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JANE FONDA: 'How I i

Jane Fonda at Fort Lawton

Free Press photo by Carolyn Mougar

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by JANE FONDA

Lots of people have been askin me recently why an actress lik myself suddenly becomes activel involved with Indians, GI's, an such. I guess the trip from pass ive concern to direct action de pends upon the information one i getting

There was a time when my in formation came mainly from th conventional sources — news paper, TV, etc. At the time I be lieved that whatever we were do ing in Vietnam must be justifiabl in terms of national security.

was unable to deal with the schism between what we said we represented as a nation and what I heard we were actually doing.

Then I began talking with American deserters in Paris. I saw a film on French television showing how our bombs were being dropped on villages in North Vietnam that contained nothing but churches, schools and hospitals. I was faced with a lot of new information and I had to re-examine just about everything I felt— about my country and myself in relation to what, as a product of the white middle class, I had been taught to respect: authority.

It seems to me that the most dangerous, potentially fatal, thing about this country is that the majority of people feel that as Americans we are exempt from committing systematic atrocities either outside our own country or within.

I'm discovering more and more how incredibly difficult it is to try to make people aware of this. Even intelligent liberals seem to assiduously avoid confronting the issue, perhaps because doing so would require taking action.

A couple of months ago, I began feeling enormously frustrated because my direct knowledge of the United States is limited to the two coasts, so I decided to take a month or so to drive across the country, to find out if there really is a silent majority, and just to see what's going on. About the same time I read an article in Ramparts by Peter Collier about the plight of the American Indians, and I was appalled. I went to San Francisco to meet Collier and to visit Alcatraz, the abandoned federal prison which has been occupied by about 100 Indians of all tribes. There are federal treaties giving some tribes the right to abandoned federal property within the tribe's original territory. The Indians on Alcatraz are asking for their land back in order to establish, among other things, an Indian university and cultural center. They have elected a tribal council which represents them, have established a school for the children on the island, but they are running out of money, have no water, and almost no electricity. It was on the island that I began to learn, firsthand, of the unbelievable problems the American Indians are facing. I learned that they exist, in fact, as prisoners of war, that they have no control over any aspect of their lives, that the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which is a relatively powerless bureau within the Department of Interior, has the right—acting as the agent of the United States government —to sell or lease their land without their consent, take their children away from their mothers, and send them to boarding schools where they are made to feel ashamed of their Indianness and forced to conform to white ways, take them off their reservations and relocate them to cities where they cannot adjust and end up as alcoholics or committing suicide.

(The Indians have the highest suicide rate in the country, the highest infant mortality rate. Their average life span is 44 years, nearly one-third short of the national average, and their yearly income average—$1,500—is half the national poverty level.)

I left Alcatraz stunned and decided that I would visit as many Indian reservations as I could during my cross-country trip to gather more information. Back in Hollywood, I met Fred Gardner, author of "The Unlawful Concert," an account of the Presidio mutiny case, and founder of the first GI coffee house in Columbia, South Carolina, outside of Ft. Jackson. I told him about the trip I was planning, and he asked me if I would be interested in visiting some GI coffee houses along the

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Fonda on Indians

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way. At the time I knew next to nothing about the GI movement. The idea of GI's organizing for peace seemed singularly incongruous. However, over the next few weeks, meeting some of the organizers of the movement, visiting a coffee house near Fort Ord in Monterey, Calif., and reading some of the GI underground newspapers, I began to realize the importance of the movement.

The movement is made up of various groups whose demands vary, but basically fall into two categories: demands for reforms within the military structure, which will guarantee some degree of democracy for the GI's, such as the right of free speech and assembly, the right of the GI's to elect their own officers, the abolition of such things as saluting—which perpetuates class differentiation—equality of pay, and the right to trial by peers. (All these things are guaranteed by the Constitution.) They also wish to abolish discrimination against minority groups within the military service. The other aspect of the movement involves opposition to the war in Vietnam. The GI's demand that they be permitted to refuse to fight in a war they consider unjust.

