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“The YWCA Was a Factor in Alton”: Phyllis Schlafly’s Cold War Women’s Club Revolt
Talk outline

St. Louis native Phyllis Schlafly may have reached the height of her prominence with the success of the STOP-ERA campaign, but Schlafly’s conservative politics of housewifery has much deeper roots. Those roots were planted in Alton, Illinois. With a view to years in which communism, rather than feminism, captured Schlafly’s activist interests, this paper examines Schlafly’s early 1950s tenure on the volunteer board of the Alton Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), an interdenominational women’s club and social service center. Presaging the New Right revolt she helped stage against Republican Party moderates during the 1964 Goldwater campaign, Schlafly pressed the largely mainline Protestant organization to re-evaluate its liberal social ideals in light of Cold War exigencies. As she challenged the organization to refute accusations of communist infiltration and renounce its support of world governance and social spending, she compelled the YWCA to answer to the political diversity of its membership. The story sheds light on Schlafly’s development of a public political voice during an overlooked period—and place—of her long activist career, and it lends insight into the dynamic activist agenda of one of the most influential U.S. women’s organizations.

I. Introduction: YWCA and the politics of liberal Christianity

II. Schlafly’s involvement with the YWCA: gender and the public outreach of women’s clubs

III. Red Scare challenges: foreign policy and Schlafly’s revolt

IV. Impact and aftermath