# Q: Would the E·R·A· really force women into the Army and unisex toilets?

# A: Well, it depends on whom you ask.

The Equal Rights Amendment needs the ratification of four more states to become law, and Illinois is tottering on the edge of indecision about its opportunity to ratify the bill this year. Will Illinois become one of those four crucial states?

Yes, if Doris Conant has anything to do with it. Conant is president of ERA Illinois, a new, broad-based coalition of organizations that will, among other things, employ a professional campaign director — a first for pro-ERA movements — in an all-out effort to achieve a single goal: Getting Illinois to say yes to the ERA.

But, if Phyllis Schlafly has her way, that day will never come. Schlafly, former president of the Illinois Federation of Republican Women, who began the Stop-ERA movement three years ago from her home in Alton, has managed to hold sway in her home state in her fight to protect her concept of the family and femininity.

The problem with Illinois — as with all other states which have not yet ratified, and with Tennessee and Nebraska, which revoked their ratification — is that constituents, and, therefore, their legislators, are confused about what the Equal Rights Amendment *doesn't* say. The wording of the amendment is simple:

"Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.

"The Congress shall have the power to enforce by appropriate legislation the provisions of this article.

"The amendment shall take effect two years after the date of ratification."

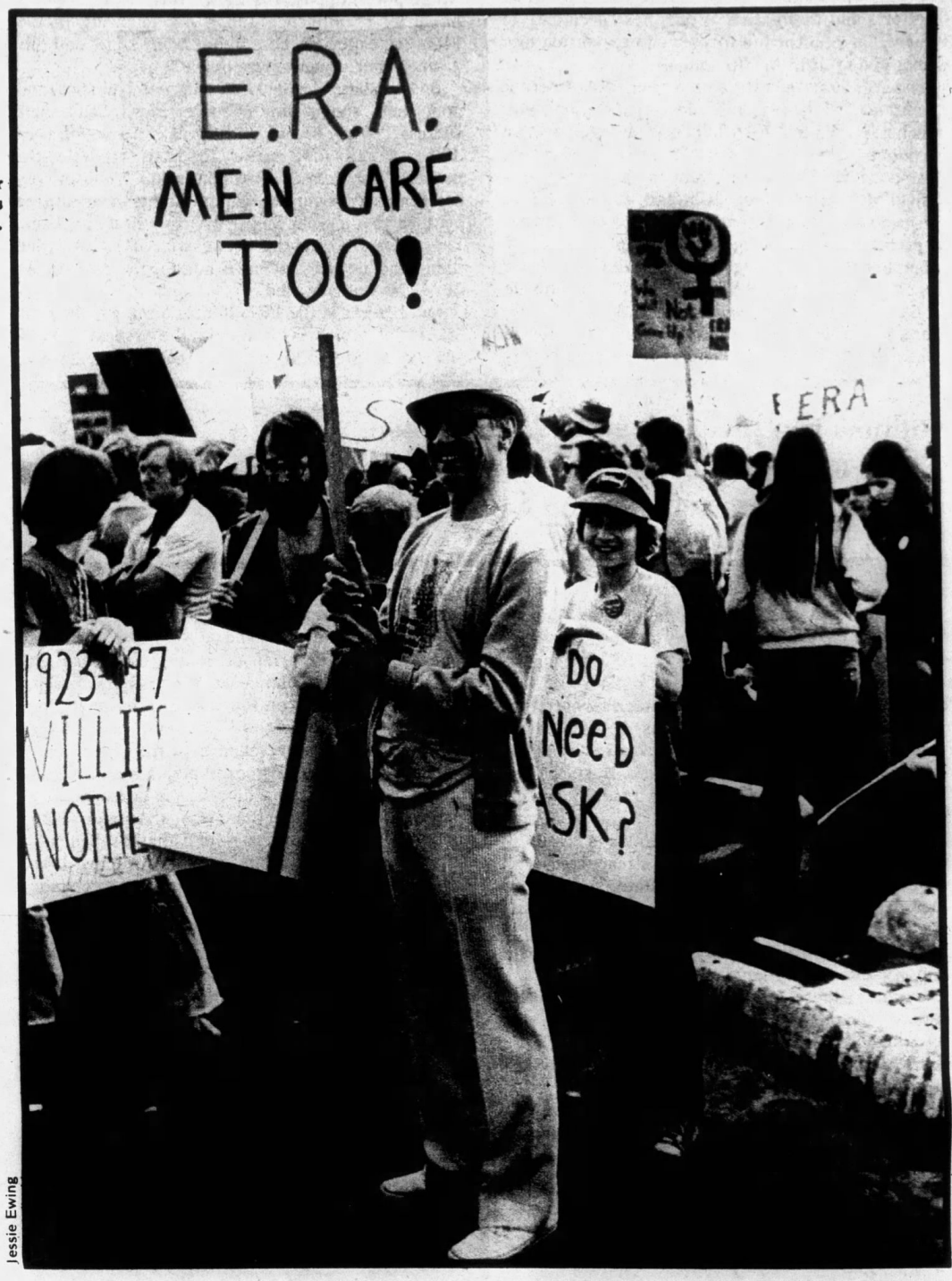
That's what it says, but what does it mean — and what could it mean in years to come? It depends on whom you're listening to. In any social arena, anti-ERA and pro-ERA forces interpret the amendment in a different light. On education, pro-ERA says states will have to eliminate differences, in enrollments and scholarships, for example, that are based on sex in public educational systems; anti-ERA says this will also extend to unisex toilet facilities. On divorce settlement, pro-ERA says alimony and child support would be contingent on economic ability rather than sex; anti-ERA says this means women will lose their legal right to be supported by their husbands, and children will lose their right to have a full-time mother in the home. On military service, pro-ERA says women would be eligible for equal job training, medical care, and education and housing benefits of the G.I. Bill in volunteer armed services; anti-ERA says women will be forced into active combat duty. And so the list goes on.