It has been pointed out to me that an entire university can march for peace and, while this type of protest is extremely important, it can't do much to bring war to an end. Whereas, if a large enough percentage of the soldiers (it was suggested that a mere ten percent would suffice) refuse to go, the war would be over. That familiar bumper sticker which says, "What if they gave a war and nobody came?", suddenly seems more than a pipe dream.

At Fort Ord I met Mark Lane, author of "Rush to Judgment," about the first Kennedy assassination, who ran as Vice Presidential candidate with Dick Gregory in the 1968 election. He is making a documentary film about the response of draft-age Americans to the military, and arranged for me to visit the Shelter Half, a coffee house in Tacoma, Wash., where he would be filming. We agreed that I would spend Sunday, March 8, there. Once that date was set, I called Janet McCloud, who participates in a traditional Indian movement in northwest Washington. I knew that the Indians in that area were facing some urgent problems, and I asked her to arrange a schedule for me on Saturday so I could find out more about what was happening. When I arrived in Washington, the first place I was taken was to the federal prison at McNeil Island. Although Indians make up less than one-half of one percent of the population of the U.S., they represent about five percent of the prison population. One inmate there told me that he had been sentenced to twenty-five years for forging a check for $107.

One of the greatest problems faced by the Indian inmates is that they are regularly denied parole, when otherwise eligible, because they are unable to find work and a place to live once they are released. What is urgently needed is a halfway house, a house with a staff that could find jobs for those about to face the parole board, a place where they could receive vocational training and assistance in adapting themselves to life on the outside. The prisoners asked to communicate these needs to people on the outside, in the hope that funds could be raised to establish such a place.

I toured the Indian reservations that afternoon and evening. I saw huge electrical power lines that ran through the Indian land by permission, I was told, of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, yet the small wooden houses in which the Indians live within the very shadow of these structures were without electricity. Everywhere we went we were told of sacred treaties that had been violated by the Federal Government or the state of Washington. Indians are, by treaty, guaranteed the right to hunt and fish in the places where they have always done so. Yet in Washington — where they depend for their livelihood on salmon fishing—they have been denied this right. The police are destroying their nets, dynamiting and confiscating their boats, and arresting the fishermen, who cannot get effective legal assistance and consequently end up in prison.

Much later that evening, while at an Indian wedding ceremony, I was informed that the next morning a United Indian force, representing all tribes of Indians and Alaskan natives, was planning to move on and occupy the lands presently not in use at Fort Lawton, Seattle. A delegation had met previously with Washington Senator Henry M. Jackson, asking his support in acquiring whatever property is soon to become surplus at the fort. They stated their plans to use this property for the city's 12,000 Indian and Alaskan natives as a multi-service cultural, vocational and educational setup, but were apparently told by the Senator that they would have to go through the Department of Interior, the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the General Service Administration. Experience has proven to every Indian that he can do virtually nothing within this

Jane Fonda arrested at U.S. Fort

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mayor that he could count on receiving the land for the city to make into a park. The Indians decided to take matters into their own hands, and, using Alcatraz as a precedent, occupied the land. I asked permission to go along as an observer, mainly because I felt that my presence and that of Mark Lane—who planned to film the proceedings—might lessen the chances of brutality against the Indians.

The next morning, with Mark, his cameraman and several others, I drove through the main gate into Fort Lawton. When asked by the guard to state our business, we said we were there as observers—as, indeed, we were. We walked around for several minutes, wondering where the Indian occupation force was and thinking that maybe there had been a last-minute change of plan.

Suddenly, we were surrounded and told to get our car off the property, the reason being given that there was too much traffic (there wasn't another car in sight at the moment). One of our group drove the car back off the fort, but at that moment a lt. colonel arrived with two captains and told us that we were ordered to leave because the base was closed to civilians. We knew, in fact, that it was an open base. As we stood there we watched civilians driving on the base for the simple purpose, as they stated at the gate, of looking around. We called this to the attention of the colonel, and said that we didn't feel there was any reason for us to leave. I had never confronted police authority before, and I had not planned to do so that day, but I knew I was there quite lawfully, and when the MP's grabbed me and said, "Get off, now!" I said I was staying, and five of them began dragging me toward the gate.

