

# RESIST

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*a call to resist illegitimate authority*



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## WOMEN'S PENTAGON ACTION

*On November 16th and 17th, 2000 women assembled in Washington to discuss militarism and violence in our daily lives. On Monday, November 18, 1500 marched on the Pentagon. Resist staff members Amanda Claiborne and Dorothy Martin wrote the following report on the Women's Pentagon Action.*

Monday, 10:30 a.m.: The word comes around from the other four sides: the Pentagon is surrounded. I don't think any of us really believed we could do it, but here we are, some linked by arms and others by the brightly colored scarves that we are using to stretch the ranks. On both sides I can see women stretched out in a long way line, surrounding the huge ugly building.

The consciousness of numbers is a flickering awareness all day. We march silently through Arlington National Cemetery, walking the narrow road between the tombstone-strewn hills, as uncomprehending men — police and television crews — struggle to keep up with us, trying to get camera angles or spurting by on motorcycles. Like a children's book, the hills are covered with women as far as the eye could see. This morning the

world is female: the doors of the buses and the Metro slide open to reveal more and more women who have come to join the crowd already waiting at the cemetery gates. On that cold and gray Monday morning, the sense is of rejoining the whole, escaping the usual isolation. This is the quiet joy and strength the men do not understand.

No leaders, no followers — what kind of demonstration is this? A few puppets, that's all, towering above us, but fragile, propelled by our flesh and blood. The day is planned in four stages: Mourning, Rage, Empowerment, and Defiance. The walk through the cemetery begins the Mourning stage. So many graves, impersonal, almost nameless. The hills of little white tombstones, all that's left of so many dead. All the lives gone, almost all men. One woman points out a tombstone on the way. "Anne F., wife of . . .," it says.

As we leave the cemetery, clumped together beneath an underpass, we howl and shout, rage and mourn, ululations echoing in the gray damp. Black veils appear, and we try to make contact with the sorrow that is always there but that we usually avoid experiencing.

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Coming onto the parade ground, facing the River Entrance of the Pentagon, we are urged to be silent and save our mourning for the proper time. I am somewhat annoyed by this. It seems that too often we have been told when and where is the appropriate time to feel. We arrive in silence and spread out around the U of the parade ground facing the Pentagon.

The puppets will signal the stages of our protest, and now the Black Mourning puppet moves to the center as women come forward to plant small white gravestones for our sisters: Karen Silkwood, Rosa Luxemburg, Victims of Love Canal, Missing Women in Brazil, Children of Alabama, Marilyn Monroe. We don't know the names of many, their identities concealed by the patriarchy that destroyed them. We mourn because we have agreed not only to mourn but to rage, to protest, to stop this dying and killing. Women have been singing Holly Near's fallen sister song on and off all day: "It could have been me, but instead it was you. If you can fight for freedom, I can too."

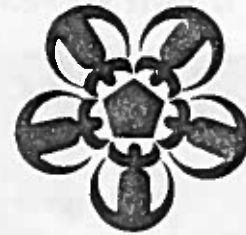
The tombstones are planted. We mourn, arms around each other, black veils over our eyes. Now the Red Rage puppet moves forward. The veils come off, bunched tightly in outstretched fists. Both arms outstretched, fists shaking to the wordless chant that comes from everywhere. "Ahh, Ahh, Ahh, Ahh," changes to "No, No, No, No, No, No." Now women stream across the parade ground, the chant changing. "We won't take it. We won't take it," and "We will fight back." Streaming up to the front, massing facing the building, the cameras, and the police. We are ready.

The Yellow Empowerment puppet distributes the scarves and bits of material that we have brought to link us for the encirclement. The musicians appear to play an empowerment song — "When the Saints Go Marching In." The bouncy rhythm is okay at the time, but in retrospect strangely seems out of keeping with our mood. Why this attempt at levity? Are we afraid to surround the Pentagon empowered by our rage? Other women also seem confused by the choice of song, and only begin to relate to it when the words are quickly changed to "When the women..."

