

# Hidden Chapter in the Fight Against War

Mary Alice Waters

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I have called this a “Hidden Chapter in the Fight Against War” because the vast majority of our generation is totally unaware of the fact that the end of 1945 and the beginning of 1946 saw the greatest troop revolt that has ever occurred in a victorious army. The central issue was whether the troops would be demobilized, or whether they would be kept in the Pacific to protect Western interests from the growing colonial revolution.

## Resentment Among Troops Explodes

When V-J Day brought an end to the war in the Pacific, the American troops expected to be speedily returned to the U.S. Quite naturally, they felt that there was no longer any need for fifteen million men in arms and that they should be released.

Contrary to their expectations, however, the army command started transferring combat troops from Europe to the Pacific. The official explanation was that troops were needed for occupation duty. Congress was immediately flooded with petitions and letters from the GIs protesting this action. Even the White House announced on August 21, 1945, that it had received a protest telegram from 580 members of the Ninety-fifth Division stationed at Camp Shelby, Mississippi.

The Ninety-seventh Infantry Division which had already spent five and one-half months in Europe was ordered to the Pacific. En route across the U.S. the soldiers displayed signs from the train windows saying “Shanghaied for the Pacific,” “We’re Being Sold Down the River While Congress Vacations,” and “Why Do We Go From Here?” (Saint Paul Dispatch, September 6, 1945). Several reporters who tried to interview soldiers on the train were arrested by the Army Security Guard under the pretext that troop movements were still classified information.

Throughout the fall of 1945 the campaign to bring the men home increased as families and friends held mass meetings across the country, and as resentment among the troops grew stronger. Drew Pearson reported on September 15, that “General Harry Lewis Twaddle, Commander of the Ninety-fifth Division, Camp Shelby, Mississippi [the same group which had earlier protested to the White House] assembled his troops to explain occupation duty in Japan. The boos from the soldiers were so prolonged and frequent, it took him 40 minutes to deliver a 15 minute speech.”

By December, the resentment among the troops had reached explosive proportions and on Christmas Day in Manila 4,000 troops marched on the Twenty-first Replacement Depot Headquarters carrying banners demanding: “We Want Ships.” The demonstration touched off by the cancellation of a troop transport scheduled to return men to the U.S. lasted only 10 minutes. But the high point of the day occurred when the enraged depot commander, Col. J.C. Campbell, thundered, “You men forget you’re not working for General Motors. You’re still in the army.” At that time there were more than 225,000 workers on strike against General Motors’ plants across the United States. Since the GI demonstrations coincided with the greatest labor upsurge in American history, the obvious

similarities between the actions of the soldiers and the actions of the striking workers in the U.S. drew comments from many quarters.

On December 26, the day after the large demonstration in Manila, Col. Krieger, an army personnel officer in the Philippines, assured 15,000 men in the Replacement Depot that they would be swiftly returned to the U.S. On January 4, however, *Stars and Stripes*, the widely read army newspaper, carried an announcement by the War Department that Pacific demobilizations would be cut from 800,000 to 300,000 per month due to the difficulties in obtaining replacements. On the same day Lt. General Lawton Collins, Director of Army Information, admitted, contrary to earlier statements by the military, that shipping was available to bring back all eligible men overseas in three months.

The GIs were infuriated. Their mood was well expressed by a soldier whose letter was read into the Congressional Record on January 23, 1946. He wrote, "First it is no ships, now no replacements; are we going to sit by and let them blackmail our families and hold us hostages to push through their compulsory military training program?"

On January 6, 1946, thousands of these "hostages" demonstrated at different points in Manila. One group was dispersed at Quezon Bridge and another broken up by Military Police as it approached Lt. General Styer's headquarters.

The demonstrations continued on January 7. Two thousand-five hundred men marched four abreast to the general's headquarters carrying banners reading, "What Does Eligible Mean?", "Service Yes, but Serfdom, Never," and "We're Tired of False Promises, Double Talk and Double Crossing." They distributed mimeographed leaflets saying, "Redeployment has been deliberately slowed down to force compulsory military training...The State Department wants the Army to back up its imperialism."

