

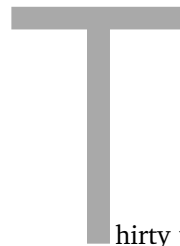
Pinned in the Beam of History:

JANE FONDA, THE MEDIA, AND THE VIETNAM WAR

BY PATRICIA BOSWORTH

“Jane Fonda is important because she is a celebrity, and unimportant because she is a celebrity. She is a revolutionary who happens to be an actress, and a movie star who happens to be a revolutionary.”

Rolling Stone, circa 1972



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hirty years ago, I tacked a *Life* magazine cover photograph of Jane Fonda to my bulletin board and left it there until it fell apart. The portrait was taken in 1971, at the height of the Vietnam War, not long after Fonda had shed her Barbarella sex-kitten image and become a key figure in the anti-war movement. The image always inspired me because it so eloquently captured her fierce defiance.

More so than Warren Beatty, Marlon Brando and other Hollywood activists who preceded her, Jane Fonda used her fame as a political weapon to challenge the United States government’s credibility in Vietnam. But her quick-change act, as documented by a dubious, timid or hostile press, left her vulnerable to unflattering representations, or none at all. Pro-war establishment media such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Time* and *Life* dismissed her radical statements almost entirely, while left-sympathizing journalists often doubted her political acuity. Her celebrity gave her a bully pulpit, but it cast suspicion on her messages. Fonda challenged reporters to be critical in a way they couldn’t possibly have been, given the strictures imposed by their convention-minded supervisors. Not until the early ’70s, when public

opinion turned against the war and feminism had taken root, did the press begin to offer her a thorough and fair hearing, and even then she was stereotyped because of her fame.

It’s not easy to recreate America’s apocalyptic state in 1970, the year in which Jane Fonda suddenly transformed herself from movie star to revolutionary. The country was still reeling from the John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. assassinations, and the Vietnam War was dragging on, swollen and unrelenting. Everywhere, there were protests against the war—sit-ins, strikes, picketing and mass marches. Fires blazed in the streets of Chicago and San Francisco, and thousands of students marched on college campuses from California to Maine, pouring blood on draft cards or burning them, as the Berrigan brothers did, with napalm. As the demonstrations and confrontations multiplied, they made headlines, and defenders of the war effort responded with a slogan that would equate anti-war activism with anti-American feeling, “America: love it or leave it”—a slogan that was instantly applied to Fonda.

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President Richard Nixon had maintained that he was “winding down the war,” but he was in fact secretly accelerating it. American military personnel would drop more than 110,000 tons of bombs on Cambodia, and thousands of American soldiers and tens of thousands of North Vietnamese would be killed over the next year.

In 1970, I was a young journalist on the staff of *McCalls* magazine, where I edited the astrology page and the home furnishing news and wrote a movie column. I’d recently interviewed Jane Fonda about “They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?” a film set during the Great Depression at the height of the marathon-dance craze.

The script was in part a hard-hitting indictment of the dehumanizing evils of American capitalism, and Fonda related to that theme because it paralleled her own rising political consciousness. “I was sick and tired of being thought of as a sex symbol. God knows I never thought of myself as one!” she told me. “I felt I had to do more serious work than ‘Barbarella.’”

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Her searing performance as the tough-talking young marathon dancer Gloria would win her an Academy Award nomination, but she didn't seem to care about winning an Oscar. As soon as our interview was over, she began talking about the Vietnam War—"our generation's war," she said. To end it was our mission, she added, predicting that the experience would define us as a nation.

Words poured out of her in a rush. She explained that while living in Paris in 1968, she'd watched newsclips on French television of American warplanes dropping bombs on villages, schools and hospitals in Cambodia, and of cataclysmic social events in the U.S.: protest marches on the Pentagon, riots in the black ghettos, chaos at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago.

She then went to Hollywood to film "They Shoot Horses. . ." after which she took a trip to India. In Bombay, she saw starvation, disease and death close up. When she returned to California in November 1969, she experienced culture shock. "India had been all urine smells, noise, color, misery, masses of teeming people. Beverly Hills was silent, clean, empty. I kept thinking, 'Where is everybody?'"

