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What's Fact and What's Fiction in *Mrs. America* Episode 5

Did that couples debate really happen? Did Gloria Steinem really date a Republican? We break down “Phyllis & Fred & Brenda & Marc.”

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Brenda Feigen Fasteau and Ari Graynor. Photos by Martha Cooper/New York Post Archives / (c) NYP Holdings, Inc. via Getty Images and Sabrina Lantos/FX.

As we've mentioned in our breakdowns of *Mrs. America*'s previous [four episodes](#), the series consists of nine installments that each foreground a specific character. The fifth focuses primarily on Brenda Feigen Fasteau (Ari Graynor), a lawyer who, alongside her husband, Marc (Adam Brody), debates Phyllis and Fred Schlafly in a televised “couples debate” about the Equal Rights Amendment. In “Phyllis & Fred & Brenda & Marc,” whose title (and closing shot) references the [classic 1969 open-relationship comedy *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice*](#), we also peer further into many of the characters' private lives, learning more about Gloria Steinem's romantic

relationships, Brenda's struggles with her sexuality, and the complicated dynamics of the Schlafly family. But did the debate really happen like that? And who are all of these boyfriends? Below, we sort out what's real and what's artistic license in "Phyllis & Fred & Brenda & Marc."

Brenda Feigen Fasteau (Ari Graynor)

While Brenda, the real-life ACLU lawyer and founding editor of *Ms.*, has been a visible presence at pro-ERA meetings throughout the series, it's only in this episode that we begin to learn much about her. Just as in the show, Brenda was among the first women to attend Harvard Law School, where, in the late 1960s, she was one of only 32 women in her class. (Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who attended Harvard Law a decade earlier, also makes a short cameo in this episode, played by Tara Nicodemo.) In her 2000 memoir *Not One of the Boys*, as in the show, Brenda describes the law school as a hostile place for women. At one point in the episode, Brenda makes casual reference to a Harvard Law professor who had designated only one day a year to call on the women in his class, which he dubbed "Ladies' Day." This anecdote is pulled directly from Brenda's memoir.

One of the secondary arcs in this episode revolves around Brenda's sexual experimentation with a female photographer named Jules (played by Roberta Colindrez). Early in the episode, the pro-ERA women take a trip to Washington, where Brenda spends a romantic evening with Jules. This scene, too, closely matches Brenda's memoir, though Brenda describes the woman with whom she had her first lesbian experience as "a notorious lesbian I'll call Lila." According to the memoir, she rationalized the affair by thinking "there were best-selling books on the subject of 'open marriage'" and that it wasn't "real adultery" because it was with a woman, a rationalization she later realized was "sexist." Still, as she writes in the memoir, and as is echoed in the show, "I knew I didn't love Lila and I did love Marc." The two remained together until they [divorced in 1987](#).

Later, we learn that Brenda is pregnant. This, too, tracks with her biography: The real Brenda and Marc [had a daughter in fall 1974](#), a few months after the episode takes place.

The Couples Debate



Adam Brody as Marc Feigen Fasteau. Sabrina Lantos/FX

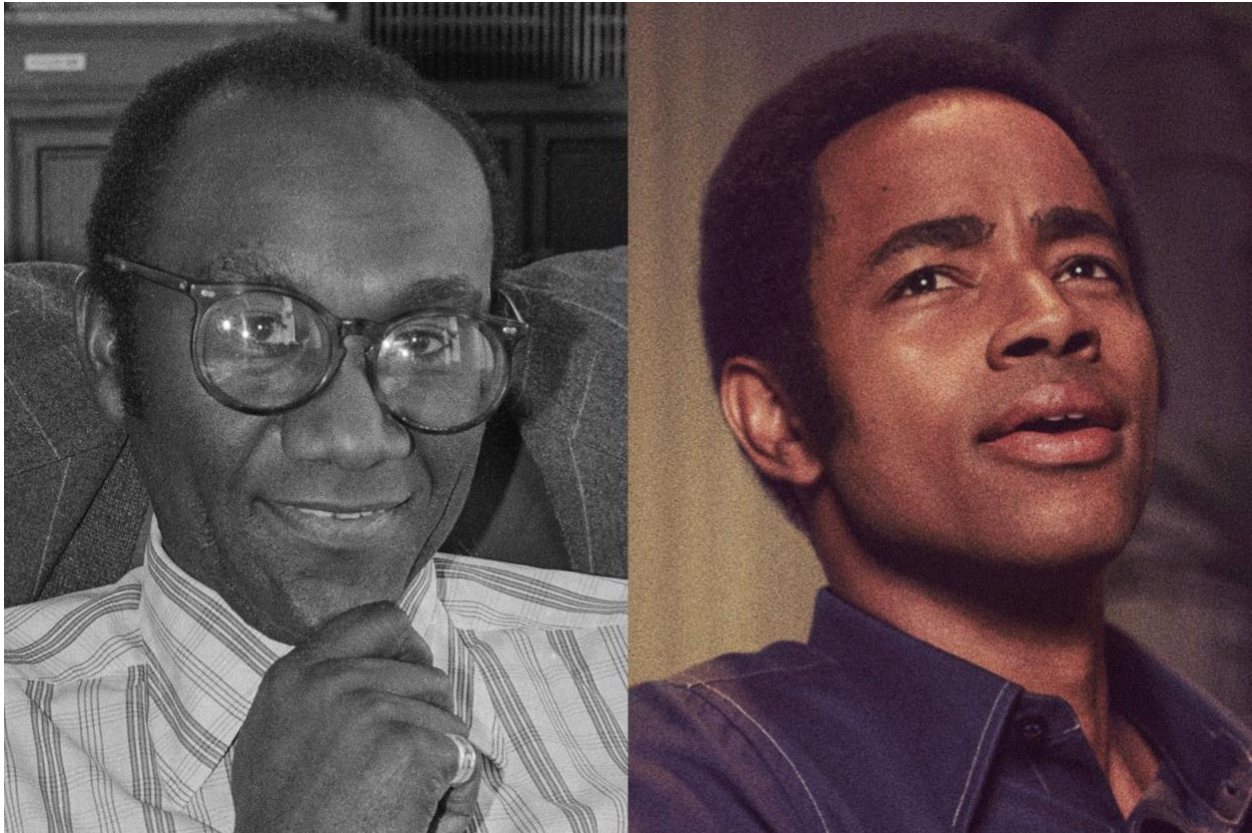
The dramatic centerpiece of Episode 5 is a debate between Phyllis and Fred Schlafly and Brenda and Marc Feigen Fasteau. In the episode, a match is struck when Brenda challenges Schlafly to debate the ERA on national television, stating she hopes to “demonstrate publicly that Schlafly doesn’t know what she’s talking about.” This moment is pulled directly from history—the show even quotes her [verbatim](#). In the episode, as in real life, the debate takes place on *The Tomorrow Show*, a glitzy late-night talk show hosted by Tom Snyder (played by Bobby Cannavale, who in real-life is the partner of *Mrs. America* actress Rose Byrne). In the episode, the idea for it to be a couples debate is attributed to Phyllis Schlafly, though the real Schlafly [once suggested Snyder himself was behind it](#), claiming, “He had a really hard time digging up any pro-ERA leader who had a husband. The only one he could find was Brenda Feigen Fasteau.”