That night, according to various reports, between 12,000 and 20,000 soldiers jammed into the bombed-out shell of the Philippine Hall of Congress to continue the demonstration and listen to speakers angrily denounce U.S. aggression in North China and the Netherlands Indies (Indonesia), and demand that the Philippines be allowed to settle its own internal problems. A UPI dispatch from Manila on January 7 described the capital as "tense."

## The Demonstrations Spread

As news of these mass protests spread, the wave of GI protests began to sweep around the world. On January 7, the second day of demonstrating in Manila, 2,000 GIs staged a mass meeting at Camp Boston, France, demanding a speed-up in European demobilization. On January 8, 6,000 soldiers on Saipan wired protests against the slowdown in demobilization, and on Guam 3,500 enlisted men of the 315<sup>th</sup> Bombing Wing of the Twentieth Air Force staged a hunger strike.

The following day on Guam, 18,000 men took part in two giant protest meetings. From Honolulu, Alaska and Japan, thousands of cablegrams flooded into the U.S. directed at friends, families, Congress, churches, veterans groups, and unions, demanding that pressure be put on the War Department to bring the troops home.

In Yokohama, 500 GIs met to plan for larger demonstrations. In Rheims, France, 1,500 gathered to protest "illogical explanations" of the demobilization slowdown. In Paris, posters reading "Don't Let Our Manila Buddies Down. Meeting, Arc de Triumphe, 8:30," drew over 1,000 GIs who paraded down the Champs Elysees to the American Embassy.

In Germany a telegram signed by 100 GIs demanded, "Are Brass Hats to be permitted to build empires? Why?...The evident lack of faith of our friends and neighbors is causing bitter resentment and deterioration of morale of men in this theater. It is to be hoped that our faith in democratic procedure is not finally lost."

From London, 1,800 officers and enlisted men of the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force demanded in a telegram, "We want an explanation of delayed return...*New York Times* says all U.S. troops who have not been redeployed have venereal disease or have volunteered. Ambiguous replies from Congressmen and three canceled shipping dates do not help. We are tired, homesick, disgusted men...eligible for discharge December 1, 1945. In European theater over 30 months."

On January 9 the protests continued to spread. At Andrews Field, Maryland, 1,000 soldiers and WACs booed down their commanding officer when he tried to explain the delay in discharging them. In Frankfurt, a demonstration of 5,000 was met at bayonet point by a small group of guards and 20 were arrested.

Five thousand soldiers demonstrated in Calcutta and 15,000 at Hickman Field in Honolulu, while in Seoul, Korea, several thousand soldiers issued a resolution stating, "We cannot understand the War Department's insistence on keeping an oversized peacetime army overseas under present conditions."

At Batangas, Philippines, 4,000 soldiers voted funds for a full page ad in U.S. papers demanding the removal of Secretary of War Patterson. Simultaneously, a service paper issued in Hawaii bore the headline: "Patterson Public Enemy No. 1."

As the GI demonstrations developed greater organization and militancy, the protest within the United States deepened too. For months the troops had been rubber-stamping the mail sent to the U.S. with slogans such as: "Write your Congressman—Get Us Home" and "No Boats—No Votes." They had been carrying on a vigorous letter-writing campaign themselves, writing Congress, families, friends, and newspapers demanding they be released and asking others to write letters too.

As the wave of mass demonstrations began to subside, the issues became broader and the soldiers protested against other abuses. On January 13, 1946, 500 GIs in Paris adopted a set of demands which a UPI release characterized as "a revolutionary program of Army reform."

The Enlisted Man's Magna Charta, as this program was called, demanded:

1. Abolition of officers messes with all rations to be served in a common mess on a first-come first-serve basis.
2. Opening of all officers clubs, at all posts, camps, and stations to officers and men alike.
3. Abolition of all special officers quarters and requirement that all officers serve one year as enlisted men except in time of war.
4. Reform of army court-martial boards to include enlisted men.