Now we set off in our three straight lines, linked together front and back like animals in a carnival. The break from the group is sudden and I feel lonely walking in single file. Faces inside the building peer out. I remember two black women in maids' uniforms throwing open a window, leaning out to watch. Heading past the loading docks some black men give the raised fist salute. I wonder what they make of this strange scene: a long line of women, mostly young, mostly white, struggling to keep together, clambering over hills, dropping hands and scarves and picking them up again.

The Red and Black puppets are leading us, and now we can see the Yellow puppet approaching from the other direction to join. We are linking. Our line in front and back is mostly unbroken. "Link arms, Link arms," we shout to the women behind us. The line snakes and stretches to fill in gaps and the runner comes around to tell us that the linking is complete. Unseen on the other

side of the building, our sisters are holding hands preparing to defy the lines of police already ranged across the steps of the loading docks and the entrances. It has the momentousness and unreality of the Moon Walk; we are joyful.



The chants and singing start again. The circles are the best part of the action both Sunday and today. The energy passes from woman to woman. Hearing women's voices take up what one voice starts, let it die or change it to something new. No bullhorns, no microphones, only 1500 women holding hands, passing the words back and forth.

The word comes round, "CD at eleven." We are going to block the entrances to the Pentagon. I am quite willing to wait twenty minutes so that the assault can be coordinated on all sides, but many women are impatient to move, full of energy from the surrounding. They begin to move out of the line, linking with affinity groups to move to the areas where we will begin our act of defiance. One group does not wait until eleven but surprises a line of police, gets behind them, and then is pushed by the police into the building. (They are later charged with forcible entry and have bail fixed at \$250 each.)

At the loading docks, affinity groups form tight concentric circles, talking and singing. They move to the stairs where they sit down, blocking the entrance, police behind them. Other women move among them weaving over and between them with yarn and scarves, a protective web to strengthen our resistance. Police move in with scissors and plastic handcuffs. They are prepared and the arrests go quickly, but as one affinity group is arrested another moves forward to take its place. Patient and silent, the weavers continue to retie the threads that the cops cut.

Those of us not doing CD have surrounded the area. Indignant that people are still getting in and out despite the blocking, we crowd forward, filling in the gaps near the wall. We let most people through after talking with them unless they look like brass. Nose to nose with medals and uniforms, we force them to find another way.

At the River Entrance and loading docks, the crowd supports the CDers with loud encouragement, and there is wailing everytime a woman is dragged off. At the third entrance, the Mall, there are problems. Fewer CDers are there, fifteen to twenty compared to over fifty at each of the other two entrances, and there is conflict both among the different affinity groups and between at least one of the affinity groups and the

peacekeepers. The peacekeepers, who were recruited the day before from among the conferees, and who are by and large unobtrusive at the other entrances, seem confused at the Mall entrance over whether the CD is only symbolic or is in fact intended to block (as was stated in the action plan). All later accounts agree they were heavy-handed. In several cases they actually helped people over the blockade while harassing the women taking part in the action. Another strange thing about the action at the Mall is that no one is arrested here, whereas all the women participating in the CD at the other two entrances is arrested. This leads to accusations and counter-accusations, and general bad feeling that was not at all characteristic of the action as a whole.

Along with the misconduct of the peacekeepers, another factor in disunity was that not all of the women doing CD at the Mall were present at the preceding conference, which was an integral part of the action. It was at the conference, during the songs and workshops, that solidarity was forged. Very different women, black and white, rich and poor, young and old, gay and straight, expressed their differences, heard each other, and determined that they were willing to work together, to mourn, rage, and defy together.

