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INTRODUCTION

A man walks into his kitchen and greets his wife after a hard day's work. As he sniffs the pots boiling on the stove, she reminds him that he has a union meeting that night. He says he told the guys he had something else to do. She asks if he will go to the PTA meeting with her. Again, he begs off. She sighs, knowing he is making a mistake. He goes to bed later, content with his uninvolved in his world. He wakes in a nightmare world. His happy household is gone, his family replaced by automatons he recognizes but does not understand. His loving, supportive wife has become cold, calculating, and demanding. His oldest daughter has been transformed from a boy-crazy teen into a zealot who moves away to work on a government-sponsored farm. His younger children threaten to turn him in to the authorities for violating rules he does not even know exist. Placed on

trial, he is sentenced to death. Before his punishment can be meted out, however, he awakens from his “Red nightmare,” shaken but with a renewed dedication to family and community.¹

This scenario from a 1961 Department of Defense film looks corny today, but it epitomizes the way anticommunism had permeated American society in the years after World War II. The blue-collar worker, who makes enough money—thanks to defense spending—to live a middle-class lifestyle, takes his good life of peace, prosperity, and freedom for granted. As a result, the film shows, he could lose everything. Vigilance, the government warned, was necessary at all times. Interestingly, the person who seemed to understand the need for caution was the wife. Although she is portrayed as a typical housewife who nags her husband to become involved in his union, his church, his children’s lives, and his community, she recognizes the importance of participation in these activities as a way to protect their way of life. She is going to the PTA meeting. During the nightmare, however, communism turns the wife into a hard, authoritative figure, completely unlike the warm, soft American woman she had been previously. The communist woman is obsessed with the party, whereas the American woman’s activities are centered around her home, family, and community. The filmmakers clearly intended to show how communism would destroy the American family. Probably unconsciously, they also indicated the essential role women played in the struggle against communism.

The relationship between women and postwar anticommunism is the subject of this book. At a time when governmental, religious, and social authorities encouraged women to fulfill themselves only as wives and mothers, millions of women expanded their notion of household responsibilities—at least temporarily—to include the crusade against communism. Some participated in traditional “womanly ways” by writing letters or hosting teas. Others took up the banner and ran for political office. Most did not see their participation in the war against communism as anything profound or controversial; they were simply doing what needed to be done to protect their families. In joining the ranks of male anticommunists, however, these women challenged existing assumptions about women as political players. Additionally, their view of the crisis, their methods of confronting communism, and their actions affected the overall tone and success of the movement. Women helped mold the domestic Cold War into a much broader and more encompassing crusade.

The fight against communism dominated American politics, economics, and society for almost fifty years. It colored Americans' views of the rest of the world, led them into two wars, and generated numerous military actions. It fueled the prosperity of the postwar years and, later, economic instability. It fostered an atmosphere of suspicion that at times threatened to undermine basic American civil liberties. It leached into society and culture, affecting in a multitude of ways Americans' thoughts, purchases, and leisure activities. It spawned both an anticommunist movement carried out by a variety of individuals and groups and an anticommunist mind-set that permeated the image Americans had of themselves and others. It permanently altered the way Americans and the rest of the world view the United States. Understanding the depth, breadth, and longevity of anticommunism is essential to comprehending late-twentieth-century America.

Responding to this imagery as well as news reports from the media and speeches by politicians, a vast majority of Americans said they viewed communism as evil. They might not have been able to explain communism as an intellectual theory or an economic system, but they perceived it to be a threat to America's international position, the country's national security, and even the internal stability of their local communities. Many accepted the government's rationale for taking steps to protect Americans from military threats abroad and subversion at home. For most Americans, however, their acknowledgment of the existence of the dangers of communism manifested itself infrequently in dinner conversations, in voting for "patriotic" Americans, in signing petitions, or in waving the flag on the Fourth of July. Most were more concerned about paying bills, saving for a new car, or going to a ball game than they were about eternal vigilance against the Red menace.