Right around then, Fonda attended a party in Hollywood for film director Michelangelo Antonioni and met Fred Gardner, an activist already famous in anti-war circles as "the father of the GI movement." A gifted speaker and an intrepid organizer, Gardner had hit upon the idea of radicalizing the U.S. Army by organizing dissent among non-commissioned soldiers and especially draftees, appealing directly to their disgruntlement. He opened the first GI coffeehouses, at which soldiers could talk about what was really going on in Vietnam. These coffeehouses sprang up around military bases all over the U.S. Fonda was very impressed with Gardner's heading of the U.S. Servicemen's Fund, a coalition of left-wing groups dedicated to financing the expansion of the GI movement, and asked if she could help him.

Soon, they were traveling together to coffeehouses near Fort Ord and then to Fort Lewis, where they met with dozens of dissident soldiers and left-wing organizers such as radical lawyer Mark Lane. By March 1970, Fonda was declaring publicly she would "do anything the GI movement asked her to do."

The anti-war-movement organizers realized what a huge public-relations asset Jane Fonda could be for them, so they quickly arranged a whirlwind tour of college campuses and Army bases around the United States. The press recorded everything she said and everything about her, including the fact that her Vuitton overnight bag was filled with vitamins and credit cards—“her only luggage as a political activist,” as the *Village Voice* reported.

By the time I interviewed her in 1970, she’d already been arrested and roughed up by police during protests outside an Army base in Georgia. But she felt that by using her fame to get across the message that the war must be stopped, she could make a difference. She confided to me, “I’m accomplishing something meaningful for the first time in my life.”

I had trouble believing this was the same young woman I’d met a few years before at the Actors Studio. Then, Fonda had been very blonde and wore elegant Chanel suits and seemed driven, as she told an acquaintance, to be “more famous than anybody in the world.” Now, sitting opposite me, I saw a skinny, exhausted, 30-year-old with shaggy brown hair and no makeup. Her grimy jeans and baggy sweater looked as if they’d been slept in.

She said she intended to travel to more GI coffeehouses. “I’ll visit them all!” she cried. We made plans to meet again after she returned to New York.

In the next weeks, I turned in my piece on “They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?” My *McCalls* editors cut out all references to her politics. Meanwhile, Fonda was moving from one cause to another; it was easy to follow her itinerary across the country because, as a glamorous movie star taking controversial public stands, she was getting tremendous media exposure. She spoke out for the emerging American Indian movement, raised money for the Black Panthers, and fasted with Dr. Benjamin Spock in Salt Lake City to protest the draft.

But her primary commitment remained the GI movement, and she appeared in countless protest rallies on both coasts. Even a last-minute announcement about a Jane Fonda college-campus visit brought out huge crowds. And with a nod to the newly emerging feminist movement and the

fact that Fonda was then nursing her newborn daughter, Vanessa, sometimes a “women’s only” appearance would be hastily arranged.

A friend recalls one such meeting at the University of Wisconsin/Milwaukee, where Fonda spoke almost in a whisper so as not to disturb the sleeping baby in her arms. She talked at length about the terrible damage America was doing to people on both sides when it undertook the war without a rationale. She implied that all the activist causes of that era—racism, poverty, the draft—were connected to the war. Students clustered around, listening to her in rapt admiration.

But the general public found her new radical persona hard to take. People still expected the sexually uninhibited space girl she’d played in “Barbarella,” so many questioned whether her commitment was genuine. William F. Buckley chuckled over her “solemn Red Guard face,” and her ex-husband Roger Vadim scathingly addressed her as “Jane of Arc.”

There was a deeper problem: that she had, as Mark Lane put it, “no anchoring belief system to guide her when she was improvising in front of reporters. She was too malleable, and she listened to everybody. Her leftism was passionate but vague, and in order to prove her sincerity—to persuade people she wasn’t a dilettante—she usually took the most radical positions in any public debate.”

