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Longtime Anti-feminist Phyllis Schlafly Says "Women Have Always Done Very Well in America"

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At her recent visit to Bates, controversial, conservative author and activist Phyllis Schlafly denounced the feminist movement, calling it incompatible with marriage, motherhood and happiness. Her speech last Wednesday, sponsored by the Bates College Republicans, drew a large crowd of both sympathizers to her cause, and many critics, who took issue with her ideas about "what's wrong with feminism."

Widely remembered as the leader of the successful fight to defeat the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) more than 30 years ago, Schlafly detailed her rise to prominence as a staunch opponent of the Women's Liberation Movement. She described how she testified in front of Congress beginning in the 1970s in order to prevent the further ratification by more states of the ERA; a measure intended to give men and women equal rights under the constitution. Her opposition to the amendment, she said, was rooted in the fact that "the constitution is gender neutral," as it uses phrases like "we the people," and that only one state had a law that discriminated against women. She also took aim at what she viewed as the potential detrimental costs of its passage, such as legalized prostitution, integration of single sex schools and female conscription. All of these consequences, and several more of which she spoke, "showed that there were no benefits in the ERA, and it would bring about mischief," she said.

In contrast to the beliefs of her feminist adversaries who believe that men have historically excluded women from positions of power, Schlafly declared that, "opportunities have been out there for women who wanted them," and said, "women have always done very well in America." Schlafly refuted feminist claims that gender is a social construct and that, "God goofed in making us two different kinds." Feminist attitudes, Schlafly said, "raise false expectations" for women because women are, contrary to what feminists would like people to believe, biologically different from men. She lambasted feminist policies, such as "no fault" divorce and Title IX, which she said were designed "to punish men and anything that is masculine."

Her comment that feminist groups were the equivalent of a "sexual harassment Gestapo" drew some of the loudest jeers from the audience, surpassed only by the reaction to her expression of disapproval of laws that prohibit spousal rape. "Feminists have convinced themselves that men are naturally batterers and women are naturally victims," she said. "We need to realize the destructive force feminism has been in society."

When asked if the feminist movement compared to the civil rights movement, she stated, "The civil rights movement was based on real grievances," whereas, "the ERA would not have given any benefits to women." She also noted that her message applied only to American women, whom she called "one of the most privileged class of people in the world," and not to women in any other country.

Toward the end of her speech, Schlafly disparaged feminists as a group who are "not for the achievement of women" and who "have convinced themselves that women can't do anything."

"The real problem is attitude," said Schlafly. "It's a matter of your attitude and whether you are spending

your time nursing old wounds." She concluded her speech by encouraging women to "make your own choices; don't think that the world is against you."

Although several attendees expressed support for Schlafly's cause, much of the audience clearly found her words to be degrading and offensive to women. Particularly vocal were members of the college's Feminist Action Coalition, whose members donned T-shirts that read: "This is what a feminist looks like."

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