

A Feminist Perspective on Military Security

by Marion Kerans

For a long time feminists in this country have been caught up in the day to day struggle for employment, for equal pay, for decent housing and better health. Feminists have been engaged in the front lines of the battle against rape, wife battering, pornography and child abuse. Although we recognize that all forms of violence are connected, we in Canada have not known war in this generation and it has taken longer for us to see that *how our government views security is a central feminist issue*. Unless we insist on a feminist definition of security we are colluding in our own extinction. The question is not whether equality means combatant roles for women in the armed forces. The question is *can the military in a nuclear age provide security and if so, how are women going to contribute to defence and defence policy?*

Whenever I have attended government consultations on the subject of defence and disarmament, striking divisions emerge on the subject of security: "national security, common security, collective security." These terms are all used to convey a variety of meanings; one hears the qualifying words *military, political, economic, social*. Underlying such expressions is the emotional assumption of well being, or at the very least some sense of safety or of protection against harm and destruction. From the government's point of view, belonging to the NATO alliance, testing cruise missiles, allowing low flying supersonic training planes to fly over Labrador, permitting American nuclear subs into our harbors, are all justified in the interest of the nation's 'security.' What feminists must do is to examine whether military security, in a nuclear

age, is a contradiction in terms — whether military forces and military defence are ever non-provocative, and do not in fact *promote* the use of violence.

The recently released Defence White Paper is a case in point. I do not believe that Canadian women have had any part in the decision that maintains that the security of this nation is better served through offensive military weaponry than through negotiations with the Soviet government and the United States government to demilitarize the north and declare a northern Nuclear Weapons Free Zone. It is not the women of this country who have insisted that spending \$14 billion on attack nuclear submarines protects the civilian population or makes nuclear war less likely. Women are more likely to advocate that the defence dollar is better spent on making more peace-keeping forces



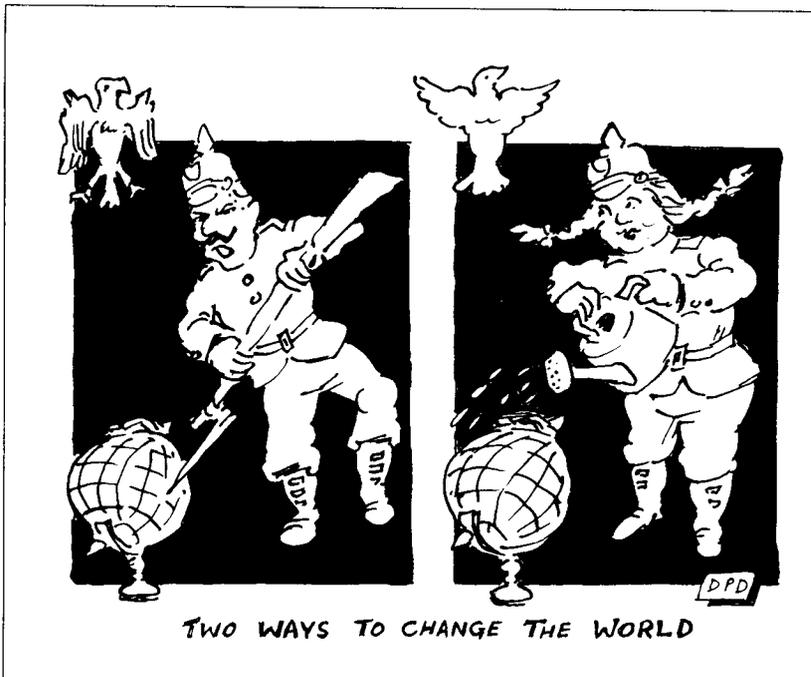
Cartoon by Peter Dockwrey

available to the United Nations or in developing non-provocative defence systems.

Like most women I have met in the peace movement, I remain uninterested in the weapons game and in military hardware. Yet I recognize that it is crucial for women to define the terms of acceptable defence. The dictionary defines militarism as predominance of the military in the administration or policy of the state; to the extent that the military has the upper hand, the political, economic and social meanings of security will be weakened.

How do Canadian feminists view defence? In my experience in discussions on disarmament many of us prefer not to get involved in learning about military weapons and military technology and we are therefore perhaps not equipped to judge whether such systems and strategies discourage military aggression or increase the threat of war. However, Anne Gertler, Johanna Miller and Peggy Hope-Simpson of Ploughshares, and the Group of 78, have contributed remarkable leadership in Canada to the study of alternative defence.

Although it is recognized that nuclear war is likely to result from any exchange between nuclear powers, the addiction to sophisticated weapons continues. And Canada participates in it through our Defence Production Sharing Agreement with the United States. Like other industrial powers we depend on military production for export revenue. Meanwhile we know that the civilian population increasingly are the victims of modern war. It is predicted that in a future war the casualties of the civilian population could amount to 95%. We also recall that in periods of military occupation it is the civilian population that organizes resistance. Why then in peacetime should the defence of a country be exclusively in the hands of the military? Why do citizens including women not contribute to defence planning and to training for resistance to military occupation?