By late April 1970, Fonda’s volatile, know-it-all attitude about the wrongness of U.S. intervention in Southeast Asia made her a lightning rod for right-wing hatred as well as a target for ridicule in some establishment media circles. Reporter David Halberstam, who had covered the Vietnam War for *The New York Times*, attended one of her press conferences. Years later, he recalled that she had rushed into statements, making errors of both fact and judgment. He described Fonda as “nothing but a stupid actress. She makes no sense.”

But I disagreed, and so did many of my friends in the peace movement. We thought Fonda’s panicky courage, her willingness to lay her career and her life on the line (she had been receiving death threats), was inspiring. She forced us to sit up and think. Jane Fonda had guts.

Then on April 30, Nixon announced that he'd ordered the American invasion of Cambodia. To many, this was a gross betrayal of the president's promise to end the war, and it brought on a new wave of mass protest across the nation. Anger from both the right and the left swelled to unprecedented proportions, culminating in the May 4 shooting deaths of four students at Kent State by National Guard troops who'd been attempting to control an anti-war demonstration on campus. They also wounded 13 other students.

In response, students boycotted classes on college campuses across the nation. "Suddenly, the floodgates are open," Fonda said at a University of New Mexico appearance. "You have to express what you feel, and what I feel is rage—rage against being lied to, rage because I idealized this country. . .rage because I am a woman. . ."

My husband and I were so upset about the killings at Kent State that we joined a protest group and drove all night to Washington D.C., where great crowds of people were massing, demanding the withdrawal of U.S. military troops not just from Cambodia but from Laos and Vietnam.

The demonstration had been put together hastily. It was like Woodstock all over again—thousands of young people milling around in beads and leather. The sweet smell of pot hung thick in the air. The mood of the crowd was angry. A black man roped himself to a 13-foot cross at the front of the speakers' stand. "He's there to show that Nixon is crucifying the American people," my husband said. Nearby, there was a kind of guerrilla theater demonstration. "End the agony—end the pain!" the performers chanted as they held blood-drenched animal organs in their hands.

That's when I saw Fonda. She ran out onto the speakers' platform in those same grimy jeans and baggy sweater and, raising her fist in a Black Power salute, she cried out, "Greetings, fellow bums!"—a reference to Nixon's description of war protesters. The crowd roared back in support of her, and she went on in a cold, hard voice, announcing that she was speaking not as an actress but as a political activist. In despairing tones, she condemned the American invasion of Cambodia as a breach of faith on the part of the admin-

istration. She spoke about the nightmare of death and destruction. Her sense of outrage was contagious, and the huge crowd resounded with anger. Then she disappeared. I learned later that she'd flown back to New York to appear at another rally in Central Park. There was press coverage of both rallies, but not a sentence about her speeches.

The following week, when my husband and I returned to New York, I found a message to call her. She wanted to know why the media wasn't doing more to inform the public about the increasingly anti-war sentiment.

By then, lawyers, doctors and corporate executives were starting to lobby in Washington against the war. But there had been virtually no reportage of the growing discontent, even among the mainstream. I had to admit that the establishment media continued to support the American military position in Vietnam.

"What about *McCalls*?" Fonda suddenly demanded. "Couldn't you write something in *McCalls*?"

I said I'd try, but that it was a family magazine and not political. "All the more reason for *McCalls* to tell its audience what young people feel about the war," she snapped, and then she hung up.

That summer, I kept after my editors at *McCalls*, but they weren't interested in Fonda and her politicking. She was arrested on various occasions for passing out pacifist leaflets at Army bases. At one base, she sneaked in wearing a disguise. As she was escorted from the post, news cameras trailing, she kept arguing her case. I learned later that she was following a strategy set up by Mark Lane and Fred Gardner, using guerrilla tactics to attract press coverage. Fonda didn't mind the controversy—she reveled in it. "I'm using my fame to help the Movement," she would say. Only one thing did upset her: her father's reaction. Henry Fonda was extremely angry about her politics.

Meanwhile, she continued to give television and radio interviews. When she and Lane went to Washington to lobby liberal senators about the war, television cameras trailed after them. She attracted attention—but not always the kind she was looking for. As *Washington Post* investigative reporter Jack

Anderson would later report, the Federal Bureau of Investigations had put her under intensive surveillance.

