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Interpreters of Violence: Novels and Memoirs about Female Journalists of the Vietnam War

In late January 2011, pro-democracy populists in Egypt publicly protested against the oppressive rule of their long-time president, Hosni Mubarak. Mubarak resigned on February 11, after several weeks of dramatic mass protests in Cairo's Tahrir Square and round-the-clock media coverage of the uprising; within days the world's attention had migrated to Egypt's western neighbor, Libya, and its revolt against its own autocratic ruler. Four days after Mubarak's resignation, CBS News reported that Lara Logan, its chief foreign correspondent, had "suffered a brutal and sustained sexual assault and beating" by a mob in Tahrir Square on that climactic day. The delayed report of Logan's assault offered a sad coda to the exhilarating news coverage of the previous weeks. It was, as well, an almost unprecedented acknowledgement of the vulnerability of news correspondents covering volatile and dangerous events. On February 19, in response to the Logan story, *New York Times* foreign correspondent Sabrina Tavernise recounted incidents in which she had been groped and assaulted while reporting, since the 1990s, from Lebanon, Pakistan, Turkey and Russia. "Crowds," Tavernise writes, "can be a dangerous place for reporters, especially during war or unrest. . . . But women reporters face another set of challenges. We are often harassed in ways that male colleagues are not. This is a hazard of the job that most of us have experienced and few of us talk about." The same day, *ProPublica* reporter Kim Barker confessed in an op-ed article co-published in the *Times* and *ProPublica*

that she too had endured—and kept quiet about—sexually threatening assaults. “Really, I was lucky,” she asserts. “A few gropes, a misplaced hand, an unwanted advance — those are easily dismissed. I knew other female correspondents who weren’t so lucky, those who were molested in their hotel rooms, or partly stripped by mobs. But I can’t ever remember sitting down with my female peers and talking about what had happened, except to make dark jokes, because such stories would make us seem different from the male correspondents, more vulnerable. I would never tell my bosses for fear that they might keep me at home the next time something major happened.” Barker applauded Lara Logan for “breaking the code of silence” and berated several media commentators who suggested that Logan was asking for such trouble. But, she conjectured, the response to Logan’s disclosure of her assault may include “suggestions that female correspondents should not be sent into dangerous situations, [that] it’s possible that bosses will make unconscious decisions to send men instead, just in case” and suggested that “that would be the wrong lesson. Women can cover the fighting just as well as men, depending on their courage. More important, they also do a pretty good job of covering what it’s like to live in a war, not just die in one. Without female correspondents in war zones, the experiences of women there may be only a rumor.”

Many dimensions of America’s current military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq evoke parallels and precedents with its greatest military defeat, the Vietnam War: the apparent lack of a clear mission and exit strategy, the special challenges of combat in areas of operations with no clear front line, the difficulty in determining the allegiances of civilians. The Lara Logan story and a new international locus of unrest and violence call to mind the Vietnam War as well, since America’s long incursion in Vietnam in the 1960s and ‘70s was the first war that female journalists reported on in significant numbers. The story of women’s participation in media coverage of the Vietnam War, related by historians, the journalists’ memoirs, and two fictional versions of the phenomenon, offers interesting parallels to contemporary events and insights into a little-known aspect of America’s involvement in Southeast Asia a generation ago. It is also an intriguing evocation of the changing, challenging lives of American women in the transformational 1960s.

In later commentary on *Night and Day*, his 1978 play about the press in wartime, British playwright Tom Stoppard expounds upon modern society’s fascination with the media and its most dramatic reporting. “I was very interested in the idea of the war correspondent who fights for the privilege of being sent into an arena where he stands a good chance of being killed or wounded for what is, in the real world, a commercial enterprise,” Stoppard asserts. “I think the glamour of bringing

the news back from a distant place, especially a war, will always be interesting, it will always be dramatic.” Certainly the story of the people who report the story was a dramatic one during the Vietnam era. For students of the subject, controversies that demonstrate the crucial role of journalism in America’s conduct of and apprehension of the war—what is now popularly known as the first television war—are myriad; they are bookended perhaps by President John F. Kennedy’s attempts to have *New York Times* reporter David Halberstam removed from his Vietnam beat in 1963 and the legal skirmishes over the 1971 publication of the *Pentagon Papers*—and the lingering effects of their release on popular perceptions of the war—and former U.S. Army Chief of Staff General Westmoreland’s 1982 libel suit against CBS Television. And the remarkable chronicle of American journalists in Vietnam in the 1960s and 70s has been well-told, by historians such as William M. Hammond; by former journalists such as William Prochnau, Ward Just, and Michael Herr; by the Library of America’s expansive two-volume collection of original documents in *Reporting Vietnam: American Journalism 1959–1975*. Less well-known is the adventurous saga—every bit as striking—of the women who reported on America’s misadventure in Vietnam.

