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# Caught between Cold War Conservatives and Radical Feminists: The Fading of Women Strike for Peace from American Memory

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Caught between Cold War Conservatives and Radical Feminists: The Fading of Women  
Strike for Peace from American Memory

by

Laura Bridgewater

A Thesis

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of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

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Caught between Cold War Conservatives and Radical Feminists: The Fading of Women Strike for Peace from American Memory

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Most importantly, I wish to thank the women of Women Strike for Peace, whose courage and work continue to delight and inspire fifty years after the movement began.

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## ABSTRACT

In the fall of 1961, the movement known as Women Strike for Peace (WSP) began when thousands of women staged a national strike to request that the government end nuclear testing. In an attempt to minimize the threat their political actions posed to the period's conservative status quo, the women who picketed asserted that their activism was altruistic, reflecting only their desire to protect their children. At first, this strategy was successful; those of their own generation embraced the women as respectable mothers, and even public figures like President Kennedy acknowledged the group's contributions to politics. Despite the attention it received and the changes it helped effect in nuclear policy, however, Women Strike for Peace seems now mostly forgotten. This thesis argues that the cultural amnesia about WSP is because the group's maternal rhetoric, although at first accepted by the public, ultimately angered the 1960s generation and alienated the feminists who followed in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As a result, neither era was willing to claim the group's message or methods as its own; the earlier generation saw WSP as too radical while the later one deemed it overly conservative. This paper thus argues that Women Strike for Peace disappeared from America's collective historical consciousness because it pushed the boundaries of acceptable female behavior too far for its day while failing to push them far enough to satisfy the second wave feminists who appeared after them.

## INTRODUCTION

On November 1, 1961, approximately 50,000 women in 59 cities across the United States walked out of their homes or off their jobs to protest nuclear testing. These women came from all different backgrounds. Some were housewives; others worked; all said they were motivated by the desire to express their unease about nuclear weapons. Groups in different cities performed different actions. Some marched in front of their City Halls. In Washington, the group delivered a letter to the White House addressed to First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy, then marched to the Soviet Embassy to deliver a letter to Nina Khrushchev, the wife of the Premier of the Soviet Union.<sup>1</sup> The mass mobilization of these women was first envisioned by a small group of women in Washington, D.C., who described themselves as mothers concerned about the consequences of nuclear testing and possible nuclear war on the health of their children. They decided to stage a nationwide “Women’s Strike for Peace” by calling on their personal contacts across the country.<sup>2</sup> The November 1 marches were covered by newspapers all over America—some put the story on their front page. Those journalists who wrote about the events of the day were, for the most part, sympathetic to the women’s concerns. The media and the American public both seemed to find the women’s march out of their homes and into the public sphere acceptable, even novel. “They were perfectly ordinary-looking young women, with their share of good looks,” an article in *Newsweek* began. “They looked like the women you would see driving ranch wagons, or shopping at the village market, or attending PTA meetings.” The article, like most others about the strike, admirably

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<sup>1</sup> “Hundreds of Women Stage Capital March In ‘Strike for Peace,’” *Schenectady Gazette*, November 2, 1961, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Amy Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace: Traditional Motherhood and Radical Politics in the 1960s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 15.

described the women's actions—all done in the name of motherhood—concluding that the women who had organized the strike “had tapped the deep emotional wellsprings of thousands of American women who as life-givers...proved themselves determined to speak out, somehow, on behalf of humanity.”<sup>3</sup>

Six years later, on September 20, 1967, this same organization, Women Strike for Peace, marched on the White House to protest the Vietnam War.<sup>4</sup> They used the same maternal language they had used in 1961, stating that their goal was peace—for their sons and for the world. At this demonstration, however, a police line was formed to prevent the women from reaching the White House gate. Members of Women Strike for Peace broke this police line and were immediately excoriated by journalists who thought the organization had become too militant.<sup>5</sup> “Four persons were arrested as an antidraft demonstration led by Women Strike for Peace erupted into a wild melee in front of the White House Wednesday,” announced the *Los Angeles Times*, exemplifying the disapprobation with which Women Strike for Peace actions were increasingly met.<sup>6</sup> Another article reported, “The women shoved and pushed, blood showed on the

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<sup>3</sup> “The Women Protest,” *Newsweek*, November 13, 1961, 21.

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this paper, I will alternate between referring to the group as Women Strike for Peace and WSP. Because the group gave full autonomy to its local chapters, however, some referred to themselves as Women For Peace (WFP), others as Women's Strike for Peace and still others as Women's International Strike for Peace (WISP). Some of the sources I use refer to Women Strike for Peace using these different terms, but all are describing the same overall movement. Further, it should be noted that Women Strike for Peace resisted the label “organization” because it did not consider itself one—at least ostensibly, it lacked an official leader and formal board positions. Local chapters were given complete autonomy, and national actions did not need to be approved by a central organization; rather, if women were interested in pursuing a certain campaign, they simply began to do so. Further, the women who were affiliated with WSP did not consider themselves “members”; again, because WSP was not seen as an organization, individuals did not believe they could “belong” to it. (See the chapter on “Organizing a ‘Nonorganization’” in Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*.) Although these are important points, throughout this paper I sometimes refer to WSP as an “organization” and to WSP affiliates as “members” for the sake of expediency.

<sup>5</sup> Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 177-180

<sup>6</sup> Jack White, “Women's March Erupts Into Washington Melee,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 21, 1967, 26.

shirtsleeve of one police officer and feelings apparently ran high on both sides of the skirmish line.”<sup>7</sup> The negative media coverage reflected the American public’s changing opinion of Women Strike for Peace: as the organization had shifted its focus from nuclear disarmament to ending the war in Vietnam, it had become increasingly unpopular.

Fifty years later, in 2011, Women Strike for Peace has been virtually expunged from popular memory. History books often fail to mention this important group in their overviews of movements in the post-World War II era, and most individuals have never heard of Women Strike for Peace. Amy Schneidhorst, in her 2001 article about peace activism in Chicago during the Vietnam War, observes that “Amy Swerdlow’s monograph on Women Strike for Peace remains the one major case study of older women’s collective peace activism in the 1960s.”<sup>8</sup> Swerdlow herself was aware of this phenomenon—one of her goals in writing her text about the group, she explained, was “to restore a significant women’s movement of the 1960s to the historical record from which it has all but disappeared,” but she did not explore why this forgetting has occurred.<sup>9</sup> This paper will offer an interpretation as to why, given their vast media coverage at the time of their activism and the changes they helped bring about in America, Women Strike for Peace has been forgotten.

Women Strike for Peace has fallen prey to a form of historical amnesia, I argue, because it straddled two distinct eras and yet was fully comfortable in neither one. WSP was first envisioned in the fall of 1961, and its nationwide march on November 1, 1961,

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<sup>7</sup> Frank Cormier, “White House Undisturbed: Women-for-Peace Group Nearly Gets Violent During Protest in Washington,” *Lawrence Journal World*, September 21, 1967, 13.

<sup>8</sup> Amy Schneidhorst, “Little Old Ladies and Dangerous Women: Women’s Peace and Social Justice Activism in Chicago, 1960-1975,” *Peace and Change* 26, no. 3 (2001), 376.

<sup>9</sup> Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 1.

was its first public event. America was still, at this point, in the grip of the culture of domesticity into which it had plunged following World War II. Although there were other, competing ideologies, the one most uniformly espoused by the media and public officials and the one most accepted by the American population was one that celebrated the nuclear family and demanded conformity from all Americans.<sup>10</sup> It was in this context that WSP was formed, and the members of WSP were careful to craft their ideology and actions in accordance with the prevailing, restrictive atmosphere. Women Strike for Peace, from its beginning, did not claim to work against women's traditional roles; rather, the group members used those roles as the foundation of their work toward world peace. Far from trying to abdicate their roles as mothers, the members of WSP based their public activism on these private roles. Thus, at first, WSP's assertions that it was working within accepted female roles were accepted by the public, as can be seen in the media's supportive coverage of their November 1 march. However, as the organization drew more and more women out of the home and into political discussions, the media and society began to turn against it. Further, as Women Strike for Peace moved from protesting a possible nuclear war to protesting an actual, military war, their position was seen as increasingly controversial, even though in both cases, WSP's goal was peace and the preservation of children's lives. In short, Women Strike for Peace was ultimately considered too radical by the generation out of which it had emerged.

At the same time, while Women Strike for Peace was increasingly rejected by the conservative forces of its own time, it coexisted uneasily with newer, self-proclaimed

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 2008) for a discussion of the conformity demanded of Americans in the postwar period.

radical feminist groups. Although WSP shared some goals with these groups, such as draft resistance, their methods were often directly at odds with one another, since Women Strike for Peace moved through the very channels the radical feminists were actively working to overturn entirely.<sup>11</sup> Further, the radical feminists were put off by the way they saw the members of Women Strike for Peace supporting patriarchy—that is, by identifying themselves primarily as mothers and housewives—while the radical feminists were committed to subverting patriarchy by self-identifying and unifying as *women*. Finally, WSP members’ reliance on their roles as mothers was directly opposed to the anti-motherhood rhetoric employed by some of the early, most radical of second-wave feminists like Shulamith Firestone and Ti-Grace Atkinson. Essentially, Women Strike for Peace was considered too conservative in its mission and too conventional in its actions to be embraced by the women who followed them and in some ways benefited from their work.

## THE POSTWAR PERIOD

During World War II, women entered the workforce in large numbers. The government needed their labor and thus encouraged them to take jobs from which they had previously been excluded. Campaigns encouraging women to perform military and

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<sup>11</sup> Both Women Strike for Peace and many second-wave feminist groups, for example, opposed the war and the draft, but the younger groups tended to be more radical in their methods of resistance. While WSP sought to end the draft by presenting challenges to conscription’s legality to the court system and by prevailing on politicians (See Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 173-180), at least one group of radical women broke into a draft office and destroyed thousands of draft files, leaving pictures of those killed in Vietnam in their stead (“Women Destroy Draft Files,” in *Voices from Women’s Liberation*, ed. Leslie B. Tanner [New York: Mentor Books, 1970], 137). Women Strike for Peace thus worked through the legal system, attempting to change existing laws, while at least some younger feminists thought it better to work against the political system entirely, considering it more expedient and impactful to break laws, not change them.

factory work, like the Rosie the Riveter advertisements, were used to appeal to women's patriotism. In this way, as historian Elaine Tyler May notes, the government could justify the women's presence in traditionally masculine jobs while laying the groundwork for their dismissal when the war ended and returning veterans wanted their jobs back.<sup>12</sup> To many observers, this postwar transition of women—from working patriots to satisfied housewives—was a quiet reversion back to the natural order of things. Women returned to the kitchens and hearths from whence they had come, men returned from the warfront to serve as the family breadwinners, and children proliferated. Early scholarship about American society following the Second World War, in fact, reinforced this idea that the 1950s was a period of placidity and retrenchment.

As the country shifted from war to peace and from rationing to consuming, American families did seem to be following the trends that were to be expected following a great war. Couples married young and had several children, then moved out to the suburbs, where many could now afford a new home with brand-new appliances. White, male veterans were particularly well-positioned to begin their ascent to the upper-middle-class, thanks to government subsidies which provided significant help in securing and buying homes in suburbia.<sup>13</sup> Statistics show that individuals and families of all races

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<sup>12</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 72

<sup>13</sup> Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). Jackson's chapter "Federal Subsidy and the Suburban Dream: How Washington Changed the American Housing Market" does a thorough job of explaining the specific benefits granted to individuals in the relevant time period. It should also be noted that veterans of color were largely denied these benefits, and minority families were kept out of the vast majority of suburbs by hostile neighbors and racist policies which allowed both the government and private companies to refuse to finance mortgages for families of color. However, since WSP was largely an organization of white, middle-class women, I focus on this demographic in my description of postwar trends. Further, as Elaine Tyler May notes in her own study of the Cold War era, "it was the values of the white middle class that shaped the dominant political and economic institutions that affected all Americans" (May, *Homeward Bound*, 15). Thus, by examining the idealized white middle class, May argues, one can understand the life to which many Americans aspired

across the nation were involved in both the population explosion and the increased consumption which occurred after the war. Stephanie Coontz writes that “a massive baby boom, among all classes and ethnic groups, made America a ‘child-centered’ society. Births rose from a low of 18.4 per 1,000 women during the Depression to a high of 25.3 per 1,000 in 1957.”<sup>14</sup> Along with this increase in births came, as Coontz suggests, a renewed societal interest in mothering. Specifically, the government and the media encouraged women to reproduce society—both literally, by having children, and figuratively, by raising them to be proper American citizens. The nuclear family in particular was celebrated in this time, since it was thought to confer stability on the nation at large. Because of the disruption in everyday patterns caused by World War II and the constant threat of nuclear war which hung over the country in the 1950s, the nuclear family was increasingly seen as a way for individuals to retreat from uncertain societal conditions and assuage their own fears by producing a world they could control.<sup>15</sup>

With comfortable domesticity as their goal, Americans eagerly purchased and outfitted new homes for themselves and their families after the Second World War. Concomitant with the population explosion was a nationwide increase in spending, especially on appliances and other newly available products for homes. “In the four years following the end of the war, Americans purchased 21.4 million cars, 20 million refrigerators, 5.5 million stoves, and 11.6 million televisions and moved into over 1 million new housing units each year. The same patterns extended into the 1950s, a decade

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in the postwar era. This approach, however, has sharp drawbacks, not least of which is the flattening and whitening of American experience.