BY AUGUST 1970, the press coverage remained heavy. The Berkeley Barb at the University of California reported, “At the University of Michigan, Jane Fonda announced to a huge crowd of students: ‘There is a new kind of soldier in ’Nam and he’s not a John Wayne freak. No orders go unchallenged. When they are sent out on patrol, they lie down on little knolls and blow grass and stargaze. . . . There’s a new kind of soldier in ’Nam—a new kind of hero who doesn’t want to kill.’”

The Washington Post reported that after she gave a speech at the University of New Mexico, someone asked, “Are you doing this for publicity?” She angrily retorted, “Do you think this is fun, standing in the heat talking to a bunch of lethargic students when I could be getting a suntan at a pool in Beverly Hills? You think I’m having fun?”

130 *The Detroit Free Press* ridiculed Fonda: “It’s as if the Weathermen had captured Barbarella and turned her loose with a peace-movement tape recorder down her throat.”

Fonda did her part to incite the press. At a rally in San Francisco for the priests and nuns accused of plotting to kidnap Henry Kissinger, she appeared in an Army fatigue jacket and raised a clenched fist to newsmen before shouting, “I’m not a do-gooder—I’m a revolutionary—a revolutionary woman!”

Director Henry Jaglom understood her motivation, but also saw the flaws in her approach. “She’s like any great actor getting into a part. She has willed herself to be a revolutionary and she won’t let in the contradictions,” he said. “She might have been more effective if she hadn’t *acted* like a militant.”

On the Dick Cavett television show, Fonda held forth on the terrors of the war and compared it to the American Revolution, insisting the conflict in Vietnam could be settled without intervention. “But during the American Revolution, didn’t we colonists ask for help when fighting the British?” Cavett probed. “Not that I know of,” she retorted, at which point Cavett murmured,

“What about Lafayette and the French support?” Her face went blank and the audience howled.

Eventually she began strategizing with advisers on how to deal with media. Gradually, she became smoother in her presentations, more assured of the facts. She never stopped studying. I once accompanied her on a train to an East Hampton demonstration, and she refused to speak to me. Her face remained buried in a sheaf of papers. “I’m boning up on statistics,” she said.

She read and re-read the report, authored by Bertrand Russell and Jean Paul Sartre, from the International War Crimes Tribunal in Stockholm. She would quote from the tribunal that the U.S. military dropped 4.5 million tons of bombs on Indochina, many times more than it had dropped during the entirety of World War II.

Near the end of the summer of 1970, a reporter asked her if she was giving up her acting career for politics. She said no, but added that she only wanted to make movies of social and political importance. That fall, she made “*Klute*,” a film co-starring Donald Sutherland and directed by Alan Pakula in which she played a prostitute—because, she said, “prostitutes are the inevitable product of a society that places ultimate importance on money, possessions and competition.” (She would give her finest performance in “*Klute*,” and it earned Fonda her first Academy Award.)

After “*Klute*,” Fonda returned to politics with a vengeance. Energized by emerging details about the 1968 My Lai massacre, in which Army troops killed hundreds of villagers in violation of military law, she helped spearhead Vietnam Vets Against the War, a coalition of veterans groups. And in January 1971 she went to Detroit with Lane to organize a series of public meetings at which veterans described the atrocities routinely carried out by American soldiers against Vietnamese civilians. More than a hundred veterans testified to their war crimes.

But the media paid little attention. As for *McCalls*, the magazine never let me do an article on Fonda again, although the editors did run a puff piece on Henry Fonda. It was rumored around the office that he felt he needed some good publicity, as he feared his daughter might be ruining his prospects for work.

Then Fonda came up with an idea. *Life* magazine had been after her to do a cover profile. She had been resisting all personal press, but now she bargained with the editors herself. She'd do the cover story, she told them, but only if they wrote about the Vietnam Vets Against the War and their testimonies. The editors agreed.

Martha Faye conducted the interviews for the *Life* story. "I met Jane at the Chelsea Hotel," Faye said. "She was so nice to me. Friendly, but so thin. And nervous, the way thin people are nervous. She never stopped smoking." Faye recalled Fonda's description of her political transformation: "I was a liberal when I left L.A. When I landed in New York, I was a revolutionary."