Other Americans understood that the danger was imminent. Ignoring ideological and geopolitical issues, they saw communism as a direct threat to their personal freedom. They believed the communist system forced everyone under its jurisdiction into a singular mold, depriving individuals of choices regarding religion, lifestyle, and employment. They feared what they perceived would be the inevitable destruction of family life as communist leaders sent fathers to factories or the army, mothers to work outside the home, children to indoctrination schools, and babies to communal care centers. Communism, in their minds, deprived its victims of control over their finances, their families, their futures. This perfidious ideology would, they argued, ultimately enslave all Americans.

As a result of their deeply held fears, these Americans did not trust government officials and politicians to end the crisis. These anticommunists remained constantly on guard, scrutinizing official actions, educating the public, searching out new encroachments against their version of democracy and free enterprise. For these anticommunists the fight against communism took on the language and urgency of a crusade. Some formed committees, both local and national—sometimes with thousands of members, sometimes with a handful of like-minded souls—to do their part in protecting the American way of life. Others worked on their own, writing books, articles, and newsletters. The memberships of these committees often overlapped, with the same names appearing on numerous boards of directors and mastheads of magazines. Anticommunist crusaders corresponded with one another, comparing notes, discussing strategies, looking for volunteers or funds.

Although they shared a common loathing of “the Left,” they did not always agree on the specifics of what that term meant. Some only reacted vigorously to card-carrying members of the Communist Party USA or to the geopolitical threat posed by the Soviets and Chinese. Others widened their lens to scope out fellow travelers, people who either consciously or indirectly helped the “real” communists. True zealots went even further, arguing that Americans faced a wide variety of threats from groups ranging from liberals to those who supported social welfare programs, Democrats, civil rights activists, feminists, homosexuals, and, for some, Jews. For the purposes of this book, this divergent group of organizations and individuals constitutes the anti-communist movement. When I write about anticommunists, I mean these activists.

These anticommunists also constituted an important component of the evolving conservatism of the postwar period. Throughout much of the twentieth century, men and women espousing very different views thought of themselves as “conservatives.” Thus, some conservatives were classical liberals who desired limited government intervention, especially in economic affairs; others were traditionalists who advocated government support of Judeo-Christian values. Because they fought as much with one another as they did with their more liberal opponents, they lacked the unity or the numbers to challenge progressives within the Republican and Democratic parties. Although the New Deal policies of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, which increased the federal bureaucracy and the presence of women and minorities in

Washington, D.C., had galvanized conservatives of all varieties, it took the threat of communism to bring them all together. Both economic and social conservatives hated communism, so the crusade provided them with common ground. Consequently, many of the most fervent anticommunists shared not only a loathing for the Soviet Union but also a deep distrust of the federal government in general and Democrats in particular.² For these reasons, conservative anticommunists conflated their two enemies: communism and the American political Left. In fact, while anticommunism helped unite conservatives, it also served as a convenient platform from which conservatives could advocate for a right-wing agenda along with hatred of communism.

By placing women at the center of the struggle against communism, this book enhances our understanding of the Cold War in several ways. First, it shows the way women translated the key political and ideological issues that fueled the anticommunist campaign for the general public. Frequently describing communism as a personal threat, the words of female activists paint a striking portrait of America in those years—simultaneously belligerent, arrogant, and frightened. Their actions as well as their writings helped mold the overall tenor of the campaign. Second, an emphasis on women's participation shows the depth of the fear and paranoia communism created in Americans. Despite idealized mores of the era that discouraged middle-class women from entering the political sphere, male anticommunist crusaders recognized that all citizens, including traditionally nonpolitical women, must unite to battle this enemy. Third, many women acted at a local level, indicating that this struggle went all the way to the grass roots. Political leaders pursued the diplomatic policy of containment at the national level, but concerns over brinkmanship in a nuclear age spread throughout the populace, drawing average citizens into the war against the Red menace. Finally, the gendered language and imagery used to describe the Cold War frequently reinforced the connection between a complicated diplomatic and political situation and the reality of everyday life for American men and women.