<sup>14</sup> Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: BasicBooks, 1992), 24.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, May, *Homeward Bound*, 151.

in which prosperity continued to spread.”<sup>16</sup> Americans were obsessed with their habits of consumption and their isolated, domestic ideal. In some cases, it was a self-perpetuating cycle. After Americans bought television sets, for example, they were inundated with advertisements encouraging them to buy even more products and with sitcoms further glorifying the nuclear family.

Although historians disagree over the driving forces behind the conformity of the 1950s and even the extent to which it existed, most agree that these population-wide trends toward domesticity in the postwar era led to an increased adherence to certain, often limiting gender roles. Further, many argue that there were many forces at this time advocating the domestic ideal, especially for women, at the expense of any public activism. William L. O’Neill, for example, argues that feminism as such died in 1920, shortly after the suffragists achieved the ballot for women. Without a cohesive movement like feminism to encourage them to enter the public sphere, O’Neill suggests, it was difficult for women to protest when their wartime gains in employment were taken away. Women found it much easier to uncomplainingly resume their housewife-and-mother roles while their husbands supported their families financially. “Women did not lose the political and legal rights so painfully acquired [by the suffragists], but in a relative sense the postwar era saw middle-class women abandon the attitudes and aspirations that had marked their century of struggle and accept a more limited definition of their social roles than anyone would have thought possible fifty years earlier.”<sup>17</sup> O’Neill considers women to have backed away from the potentially society-shaking changes in women’s status that

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>17</sup> William L. O’Neill, *Everyone Was Brave: The Rise and Fall of Feminism in America* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969), 333.

had been the goal of many suffragists, especially after the Second World War. He attributes this skittishness largely to the “postwar orgy of domesticity” which was supported by the mainstream media and public opinion.<sup>18</sup>

Historian Harriet Hyman Alonso argues that some women did continue to agitate for social reform—and especially for peace—during the postwar era, despite the pressure on women to stay home. However, as Alonso describes, this political involvement came under increasing amounts of attack during the postwar period. As the Cold War gained momentum, individuals working for peace in various organizations were called subversive, and it was feared they were working for communists. Because being considered “red,” or aligned with communism, was considered high treason in this era, the peace organizations suffered huge membership losses and internal divisions proliferated. Some organizations were even investigated by government groups to determine whether they were truly threats to American security, all of which destroyed the respectable reputation that most peace organizations had at least attempted to maintain prior to the Cold War. As Alonso writes of the postwar era, “The openly leftist [Congress of American Women] was forced to disband, and its successor, American Women for Peace, was short-lived. Meanwhile, [the Women’s International League of Peace and Freedom] branches suffered from divisive internal accusations [of communist affiliations].” However, she continues, “the women’s peace movement survived.”<sup>19</sup>

Alonso thus contradicts historians like O’Neill, who argued that the 1950s were devoid of

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 332.

<sup>19</sup> Harriet Hyman Alonso, “Mayhem and Moderation: Women Peace Activists during the McCarthy Era,” in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 148.

women activists, while acknowledging the difficulty these women experienced once they decided to pursue a path other than the one endorsed by the media and the public.

O’Neill and others may have not noticed the activism in which women were engaged in the postwar era because it was, as Alonso notes, heavily sanctioned by the government, which wanted the activism to disappear. According to Elaine Tyler May, this suppression of women’s public actions can be described as the result of the Cold War ideology of “containment.” The government sought to contain both the nuclear threat, in order to avoid mass hysteria on the part of the nation, and American women, who were needed to bear children and otherwise fill their prescribed domestic roles.<sup>20</sup> Women were to be the dependable nuclei of nuclear families, maintaining order as their husbands and children orbited around them. May writes that the importance of childbearing was so internalized by postwar men and women that they considered domesticity “an expression of one’s citizenship,”<sup>21</sup> which speaks to both the importance bestowed on parenthood—especially motherhood—in the postwar era and the pressure Americans may have felt to repeatedly reproduce, regardless of their own goals or desires. Importantly, although the roles associated with the nuclear family were restrictive for both men and women, women were particularly powerless to change them both structurally, since they were allowed only a limited role in public life, and individually, as their economic subordination made it essential that they marry.

It was this culture of limited opportunity for women that Betty Friedan’s enormously influential book *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, decried. In it, Friedan writes of a “problem that has no name”—the despair and isolation felt by

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<sup>20</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 15-16.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 151

housewives across the country. Friedan blames this problem on what she terms “the feminine mystique,” the culture which has provided women with only one option for socially-approved happiness: marriage and motherhood. Friedan described the feminine mystique as having gained its traction mostly through articles and advertisements in popular magazines in the 1950s. As Friedan argued, consumerism, and especially the advertising that accompanied it, helped to reinforce the ideas about gender which were common at the time. Many advertisements attempted to convince women that fulfilling the domestic duties of mother and housewife, especially through consuming certain products, was a large responsibility, akin to the importance of the wage-earning role assumed by men.<sup>22</sup> Although woman’s new role as consumer could be seen as an improvement over her previous domestic role, in which she was denied any influence in family decisions, Roland Marchand suggests that America granted women the role of primary consumer, and advertisers went to such effort to promote this role as one of great importance, in order to compensate for all the other rights they were denied. In other words, “the more that women achieved recognition for their modernity in consumption, the less they qualified for any true equality in the broader quest for modern progress.”<sup>23</sup>

As Friedan argued, the appeal by advertisers to women as important decision-makers can be understood as a mere condescending ploy. Like the historians who held that the 1950s

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<sup>22</sup> Particularly illustrative of this phenomenon is Friedan’s chapter on “The Sexual Sell,” in *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001). Note also that this same rhetoric helped justify the dismissal of women from the workforce after the war. Individuals like J. Edgar Hoover, the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, told the nation he considered women’s childbearing role just as vital to the success of the nation as the wage work he considered men’s domain (*May, Homeward Bound*, 132). In both cases, women were denied access to paying jobs by individuals in positions of authority who sought to mollify them by aggrandizing the role of housewife.

<sup>23</sup> Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 168. Although Marchand writes about a slightly earlier period, I suggest that his analysis of the advertisers’ treatment of women remains true into the years of “the feminine mystique.”

were a moment of calm between the upheaval of the Second World War and the radicalism of the 1960s, Friedan suggested that the 1950s was a period of quiescence in which everyone settled into their domestic roles. Unlike the former view, however, Friedan argued that this period was not one of complete, unquestioning placidity; rather, she wrote that beneath the external layer of conformity to the domestic standard lay a growing discontent among women who were beginning to feel that being a wife and a mother was not enough.<sup>24</sup>

Although Americans tend to look back on the 1950s with nostalgia, as an idyllic period in the nation's history, it is important to remember that the lived experience of Americans in the postwar period was not universally calm or satisfying. The idealized depictions of the nuclear family found in 1950s sitcoms, for example, ignore the racism and sexism on which the domestic ideal was built. Further, as Stephanie Coontz argues, this experience was never the norm for all American families, even at the time. Finally, even those Americans who *were* part of a white, middle-class, nuclear family did not necessarily feel fulfilled in their roles.<sup>25</sup> In fact, as researchers like sociologist Wini

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<sup>24</sup> It should be noted that Betty Friedan's description of the era has not gone unchallenged. Joanne Meyerowitz, for example, wrote a well-known article which argues that Friedan's reading of the atmosphere of the 1950s as singularly oppressive is reductive and that it ignores the women who actively defied the homemaker ideal. While Meyerowitz does not discount the feminine mystique entirely, after reviewing magazine articles from the 1950s, she argues that alternatives to the limiting ideology Friedan describes could also be found in post-World War II media (Joanne Meyerowitz, "Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958," in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz [Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994]). However, my intention here is not to argue the extent to which the feminine mystique existed; rather, I merely wish to suggest that it existed and that women felt constrained by it. Given the huge popularity of Friedan's book and the letters she received from women in response to her book (See, for example, Stephanie Coontz, *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s* [New York: BasicBooks, 2011] for a fascinating discussion of the ways *The Feminine Mystique* affected women when it was first published), it seems clear that what Friedan wrote resonated with women, even if later historians found her claims overblown.

<sup>25</sup> Coontz's chapter "'Leave It to Beaver' and 'Ozzie and Harriet': American Families in the 1950s" in *The Way We Never Were* is particularly relevant to this discussion.

Breines point out, there were undercurrents of dissent running beneath the surface in the 1950s, fueled by individuals who felt constrained by the atmosphere of the Cold War.<sup>26</sup> Organizations, too, were limited in their actions during the Cold War. As Alonso notes, despite efforts by women's peace organizations and other groups agitating for social change, the postwar era was not a time in which progressive causes made great headway.

### **THE BIRTH OF A MOVEMENT**

In the period following World War II, Americans became increasingly preoccupied with the possibility of a nuclear war with the Soviet Union. Individuals were well aware that, at any moment, a nuclear war could commence and they might be given only a few minutes' warning before a nuclear bomb descended on their city. Americans had seen the footage and heard of the devastation resulting from the two nuclear bombs America had dropped on Japan during the war and knew that a nuclear war would inflict more damage in a shorter period of time than any of the world's previous wars. Much of this anxiety went unvoiced, however; as noted, theorists have suggested it was instead expressed in Americans' scramble for the perceived security that domesticity offered them. As a result of this silence, the American public seemed to know little about the specifics of atomic war until the late 1950s and early 1960s. In 1955, for example, only 17% of Americans polled by Gallup knew what the term "fallout" meant.<sup>27</sup> In that same

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<sup>26</sup> Wini Breines, *Young, White and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). Her chapter on "The Other Fifties: Beats, Bad Girls, and Rock and Roll" provides a helpful overview of a subculture of the 1950s in which young, white, middle-class individuals, both male and female, engaged.

<sup>27</sup> Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 42.

year, however, rain fell in Chicago that proved to be radioactive.<sup>28</sup> Also in 1955, tests showed that the drinking water in Chicago had “become slightly radioactive as a result of recent explosions of nuclear weapons at Yucca Flats, [Nevada],”<sup>29</sup> and in 1957, more radioactive rain fell, this time in Washington, D.C.<sup>30</sup> In these and other cases of documented radiation, officials assured citizens that the levels were well below those considered dangerous. As incidents like this continued to happen, however, fears rose about the effects of atmospheric radiation. As Paul Boyer notes, in 1959, a *Saturday Evening Post* article featured acclaimed scientists warning of the dangers of nuclear testing, which both demonstrated and contributed to “a full-blown fallout scare [that] gripped the nation.”<sup>31</sup>

Concerns about the toll such testing might take on human health continued to grow as citizens followed in the newspapers the increasingly tense negotiations for a test ban between the Soviet Union and the United States. Finally, in September 1961, unable to come to a test ban agreement with the West, the Soviet Union resumed atmospheric testing after three years of dormancy. The United States announced a few days later that, in response, it too would resume testing its nuclear weapons.<sup>32</sup> Two weeks later, prompted by this resumption of nuclear testing, a small group of women met in a Washington, D.C. townhouse to discuss their growing fears over the radioactive buildup in the atmosphere. They talked to each other as mothers, sharing with each other the

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<sup>28</sup> Paul Boyer, “From Activism to Apathy: America and the Nuclear Issue, 1963-1980,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 40, no. 7 (1984): 14.

<sup>29</sup> “Drinking Water Found Slightly Radioactive,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 17, 1955, B1.

<sup>30</sup> “AEC Reports Radioactive Rain in Area,” *Washington Post*, May 18, 1957, A1.

<sup>31</sup> Boyer, “From Activism to Apathy,” 15.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Tom Wicker, “Atmosphere Test: Long-Range Devices of U.S. Detect and Identify Blast,” *New York Times*, September 2, 1961, 1; Tom Wicker, “‘No Other Choice’: President Calls New Blasts Essential to Nation’s Safety,” *New York Times*, September 6, 1961, 1.

difficulties they felt in ensuring their children's safety in an increasingly polluted and threatened world. They felt powerless, they said to one another, to stop the nations of the world from going down what they saw as the inevitable path to human annihilation.

Dagmar Wilson, the woman who had called the meeting, and the others who gathered that night in September, were convinced that the best way to stop the proliferation of nuclear weapons was to continue to educate Americans about the problems associated with nuclear radiation, especially as they related to children. If all Americans knew how truly dangerous nuclear weapons could be, the women thought, every citizen would be agitating for peace between nations.

Once they decided that their goal was to bring this issue of nuclear radiation to the nation's attention, the women soon agreed to organize a one-day strike for peace. In a September 22, 1961 letter which asked their friends and neighbors to join the strike, the planners of the strike wrote that they did not want "any 'organization'—we don't want any chairmen, boards, committees, mechanics to get bogged down in, power structures to create new conflicts."<sup>33</sup> They were interested in direct action by concerned women, not labyrinthine systems of bureaucracy in which the message they wanted to send the nation was lost. The women sent these letters out to their friends across the nation. The group utilized informal networks like parent-teacher associations, women's clubs, church organizations, even Christmas card lists.<sup>34</sup> Such networks and systems of communication have historically been denigrated because women often assume primary responsibility for maintaining them. As communication researchers Karen Foss and Sonja Foss note in

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<sup>33</sup> Eleanor Garst, draft of letter, Washington, D.C., September 22, 1961, mimeograph, Women Strike for Peace Papers, Swarthmore College Peace Collection (Hereafter WSP Papers).

