

Women's Antiwar Diplomacy During the Vietnam War

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Jessica M. Frazier's *Women's Antiwar Diplomacy During the Vietnam War Era* illuminates a consistently overlooked feature of anti-war activism; the transnational exchanges and relationships forged between US women and their Vietnamese counterparts. In addition to enhancing the historical status of such endeavours, Frazier explores the impact these exchanges had on the women who took part. Covering the period from 1965 to 1978, she counters traditional depictions of US feminists' cultural imperialism, instead arguing that women 'crossed geopolitical boundaries to criticize American Cold War culture, not promote it' (p. 3).

Women's Antiwar Diplomacy makes three important observations; 1) it demonstrates that exchanges with Vietnamese women influenced the development of feminist thought in the US; 2) it shows how anti-war activists created space for political action, undercutting the authority of government while successfully performing citizen diplomacy; and 3) in doing so, it explains how US women used the otherwise divisive Vietnam War to form 'effective transnational relationships on genuinely cooperative terms'. Although avoiding a couple of avenues for further analysis, *Women's Antiwar Diplomacy* is a worthy addition to historiography of the Vietnam War.

Frazier's persuasive and compelling account must be read in conjunction with the work of Mary Hershberger and Judy Tzu-Chun Wu (1), who both chart how US activists engaged with Vietnam during the war. Wu's explication of 'radical orientalism' evidently influenced Frazier's argument in particular (p. 4) and both effectively demonstrate how US women admired their Vietnamese colleagues while criticizing the reactionary imperialism of their own country.

Women's Antiwar Diplomacy differs in two significant ways. First, while Frazier's work is somewhat more descriptive, she provides insight into specific trips and instances of citizen diplomacy currently lacking from Vietnam War historiography. Her discussions of Women Strike for Peace's (WSP) 1965 Jakarta Meeting, the 1968 Conference of Concerned Women, and the 1971 Indochinese Women's Conference highlight overlooked but decisive acts of citizen diplomacy conducted by women during the war. Coverage of POW release and the sterling work of the Committee of Liaison with Families of Servicemen Detained in North Vietnam (COLIAFAM) restrains acknowledgment of North Vietnamese torture (p. 127), but demonstrates how women secured the trust of the DRV and could 'gain more information on the POW issue' than

government officials and diplomats (p. 51). Additionally, Frazier brings neglected historical figures into the foreground, illuminating the transnational activism of Diane Nash, Anne McGrew Bennett, Elizabeth Sutherland Martinez, Elaine Brown, and Cora Weiss among others.

Second, Frazier expands her analysis to demonstrate how US women's political views evolved as a result of these encounters. The influence of leftist activism and the anti-war movement on the development of women's liberation has been noted at length, but Frazier takes this a step further. She notes that Vietnamese women, 'as both subjects and objects, helped to mold American feminisms' directly (p. 4). Crucially, Frazer explains that the feminist movement must not be depicted as a monolith, but as a conglomeration of various outlooks. As such, different women drew different conclusions from the example of Vietnamese women. Women Strike for Peace activists idolized their Vietnamese counterparts, but developed feminist consciousness and new perceptions of maternal roles when they witnessed mothers taking up arms to defend their children. Women of color viewed the Vietnamese both as revolutionary exemplars and feminine role models. Women's liberationists meanwhile, perceived the legal, economic, and social rights enjoyed by women in Vietnam as exactly the gains they wished to achieve in the US.

The book's opening vignette evocatively frames the study with Frazier explaining that 'a single photograph provides one of the few pieces of evidence' of the historic 1965 trip to North Vietnam by Women Strike for Peace (WSP) activists Mary Clarke and Lorraine Gordon (p. 1). The first two chapters concentrate on the role played by self-described 'mothers,' with WSP as a key feature. Here, *Women's Antiwar Diplomacy* offers a comprehensive assessment of maternal politics. Frazier demonstrates how visitors' status as mothers helped them find common ground with their hosts while also stymying criticism back home (p. 26). Maternal identity created political space through which women could subvert the authority of the government.

Yet Frazier importantly highlights that 'maternalism was both a tool and a reality' (p. 33). WSPers created a sympathetic image of Vietnamese women by highlighting their similarities to 'ordinary' American housewives and mothers, but when facing the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in the aftermath of their trip, they distinguished themselves as 'the only group of American women who have had the opportunity to speak with "the other side"' (p. 16).

Frazier also shows that conceptions of motherhood were not static. She documents the change in attitudes well, particularly when explaining ongoing tensions between nonviolent motherhood and violent resistance on behalf of children. Encounters with Vietnamese women exposed members of WSP to new perspectives of gender roles as they heard from mothers willingly fighting for their children (p. 11). As Frazier writes, the Jakarta excursion was a transformative moment in WSP's history, changing activists' definitions of femininity, motherhood, and perspectives on pacifism (p. 28). An additionally important feature of transnational exchanges was the manipulation of Vietnamese womanhood in order to suit domestic US audiences (p. 15).

