do Not Need to Work, While Feminism Forces Them to Do So

Decter's arguments on the issue of work should be considered in their context, at a time when the 1972 Equal Employment Opportunity Act had not insisted on gender but on racial equality, which partly explained why the ERA was being promoted simultaneously. According to Decter,

as the family's major breadwinner. If he must live in a certain place, or in a certain style, or according to a certain routine, so must she" (132).

¹¹ For a discussion of various objections to the automatic replacement of a women's maiden name by her husband's name, see Maria M. Hughes, "And Then There Were Two," *Hastings Law Journal*, vol. 23, no. 1, 1971, pp. 233-247.

https://repository.uclawsf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2207&context=hastings_law_journal.

in an earlier article published in 1961, "Women at Work," the discourse on necessary and emancipatory work did women no good, as it transformed husbands and families into personal impediments. More importantly, this discourse pushed women to "go to work," thus increasing their burden and stress, especially when they had babies and small children. In her 1970 article "The Liberated Woman," Decter explained that the real inequality lay between women who were forced to work—such as women of color, due to lack of support, severe poverty, and single motherhood—and women who were not. Midge Decter also posited that women do not have the same relationship to work as men because work is not considered a priority in their lives. Pushing women to pursue a career would only make them endorse a masculine way of thinking, oblige them to reason in terms of success and failure, as winners and losers, which was supposedly at odds with female psychology. Gender inequality at work because of childcare was not a sign of discrimination, because it was believed to be normal to stop working when a woman had young children. Women who continued to work despite having small children were both too few and too privileged to be significant examples. They could afford to pay someone to look after their children, which was not the case for most women ("The Liberated Woman" 36). Unless a woman was fortunate enough to marry a man who could, and in fact did, provide all the support and protection that Decter's argument put forward, she might face the unpleasant alternatives of a difficult life. This was the reason for the feminist emphasis on equal education, equal job opportunities, and when possible, equal distribution of the burden of childcare. Without these, a woman was weakened to the point of exploitation and, as such, could not continue to view marriage as a shelter.

With respect to gender discrimination in employment, Decter also criticized the feminist discourse on women's subordination at work. Decter's position was that women, far from being excluded from the centers of power in contemporary society, "cannot tolerate the terms imposed upon them by so much of power as they already enjoy." "Women's Liberationists" use the notion of "male supremacy" to "excuse" women's retreat from power and responsibility. Instead of proposing to "alter themselves" to fit our present society, they prefer to demand "an alteration of all the present arrangements of society," seeking a new society which "would shape itself to them" ("The Liberated Woman" 43).

These assertions were weakened by Decter's own admission that women had not attained full equality of opportunity. There was no doubt, she wrote, that women have been discouraged from undertaking the practice of certain professions. No doubt they were in many instances paid less for the work they do than men were ("The Liberated Woman" 42). Decter wrote that these were "however, issues of injustice that lend themselves not to the large-scale analysis of a liberation movement, but to the particular and practical application of pressure against the wrongdoers" ("The Liberated Woman" 42). However, one might ask, how can an individual, who has been "discouraged" from undertaking the practice of medicine, law, or any responsibility at work, apply "pressure against the wrongdoers"? Even in the situation of outright gender discrimination, e.g., when an individual woman was aware that she was paid less for identical work performed by male co-workers, or when she was passed over for promotion in favor of a less-qualified man, a woman was unlikely to complain unless and until she believed that her complaint would be heard and, even more fundamentally, until there was a mechanism through which such complaints could be heard.

There is in fact tremendous disagreement as to whether infringements on women's rights to equal job opportunities constituted an injustice or not. If such disagreements did not exist, the body of case law which has developed under Title VII, and similar legislation following its passage would not exist, nor would the increasing number of challenges that have been brought to contest Title VII on constitutional grounds. Decter's logic was questionable in doubting the usefulness of a movement that confronted society's injustices through the courts and elsewhere with individual cases of inequality and hardship.¹²

¹² It took time before Title VII claims of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, prohibiting racial and sexual discrimination, made it before the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission—a governing body created by the law to adjudicate on inequality at work. It took more time still, before the courts began to pay serious attention to sex discrimination claims. For a convincing analysis of the slowness of the American judiciary to respond readily to contentions of gender discrimination before and after the 1970s, see John D. Johnston and Charles N. Knapp, "Sex Discrimination by Law: A Study in Judicial Perspective," *New York University Law Review*, vol. 46, no. 675, 1971, pp. 675-747.

In this way, Decter denied or ignored that the women's "Movement" was beneficial to all women despite an expressed concern for women's rights to equal job opportunities, social security benefits, educational opportunities, and tax deductions for child-care expenses. She did nevertheless inspire Phyllis Schlafly who campaigned against the ERA by promoting a similar idea. Far from helping women, Schlafly claimed, the ERA would supposedly take away the protections women had obtained in labor laws and would cause them to suffer by denying their difference and nullifying their maternal rights ("What's Wrong with 'Equal Rights' for Women?" 91). This idea was shared by female trade unionists of the *Women's Trade Union League*, who also campaigned against the ERA (Blum 36).