<sup>34</sup> Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 18.

their book *Women Speak: The Eloquence of Women's Lives*, “The realm of the interpersonal and the private—where women’s communication achieves its significance—is simply not considered political.” Their book goes on to argue against this bias and considers the maintenance of Christmas card lists, among other activities, a form of communication with potentially political ramifications.<sup>35</sup> These Washington, D.C. women, too, recognized the powerful possibilities their connections offered and were savvy in using them for their own political ends. Specifically, the group considered itself composed of mothers concerned for the future of their children. As such, it saw fit to recruit other like-minded mothers. Using Christmas card lists and other such networks was an effective way to accomplish this goal.

Equally important in convincing other women to participate in their strike was the Washington group’s use of maternal rhetoric which relied on the argument that women, as the life-givers of the species, were inherently more nurturing and less violent than men. This was reflected in the letter they sent to their acquaintances, which continued, “We believe that it is the special responsibility of women—who bear the children and nurture the race—to demand for their families a better future than sudden death.”<sup>36</sup> The women who organized the strike recognized that their self-presentation would determine how they were received by the public and believed they would be beyond reproach if they used their roles as mothers to advocate peace. Especially in the context of the Cold War, when domestic concerns were seen as women’s special vocation, this ideology appealed to a broad base of Americans, as it glorified what was considered women’s

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<sup>35</sup> Karen A. Foss and Sonja K. Foss, *Women Speak: The Eloquence of Women's Lives* (Prospect Heights: Waveland Press, 1991), 15.

<sup>36</sup> Garst, draft of letter, September 22, 1961, WSP Papers.

work while maintaining the existing, gendered division of society. Maternalism, however, did not begin here; it had “enabled white, middle-class women to exert a morally charged influence within the public and private realms” by presenting motherhood as “both a familial and a civic act”<sup>37</sup> since America’s founding. Linda Kerber, for example, describes how, in the early American republic, although women were denied the vote, they were thought to contribute to the fledgling country as mothers and wives. Kerber writes, “The Republican Mother’s life was dedicated to the service of civic virtue; she educated her sons for it; she condemned and corrected her husband’s lapses from it.”<sup>38</sup> As Kerber notes, this was a way for women’s traditional, domestic role to take on political significance. Female social reformers in the Progressive Era also employed maternal rhetoric to justify their interventions in the political realm—women were responsible for privately ensuring the health and happiness of their families, they argued; if granted a role in government, they would exercise this ability over the nation as a whole.<sup>39</sup>

Although Women Strike for Peace did not recognize any specific link to these or other earlier movements, the group employed the same rhetoric that women had used throughout history to accomplish various goals. This granted women certain privileges, but it also presented constraints. Katha Pollitt, for example, argues that this vision of women’s role is ultimately “demeaning” because “it asks that women be admitted into public life and public discourse not because they have a right to be there but because they

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<sup>37</sup> Rebecca Jo Plant, *Mom: The Transformation of Motherhood in Modern America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 7.

<sup>38</sup> Linda Kerber, “The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment—An American Perspective,” *American Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (Summer, 1976): 202.

<sup>39</sup> Schneidhorst, “Little Old Ladies and Dangerous Women,” 379.

will improve them.”<sup>40</sup> Women Strike for Peace members, however, were not seeking gender equality or unqualified access to the political realm, so this limitation did not seem to bother them. Their only concern was producing a peaceful world for their children, the women implied. Once this had happened, they would happily return to their domestic duties. As Dagmar Wilson explained to a reporter for the *Baltimore Sun* in regard to WSP’s first national strike, ““We are not striking against our husbands. It is my guess that we will make the soup that they will ladle out to the children on Wednesday [the day the strike was to take place].””<sup>41</sup> Statements like this were attempts by the Washington group of women to assure the public that the women who struck for peace on November 1, 1961 were committed wives and mothers, not radical extremists. The organization stressed maternal rhetoric and worked to manage the presentation of its members to make itself as palatable to Cold War America as possible.

The archives of Women Strike for Peace reflect this organization-wide concern with maintaining an image of its members as concerned but respectable housewives; it contains drafts and revisions of members’ biographies, as if the group wanted to be ready to present this image of its members at any moment. The biography of Dagmar Wilson, for example, the woman who had called the group together in September 1961, begins, “Mrs. Dagmar Wilson is a Georgetown housewife, artist, mother of three daughters, and the founder of Women Strike for Peace. Never politically active before 1961, Mrs. Wilson conceived the idea of the movement when women throughout the country were growing increasingly concerned over the radioactive poisoning of their children’s milk

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<sup>40</sup> Katha Pollitt, “Are Women Morally Superior to Men?,” in *Public Women, Public Words*, vol. 3, ed. Dawn Keetley and John Pettegrew (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), 457.

<sup>41</sup> *Baltimore Sun*, October 29, 1961. Quoted in Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 22.

resulting from nuclear testing.”<sup>42</sup> Here, one can see the self-consciousness with which Women Strike for Peace determined its presentation to the public. Wilson’s role of housewife and mother is emphasized in the first sentence, and her lack of a controversial, political past is highlighted in the second. It is not until later in her biography that one learns that Wilson also enjoys a successful career as a children’s book illustrator, a fact that, if called attention to, might raise questions about her dedication to her duties as housewife and mother. Wilson is carefully described as having gotten involved in the peace movement because she was concerned about the health of her children—not, for example, because she wanted to make a radical statement about women’s role in society. Women Strike for Peace, from its first march in 1961, was thus preoccupied with its reception by the public, the media and the politicians whose decisions it was trying to influence.

The women were aware that, by stressing their domestic roles, they would run the risk of being ignored by the public and dismissed by decision-makers. After all, they called themselves “just” housewives and mothers—“ordinary people, not experts.”<sup>43</sup> Despite this risk, the women decided to foreground their identification as mothers, both because they truly believed that protecting their children was of primary importance and because they thought the media would be more likely to sympathize with mothers than with militant women, especially women who, like many of the members of the group, were employed. Women Strike for Peace was particularly concerned with the media’s depiction of its marches and campaigns, since it understood the power of the press to determine a group’s public reception. The Women Strike for Peace archives, for example,

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<sup>42</sup> Dagmar Wilson biography, Washington, D.C., December 1968, typescript, WSP Papers.

<sup>43</sup> Garst, draft of letter, September 22, 1961, WSP Papers.

are filled with newspaper clippings about the group. Women Strike for Peace, then, was not merely a group of novices who allowed the public opinion to form as it would; rather, the women who organized the group knew full well the importance of the media and actively negotiated their own image to ensure coverage—and, at least at first, nearly universal support.

On November 1, 1961, the strike the women had written about to their friends took place across the country.<sup>44</sup> The protests were orderly; the women got their message across calmly but effectively. Some women carried placards with slogans urging the abolition of nuclear testing in order to save the human race; others marched with their children in tow, as if to provide visuals of the potential victims of nuclear war. The messages of motherly concern on their signs—like “Fallout Kills Children”<sup>45</sup>—were reinforced by their comments to reporters and even by their outfits. As Amy Swerdlow noted in an interview with journalist and historian Gail Collins about this and other Women Strike for Peace events, ““You know, we’d get dressed in mink coats and hats and gloves to look like the woman next door.””<sup>46</sup> It was crucial that Women Strike for Peace members be seen as relatable and feminine for several reasons. First, because their tactic was one of supplication, they had to gain the sympathy of those whose votes they were trying to change. By embodying the Cold War ideal of domesticity, the women of WSP could prove to politicians that they were not threats to the status quo; rather, they

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<sup>44</sup> According to an internal WSP document, events and/or strikes took place in at least 67 cities, in Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Washington, D.C., Florida, Illinois, Iowa, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Washington and Wisconsin (Internal WSP memo, Washington, D.C., November 1961, typescript, WSP Papers).

<sup>45</sup> John Raymond, “300 March on City Hall, Urge End to Atomic Race,” *Berkeley Daily Gazette*, November 1, 1961, 1.

<sup>46</sup> Gail Collins, *When Everything Changed: The Amazing Journey of American Women from 1960 to the Present* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2010) , 179.

were actively supporting existing gender relations. Second, WSP sought to appear relatable because it hoped other mothers might see the protests and realize that they, too, could join Women Strike for Peace's cause, even if they did not have any particular knowledge about politics or did not consider themselves experts on disarmament policy.

Most women who attended the strike on November 1 told reporters they simply wanted to express their concern for their children, mirroring the strategy of the strike's organizers. According to a front page article in the *Berkeley Daily Gazette* about the November 1 march, one "housewife, Mrs. Alice Chalip of 1439 Francisco St., said she has three children and wants to see them grow up in a safe world."<sup>47</sup> Other women interviewed at the strikes across the country shared this maternal concern and described the issue as one of particular interest to women. One Los Angeles woman explained she was marching because "women have a special place to protect their families."<sup>48</sup> Many of the women interviewed denied a connection to any specific organization, instead calling themselves concerned mothers and reporting that they had heard about the strike from a friend.<sup>49</sup> In Washington, women delivered one letter to Mrs. Khrushchev at the Soviet Embassy and an identical one to the White House for Mrs. Kennedy. The letter echoed the maternal rhetoric used by individual strikers when it asked both women to join with the women strikers to "end the arms race instead of the human race." It continued, "Surely no mother today can feel that her duty as a mother has been fulfilled until she has spoken out for life, instead of death, for peace, instead of war."<sup>50</sup> This appeal to the First Ladies' maternal instincts reinforced the group's message that

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<sup>47</sup> Raymond, "300 March on City Hall," 1.

<sup>48</sup> "2,000 L.A. Women Join March to Keep Peace," 1.

<sup>49</sup> Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 16.

<sup>50</sup> Letter to Mrs. Nikita Khrushchev, Washington, D.C., November 1, 1961, mimeograph, WSP Papers.

motherhood in and of itself lent women the authority to participate in political discussions about nuclear testing. Moreover, by calling on the First Ladies of both countries instead of on the leaders themselves, the women strikers ensured that their request and tactics would not be considered overly radical—their method in this first national event was to be understood as one of indirect influence, not militant action.

Perhaps because of this explicit attempt by Women Strike for Peace to present itself as a nonthreatening group of mothers, much of the press coverage of the event was sympathetic. Newspapers in cities all over America reported on the novel event—some with front page pictures and articles, others with small mentions of the women in hats who had marched for peace. A front page article in the *Berkeley Daily Gazette*, for example, characterized the women who gathered in the Bay Area as having come “from everywhere—businesswomen, housewives, students—to protest Russian and United States nuclear testing and to lend collective support to President Kennedy’s recent disarmament proposal.”<sup>51</sup> This article thus approvingly depicted the women as patriots who were supporting the president’s policies. Elsewhere, “some 500 well-dressed women gathered at the community center in the posh North Shore suburb of Winnetka, [Illinois],” suggesting that the women’s respectable image was noted, and approved of, by the media.<sup>52</sup> An article in *The Nation* describing the early actions of the group, including the November 1 strike, concluded that, although the women were “newcomers to the field of public action, so far they are doing all right. They surprised not only the community but themselves by proving that the voice of the average citizen can still be

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<sup>51</sup> Raymond, “300 March on City Hall,” 1.

<sup>52</sup> “The Women Protest,” 22.

heard.”<sup>53</sup> Although the community’s “surprise” at the women’s success could be seen as somewhat condescending, the article’s overall tone, like most of the others which described the strike, was overwhelmingly positive. Particularly noteworthy in the media coverage were the newspapers, like the *Chicago Tribune*, which chose to list all of the women strikers’ proposals as the group itself had composed them, like the suggestion that the government “stop all nuclear weapons tests and resume negotiations for a formal test ban.”<sup>54</sup> By choosing to print, at length, the women’s own words, the newspapers legitimized the women’s demands while granting them extensive coverage.

The strike was a success. The women had made a public impact, and a positive one, at that. The strikers had accomplished their goal of elevating the issue of nuclear radiation to one worthy of public consideration. The press had seen fit to cover the demonstrations, and headlines like “US WOMEN PROTEST BOMBS” and “300 March on City Hall, Urge End to Atom Race” made it clear exactly why the women were protesting.<sup>55</sup> The women had believed from the beginning that public education about nuclear radiation was the first step to achieving consensus that nuclear testing be stopped, so this media coverage was welcome. Even more fulfilling to the women strikers than the media coverage was the response by public figures. A November 15, 1961, article in the *New York Times* reported that Madame Khrushchev and Mrs. Kennedy both responded to the letters from Women Strike for Peace. Both women supported the cause of peace and believed it was an important women’s issue. Mrs. Kennedy wrote, for example, that “as mothers, we cannot help but be concerned about the health and welfare of our husbands

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<sup>53</sup> Stephanie Gervis, “Women Speak Out for Peace,” *The Nation*, December 30, 1961, 526.

<sup>54</sup> “Women Stage Peace Strike Thruout U.S.,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 2, 1961, 4.

<sup>55</sup> Front-page headlines from *San Francisco News-Call Bulletin* and the *Berkeley Daily Gazette*, respectively. Both appeared on November 1, 1961.

and children,” while Mme. Khrushchev looked forward to the day when the nuclear threat had passed “and mothers [would] be able to think of their children’s future without anxiety.”<sup>56</sup> Although their responses were somewhat couched in political platitudes, the two First Ladies expressed their support both for peace and for the maternal rhetoric used by the women strikers.

