

A CLEVER NEW WAVE OF FEMINIST ANTIWAR ACTIVISM MANAGES TO AVOID OLD CLICHÉS.

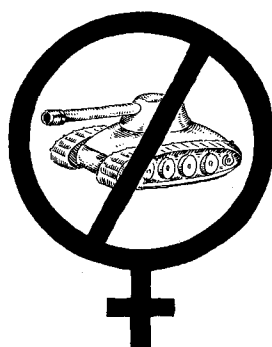
Mighty in Pink

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This article is part of the Waging Peace series, covering the movement that is emerging across the United States to oppose war on Iraq.

—The Editors



WESLEY BEDROSIAN

week of actions in the first week of March, ending on March 8, International Women's Day. Code Pink-inspired vigils are regularly held in Utah, Texas and elsewhere, and a group of women in Albany, New York, will keep a rolling fast and vigil until March 8. Code Pink is not an organization but a phenomenon: a sensibility reflecting feminist analysis and a campy playfulness, influenced in style and philosophy both by ACT UP and the antiglobalization movement.

"It's not easy to be warm and fashionable at the same time," smiled Nina Human of Atlanta, who, ensconced in a billowing pink scarf, was succeeding admirably. It was a sunless late afternoon in January, and

Human was at the Women's Peace Vigil in front of the White House, protesting the Bush Administration's impending war on Iraq. Human has never protested anything before, but she has spent many sleepless nights worrying about this war. She learned about the vigil, organized by the Code Pink Women's Pre-emptive Strike for Peace, on the web. "I told my husband and my boss: 'I'm going,'" she said.

The name Code Pink is, of course, a clever spoof on the Bush Administration's color-coded terrorism alerts. The idea grew out of the observation of organizers—including Starhawk, Global Exchange's Medea Benjamin and Diane Wilson of Unreasonable Women—that women were leading much of the current antiwar organizing and that more women than men opposed the war on Iraq.

In October, women all over the country began wearing pink to protests, while Benjamin and her cohorts conceived the Women's Vigil, a constant, rolling presence in front of the White House. The vigil began November 17 and will conclude with a

Though everyone is moved by the seriousness of the issue—many participants feel that the survival of the planet is at stake—the actions have been high-spirited. In December a Code Pink posse disrupted a press conference held by Charlotte Beers, a public relations expert hired by the State Department to market the war on terrorism, especially in Islamic countries. In the middle of the event Code Pink activists unfurled a pink banner, which admonished, CHARLOTTE, STOP SELLING WAR. An action in New York City on Martin Luther King Day targeted Laura Bush, who was speaking at the Sheraton, holding signs urging her to TELL GEORGE NOT TO GO TO WAR. Even when Code Pink actions are small, says Medea Benjamin, "we're dressed in pink, so it's hard to ignore us."

Code Pink is part of a rising tide of creative and memorable feminist antiwar activism. In early January a group of Point Reyes, California, women spelled out PEACE on a beach with their naked bodies, protesting Bush's "naked aggression." A few weeks later and many degrees colder, a group of New York women did the same. The Lysistrata Project, named for the Aristophanes character whose name means "she who disbands

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armies" (Lysistrata organized Athenian and Spartan women in a sex strike in order to get men to stop making war), is working to make the connections between peace and reproductive freedom. The Raging Grannies, a guerrilla theater group with origins in the Canadian antinuclear movement, have also been a vibrant presence. These activists are joined by established international groups like Women in Black and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

Historically, women's resistance to militarism has taken many forms—and ideas about it have varied. In her 1938 treatise *Three Guineas*, Virginia Woolf argued that as a woman, she had no reason to be patriotic, as the state denied her equal property and citizenship rights. She wrote, "If you insist upon fighting to protect me, or 'our' country, let it be understood, soberly and rationally between us, that you are fighting... to procure benefits which I have not shared... in fact, as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world."

Other feminists have suggested that whether because of biology or culture, women's traditional roles as caregivers—especially as mothers—lend us a more life-affirming worldview, one that frowns on war and violence. In this spirit, in 1961 a national organization called Women Strike for Peace organized 50,000 women nationwide to walk off their jobs and out of their kitchens, to demand that their elected representatives embrace a nuclear test ban. These women wanted to protect their children, but as historian Amy Swerdlow has pointed out, they also felt a motherly responsibility to the world. As one WSP participant put it: "No mother can accept lightly even the remote possibility of separation from the family which needs her. But mankind needs us too."

The otherwise admirable antinuclear activist Dr. Helen Caldicott has appealed to popular audiences with an even less subtle traditionalism. "As mothers we must make sure the world is safe for our babies," she once said in a speech. "I appeal especially to the women to do this work because we understand the genesis of life.... We have wombs, we have breasts, we have menstrual periods to remind us that we can produce life!"

No Code Pink participant that I interviewed discussed her womb or her period (for this I was grateful). But Nina Human, the protester from Atlanta, said she felt that "women need to get together because it's our sons and daughters they'll force to go over there." Besides, she added, "I think women are basically more peaceful people."

This sort of sentiment doesn't sit well with Jenny Brown, a Gainesville, Florida, activist who is a member of Redstockings (yes, this radical feminist group, founded in the 1960s, is still around). "Since when are women naturally peaceful?" asks Brown. "Harriet Tubman carried a gun when she ran the underground railroad." Brown is only 37, but her thinking comes out of a venerable tradition. In January 1968, radical feminists protested the Jeanette Rankin Brigade, an all-women peace formation. They held a funeral procession and buried traditional womanhood. As Brown explains, "They felt that appeals based on women's peaceful natures would only assure men that they were not a threat."