In Addition, these soldiers also demanded the removal of Secretary of War Patterson, and elected a committee to present the Magna Charta to a Senate investigating committee scheduled to come to Paris in two weeks. Their final action was to establish the "GI Liberation Committee" and urge everyone to return to their units and organize for further action.

## Officers Unable to Curb Revolt

The Truman administration was well aware that this massive GI revolt represented a serious challenge to the American military system. The army of World War II was not designed to permit criticism from the ranks, and GIs who protested to their congressmen or participated in any similar actions left themselves open to severe reprisals.

However, the massive character of the GI protests after World War II did not give the authorities much leeway. They could not victimize the leaders without stirring up even larger protests; and at the same time it was difficult to crack down on hundreds of thousands of men at once.

Yet, from the military's point of view the situation was critical and the rapidly dissolving discipline had to be halted somehow. When privates and sergeants started requisitioning planes and jeeps to carry elected GI representatives to meetings with Congressional investigating committees to talk about arranging transportation home, the officers knew they were in trouble.

The military used a soft hand at first, merely "requesting" that all complaints go through normal channels, and imposing greater censorship on service newspapers. On January 11 the staff of *The Daily Pacifican*, an army newspaper in Manila printed a statement that, "new restrictions on freedom of expression imposed from above no longer enable us to bring full news and full truth to our GI readers."

However, demonstrations continued to spread and broaden in scope, as indicated by the Paris meeting where the Magna Charta was proclaimed. Furthermore, the military had no intention of immediately living up to the promises it had made to pacify the soldiers. A UPI dispatch on January 16 announced that, "The USS *Cecil*, carrying veterans to the U.S., left Manila one-third empty, the Navy disclosed today." The Manila Soldiers Committee on that same day, January 16, announced plans for another mass demonstration.

At this point the army decided things had gone too far, and on January 17, Chief of Staff General Eisenhower issued an order banning further soldier demonstrations. A similar order was issued by General McNarney, commander of U.S. forces in the European theater who stated that, "further meetings may prejudice the prestige of the occupation forces." Lieut. General Richardson ordered a court-martial for any soldier or officer in the mid-Pacific who continued to agitate for speedy demobilization and confined to quarters three leaders of the Honolulu protests while the army "investigated" their remarks about the demobilization policy. Other minor reprisals followed, primarily in the form of transfers and threats of disciplinary action.

Leaders of the Manila Soldiers' Committee were also transferred to Okinawa and one of these leaders was Sgt. Emil Mazey, former president of the militant Briggs Local 212 of the CIO United Auto Workers. Mazey had led the fight at the 1943 UAW convention to revoke the no-strike pledge and introduced a resolution to form a labor party.

## **Workers in Army and Unions Unite in Struggle**

A conscript army of many hundreds of thousands of men depends on the working class for its human raw material, and many of the men who served in the U.S. forces during World War II had just participated in the great labor upsurge of the late 1930s. Thousands upon thousands of them had taken part in the CIO organizing drives and had learned the methods and tactics of mass struggle from their experiences. They had gained organizational ability and knew the power of united action. These lessons and the abilities of men like Emil Mazey were used with great effectiveness by the rebelling troops.

At almost every base where soldiers demonstrated they began organizing themselves immediately. One news item after another reported that "the soldiers' elected representatives present their demands" or "the GIs chose a committee to plan further action." The highest point of organization was reached by the Manila Soldiers' Committee.

On January 10, 15 delegates, elected by each outfit in the Manila area, and representing 139,000 soldiers, held their first meeting. The delegates unanimously elected a chairman and adopted a program. The chairman appointed a central committee of eight, which, according to the *New York Times* of January 11, "included two officers and [was] widely representative of creeds and backgrounds." In addition to Emil Mazey, the group was composed of a North Carolina Negro, an Alabama white, a Jew, an Italian, and regional representatives from different sections of the U.S.