Some of these women explorers followed boyfriends to Vietnam, looked around for something to do, wheedled press credentials, and signed on as stringers at any newspaper or magazine that would take their stories. Some were seasoned, even famous reporters from earlier wars—Marguerite Higgins, Martha Gellhorn—still tracking their lifelong story. Others were young journalism school graduates who begged their hometown newspapers and magazines to liberate them from writing for the anodyne women’s page. Some were rabid supporters of the war and the military; others as insistently against the war; most were apolitical and disinterested. All, insists Virginia Elwood-Akers in *Women War Correspondents in the Vietnam War, 1961-1975*, made their way to Southeast Asia for the same reason that all journalists went to Vietnam: “The war in Vietnam was the major event, the biggest news story of its time. If you were a journalist, and if you were adventurous, sooner or later you went to Vietnam. And the mere fact that you were a woman surely could not stand in your way” (9).

With talent and tenacity, it was relatively easy to obtain credentials as a legitimate journalist in Vietnam in the 1960s. Because it was an undeclared war, there was unprecedented access, even to combat areas, and virtually no censorship on reporting. A visa and a ticket on a commercial airline flight offered uncomplicated transit to Saigon. Three letters from news organizations willing to even consider using one’s work bought MACV press credentials. And credentials meant free in-

country military ground and air transportation, access to military personnel, use of communications technology, even food, shelter and fatigues. That is, it was a simple process for the men. Women had to convince often-reluctant editors, fellow in-country journalists, and even more uncooperative military brass that they needed to hump the boonies, hang out with the grunts, and risk getting shot in order to do their job.

That a journalist's reportage is based on direct, first-hand observation of the story is seemingly the lowest common denominator of serious journalism. Yet, as Michael Herr and others have suggested, a generation gap existed in Vietnam between old-school, jaded reporters who reported from the safety of the official daily military Saigon briefing commonly known as the Five O'Clock Follies and the bar at the Hotel Caravelle—and the young, gungy war correspondents like Herr, Halberstam, Peter Arnett, and Neil Sheehan, who understood that they were covering a new, postmodern kind of war, that getting the story meant “getting close to the war, touching it, losing yourself in it and trying yourself against it.” (206). But the predominately male press corps—both the wizened professionals for whom Vietnam was just the war du jour and the hungry risk-takers whom Herr tags “Those Crazy Guys Who Cover The War”—was unified in its unwillingness to acknowledge the women (whom Herr glibly labels “girl reporters”) who sought to join the glamorous club.

In Tatjana Soli's 2010 novel *The Lotus Eaters*, when photojournalist freelancer Helen Adams first meets her journalist colleagues in a Saigon restaurant in late 1965, the “lack of welcome” that exudes from the table of male reporters is “palpable”: “So now the girls are coming. Can't be much of a war after all,” grumbles one of the men (75). When, after dinner, the “large, boisterous circle” of reporters launches out for more evening fun, Helen recognizes that she is “excluded from the boys' club” (79). *The Lotus Eaters*, a work of fiction clearly based on the real-life experiences of the women who worked as journalists in Vietnam during the war, echoes the challenge that real female reporters faced finding acceptance from other war correspondents. In *War Torn*, the 2002 collection of memoirs by nine of the 70 or so female journalists who covered the Vietnam War, freelancer Jurate Kazickas recalls that she socialized with Michael Herr and the gung-ho male correspondents he glamorizes in *Dispatches* as they smoked pot and “drank too much” to “obliterate the war and all its craziness, if only for a few hours,” but, Kazickas notes, “I never felt totally comfortable around that journalist fraternity. Most male reporters had the same attitude about a female correspondent in

Vietnam as the military did. ‘What the hell is a woman doing in a war zone?’ (133). Other women war correspondents bear witness to a similar perception.

If gaining acceptance by fellow journalists was a matter of respect and camaraderie, women’s struggles to be assigned to the Vietnam story and then to obtain access to its most significant and dangerous arena—combat—were more essential. Many of the women who offered accounts of their experiences in *War Torn* or interviews to scholars and historians testify to their own battles to get to the story. One of the intersections between women’s reporting on the war and broader social and cultural developments for American women in the Vietnam era is that the women’s campaign to convince publishers and editors that they could and should be assigned to the combat beat was furthered by home front advances for women in the workplace. As Laura Palmer acknowledges in her *War Torn* memoir, the women journalists whose papers assigned them to Vietnam late in the war—such as Palmer, Edith Lederer, and Tracy Wood—benefited from female employees’ early 1970s lawsuits against the *New York Times* and the Associated Press and other news outlets. The earlier, first wave of women reporters generally had to make their own way to Vietnam and hope to get hired on by a reputable news organization as a result of their freelance reporting. Even after she places an important combat story with *Time* magazine in 1963, Miranda Pickerel, the autobiographical protagonist of journalist Pamela Sanders’ 1978 novel *Miranda*, fails to secure a staff job with the magazine. “*Time* rarely hired overseas stringers on staff,” Miranda knows. “More rarely yet did they hire female correspondents” (326).

