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Winter 2006

Silence = War

A new wave of feminist peace activists takes it to the streets.

By Katti Gray

On an October day, Susan Shaer huddles in the cramped Washington, D.C., offices of Women's Action for New Directions (WAND). She's on a conference call with the Win Without War steering committee, deciding precisely how they will respond when the 2,000th member of the U.S. military perishes in Iraq.



"I think we're up to 1,963," says Shaer, putting the phone on mute to make an aside. "Oh, my God! This probably is going to happen next week." She rejoins the teleconference: "Is anybody going to do more work with Congress?" She pushes the mute button again. "So the Quakers are pushing for congressional action. Go Quakers!"

Her fist pumps the air. She wades in once more: "We're also going to honor all the Iraqi deaths. Do we have a reliable number on that?"

Shaer is both national executive director for WAND — which launched itself in 1982 as Women's Action for Nuclear Disarmament — and co-chair of Win Without War, an anti-Iraq war consortium of well-known national organizations. As such, she's one of many impassioned women leading the growing national movement against the war in Iraq. "So many women instinctively knew it was a rush judgement and fundamentally wrong," says Shaer.

Mounting death tolls — more than 2,100 at press time — soaring costs, an ever-growing Iraqi insurgency and daily revelations of the Bush administration's disinformation campaign to garner U.S. support for the war have soured even those who may have initially backed the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's government. At the U.S. Capitol, not far from the converted townhouse in which WAND conducts its activism, U.S. Rep. Lynn Woolsey, a California Democrat, also has her mind on the war. "The Congress," she says, "has to catch up with the American people. And the American people are sick of the bloodshed."

Together with Democrats Maxine Waters, Barbara Lee, Jan Schakowsky and four congressmen, Woolsey co-founded the House of Representatives' "Out of Iraq Caucus." Considering women make up only 70 of the 435 seats in the House, the 23 women in the 60 member caucus represent a disproportionate share of the group. In November

the 69-member caucus represent a disproportionate share of the group. In November, the group filed a "discharge petition" that would require the president to begin bringing U.S. troops home.

"We've been nursing this idea of getting out [of Iraq]," says Waters, a [2004 Ms. Woman of the Year](#). "Now we're at a point where we think we can say, 'Get out now!'"

Meanwhile, in Manhattan, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) — the 90-year-old organization with headquarters in Geneva and at the United Nations — has issued several Iraq war-related resolutions. They'll further take up the Iraq debate when they convene in Caracas, Venezuela, for the World Social Forum on January 24.

WILPF, WAND and the Out of Iraq Caucus have been joined in protest by a nationwide complement of female grassroots activists, veterans of the present conflict and mothers of the enlisted. Whether newcomers to the anti-war movement or feminist stalwarts who have long listed peace on their action agenda, these women now are on the front lines. They marched in large numbers on Washington in September. They lobby in the halls of Congress, hand out anti-war postcards on Oregon street corners, sign NOW's peace petition and place grave markers on a Santa Monica beach they dubbed Arlington West. In November, they topped off New York City's 2005 Veterans Day parade with a "Love the Troops, Hate the War" rally.

They are motivated, the women say, by a fundamental belief that time, money and human capital swallowed up in combat might be better spent addressing human needs at home and abroad. "For the women's movement to ever really take on patriarchy, it must take on militarism," says Eleanor Smeal, president of the Feminist Majority Foundation (which publishes *Ms.*). "The military construct has made us damsels in distress. We're constantly told that we don't know enough, that this is not our realm, that we know nothing of the global issues of our day. First, that mythology kept us out of politics. It certainly keeps [most of] us out of policy."

There is much room and means for women to weigh in, Smeal says. Cindy Sheehan, as a prime example, made a singular protest against George W. Bush and his insensitivity to grieving mothers, thus spotlighting the anti-war effort in a way that no other protester had.

"I needed some reason to get up in the morning, I needed some reason to live," says the Californian of her encampment outside Bush's Texas ranch and the crusade — as cofounder of an organization for those who had lost family members in Iraq, Gold Star Families for Peace — she has taken on the road. "If I couldn't stop that from happening to Casey" — her 24-year-old soldier son who returned from Iraq in a coffin — "then maybe I could stop that from happening to someone else's child."

