

off our backs visits the national women's political caucus fund raiser



I walked into the Shoreham Hotel, one of Washington's finest, loaded down with newspapers. I had come to sell off our backs at the National Women's Political Caucus' \$25.-a-person fund raising party. Arriving early, I approached someone who looked like she was busy with preparation and naively asked where people would be entering. I was sure I wouldn't have any trouble with the hotel management--they wouldn't dare--but it didn't occur to me that the women would refuse me. I was quickly directed to Liz Carpenter, Lady Bird's former press secretary. She said no, I couldn't sell papers. Other groups had wanted to raise money at the event and had been refused. The caucus was here only to raise money for their office. My sisterly rebutals only made Liz impatient and she dumped me off on another woman who also said no. I replied that a women's paper should be sold at a women's meeting. But this isn't a women's meeting, she said, it's a fund raising party. At this point, Liz angrily reappeared and told me that I was just going to have to take no for an answer; they were here to raise funds only for their office but perhaps they could come up with a free pass for me (the buy-off). I said that a 35 cent newspaper wasn't going to take away from their \$25.00 admission fee and walked away in disgust.

I temporarily suspended the idea of selling newspapers and secreted them away in a safe hiding place, keeping some in my knapsack. I wandered around, watching the preparations. Men were everywhere, setting up lights, cameras, and microphones. Liz was directing the hostesses, all of whom were wearing large buttons saying, "Right On," to place complementary packs of Virginia Slims on all of the tables. I heard one of the hostesses say that Virginia Slims had given the Caucus \$1000. (The next day the *Washington Post* reported \$500.)

Finally the reception began in the Regency ballroom. In the center of the room was a banner which said "male chauvinist" and underneath was a suckling pig with an apple in its mouth. I checked out the refreshments, for \$25.00 they weren't much--corn chips with a spicy dip, celery sticks and olives and sweet pork in a greasy gravy. It was a \$25.00-a-plate affair and they didn't provide plates, not even paper plates. Warm champagne and a non-descript fruit punch were also available. Drinks were being sold for \$1.35. Buttons with slogans such as "Measurement for '72--52%"; "Women make policy, not coffee"; and "Uppity women unite!" were on sale for \$1.

The lights flickered on and off and I moved across the hall to the Ambassador room for the program. As I was waiting for things to begin I read a hand-out headed "Our Ballot of Friends," presumably a list of groups and people who had contributed to the NWPC. Included were such individuals as Mrs. William D. Ruckelshaus and Mrs. Earl Butz (I guess they don't have given names), Louise Day Hicks, "Hon." and Mrs. Henry M. Jackson and John M. Ashbrook. Also listed as friends were Virginia Slims cigarettes, the American Petroleum Institute, A&P and Sloans, the furniture company, Bennetta Washington, the wife of D.C.'s presidentially appointed Commissioner, who for some reason people are always referring to as Mayor, introduced Art Buchwald, the Master of Ceremonies. "Gentlemen...and sisters," he began to laughter and a few half-hearted hisses, "...I believe this is a sex whose time has come. I have seen the future and it is women...I know what it is like to be treated as a sex symbol." After carrying on in an equally obnoxious way for several more minutes, he asked for forgiveness for being a "former" male chauvinist: "Forgive me. Take me to your bosom and say I forgive you Arthur, go and sin no more."

Federal Maritime Commissioner Helen Bentley then gave a short but dull speech about political participation. She ended by telling everyone she had been asked to be a member of the Nixon administration because Nixon "needed a Helen to launch a 1000 ships."

After Carole Ann Taylor sang "You Can Have Him, I Don't Want Him," Bella Abzug spoke, conjuring up a vision of how things would be in the future when Shirley Chisholm was president and the issues of the day would include whether to convert the Pentagon into a dual facility--housing for the elderly and a play center and whether Henry Kissinger should receive amnesty.



As Lenore Romney was being introduced, I rushed out to reclaim my newspapers and begin selling them. I sold almost 100 papers to the women as they were leaving. When asked to buy one, Bella said she already had that issue, believe her. Shirley said no thanks. Helen Bentley walked by wearing a giant jeweled American flag on her coat and said she didn't think she wanted one and Betty Frieden looked down her nose at me and brushed past as if I were a prostrate beogor at her feet. Finally Liz made her exit; she saw me and recognized my face but couldn't remember why (after all, there are so many faces and names in this business) so she gave me a big smile and said good-night.

by chris hobbs

About 700 of them came to the bash at the Shoreham for the National Women's Political Caucus.

They came slowly down the stairs to the Regency Ballroom, their ankle-length evening dresses not allowing too wide steps.

Most of them did not buy our newspaper. They had no place to put them. Those that did had their escorts pay as they were carrying no money.

They came to pay 25 bucks to hear Master of Ceremonies Art Buchwald ask them to take him to their bosoms for his past sexist transgressions...

...and to see Bennetta Washington, Helen Bentley, Gloria Steinem, Bella Abzug, Liz Carpenter, and Lenore Romney ensconced on sofa on stage...

...and to see the dashing Mayor Washington fly through the stage door in the middle of the program to kiss his wife and shake hands all around.

Who were they? What were they there to accomplish?

Lenore Romney called them "statesmen and women in industry and labor" as she thanked them for the \$15,000 they had contributed that evening.

\$15,000--enough to empty the Women's Detention Center, enough to fill lots of empty bellies this winter.

But this \$15,000 is to be used for stamps, envelopes, leaflets, office, etc. to keep the National Women's Political Caucus grinding on. And listed among the "ballot of friends" who helped raise this \$15,000 were none other than Virginia Slims Cigarettes and the Hon. Louise Day Hicks, to mention just a few.

Virginia Slims and Louise Day Hicks! It had to be a sick joke. Is that where the \$15,000 was coming from? Is that for whom it would be working?

Well, Gloria Steinem stood up there, blue jeans and all, and did not equivocate. "I will go anywhere to work for a Republican woman!"

A few months ago, Gloria Steinem was on a late night talk show. There was much titillation in the air waves: The interviewer and the audience were all set for a sexy conversation. But Steinem disappointed them. She talked about welfare.

She didn't talk about welfare at the Shoreham. She talked about getting women into power, any women. Inconspicuously, she also talked about a "coalition of the outs" as her eyeglasses deflected the glitter of her jeweled audience.

She said that all those women there were an indication of the "depth of the women's movement, its popularity and strength."

Virginia Slims, Louise Day Hicks, \$25 a plate, Art Buchwald, Lenore Romney mouthing "right on" -- the women's movement??

It was all we had ever conjured up in our grimmest moments -- and all we had ever cracked up over in our diabolic ones.

The champagne was good, Abzug was funny, but the next time there's a bash in this town, we're taking the stage.

by fran pollner



Norma Allen Lesser