

The Hanoi Jane Legacy

The Many Faces of Jane Fonda

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“Jane Fonda, Traitor Bitch”

—Bumper Sticker at Old Miami, a Detroit Bar

In 1968, Jane Fonda was best known for the role she played as the scantily-clad Barbarella in the film by the same title. Shortly thereafter, she emerged as an influential voice in the movement against the war in Vietnam, leaving as her most lasting contribution the support she gave the resistance efforts of GIs and veterans.

In April 1970, Fonda, with actor Donald Sutherland and others, formed the FTA tour (“Free The Army,” a play on the troop expression, “Fuck The Army”), an anti-war road show designed as an answer to Bob Hope’s USO tours. Their tour visited towns near American military bases in the U.S. and along the Pacific Rim, including Japan, Hawaii, and the Philippines. Although never allowed on-base, they received enthusiastic responses from soldiers about to be shipped to Vietnam.

In 1971, she came to Detroit to support the Winter Soldier Hearings, a 3-day hearing where 109 veterans and 16 civilians gave testimony about war crimes they had committed or witnessed between 1963 and 1970.

In 1972, Fonda traveled as a peace activist to Hanoi and thereupon laid the groundwork for a right-wing campaign to disparage her as the femme fatale betrayal figure, “Hanoi Jane.” Hanoi was the enemy capital, so visits there were viewed by pro-war Americans as traitorous.

While in Hanoi, she made radio broadcasts urging GIs to rethink what they were doing. She also visited U.S. POWs and was photographed sitting on an anti-aircraft gun looking, seen by both her supporters and detractors, as though she was aiming at U.S. pilots who were bombing the country at the time.

It is this iconic image that is at the root of the “Hanoi Jane” trope. At the time, Fonda’s trip to Hanoi attracted little press attention. The war, after all, was all but over with only a handful of U.S. ground troops left in the South. She was, moreover, number 300-something on the list of Americans who had made similar trips, many of whom followed the same itinerary.



Jane Fonda, Donald Sutherland and other entertainers performing in FTA, a satire on the army & Vietnam war.

From the documentary “F.T.A.: (F**k the Army)”
available from StoneyRoadsFilms.com

It was only in the post-war climate, when angst over the nation's lost war began metastasizing into a betrayal narrative that blamed home-front radicals for the defeat, that the right-wing campaign to recast Fonda's public image from activist-actress to that of the duplicitous "Hanoi Jane" label would take root.

The strategical core of that campaign was character assassination that exploited features of Fonda's real-life biography to configure her as a threat to national security. Richard Nixon's operatives had adeptly used the same tactic against *Pentagon Papers* whistleblower, Daniel Ellsberg, and to pathologize the dissent of Vietnam veterans as an emotional disorder.

Fonda, cast in that same narrative, wasn't just bad—she was a flawed person, the issue of a disordered childhood environment. Her mother—critics never tired of recalling—had committed suicide; her father, movie star Henry Fonda, was "the good Fonda" betrayed by his ungrateful daughter.

Her political coming-out and her subsequent rebranding as a home-video exercise guru were portrayed by her enemies as the desperate reaches of an insecure woman for self-esteem. Her move into the business world was mocked as an opportunistic communist-to-capitalist pursuit of wealth.

Her series of marriages that ran from French film director, Roger Vadim, to activist Tom Hayden and then media mogul Ted Turner (and subsequent divorce) brought howls of derision calling-out her instability and insincerity, and indictments of her disloyalty to the traditional values of marriage and family.

The issues of Fonda's fidelity to patriarchal values, combined with the attraction to her of anti-war GIs and veterans, touched sensitivities in the culture as to the adequacy of American masculinity for the military task at hand. The revisionist history became that the U.S. had not been defeated by a small upstart nation but by seditious traitors on the home front.