Many of the politicians with whom the women met also seemed inclined to support the group’s agenda—predicated, as it was, on the women’s role as mothers. In San Francisco, for example, Mayor George Christopher told the women at the November 1 event, “As I look at those little children playing on the carpet...I can sympathize with the purpose bringing you here.”<sup>57</sup> Similarly, in Mount Vernon, New York, in the days leading up to the strike, several women asked Mayor Sirignano for permission to demonstrate on November 1. According to an article in *The Nation*, “the mayor granted not only his permission, but his enthusiastic support.”<sup>58</sup> In Chicago, too, the women were met with support by Mayor Daley, who “told the women he would do everything he could to assist the cause of world peace.”<sup>59</sup> Governor Brown of California told a group of women strikers in Sacramento that “he hope[d] their plea for peace [would] be heard around the world.”<sup>60</sup> Far from rebuking the women for engaging in the strike or encouraging them to return to their homes, then, politicians seemed impressed by the women’s determination and supportive of their goals.

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<sup>56</sup> Alvin Shuster, “First Ladies of U.S. and Soviet Back Husbands as Peacemakers,” *New York Times*, November 15, 1961, 1.

<sup>57</sup> Raymond, “300 March on City Hall,” 1.

<sup>58</sup> Gervis, “Women Speak Out for Peace,” 524

<sup>59</sup> “Women Stage Peace Strike Thruout U.S.,” 4.

<sup>60</sup> “2,000 L.A. Women Join March to Keep Peace,” *Los Angeles Mirror*, 1.

Following the success of the strike, the women began to reconsider their reluctance to establish an organization. Women were interested in continuing to protest nuclear testing, according to communications which arrived in Washington from around the country.<sup>61</sup> This national interest convinced Dagmar Wilson and the others who had organized the strike that their activist work could and should continue. The strike had been an important first step, but the women could not simply stop there. As they had written in the letter they sent out on September 22, however, the women did not want a traditional “organization.” The women maintained that they did not want a bureaucracy through which all ideas had to be processed, nor did they want a central board of directors with the capacity to veto the ideas members across the country came up with. Instead, as Amy Swerdlow notes, the women created something new—“a nonhierarchical, loosely structured ‘unorganizational’ format that allowed autonomy to each chapter...WSP developed a simple maternal rhetoric, spontaneous direct action on the local level, relentless political lobbying in Washington, and an instantly effective national telephone chain.”<sup>62</sup> These aspects of the nascent movement were unconventional, to be sure, but the founding women saw these tactical decisions as in keeping with their maternal rhetoric. This would be a new, women-run organization, they proclaimed, one that was unhindered by hierarchy.

Even though Women Strike for Peace described their organization as one based on women’s tactics and beliefs, however, their mission was never to subvert or challenge the gender status quo; rather, they made active efforts to support it. They never advocated women’s rights—in fact, most members did not believe there was any need for any such

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<sup>61</sup> “U.S. Women Parade in Bid to End Arms Race,” *The Age* (Melbourne), November 3, 1961, 4.

<sup>62</sup> Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 3

advocacy, as many were “convinced that women’s battle for equality had been won.”<sup>63</sup> Their efforts to produce a “feminine” organization without hierarchy was based on their ideological location within existing gender relations, as it relied on their identification as mothers and nurturers. Thus, because of their deferral to—and even celebration of—the gender norms of the day which gave a woman power only in her role as mother and, even then, only in relation to her children, WSP’s activism and message was at first not threatening to the public. The media coverage of WSP’s early campaigns reinforced the image of WSP as a group of respectable mothers. In December 1961, in an article in *The Nation*, Stephanie Gervis described the formation of Women Strike for Peace. While the article was supportive of the women’s “maternal concern” and applauded the organization’s actions, Gervis was sure to note that, despite the women’s burgeoning activism, they continued to carry out the domestic duties of their households. She wrote, “Most of the women are wives and mothers, which is why they became involved in the first place.” As Women Strike for Peace grows, she notes, “a system of rotating responsibility...will have to be developed so that children can be fed and husbands reassured.”<sup>64</sup> Gervis made it clear that the women of WSP were not attempting to shirk their duties as housewives or mothers; rather, they saw their peace work as extensions of their existing domestic roles. A *New York Times* article from April 1962 agreed with this assessment of Women Strike for Peace’s commitment to the socially accepted domestic role of women. Jeanne Molli, the reporter, wrote that the members of WSP “stress femininity rather than feminism. They are amateurs, women who, in less urgent times, would never have put down the mop to write a Congressman, much less demonstrate with

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>64</sup> Gervis, “Women Speak Out for Peace,” 526.

their children in the street.”<sup>65</sup> Molli thus bolstered the assertions of Women Strike for Peace members who argued that they would not have made forays into the political arena if they did not feel their children’s health depended on immediate action.

In keeping with this image, Women Strike for Peace’s rhetoric remained focused on their children, and many of their campaigns involved educating the public about potential threats to world peace through mailings—actions considered acceptable by society. In the spring of 1962, for example, Women Strike for Peace launched its first official public education campaigns. Still relying on what political journalist Katha Pollitt has described as WSP’s “maternity-based logic for organizing against nuclear war,”<sup>66</sup> the women of WSP warned other mothers about the hazards of Strontium 90 and Iodine 131, two dangerous byproducts of nuclear tests. Specifically, the WSP women were concerned about the way these and other radioactive elements were leaching into and contaminating food products like fresh milk. Women Strike for Peace sent out pamphlets and informational materials to the growing number of women on their mailing list, including one which announced that “NUCLEAR TESTS COST LIVES” and encouraged mothers to “Stock up now on canned and powdered milk to meet your family’s needs.”<sup>67</sup> Another, similar flyer from the same campaign for food and milk safety appealed to mothers by saying, “Sure... You’re O.K....but what about your children? What about those children yet unborn?” This latter flyer was posted in supermarkets and urged women to “Tell President Kennedy: NO MORE TESTING!”<sup>68</sup> These flyers were important in several ways. First, they demonstrated WSP’s unique attempt to combat nuclear radiation on both

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<sup>65</sup> Jeanne Molli, “Women’s Peace Group Uses Feminine Tactics,” *New York Times*, April 19, 1962, 26.

<sup>66</sup> Katha Pollitt, “Phallic Balloons Against the War,” *The Nation*, March 24, 2003, 9.

<sup>67</sup> “Nuclear Tests Cost Lives,” Washington, D.C., March 1962, mimeographed flyer, WSP Papers.

<sup>68</sup> Supermarket campaign flyer, Washington, D.C., March 1962, mimeographed flyer, WSP Papers.

a large scale and a smaller one. While attending to national and international nuclear developments, WSP was also able to articulate the implications of nuclear radiation to individual women in their everyday lives. In other words, while WSP worked to protect humanity in the abstract from annihilation by nuclear war, it also made concerted efforts to protect babies and children, on an everyday basis, from the more concrete threats of rising contamination in food. Second, this type of campaign reaffirmed Women Strike for Peace's basic contention, which was that being a concerned mother and citizen was enough to qualify any individual woman to speak out against nuclear testing.

Further, the campaign was successful in raising women's awareness about the possible effect of nuclear testing on America's food sources. Although it is difficult to determine the exact number of women who limited their milk consumption because of WSP's efforts, there was enough concern over the issue in the spring of 1962 to prompt a response from public officials. The government encouraged Americans to continue drinking milk, to avoid both public hysteria over nuclear fallout and lost profits for the dairy industry. In April 1962, for example, Women Strike for Peace announced it would urge women to "conduct a one-week boycott of fresh milk products every time there [was] a nuclear explosion anywhere in the world."<sup>69</sup> Shortly thereafter, the National Dairy Council warned Americans that reducing milk intake would result in malnutrition, which would be much more dangerous than the "possible effects" from nuclear radiation in milk.<sup>70</sup> In a May 1962 article printed in newspapers around the country, Dr. James M. Hundley, the assistant surgeon general of the public health service, was quoted

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<sup>69</sup> "Dirty Pool," *Eugene Register-Guard*, April 9, 1962, 12A.

<sup>70</sup> Oletha Yates, "Fallout in Food No Danger Due to Health Office Check," *Lawrence Journal-World*, April 19, 1962, 11.

as saying, “There is no reason whatsoever for the public to reduce consumption of milk or other dairy products because of fear of radioactive contamination.”<sup>71</sup> The efforts of Women Strike for Peace were thus rewarded with public attention, speaking to the effectiveness of their tactic of appealing directly to women as well as to national politicians.

Another flyer in this campaign, released on February 12, 1962, demonstrated WSP’s ability to understand the importance of abstract, nuclear deliberations. In honor of Valentine’s Day, the flyer was titled “Love Letter to the World,” and, in the middle of a large heart, it announced that the members of WSP “LOVE LIFE...LOVE THE WORLD...[and] LOVE OUR CHILDREN.” As a result, the flyer continued, since “today—February 12—the Test Ban Talks Reopen at Geneva,” Women Strike for Peace members were sending wires to the President and to senators to protest any resumption of testing, and the group asked readers of the flyer to do the same.<sup>72</sup> Women Strike for Peace was admirable in its ability to relate to the average housewife without condescending to her. To this end, the group often sent educational materials along with the flyers asking women to take action. WSP would attach newspaper articles describing the dangers of nuclear radiation or statements from expert scientists who were concerned about the levels of radiation in the atmosphere to prove the immediacy of the threats facing the human race. This widespread ambivalence about the necessity and desirability of nuclear testing helped Women Strike for Peace remain a respectable, not radical, organization. On Tuesday, April 17, 1962, for example, the front page of the *New York*

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<sup>71</sup> Drew Pearson, “Merry-Go-Round: Health Service Allays Fears on Radioactivity,” *Spokane Daily Chronicle*, May 15, 1962, 4.

<sup>72</sup> “Love Letter to the World...,” Washington, D.C., February 12, 1962, mimeographed flyer, WSP Papers.

*Times* read, “WE PHYSICIANS FEAR NUCLEAR TESTING!” The rest of the page was taken up by three columns of doctors’ names.<sup>73</sup> Women Strike for Peace’s goals, then, were not those of fringe radicals—hundreds of doctors had, after all, felt comfortable enough to admit their disapproval of continued nuclear testing in a visible public context.

Over the next year, public concern about nuclear testing continued to grow, making Women Strike for Peace’s demands that it be banned an increasingly mainstream desire. Ultimately, when the limited test ban treaty was signed in August 1963, Women Strike for Peace’s sustained efforts to end nuclear testing were praised.<sup>74</sup> U Thant, for example, the secretary general of the United Nations, noted Women Strike for Peace’s contributions to the nuclear test ban.<sup>75</sup> President Kennedy’s science adviser at the time, Jerome Wiesner, “gave the major credit for moving President Kennedy toward the limited test ban treaty of 1963 not to arms controllers inside the government but to the Women’s Strike for Peace and to SANE and Linus Pauling.”<sup>76</sup> Although not perfect, this nuclear test ban treaty was a major milestone for international relations in general and the American peace movement in particular, and WSP’s acknowledged role in achieving it was crucial for gaining both publicity and acceptance.

Even as Women Strike for Peace was becoming more accepted by the public, however, the actions of the organization were being monitored as potentially subversive by certain sections of the government. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), for example, had begun gathering information on Bella Abzug, a dedicated member of

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<sup>73</sup> “We Physicians Fear Nuclear Testing!,” *New York Times*, April 17, 1962, 1.

<sup>74</sup> See, for example, Henry Tanner, “Test Ban Treaty Signed in Moscow; Leaders Rejoice,” *New York Times*, August 6, 1963, 1.

<sup>75</sup> Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 94

<sup>76</sup> Andrew Hamilton, “M.I.T.: March 4 Revisited Amid Political Turmoil,” *Science* 167, no. 3924, March 13, 1970, 1476.

Women Strike for Peace and later a congresswoman, in 1953. The CIA kept track of Abzug's appearances, especially those affiliated with Women Strike for Peace, and even opened some of Abzug's mail during its twenty-year investigation. The CIA claimed the investigation was conducted to make sure Abzug and Women Strike for Peace were not threats to the security of the nation.<sup>77</sup> It was not just specific individuals that the government had concerns about, however; as an organization, Women Strike for Peace was also targeted for study by the CIA. Starting in February 1967, WSP was one of several groups under surveillance by the CIA, which "sought to learn the sources of each organization's income" to determine whether any were under the control of foreign powers.<sup>78</sup> This investigation was kept secret until 1975, but in December 1962 a more open investigation of Women Strike for Peace was conducted when several members of Women Strike for Peace were subpoenaed by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC).

HUAC had been created to "make from time to time investigations of (i) the extent, character, and objects of un-American propaganda activities in the United States, (ii) the diffusion within the United States of subversive and un-American propaganda that is instigated from foreign countries or of a domestic origin and attacks the principle of the form of government as guaranteed by our Constitution."<sup>79</sup> Essentially, the committee was able to use its own discretion to determine whether the activities of any given organization or individual were worthy of investigation as attempts to subvert the

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<sup>77</sup> John Crewdson, "C.I.A. Opened Bella Abzug's Mail, Kept 20-Year File," *New York Times*, March 6, 1975, 1.

<sup>78</sup> Harry Kelly, "Secret Operation CHAOS: CIA's illegal spying bared," *Chicago Tribune*, June 11, 1975, 1.