While anti-war concerns are not exclusively the domain of mothers, many women do filter what they see, at least partly, through a maternal lens, says Katy Elliott, a board member of the Arkansas Coalition for Peace and Justice, which cosponsored the touring

"Eyes Wide Open" exhibit of actual and symbolic American combat boots from Iraq. "Especially the young mothers see their involvement as a very holistic thing," she says. "They see the state of the world, and what they're raising their kids into, and they just get very discouraged. The anti-war movement is a way to advocate for the entire global community. A rally against nuclear arms or aggressive foreign policy is as natural for them as going to the local farmers market to support farmers and buy food."

But young women who aren't mothers also have demonstrated a burning opposition to the current conflict. "Women are more prevalent and activist than men, especially at the community level," says Notre Dame University peace studies research fellow David Cortright, whose course in nonviolent social change has been dominated by women every year that he has taught it. "But I am skeptical of those who argue that [just] nurture or maternal instinct account for that. I'm teaching 20-year-old women; there's no mothering involved."

Yet, "Men have a whole experience toward the military; women are often spared that," adds Cortright, author of *Soldiers in Revolt: GI Resistance During the Vietnam War* (reissued by Haymarket Books in 2005) and husband of Karen Jacob, president of the Northern Indiana chapter of WAND. "It probably helps [women] to see more clearly that violence is not the answer."

During the Vietnam conflict, much of American protesters' anger was directed toward the military. These days, many see American soldiers more as unwitting pawns of political ideology and corporate interests. At the candlelit "Love the Troops, Hate the War" rally, the New York chapter of Code Pink displayed a waist-high banner with the names and official military photos of recent war dead: Army Staff Sgt. Julian S. Melo...Army Reserves Staff Sgt. James D. McNaughton... Marine Cpl. Ramona M. Valdez... Army Sgt. Linda C. Jimenez...

"A lot of us see the hypocrisy of our government saying it supports the troops but when [soldiers] get their arms blown off...we also see the government trying to shut down the VA Hospital," says novelist Nancy Kricorian, the chapter's coordinator. The wool duffle coat she wore to the rally was fuschia, the splash of color that helps give Code Pink — formed in 2002 to "wage peace" instead of invade Iraq — its signature flamboyance, making it one of the more visible and feisty women's activist groups.

"The formation of Code Pink came out of sheer desperation," says Medea Benjamin, cofounder of the group along with Jodie Evans and Gael Murphy. "They've [U.S. forces] already killed all these people in Afghanistan, and now they're going to do it in the next country — what are we going to do?" Besides Code Pink's theatrical presence at demonstrations, Benjamin and her cohorts are active behind the scenes, meeting with women in Iraq, Iran and elsewhere, and continuing to encourage a nonmilitary reaction to the threat of terrorism.

While most anti-war protesters have no battlefield experience, the current peace movement has also been joined by women military veterans who have witnessed the carnage firsthand and been repulsed by it. "While I was deployed in Iraq, we had the

highest casualties under these new rules of engagement," Nicole Goodwin told an audience at a Manhattan Veterans for Peace "speak out" on the Saturday after Veterans Day in November. Her four months in the Iraqi desert as a member of the First Armored Division sparked her opposition to the U.S. invasion. "You fight for something and sometimes realize it is not what you believe in," she told the crowd. What, she asked, might war mean for her 2-year-old daughter's future? For the planet's?

The women now protesting the Iraq war aren't necessarily pacifists. Susan Shaer of WAND, for one, resists absolutism. Sometimes, she says, war might be required. Sometimes it might be necessary. "But the march to war must be less hair-trigger; it must be more circumspect."

The anti-war movement — especially as it has been joined by surprising supporters such as Rep. John Murtha (D-Penn.), the formerly hawkish Vietnam vet — is gaining traction. Public support for keeping our troops in Iraq has dipped to less than 40 percent, while approval ratings for George W. Bush hover around the same level of displeasure. But women on the front lines of peace know that the battle ahead may still be hard and cruel.

"We want to get in there where the old boys are and try to turn this around," says Karen Jacob of Indiana WAND. "It's so easy for people to demonize, to tell you you're not an authority, you're just a woman. It takes real initiative and backbone to work in the anti-war movement. It takes a lot of courage."