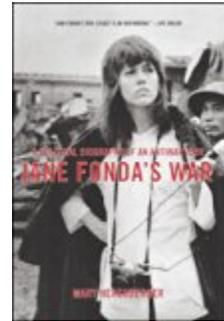


Mary Hershberger. *Jane Fonda's War: A Political Biography of an Antiwar Icon*. New York: New Press, 2005. 256 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56584-988-4.

Reviewed by Tanya L. Roth (Washington University in St. Louis)

Published on H-Minerva (December, 2009)

Commissioned by Kara Dixon Vuic



Undermining the Myth of Jane Fonda as Un-American Activist

Despite her antiwar activism in the 1960s and 1970s, many members of the post-Vietnam generation know Jane Fonda better as the fitness guru of the 1980s and early 1990s. With the Iraq War, however, Fonda's political history reemerged in the national media. Mary Hershberger's "political biography" of Fonda takes advantage of the nation's renewed interest in Fonda's activism to analyze the actress's role in the anti-Vietnam War movement and the legacy of her activism in American memory. Hershberger wants to resolve what she sees as the myth of Fonda as an antiwar and un-American activist. Rather, Hershberger argues, Fonda supported American soldiers and fought to place soldiers' complaints against the war in the national spotlight. Unfortunately, as Hershberger documents, Fonda's consistent efforts to support the troops have been largely ignored.

Hershberger traces Fonda's efforts in the anti-Vietnam War movement from the birth of her political activism through her visits to Vietnam and the decades following the war. While at least half the book examines Fonda's activities on behalf of the antiwar movement, the other half considers the FBI's response to her and her legacies as an anti-Vietnam spokeswoman. Hershberger argues that Fonda has become part of a myth designed to "intimidate democratic opposition to U.S. military ventures" (p. 1). According to this myth, Fonda worked actively to prevent American success in Vietnam by colluding with the enemy in North Vietnam and undermining American soldiers' morale.

To correct the Fonda myth, Hershberger covers nearly fifty years of Fonda's activism and postwar legacy. Hershberger follows Fonda's early interest in the Vietnam War and her initial low profile in the antiwar movement. In these early days, Fonda held informal conversations with soldiers at GI coffeehouses or college campuses and came to antiwar events as an attendee only (not a speaker). When Fonda began to speak out at these events, she focused on the discrepancies between media coverage and actual events occurring in Southeast Asia. In particular, Hershberger points to Fonda's efforts to support enlisted soldiers' rights to free speech, although Hershberger specifies "enlisted men's" rights, which raises a question about whether this support extended to enlisted women's rights as well (p. 22). Fonda garnered heavy criticism and suspicion from the federal government because of her activism, thus the second part of the Vietnam-era activities center on the FBI's responses to Fonda and the steps the organization took to monitor her activities. Finally, Hershberger moves beyond the war itself to analyze the roots of the Fonda myth and its current state in the early twenty-first century.

As a political biography, Hershberger largely succeeds in hitting the mark. However, choosing biography as the frame to unravel the erroneous Fonda myth makes Hershberger's focus far too narrow at times. Consequently, the book only touches on several larger conversations when it could have made excellent contributions to broader issues that have long held interest for academics. For example, more discussion of the relation-

ship between women and peace movements would have been a welcome addition to this biography. Is Fonda an anomaly among women peacemakers, or does she share a place in the larger story of women's peace activism? In the final pages of the book, Hershberger suggests Fonda does indeed deserve to be placed in this larger story of women's twentieth-century peace activism, but only briefly in a reference to the history of "personalized anger against women who speak out against violence and war ... a distinct thread throughout American history" (p. 185). Relegating the history of women's peace activism to a one-paragraph reference to 1830s anti-Indian Removal activism and Jane Addams's antiwar activism in the early twentieth century diminishes a highly important strand of American women's history. Specifically, Hershberger missed the opportunity to connect Fonda's story to a larger history of women's antiwar activism. Extending analysis of women's antiwar activism into the Vietnam War era is a fruitful topic, especially in light of the modest attention Hershberger gives to Women Strike for Peace within the larger narrative.

At the same time, the military in Hershberger's account is a monolithic entity, one that seems comprised solely of men. No Vietnam-era servicewomen or female Vietnam veterans appear in these pages. Consequently, Hershberger's analysis occupies a strange space. One of the key benefits of this book is that it complicates a mythic image (the antiwar woman) by highlighting how Fonda supported the military and used her public image to get the soldiers' opinions out in public. As Hershberger tries to dispel the myth of Fonda as anti-American, however, she also perpetuates the incorrect myth of the all-male military. In the process, Hershberger inadvertently contributes to a larger cultural assumption (if only briefly hinted at) that women are aligned solely with peacemaking, and never with making war. (Despite the

presence of Women Strike for Peace, military women are nonexistent.) While Hershberger tries hard to restore Fonda to a positive place in anti-Vietnam War activism, she errs in overlooking the diverse roles women played in the Vietnam War, both as soldiers and antiwar activists.

Finally, the biggest question of all with this biography is in the lack of oral histories. In her acknowledgments, Hershberger notes that she relies on written sources because of the sheer fact that recollections can change over time, while written documents do not. When Hershberger turns to the subject of the creation and perpetuation of the Fonda myth—one that has emerged in large part because of faulty oral tradition—the reader finds some compelling evidence why written sources may be better. And yet Hershberger also demonstrates the fallibility of texts. For example, she mentions that there are two very different versions of Fonda's broadcasts from her time in Hanoi: the CIA translations of the Vietnamese back into English and the Vietnamese translations themselves. A careful look at Hershberger's endnotes shows that she did, indeed, speak with several individuals regarding the Fonda myth, but there do not seem to be any efforts to speak with Fonda herself, for example. Fonda's voice is present in the biography through her Vietnam-era speeches and broadcasts, but there is no evidence that Hershberger thought it worthwhile to get Fonda's perspective on the legacy of her Vietnam activism.

Despite these questions and limitations, Hershberger offers a succinct new perspective on an iconic figure of the Vietnam War era and today. This biography raises questions about how the nation remembers the Vietnam War and how that memory has changed in recent decades. Hershberger demonstrates that Fonda's antiwar activism has been mischaracterized, and this book does a solid job of correcting Fonda's image.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-minerva>

Citation: Tanya L. Roth. Review of Hershberger, Mary, *Jane Fonda's War: A Political Biography of an Antiwar Icon*. H-Minerva, H-Net Reviews. December, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24410>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.