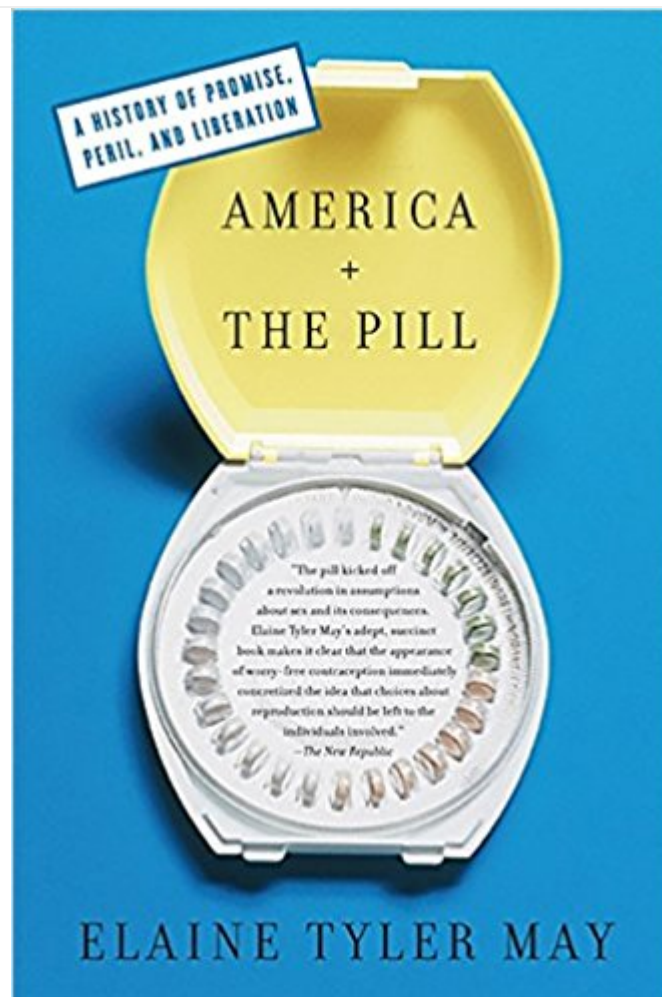


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## America and the Pill: A History of Promise, Peril, and Liberation



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### Reviewed Work(s)

*America and the Pill: A History of Promise, Peril, and Liberation.* By Elaine Tyler May (New York: Basic Books, 2010). Pp. 214. Hardcover \$25.95. E-book \$12.99.

This timely study examines the development and use of the only pharmaceutical drug referred to by a singular phrase: the pill. Building upon the works of other historians on contraceptives and sexuality, Elaine Tyler May (no relation to this reviewer) sets out to explain the hopes and fears of those involved in the creation of the pill and the way oral contraceptives have affected multiple generations of women since the pill's approval fifty years ago. May's purpose – to show that the pill was a valuable tool for women to pursue professional goals but was not solely responsible for the feminist movement and did not meet all the expectations of early onlookers – is achieved easily and with eloquent style.

May begins with the development of ideas on women's right to control their own reproduction during the larger women's rights movement of the early-twentieth century. While Margaret Sanger provided the direction and leadership behind the drive for an oral contraceptive, Katherine McCormick provided the necessary funds. The two women teamed up with scientists Gregory Pincus and John Rock, and the Food and Drug Administration ultimately approved the pill for treatment for menstrual disorders and infertility in 1957 and for use as a contraceptive in 1960.

The author is at her best in the second chapter as she ties the goals of the pill's most vociferous advocates to the Cold War. Experts agreed in the postwar era that there was a population problem threatening the stability of the world. May notes that the majority of American politicians were not as concerned with the potential suffering of hungry people as they were with the possibility that impoverished people might turn to communism. Additionally, conservative politicians argued that the population of the "unfit" should be reduced by giving the pill to women on welfare, goals at odds with the women's rights activists involved with

the initial creation of the pill. The racist nature of those policies did not prevent African American women from using the pill to control their reproduction, often in opposition to Black Power leaders and the men in their own lives. Thus, May effectively ties the promotion of the pill to the social and political environment of the Cold War.

In the third chapter, May examines the pill's effect on men. At one end of the spectrum, doctors and scientists predicted that the pill would lead to a loss of male self-esteem, apparently imbedded in their ability to reproduce at will. At the other end, proponents of the pill, like *Playboy*, believed that the pill would lead to the "good life" for men without any kind of responsibilities. May notes that most of the men who did support the pill "wanted to be sure that women's sexuality would be liberated for men, but not for women themselves" (63). Continuing the inclusion of men, May's fifth chapter discusses the possibility of a contraceptive pill for men and discusses the reasoning behind its continued unavailability.

While the pill did not effectively control population growth as its advocates had intended, it also did not start the sexual revolution. Instead, May shows that women who had already decided to be sexually active used the pill, and the oral contraceptive merely enhanced an environment that was becoming freer from shame and guilt concerning sexual activities. Indeed, the author shows that the sexual revolution was hardly "revolutionary." The rise in sexual activity was part of a trend that halted only during the 1950s, an aberrant time when young women were still sexually active but within the confines of marriage. However, as shown in the sixth chapter, women who took the pill sometimes had to challenge authority. After *Griswold v. Connecticut*, married women could legally obtain contraceptives, but the Catholic Church's ban remained in place. Nevertheless, many Catholics protested the Church's decision, and May argues that the Church's position on birth control weakened the power of the papacy, even causing many Catholics to leave the Church. The author also notes that women began to turn on medical experts as dangerous side effects of the pill began to appear. The pill's introduction came during a time of deep trust in experts and science to solve all the world's ills. Eventually, as medical tragedies began to enter the headlines, women began to challenge their doctors' opinions, leading to a Senate hearing on the safety of the pill in 1970. May's final chapter examines the pill in 2010 as both an enhancer of opportunities and a

burdensome hassle, concluding that though women are not of one mind about loving or hating the pill, it has become an important part of American culture.

In terms of sources, May largely relies upon existing monographs with periodic usage of magazines, newspapers, and film. Her most valuable original research comes from the responses to her Internet survey, upon which she heavily relies for her chapter on the pill in 2010. May's great strength lies in her ability to weave together those sources in a well-organized manner and present the information in an easily accessible tone. Unarguably pro-pill, the work still manages to refrain from partisanship. Though she admits in the introduction that her father was involved in the FDA hearings on the pill and was responsible for a postponement of its approval due to his misgivings about its safety, the work does not suffer from that early involvement and is instead enhanced by it. Her organization, by theme and not chronology, could result in the loss of viewing trends overtime, but in May's hands it does not happen. The only real criticism is that the author tries to do so much on the cultural history of the pill in such a small space. May readily makes up for that possible fault, though, in her extraordinary ability to pick out what is most important and present it without accompanying flourishes.

May's work is far from the first on the pill or contraceptives. However, her analysis, especially concerning the relationship between the pill and the Cold War, is a concise addition to the growing historiography on both sexuality and the postwar era. The book will be a valuable resource for scholars in history and sociology, as well as providing easy accessibility to a popular audience.

**Meredith May**

*Texas Christian University*



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