### The Conference

On Sunday morning groups of us from all over the Northeast gathered at the Marie Reed Center in Washington's Adams-Morgan district. As we crowded off the New York bus, the atmosphere was alive with excitement and anticipation. The building was overflowing with women. We were welcomed and told that our numbers had far exceeded expectations. Grace Paley read us a few of the many telegrams sent from women in other parts of the country and from Scotland, England, Australia, West Germany and Canada. Some groups had organized support actions; women in Ottawa, Canada, would be picketing the U.S. Embassy while we were surrounding the Pentagon. We were invited to join the workshops which were already underway, spread out over the large comfortable spaces of the Center.

Some of the history of the Marie Reed Center had been given earlier in the morning session by Jo Butler, chairwoman of the D.C. Statehood Party. She explained that the community center had originally been a tarpaper shack. Its replacement was the result of hard work and struggle by the community. However, the victory had ironic repercussions as neighborhood improvement brought with it gentrification, and many poor and black residents were forced out. The Center's story was a reminder of the layers of the struggle which was now bringing us together.

Next that morning came a special remembrance for three women whose lives hold particular significance for the D.C. area. They were Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Yolanda Ward, a twenty-two year old local housing activist and Howard University student who had been slain two weeks before. Our evening vigil would be dedicated to her. These opening remarks pre-

viewed two days of events which would reflect our growing sense of collective strength and solidarity.

The workshops were an important phase of these events. Because of our size several subgroups were required for most topics. The wide range of issues addressed was striking. There were nine workshops covering militarism, racism, poverty, work, health, the arts, violence, ecology, and sexuality. Despite the diversity of subjects, the reports from each workshop revealed similar concerns. We saw our that our struggles are intrinsically connected by the malignant patterns of oppression and militarism which threaten the continuation of life. Our conference revolved around the realization that militaristic insanity has infiltrated every aspect of our lives. We identified the many ways in which our collective needs overlap: military spending robs our society of health care, social services, decent housing, and education; money is put into jobs intended to kill people instead of jobs that would encourage creativity, renew our resources, develop the arts, and provide a safe environment; patriarchy embraces racism and homophobia; and the military mentality is translated in our daily lives as repression, abuse, brutality and rape.

Our conclusions were based on acknowledging our right and responsibility to make world-changing policy. We recognized the need to replace the current system of rabid fear and destruction with a coherent feminist analysis and structure. The conference showed us the importance of continuing to work in coalitions, of joining with other women to reclaim our bodies and our powers of self-healing, and of aggressively opposing the insensitivity and inherent misogyny of the New Right.

As the day progressed the spirit of hope and determination grew. At intervals between workshops, we all assembled in one large room for entertainment, announcements, messages, and updates. More telegrams had arrived. We were 2000-strong and elated. An easy cooperation flowed among us. Despite our unplanned-for numbers, food and housing were arranged for everyone. Because of time pressures, workshop reports had to be condensed so that each of the many subgroups could be heard. We were worn and eager to get on to the vigil, yet we took a few moments to hold hands and silently appreciate our strength and unity.

The vigil began just after dusk. We took our energy out to the community. Leaving the bright lights of the Center, we chanted and sang softly as we marched, following the giant Black puppet of Mourning and the slow dirge of the drumbeat. We were marching for the women who could not be with us, for Yolanda Ward and all our sisters who have died for freedom, and for women confined in prisons and institutions. At the end of the march we congregated at the corner of 18th and Columbia. Chants started up and the voices of 2000 women responded in unison. We were asked to pause and remember Yolanda Ward, and we were silent. A black woman, a poet, led a freedom song and we all joined in for chorus after chorus: "Ain't gonna let nobody turn us around, turn us around." We sang out the songs of peace and hope, in defiance and joy.

## Conclusion

The Women's Pentagon Action did not end with our gradual dispersal by the rain Monday afternoon. That evening, on buses and trains returning to New York and Boston, Brattleboro and Syracuse, women were talking. Cold and wet, we packed in for the six- to twelve-hour ride home and talked. At the conference we had become aware of the many things that divide us — race, class, sexual preference — as well as the many things that unite us. On the way home these differences surfaced again, but the conference made it possible for us to talk about them, not without disagreement, but without bitterness.