<sup>79</sup> Rules of the House of Representatives, Rule XI, Pub. L. no. 601, 79<sup>th</sup> Congress, 60 Stat. 812 (1946).

government or commit treason. In practice, the question most often asked of individuals made to appear in front of HUAC was whether they had connections to Communism or to the Soviet Union.<sup>80</sup> If someone was found to have any link to Communism in his or her past, that person could be brought up on criminal charges. Often of greater significance, however, was the damage done to an individual's reputation, even if there was no proof that he or she had any connection to Communism.<sup>81</sup> Despite the mostly supportive coverage Women Strike for Peace had been receiving in the media, the investigation by the CIA and the subpoena by HUAC showed that the government viewed the organization as a threat and considered it worthy of investigation. The aspect of Women Strike for Peace most suspect to the government was WSP's decision to ignore the Red Scare of the day and to allow anyone who was interested in the organization to join, without asking about their past or present connections to Communism.<sup>82</sup> This was unusual; other peace organizations like The Committee for a SANE Nuclear Policy had codified in their charters the exclusion of anyone with Communist affiliations.<sup>83</sup> Given the anti-Communism climate in which WSP had been formed and continued to operate, this insistence on the inclusion of all was a powerful—and potentially dangerous—decision by Women Strike for Peace.

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<sup>80</sup> A full description of the House Un-American Activities Committee or McCarthyism is beyond the scope of this paper. For further reading, I recommend Robert Griffith, *The Politics of Fear: Joseph R. McCarthy and the Senate* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987) as a starting point.

<sup>81</sup> One well-known example of this occurring is the blacklisting that swept through Hollywood. For an interesting description of this phenomenon and other connections between television and McCarthyism, see Thomas Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

<sup>82</sup> Many admired that, even after certain WSP women had been individually called to testify before HUAC, the organization “asked no questions about the political affiliations of the subpoenaed women prior, during, or after the HUAC hearings” (Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 98).

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

The committee was particularly interested in the peace movement because it believed that Communists were creating new peace organizations, and infiltrating existing ones, to weaken public support for the political actions of the United States. As Congressman Clyde Doyle noted in his opening statement at the HUAC hearing on December 11, 1962, the committee believed that “this Communist activity...is internal psychopolitical warfare, directed by Moscow and waged within our own borders. The aim of this activity is not peace, but the undermining and sabotage of the United States.”<sup>84</sup> These were weighty charges, and HUAC was a daunting institution. Instead of allowing HUAC to intimidate them, however, the members of Women Strike for Peace worked to come up with a strategy which would protect the women who testified while making clear their opinion that one’s political beliefs should not be subject to interrogation by the government. Swerdlow notes, “The decision made by the New York and Washington women not ‘to cower’ before the committee, to conduct no purges, and to acknowledge each woman’s right to work for peace in her own way and according to the dictates of her conscience was bold for its day.”<sup>85</sup> WSP believed that all forms of peace were necessary to ensure a future for the world’s children—peace between the Soviet Union and America, most obviously, but also peace between Communists and capitalists, between HUAC and the rest of the country. Unlike HUAC, which was premised on the belief that anyone who would not denounce Communism and explicitly sever ties with anyone suspected of being a Communist was betraying America, WSP believed that “with the fate of humanity resting on a push button, the quest for peace has

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<sup>84</sup> Opening Statement of Representative Doyle. Hearings before the Committee on Un-American Activities, House of Representatives, Eighty-Seventh Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, December 11, 1962. (Hereafter HUAC Hearings.) 2066.

<sup>85</sup> Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 99

become the highest form of patriotism.”<sup>86</sup> Like the maternal rhetoric espoused by WSP’s unacknowledged foremothers who advocated republican motherhood, this vision of patriotism was one informed by nurturing love, not suspicious paranoia. To be a mother, according to this ideology, was to be the best type of citizen a woman could hope to be. To be a mother agitating for peace for her children was a passionate extension of this citizenship, proving a woman’s patriotic devotion to her country. As Ruth Meyers, one of the WSP witnesses, testified after being asked whether she was working for peace because of Communist directives, “Mr. Doyle, I think that question is an insult to an American citizen who has tried in the best way to fulfill her duty as a citizen.”<sup>87</sup>

Believing thus in their own unimpeachable identities, the WSP members who had been subpoenaed by the court took the stand in December 1962. As a symbol of solidarity, dozens of WSP members from around the country had actually volunteered to testify alongside those subpoenaed to prove the organization had nothing to hide. The women were ultimately denied the opportunity to speak.<sup>88</sup> Many women appeared at the hearings anyway, hoping to show their support for their fellow WSP members. When the first WSP witness was called to testify, the women in the audience “rose silently” with her. “Some were carrying small children whose cries punctuated the hearing.”<sup>89</sup> Women Strike for Peace thus presented itself to HUAC as a united group of respectable mothers, even as some of the statements made by its members were seen as uncooperative by the committee.

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<sup>86</sup> Women Strike for Peace, “House Un-American Activities Committee Subpoenas,” no date, WSP Papers. Quoted in *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>87</sup> Testimony of Ruth Meyers. HUAC Hearings. 2102.

<sup>88</sup> Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 105; Elsie Carper, “60 Peace-Drive Women Ask Voice in House Quiz,” *Washington Post*, December 11, 1962, A15.

<sup>89</sup> Elsie Carper, “House Peace Probers Find Witnesses Balky,” *Washington Post*, December 12, 1962, A1.

The members who had been called to testify responded calmly and clearly to the committee's questions, often pleading the Fifth Amendment to avoid incriminating themselves or others.<sup>90</sup> When they did respond to questions, the women expressed their disagreement with the hearings' purpose while maintaining that their peace actions were done on behalf of their children, not the Communist Party. Anna Mackenzie, for example, testified, "I think that this is an attempt to prevent me and other people from exercising our rights to speak as women for peace to protect our children."<sup>91</sup> Observers were impressed by the women's composure, even humor, under fire. When asked, for example, whether she had attended a certain parade and worn "a colored paper daisy to identify [her]self as a member of Women Strike for Peace," Blanche Posner responded, "It sounds like such a far cry from communism it is impossible not to be amused. I still invoke the fifth amendment." Newspapers across the country noted the way the women stood up for themselves and their organization, refusing to turn on one another or involve themselves in a debate about Communism that was irrelevant to their mission. About Blanche Posner, for example, Elsie Carper in the *Washington Post* approvingly noted that the "blond, middle-aged housewife from Scarsdale, N.Y....lectured the subcommittee after taking the stand. [Chairman] Doyle attempted to stop her but gave up."<sup>92</sup> Although Posner's continued invocation of the Fifth Amendment may have seemed suspicious to some observers, and her "lecture" to the committee may have seemed to overstep certain

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<sup>90</sup> Like most of the women in WSP, Blanche Posner was neither a current nor former member of the Communist Party. However, she pled the Fifth Amendment, she told author Amy Swerdlow, "because she understood that, according to the committee's rules, once one answered a question about oneself, one could be cited for contempt if one refused to answer questions about others. Posner, like the others, stated that she wanted to avoid being forced to discuss other people who could be hurt" (Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 111).

<sup>91</sup> Testimony of Anna MacKenzie. HUAC Hearings. 2144.

<sup>92</sup> Carper, "House Peace Probers Find Witnesses Balky," A1.

bounds of politeness, Carper refused to characterize Posner's testimony as radical. Much of the media coverage of the HUAC hearings, like Carper's article, seemed to support Women Strike for Peace. One newspaper article which ran nationally began, "A soft-spoken, Virginia-born woman refused to answer when asked by a House subcommittee on un-American activities today whether she had held Communist membership or had connections with the pacifist group Women Strike for Peace."<sup>93</sup> This description of one of the WSP witnesses, and the rest of the article, evoked sympathy in readers and suggested that the reporter sided with Women Strike for Peace, but it was also vaguely condescending, as it summoned an image of a naïve, delicate woman who appeared defenseless when confronted with the authoritative HUAC. Other reports, while still supportive of WSP, were less patronizing. A headline in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, for example, announced, "Probers Defied by Women." The ensuing wire service article quoted several WSP witnesses, thus offering Women Strike for Peace a chance to share its side in the case, but no HUAC members. One woman, Elizabeth Moos, was quoted as saying of HUAC, "The committee is doing a terrible disservice to everyone in America and the world when it tries to attribute every effort for peace to Communists."<sup>94</sup> Explanations like this one helped neutralize Women Strike for Peace's rather radical actions—although they were actively defying a national committee, the women argued, they were doing so, as they did everything, only in the pursuit of peace.

Their message was further deradicalized by the support they received from other public figures. Linus Pauling, for example, a Nobel prize-winning scientist, "said the committee was guilty of 'a shameful action' in investigating to determine whether

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<sup>93</sup> "Woman Skirts Quiz By 5<sup>th</sup> Amendment," *Meridien Journal*, December 12, 1962, 1.

<sup>94</sup> "Probers Defied by Women," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, December 13, 1962, 2.

Communists had infiltrated a group called ‘Women Strike for Peace.’”<sup>95</sup> He later expanded in a letter to Dagmar Wilson, “Let me congratulate you on the admirable way in which you handled your appearance before the Un-American Activities Committee. From the accounts of the affair that I have read, I judge that it would have been impossible for you or anyone else to have made a more effective appearance.”<sup>96</sup> Pauling was a peace advocate himself, but his position as a prestigious scientist often lent him more credibility than the women of WSP. Further, he was nationally known, which meant that his condemnation of HUAC was heard by many Americans. Several figures in government positions also sided with Women Strike for Peace. An article in the *Meridien Journal* reported that Representative William Fitts Ryan, for example, a Democrat from New York, said that the HUAC hearings involving Women Strike for Peace “were an example of ‘misuse and abuse of power,’”<sup>97</sup> and a former Federal Bureau of Investigation agent named Jack Levine was ejected from the HUAC building after interrupting Blanche Posner’s hearing to announce, “I am a patriotic American citizen and a former FBI agent. I petition you to discontinue these proceedings before you heap further disgrace on the Congress of the United States.”<sup>98</sup> Women Strike for Peace was thus not the only party in the United States which disagreed with HUAC’s mission and tactics, nor was it the only one which voiced these opinions. It seems that individual American citizens were also beginning to articulate their discontent with HUAC’s interrogations. Letters to editors questioning the committee’s practices began to appear in newspapers around the country

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<sup>95</sup> “‘A Shameful Action’: Probe Said Attempt to Crucify Women,” *The Windsor Star*, December 13, 1962, 6.

<sup>96</sup> Linus Pauling, Letter to Dagmar Wilson, Washington, D.C., December 27, 1962, typewritten letter, WSP Papers.

<sup>97</sup> “Woman Skirts Quiz by 5<sup>th</sup> Amendment,” 1.

<sup>98</sup> Testimony of Blanche Posner. HUAC Hearings. 2091.

in response to the Women Strike for Peace hearings. One in the *Washington Post* argued that “the House Committee on Un-American Activities imperils democracy itself.”<sup>99</sup> Another in the *Schenectady Gazette* began, “As a concerned citizen, there are times when I am deeply ashamed of some of the actions of our American government. The recent antics indulged in by the House Un-American Activities Committee is an example.”<sup>100</sup> Most of the coverage and, it seemed, most of the public was thus supportive of the WSP women. The women of WSP came away from this encounter looking like heroines, not radicals. As Eric Bentley wrote in his book about HUAC, *Thirty Years of Treason*, the WSP hearings were “the fall of HUAC’s Bastille.”<sup>101</sup> Nevertheless, it is possible that this encounter with HUAC left lasting stains on the reputation of Women Strike for Peace—that the questions raised about WSP’s Communist affiliations and the doubts cast on their goals of peace affected the public’s understanding and support of the organization. As Women Strike for Peace shifted its protest focus to the Vietnam War and became more militant, the public may have thought back to the HUAC hearings and wondered whether WSP had been a radical, and therefore dangerous, organization all along.

## **PUBLIC OPINION SHIFTS**

After the HUAC hearing, Women Strike for Peace continued carrying out its campaigns for peace, but, especially after the test ban treaty had been signed, the media coverage of WSP began to decline. The novelty of middle-aged women marching for

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<sup>99</sup> “Letter to Editor: Stifling Protest,” *Washington Post*, December 6, 1962, A30.

<sup>100</sup> Watrous, Aria. “Letter to Editor: Defends Women Strike for Peace,” *Schenectady Gazette*, December 21, 1962, 20.

<sup>101</sup> Eric Bentley, *Thirty Years of Treason: Excerpts from Hearings before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1938-1968* (New York: The Viking Press, 1971), 951.

peace had begun to wear off, and the women's actions were less universally supported than they had previously been. Further, as the focus of Women Strike for Peace shifted from preventing a potential nuclear war to protesting an actual, ongoing war in Vietnam, the American public began to view Women Strike for Peace with increasing suspicion. Women Strike for Peace, for its part, considered its dedication to peace in Vietnam exactly in keeping with its commitment to world peace from nuclear war. The organization, which began its Vietnam campaigns in 1965, was one of the first in the United States to question America's actions in Vietnam. In the spring of 1965, two of WSP's members "were the first U.S. peace activists to travel to embattled Hanoi on a peace mission."<sup>102</sup> They returned with plans to protest the war. As before, the members of Women Strike for Peace depended on rhetoric which emphasized their dedication to their roles as mothers. One of WSP's popular antiwar slogans was "Not Our Sons, Not Your Sons, Not Their Sons." WSP used language like this to point out that their opposition to the war was on behalf of their own children, as well as their desire to protect children worldwide. Women Strike for Peace members saw no distinction between marching for peace from nuclear war and decrying a military war which was producing mass casualties; both threatened the wellbeing of their families, whose happiness and safety had been entrusted to women during the postwar period. Again, Women Strike for Peace stated that their mission was to fill this stabilizing role for their families, but that peace was necessary for them to do so. Others in society drew a sharp distinction between WSP's antinuclear actions and their new, antiwar actions. In their efforts to protect the world from nuclear war, as has been noted, women in the organization were seen as

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<sup>102</sup> Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 132.

reiterations of eighteenth-century republican mothers, their political actions couched in domesticity. Once Women Strike for Peace members began protesting the Vietnam War, however, their actions were taken by some to be treasonous. No longer were these women patriots; they were now traitors.

