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Kathie Sarachild

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TAKING IN THE IMAGES: A RECORD IN GRAPHICS OF THE VIETNAM ERA SOIL FOR FEMINISM

KATHIE SARACHILD, with DOCUMENTS FROM THE REDSTOCKINGS WOMEN'S LIBERATION ARCHIVES

The Women's Liberation Movement that revived at the height of the Vietnam War era militantly challenged rather than celebrated any traditional association between women and peace (or conversely, men and war).

"Women for Peace" groups in existence at the time were playing for effect on women's traditional role—as the "Bring the Boys Home for Dinner" cartoon (below) from the Women's Strike For Peace cookbook *Peace De Resistance* (not to mention the cookbook itself) so graphically and wittily demonstrates, albeit with good humor. (Some Women's Strike for Peace activists may have seen themselves as covert feminists, but



From *Peace de Resistance Cookbook #1*, published by Women's Strike For Peace, Los Angeles, mid-1960s. Courtesy of Redstockings Women's Liberation Archives

Le Thi Tuyet, a deputy leader of a guerrilla detachment somewhere in central south Vietnam, once killed ten enemy soldiers and wounded two—with a total of just 12 bullets. (Democratic Republic of Vietnam, Foreign Language Publishing House, Hanoi.) Courtesy of the Redstockings Women's Liberation Archives.



how far away the idea of an overt feminist challenge was can be seen in the cookbook's introduction: "My place is in the home, but... it's on the peace line, too!"

In stark contrast, the media, both "Establishment" and "underground," were beginning to carry jolting photos of women guerrilla combatants among our Vietnamese "enemy"—captured and being guarded by American servicemen, or perhaps even *capturing* a serviceman, most likely an American bomber pilot shot down over North Vietnam. These were images that certainly played their part in "violating the reality structure,"—to use a movement phrase of the era—and challenging cultural norms about "gender," not to mention much other conventional wisdom (also challenging, for instance, the U.S. interventionists' claim to the war's justice and democratic purpose.) The images suggested an undeniable reality to the Vietnamese revolutionaries' proclaimed new liberation strategy of "people's war."