Anticommunist activity provided women with a way to involve themselves in the politics of the day. At a time when the image of female domesticity smothered most women's career aspirations, women found few outlets for their political ambitions. Because almost all Americans believed communism was evil and must be stopped, however, working against communism afforded women the opportunity to jump into a national political struggle without having to justify

their actions, as might be required of women who supported women's rights or unionism or any number of left-wing causes. These anticommunist women could engage themselves in politics while espousing the female domestic virtues endorsed by mainstream society.

Female anticommunist crusaders built on a historical tradition of American women's participation in politics, especially when danger threatened home and family. For example, in the years preceding the American Revolution, women found themselves drawn into political debates that affected them through their roles as household managers. Colonial boycotts against English goods transformed shopping into a political exercise that turned women into active participants in the rebellion. Later, intensifying hostilities forced women to play roles usually forbidden: soldier, businesswoman, head of household. Although most men and women viewed these actions as temporary, a significant change in gender relations did occur in the aftermath of the Revolution. The development of the ideal of Republican Motherhood created a way for women to participate in the political process without appearing to undermine the traditional political role of men. Educated and informed about local and national concerns, the Republican Mother served as teacher, guide, and role model for her children. She showed them how to be good citizens, no matter how large or small their role in the body politic might be. Maintaining their primary function as wives and mothers, American women during this period nevertheless broadened their sphere of activity, if only slightly.³ Their domestic responsibilities were now invested with political significance.

The industrialization of early America similarly brought changes to women's lives. As men's labor began to shift from the farm to the factory and from rural to urban areas, women—especially middle-class white women—were increasingly inundated by advice manuals, novels, and religious sermons that emphasized what historian Barbara Welter called "the cult of true womanhood." A woman, according to religious and social leaders, should be pious, pure, domestic, and submissive. Too delicate to perform any "real" (i.e., paid) labor, women were directed to focus on home and family, providing a safe haven for husbands and children against the dirty, dangerous world of industry. Women, according to this view, utilized their natural moral superiority to balance men's more aggressive and sinful tendencies. This image also served as a way to distinguish between the classes; many immigrant and black women hired themselves out as wage laborers,

while proper middle-class white women did not. For all its hypocrisies, the cult allowed middle-class women to cloak themselves in respectability.⁴

Some women took advantage of the ideals of Republican Motherhood and the cult of true womanhood to operate outside their normal boundaries. Domestic reformer Catharine Beecher accepted the premise of separate spheres and worked to carve out a unique place for women within that system. Rather than seeing the cult as a limitation, she empowered women's position within the home by redefining domesticity and motherhood as a vocation that preserved essential American values. Other women, working within their proper area of domesticity and piety, involved themselves in church and reform activities, carefully selecting those that conformed to their assigned sphere. Thus, women worked for missionary societies, joined ladies' clubs organized to save children and fallen women, and tried to eliminate the evils of alcohol. Once they became involved in public activities, women might move beyond such "womanly" reforms to embrace much more overtly political concerns such as abolition and suffrage. By the mid-nineteenth century, women had created a unique political role for themselves. In addition, by expanding the boundaries of home, women expanded their sphere of influence to include "anywhere women and children were [located]." In the process of redefining their sphere, they created a "distinct . . . political culture."⁵

This expansion was perhaps most evident during the Progressive era around the turn of the twentieth century. Unmarried, educated middle- and upper-class women found new opportunities to broaden their activities. Like their earlier sisters, these women joined reform societies that fought alcohol, moral decline, and child labor. They went further, however. Taking their cue from European women, Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr founded Hull House, a settlement house in Chicago. Their aim was to help immigrants in surrounding areas cope with the adjustment to life in America. Other such enterprises followed, providing needed help to the poor and working classes and creating a new profession for women: social work. Since these women acted as nurturers and caretakers, many Americans tolerated the fact that the settlement house workers exhibited nontraditional female behavior. After all, they were just cleaning up the mess left by male politicians and businessmen who welcomed the immigrants' labor but ignored their troubles.