The action itself raised many questions that we could not answer. I.e., Why were almost all the demonstrators young and white? What did it mean to us that almost all the cops were male and black? How can the struggles against racism, sexism, and militarism be most effectively combined? Other questions concerned civil disobedience. Is it still a useful tactic? Is it only symbolic or is it more? Why do we hold so strongly to nonviolence not only as our tactic but as our way of life? Is nonviolence in fact a realistic alternative and was it real to feel ourselves more powerful than the weaponry and sterile military technique we confronted at the Pentagon.

We also talked about how we could use the spirit and energy generated by the action to continue the work, to expand it in our communities. We talked about holding small conferences in all the places we come from; of talking in schools and check-out lines; of holding house meetings of our friends and neighbors, and of forming coalitions which will work together to tear down the old structures and create new ones to serve our needs instead of repressing us.

The action helped us understand the meaning of a shift that has been going on for the last year or so in the

### THE RESIST PLEDGE SYSTEM

The most important source of our income is monthly pledges. Pledges help us to plan ahead by stabilizing our monthly income. In addition to receiving the newsletter, pledges get a monthly reminder letter, containing some news of recent grants. If you would like to learn more, drop us a note. Or — take the plunge! — and fill out the handy form below.

Yes, I would like to be a Resist pledge for

- \$5/month                       \$50/month  
 \$10/month                       \_\_\_\_\_ (other)  
 \$25/month

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Street \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

women's movement. The action was part of creating — or recording — this shift. We are seeing a kind of rearrangement of the many strands of the women's movement, not the abandonment of any of the central threads, but the addition of some new ones and so a change in the whole fabric. In the last few years women particularly have become sensitive to the great danger that hovers over our lives and the life of the planet. The Reagan administration presents a grave threat to the gains women have won around traditional "women's issues" — reproductive rights, childcare, and affirmative action — and we must fight together not only to hold on to these gains but also to expand them. However, we now see that "women's issues" are not just daycare and abortion and the ERA, but that war, and racism, and the survival of the earth itself are our issues as well. We see more and more that the struggle to end war and the threat to life everywhere is creating a sense of the unity of our struggles. As our Statement says, "We know that all is connectedness. . . . We know that there is a healthy, sensible, loving way to live and we intend to live that way."

### Postscript

At least 140 women were arrested for acts of civil disobedience at the Monday action. For most, the charge was blocking access to a federal building, a misdemeanor which carries a maximum sentence of thirty days and/or a fine of \$50. Thirty-four women pleaded guilty or *nolo contendere* and were ordered to immediately begin serving ten-day sentences (thirty days if they had any prior arrest). The 34 were manacled ankle, wrist, and waist and were kept in an unheated bus without food overnight until their arrival at Alderson Federal Penitentiary in West Virginia. These women were repeatedly denied access to counsel, and attempts to reach them by phone were largely unsuccessful.

Of the others, 31 pleaded innocent and stayed in jail to await trial, maintaining bail solidarity. The remainder also pleaded innocent and posted bail in amounts from \$25 to \$250. The women participating in bail solidarity were taken before judges in Alexandria, Virginia where twenty-five of them were forced to stand in an eight-by-eight foot cell for five hours awaiting arraignment. Although the charge was only a misdemeanor, all the women were fingerprinted. They were eventually taken to the Arlington County jail and locked into a gym equipped with cots, no windows or bathrooms, and twenty-four-hour lighting. At least eight women in the bail solidarity group participated in a hunger strike. Some do not have trial dates until January, and if they do not post bail, may have to remain in jail until then.

Because the bail amounts were set prohibitively high for a misdemeanor and because the conditions that these women have had to endure have been unusually severe, money is badly needed by the Women's Pentagon Action Defense Fund for bail and legal expenses. Please send contributions to the fund c/o Women and Life on Earth, P.O. Box 580, Amherst, MA 01002.