The public discourse spelled out by the sellout thesis, scapegoated radical activists and congressional liberals for the defeat. But there was a deeper cultural vein in that discourse, one alluding to a failure of American masculinity as the Achilles heel in the American war machine. Femininity had surfaced, so went the argument, in the hedonism of the 'sixties as Second Wave Feminism, entitlement programs, and the prominence of women in the anti-war movement.

Vietnam veterans sporting ponytails with their necks draped with peace symbols, drew chides from their elders that Vietnam had been lost because, well, the men fighting it were not "real men."

The adoption by GIs and veterans of the cultural affectations of the time—like hair length—may have been nothing more than that. But in 1971, when Vice President Spiro Agnew gay-baited anti-war veterans on the Capitol Mall protesting the war, he also signaled that the right was concerned about something deeper.

Perhaps the experience of war for millions of American men had brought to the surface a suppressed feminine side of themselves. It was the fear of this once-out-of-the-box genie that sent chills through the political and military bureaucracies.

Fonda, as a celebrity female opponent of the war, became the icon of the right-wing betrayal story. According to her detractors, young men had lusted after the fantasy sex symbol Barbarella. For GIs in Vietnam, they claimed, she was a pinup girl comparable to Betty Grable of the World War II years.

Her seductive manipulation of male insecurities to then rip off the Barbarella mask by coming out as a peace activist was deceitful, a betrayal that seemed to say, "Ha, fooled you suckers!"

The sexualizing of Fonda's image in that way set her apart from other celebrities in the movement. Joan Baez and Pete Seeger both went to Hanoi, but there is no Hanoi Joan or Hanoi Pete.

In fact, the imaging of Jane Fonda, as a sex-bomb figure was itself a post hoc fantasy ginned up in right-wing imaginations for use in constructing "Hanoi Jane." Going back to the supposed point of origin—Barbarella—the character played by Fonda was an intergalactic warrior-woman, campy in her exhibitions of sexual ambiguity and nowhere near the "voluptuous space-age sex toy" that biographer Claire La Fleur said indelibly typed Fonda.

Actually, it was *Playboy* centerfolds that adorned GI lockers in Vietnam—the lithe Fonda was not the preferred body type. For those who disparaged Fonda as "Hanoi Jane," however, Barbarella was made into a sluttish pariah figure with which they could equate and degrade her.

The sexualizing wrought by that equation could be seen years later in on-line postings at sites like forum.grunt.com where "Frank" called Fonda a "commie, traitor bitch" and "OP-gunny" got creative with a (C)harlie (U)niform (N)ovember (T)ango traitor reference to Fonda.

Backlash against Fonda continues into the present through boycotts and protests. In 2011, the QVC shopping channel canceled her appearance after protests against her Vietnam War views. In 2015, military veterans protested her appearance at an art center in Maryland.

The specter of “Hanoi Jane” still hovers over the celebrity world. When Dixie Chicks lead singer, Natalie Maines, criticized President George Bush in 2003 for the invasion of Iraq, the group’s airplay dropped by 20 percent.

Three years later, Maines told a reporter that she was still called “Jane Fonda” in her hometown of Lubbock, Texas.

The public disparagement of Fonda has also encroached on the way she is remembered by former anti-war activists. Many with whom I spoke while writing my biography of the “Hanoi Jane” trope, faulted her for having “sold out,” taking her oft-reported media apologies as meaning she regretted all of her anti-war activity.

Her regrets satisfied neither side although, in fairness to Fonda, her apology wasn’t for her opposition to the war or her trip to North Vietnam. Rather, she says sitting on or near or on top of the anti-aircraft gun, however it is remembered, was a “two minute lapse of sanity,” that she says, was a “huge mistake.”

Regardless of how her apology is interpreted, her agency as an activist has been successfully neutralized. When she canceled a 2006 cross-country bus tour against the war in Iraq saying it was because she “carried too much baggage,” it was clearly a reference to the damage her reputation might do to the anti-war cause and a nod to the power of character assassination as wielded by the right.

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