The protesting soldiers were as conscious of their union allies as Col. Campbell had been when he reminded the soldiers that they were not working for General Motors. The outfit stationed at Batangas, Philippines, headed by Mazey, sent an appeal to the United Auto Workers asking for support. The cablegram was immediately made public by the unions and UAW President R.J. Thomas issued a statement saying:

"I have the utmost sympathy for the outraged feelings of these GIs. The War Department having made a public commitment on the rate of discharge, that commitment should be carried out in full, at least in non-hostile countries. What soldiers and sailors do we need to occupy the Philippines? To ask the question is to expose how ridiculous it is."

From 1941 to 1945 the American labor movement operated under tremendous restrictions imposed by the Roosevelt government with the assistance of the labor bureaucracy. A War Labor Board was established which settled all disputes by compulsory arbitration. Hours were lengthened, wages were frozen at the pre-war level and a War Manpower Commission was established with control over some 2,300,000 federal employees, in addition to workers in many of the industries classified as "essential." Civil liberties were severely curtailed and outspoken opponents of the war, such as leaders of Teamster Local 544 in Minneapolis were jailed under the Smith Act.

All the major political tendencies in the country united in support of the war drive and in denouncing any attempts by workers and Negroes to protect their rights. This left the field wide open for the right wing to launch an all-out attack on the gains made by the unions during the thirties. They were not long in taking advantage of this opportunity.

As the war drew to a close, the bitterness of the workers over restrictions and right-wing attempts to destroy their organizations reached explosive proportions. Within six months after V-J Day, there were more than

1,700,000 men and women on the picket lines in the U.S. demanding better hours and decent wages to compensate for the soaring cost of living.

## **Troops Refuse to Crush Colonial Revolts**

One of the most important results of the “Bring Us Home” movement was that it served notice to all that the American troops would not allow themselves to be used against their brothers, either at home or abroad. The resolutions, letters, and telegrams written by the GIs give a clear indication of their mood. They protested being used to back what they themselves labeled American imperialism in the Far East and resented the role of protecting business interests abroad. What was behind these accusations, and what were the American troops being used for that created such bitter resentment?

The events in Indochina (Vietnam) are an excellent example. At the Potsdam conference it was decided that northern Indochina would be awarded to Chiang Kai-shek’s government as a sphere of influence, and that southern Indochina would be given to the British. Immediately following V—J Day, the anti-Japanese guerrilla forces led by the Viet Minh, rode to power on the wave of a popular revolution and established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

When the British occupation forces arrived, the Ho Chi Minh government welcomed them with open arms, only to find that the British had no intention of allowing Vietnam to become an independent nation. As the British were having their own troubles in India, Burma, and elsewhere, they returned the colony to France, and French troops, together with Japanese troops, launched a military campaign to wipe out the Vietnamese liberation army.

American troops stationed in the Far East were well aware that the U.S. was aiding the effort to subjugate the Vietnamese people. In addition to other material aid, many U.S. troop ships, instead of bringing American soldiers home, were used to transport French reinforcements to Indochina.

The Indochinese story was repeated in the Netherlands Indies (Indonesia). With the conclusion of the war against Japan, the Indonesian nationalist forces set up a government and proclaimed their independence. The Dutch launched a campaign of extermination against them which can easily be compared to the atrocities committed by the U.S. in Vietnam today. An AP dispatch on December 30, 1945, pointed out that American aid to the Dutch was considerable. “Two thousand American-trained and equipped Dutch marines arrived off Batavia [Indonesia] today. Trained at Quantico, Va., Camp Lejeune, N.C., and Camp Pendleton, Calif., and fully supplied with American equipment, the marines are considered among the finest troops in the Netherlands armed forces.”

