

*Barry Goldwater and the Little Old Ladies in Tennis Shoes:*  
Conservative Female Activists in the 1964 Republican Presidential Campaign  
Short abstract for *Goldwater at 100 Conference*  
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In his memoir of the Draft Goldwater movement that he masterminded, Republican strategist F. Clifton White devoted an entire chapter to “The Women.” Insisting that Goldwater’s run in 1964 represented more of political awakening than mere Presidential campaign, White remembered the enthusiasm of women supporters as an essential element to the grassroots uprising, a moral undercurrent that legitimized the purity of Goldwater’s conservative principles. The Arizonan’s “cause” appealed to “mothers and grandmothers.” Quoting the French writer Victor Hugo, White observed that, “Men have sight, women insight.” Though the GOP had been courting women volunteers for decades, the Goldwater movement created new institutions within the campaign, namely the Goldwater Gals, Goldwater Girls, and Mothers for a Moral America, which staffers hoped would soften the tough, hawkish image that made their candidate unpopular with female voters polled in the general electorate. While the Gals’ courtesy, Girls’ effusive cheeriness, and Mothers’ moral outrage projected the carefully crafted images of femininity that strategists hoped would compliment the masculine edge of Goldwater’s anti-welfare and anti-communist conservatism, women supporters created problems for the campaign by acting in ways that made them symbols of right-wing extremism. Over the summer of 1964, conservative women activists for Goldwater acquired the epitaph of “Little Old Ladies in Tennis Shoes,” a label that simultaneously praised the vigor of their volunteerism while mocking their approach as shrill, flighty, and outdated.

This paper will examine the gender ideology, activist history, and movement hierarchy that made conservative women into icons of zealotry. Though the “Little Old Lady in Tennis Shoes” elicited rhetorical smiles and winks from the columnists who dismissed her, she represented unresolved gender trouble within the Goldwater campaign and larger conservative movement—tensions created by competing visions within the emerging right. By 1964, women had created female-centered organizations, media, and activist styles to express a conservatism that reflected a mix of their own concerns born of everyday experiences combined with the ideas they consumed as voracious readers of the conservative literature that blossomed in the 1950s. However, the political tools and discursive strategies they developed to make themselves heard drew mixed responses from compatriots on the right. Women acting on their own out of maternal outrage deserved praise, but they also seemed out of control. Without the grooming that male intellectuals and party officials received through established institutions, the lack of polish, nuance, and finesse exhibited by women activists made male leaders uncomfortable. Although Goldwater’s team successfully mobilized and augmented the formidable network of female Cold Warriors that had been growing since the end of World War II, the effort to channel female maternal warmth, “insight,” and outrage toward a successful electoral outcome failed miserably. This essay will explore why.