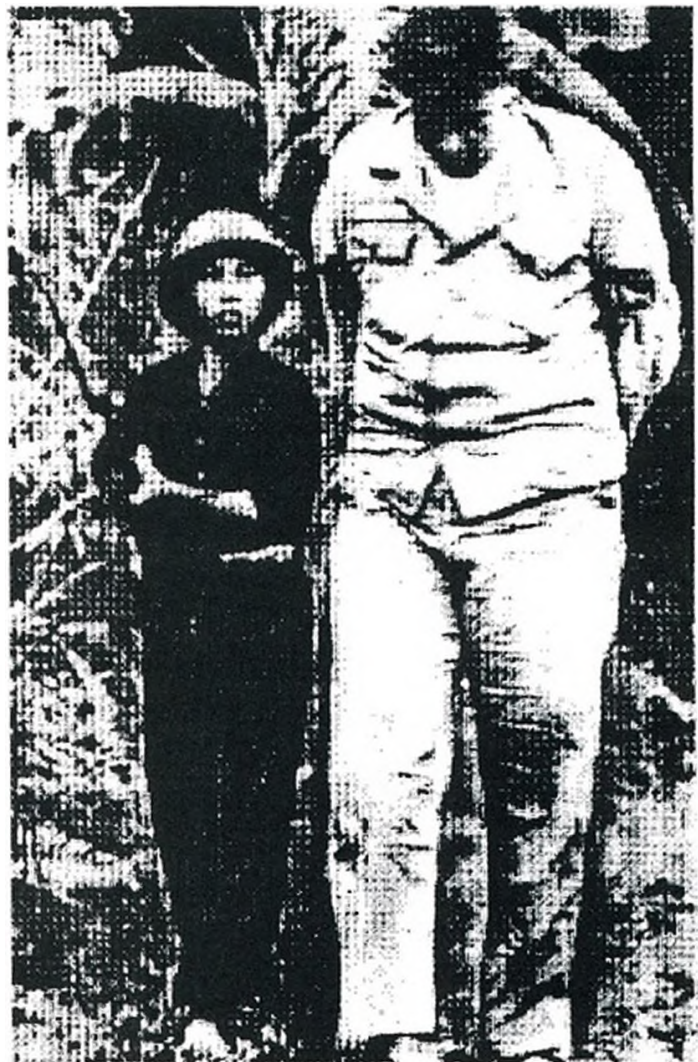


Chinese paper cut of woman and man fighting alongside each other in a "people's war" of national liberation. Published in the *Guardian Radical Newsweekly*, New York City (8/16/72). Courtesy of the Redstockings Women's Liberation Archives.



North Vietnamese postage stamp, 1967. Militawoman and captured U.S. bomber pilot. Courtesy of Redstockings Women's Liberation Archives.

North Vietnamese photograph of militia woman with a captured U.S. airman. It is said to be the most popular photo in a war exhibit in Hanoi. The photo was originally released by Hanoi in January, 1967. *NO MORE FUN AND GAMES: A Journal of Female Liberation* (No. 5), July 1971. Courtesy of Redstockings Women's Liberation Archives.



The Vietnamese woman guerrilla with a gun almost became a stock symbol in the antiwar movement's widely circulating underground press. In many cases, the same (predominantly male) editors of the underground press who adored Third World women with guns 10,000 miles away, still preferred "Women for Peace" to "Women's Liberation" at home—as the following spoof of a lonely hearts column in the Women's Liberation Movement's first national newsletter shows:

Dear John,

I've always been a good provider. We have a lovely home in the suburbs and my wife has an unlimited charge account at Marshal Field's. I've always encouraged her to take night courses in art history and French cooking, so you can see I'm in favor of improving her mind.

She joined the League of Women Voters and I nodded my approval. She even started picketing with Women for Peace and I said yes. I agreed that it was good for women to question their government as long as dinner was on time and my shirts were ironed. However, now she's gone too far. She talked to this radical who convinced her that she ought to define herself, and some nonsense about liberating herself.

Now I believe in humoring women, but I'm sick of TV dinners and wrinkled collars. Can I convince her true happiness is found in a well-done cheese souffle?

Larry Liberal

Dear L.L.,

Your wife has obviously lost confidence in your manhood since she seeks fulfillment elsewhere. You must try to convince her that it is exciting to be part of your world—have you tried MAN TAN?

Dear John,

I used to be a movement bureaucrat and do city wide co-ordinating. My chick was always with me and a great help since I don't type, and she was much better on the phone asking for money and favors. Then I decided that

in order to be more effective I should broaden my experience. I decided to organize a working class neighborhood. Fortunately, my chick had no political disagreements with me so she came along. For a while we were doing great. My chick would go into a local bar and start up conversations with some of the guys. Then I would come in shortly after and join in, talking political stuff.

But lately, my chick has started hanging around grocery stores. If she does come into a bar, she just talks to the women and doesn't help me to get to know the guys. Now that's the important issue, the way she is messing up our organizing. But also she's talking about women's liberation stuff and refuses to cook all the time (although she's the better cook) and insists I learn to type.

How can I get her back to using her best talents in everyday tasks and being a good organizer?

Disorganized

Dear Disorganized,

Perhaps you could analyze women's liberation as counter-revolutionary and re-enlist her support. If you do come up with such an analysis, please send me a copy as I have many readers with similar problems.

John Magnus Fallus

There seemed no end to the visual evidence of "our" men, "our" country, as more the oppressor than the victim, as more the invader than the defender. So when radical women began exploring what seemed to be the deep connection between "gender and war," as Peggy Dobbin's leaflet "Liturgy for the Burial of Traditional Womanhood" shows, it also meant examining, not evading, the possibility of a female, "womanly" share of responsibility for war—and of "traditional womanhood's" share in the benefits of war's aggrandizement.