While there wasn’t much coverage of the debate at the time, it really did happen, the same [spring of 1974](#) that the [groundbreaking *Free to Be... You and Me* television special](#) aired, just as the show depicts. (The show does rearrange some events: In real life, the special aired before the couples debate, not after.) Based on what we know from the memoir and the several times Schlafly recalled the debate publicly, the events depicted on the show also match up with what actually happened. The most heated point in the debate arises during a discussion of parental custody rights. Phyllis argues that the ERA would impose a “doctrinaire equality” (a phrase [Schlafly often employed](#)) on men and women, and would lead to the splitting up of families by infringing upon the rights of the mother to keep her children. She then references an Illinois case to support her argument but, when pressed by Brenda to cite the name of the case, avoids the question and begins to falter. Brenda then becomes harsh, demanding that Phyllis cite the case, to which she mumbles a name. “There is no such case,” responds Brenda. This moment,

which essentially clinches the debate for the pro-ERA side, is nearly identical to an anecdote in the memoir. The tense tone of the debate, with the women often speaking loudly over one another, also closely matches Feigen’s description in her memoir. As she puts it:

The only way to get a word in was literally to speak over her, which on television doesn’t work well and makes the one interrupting look uncivilized. Occasionally, though, I resorted to talking over her. It was my only choice if I wanted to get the feminist point of view across.

Gloria Steinem’s Boyfriends



Franklin Thomas and Jay Ellis. Photo illustration by Slate. Photos by Bettmann/Getty Images and Pari Dukovic/FX.

Though she isn’t the principal character in this episode, Gloria Steinem’s romantic life also comes into focus somewhat more clearly in this episode, and in particular, her relationship with Franklin “Frank” Thomas (portrayed by *Insecure*’s Jay Ellis), a handsome lawyer. Though the recorded history of Steinem’s relationship with Thomas is limited, the two really did date, and Thomas really was recently divorced with two daughters, with Steinem describing Thomas in a 2015 *New Yorker* profile as “[the longtime love of my life, and best friend.](#)” Though Thomas is not foregrounded in the series, he is an impressive historical figure in his own right and went on to become the first black president of the Ford Foundation.



Stanley Pottinger and Jake Lacy. Photo illustration by Slate. Photos by Bettmann/Getty Images and screengrab from FX.

Later on in the episode, we see Steinem begin a second, seemingly unlikely romance with a Republican lawyer in the Nixon administration. Still, as you may suspect by now, this plotline is based in reality. The character of Stan is based on Stanley Pottinger, a lawyer in the civil rights division of Richard Nixon's Justice Department, whom [Steinem did in fact date from 1974 until the early 1980s](#). The show even slips in a few little true-to-life details, including the fact that Pottinger, like Steinem, is [from Ohio](#). While it may strike some viewers as odd that an outspoken liberal like Steinem would date across the aisle, she was less partisan in her personal life. In an [article in the Washington Post](#) from 1983, a colleague of Steinem's recalls, "I mean, you fall in love with a Republican. What are you going to do?"

Phyllis Schlafly Goes to Law School



Phyllis Schlafly and Cate Blanchett. Photo illustration by Slate. Photos by Joan Roth/Hulton Archive/Getty Images and FX.

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One of the central ironies of Phyllis Schlafly’s character is that, for all her proselytizing about a woman’s right to remain at home, she’s hardly ever at home herself, and in this episode, she tells Fred that she plans to apply to law school. This, too, is true to reality: Schlafly attended law school at Washington University in St. Louis and [earned her J.D. in 1978 at the age of 53](#).

Margaret Sloan-Hunter Quits

The episode also shows Margaret Sloan-Hunter (Bria Henderson) tell Steinem that she is leaving Ms. magazine to move to Oakland, California. Though she mentions something about “better schools,” it seems clear that this is just a guise and that she feels like the token black editor. As we mentioned in our breakdown of the previous episode, [Ms. magazine really did struggle to include and represent black women](#), and the real Sloan-Hunter did in fact leave Ms. for Oakland, though [not until 1975](#).