The truth about bra-burners

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VOLUME: 3
ISSUE: 2
MONTH:
YEAR: 1992
PAGES: 80-
ISSN: 0047-8318
OCLC #: 
The Truth About Bra-Burners

By Lindsy Van Gelder

For years, you've been hearing about feminist "bra-burners." And you probably assumed that the whole notion of blazing lingerie was the twisted invention of some dirty-minded right-winger, right?

Well, Dear Reader, I cannot tell a lie. I, your longtime faithful Ms. contributing editor, am actually the Mother of the Myth of the Maidenform Inferno. Of course, I didn't do it all on my own. I had an assist—of sorts—from Robin Morgan, who edits this magazine. But let me explain.

It was September 1968. It was not the best of times, despite the patina of nostalgia that now glosses over the sixties. Although the world seemed to be exploding, there was still no women's movement. Women had been added to the 1964 Civil Rights Act . . . but only as a joke by a senator who wanted to show his contempt for civil rights for blacks.

I was a 23-year-old reporter for the New York Post, then a liberal paper, albeit a typical tabloid. Most "girl reporters" were confined to writing about food, fashion, and weddings on the "women's pages." The few women who were written about on the other pages were invariably described in terms like "a blonde mother of two" or "an attractive divorcée." (This was true no matter who they were. Golda Meir, the Israeli prime minister, was often identified as a "grandmother.") I had been turned down for more than one journalism job on the grounds that I should be home having babies, and I spent most of my energy desperately proving that I could cover the social movements of the day—the very world in which Robin, a 27-year-old poet and activist, was also struggling to be taken seriously.

Things weren't much better in the counterculture. One of the crucial battles was against the draft and the war in Vietnam . . . but only in the context, as the slogan went, that "girls say yes to boys who say no." The left was also committed to the civil rights of black people . . . but only of black men, this also being the era of black militant Stokely Carmichael's "black power" and the proper position of women in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was "prone." The sex/drugs/rock&roll "youth revolution" was in full swing, too, but women, including hippie "chicks," were still dying from illegal back-alley abortions everywhere. The main difference between our generation and our mothers' was that we were expected to fuck.

Then Robin and a few other pissed-off radical women organized a demonstration against that "Degrading, Mindless-Boob-Girlie Symbol" of stereotyped womanhood, the Miss America Pageant in Atlantic City. (And yes, Dear Reader, in 1968 the mainstream really did take Miss America seriously. The title was one of the highest honors a woman in the United States could achieve outside marriage and motherhood without being accused of being a ball-breaker.)

When Robin first announced the protest plans to the steering committee of the Youth International Party (Yippie), they thought she was kidding. My editors had the same thigh-slapping reaction after Robin's press release arrived in the city room. Broads picketing for their rights! It was a hilarious concept. I was sent out to meet Robin and bring back a "humor piece."

Why me? It certainly wasn't because I was earning my stripes covering legitimate social issues. No, I was picked because the demonstrators specifically stated that they would only talk to female reporters. (African American activists had previously taken a similar stand with regard to African American journalists.) I remember losing all journalistic "objectivity" in about 20 seconds: these feminists were furious at all the same things that I was—things I hadn't even had words to wrap my anger around—and they were giving notice to my editors that they had better have at least one woman on staff if they wanted to cover this story at all. One of my first questions to Robin was "Where can I sign up?" Our "interview" could better be described as the hatching of a conspiracy.

In the years to follow, Robin would say that of all the points raised by the pageant protesters, the refusal to speak to male press might well leave the most enduring legacy. Newsrooms were honeycombed with closet feminists who understood that this burgeoning movement was speaking to us, and who eventually went on to transmit the message to the world. Meanwhile, however, back at the beginning of this chain of events, sitting down at my typewriter to write what as far as I know was the first article in a mainstream newspaper about modern radical feminism, I had a real problem: how to get a serious story into the paper, since the Post clearly wanted something frothy?

In the press release, the demonstrators had announced that they were planning to set up "a huge Freedom Trash Can into which we will throw bras, girdles, curlers, false eyelashes, wigs, and representative issues of Cosmopolitan, Ladies' Home Journal, Family Circle, etc." I
swear I remember plans to set a bonfire in the trash can — and that the only reason it didn’t happen was that the Atlantic City police chief threatened to arrest any protesters who set a fire on the boardwalk without a special permit, which he wasn’t about to give them. Robin doesn’t recall any such plans at all about fires. In fact, she says that the permit fight was actually over the group’s thwarted plan to stage the coronation of a live sheep as the new Miss America. (O.K., so we didn’t know from animal rights in 1968.) If her memory is correct, I’ll be the first to acknowledge that I was professionally remiss not to have invented the phrase “bra-trashers” instead, or maybe gone with “lamb-crowners.”

But “bra-burner,” aside from being pleasingly alliterative, had a connotation that carried moral weight in 1968. At the height of the war, thousands of young men had set fire to their draft cards in public demonstrations. It was an act associated with dignity, bravery, and impeccable politics. To talk about bras being burned was at one and the same time to speak in a language that the guys on the city desk could understand (i.e., tits) and to speak in code to the radicals of our generation. And so the lead of my article in the Post went: “Lighting a match to a draft card or a flag has been a standard gambit of protest groups in recent years, but something new is due to go up in flames this Saturday. Would you believe a bra-burning?”

After this tabloid beginning, the piece went on to assure readers that “if it sounds like fun, don’t be fooled. The ladies are serious . . . [and] some of their plans may be enough to wipe the toothpaste smile off Bert Parks’s face.” Connections were painstakingly drawn to the more established movements—not a stretch, since one of Miss America’s duties was entertaining the troops in Vietnam and since the pageant had been lily-white for most of its history. Still, reading the article today, it’s hard not to be struck by how defensive both Robin and I sound. She is almost apologetic about organizing women around issues that might directly concern their own lives, and not just as extra troops getting behind the approved leftist agenda. Then there is my description of Robin as an “attractive brunette” and my gratuitous mention of her husband. The piece walks a schizoid tightrope between “Don’t mind us, mister” and “Please listen, sister.”

The headline above the story; however, was less ambiguous. It simply blared: BRA-BURNERS & MISS AMERICA. And the rest, as they say, is history.

I do, however, have a footnote to add to anyone under 35 who questions why feminists were goofy enough to toss their undergarments in the garbage, period. In those days, Dear Reader, we did not wear sports bras, or cute little numbers from Victoria’s Secret. Bras were white, underwireless, invariably padded, and looked like they had been designed by NASA, right down to the nose cones. They went under slips that were forever “showing,” and atop gut-crunching panty girdles, since we didn’t even have pantyhose in the sixties, which meant that one’s legs froze in winter and one’s underpants perpetually hung out of one’s de rigueur miniskirt, because women who lived their lives outside the counterculture were also not supposed to wear trousers. In fact, the same week my article about the Miss America protest ran, I wrote another story for the Post about what was truly one of the burning issues of the day: whether women should be permitted to go to offices, school, and restaurants in pants . . . which were generally held to be a plot by gay male designers to make women look like men. This, Dear Reader, is not a joke.

I never burned my bra in the sixties. But I wish I had.

Lindsy Van Gelder is a contributing editor to “Ms.”