* "Dear John: Women for Peace—Yes, Women's Liberation—No!" from *Voice of the Women's Liberation Movement* (June 1968). Courtesy of Redstockings Women's Liberation Archives.

LITURGY FOR THE BURIAL OF TRADITIONAL WOMANHOOD

Chorus:

Oh women of Chalcis and Argos
Of Manhattan and Chicago
For 3000 years of western wars
In submission
We have sinned
Bemoaning death
HYPOCRISY (response)
Affirming life
COMPLICITY (response)
Where have we stood to turn the tide
Of civilization
OF PACIFICATION (response)
Of civilizing ourselves
OUR MEN (response)
By war.

I.

Oh women
YOUNG WOMEN (response)
Civilized women, we have sinned.
We have sinned to the trill of martial
trumpets
And patriotic hymns
For the thrill of pride and power
And to glory in lusty men
We cheered and waved and goaded
Our men to murder and maim
For heroic virility in our eyes.

Chorus:

Oh women from forests to Savannah
From tribes to urban centers
For 10,000 years of human wars
In submission we have sinned
Bemoaning death....

II

Oh women
WIVES AND MOTHERS (response)
Civilized women, we have sinned
Since the first expulsion from Eden
Since the sexes were spit asunder
And we lay with belly bulging
Licking our sleek skin and learning
That Adam would forage still further
And to bring more back than he
needed would kill
As long as we kept the immortality
Of our shared species to ourselves.
Primary division of labor
Destruction of our intellect and
courage
Fair exchange for denying gentleness
to men.

Preening, posing, and prodding
Adam to forage still further
To bring us furs, kelvinators, and empires
With the bribe that we might let him back
Into our warmth and with him share
The glories of our births.
Women, widowed by sin
Simpering and spineless now
The blame is ours if they heed only
The wit and power of general's glory
And seek warmth in the comradeship of
war.

Chorus:

Women of Cleveland and Baltimore
Of Philadelphia and Newark
How many more years of human wars
In submission shall we sin
Bemoaning death....

III

Oh women
WOMEN TODAY (response)
Civilized women, we sin.
Wiser than virgins awed by important men
Hearts stronger than ambitious wives
Who use men and children to gain their
ends.

Women unabashed of feelings

Loving peace
And lively bodies
More than efficiency
And exigencies
Of war.

We also

We have sinned
Aquiescing to an order
That indulges peaceful pleas
And writes them off as female logic
Saying peace is womanly.
We sin with brimming hearts conceding
Our arguments are filled with feeling
And feeling must give way to legalese.
We sinned today
If we indulge our hearts
And leave thought and action to men.
We sin tomorrow
If cool computators act out their parts
Blameless, if we cannot find our minds
and courage
To force rediscovery of heart.

—Peggy Dobbins

pilgrim's progress

OR: NEW LEFT NANCY AND LIBERATION LINDA

A serialized morality play (in the style of the early thirties)

by Naomi Weisstein

Start Here



Nancy chains herself to Jim, and they get arrested at the induction center

LET NO PIE FALL THESE CHAINS ASUNDER!

KICK STOMP

GO AWAY, DADDY, I HAVE IMPORTANT POLITICAL THINGS TO THINK ABOUT— ORGANIZING, DEMONSTRATING, PUTTING MY PERSONAL SOME ON THE LINE

TALK TO ME ABOUT THEM, I DO IMPORTANT POLITICAL THINGS, TOO

WHE, DUDE, BABY

YOU'RE BEING UNFAIR

YOU'RE CUTE WHEN YOU'RE ANGRY



Later that day:

I WENT INDUCTED, I'M DEAF IN ONE EAR.

OH, BABY!

WHAT?

OH BABY!



