



Madam Chairman: Mary Louise Smith and the Republican Revival after Watergate

Suzanne O'Dea

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For much of her career Mary Louise Smith stood alone as a woman in a world of politics run by men. After devoting over two decades of her life to politics, she eventually became the first, and only, woman chairman of the Republican National Committee. Suzanne O'Dea examines Smith's rise and fall within the party and analyzes her strategies for gaining the support of Republican Party leaders.

Smith's leadership skills grew from the time she worked in rural precincts. During her twenty-eight months as chairman, Smith dealt with highs and lows as she blazed not only a trail of her own but also one for the Republican Party, including assembling the team that kept the party intact following the devastation of Watergate. She was present during the party's shift from moderate leadership, as exemplified by Ford, to the increasingly conservative leadership still seen today. Smith was an advocate for the Equal Rights Amendment, a supporter of the pro-choice movement, and a proponent of gay rights.

Though handpicked by President Ford, Smith still found herself struggling against the party and at times even against the president himself. At one point Smith lost months of fundraising opportunities as a result of a disagreement with the president. She and her staff developed innovative strategies, still used in the party today, to attract desperately needed dollars from major donors. Even so, people within the administration as well as unnamed party leaders regularly intimated that Smith's days as chairman were numbered. Even after leaving the chairmanship, Smith remained loyal to the party from which she felt increasingly alienated.

O'Dea uses extensive personal interviews with Smith and her staff at the RNC to recount not only Smith's and the GOP's changing fortunes but also the challenges Republican women faced as they worked to gain a larger party presence. These behind-the-scenes perspectives show the tactics and strategies of the Republican Party's power struggles along with Smith's own opinions about leadership style. With relevance to today's political strategies and conservative shift, O'Dea highlights Mary Louise Smith's mark on Republican history.



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