Use of the term 'citizen diplomats' necessitates caution, especially as the extent to which activists derived authority to speak on behalf of their respective nation is complicated. Nevertheless, Frazier makes a convincing argument that transnational exchanges were diplomatic missions. By depicting such meetings, she shows the significance of women's intervention in the Vietnam War. There is deserved coverage of WSP's historic 1965 meeting with VWU and WUL activists in Jakarta, highlighting the formality and international scope of the event and noting that Vietnamese and Indonesian officials personally endorsed the conference (p. 12). Depicting the 1968 Paris Conference of Concerned Women, Frazier illustrates US and Vietnamese women's ability to set aside their differences and talk peace more quickly than their political leaders (p. 37). Later, we see the instrumental role played by women in freeing POW's and establishing liaison networks with their families through COLIAFAM (p. 51). During the stalled peace talks in 1972, it was women who 'took the place of US diplomats' by traveling to Paris to keep communication going (p. 115).

Chapters three, four, and five delve into the crux of Frazier's argumentation. First, she examines the development of 'third world' feminist networks through the Vietnam War. It is a thorough dissection of how individual US women from different backgrounds saw their own struggles in the example of North Vietnamese women and the NLF. Where WSP saw mothers, Mexican-Americans, African Americans and Asian Americans observed revolutionaries embroiled in a struggle for liberation against oppressive racist imperialism. The detailed biographical case studies of Elizabeth Sutherland Martinez, Elaine Brown, and Pat Sumi demonstrate Frazier's engaging writing as she shows the powerful politicizing effect of travel to Vietnam during the war. Each saw the Vietnamese as examples for those who felt oppressed and isolated in the US, and they returned home with a heightened awareness for the racism and sexism they faced.

Chapters four and five further demonstrate that transnational exchange with Vietnamese women influenced feminist thought and cultivated anti-imperialist critiques of US politics and society. In one sense, Frazier makes the practical case that diplomatic conferences transformed women into confident political leaders (p. 80). Moreover, she persuasively argues that the Vietnam War generated feminist perspectives on military actions, sparking debate about the relationship between sexism and imperialism. Here, the book affirms its central premise, arguing against the decades-long tradition of historians highlighting 'instances when white Western women have supported imperialist endeavours by declaring that women in colonies needed to be saved from their traditional cultures' (p. 101). Instead, US women sought collaboration. For the VWU, NLF, and American activists, US intervention in Vietnam actually impeded the development of women's rights and caused inequality. This, Frazier argues, is an international context that much of second-wave feminist literature overlooks (p. 80). With US imperialism recognized as a common enemy, Americans 'looked to Vietnamese women as the vanguard in women's struggle for liberation' (p. 94).

Women's Antiwar Diplomacy shows the extent of such reassessments of US militarism. Anne McGrew Bennett, as a Christian feminist, began questioning the patriarchal basis of her religion. 'Could it be,' she asked, 'that the drive for dominance, power, control by men is rooted in an identification of the male sex with attributes of God' (p. 107). Vietnam also awakened ecofeminism as women connected male-led violence, chemical warfare in Vietnam, and imperialist destruction of the ecology (p. 48).

Frazier does not depict transnational exchanges as entirely successful. She notes considerable resistance to women's involvement in the war as well as the struggles activists endured in being taken seriously as spokespeople. In what is probably an unintentional allusion to the contemporary post-truth climate, Frazier charts Barbara Deming's difficulties convincing US audiences that American planes were bombing civilians. Attendees would only accept her word if she had 'actually seen any planes in the sky?' Even possession of US-made anti-personnel cluster bombs was not enough proof of wrongdoing (pp. 23-4). Similarly, visitors could expect severe denunciations and charges of treason, even if deploying their status as 'ordinary' mothers.

Still, further rumination on the subsequent public outreach of these excursions would provide more insight into effectiveness of these exchanges. Women notably experienced pushback, but how did these exchanges affect wider public impressions of the Vietnamese? For example, did reports of strong, independent Vietnamese women reinforce or erode the stereotype of South East Asian 'dragon ladies' (p. 13)?

The final chapter, discussing how the end of US intervention in Vietnam affected transnational relationships, is an important coda to the book's themes. Frazier once again demonstrates her stylistic flair in the chapter's opening, deploying an engrossing historical allegory to highlight the instinctive coordination that women's groups in different countries developed during the course of the Vietnam War (p. 122). The chapter documents the sterling and underreported efforts of Cora Weiss to secure medical aid and humanitarian attention for the Vietnamese, as well as women who observed reunification initiatives, adoption programs, POW releases, and the continuation of war-related violence.