The Care and Responsibilities of Men Count for Nothing

Decter criticized the feminist depreciation of men. She argued women had the social and recognized privilege of not being obliged to work, while men had the duty and burden of doing so for the whole family. Feminism showed no recognition of their sacrifice. Men were accused of watching their wives and limiting their freedom, while they worked hard to support their families. Midge Decter presented men as the forgotten casualty of feminism (*The New Chastity* 53). Some years later, she wrote:

When it was said to and about middle-class American women that their husbands beat them, cow them, and kick them around..., not a single man stood up to say: "Wait just a moment, I have been working hard and under considerable stress to support my wife and family. Is that a just thing to say about me? I have tried to be decent and responsible, and this is the thanks I get?" ("Liberating Women" 34)

This same idea was taken up by Schlafly but articulated in similar terms earlier. Tellingly, she particularly insisted on the material well-being of American women thanks to their husbands. According to her:

[the superiority of women] is not... just a matter of opening doors for women, seeing that they are seated first, carrying their bundles... Such good manners are merely the superficial evidence of a total attitude toward women that expresses itself in many more tangible ways, such as money.... In America, a man's first significant purchase (after a car) is a diamond for his bride, and the largest financial investment of his life is

a home for her to live in. American husbands work hours of overtime to keep their wives in fashion, and to pay premiums on their life insurance policies to provide for their widow's comfort. ("What's Wrong with Equal Rights for Women?" 90-91)

The subtext in such a description is the idea that women's privileges would not exist without the sacrifices of men.

Similarly, for Decter and Schlafly, the aim was not just to criticize feminism, but rather to discredit its reasons for existing. Feminism was not just misguided, for Decter and Schlafly, it was utterly unnecessary. Decter deemed complaints of women being victims ridiculous. For Schlafly, their fortunate lives, as American women, rendered feminism completely incomprehensible. She wrote:

The truth is that American women never had it so good. Why should we lower ourselves to 'equal rights' when we already have the status of special privilege? ("What's Wrong with Equal Rights for Women?" 93).

Decter would write again in 1994:

Using the pretext of the demand for equality, a group of the luckiest, healthiest, most prosperous, best educated, and most kindly treated young women in the history of the world, declared open warfare on men. (*The New Chastity* 79)

Conclusion

In conclusion, how can one understand the antifeminist assertions from such well-known women, who through their own work and lives were counterexamples to their arguments?

Midge Decter's position could be the reactive result of her anger and resentment of a generation of women raised free, as she herself was, but who were unable to recognize the scope and worth of that freedom. These women gracelessly trampled on their chance to live in the most open society for women, as she experienced it, while her ancestors had fled from incredibly repressive countries and conditions, without a single freedom, not even that of deciding to stay home. One can understand Midge Decter's position as allergic to the leftism

in feminism. Her ideological loyalty to democratic liberalism rendered her *ab initio* hostile to any use of Marxist analysis. Decter justified her anti-Marxist position with the anti-totalitarian bias that led many Jewish Democrats, secular intellectuals of New York's academic and intellectual scene, as well as Catholic Democrats, to break with their initial/long time political family to create and support neoconservatism. Decter was intimately involved in this movement, as she was married to Moshe Decter, the steadfast defender of Russian Jews who suffered from Soviet discrimination. Later in her life, Decter became Norman Podhoretz's wife. Her husband's review, *Commentary*, has been described by journalist Benjamin Balint in the subtitle of his 2010 book *Running Commentary*, as *The Contentious Magazine that Transformed the Jewish Left into the Neoconservative Right*.

One should perhaps finally consider her position as a sign of marital loyalty, which would, after all, make sense regarding her conception of the couple and parenthood. She saw both as serious alliances, devoted to the only human social structure that had ever been valuable to humankind: the family. Could her own system of values inherited from her Jewish culture, which makes women pillars of the family and guardians of the surviving community, have played the most influential role?

Because of many loyalties—privacy, family, identity, American democracy—Decter developed a conservative conviction that feminists invented women's discrimination, victimized women instead of comforting them, and pushed them to destroy a social order that had always protected them. She gave arguments to those who reacted against feminism in the name of conservatism or religion, like Schlafly. Decter focused on undermining feminist arguments about subordination and unequal treatment at home, work, and in the public sphere. She could have built a feminist argument that tried to consider the freedoms that she prized—the couple, motherhood, the family¹³—an argument that positioned these as fundamental to

¹³ Ronnie A. Grinberg, "The First Lady of Neoconservatism: Midge Decter and the Politics of Family Values," *The Journal of American History*, vol. 110, no. 3, Dec. 2023, pp. 497-521.

women's rights. Instead of lifting the women's "Movement," she chose to align herself against it.

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