Why was the U.S. government so concerned with the situation in the Netherlands Indies? The December 28, 1945, United States News explained it by saying, “If the Javanese people are successful in their challenge to Dutch rule, the effect may be felt through a large part of Asia. Already in Sumatra, Malaya, Siam, and French Indochina, there are evidences of unrest...” The outcome of the events in Java “...may determine what happens to the white man’s position in neighboring areas inhabited by hundreds of millions of people.”

The U.S. government was vitally concerned that these hundreds of millions of people and their countries, rich in natural resources, should not be lost to American economic domination. Several months before the war was over, Senator Tunnel, in a speech to Congress on February 15, 1945, spelled it out very clearly. “It would be an anomalous position for the United States to occupy, after putting up the men, the money and enduring all the sacrifices which these mean, to have our country precluded from the markets we have liberated.”

## **American GIs in China**

The most blatant use of American troops to suppress the colonial revolution occurred in China. At the end of the war Chinese communist forces were supported by the vast majority of the Chinese population, but Chiang Kai-shek’s troops still controlled part of south China. The U.S. immediately moved in American soldiers to support Chiang and try to suppress the revolution. China was the great prize market of the Pacific, and men like Senator Tunnel did not want the U.S. to be excluded.

According to the U.S. *Foreign Policy Bulletin* of November 30, 1945, the strength of nationalist troops “was reinforced by the presence in north China of over 50,000 United States marines, who have made possible the entrance of Chungking divisions by holding certain cities for them until their arrival, jointly patrolling these centers with the Central troops thereafter and guarding stretches of railway in the Peiping-Tientsin area.”

## **Why Did American Troops Revolt?**

Today, American troops are again fighting in Asia. They are being used in a colonial war even more brutal and destructive than those which followed World War II. Their morale is low, and most do not like what they are doing, but their resentment has not yet reached the heights it did following the Second World War. Why did soldiers refuse to fight then?

First of all, they were just plain tired of fighting. They had had enough and wanted out. But this does not adequately explain their rebellion. Had they been convinced of the need to fight, and had they felt it was their duty to crush the growing colonial revolution they might have done so. However, five years of war-time anti-fascist propaganda could not be wiped out in a matter of months.

World War II had been described as a war to liberate subjugated people from the yoke of fascism, as a war to destroy a system that practiced genocide, as a war against Nazi totalitarian oppression of the working class and its organizations. At the end of the war, when the allied powers tried to re-conquer their former colonies, the American soldiers simply said, “No, this is not what we fought and died for.”

Another reason the soldiers refused to go on fighting was that a fear of communism great enough to override all other considerations had not been ingrained in them yet. The Soviet Union had been an ally in the fight against fascism, and the American troops were not psychologically prepared to fight their former friends.

Another and very significant aspect of the troop revolt was the racist character of the U.S. foreign policy, as well as the completely racist organization of the army. A segregated army made it much easier to assure that the black troops would get the most distasteful assignments, and one result of this was that many of the construction battalions which were assigned to the Pacific after the war were all-Negro outfits. This meant that delayed demobilization hit them hardest.

Throughout the war, racial tensions had of course been very great, and there were many instances of strikes and demonstrations against the Jim Crow practices of the military. One of the most severe and horrifying results of Jim Crow practices in the armed forces occurred at Port Chicago, California. Port Chicago was a major supply depot on the West Coast, and the crews that loaded ships were almost entirely black. On July 17, 1944, one of the ammunition ships being loaded in the harbor exploded, and 320 Negro sailors died.

When the eight or nine hundred survivors were ordered back to work, most of them refused because of the obviously unsafe working conditions. In retaliation, the Navy shipped hundreds of them off to the front lines in the Pacific. In the largest mass trial in naval history, fifty were court-martialed on charges of conspiracy to mutiny. Every single sailor court-martialed received a sentence of at least eight years at hard labor and several received as many as fifteen years.

These few examples give an idea of the kind of conditions that existed in the U.S. armed forces, and they certainly did not make the black troops very enthusiastic about subjugating Asia. They knew from long, bitter history the racist attitudes that made wholesale slaughter of non-white people “acceptable” to the military command.

