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Keeping to a Cause During Discontent

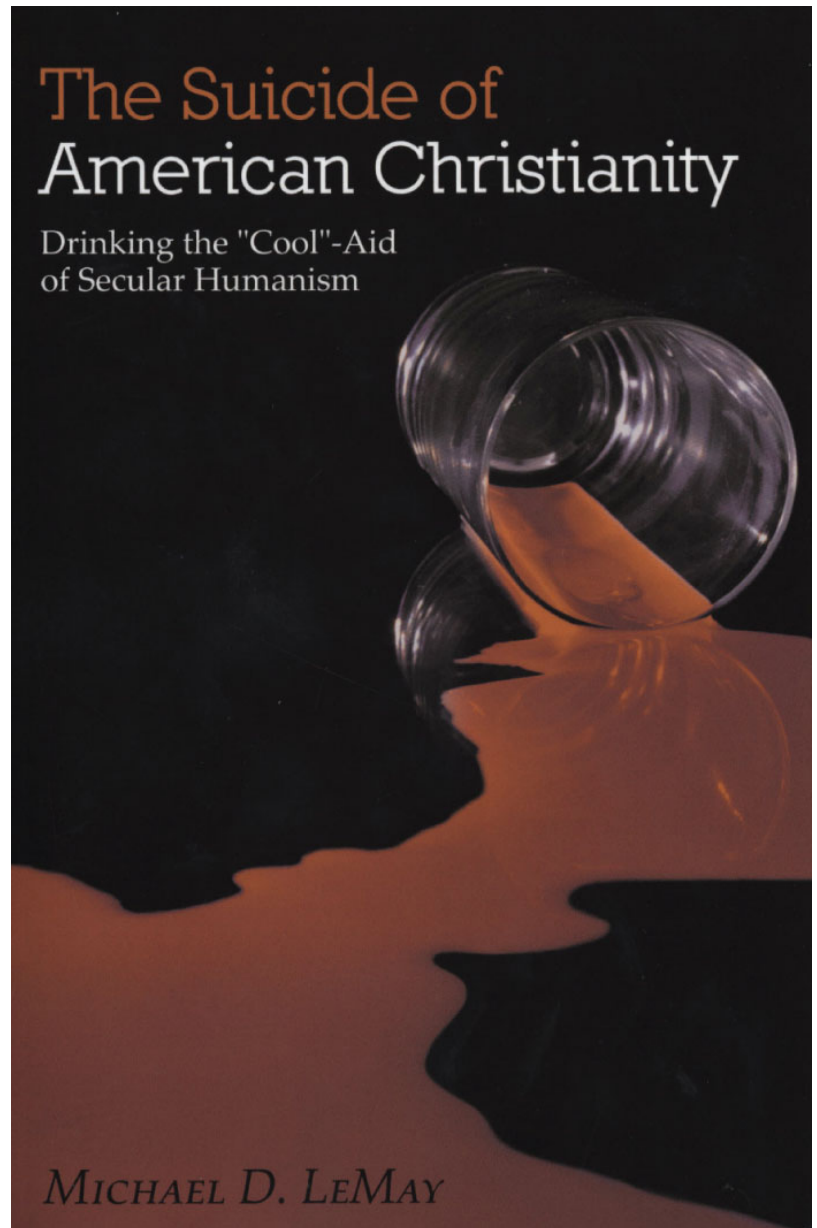
How the Republican Party Became Pro Life, by Phyllis Schlafly, St. Louis, Missouri: Dunnrobin, 2016, 131 pages, paperback.

With recent comments this spring by Donald Trump, who is expected to be the Republican Party nominee for president, that he would like to see some modification of the Republican Party plank on abortion, the issue could well be debated — once again! — at the Republican National Convention.

But as has been the case since 1976, in the end, the unequivocal support for the pro-life plank in the national platform of the Republican Party is expected to remain. This can be attributed largely to the fidelity of the Republican Party grassroots to protecting the lives of the unborn, and to a leading champion within that grassroots, Phyllis Schlafly.

With *How the Republican Party Became Pro Life*, Schlafly has written a slim but important volume summarizing how the Republican Party placed a strong pro-life plank in its platform in the first convention after the notorious *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision of 1973. (In *Roe v. Wade* and its companion case, *Doe v. Bolton*, the Supreme Court asserted that abortion was legal in all 50 states). Schlafly explains why, despite vigorous efforts by the media and some Republicans to ditch or water down the pro-life language of the platform, the plank survives intact.

No person is better equipped to tell this story than Schlafly. She burst on the national scene with her best-selling 1964 book *A Choice Not an Echo*. This book, which was published as part of the effort to wrest control of the Republican Party from what was then called the Eastern Liberal Establishment, and nominate Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona, was another thin volume that had a huge impact on American politics. In the book, Schlafly detailed how the Republican Party had been in the grip of those she called the “kingmakers” of the party, who had imposed globalist, non-conservative candidates such





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as Willkie, Dewey, Nixon, and Eisenhower upon a party that was very conservative at the activist, or grassroots, level. These candidates had only offered the country an “echo” of the globalist liberals of the Democratic Party, instead of an actual choice.

Schlafly’s Eagle Forum was founded in 1972, and is credited, along with other groups such as The John Birch Society, with stopping the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment and the calling of a national Constitutional Convention. Schlafly has argued that a national convention to consider potential amendments to the U.S. Constitution is a dangerous gambit that could lead to a “runaway convention,” and the overthrow of our present constitutional republic.

It is also Schlafly who was most responsible for initially placing the pro-life plank in the Republican platform, and keeping it there.

