

*Big Sister: Feminism, Conservatism, and Conspiracy in the Heartland.* By Erin M. Kempker. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018. xiv, 201 pp. Cloth, \$99.00. Paper, \$24.95.)

Feminist priorities in the late 1970s included ratification of the equal rights amendment (ERA) and participation in the 1977 Women's National Conference in Houston, pertaining to the United Nations' International Woman's Year (IWY). Erin M. Kempker argues in *Big Sister* that antifeminism belonged to a longer history, beginning in the 1940s, of rightists' deep suspicion of supranational attempts at world government, which seemed to threaten local and family sovereignty. Right-wing women viewed feminists connected to hidden networks of elites resembling "big sister," a counterpart to George Orwell's Big Brother. Kempker draws her evidence from Indiana, the last state to ratify the ERA, in January 1977, before the legislation subsequent defeat. Discussing feminist women and right-wing women alike, the book's chapters move chronologically, from the early Cold War to the Indiana IWY state meeting in July 1977.

Among *Big Sister's* strengths are Kempker's oral histories of right-wing women and feminists who were active at the time, and deep archival research. She shows how differently feminists and rightists handled differences in their ranks. For conservatives, the urgency of the moment decreased the importance of internal differences. But Indiana feminists' low-key, bipartisan approach to inducing the state legislature to ratify the ERA entailed stifling radical and "liberationist" voices in their midst. No matter how moderate feminists seemed, though, they came in for rhetorical punishment from rightists who lumped all feminists in with feminist extremes, as perceived by the Right, as if the mild-mannered Hoosiers had run off to build utopias cleansed of men. Feminists' consequently low morale and internal divisions left them unable to struggle effectively against their antagonists. Republicans eventually deserted them, too, when the national party platform began opposing abortion and the ERA in 1980.

Kempker's political history of right-wing women and feminist women in the same 1970s arena would make her book the first of

its kind—but for Marjorie J. Spruill's *Divided We Stand* (2017). Spruill narrates the hopes and disappointments of feminists participating in the IWY, as antifeminism arose nationally. Kempker's deep research on the Midwest remains all the more necessary, though. Such right-wing citadels as southern California, as described in Lisa McGirr's *Suburban Warriors* (2001) and Michelle M. Nickerson's *Mothers of Conservatism* (2012), have received more scholarly attention than contested ground of the sort explored in *Big Sister*.

For all her book's strengths, the plainspoken Kempker needed to push her thinking further. She parses scholarship on conspiracy theories to point out that conspiratorial thinking transcends boundaries of class, educational level, and political affiliation. Yet she shows repeated uses of conspiracy theories by rightists, while feminists interviewed for *Big Sister* eschewed conspiratorial thinking. I wish that she had explored further the question of just why conspiracy theories have found such fertile soil on the right, especially since her own epilogue concerns the 2016 Republican primary in Indiana. Donald J. Trump and his followers spread conspiracy theories to discredit opponents. The effort did not deploy dog whistles so much as Freon horns.

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*A People's History of Computing in the United States.* By Joy Lisi Rankin. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018. 325 pp. \$29.95.)

Oh, those early computer days! What a pleasure to read a well-written, meticulously researched book that brings personal recollections of BASIC, PLATO, COBAL, and FORTRAN flying back. In *A People's History of Computing in the United States*, Joy Lisi Rankin details contributions that numerous students and educators made to computer development from 1965 to the mid-1970s. These "computing citizens," as she calls them, used terminals connected to mainframes via telephone lines to create networks for communicating and

sharing information and programs. Based largely at universities and high schools in New Hampshire, Minnesota, and Illinois, these networks connected a widely dispersed, diverse set of users who created communities, exchanged messages, and developed early computer games. Their efforts and discoveries shaped the computer world of the mid-1970s, when other inventors and garage-based geniuses began fashioning today's interactive world.

Rankin explores the development of these "time-sharing" systems, so called because the computer allocated its processing time among multiple simultaneous users working on individual terminals, and not, as sometimes erroneously believed, because the computer allotted time to individual users. Central to time-sharing's creation were students based at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire. The first three chapters detail the contributions Dartmouth made to user-friendly computer environments, including how Cold War gender role expectations played a key part in perceptions of computing as a "masculine" discipline. Rankin also outlines how Dartmouth's programming language, BASIC, became the language of computing citizens from New England to the Midwest and, eventually, to California during the 1960s and 1970s.

In chapters 4 and 5, Rankin covers discussions of computing as a public utility, akin to electricity or the telephone system. She argues time-sharing and the vision for networked computing for the public good were not short-lived, as Internet mythology might have us believe. For example, from 1965 to 1980 Minnesota led the nation in implementing statewide interactive computing in its public schools and universities. By the late 1970s, Minnesota students not only interacted with each other but also developed computer games such as the beloved Oregon Trail, later a staple of Apple's software offerings.

In chapters 6 and 7, Rankin focuses on the contributions of the University of Illinois to the creation of personal terminals and the PLATO system, which included the first flat-panel plasma screens. As Rankin notes, "by 1975, the 950 terminals on the nationwide PLATO network enabled 'on-line' communication in the form of bulletin boards, instant

messages, and electronic mail" (p. 9). Even then, PLATO users dealt with issues common in today's interactive world—stolen identities, hacking, censorship, and harassment.

In the epilogue, Rankin argues that computing communities grappled with the transition from being "computing citizens," who created vibrant communal networks, to "computing consumers," who paid for isolated machines and their floppy disks. She laments the loss of computing citizenship and the notion of computing as a public good. Through her book, Rankin gives readers a much richer portrait of today's digital world through the contributions of the computing citizen culture of the 1965–1975 period.

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*Selling Reagan's Foreign Policy: Going Public vs. Executive Bargaining.* By N. Stephen Kane. (Lexington, Lanham: 2018. xii, 301 pp. \$110.00.)

Was Ronald Reagan a great communicator? That question drives this communications-centered analysis of seven selected case studies of Reagan's foreign policy making in the 1980s. N. Stephen Kane's argument is that Reagan often fell short of communicating his goals and that his foreign policy suffered as a result, relying too much on hyperbole and emotional, anticommunist rhetoric, and the ultimately overblown warnings regarding threat assessments. In the end, the administration and the president were not skillful and artful in the conduct of public diplomacy toward their goals, nor were they successful at creating the mechanisms politically to advance them.

The focus of Kane's study is an analysis of seven foreign policy issues: selling aid to the Contras in Nicaragua; yellow rain in Vietnam; the sale of Airborne Warning and Control System surveillance aircraft to Saudi Arabia; the Strategic Defense Initiative; the M-X missile; Grenada; and the Iran-Contra scandal. Kane explores how the Reagan administration consistently fell short of attaining its goals through