

by Shulamith Firestone (1968) The Jeanette Rankin Brigade was a women's protest to end the SE Asia War. This article is a radical feminist critique of that well intentioned, but ultimately frustrating effort. **by Shulamith Firestone**

(Editors Note: In January of 1968 with the SE Asia War raging, the Jeanette Rankin Brigade came to Washington to pressure Congress to end the conflict. The Brigade was named for Jeanette Rankin, the first woman to be elected to Congress. Rankin voted against US entrance into both WWI and WWII and was a well known feminist and peace activist. Shulamith Firestone analyzed the Brigade from a radical feminist point of view.)

A lot of energy and a good few months of our early formation period were spent preparing an appropriate action for the Brigade peace march in Washington, D.C., the largest gathering of women for a political purpose since the heyday of Jeanette Rankin (the first woman elected to Congress from Montana in 1917). The brigade was a coalition of women's groups united for a specific purpose: to confront Congress on its opening day, Jan. 15, 1968, with a strong show of female opposition to the Vietnam War.

However, from the beginning we felt that this kind of action, though well-meant was ultimately futile. It is naive to believe that women who are not politically seen, heard, or represented in this country could change the course of a war by simply appealing to the better natures of congressmen. Further, we disagreed with a women's demonstration as a tactic for ending the war, for the Brigade's reason for organizing AS WOMEN. That is, the Brigade was playing upon the traditional female role in the classic manner. They came as wives, mothers and: mourners; that is, tearful and passive reactors to the actions of men rather than organizing as women to change that definition of femininity to something other than a synonym for weakness, political impotence, and tears.

So that we came as a group not of appeal to Congress, but to appeal to women not to appeal to congress. Rather we believed that such a massive gathering should be used to devise ways to build up real political strength.

To drive this home, we felt that a dramatic action would be least offensive and most effective. In addition to a speech written and delivered to the main body of the convention on Jan. 15, and reprinted below, we staged an actual funeral procession with a larger-than-life dummy on a transported bier, complete with feminine getup, blank face, blonde curls, and candle. Hanging from the bier were such disposable items as S & H Green Stamps, curlers, garters, and hairspray.

Streamers floated off it and we also carried large banners, such as "DON'T CRY: RESIST " Kathy Barrett of the Pageant Players, a New York street theater group, worked with others on simple but effective costumes for the funeral entourage. We had a special drum corps with kazoo, and a sheet of clever songs written by Beverly Grant and others. Peg Dobbins wrote a long funeral dirge lamenting woman's traditional role which encourages men to develop aggression and militarism to prove their masculinity. There were several related pamphlets, including one written by Kathie Amatniek which elaborated on the following Progression:

TRADITIONAL WOMANHOOD IS DEAD.

TRADITIONAL WOMEN WERE BEAUTIFUL...BUT REALLY POWERLESS.

"UPPITY" WOMEN WERE EVEN MORE BEAUTIFUL...BUT STILL POWERLESS.

SISTERHOOD IS POWERFUL!

HUMANHOOD THE ULTIMATE!

Finally, by way of a black-bordered invitation we "joyfully" invited many of the 5,000 women there to attend a burial that evening at Arlington "by torchlight" of Traditional Womanhood, "who passed with a sigh to her Great Reward this year of the Lord, 1968, after 3,000 years of bolstering the egos of Warmakers and aiding the cause of war..."

The message inside read:

Don't Bring Flowers...Do be prepared to sacrifice your traditional female roles. You have refused to hanky-wave boys off to war with admonitions to save the American Mom and Apple Pie. You have resisted your roles of supportive girl friends and tearful widows, receivers of regretful telegrams and worthless medals of honor. And now you must resist approaching Congress playing these same roles that are synonymous with powerlessness. We must not come as passive supplicants begging for favors, for power cooperates only with power. We must learn to fight the warmongers on their own terms, though they believe us capable only of rolling bandages. Until

we have united into a force to be reckoned with, we will be patronized and ridiculed into total political ineffectiveness. So if you are really sincere about ending this war, join us tonight and in the future.

Later, 500 women split off in disgust from the main body of the convention to call a counter congress. Although predictable under the circumstances, nevertheless it was unexpected. We were not really prepared to rechannel this disgust, to provide the direction that was so badly needed. There was chaos. The women were united only in their frustration, some calling for militancy of any kind at that late date, others for more organization for the future. They were all keenly disappointed, and fully aware of their impotence.

It was a great moment. But we lost it. And we learned the value of spontaneity, of quick and appropriate political action, the value of learning to size up a situation and act on it at once, the importance of unrehearsed speaking ability. For I think one good guiding speech at the crisis point which illustrated the real causes underlying the massive discontent and impotence felt in that room then, would have been worth ten dummies and three months of careful and elaborate planning.

The measure of that impotence was the very fact that the number of marchers was, for the first time in years, accurately reported: the march was no threat at all to the Establishment. By the same token general coverage of such a large march was slight or nonexistent, handled by minor reporters who had to work or wring some human interest value or slight sexual titillation from the fact that a few younger women could be spotted at this dull and hennish hotel teaparty. But where minor reporters failed, Ramparts succeeded. They had to use odd agile photography distorted quotations, and a whole lot of incorrect facts, granted, but succeed they did. (Even Life couldn't have done better, had they been interested in trying.)

Letters of protest poured in from women in radical groups around the country. But Ramparts just chuckled patted the little women on the cheeks published a few (out of context) and went on its more important radical business.

Despite all this discouragement and the small returns on all our labors, the Washington experience was not entirely wasted. We learned alot. We found out where women, even the so called "women radicals" were really at. We confirmed our worst suspicions, that the job ahead, of developing even a minimal consciousness among women will be staggering, but we also

confirmed our belief that a real women's movement in this country will come, if only out of the sheer urgent and immediate necessity for one.