The role the grassroots plays in the adoption of the platform is largely misunderstood, even by many political analysts and some presidential candidates. Presidential candidates might have enough bound delegates to give them the nomination, but they do not dictate the platform. Each state’s delegation to the national convention elects two individuals to the national platform committee, one male and one female.

Over the years, efforts have certainly been made to dilute or even delete the pro-life language in the platform, but because presidential candidates cannot dictate who sits on the platform committee, they likewise cannot dictate the platform. They can, however, in Schlafly’s words, attempt to “badger, threaten, persuade, or intimidate” some members of the subcommittee working on the abortion plank language. So in 1980, Schlafly and other pro-lifers took the subcommittee out to dinner the night before the final vote on the language, so as to keep the members from being pressured to modify the pro-life plank. The dinner party did not break up until nearly midnight, and Schlafly later learned that the platform committee chairman, U.S. Senator John Tower of Texas (who was not pro-life), “had spent the entire evening trying to call our subcommittee members but couldn’t reach a single one. (This was, fortunately, well before cellphones).

There was no real contest on the platform in 1984, when the pro-life Ronald Reagan was re-nominated and went on to win a 49-state landslide. By 1988, Reagan’s vice-president, George Herbert Walker Bush, had switched from pro-choice to pro-life. Running for what voters thought was Reagan’s “third term,” Bush was easily elected over Democratic Governor Michael Dukakis of Massachusetts, a pro-abortion candidate who proudly proclaimed himself a “card-carrying member” of the American Civil Liberties Union.

Unfortunately, as Schlafly recalls, Bush governed as a “globalist,” and about “the only conservative thing Bush did while President was his nomination of Clarence Thomas to the U.S. Supreme Court.” By 1992, the pro-life plank faced a serious challenge. Ann Stone, a prominent GOP fundraiser, announced that she had reinvigorated “Republicans for Choice,” and intended to raise three million dollars to gut the platform of its pro-life plank. First Lady Barbara Bush announced she also wanted to see the pro-life plank gone.

“It wasn’t hard to anticipate that we would face a big fight about abortion at the Republican National Convention in Houston in 1992,” Schlafly wrote. Bush faced a tough reelection battle, and was “squishing on pro-life.” Schlafly’s Republican National Coalition for Life organization purchased 3,000 large red cowboy hats as the symbol of keeping the party pro-life, and passed them out to convention



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delegates. The convention, with a sea of red cowboy hats, overwhelmingly retained the pro-life plank.

The media “orchestrated a campaign to blame [Bush’s] defeat on the pro-lifers and those who had talked about the social issues, such as Pat Buchanan,” Schlafly recalled. “However, the TV networks’ own polls conducted right after the Convention reported that the Buchanan and [Marilyn] Quayle speeches actually gave George Bush a big boost.”

The pro-life plank faced an even stiffer challenge in 1996. Pressure was intense to modify the pro-life plank, but the pro-life forces were determined to not change “a comma.” Schlafly explained, “If we did, that would give the media the opportunity to report that we had softened our solid pro-life position.”

But it was not just the liberal media that was beating the drums for softening the pro-life plank. Schlafly writes that many “kingmakers” wanted Colin Powell as the nominee, even though he proudly proclaimed himself “pro-choice.” The Powell boomlet faded, and finally, Senator Bob Dole won the nomination.

“Bob Dole was not easy to deal with,” Schlafly recalled. “Dole wanted to purge the pro-life language altogether, but his ‘Plan B’ was to add additional language to the platform about promoting ‘tolerance.’ Our pro-lifers didn’t want to say we’re tolerant of abortion.”

Dole told CNN that a “tolerance” statement is “going to be in the abortion plank,” adding, “I make that decision and it’s not negotiable.”

The “tolerance” statement did not make it into the platform, however. Schlafly explained: “Dole apparently didn’t know that the presidential nominee could no longer dictate the platform as Richard Nixon and Nelson Rockefeller dictated it in 1960.” (At that time, although conservative delegates had hammered out a strongly conservative platform, Nixon simply altered it in order to please Rockefeller and other liberal Republicans. Barry Goldwater called it the “Munich of the Republican Party”.) Although the platform remained staunchly pro-life, Dole announced to the press, “I haven’t read the platform and I’m not bound by it anyway.” He then went on to delete the “life, cultural, and sovereignty issues,” out of his campaign, and lost to Clinton in the fall.

In 2000 and 2004, George W. Bush opted to make no effort to change the pro-life plank, and won twice. But in 2008, while nominee Senator John McCain proclaimed himself pro-life, his campaign ordered his running mate, Alaska Governor Sarah Palin, to not speak to the Republican National Coalition for Life luncheon. By 2012, former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney took a strong pro-life stance in his bid to get the nomination, despite having called himself “pro-choice” when he ran for the U.S. Senate and governor in Massachusetts.

Schlafly concludes by including pro-life language from previous Republican platforms since 1976, and language involving issues such as traditional marriage, Common Core, and judicial overreach.

Some conclusions that can be drawn from Schlafly’s account of Republican conventions since *Roe v. Wade* include that it is apparent that the Republican grassroots (those Republicans who work in the trenches for the party and its candidates) are much more conservative and pro-life as a group than its recent presidential candidates and, on the whole, average Republican voters. While Republican nominees since Reagan have given lip-service to the pro-life cause, it appears that it is little more than an act of necessity, rather than a heartfelt belief, at least for most of them.

Schlafly’s book is a valuable resource, and is illustrative of how one person, or a small group of



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dedicated constitutionalists, can make such a huge difference in our nation's history.



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