Eventually, Faye's reportage was taken away from her, and another writer incorporated it into a short piece that accompanied a lavish photo spread of Fonda at rallies and Fonda speaking to students. The Detroit testimony of the Vietnam veterans wasn't mentioned, and though the coverline called her a "Busy Rebel," the inside title—"Nag! Nag! Nag! Jane Fonda has become a non-stop activist"—was far harsher. The article's tone was downright misogynistic, ending with the dismissive comment, "If Fonda only had a sense of history and a power base, she could cause a real commotion."

"This enraged everybody on the editorial staff at *Life*," Faye said. "We were all very pro-Fonda and totally against the war. We fought to at least change that 'Nag! Nag!' title, but we lost. The whole thing had been a setup—get Jane Fonda on the cover and then trash her."

Obviously, word had come down from the top brass that Fonda was not to be taken seriously. Time/*Life* was still very much in favor of the Vietnam War.

If Fonda was upset about the story, she never mentioned it, and the issue sold well. Photographer Bill Ray had captured her stubbornness as well as her enjoyment of being looked at. I tacked the *Life* cover to my bulletin board.

IN MID-1972, Jane Fonda flew to North Vietnam for a firsthand look at what the war was doing to that country. She stayed 10 days, touring ruins, hospitals and refugee camps. She was especially upset by the American bombing of

the North Vietnamese dike system. She felt the U.S. was intentionally trying to destroy an entire country in an undeclared war for which there was no valid justification. She decided to appeal directly to U.S. troops by making 10 broadcasts over Radio Hanoi, begging the American pilots to stop bombing.

But a damning episode for Fonda occurred off the air, when she climbed onto a North Vietnamese anti-aircraft gun aimed at U.S. warplanes and was filmed, helmeted and laughing, by television news cameras. The clip was only a few seconds long, but the image was broadcast repeatedly in slow motion all over America and around the world, and it immortalized her as "Hanoi Jane."

At a hastily called press conference in Paris after she returned from Hanoi, reporters asked Fonda if she was a propaganda tool for the North Vietnamese. Jane exploded, "Do you think they blow up their own buildings? Do you think they bomb their own dikes? Are their women and children being mutilated in order to move Americans?" She continued, "I cried every day I was in Vietnam. I cried for America. The bombs were falling on Vietnamese citizens, but it was an American tragedy."

Her voice trembled with emotion; her hands shook in an agony of frustration at trying to talk to reporters who remained skeptical.

She returned to the U.S. and was greeted with cries of "Red Pinko!" and "Commie Slut!" Many politicians called her a traitor for consorting with the enemy and accused her of treason, although the U.S. had never formally declared war on North Vietnam.

The following spring, Jane engendered further controversy when she maintained that the first POWs returning home, who described how the North Vietnamese had tortured them, were "liars and hypocrites." Subsequently interviewed by *Newsweek*, she called the POWs "Nixon's pawns," and she went on to explain in a letter to the *Los Angeles Times* that she believed the Nixon Administration was using the POWs' plight to divert the press from focusing on thousands of Vietnam veterans who were now back home—maimed, drugged-out, suffering from the crippling effects of Agent Orange, disgusted by the war and what had happened to them.

As a result of such statements, the outcry of pro-war advocates became even more brutal. According to *The New York Times*, two Maryland state legislators debated which punishment for the actress would be more proper: execution or cutting out her tongue.

