

Madam Chairman: Mary Louise Smith and the Republican Revival after Watergate, by Suzanne O'Dea. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2012. x, 202 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 hardcover.

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Born into a Republican family in southeastern Iowa, Mary Louise Smith did not become an active party worker until the late 1940s, when Cathlene Blue, Iowa's former First Lady, encouraged the young housewife to join a local Republican women's club. Over the next decades, by virtue of her talent for grassroots organizing, her celebrated speaking skills, her ability to earn the confidence of those in power, and her own conviction that she had something to offer, Smith would continue to rise through the ranks. By 1964, she ran successfully to be Iowa's Republican National Committeewoman, moved quickly onto the RNC Executive Committee and was the first woman to chair the RNC in the critical years after Watergate. A "female first" during the heyday of second-wave feminism, she was also a consummate party loyalist. Her belief in the two-party system and her commitment to her party never wavered. As her biographer Suzanne O'Dea writes, however, Mary Louise Smith "found the limits of that loyalty and discipline" (164). Many of those limits concerned Smith's persistent commitment to women's equality even as her party came to be seen as increasingly hostile to that commitment under Ronald Reagan's presidency.

Based on a thorough examination of Smith's papers (held at the Iowa Women's Archives), other archival sources, and oral interviews, O'Dea's work contributes to our knowledge of Iowa politics, the national Republican Party, and women in leadership. A strength of the book is the large number of interviews O'Dea conducted not only with Smith, but also with many of the Republican women and men Smith worked with over the years.

The book covers Smith's long life, from her birth in Eddyville, Iowa, in 1914, to her death in 1997. It concentrates, though, on the period when she was most in the public eye, the late 1960s to the mid-1980s. O'Dea argues that Smith's strengths and interests were always more in organizing than in policy. O'Dea traces the inner workings of the Republican organization, especially during Smith's tenure as RNC chairman (to which O'Dea devotes 6 of her 12 chapters). The party attempted to rebuild after Richard Nixon's resignation, a time when few Americans identified with the party and when its financial condition was dire. One of the difficulties Smith faced was the reluctance of longtime Republican donors to contribute to the party in the face of

new post-Watergate campaign finance laws. O'Dea takes us behind the scenes as Smith and other leaders debated controversial strategies for promoting the party. Seen by some as an unqualified, ill-advised, temporary appointee, Smith was subject to repeated calls for her ouster. She held on, however, through the 1976 elections. Despite party losses in 1974 and 1976, she produced significant accomplishments, especially, O'Dea suggests, in bringing the RNC back to financial viability.

O'Dea explores the sexism Smith encountered, her support for abortion rights and for the Equal Rights Amendment, along with her growing awareness that she was a "feminist" (while still asserting that she was, as O'Dea notes, "first a Republican and only second a feminist") (51). Smith's interests in women's equality did not lead automatically to a concern for the equality of other groups. O'Dea's discussions of Smith's evolution on issues of race are especially interesting. She notes that the black civil rights movement "did not engage" Smith during the critical years of the fifties and sixties (21). When President Reagan appointed her as a member of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Smith had to learn about black civil rights from fellow commissioner Mary Frances Berry. Yet she came to be a strong advocate for affirmative action and busing, much to Reagan's chagrin.

Smith was certainly a national figure, especially during her tenure as RNC chair, but readers of the *Annals of Iowa* will undoubtedly be particularly interested in the book's Iowa stories, including accounts of Smith's friendship with former Governor Bob Ray, her involvement with the Iowa Women's Political Caucus, and her reaction to the Iowa Republican Party's shift to the right during the 1980s and 1990s.

Smith was an intensely private person, so O'Dea's book is, not surprisingly, mostly a story of Smith's public life. We learn very little about her life as a daughter, sister, mother, or wife. There are occasional glimpses of her private concerns, most notably in reference to the last years of her husband's life, when, O'Dea tells us, his health was a factor in Smith's decision to step down as RNC chair. But we learn little about how her public life in politics, her commitments to the Republican Party and to feminist principles, grew out of or influenced her private life.

This book joins Sara Fitzgerald's recent biography of Elly Peterson of Michigan, who served as RNC assistant chair in the late 1960s, in restoring the histories of dynamic, feminist, Republican leaders. (See Sara Fitzgerald, *Elly Peterson: "Mother" of the Moderates* [2011].) Such women deserve to be better known. We can be grateful to Suzanne O'Dea for helping us better understand the public accomplishments and professional struggles of Mary Louise Smith.