**Doris Conant, president of ERA Illinois**

The fact is that the Equal Rights Amendment neither does nor does not actually provide for any of these things; all it provides is a possibility. But the interpretation of that possibility — and the strategies through which they are presented — have left most states in a state of confusion.

Conant and other proponents of the amendment, in general, say that the main advantage of the amendment would be in providing an equal footing for women in such areas as employment, education and economics. "As it stands now," says Karen DeCrow, president of the National Organization for Women, "the only legal right women are guaranteed by the Constitution is the right to vote." The pro-ERA argument tends to be intellectual: We all should be equal.

The anti-ERA argument, on the other hand, tends to be emotional: We all should be protected. To tell the mother of six children that, should divorce occur, there is no guarantee of alimony is to hit home — literally; equality will take second place to an empty refrigerator against such an appeal. And to say that a vote for ERA is a vote against motherhood and the family is to cause tremors in the very foundation




Jessie Ewing

**Equal Rights Amendment supporters hold their placards high before the march to the Illinois State Capitol during the May 16 ERA rally in Springfield.**

upon which society has been building for thousands of years.

Schlafly has been accused of manipulating debates and interviews so that the ERA and feminism in general become one and the same to women who have chosen to be homemakers and who feel threatened by the prospect of loss of that choice. "The militant women's lib movement is a radical destructive force that has made total war on the family unit and the rights of wives. Their principal objectives are for lesbians' rights and the ERA," Schlafly said in an interview. "They want tax-supported state nurseries for all children and tax-financed abortions for everyone. They want to change school textbooks to eliminate the role-model of the mother in the home and kitchen, and put her instead in places like coal mines and ditches, where they think she belongs. I think that people intuitively recognize women's lib as an anti-family movement, just like the ERA."

It's this philosophy, this strategy — and Schlafly's Stop-ERA has chapters in forty states — that Conant is trying to combat through ERA Illinois.

"The reason you haven't seen this kind of organization before," says Conant, who is married, has three children and describes herself as "a very conventional housewife," "is because nobody dreamed, a few years ago, that anyone would be opposed to equal rights for women. It was so clearly, so obviously something whose time had come that we really weren't prepared for opposition. So, no organization was formed until we became aware of the fact that there *were* people who opposed it."

When pro-ERA constituents in Illinois did organize, they did so in two groups — ERA Central

and ERA Coalition — which resulted in duplication of efforts and dissipation of energies, according to Conant. In late April, a merger and expansion took place, giving birth to ERA Illinois.