Further, these newly minted traitors were not passive protestors; indeed, WSP's tactics had begun to veer in more radical directions. Dozens of women, for example, were detained at the Netherlands border in 1964 for fear that they would behave radically when protesting NATO's plans for a multilateral nuclear fleet (MLF).<sup>103</sup> That winter, two WSP representatives were jailed when trying to deliver another protest against the MLF.<sup>104</sup> In March of that year, Alice Herz, an 82-year-old woman who had founded the Detroit chapter of WSP and remained active in the peace movement, set herself on fire in the middle of a shopping mall to protest the Vietnam War.<sup>105</sup> The act was neither pre-approved nor sanctioned by Women Strike for Peace, but Herz's connections to the organization were well-known, and media descriptions of the event inevitably linked the radical act to the organization as a whole. Other actions which were less shocking but which furthered the image of Women Strike for Peace as an increasingly radical organization were, in fact, sponsored by the organization. In the summer of 1966, for example, two WSP members joined with two members of another peace organization in Santa Clara to block a barge bound for Vietnam which was carrying napalm bombs. The women were arrested but proudly described how they had managed to "stop murder for 63 minutes before our arrest." Despite the radical implications of this act, however, the

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<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

women maintained “that they had come to the port of Santa Clara ‘to invoke the law, not to disobey it.’”<sup>106</sup> In other words, the women of WSP were willing to engage in these increasingly militant actions not merely to make a statement or to receive media attention but because they truly believed they were doing what was right for their country and for the world.

The public, however, often disagreed and increasingly found the actions of Women Strike for Peace unpalatable. Particularly distressing to many members of American society were WSP’s actions that encouraged draft resistance. The National Consultative Committee of Women Strike for Peace created the Women’s Statement of Conscience, which described WSP’s support of draft resisters and its intentions of aiding and abetting anyone who did not want to fight. The pledge was to be signed by any woman who found both the forced conscription of young American men and the Vietnam War itself “immoral, unjust and brutal.” The statement continued: “We believe that support of those who resist the war and the draft is both moral and legal. We believe that it is not we, but those who send our sons to kill and be killed, who are committing crimes. We do, however, recognize that there may be legal risks involved, but because we believe that these young men are courageous and morally justified in rejecting the war regardless of consequences, we can do no less.”<sup>107</sup> Women Strike for Peace, then, did recognize the illegality of its actions, but it refused to allow legal restrictions to stand in the way of what it considered the morally right thing to do. Interestingly, though, WSP did not frame its argument in strictly moral terms; rather, it also argued that its actions were more legal

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<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>107</sup> “Women’s Statement of Conscience to Be Presented to General Lewis Hershey, Director of Selective Service,” Washington, D.C., no date, mimeograph, WSP Papers. Quoted in *Ibid.*, 177.

than the actions of those who had given governmental approval to the war, perhaps in an effort to deradicalize itself. Regardless of these efforts, however, the public increasingly viewed Women Strike for Peace as an organization worthy of suspicion.

Women Strike for Peace planned an antiwar protest in front of the White House for September 20, 1967, but shortly before the march was to take place, the Department of the Interior announced a new rule which limited the number of protestors outside the White House to 100. Convinced that this new rule trampled on their civil rights, Women Strike for Peace refused to cancel the march or alter their plans in any way. On the day of the march, the women carried a coffin, representing the American sons they had already lost in the war and left it at the door of General Hershey, who was in charge of the Selective Service, filled with hundreds of copies of the pledge the National Consultative Committee had created, all signed by women who opposed the war.<sup>108</sup> After this performance, the women marched to the White House, where they were confronted by a police line blocking them from accessing the sidewalk in front of the White House. Swerdlow describes the scene: “Incensed at the denial of their rights as mothers and citizens, the women tore down the fence, trampled on it, pushed through or crawled under the police line, withstanding clubs, shoves, and blows, to dash into the road directly in front of the White House gate. There they were stopped by another solid wall of policemen brandishing clubs. This line was too tight and fierce to overcome, so the women sat down in the road, blocking traffic and refusing to move despite threats of arrest.”<sup>109</sup> Although such an action may not seem overly radical from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, for its time, this was a bold action, especially when one

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<sup>108</sup> Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 178.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

considers that it came from a group of women who referred to themselves as middle-aged mothers. The press coverage of the event was unsympathetic to the members of Women Strike for Peace. The *Chicago Tribune*'s article about the event was headlined "Cops, 'Peace' Women in Bloody Melee" and began: "Police and 400 screaming women opposed to the Viet Nam war engaged in a brief but bloody brawl across the street from the White House this afternoon." It described the women as having been "led by Mrs. Dagmar Wilson of Washington, who with two others spent two weeks in Hanoi, North Viet Nam, last month in direct defiance of state department orders."<sup>110</sup> Gone were the—occasionally condescending—pleasantries about the women's hairstyles and outfits; gone was any good-natured support for the women's actions. The women were described as violent scofflaws, a far cry from their original image of peaceful mothers picketing the White House. Even the women's desire for peace was under suspicion. A wire service article reports that a few of the "middle-aged matrons" demonstrating at the White House "were thrown to the ground or struck with nightsticks during the fracas."<sup>111</sup> This article implied that the women's willingness to engage in a physical confrontation directly conflicted with their ideology which advanced peace and nonviolence. Further, by referring to the women as "matrons," this reporter demonstrated that the women's age was no longer a measure of respectability; rather, it had become fuel for ridicule. The article did not even address the women's antiwar stance; rather, the focus was on the scene that had been caused by the clash between the police and the demonstrators. Another national article reported that Dagmar Wilson eventually requested that the

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<sup>110</sup> James Yuenger, "Cops, 'Peace' Women in Bloody Melee," *Chicago Tribune*, September 21, 1967, B6.

<sup>111</sup> "Women Peace Demonstrators Battle Police in White House Picket Try," *Press-Courier* (Oxnard), September 21, 1967, 26.

women obey the police order to vacate the street. The report concluded: “And they did, as President Johnson continued his activities inside the White House, uninterrupted by the clash.”<sup>112</sup> Closing the article this way suggested that the women had engaged in the strike in vain—that the president, and the American public, did not care what the women had to say. The focus of the article, like the previous one, was again on the conflict between the women and the police, not on the antiwar message the women had been trying to send.

This emphasis on Women Strike for Peace’s growing reputation for radicalism was also seen in the coverage of an earlier march on the Pentagon. This strike, in February of the same year, had been described on the *Washington Post*’s front page under the headline “2500 Women Storm Pentagon Over War.”<sup>113</sup> The women carried shopping bags and wrote messages of peace on a women’s restroom mirror with lipstick, all in keeping with their image of femininity, but the article’s headline and tone sensationalized the action, making it seem masculine and militaristic. Another article about the march reported that “More than 1,900 angry women...stage[d] a noisy, bitter demonstration against the war in Vietnam,” which was “described by long-time Pentagon workers as one of the most virulent protests ever staged at the Defense Department.”<sup>114</sup> Notably, almost all of the articles written about Women Strike for Peace’s activism against the war, including this one, failed to mention WSP’s maternal rhetoric. The women were beginning to be described as antiwar extremists, no longer as concerned mothers.

At least one other factor besides the group’s increased militance seems to have contributed to the shift in public opinion toward Women Strike for Peace. For

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<sup>112</sup> Frank Cormier, “Washington Undisturbed: Women-For-Peace Group Nearly Gets Violent During Protest in Washington,” *Lawrence Journal-World*, September 21, 1967, 13.

<sup>113</sup> White, Jean M., “2500 Women Storm Pentagon Over War,” *Washington Post*, February 16, 1967, A1.

<sup>114</sup> “Noisy, Bitter War Protest at Pentagon,” *Washington Observer*, February 16, 1967, 5.

generations, mothers had been revered in the United States. In the 1930s and 1940s, however, the attitude toward mothers shifted suddenly. Many historians have documented this shift, noting in particular Philip Wylie's 1942 text *A Generation of Vipers*, since Wylie gave this phenomenon a name: "momism." Momism, as Wylie described it, was the excessive overprotection women lavished on their children, and it would be the downfall of America, he argued, if society let this continue. This type of parenting, Wylie wrote, produced children who could not fend for themselves. The results of momism on boys were particularly dangerous, as they could grow up to be sissies if they were smothered by their mothers.<sup>115</sup>

Although this attitude toward mothers had existed since before Women Strike for Peace was formed, the members of Women Strike for Peace had mostly side-stepped being accused of "momism" by maintaining their commitment to their role as mothers and housewives without appearing to smother their children. This was largely because the children they said they were protecting by protesting nuclear war—that is, the children they brought with them to marches and chose to depict on flyers and mailings—were usually very young children, who, it was acknowledged, really did need their mothers to protect them. Once Women Strike for Peace became involved in antiwar campaigns, however, the children they were protecting were grown men who were perfectly capable of making their own decisions and—literally—fighting their own battles. The members of Women Strike for Peace were aware that they could be seen as overbearing mothers who were trying to speak for the draftees—in fact, "WSP, as a movement, was intimidated by the anti-'momism' of the 1940s and 1950s that blamed assertive mothers

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<sup>115</sup> Philip Wylie, *A Generation of Vipers* (New York: Rinehart, 1955). See especially his chapter titled "Common Women" for a description of the phenomenon of "momism."

for ‘sissy’ sons and attacked assertive women as castrating neurotics”—but they worked to refute this image by explicitly stating that their goal was not to tell the young men what to do; instead, they offered themselves as support systems and fellow war-protestors.<sup>116</sup>

Despite WSP’s assurances that it was playing only a supportive role and not one of puppet-master to the draft resisters’ puppets, the idea that the women of WSP were attempting to speak for their sons surfaced throughout their antiwar campaigns, including during a WSP-supported 1969 court case. When one of Evelyn Whitehorn’s four sons, Erik, turned eighteen—and, as a result, was expected to register with the Selective Service System—she sought a “restraining order preventing [his] induction.” At first, the public seemed to support the action. The court system, however, did not; Erik was arrested and put in jail. Tensions between mother and son grew, and the public’s estimation of Evelyn began to fall. Eventually, Erik decided to join the army to be released from jail. As Amy Swerdlow notes, “[Evelyn] Whitehorn had been defeated not only by the Selective Service Act but by a gender ideology that found her too presumptuous as a woman and mother.”<sup>117</sup> Given these and other interventions which the members of Women Strike for Peace made on behalf of draft resisters, it is thus possible that the public began to view Women Strike for Peace as overbearing and “momist.”

Even as WSP members were beginning to be criticized as calculating mothers, however, the organization was simultaneously under attack for being too naïve. Robert Spivak, for example, a Washington, D.C. columnist, called Women Strike for Peace’s rhetoric and advertisements “highly emotional” and suggested that WSP’s proposals for

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<sup>116</sup> Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 172.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

peace with Vietnam revealed the organization's ignorance of political strategies. He went so far as to say that the demonstrations for peace sponsored by WSP and other peace organizations would convince the Communists that America was "badly divided," at which point "the demonstrations will not only have been useless but even harmful for they will help prolong the war."<sup>118</sup> Spivak seemed to condescendingly imply that Women Strike for Peace's "wide-eyed and innocent" leaders should thus avoid involving themselves in the complexities of politics. Another article suggesting WSP's naïveté appeared in newspapers around the nation in March of 1970. The article featured Sybil Stockdale, the founder of the National League of Families of American Prisoners in Southeast Asia. Described as a "calm, attractive blonde mother of four" with "blue-gray eyes sparkling," Stockdale was clearly to be admired as a symbol of successful womanhood. She created her organization both to provide a sense of community to families who had loved ones imprisoned in Vietnam and to "[make] the needs and wants of POW wives known to Washington." Although one might expect Stockdale to have allied herself with Women Strike for Peace, since both organizations were premised on the importance of domesticity, in fact, the article notes, "she has little respect for the Women's Strike for Peace movement," since she believed their solutions to war were too simplistic. Women Strike for Peace members were thus simultaneously, and contradictorily, seen as overinvolved mothers and out-of-touch matrons. Combining these conflicting criticisms with the fact that Women Strike for Peace was both more militant than it had been and that it was pursuing a more controversial goal than it originally had, it is clear that the public was uncertain about what to make of Women Strike for Peace.

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<sup>118</sup> Robert Spivak, "Peace' Demonstrations May Prolong Viet War," *Beaver County Times*, November 29, 1965, A6.

Moreover, as suggested previously, some observers may have had lingering suspicions about WSP's radicalism because of the earlier HUAC investigation. Overall, many who had originally supported the organization began to turn their backs on Women Strike for Peace as the organization continued to campaign against the war.