As women pushed the limits of accepted behavior, however, they met with opposition from both men and other women. In particular, the suffrage issue caused problems. Ironically, both sides fell back on the “cult” imagery to make their arguments. While suffragists often used the language of moral superiority as a justification for granting women the vote, those opposed claimed women were moving too far outside their domestic sphere. Anti-suffragists feared that if women entered the male world of politics, all women would lose the protections and privileges the ideology of separate spheres had afforded them.⁶ Recognizing that they would have to move into the political realm to fight their enemies, anti-suffragists rationalized their behavior. They told themselves that their foray into politics was just temporary, designed to achieve a higher purpose, and that it would have no lasting implications for women’s social role. Once they had achieved their goal, they would gladly go back to the responsibilities of home and children.

Throughout much of American history, both advocates of women’s political participation and those who opposed it have used the image of woman as housewife to benefit their cause. Colonial women boycotting English goods, abolitionist women protesting the degradation of slave women, and Progressive women setting up kitchens in settlement houses discovered that their normal duties could take on a political meaning. Similarly, anti-suffragists used their desire to preserve women’s housewifely role as a justification for their political activities. These early-twentieth-century women so successfully incorporated the concept of “municipal housekeeping” into the image of the lady that future generations assumed “good” women could be active in certain areas of the “man’s world.” Clearly, the image of the homemaker-mother was fraught with political overtones.⁷

The idealization of the housewife image, however, truly came into its own in the years following the Depression and World War II. After two decades of economic and international disruption, many women and men longed for the safe haven glorified in myths of the “good old days.” They wanted what they perceived to be the perfect family, with Mom staying at home and Dad going to work. The prosperity of these years made this dream a possibility, at least for a time. In fact, the enormous increase in the variety and availability of consumer goods helped turn the nineteenth-century “true woman” into a shallower version of herself in the 1950s. The earlier woman had lived for the moral good of her husband and children; the 1950s wife and mother

spent much of her time trying to maintain the symbols that marked her family as middle class.⁸

A deeply entrenched and comfortable image of middle-class prosperity became a valuable tool for both men and women activists as they worked to enlist the majority of American women in their campaign against communism. Glorifying the role of housework and the position of homemaker, anti-communists showed women that they could participate in politics without abandoning their traditional roles. At other times, activists recognized the valuable role housewives played in the economy and used that to their advantage. Whichever strategy they utilized, these men and women succeeded in more than simply drawing women to their cause. They also reinforced the current domestic ideal of femininity as the only viable option for women.

Although female activists all along the ideological spectrum utilized the expanded housewife imagery, it was especially vital for more conservative women. Because women on the Right theoretically supported status quo gender roles, advocating women's political participation contradicted their underlying principles, much as the activism of anti-suffragists had challenged their deeply held convictions. They could avoid appearing hypocritical, however, by explaining their behavior as a temporary breach of the norm required by the serious threat of communism. They reassured the men in their lives, and themselves, that everything would return to "normal" once the danger had passed.

Conservative anticommunist women followed this tradition and used it to their full advantage. Draping their work in maternalistic rhetoric and housewifely images, women activists reassured their male colleagues that they wanted nothing more than the end of communism; they posed no threat to the power structure. In many ways, in fact, they became storm troopers for patriarchal dominance. They did, however, expect to be taken seriously as concerned citizens; they assumed they had a right to participate in the struggle to save their homes and families from the communists. Far from submissive, hesitant "little women," conservative anticommunist women boldly jumped into the national debate on the issue of communism, all the while acting as though they were not challenging the existing gender structure.

Out of necessity, conservative anticommunist men accepted this version of reality. The fact that women were not challenging men's political dominance helped ease the minds of conservative male

activists. Convinced of the virtue of the housewifely woman, men generally treated women activists with the tolerant respect accorded to mothers and “ladies.” In turn, the women became adept at overlooking male condescension, paternalism, and sexism as they pursued advocacy of their cause. With no one’s worldview threatened, men welcomed female participation—within limits—in the anticommunist movement.