The organization is structured after ERA America, a national Washington-based organization with which it is affiliated: ERA Illinois is outfitted with an executive committee with bipartisan co-chairs (Democrat Sister Ann Ida Gannon, formerly president of Mundelein College, Chicago, and Republican Gertrude Miller), a fifty-member board of directors, a professional campaign director plus staff, a professional fund-raiser and a public relations director. Although ERA America will not provide funds — and Conant estimates ERA Illinois will spend a quarter of a million dollars before Illinois ratifies — it will provide support in mapping out a campaign strategy.

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If it sounds like the big guns are aimed at Illinois in the battle for ERA, indeed they are, because time — or, rather, the lack of it — is the ERA's biggest enemy right now, according to Conant. If the required majority of thirty-seven states does not ratify by 1979, the ratification process must begin all over again. And the focus is on Illinois because, owing to its legislative agenda, Illinois is the only state that has the possibility of ratifying the amendment in 1976.

"Also, Illinois is a pivotal state," says Conant, "because it's an influential state. It's respected, it's well-populated, and it's a wealthy state, so it has a great deal of influence on what other states do. Indiana, for example, is still waiting to ratify the ERA and Illinois' ratification would, I'm sure, have some influence on Indiana."

Of course, these are facts that Schlafly is also aware of; Conant's problem will be trying to catch up with Schlafly's three-year lead. "The fact that the anti-ERA movement had its birth here in Illinois has made it especially difficult," says Conant. "Of course, this state has always been a hotbed of right-wing activity, and it's essentially the right-wingers who oppose the ERA. But Phyllis Schlafly has a lot of influence and a big following in the Midwest, especially here in her home state, and this is where her organizing activies began."

By necessity, Conant knows a great deal about the opposition and willingly conjectures about their success. "They're very widespread, they seem very diligent, and they seem to have an effective network," she says. "I think ordinary housewives are confused about the Equal Rights Amendment because that's what Stop-ERA tries to do to them. They're mixing up this issue with a lot of other right-wing issues that have nothing to do with it. But *we're* not confused."

And neither is the ERA Illinois strategy, the first priority of which is to unmix the issues: "We'll educate at the local level so that people have a clearer understanding of what the amendment can and cannot do — to try and dispel some of the fears that are so groundless," she says.

One thing the ERA can do, points out Conant, is end legislative discrimination in a single sweep. "There are 800 laws on the books right now that discriminate because of sex," she says, "and a lot of them will have to be revoked because of how they influence our lives. For example, a woman isn't allowed to run for statewide office in Arizona. If a woman enters politics in that state, she simply can't aspire to a statewide office — and that's ridiculous.

"Some efforts are being started to remove laws like that from the books, but if you have to change 800 laws individually, it'll take 800 years."

ERA Illinois has the membership of fifty organizations — among them, the Illinois Women's Political Caucus, Illinois Business and Professional Women, the YWCA, various church groups and the League of Women Voters, as well as such feminist organizatons as NOW — but a great deal of the organization's strength comes from unions, particularly those with a large number of women members.

"The unions are highly supportive and have spent a lot of money in trying to get the ERA passed," says Conant, "and for obvious reasons: It means equal pay for equal work."

Conant is hopeful that the pro-ERA convictions of elected Illinois officials and presidential candidates will prod Illinois legislators into ratifying the amendment. "It doesn't seem to be too controversial for presidential candidates because they've all come out in favor of it," she says. "Here, Howlett is for it, Hartigan is for it, Thompson is for it, Daley is for it, and Walker has been very outspoken in favor of the ERA — it's hard to find a prominent person who's not. And both President and Mrs. Ford have personally telephoned Illinois legislators to persuade them to pass the bill."

But it hasn't passed yet. Even if Walker has been outspoken in favor of it, he also has admitted that "even state legislators favoring the ERA are afraid to vote for it because of criticism they would draw from women constituents who have been brainwashed and misinformed."

Last time through the Illinois Senate, four votes were needed for the required three-fifths majority; Conant's challenge is to change those four votes from no to yes in 1976. Does she think ERA Illinois' quarter of a million dollar campaign can do it?

"From what I've been able to learn," says Conant, "almost anybody is capable of change."

*—Bernadette Doran*