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Particularly given the Bush Administration's ferocious attack on reproductive rights, now would be an especially bad time to reinforce traditional gender stereotypes or to exalt the cult of compulsory motherhood. The notion that women are biologically—or even culturally—destined to breed and to nurture could feed the forces of reaction. As radical feminists have long suggested, denying women's capacity for aggression—and militancy—also denies our power.

But asked about the emphasis on mothering, activists say it hasn't played a significant role in contemporary feminist antiwar organizing. "Some people like it," says Medea Benjamin. "But we really want to be inclusive. A lot of our friends don't have kids. We don't want it to sound corny, old or off-putting." Code Pink's mission statement emphatically rejects biological determinism:

Women have been the guardians of life—not because we are better or purer or more innately nurturing than men, but because the men have busied themselves making war. Because of our responsibility to the next generation, because of our own love for our families and communities and this country that we are a part of, we understand the love of a mother in Iraq for her children, and the driving desire of that child for life.

Those standing in front of the White House had widely varying theories about why women should oppose war. Some pointed out that militarism is nourished, at least in part, by our ideas about masculinity. Gail Kielson, an activist who fights domestic violence in western Massachusetts, sees connections between the Bush Administration's bellicose, cowboy rhetoric and violence against women. Gesturing with some frustration toward the White House, she said she and others in her field have recently noticed "a curious, scary upsurge" in domestic violence: "There is a parallel between the President's attitude toward Iraq, and what men do in their homes."

The National Organization for Women has made a strong statement against war on Iraq, and has actively assisted the Women's Vigil from its Washington, DC, headquarters, which is just around the corner from the White House. NOW's statement does not mention women's peaceable natures, but focuses on practical objections to war with Iraq: Its massive cost would divert funds from education, healthcare and welfare, creating economic hardship, of which "women will bear the greatest burden." NOW also points out, "A U.S. invasion of Iraq will likely...[endanger] the safety and rights of Iraqi women—who currently enjoy more rights and freedoms than women in other Gulf nations, such as Saudi Arabia."

Feminists were divided over the war in Afghanistan: Some applauded the overthrow of the Taliban, while others objected on anti-imperialist, nonviolent or practical grounds. Yet there is little controversy on Iraq. Bush has feebly attempted to use feminism to justify invasion, fantasizing that a "democratic" Iraq would show "that honest government, and respect for women, and the great Islamic tradition of learning can triumph in the Middle East and beyond." But feminists aren't buying it; few see

reason to hope war will relieve the miserable condition of the Iraqi people, women included.

NOW's statement also makes the point that militarism often hurts women in unique ways, a point well understood by a group of Okinawan women at the White House vigil. Their protest group was founded in 1995, when a 12-year-old Okinawan girl was raped by US soldiers. The women had traveled to Washington to protest the impending war on Iraq, and spoke excitedly through a translator. Said Noriko Akahane, "Women don't want the military anywhere."

In addition to its political openness, one of the most convincing reasons for Code Pink's success is that it's fun. As Benjamin puts it, "Women like hanging out with other women." Indeed, the mood at the vigil, and at its nearby (tiny) administrative office, is buoyant. "Can't you feel the energy?" says Robin Metalitz, a student at George Washington University. Maddy Bassi, who is taking time off from school to work with Global Exchange, has been coordinating the Women's Vigil—as well as a women's delegation to Iraq. "A few nights ago, I thought, 'I miss men!' So I went to a bar," she laughs. "But then, I wished I hadn't. I wanted to be back here!"

While some feminist activists are organizing against the war by using their identity and cultural power as women, many women—and men—are simply organizing with a feminist analysis. New Yorkers Say No to War (NYSNTW) is a good example, says Chris Cuomo, a feminist philosopher now teaching at Cornell University and active in the group, founded just after September 11. Its first meeting, held at Eve Ensler's apartment, was a who's who, as Cuomo puts it, of "the New York cliterati," including Urvashi Vaid, Laura Flanders, Sarah Schulman and other notables. Not all members of the group are women, but from the beginning, women have been running the show.

Even though the words "women" and "feminism" don't appear in the group's name, a gender analysis has always been at the forefront: The organization has held teach-ins on women and militarism, and hosted speakers from the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan. Many members of New Yorkers Say No to War come from the global justice movement, which has been deeply influenced by feminism, especially in its culture, which emphasizes consensus-building and communication.

Discussion in such groups is, for the most part, open and respectful. Like global justice activists, feminists have always tried to put political ideals into practice within their organizations, "creating another reality in a hostile context," as Cuomo puts it. "If peace isn't happening here," she asks, "how are we making it out there? There's an understanding that we're creating the new world here and now."

It is a measure of the success of this vision—and of feminism—that few feminists wish to exclude men from their organizations, and that so many male antiwar activists embrace feminist associations. The Women's Vigil welcomes men and has many male fans. As Medea Benjamin points out, "Men like to talk to women." Some local men come by every day. "They stand with us. It's nice because we're in control, and they're fetching things for us," explains Benjamin matter-of-factly. "Some men have baked us cakes."

Other men have been challenging militaristic masculinity on their own. At the Washington march on January 18, a group of tall, middle-aged men stood on the sidelines singing "We Are a Gentle, Angry People." A group of women singing that song—a classic of the "womyn's music" genre—might have seemed clichéd, dated, a bit wimpy. But in this rendition, the song sounded ironic and subversive, yet completely sincere: an optimistic glimpse of a different world. Just like Code Pink. ■