Cartoon by Peter Dockwrey

TWO WAYS TO CHANGE THE WORLD

I have never forgotten a pamphlet handed out to twelve of us who were being treated to a government-sponsored women's tour of NATO, in Brussels, seven years ago. It depicted a soldier carrying a rifle in one corner and a woman with her baby-in-arms on the other side. Clearly it meant to convey that Canadian armed forces in Europe were there to protect the women and children of Canada. How do the women of the nation feel about this in view of the fact that NATO thus far has refused to promise that it will never be the first to use nuclear weapons?

Berit As, of the Women's University in Norway, claims that western culture has spawned two completely different ways of approaching the problems of war and peace. While those who are rich in resources, with access to technology, money and political institutions, have been responsible for war, the responsibility for peace has been placed on the women. Even United Nations statements directed to women for equality, development and peace have no concrete references to the right of women to participate in defence on the same level as men, although it is clearly elaborated in connection with efforts for peace. It is such a division of labour that has resulted in the theory of nuclear deterrence. The super powers carry the big stick of military preparedness for nuclear war and the threat of its consequences; women in the peace movement have been saying for

forty years that this is no way to ensure security. Now that the USSR and the USA are beginning to downscale nuclear weapons, the likelihood is that sophisticated expensive conventional arms, almost as lethal to the civilian population, will be promoted vigorously by the military in the interest of security — military security. It is time for feminists to research and to lead in the public debate as to what constitutes acceptable defence. I am aware of two such encouraging beginnings.

1. At the Women's International Peace Conference

held in Halifax in 1985, women were determined to re-appropriate the concept of security. They recognized, as Ursula Franklin maintained, that governments use the word 'security' to sell ideas and institutions that in fact produce the opposite. Freedom from fear, dominance and oppression were integral to every woman's view of security at this conference. The notion of militarism was seen as the antithesis of security. Rosalie Bertell's description of militarism as a social addiction was immediately recognized and repeated in the conference's powerful consensus statement. In it the women rejected militarism as an addiction that distorts human development, causing world-wide poverty, starvation, pollution, repression, torture and death. They further insisted that feeding this habit robs all the world's children and future generations of their inheritance. Sonja Pares-Morch of the Philippines reminded women that nuclear catastrophe is possible through radioactive pollution of our environment: *we cannot compromise ourselves and the future generations by radioactive wombs that are likely to produce defective babies, mutations and miscarriages.*

2. Following the Nairobi Conference, an organization called "Women for a Meaningful Summit" was founded to ensure that their members would be present on the site of the superpower negotiations for

the elimination of nuclear weapons. To this organization belong world leaders, politicians, writers, academics, scientists and leaders in the peace movement. Voice of Women members Kay Macpherson, Madeline Gilchrist and Muriel Duckworth were appointed as representatives to its meetings. In September 1987 delegates from the Women for a Meaningful Summit met at the NATO headquarters and each questioned their respective foreign ministers on NATO's accountability and its method of decision-making. Having determined that the NATO foreign ministers have little reference to their respective parliaments, the women then met with Lord Carrington, the executive director of NATO, to challenge him with the responses they had received. They found this exchange universally unsatisfactory and Bella Abzug received a chorus of applause when she concluded, "we will just have to take the toys away from the boys."

What would Canada's defence policy look like if it truly were non-provocative? Most of us assume that nations must have armed forces to protect and defend our countries. But in a nuclear age what exactly does this mean? And in third world countries, where so often the military is used against the civilian populations, how can we condone such violence? If our defence policies do not promote security, what can feminists do to delegitimize military force? What kind of defence policies would support political, economic and social security for all of us and for all the world's children? It is time that feminists got busy finding answers to these questions. Just as rape crisis centres and shelters for battered women never would have existed without the work of feminists, so there will never be acceptable structures for defence without the participation of women. Until we have an equal say in the setting of defence policy women will not have attained political equality.

Marion Kerans has been an active member of the Voice of Women for the past ten years. She has helped to present briefs to government, attended women's international conferences, Canadian government consultations and organized the Women's International Peace Conference in Halifax in June 1985 [see Atlantis, Vol. 12, No 2, (Fall 1986)].

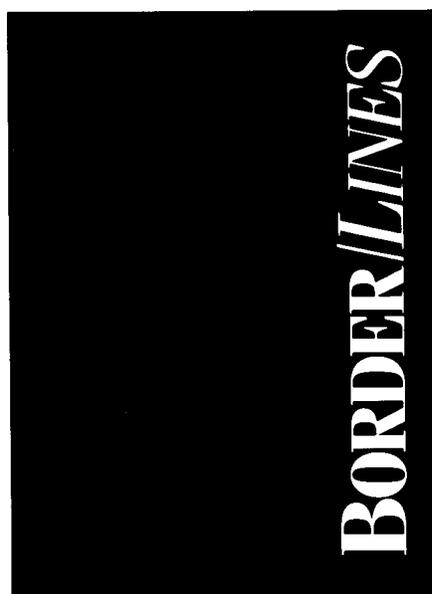
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