NANCY SCRATCHES HER HEAD: CAN THIS BE RIGHT? DOES JIM HAVE MORE IMPORTANT POLITICAL THINGS TO DO THAN SHE DOES? SHOULD SHE TELL HIM TO GO F*CK HIMSELF? IS SHE CUTE WHEN SHE'S ANGRY?

READ NEXT THRILLING INSTALLMENT

Weisstein

Cartoon by Naomi Weisstein, *Voice of the Women's Liberation Movement*, (October 1968)
Courtesy of Redstockings Women's Liberation Archives.

The association of one gender with peace was the other side of the association of the other gender with war. The Vietnamese "enemy" had already challenged both these associations with their rhetoric and the reality of a people's war. The other side of a people's war, of course, would be a people's peace.

One of the most illuminating contradictions radical women faced and began to understand in a new way in the crucible of the times was

that their automatic exclusion from the draft was maybe not so “lucky,” after all—that it reflected a second class position in society for which there was a stiff price to pay for a lifetime. Rather than being a source of power for women as young antiwar activists, it was a source as well as an emblem of their powerlessness compared to the men of their generation—as their “No” to the war lacked the strength the men’s had of being able to say “We won’t go”—and highlighted their more powerless and auxiliary position in the rest of society, as well. (For a version of this discovery, see the Naoimi Weisstein’s cartoon on the preceding page.)

There have been victories for women’s liberation and equality between the sexes as well as for peace since radical women in the United States came to their conclusion that part of the power to stop the war lay in having the power to participate in war, and that there couldn’t be a fully powerful “People’s Resistance” to the war until women had full power as people.

By the mid-70s, all U.S. troops were out of Vietnam, and the draft had been ended. U.S. imperialist interventionist policy in the Third World had been considerably curtailed by popular opposition at home and resistance abroad (although there is still a huge military budget that is terribly costly to the American people, and continuing covert intervention—reflecting the reality that many of the questions of the Vietnam war have never been fully settled in our country and many of the attitudes and interests behind the policy are still in place among those whose wealth gives them disproportionate power to start pressing their course again.). At the same time, a massive feminist movement for equal rights for women has developed in the country from the women’s liberation organizing and consciousness-raising started in the 1960s Vietnam generation, and it has won many reforms—including considerable freedom from the forced childbearing mandated by the old laws against abortion.

Vast social and cultural changes have taken place, too—partly as a result of the spread of feminist consciousness. Among them has been a tremendous growth in the number and percent of women in the armed forces. Today, more than twenty years later, a military correspondent of the *New York Times* writes that “The United States relies on women in the military more than any other nation, Israel and the Soviet Union included. Women constitute over 10 percent of the enlisted force today” (Richard Halloran, *New York Times*, book review section, Sep 3 1989).

Even though there are quotas on the numbers of women, and women are formally barred from combat duty (in what is currently, and hopefully forever, a peacetime army with a volunteer force), this is still a major break with tradition and history. Women have undoubtedly been going into the armed services, so newly opened to them to any significant degree, for a variety of reasons, including economic benefits like job opportunities and the various veterans’ benefits that have long drawn men into the military—especially into peacetime service. They

have undoubtedly been going in for feminist reasons also, as they are still challenging eons of “gender and defense” tradition, and every woman who is doing it is to some extent a pioneer asserting women's right to equality with men.



The Women's Strike for Equality, August 26, 1970, New York City. Courtesy of Redstockings Women's Liberation Archives.

There is much to be said for the view that a lot of what led the United States into Vietnam still holds sway, and as long as that's true, peace may very well not be long lasting, and the kind of war our soldiers are likely to be sent to is not going to be the kind of war that any American—male or female—ought to be fighting (voluntarily or involuntarily).

Even if this is true, however, and there is considerable danger that it is, it's also true that the same factors, considerations and paradoxes that existed then and led to the revival of feminism are also still in place. For the sake of women's liberation and a more democratic, equal and overall fair society—for all people, in every area of life—and even more for democracy and equity in the military and for greater power to end war itself, gender equity in the military, as in the rest of society, needs to continue to advance.