### **FEMINIST REJECTIONS**

One might think that this increased militance and devotion to ending the war in Vietnam would have endeared Women Strike for Peace to the emerging young radicals in the late 1960s. After all, many of these young activists wanted similar reforms to the ones Women Strike for Peace demanded. It might have been advantageous for the younger women to build off the advances that Women Strike for Peace had already made, especially in terms of the war protest or in discovering a new—hierarchy-free—form of organizing a movement. However, second-wave feminists, on the whole, rejected Women Strike for Peace, both passively and actively. One of the largest problems young feminists seemed to have with Women Strike for Peace was that WSP expressly defined itself as a non-feminist organization. By eschewing any connection to earlier feminists and refusing to make any public claims about the status of women, WSP had hoped to make itself more palatable to the public. Further, as described previously, to many of the members, widening women's societal roles was not a priority; they were comfortable in their own lives and were more concerned with stopping nuclear annihilation than with examining their own roles and decrying their lack of fulfillment. For the feminists who

appeared at the end of the 1960s, however, this position was unacceptable.<sup>119</sup> Instead of viewing Women Strike for Peace as a model to which to aspire, the younger women saw them as symbolizing everything that the feminists wanted to reject: woman's voluntary subordination to man, a white, middle-class, suburban lifestyle, even the women's respectable clothing and behavior during protests.

Essentially, early second wave feminists, many of them self-styled "radical feminists," were particularly put off by WSP's early methodology of indirect influence, which was exemplified by their first strike in 1961 in which they wrote letters to the first ladies of the Soviet Union and the United States. In this instance, Women Strike for Peace was acting through two filters: first, they wrote letters hoping to persuade the first ladies to side with them against nuclear war, and second, they then depended on the first ladies to persuade their husbands to also oppose nuclear war. The radical feminists rejected this method of political influence since it denied women the right to be public figures in their own right with the power to effect political change. In a sense, Women Strike for Peace was politely asking the President and the Premier to cease their nuclear testing, while the radical feminists were more interested in demanding what they wanted. By going through the proper channels, the radical feminists thought, Women Strike for Peace was affirming men's right to bear all political power, which supported the status quo instead of tearing it down. Part of this difference in opinion about desirable tactics was based on age—groups had been performing increasingly radical acts throughout the 1960s, paving the way for some of radical feminism's more extreme acts and performances, including their infamous guerilla theater at the 1968 Miss America

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<sup>119</sup> See, for example, Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 137-141 for a discussion of an early, unpleasant encounter between Women Strike for Peace and the younger feminists.

pageant.<sup>120</sup> In the early 1960s, the middle-aged members of Women Strike for Peace, some of whom had never demonstrated in public before, felt more comfortable framing their demands in less controversial ways.

It is crucial to note that radical groups were not indicative of all second-wave feminists. As theorists have noted, second-wave feminism was not one unified movement; rather, it was composed of different groups with different methods and goals. Dawn Keetley and John Pettegrew, for example, write that, although the term “second-wave feminism” is helpful in describing the overarching themes of the movement, “it would be a mistake to characterize it as singular in its political goals, ideology, or orientation.”<sup>121</sup> However, because Women Strike for Peace had, since its inception, explicitly worked to disavow connections to women’s rights organizations and had denied that its intent was to alter gender relations in any way, most second-wave feminist groups—liberal, radical and otherwise—found little in common with WSP. The National Organization for Women (NOW), for example, was founded by Betty Friedan, among others, shortly after she published *The Feminine Mystique*. Like the book itself, the organization advocated relatively moderate, often legal, changes to women’s status in society, with the ultimate goal of making women equal to men. Since the members of Women Strike for Peace saw their political interventions as predicated on their differences from men—that is, on women’s ability to have children and their presumed responsibility to care for them—equality with men was not their primary concern. In fact,

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<sup>120</sup> For an interesting account of the 1968 Miss America pageant protest in Atlantic City written by one of its organizers, see Robin Morgan, *Going Too Far: The Personal Chronicle of a Feminist* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 62-67. For an alternate view, including analysis of how this action may have been misguided, see “What Can Be Learned: A Critique of the Miss America Protest,” in *Voices from Women’s Liberation*, ed. Leslie B. Tanner (New York: Mentor Books, 1970), 132-136.

<sup>121</sup> Dawn Keetley and John Pettegrew, *Public Women, Public Words*, vol. 3 (Lanham: Rowman & Little Publishers, Inc., 2002), 3.

WSP's preferred method of prevailing on male politicians was antithetical to NOW's mission statement, which read, in part, "We believe that women can achieve...equality only by accepting to the full the challenges and responsibilities they share with all other people in our society, as part of the decision-making mainstream of American political, economic and social life."<sup>122</sup> In other words, NOW's vision of women's role required women actually to be decision-makers, not merely to attempt to influence those who were. Over time, WSP did shift from relying exclusively on indirect influence to taking direct action, as is evidenced by, for example, the organization's movement "from seeking to *influence* the men in Congress to do the right thing to electing one of its key women, Bella Abzug, to the U.S. House of Representatives, where she became a recognized leader."<sup>123</sup> However, Women Strike for Peace still never explicitly embraced the cause of gender equality, which explains the lack of alliances formed between WSP and other feminist groups. As Betty Friedan wrote in *The Feminine Mystique*, "Even in politics, women must make their contribution not as 'housewives' but as citizens. It is, perhaps, a step in the right direction when a woman protests nuclear testing under the banner of 'Women Strike for Peace.' But why does the professional illustrator who heads the movement say she is 'just a housewife,' and her followers insist that once the testing stops, they will stay happily at home with their children?"<sup>124</sup> WSP's lack of feminist consciousness thus appears to have prevented it from forming connections with, or even seemingly being accepted by, second-wave feminist groups. Second-wave feminists may

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<sup>122</sup> National Organization for Women, "Statement of Purpose," in *Public Women, Public Words*, vol. 3, ed. Dawn Keetley and John Pettegrew (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), 16.

<sup>123</sup> Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 4. Italics in original.

<sup>124</sup> Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 375. The "professional illustrator" described by Friedan in this passage is Dagmar Wilson.

have also resented Women Strike for Peace's seeming obliviousness to women's issues because, as historian Richard Hughes has shrewdly noted, the antiabortion movement which developed in opposition to second wave feminism's demands for legalized abortion borrowed the strategies of peace movements, including those of Women Strike for Peace, to advance their own agenda. Hughes suggests that there was "a powerful visual connection between the antiwar and antiabortion movements [which] lay in the use of images of motherhood, children, and especially babies to shape public opinion."<sup>125</sup> Although, as a group, Women Strike for Peace did not involve itself in the abortion debate, it is possible that younger feminists resented the organization for having even inadvertently supplied the antiabortionists with effective propaganda strategies.

Women Strike for Peace was most explicitly rejected by the radical feminists, who composed some of the earliest second-wave groups and were therefore the feminists with whom the Women Strike for Peace members first and most often came into contact. Aside from the differences in methodology, the radical feminists seemed unwilling to partner with Women Strike for Peace because of the similarities the radical feminists saw between their own mothers and WSP's members. The women of WSP would have been about the same age as the radical feminists' mothers, and many of the radical feminists came from privileged upbringings, as sociologist Wini Breines notes. Further, she adds, about the later generation, "Images of their mothers' lives motivated many young women to construct different lives; many did not want to replicate their mothers' situations."<sup>126</sup> Younger women, she writes, wanted to dissociate themselves from their mothers' choices

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<sup>125</sup> Richard Hughes, "Burning Birth Certificates and Atomic Tupperware Parties: Creating the Antiabortion Movement in the Shadow of the Vietnam War," *The Historian* 68, no. 3 (2006): 550.

<sup>126</sup> Breines, *Young, White and Miserable*, 70.

and actions because they had seen how those decisions could lead to unhappiness and repression. The younger feminists may have viewed the members of Women Strike for Peace as surrogates for their mothers, to some extent, and transferred this repudiation to them. As Amy Swerdlow, who was present for several encounters between the radical feminists and WSP, notes, “The radical women tended to dismiss the WSP women with a good deal of disdain, presumably because they identified them with their own mothers, whom they thought of as abysmally backward in gender consciousness and timid in defense of their own and their daughters’ rights.”<sup>127</sup> The young feminists were disenchanted by what they considered their own mothers’ obliviousness to sexism and assumed the women in WSP, who were of the same generation as their mothers, shared this sentiment. This assumption led the young feminists to dismiss Women Strike for Peace as an organization which supported, rather than subverted, the gender status quo.

Even WSP’s later actions, when it became more socially radical and was as a result denounced by the media for its unladylike behavior, were repudiated by second wave feminists because WSP never identified itself as an organization concerned with women’s rights, nor did it ever seek to address the issue of women’s role in public. As Women Strike for Peace made inroads into the public sphere, it never addressed its own difficulty in doing so or questioned why women were less welcome in politics, which the radical feminists saw as a disservice to themselves and to future generations. For many of the members of the WSP, however, as Amy Swerdlow notes, this was not a conscious choice. Many of the women had never thought of themselves as being particularly oppressed, especially by their gender, and it was not until the second-wave feminists

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<sup>127</sup> Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 137

introduced these phenomena to them that some started to understand themselves as women, not as housewives or mothers. Particularly difficult for the members of Women Strike for Peace, Swerdlow writes, was “accept[ing] and internaliz[ing] the analysis of women’s secondary status in the family and the economy offered by the second wave of feminism,” because their identities as individuals and as members of Women Strike for Peace were predicated on their experiences and responsibilities as mothers.<sup>128</sup>

Some of the rejection of Women Strike for Peace by second-wave feminists was clearly expressed, as when certain radical feminists actually encountered the members of Women Strike for Peace at various events. In 1967, for example, a National Conference for New Politics (NCNP) was held in Chicago. Members of Women Strike for Peace were there, as were various radical feminists. The conference was intended to “unite the disparate factions of the Movement—the electoral reformers, radical organizers and Black militants.”<sup>129</sup> The organizers told the radical feminists that they would have to work with Women Strike for Peace to create a resolution to be read at the conference, since there was only room on the agenda for one “women’s” resolution. The radical feminists were outraged at what they considered to be a tactic by the men to silence the radical women’s concern about sexism. This was exacerbated when the radical feminists met with Women Strike for Peace and only succeeded in incorporating two of their points into the existing WSP resolution. The radical feminists walked out of the meeting in protest and drafted their own resolution.<sup>130</sup> Instances like this one strengthened the radical feminists’ belief that women needed to organize as women instead of being considered

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<sup>128</sup> Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 241

<sup>129</sup> Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 46.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

mere afterthoughts at men's meetings. At the same time, this encounter with WSP only served to convince the radical feminists that WSP was a bulwark of the status quo and therefore needed to be deconstructed along with the men's organizations.

In January 1968, Women Strike for Peace again encountered the radical feminists, this time at a march against the Vietnam War sponsored by the Jeannette Rankin Brigade (JRB). Jeannette Rankin was a first-wave feminist, a suffragist and the first woman ever elected to Congress.<sup>131</sup> The brigade named for her was a coalition of women's peace activists, many of whom were already involved in other organizations like Women Strike for Peace, who worked to end both poverty and the war in Vietnam.<sup>132</sup> The Jeannette Rankin Brigade antiwar march on January 15, 1968 brought together approximately 5,000 female protestors from dozens of different organizations.<sup>133</sup> The agenda for the march was typical: the women were to arrive and deliver their group petition to the Capitol, and then each organization would have the opportunity to give a speech to the gathered protestors. Most of the speeches by the older organizations like Women Strike for Peace followed the traditional formula of describing the active campaigns the organization was pursuing and listing goals for the future.

Eventually, a group of young feminists who called themselves New York Radical Women (NYRW) approached the stage, proclaiming the death of "Traditional Womanhood." The women "staged an actual funeral procession with a larger-than-life dummy on a transported bier, complete with feminine getup, blank face, blonde curls,

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<sup>131</sup> Collins, *When Everything Changed*, 178.

<sup>132</sup> Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 137.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*; Collins, *When Everything Changed*, 178.

and candle.”<sup>134</sup> The intent of the NYRW’s performance was to convince the gathered members of traditional women’s organizations like Women Strike for Peace to abandon their tactic of politely asking the members of congress to grant their wishes. Rather, as Shulamith Firestone, a member of NYRW, described later in a newsletter, the performance was intended to convince women that they should start demanding that their voices be heard. Firestone wrote of the older peace organizations: “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.”<sup>135</sup> Firestone thus has two criticisms of the rhetoric used by traditional women’s peace organizations. First, she argues that it is ineffective. By constantly deferring to male politicians, she says, women allow those politicians to ignore or patronize them. Second, she thinks rhetoric which relies on the gentleness of women’s nature is damaging to women’s status overall. Women are seen as weak, Firestone argues, when female groups stress their own helplessness in their attempts to make political changes. The NYRW concluded their onstage performance by asking anyone interested in more radical action than a peaceful march to join them for a “counter congress,” where they could discuss future actions. It is clear that the radical women considered themselves and their goals “counter” to those of the older women’s peace organizations. Firestone further emphasizes this point when she describes the counter congress as having been called by “women [who] split off *in*

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<sup>134</sup> Shulamith Firestone, “The Jeannette Rankin Brigade: Woman Power,” *Notes from the First Year* (1968). See also Carol Hanisch, “Struggles over Leadership in the Women’s Liberation Movement,” in *Leadership and Social Movements* by Colin Barker, Alan Johnson and Michael Lavalette (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 77-95 for a description of this event.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

*disgust* from the main body of the convention.”<sup>136</sup> This description of the response Firestone and many of her fellow radicals had to Women Strike for Peace and other organizations which used similar tactics is vehemently negative. Language and encounters like this support the argument that the radical feminists denounced Women Strike for Peace outright, refusing to form coalitions, make personal connections or give WSP credit for any of its accomplishments.

