

Their Revolution or Ours!

Barbara Garson

1970(?) / 1971(?)

I work at the Shelter Half, a coffee-house for G.I.s, in Tacoma. If you've ever run Mom and Pop's candy store, you know half our problems. (Buying supplies, mopping up, recording sales tax, and running to the bank to deposit the money you borrowed to fix the car before the ice cream dealer can cash the check you gave him late Friday afternoon.) And if you've ever worked in an organizing project like down south with SNCC in the old days, you know the other half of our problems. (The staff house is bombed, the health inspector's coming, a suspicious number of birchers hanging around last night, get out a real heavy publicity campaign so they'll drop charges against the thirty-five guys arrested for holding a meeting on base, get a lawyer out to base quick for this guy who's being held for distributing papers, and talk-talk-talk-to guys who know much better than you what's wrong with their lives and why, try to get them to meetings, start them making their own leaflets, give them a sense that anything can happen.)

When we started the movement left us alone, except for sending down free newspapers—thousands of them—more than could line all the garbage cans on Fort Lewis army base and McChord air-force base combined —

But lately we've been getting more visits from movement celebrities, old friends from San Francisco, even some Seattle Weathermen blow in now and then. They plant their Viet-Cong flags at the door, make some noise to arouse the assembled peat-bog soldiers and sometimes ask us what's been happening.

I point to the guy typing in the corner. He had so little sense of himself he even re-enlisted two years ago for lack of anything else to do. One day in a fit of sanity he just refused to follow orders. He took my baby to "work" with him one morning at 6:00 a.m. I was a bit reluctant but he won me with his political line. "I'll just say, 'This woman has important things to do while I'm just standing around playing army. Why should a woman be tied down twenty-four hours a day just because she has a child!'" So I sent the kid and like any 1½ -year-old, she can undermine the authority, deflate the discipline of any officer.

I might tell our visitors about the thirty-five guys who were arrested for holding a union meeting in the music room. I tell them about how the guys were isolated and threatened yet no one would answer questions or give information about "leaders". Every one stood together including two guys who just happened to be in the music room when the meeting occurred around them.

I tell how 4,500 copies of the Fort Lewis paper FED-UP found their way onto base despite the fact that it's illegal to distribute on base. I try to explain to my would-be terrorist friends about the underground web that can't be untangled because it has no threads. Just everyone do what he can and don't ask what anyone else is doing.

Or I might just tell them to listen in on a conversation:... so the sergeant gets this guy up on a platform and says, "O.K., tell em why you won't buy a bond", and the guy says, "The war sucks and I'm not going to pay for it". "O.K.", the sergeant says, "everyone down and we'll just do push-ups till this guy decides to buy the bond." So we all get down and we're doing push-ups and a few gung-ho guys--there's maybe six or seven in the whole company--are shouting, "But the bond!" And the sergeant asks again,, "You gonna buy the bond?" and the guy answers "No". Then somebody just gets up--I'm still not sure who--and other guys started to get up, and I got up, and we all got up. And someone walks over to the guy who won't buy a bond and shakes his hand and then there was a line of us all shaking his hand and patting him on the back. And that was it! We didn't hear any more about bonds, and no more push-ups and no mass punishments in that company for the whole rest of basic.

Most of the time our visitors are extremely unimpressed. "The brown, the yellow, the black, the third world people (or peoples) of the world are hurling bombs back at the Americans, knocking their jets out of the sky and you're talking about bombarding them with babies. While imperialism dominates three-fourths of the earth you're talking about grievances like being forced to buy bonds, or being woken up at four in the morning."

In fact, I think our activities contribute as substantially as any front of the movement to the victory of the NLF. We provide the moral justification for soldiers who stayed high and hid throughout their tour in Nam. If men ever turn their guns on their officers and decide themselves to fly the planes and ships home, it will be because they learned in basic that you can refuse orders and get away with it if you act together.