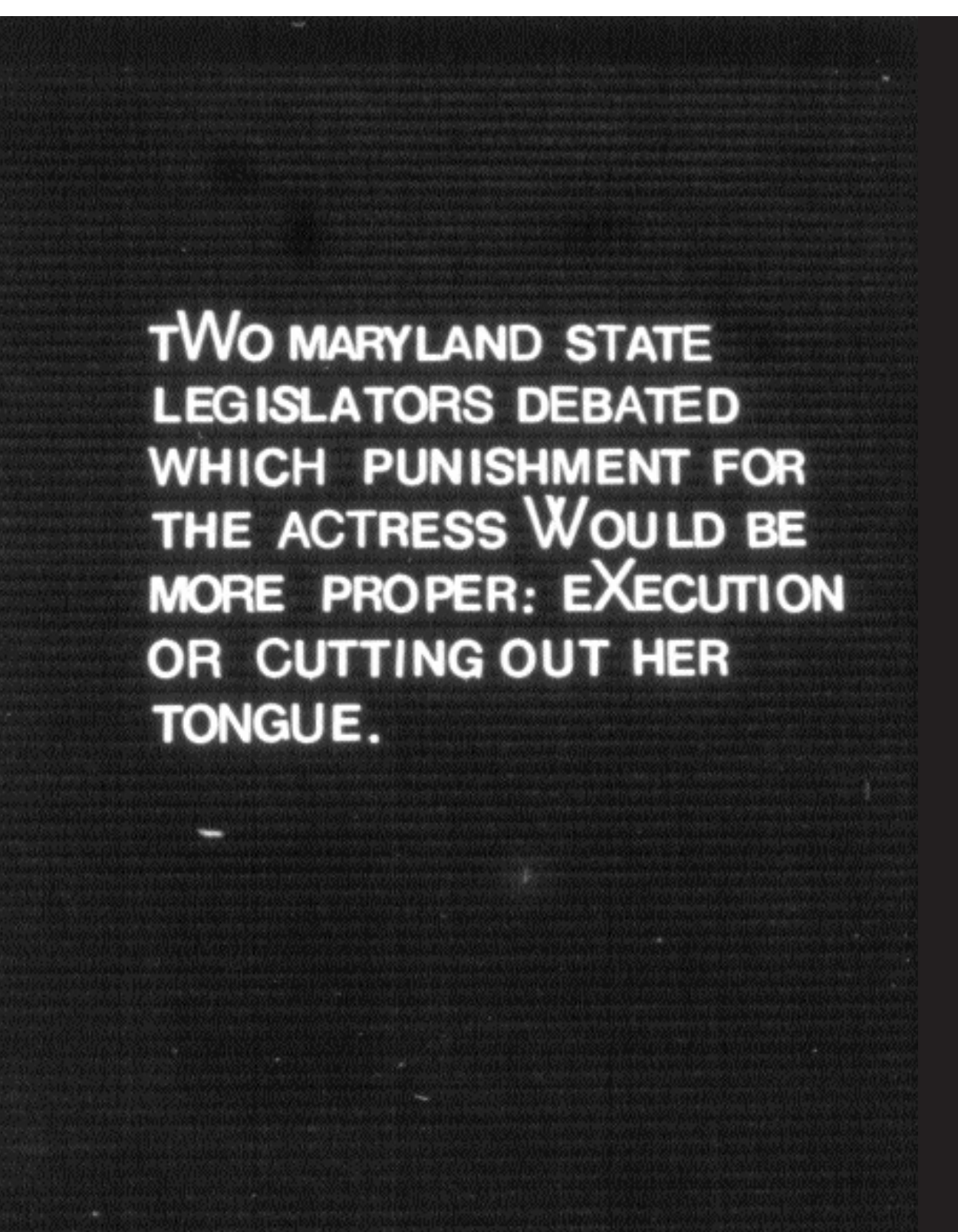
After the war wound down, Fonda did not make another mainstream Hollywood movie until 1977, when she starred in “Fun With Dick and Jane,” a comedy about the 1970s recession with George Segal. It was a surprisingly huge hit, and the film’s publicity posters declared, “America loves Jane Fonda again.” But the truth was that she had been “gray-listed” for more than five years by producers, directors and even actors, who were too terrified to work with someone who’d been branded a traitor.

She went on to play the sharp-tongued Broadway playwright Lillian Hellman in the Oscar-nominated 1978 film “Julia,” and in 1979 she won her second Oscar for “Coming Home.” Her re-emergence as a major movie star was complete.

134 Meanwhile, she began to produce films because she wanted to make, as she described it, “political movies to turn audiences on and make them think.” This was a risky concept in Hollywood, but Fonda’s track record turned out to be quite remarkable. By 1984, her IPC Films production company had grossed \$340 million for five films that ranged from “The China Syndrome” (about the dangers of nuclear power) to “9 to 5” (a comedy about a trio of exploited secretaries who rebel against their male-chauvinist boss).