To fight communism successfully, men needed women’s involvement in at least three ways. First, they needed the women’s vote. As a result, men frequently spoke to groups of women, encouraging them to be informed, to write letters, and to support strong anticommunist candidates. The men usually couched their speeches in very traditional ways; they spoke to the women as wives, household managers, and mothers. Second, male anticommunist crusaders recognized that within their “careers” as wives and mothers, women could provide valuable service to the cause. Women willingly did much of the educational work needed at the grassroots level to build support for the cause and for right-wing candidates. Third, male anticommunists used women, especially in their roles as housewives and mothers, to define both the evils of communism and the virtues of America. In fact, the image of an idealized family lay at the center of most anti-communist versions of the American way of life.

Although they lacked much formal power to battle communism either around the world or at home, female anticommunist zealots did possess certain tools that benefited both the cause and themselves. In short, they utilized their gender as an asset rather than a limitation in fighting against the Reds. As a result, women were involved in all levels of anticommunist activity. Coming from a variety of backgrounds, these overwhelmingly white, middle-class women did not let preconceived notions of femininity stop them from participating in a battle they felt was vitally important. They claimed the right to speak and write about the evils of foreign and domestic communism. Sometimes they spoke in general terms as Americans; other times they framed their arguments as women who could and should speak to and for their gender.

Gendered language and images pervaded discussions of communism’s danger to the world and to the American way of life. From the testosterone-laden speeches of “Tailgunner” Joe McCarthy to the portrayals of Soviet women as heartless amazons, anticommunists utilized gendered symbols in making their arguments to the Amer-

ican people. Gendered subtexts allowed anticommunists to broaden their appeal by linking the fight against communism to concerns over the shifting roles of men and women in the postwar world. Americans who might not understand the intricacies of government machinations abroad or bureaucratic spy networks at home had no difficulty seeing a threat in the increasing number of women working, African Americans protesting, or homosexuals coming out of the closet. Additionally, emphasizing their femininity provided “cover” for anticommunist women who adopted masculine characteristics and language in their advocacy of crushing communism. Whereas this gendered language legitimized their participation in the crusade against communism, anticommunist women found it could also be used to undermine the value of their work for the cause.

Like the anticommunist movement itself, the women in this book are a diverse but not all-inclusive group. They are overwhelmingly white and middle class, as mentioned previously. There were a small number of conservative anticommunist African American women, but I chose not to include them because their focus tended to be less on anticommunism than on obtaining civil rights and fighting segregation. Additionally, although working-class women were concerned with communism, most lacked the time and extra income necessary to join an active crusade.

Within these parameters, the anticommunist women in this study include a variety of American women. Some were well-known and powerful; most were not. Some feared elements of the U.S. government almost as much as they did the Soviets. Others focused on threats closer to home to protect their children from outside influences. Most were genuinely concerned about the future of their country and their families. Some, however, were extremists who took their beliefs to irrational ends. I have included a few of the more zealous to show the variety of women’s views and the responses of the community at large. Often, men and women used the obsessive behavior of a few women to undermine all women’s political activity.

Whether they stood on the extreme Right of the ideological spectrum or leaned more toward moderation, anticommunist women shaped the anticommunist crusade. They brought anticommunism into the home, motivating women to expand their domestic duties to include ridding their houses of the Red menace along with dust and grime. In the process of enlightening less politically aware women, anticommunist activists created a space for themselves within the political

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arena. Particularly on the local level, women discovered their power to effect change through demonstrations, letter-writing campaigns, and newsletters. Other women tried to influence national domestic and foreign policy through research, speeches, and writing books. Anti-communist women utilized gendered language and imagery both to reinforce their right to participate in the crusade against communism and to emphasize the importance of their cause. In the end, these local campaigns and controversial books and images transformed the anti-communist movement in ways both contemporaries and historians have overlooked. Only by examining women's participation in the struggle against the Left can we begin to understand the depth of the influence anticommunism had on American society and politics. Conversely, without probing anticommunist activity, we cannot see the complexity of women's lives during those years.