## **Historical Consequences of Troop Revolt**

The mass demonstrations to “Bring the Troops Home,” brief as they were, had far-reaching consequences in the post World War II era. First of all, they did force the U.S. government to demobilize the troops. Fifteen million men and women served in the armed forces during the war, and by mid-summer 1946 the army had been reduced to one million, five hundred thousand troops. The strength of the revolt, its size and depth, and the massive support

it received within the United States brought about a near disintegration of the American military machine. The government had no choice but to disband the large draftee army.

Second, the revolt gave notice to the military that the entire concept of a permanent, disciplined, peacetime conscript army could not be easily foisted on the American population. It is hard for our generation to comprehend this fact, but a conscript army never existed, except in time of large-scale war, prior to our lifetimes!

The charges made by the soldiers that they were being used as hostages in the military's campaign to force universal military training made it evident that the American people wanted no part of such a program, and it was two years before Congress could safely pass a law instituting universal military training. Madison Avenue advertising techniques had to swing into high gear before Americans "bought" the idea.

Third, the "Bring Us Home" demonstrations made it clear to the U.S. ruling class that a new propaganda campaign was needed and must begin immediately if Americans were to be convinced of the "communist menace" and the need to play a world-wide counter-revolutionary role. It was time for the Cold War to begin in earnest when American troops rebelled at fighting the Chinese Red Army and "communist" guerrillas. Anti-fascist propaganda had to be replaced by anti-communist propaganda, and the struggles of the colonial people for independence had to be transformed into "Communist conspiracies."

Fourth, the troop revolt postponed the entire post-war time schedule as proposed by Churchill and Truman for the war against the Soviet Union. Because the American army served notice that it would no longer fight, and because it became necessary to allow time to generate the Cold War atmosphere, the Soviet Union gained a breathing space to recoup from the war, to rebuild its economy, and to develop into a nuclear power.

This breathing space gave the colonial revolution a chance to advance, and prevented the U.S. from crushing the Chinese Revolution. The victory of the Chinese Revolution and the possession of nuclear arms by the Soviet Union produced a stalemate during the Korean War and prevented the American government from reversing the North Korean Revolution.

The inability of the U.S. to win in Korea, and the unpopularity of that war, in turn, made Americans very hostile to entering the Indochinese war on the side of the French in 1954. This, and France's decision to turn down the offer, were the only factors that prevented Eisenhower from asking Congress for permission to use nuclear weapons already enroute to Vietnam at the time of Dien Bien Phu in 1954.

Fifth, the close ties that existed between the "Bring Us Home" movement and organized labor made it evident that returning soldiers would not be anti-union and could not be counted on to serve as strike breakers. This gave a tremendous boost to the labor struggles occurring simultaneously in the U.S. It meant that the CIO was not crushed in the post war period, but on the contrary made significant gains.

Although the Cold War red-baiting campaign served to split and seriously weaken the unions, they were not physically destroyed as were the working-class organizations of Germany, Italy, Spain, and Japan under fascism. Had such a defeat occurred in the post war era the working class would probably not yet have recovered. A case in point is Spain, where thirty years after the defeat of the Spanish workers, they are only now beginning to rise again.

Sixth, the struggle for Negro emancipation was given impetus by the "Bring the Troops Home" movement. The inclusion of Negroes on the soldiers' committees and the inter-racial solidarity against the most blatant racist aspects of American foreign policy served only to encourage the freedom struggle within the U.S. as well as abroad.

And seventh, the "Bring Us Home" movement is graphic proof of the fact that the American working class is capable of mass action on non-economic issues, that it can be moved by something other than its stomach.

Finally, the post war troop revolt has tremendous significance for those of us involved in the antiwar movement today. The "Bring Us Home" movement provides some proof that ultimately, when the troop resentment is great enough, the American GIs can unite in a protest that will shake the very foundations of American foreign policy and the American military machine.



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