

Cultural Daily

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Mrs. America

Elisa Leonelli · Wednesday, May 27th, 2020

Mrs. America, the nine-part FX series, aired on Hulu starting April 15 and ending May 27. Now you will be able to binge watch all of it, and we highly recommend it. Even if you followed in real time the unfolding milestones of the Second Wave Women Rights movement, as I have, there are many discoveries you can make in this exciting retelling of the story that covers the period from 1971 to 1980, when Reagan was elected President and the Republican Party withdrew their support for the [Equal Rights Amendment](#).

Many Americans believe that the ERA, guaranteeing equal rights to all Americans regardless of sex, was already passed decades ago and it's now enshrined in the US Constitution, but it is not. An early version of the ERA was first proposed in Congress in 1923 by [Alice Paul](#), the First Wave feminist who had lead the successful fight to earn women the right to vote in 1920. It was finally passed in 1972, but only 35 states had ratified it by the 1982 deadline, not the required 38, a two-thirds majority. Very recently, on January 27, 2020, Virginia, the 38th state, ratified it, and on February 13 the Democratic Congress removed the 1982 deadline, however the final decision may end up with the conservative majority of the US Supreme Court.



Cate Blanchett as Phyllis Schlafly © Sabrina Lantos-FX

Mrs. America explains why, when it seemed assured that the ERA would easily be ratified, it was not. It was because of the relentless country-wide opposition campaign of one Mrs. [Phyllis Schlafly](#). Cate Blanchett who plays her explains: "I had seen this little old lady in her 90s being trucked out at the tail end of Trump's 2016 Presidential campaign. There was a standing ovation for her, and she seemed to be treated with profound respect. Later that year I saw Trump attending her funeral. Then I learnt about her dubious achievements, that she single handedly had a hand on preventing the ERA from being ratified, and the notions of being pro-life, pro-family and pro-American became embedded into the spine of the Republican Party."



Tracey Ullman as Betty Friedan © Pari Dukovic-FX

The series also illustrates the achievements of the many women who lead the Women's Liberation movement of the 60s and 70s. In 1963 [Betty Friedan](#) published the seminal book *The Feminine Mystique* and in 1966 she co-founded [NOW](#), The National Organization for Women. Tracey Ullman, who plays Friedan says: "In my 20s I read [Simone de Beauvoir's](#) *Second Sex* (published in 1949) and *The Feminine Mystique*. Betty Friedan did an extraordinary thing, she wrote an amazing

book at a time in America when nobody spoke about this, and she lit the flame. She was a bohemian raised in a political home where girls could be educated, she went to Smith College, then she was expected to be the housewife within the marriage. Her work life had to stop for the children and for the family, and it frustrated her.”



In 1971 [Gloria Steinem](#) became the public face of the Feminist movement and started [Ms. Magazine](#). On the cover of the first issue, published in January 1972, was Wonder Woman for President, the superhero from DC comics. I had just moved to the US and I was elated, having joined Rivolta Femminile, the very first feminist group in Rome, Italy, in spring of 1970. I still subscribe to Ms. today and I am a proud member of NOW.



Uzo Aduba as Shirley Chisholm (c) Pari Dukovic-FX

Watching *Mrs. America* I was reminded that [Shirley Chisholm](#), played by Uzo Aduba, the first black woman elected to Congress in 1968, was the first woman to run for the Democratic Party Presidential nomination in 1972. However, George McGovern was chosen as the candidate, and he failed to beat Richard Nixon. It was tragic that Hillary Clinton, the first woman to be chosen as the Democratic Presidential candidate, won the popular vote but lost the Presidency to Donald Trump in 2016.



Margo Martindale as Bella Abzug (c) Pari Dukovic-FX

I had met [Bella Abzug](#) at a Democratic Party Telethon that I was photographing in 1975. In 1977 she organized the first ever government-funded National Women’s Conference in Houston. That was a very emotional moment for me while watching the series, to see all these women come together from every corner of the United States, including the Christian conservatives and Phyllis Schlafly. Margo Martindale, who plays Battling Bella, comments, “She’s the most liberated woman on America.” In fact, Phyllis, a married mother of six, despite the frequent put-downs by her lawyer husband Fred, played by John Slattery, earned a law degree and continued to work for her causes, fighting against abortion, homosexuality, Communism and the “libbers.” Her last book, *The Conservative Case for Trump*, was published the day after her death.

Blanchett, whose favorite feminist is the Australian [Germaine Greer](#), author of *The Female Eunuch* (1970), articulates the take-away message of *Mrs. America*, “There’s a lot of connective tissue between the desires of traditional women and women who are in the feminist camp, there is a lot more that unites us than separates us.” Hopefully those Republican wives who voted for Trump in 2016 won’t make the same mistake in 2020. And to Third Wave feminists, Blanchett says, “There’s a lot of girls and boys from younger generations who think they know about the plights of their mothers and grandmothers, but in fact they don’t.” Ullman says, “I really recommend young people go back and read *The Feminine Mystique*, because you may think it’s ancient history, and it’s not.”



Rose Byrne as Gloria Steinem (c) Pari Dukovic-FX

I had met Gloria Steinem in the 1990s, when she gave a talk at USC. Disappointingly, creator [Dahvi Waller](#) admits not having consulted her on purpose, even though she is still alive and active.

Rose Byrne, who plays Steinem says, “Her legacy, her humanitarianism and activism are pretty unmatched, so she was always a hero of mine. Her autobiographical novel *My Life on the Road* is a fantastic book and that was really my source, I had it in my pocket and I’d constantly be referencing it.”

Personally, I am looking forward to the movie *The Glorias* directed by Julie Taymor, where Steinem is played by Alicia Vikander and Julianne Moore, Bette Midler plays Bella Abzug. It premiered at Sundance and it will hopefully be out in theaters this fall.

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