Firestone’s negative response to Women Strike for Peace’s tactics and rhetoric is not surprising, given her written work, which called both motherhood and marriage restrictive for women. Many of the texts produced by Firestone and other second-wave feminists criticized the foundations on which Women Strike for Peace had been built. Most significantly, many of the early second-wave feminists who occasionally dealt directly with Women Strike for Peace were opposed to the way they saw motherhood constraining women. Motherhood was a point of pride for Women Strike for Peace members; it was the experience which granted the women their entrance into the political world. Many second-wave feminists denigrated this idea, arguing instead that women should feel worthy of entering politics and the public sphere by virtue of their intelligence and their equality to men, not based on what they considered an arbitrary biological fact. This deference to—and formation of one’s public identity around—the biological was attacked by second-wave feminists, who did not think a woman should be defined by her ability to reproduce or by her relationships to men, either as mother, wife or sister. This was, essentially, the rhetoric which governed Women Strike for Peace’s campaigns. The pledge that WSP had made in support of draft resisters, for example—the Women’s

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<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.* Italics mine.

Statement of Conscience—described women as “mothers, sisters, sweethearts, wives”—never as first and foremost women.<sup>137</sup>

Firestone and others implicitly attacked this type of rhetoric in their writings, which argued for the dismantling of nuclear families and a new construction of motherhood. For example, according to Firestone, the first demand in the “ultimate revolution” to create a more just society was “the freeing of women from the tyranny of their reproductive biology by every means available, and the diffusion of the childbearing and childrearing role to the society as a whole, men as well as women.”<sup>138</sup> Firestone advocated the development of new reproductive technologies which would not require a woman’s uterus at all—she “hoped that in the future, babies could be conceived and grown in incubators.”<sup>139</sup> Thus, while Women Strike for Peace described motherhood as a prized experience which conferred moral superiority on its participants, Firestone denounced motherhood as singularly oppressive. Firestone wanted to eliminate motherhood and the limitations she considered inherent to it, which necessarily set her in opposition to WSP, which sought to preserve motherhood and the benefits they gained from it. The disavowal of nuclear families and motherhood as they were both construed by society was also described by Ti-Grace Atkinson, who gave a speech in 1968 in which she argued that “women have been *murdered* by their so-called *function* of childbearing,”<sup>140</sup> a statement striking in its vehemence. Atkinson did not see motherhood

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<sup>137</sup> “Women’s Statement of Conscience,” Washington, D.C., no date, mimeograph, WSP Papers. Quoted in Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 177.

<sup>138</sup> Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), 206.

<sup>139</sup> Collins, *When Everything Changed*, 190.

<sup>140</sup> Ti-Grace Atkinson, *Amazon Odyssey* (New York: Links Books, 1974), 5. Italics in original.

as a privilege, like the women of WSP did, but as a form of oppression which harnessed women in subservience to the patriarchal status quo.

Not all second-wave feminists were as adamant as Firestone or Atkinson that motherhood was exclusively negative for women. Vicki Pollard, for example, wrote a more temperate article for a radical feminist journal in 1969 in which she argued against the current construction of motherhood in American society. She proposed that “women are oppressed because society defines them in terms of their roles as wives and mothers.”<sup>141</sup> Her account of childbearing and childrearing was not unequivocally negative; rather, she argued that motherhood becomes negative only when society forces women to sacrifice being an individual for being a mother. Although Pollard’s description is more positive than Firestone’s or Atkinson’s, she still suggests that motherhood is problematic, especially given the limits imposed on mothers by society. Like Firestone and Atkinson, then, Pollard would not support basing one’s identity or political position on being a mother. Here, one can clearly see how the ideology of at least one strain of second-wave feminism was diametrically opposed to that of Women Strike for Peace. WSP members felt emboldened by their roles as wives and mothers, and they used these identities to justify their public presence and demands for peace. Pollard and others, however, argued that these roles were inherently restrictive and that they must be deconstructed, not reinforced by older women desperate to enter the public arena, regardless of the cost to future generations of women. Motherhood must be changed, they argued, not used as a platform and thus tacitly accepted.

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<sup>141</sup> Vicki Pollard. “Producing Society’s Babies.” in *Voices from Women’s Liberation*, ed. Leslie B. Tanner (New York: Mentor Books, 1970), 193

These and many other second-wave feminists were prolific writers; the movement is known for having produced a plethora of manifestos, journals and other written works. In all of this writing, however, there is little mention of Women Strike for Peace. Although this near silence may seem like a lack of evidence, I argue that the opposite is true—that this absence instead demonstrates the disapprobation with which Women Strike for Peace was met by second-wave feminists. Women Strike for Peace’s active antiwar work continued into the 1970s, and it continued to sponsor campaigns into the 1990s, well after the radical feminists had appeared on the scene. Further, as noted previously, there were at least a few direct encounters between the two groups. Despite this overlap in time, their shared concern for certain issues and the meetings between the two groups, however, the radical feminists rarely mentioned Women Strike for Peace. This disregard can be understood as a refusal on the part of the young feminists to claim a connection with Women Strike for Peace. Writer Tillie Olsen, for example, in her book *Silences*, argues that it is important to investigate that which is missing from the historical record. Her project is most concerned with the ways in which writers from marginalized groups, like women and the working class, are omitted from literary canons. She argues that these “unnatural silences” on behalf of those who determine literary canons and syllabi is a result of explicit devaluation of the works—and the lives—of the members of these groups.<sup>142</sup> Similarly, I suggest that the silence with which the activism and accomplishments of WSP were met by second wave feminists is evidence of the low opinion the second wave feminists had of WSP—of, as Shulamith Firestone noted, the “disgust” with which WSP’s ideology was viewed by many second-wave feminists.

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<sup>142</sup> Tillie Olsen, *Silences* (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York), 21.

This silence in terms of commentary about Women Strike for Peace is particularly striking in at least two ways. First, as time went on, certain radical feminists became more interested in the politics of separatism. Some, who became known as “cultural feminists,” began to emphasize, and celebrate, the differences between men and women.<sup>143</sup> As Alice Echols describes them, cultural feminists “were generally essentialists who sought to celebrate femaleness.”<sup>144</sup> Although the cultural feminists could have chosen to ally themselves with Women Strike for Peace, since WSP had been for years basing its own identity on these gender differences, there is no evidence that the cultural feminists sought a connection with WSP. I suggest this is because, first, like other second-wave feminist groups, the cultural feminists were put off by WSP’s lack of concern regarding what the feminists saw as society’s subordination of women. Second, although cultural feminists, like WSP, suggested that the differences between men and women were important, cultural feminists did so to upend the status quo, arguing that women’s particular nature made them superior to men, while Women Strike for Peace, on the other hand, self-effacingly used this ideology to reinforce the status quo, asserting only that women’s unique qualities rendered her worthy of being listened to by the men in charge.<sup>145</sup> Cultural feminists may have seen WSP’s method as ultimately supporting woman’s subordination and worse, attributing it to her biology, which may explain both their failure to make connections with Women Strike for Peace and their overall silence about the organization.

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<sup>143</sup> Linda J. Nicholson, introduction to *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1997), 3.

<sup>144</sup> Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 6.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

The second way in which the feminists' silence about Women Strike for Peace is notable is in light of the strategies which were explicitly borrowed from WSP and reinterpreted in the second wave of feminism. Several historians have noted that Women Strike for Peace created and refined a new strategy of "nonorganization": as noted previously, WSP operated primarily on consensus and direct member-to-member communication.<sup>146</sup> Although there were clearing houses from which informational pamphlets were distributed and a national headquarters where individuals could write to ask for more information, the organization prided itself on its lack of bureaucracy. Meetings were influenced by the Quaker method of consensus and quiet discussion. As Eleanor Garst, a member of WSP, described it, "'Any woman who has an idea can propose it through an informal memo system. If enough women think it's good, it's done. Sounds crazy? It is—but it utilizes the creativity of thousands of women who would never be heard from through ordinary channels.'"<sup>147</sup> Many second-wave feminist groups attempted to organize their groups in this way, without hierarchies, recognizing that each individual woman deserved to have her opinion heard. As Jean Bethke Elshtain and Sheila Tobias note, "Long before the second feminist wave embraced a nonhierarchical ideal, the Women Strike for Peace showed its power."<sup>148</sup> Given this intellectual debt to part of WSP's founding philosophy, then, the silence on behalf of the younger women toward Women Strike for Peace is particularly noteworthy. It seems that the younger

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<sup>146</sup> See Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 70-80, for a discussion of the ways in which this ideal both did and did not work in practice.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 74

<sup>148</sup> Jean Bethke Elshtain and Sheila Tobias, *Women, Militarism, and War: Essays in History, Politics, and Social Theory* (Savage: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1990), 3.

generation knew of WSP's existence and even relied on some of its tactics but merely chose not to address it or honor it in any way.

## CONCLUSION

Women Strike for Peace was a fascinating organization. At times tentative, at others bold, often contradictory, the group met with its share of both supporters and detractors. Despite its popularity with the media and the meticulousness with which its members kept archives, however, the movement has largely been forgotten. The women involved with Women Strike for Peace maintained that they were not trying to build a name for themselves or to create an organization whose radical exploits would be recorded for all of posterity. The women described themselves as mothers to their children, the nation and the world and appeared to worry less about future generations remembering their actions than about future generations existing at all—and existing, moreover, in a world where food and water were not poisoned by nuclear radiation and where the population had not been crippled by preventable diseases. Externally, at least, this seems to have been true. Most of the women were indeed housewives and mothers who seemed concerned for their children's futures. The media both believed and helped promote this image of the organization when the women first appeared in public on November 1, 1961. However, as time went on, the women did not show signs of returning to their domestic sphere; after the immediate threat of nuclear war had passed, the women found another cause to support—the ending of the Vietnam War. The women, it seems, began to enjoy the actions in which they engaged and the time they spent outside the home. As Elaine Tyler May notes of the Cold War era, “for

women, ... employment or community work alleviated some of the pressures of full-time homemaking.”<sup>149</sup> Many of the women in WSP may have begun their involvement because they sought, as May suggests, a form of stress relief. As the movement proved successful, however, and as public figures acknowledged the importance of the work WSP was doing, the women in the movement experienced powerful desires to continue their activism. According to Amy Swerdlow, even after the nuclear threat had, for the most part, passed, the women of WSP voted to keep the organization going because they did not want to relinquish the “heady sense of political efficacy and personal importance” they experienced while advocating peace.<sup>150</sup>

The media, at first enamored of Women Strike for Peace, became wary of the group when it showed no signs of disbanding after the Cold War ended and then actively began censuring the group after the women started protesting the Vietnam War. Perhaps this is because the media, and the public, sensed what the women of WSP were unwilling—or unable—to articulate: their reluctance to return fulltime to their domestic duties. The women, for their part, continued to call themselves housewives in an effort to maintain respectability in the eyes of the public, but they seemed to be fighting a losing battle, as the media had lost most of its sympathy for the group. At the same time, the women’s repeated self-effacements and refusals to advocate for women’s rights led to the organization’s being ignored, when not outright denounced, by second-wave feminists. As a result, Women Strike for Peace essentially fell between the cracks of the historical record. The conservative era out of which the organization had emerged turned its back on the group when it outstayed its welcome in the public domain, and the feminist groups

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<sup>149</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 176.

<sup>150</sup> Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace*, 127.

which came after WSP found the group's methods dated and its ideology at cross-purposes to their own.

Cold War America and second-wave feminists both ultimately rejected Women Strike for Peace because of the group's use of maternal rhetoric. The press and the public, in the postwar period, sanctioned Women Strike for Peace because the group claimed to represent mothers' concerns for their children even as its actions soon fell outside the existing, tightly circumscribed role of acceptable maternal behavior. The second wave feminists, on the other hand, took issue with WSP's reliance on maternal rhetoric because the feminists rejected the idea that women needed to apologize for or otherwise justify their entrance into the realm of politics. In my estimation, however, neither era provided a much better model of motherhood. The conservative Cold War era strictly delimited the role of mothers. Successful mothers, in this formulation, were those who identified only as mothers, not as women or as public figures, and who never strayed from the domestic domain. Second wave feminists acknowledged that this construction of motherhood was limiting but failed to produce the society some of them imagined, where childcare was provided for all who needed it and mothers were allowed to flourish as human beings.<sup>151</sup> Some of the early writers in particular denied that any joy or selfhood could be found in mothering. Thus, they argued, women should not take any pride in or find any power within motherhood—if at all possible, they suggested, women should avoid the oppression of motherhood altogether. This blanket condemnation of motherhood, however, also seems unnecessarily limiting. There must be some middle ground—where

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<sup>151</sup> See, for example, the section on "Families—Day Care" in *Voices from Women's Liberation*, ed. Leslie B. Tanner (New York: Mentor Books, 1970), 181-207, for several articles from second wave feminists about the importance of available childcare to their feminist visions.

women do not have to be defined by motherhood but can still take pleasure in their children, where difficulties of childrearing are acknowledged alongside its pleasures, where women can view motherhood as an important part of their lives—or even their political identities—without having it eclipse all other parts. The formulation of motherhood put forth by WSP may not have been perfect, either, but restoring Women Strike for Peace to the historical record allows individuals to determine for themselves whether the group offers viable options for their own lives.

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