Frazier shows that the rise in humanitarian endeavours provoked greater scrutiny on the inner workings of

Vietnam, while the disappearance of the 'common enemy' in the postwar period caused a divergence in the priorities of women's groups. Meanwhile, the chapter weaves the end of the war into the context of US feminism in the 1970s. UN International Women's Year in 1975 and the 1977 National Women's Conference saw feminists drawn away from anti-war activism towards the cause of global and domestic women's rights (p. 134). Vietnam fell away as a priority. Significantly, when Saigon fell, the prescribed role of women in the DRV shifted. Nguyen Thi Binh, previously lauded as an icon by western feminists, was demoted from foreign minister of the PRG to minister of education. A number of American women, previously admirers of Vietnamese gender equality, expressed disappointed with the return to sexist assumptions and emphasis on women's maternal responsibilities (p. 135).

Frazier's explanation of shifting alliances in the war's aftermath makes explicit an important feature of her argument – that US women did not eulogize Vietnamese culture and society uncritically. They did not naively venerate America's 'enemies' simply to highlight their own country's failures. Their later criticism of failures to maintain gender equality show this. Instead, they celebrated Vietnamese culture and gender roles based on a rational assessment of its merits.

The scope of *Women's Antiwar Diplomacy* is not strictly limited to American perspectives of transnational exchange. Frazier neatly interweaves her narrative of US women's activism with appreciation for the actions of Vietnamese. She notes that VWU and WUL delegations often had their own motivations for meeting, often centering on the desire to illustrate their determination for liberation (p. 14). It is important to acknowledge that such initiatives were part of Ho Chi Minh and North Vietnam's broader attempts to secure international sympathy for their cause, which Frazier mentions on a number of occasions (p. 99). Similarly, *Women's Antiwar Diplomacy* provides illuminating profiles of Vietnamese women. Frazier importantly highlights the influence Nguyen Thi Binh had on western feminists, while the biographical discussion of Ngo Ba Thanh's anti-war initiatives is a particular highlight of the book.

Nevertheless, the narrative is predominantly focused on American activists and would benefit from some more insight into the Vietnamese story. From the outset Frazier notes that gauging Vietnamese perspectives 'is more difficult to determine because US voices dominate most of the available sources' and the Vietnamese sources that do exist often emerged from 'those who were closely connected to the North Vietnamese government and generally agreed with the official line on the war effort' (pp. 5–6). Yet some more could be done to show the extent to which diplomacy was collaborative and a two-way exchange of ideas while depicting how transnational meets changed the lives and outlooks of Vietnamese activists. Such a suggestion may run counter to the book's premise that US women did not act as cultural imperialists, yet it would further demonstrate how Vietnamese activists engaged with the wider world. For example, Frazier touches briefly on the Women's International Democratic Front (WIDF) and relations between Vietnamese groups and those in the Eastern bloc. While very illuminating, mention of this is all too brief. The WIDF is often discounted from ruminations on Cold War transnational activism (something this reviewer is guilty of themselves). Extending the discussion to include Vietnamese relations with groups outside of the US would add enlightening context.

Reflections on the Vietnam War frequently acknowledge that the conflict and its legacy divide society. In contrast, Frazier demonstrates how the war brought people together across borders. 'By war's end,' she writes in her conclusion, 'women had created networks such that, despite national, social, political, and economic differences, they collaborated on terms dictated by those asking for assistance' (p. 142). Yet there is a lingering issue of the legacy left by transnational exchanges. *Women's Antiwar Diplomacy* presents a favorable assessment of such trips, yet many participants are still considered traitors by some. Jane Fonda, for example, is actively detested by veterans groups. Similarly, women who met with POWs and recounted the welcoming experience of visiting North Vietnam were criticized for their supposed naivety. Frazier justifiably emphasizes the building of bridges between citizens of warring nations. She confronts this in her conclusion, acknowledging that the 'memory of the war still divides US society' but that 'evaluating American and Vietnamese women's relationships leads to a different conclusion' (p. 142).

Frazier makes an illuminating case that Vietnam only mattered while it represented issues at the heart of US culture and society, but persuasively asserts that the example shown by Vietnamese women during the war fundamentally influenced the development of women's liberation in America. As such, *Women's Antiwar Diplomacy During the Vietnam War Era* provides a compelling rumination of cultural imperialism, US feminism, and anti-war activism. Read in conjunction with Wu and Hershberger, it draws attention to overlooked events and emphasizes the significant work conducted by female citizen diplomats during the war.

Notes

1. Mary Hershberger, *Traveling to Vietnam: American Peace Activists and the War* (Syracuse, NY, 1998); Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, *Radicals on the Road: Internationalism, Orientalism, and Feminism During the Vietnam Era* (Ithaca, NY, 2013).[Back to \(1\)](#)

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