I am mightily unimpressed by the third world and anti-imperialism. First on a tactical level, even the Viet-Cong don't try to make revolution on the basis solely of anti-imperialism. When they take over a village they off the landlords, build schools and hospitals and try, within their limited means, to create something they consider socialism. They not only kick out the Americans, but they leave something people might fight to defend.

Just as a tactical matter, we are not going to have either a revolution or a revolt in the army unless people are fighting for something they themselves want.

Sometimes my militant visitors see the point and agree that it might be all right to add a bit about "G.I. Rights" to our general anti-imperialist platform. But when they find out my objections are more than just tactical, we lose them forever (if we're lucky. If not they stick around to denounce us.)

The poor countries of this world offer no model for the revolution we want to make. They do show us that someday we will have to fight with guns and with our lives against capitalism. But on the questions of how to fight, and when to fight, and most of all what to fight for, they shed no light.

Most of the unindustrialized countries are lousy places to live both before and after their revolutions. There is no respect for democracy, there's a great stress on uniformity, there's tremendous differences in power and wealth among people. Yes of course I'm for their revolutions. When people are fighting to throw out foreign domination, when they're trying to reorganize things

so they won't starve and their children won't stare listless and wasted by diseases, of course I'm with them.

But starvation, foreign domination, disease, overwork, these aren't the problems that will move Americans to risk their lives. Societies like China, Albania, Korea, Algeria are no more alluring to normal, decent Americans than, say, the Soviet Union which, thank heaven, no new leftists have thus far re-discovered like they are rediscovering so much other crap.

In an apparent mood of militancy, the left is attaching itself to the third world as though all they could see for themselves as revolutionists is a fifth column role inside the mother country—an annoying tummy-ache in the "belly of the monster". When it comes to describing what we're fighting for, by default, all that's being projected is an image of 700,000,000 Chinese marching in step.

I think the reason the third world has such an allure is because they are the only people really fighting. And in the movement at large there is a big hang-up about fighting. There's a whole non-violent phase to get over. Many Weathermen were explicit in saying that their action in Chicago was to show blacks and Mexicans that white middle-class Americans can fight too.

The G.I. movement never really had these hang-ups. Most of the young men I meet are neither pacifists nor would they enjoy playing soldier just for the fun of it. A fellow who said he was a revolutionary pacifist was laughed off at a G.I. conference in Washington. At the same time, having nothing to prove about themselves, most G.I.s, like most Americans, like most people in the world, will only fight for something.

It is time that anarchist and libertarian socialist thinkers started sending into the movement solid (or even airy) images of the world "afterwards" which we are fighting for. Militants must become unashamed to bring forward the feelings of alienation which tossed them into the struggle which they now believe to be a struggle for the Vietnamese or Chinese masses.

I don't know exactly how and when we will bring down capitalism. And I'm not exactly certain what society will look like afterwards. But I know one of the key concepts will be a society where no human is being used for someone else's profit, where no one's labors are forced or exploited. Capitalism can probably meet any demand but the total end of exploitation.

The military makes a very blatant effort to turn men into tools. When I see guys standing up and saying collectively, "You can't use us", I know my organizing must be going in the right direction. This is true when they say I won't go on riot-control, I won't fight in Viet Nam, but it is also true when they say I won't grovel on my belly, I won't buy a bond, I will go home when my baby is being born.

An army with the attitudes I wish to nurture can not be used to fight imperialist wars. So I am not too concerned about the charge that we are ignoring our obligation to the oppressed of the earth. I am much more worried that the hollow anti-imperialist slogans of our movement create an image of freedom for which people will (or should) fight.

B.G.

NOTE: The Shelter Half Coffee House runs on a ridiculous hand-to-mouth basis. Please send donations to Shelter Half Coffee House, P.O. Box 244, Tacoma, Washington, 98409. Civilians who would like to subscribe to the G.I. paper FED-UP may send \$5.00 for a year's subscription to FED-UP, P.O. Box 414, Tacoma, Washington, 90409.

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