

Big Sister: Feminism, Conservatism, and Conspiracy in the Heartland

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Big Sister: Feminism, Conservatism, and Conspiracy in the Heartland, by Erin M. Kempker. *Women, Gender, and Sexuality in American History*. Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2018. xii, 201 pp. \$99 hardcover, \$24.95 paperback.

Reviewer Karissa Haugeberg is assistant professor of history at Tulane University. She is the author of *Women against Abortion: Inside the Largest Moral Reform Movement of the Twentieth Century* (2017).

In *Big Sister: Feminism, Conservatism, and Conspiracy in the Heartland*, Erin M. Kempker complements the scholarship of Kim Nielsen, Catherine Rymph, Landon Storrs, and Michelle Nickerson by exploring the history of reactionary women in Indiana. To understand how opposition to feminism operated, Kempker studied Indiana-based newspapers, newsletters, the papers of key conservative activists and their organizational records, and scholarship on conservative women and conspiracy theory–fueled politics in the United States.

Most of the book focuses on right-wing women, but Kempker also offers a brief yet fascinating history of progressive feminist work in Indiana during the 1970s. Leaders of Indiana’s Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) coalition understood that they operated in a conservative state and were decidedly cautious. To court moderate Republican legislators, they emphasized the theme of justice and muted calls within their ranks to fight homophobia or to rethink capitalism. That disciplined approach may have worked in the short term: in 1977 Indiana became the thirty-fifth—and final—state to pass the ERA. But just as the ERA effort stalled nationally, only three states shy of the three-quarters needed for ratification, the coalition unraveled. ERA supporters’ “low-key” strategy did not prevent detractors from maligning feminists as dupes or conspirators in a world government movement. It is not clear from this book how ERA coalition leaders in Indiana sought to mollify progressive activists’ demands or whether a less cautious approach would have prepared feminists for antifeminists’ attacks.

As the coalition of feminists who came together to support the ERA adopted narrow parameters for speaking publicly about their vision, right-wing women in the Hoosier State enlarged their tent, welcoming diverse groups into the fold. By the 1950s, these groups had welcomed evangelical Christians who offered explicitly religious arguments for fighting communism and defending families. Kempker explores how diverse right-wing coalitions enabled conservative women to attack progressive feminists on a number of fronts, accusing them of undermining traditional gender roles and subverting states’ rights.

This book is useful for understanding why so many Americans found conspiracy theories appealing in the postwar period. With sensitivity, Kempker explains that conspiracy theories offered women who had little advanced education and who did not have access to politically powerful people creative ways of understanding the world. For example, ordinary women could study the *Congressional Record* and identify bills that sought to increase federal aid to local police. Drawing on theories circulated in the John Birch Society, right-wing women then pointed to such bills as examples of federal meddling in municipal affairs.

One of the right-wing groups Kempker calls attention to is Minute Women, who charged that internationalists rather than nationalists controlled the levers of power in the Eisenhower administration, just as they had during the Roosevelt and Truman administrations. Kempker underscores the importance of Minute Women's use of the telephone, a recent technology in many Americans' homes in the 1940s and '50s that enabled women to forgo formal meetings. This must have been especially important for women in rural Indiana, for whom travel to meetings may have been burdensome. Minute Women also used this technology to harass their perceived enemies: they sought to blacklist Indiana Civil Liberties Union members by calling their employers and churches.

Despite women's outsized role in organizing grassroots right-wing groups, many groups ignored women in their official publications. It is not clear whether women resented these slights or whether the publications' focus on men aligned with the patriarchal perspective right-wing women found appealing. Kempker suggests that conservative women, acting as wives and mothers invested in protecting the home, found their work to be both personally meaningful and socially acceptable. That reinforces the conclusions that Kristen Luker drew from her study of antiabortion activists and that Donald Critchlow found in his investigation of Phyllis Schlafly.

Big Sister opens the door for scholars to investigate understudied topics. Other scholars might study internal communiques in the progressive ERA coalition to understand how feminist-identified activists responded to homophobic attacks, which they had both anticipated and feared. It might also be fruitful for scholars to compare Kempker's findings to states that adopted less conservative strategies for securing passage of the ERA in order to understand what was lost and what was spared when Indiana feminists privileged reform over revolution. Kempker persuasively demonstrates that scholars must look to the states to understand how the right wing seized control of the GOP. Future scholars might take the next step by examining how these battles were waged in townships and cities throughout the United States.