At the same time, Fonda continued her activism. She campaigned hard for her second husband, Tom Hayden, during his successful run for California State Assembly in 1982, and she funneled millions of dollars of her own money to help create the California Campaign for Economic Democracy, a grassroots organization that promoted progressive issues such as solar energy, affordable housing and nuclear disarmament.

In a 1984 Gallup Poll survey, Fonda was ranked as one of the most admired women in the U.S., alongside Eleanor Roosevelt and Jackie Onassis. She was described by one magazine as “the godmother of the fitness move-



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ment.” By then, thousands were using her Jane Fonda’s Workout exercise tapes, and among those attending her Workout salons were many who had disagreed with her politics in the early 1970s.

Still, her radical past continued to haunt her.

In 1988, just before she was to go on location in Waterbury, Conn. for a film with Robert De Niro, the local Vietnam veterans group picketed to pressure her to stay out of town. Nearly every newspaper and television and radio station in the country carried the story.

As a result of the Waterbury protest, Fonda agreed to be interviewed by Barbara Walters on “20/20,” and she made a public apology to Vietnam veterans. The reason she had joined the anti-war movement, she said, was to help save the lives of American soldiers. Her anger was never at the soldiers, thousands of whom she had met through the GI coffeehouse movement. Her anger was directed at those who had sent them to die.

Afterward, Fonda told Ron Rosenbaum of *Vanity Fair* that “20/20” had cut the most important remarks from her apology—the explanation for “how I got onto the [anti-aircraft] gun.” She said she’d been with a group of young North Vietnamese soldiers, and they had sung their national anthem for her. When it was translated, she said she was moved to find that it contained a passage from the American Declaration of Independence—“We hold these truths to be self-evident.” She added that she had described the story behind that scene many times before, but “it didn’t get heard.”

Also in 1988, Fonda divorced Hayden and a few years later married Ted Turner, the maverick founder of CNN who’d turned the world into a global village with his 24-hour news network. Journalists had a field day, hailing the Fonda/Turner marriage as “the merger of two empires,” but Fonda disappointed them by closing her production company, giving up politics and scaling down her multimillion dollar exercise video company. She declined all requests for interviews and lived a relatively private life with Turner, whom she divorced in 2001 but with whom she says she remains “very close.”

It’s difficult to assess Fonda’s impact on the anti-war movement. Did her trip to Hanoi, her marches and her press conferences, accelerate the end of the Vietnam war? Probably not. But she did give voice to a legion of anti-war protesters. Certainly, no celebrity has ever maintained such a powerful, sustained presence in media for so long a period and during such a serious national debate.

Fonda invariably presented a real challenge to reporters whenever she gave an interview. Her rhetoric was usually inflammatory but well-intentioned, like much of the radical politicking in those days. Because her influence was based on her celebrity and not her expertise, the media printed everything, even when she hadn’t thought her message through. Often, the press was too snowed by her fame to go beyond her glitzy movie-star image.

The media didn’t start taking her seriously until after the Pentagon Papers were published in 1971. Only then did American citizens become aware of how much they’d been lied to about the war, and how right Jane Fonda had been when she said the Vietnam war was “immoral, illegal, wasteful and unwinnable.”

By 1974, *Playboy* and *The New York Times* had changed their attitude about Fonda and were covering her more seriously and in-depth. (*Rolling Stone* had always covered her respectfully.)

“Jane was transitional,” Gloria Steinem said. “What’s important is that her immersion in radical politics during the 1970s transcended the role traditionally assigned not just to celebrities but to women in general. Jane paved the way for the celebrity feminist activist of today, such as Oprah Winfrey, Eve Ensler, Rosie O’Donnell and Susan Sarandon.”

What makes Fonda’s story particularly interesting is that she was at the heart of a genuine cultural and generational rebellion. As such, she will always be remembered, to borrow a phrase Joan Didion once used, as “someone who was pinned in the beam of history.”