In the meantime a captain had examined Mark's identification and filled out a mimeographed form, which he read to Mark. It was an expulsion order, which said that he had entered the military reservation for a "purpose prohibited by law or lawful regulation," but they were unable to explain what they thought he had done that was unlawful. I was told that I would be taken to the Provost Marshall's office, presumably fingerprinted and then given an expulsion order. Mark, who had read the document served him, discovered that he was banned from a number of military installations, including Ft. Lewis.

As I felt that it was more important for me to go to Ft. Lewis that afternoon and talk to the GIs, than to try to buck the system at Ft. Lawton, I decided to leave, and together we walked off the base.

By then it looked like the entire MP staff at the fort had been alerted. They put up wooden barricades at the gate, while trucks and jeeps of reinforcements began arriving. During this period of concentrated effort at the front gate—and quite unbeknownst to us — the Indians were quietly scaling a small cliff and climbing over a fence at the back of the fort.

I did not see what happened to the Indians, but later that night and early the next day I was told that many had been beaten and gassed by the military.

That afternoon, as planned, I went to Ft. Lewis—which is an open base—with some of the staff of the Shelter Half coffeehouse and seven GI's. It was hard to find any GI's to talk to. By some incredible coincidence many had been called for riot control duty, and most of the others had been restricted to their barracks about the time I arrived on the base. Some of them were leaning out of their windows, however (the atmosphere didn't seem much different from McNeil prison), and we talked. Some told me about their experiences in Vietnam; others said they were about to be sent over. I asked them how they felt about the war, and invited them to come to the Shelter Half that evening. A number of recruits taking basic training were standing around, but as soon as I began

JANE FONDA, MARK LANE (center) & Two Friends
at Seattle, Washington Indian protest. Photo by Carolyn Mougar.

to talk with them they were ordered into formation and marched off singing an inane army song. ("Therapy," one of the remaining soldiers called it.)

Soon after that a group of MP's and others approached us, demanded our identification and ordered us to the Provost Marshall's office, where the other civilians and myself were separated from our GI friends and put into a back room. After more than three hours of trying to find out what we were there for, we were photographed, taken one by one into the colonel's office, and served with the same expulsion papers that Mark had received that morning, which said that we had come onto the base for "purposes prohibited by law." When I asked the colonel what I had done that was unlawful, he said, "I don't know." A note was typed at the bottom of the paper testifying to the fact that I had refused to sign, and I was thereupon told we would be escorted off the base.

Mark, in the meantime—hearing about our arrest—had asked permission to come onto the base in the capacity of attorney. He stayed with the seven GI's to make sure they were released as well and to assure them that they would, if necessary, receive legal aid.

When I got off the base, I met a friend who had called the Provost Marshal's office saying he was from the New York Times, in order to find out what story the military would be giving out. He said everyone seemed very nervous and up tight, and they had given him several versions — among them, that I had been arrested for "inciting to riot" and "demonstrating."

That evening I appeared at the Shelter Half. The place was full, yet I was expelled from two open and public forts and served with official documents at one. I fully intend to return to Ft. Lewis. The attempts by the military to isolate the enlisted men at the fort from those who are concerned about them, from those who support their efforts to obtain some semblance of democracy in an institution that claims it is willing to kill and fight in the name of democracy, and from those who share with them their opposition to a cruel and senseless war in Vietnam—those attempts must not succeed. My first concern is to see to it that nothing happens to the seven GI's who accompanied me onto the base at Ft. Lewis. I am well aware of the fact that, while I received expulsion orders from Ft. Lewis, they were not so fortunate. And they are more vulnerable to military justice than I am.

When Bob Hope spoke at Ft. Lewis a GI named Wade Carson helped to put out a leaflet that read, "40,000 jokes. 40,000 dead." Soon after that Wade Carson was charged with the attempted distribution of Fed Up, a newspaper published by the Fort Lewis GI's. Even though the testimony at the court-martial—all of it—proved that he had only shown the paper to two other enlisted men, not given it to them—in fact, refused to give it to them—he was convicted. He is now serving a five-month sentence in the Ft. Lewis stockade.

The men at Ft. Lewis should be told that they are not being abandoned. We have conveyed that message to them through a suit that Mark Lane and I filed on March 16 against the federal government to set aside the expulsion orders. The American Civil Liberties Union is repre-