As the radical women found in 1968, although some didn't take it so far then, military duty was and is a power, not just a burden. It's a two-edged sword—power to stop a war (although all the teach-ins and war protests helped in this, too) by refusal of military duty. And power in the hands of the people in grim, extreme situations to throw off an oppressor or occupier, to throw out an invader, as the Vietnamese were doing. The right to participation in the military can be used to oppose a war that lacks democratic wisdom and purpose; and it was. A short while before President Lyndon Johnson's announcement that he would

not run for another term, Walter Lippman, as quoted in Kirkpatrick Sale's book *SDS*, wrote:

The President is confronted with the resistance, open or passive, of the whole military generation, their teachers, their friends, their families. The attempt to fight a distant war by conscription is producing a demoralization which threatens the very security of the nation.

Of course, the problem wasn't only "distance;" Americans had fought at quite a distance when we had fought the Nazis, and the Japanese fascists. The problem was the war's injustice. The problem was that the war's democratic wisdom, principles, and even legality were, at the very least, in serious question—in a situation whose gravity demanded no question, or at least less question than we had.

When President Carter issued his call in 1980 for registration for a draft once again (although there was not a draft, and no war, needless to say, only a slightly more credible threat of one) he included women in the call for draft registration. The proposal was another first in U.S. military history.

For a brief while, for better or worse, it looked from the climate of things—the Equal Right Amendment (ERA) had recently been extended for three more years, after a massive march on Washington—that the step of a truly universal draft registration would actually be taken.



Peggy Averill, Liberation News Service cartoon, Delaware Alternative Press, Newark, DE (April, 1980). Courtesy of Redstockings Women's Liberation Archives.



Peggy Averill, Liberation News Service cartoon, Delaware Alternative Press, Newark, DE (April, 1980). Courtesy of Redstockings Women's Liberation Archives.

The apparently imminent prospect conjured up whole new and uniquely powerful, inflammatory images of what a new resistance to an unjust war might be like under the new conditions—as the cartoons by Peg Averill of Liberation News Service illustrate. (Liberation News Service is one of the still living “counter-institutions” from the Sixties.)

In one, a spirited young woman of draft age—and now draft potential—in pants and long, free-flowing natural hair, holds a sign that reads, “I’m not gonna be cannon fodder—how about you?” This shows how far the consciousness and condition of women and the rest of society had come since the days of “Bring the boys home for dinner.” It also suggests some of the bittersweet reasons for the transition—the hard struggles of the sixties, the lessons learned from them, and the spirit created. Though the thought that young people are worried enough about becoming cannon fodder to be motivated to get out the signs and start planning the resistance, the fact that there is a widespread political consciousness and movement ready to spring into action against a draft and a war is also evidence of the distance travelled since the early days of the sixties.

A new version of the “Bring the boys home” sign—this time carried by both parents—might be “Keep the boys and girls home,” or “Keep the kids home!” And for the potential draftee or soldier organizing in the resistance, what about “Cannon fodder of both genders unite!”

It was just speculation, however. The combination of both proposals created an emotional and political storm, and when the storm settled Congress had voted down the provision for women, but had passed the measure for draft registration itself—for young men only. The opponents of equality and proponents of increased war preparation and

spending won the day—the war measure was won and the equality measure was lost.

Along with the movement in the direction of war readiness, came the return of the “men’s army,” at least as far as the draft registration was concerned. Apparently, it was the sense or desire of Congress that the new idea of a people’s army with growing equality between the sexes was well and good for peacetime, and a peacetime army, and a volunteer army. But not for a wartime army. Or not right for a draft.



A sequel to this article will appear in a future issue of *Vietnam Generation*, and will also be available from the Redstockings Women’s Liberation Archives.