For the women who managed to become credentialed as reporters, the next challenge was to obtain military cooperation for access to the people and locations that offered the most compelling stories. As Joyce Hoffmann explains, “even when reluctant bosses . . . belatedly agreed to assign women to Saigon, they issued specific directives to avoid combat and focus instead only on the human interest side of the war. Among the military, the general rule appeared to be that a willingness to accept women in combat was inversely proportional to military rank. Although average GIs generally seemed to welcome women reporters into their midst, the higher their rank the more averse military men were to allow women to join combat operations” (5). It is her lover-mentor, famous combat photojournalist Sam Darrow who first discourages Soli’s Helen Adams from pursuing the real story of the war. “Only a handful of women are covering the war,” he admonishes Helen when she asks him to help her get “in the field.” “None doing combat. It’s too dangerous, too spooky out there. It’s hard work” (86). Helen gets permission to accompany the troops on search-and-clear missions only after months of badgering military

command, who “trot out the worn-out old objections of lack of bathroom facilities and lust in the soldiers” (126), though late in the novel, after two years of covering combat missions, she still has to defy a captain who protests that “we don’t need a dead woman” (319). Sanders’ Miranda; the earliest woman reporting in Vietnam, Dickey Chapelle; and several of the *War Torn* memoirists have to counter a military officer’s “no latrines in the field” pretext too, as though, Miranda observes, “this were of far greater concern than a bullet through the head” (258).

In April, 1967, *War Torn* memoirist Denby Fawcett, who followed her reporter-boyfriend to Vietnam in 1966 and stayed around long enough to inherit his position as the Saigon correspondent for the *Honolulu Advertiser*, was in the Central Highlands, covering an Army unit from Hawaii, when armed forces commander William Westmoreland choppered in for a pep talk to the battle-weary troops. Westmoreland, who was a friend of Fawcett’s parents, recognized her, and when he learned that the twenty-five-year-old reporter had been at the forward base with the grunts for several days, he decided to ban women reporters from overnight operations in the field. As Fawcett notes, “Westmoreland’s directive would have made it almost impossible for women to cover the fighting. Reporters could not expect to go on a combat operation during the day and afterward demand a helicopter to take them out in the evening. There was no such special taxi service in and out of the war” (13). Westmoreland’s threat compelled in-country women correspondents to mount an organized campaign to maintain their hard-earned right to get the story. As the designated spokespersons for the group, ABC news reporter Anne Morrissy and Ann Bryan, who worked for *Overseas Weekly*, convinced Defense Secretary Robert McNamara’s deputy assistant to back off of Westmoreland’s edict. Much as Kim Barker admits that she and other women correspondents today do not discuss their common challenges lest they “seem different from the male correspondents, more vulnerable,” the anti-Westmoreland crusade was the only time that female journalists in Vietnam banded together, the one time that they worked together as women.

By the middle of the war, women journalists were fully involved in coverage of all aspects of the war in Vietnam. Beverly Deepe, who graduated from stringer to official correspondent for the *Herald Tribune* and the *Christian Science Monitor* and who reported from Vietnam from 1962 until 1968, stayed in Vietnam longer than most journalists. It was Deepe whose stories on South Vietnamese politics and America’s role in the war inspired Pamela Sanders, who also started as a freelancer before affiliating with the *New York Times* and *Time* magazine, and who later translated her experiences into the daring, sexually promiscuous fictional

protagonist Miranda Pickerel. By the time of Westmoreland's 1967 unsuccessful attempt to prohibit women from covering operations, women journalists had proven in myriad ways that they were serious, competent, even risk-taking reporters: in November 1965, veteran war correspondent Dickey Chapelle had been killed in a Marine operation near Chu Lai. Frances FitzGerald, who spent ten months in-country in 1966 and '67, published the *Atlantic* article that she would expand into her multiple prize-winning book *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam*. In the later years of the war, Australian UPI correspondent Kate Webb would become the first woman to be formally affiliated with an American wire service; Webb would recount her 23-day captivity in Cambodia in her 1972 memoir, *On the Other Side: 23 Days with the Viet Cong*. In the early 1970s, Gloria Emerson did her second tour as a Vietnam journalist, this time as the *New York Times*' first female correspondent. Her 1977 book *Winners & Losers* was an early, trenchant commentary on the war.

One of the least-known but gripping stories of the Vietnam War, then, is the gradual, even grudging professionalization of the women who were lured to their generation's most compelling drama. By the end of the war, female journalists had defied male resistance at all levels, as well as imprisonment, danger and death, to emerge as full-fledged representatives of major newspapers, wire services, and television networks. And their post-war memoirs and assessments of the war rivaled books by Just and Sheehan and Halberstam as profound, influential analyses of the lost war. As Joyce Hoffmann asserts in *On Their Own: Women Journalists and the American Experience in Vietnam* about the first wave of female journalists who wandered to Southeast Asia in the early 1960s, "that women would attempt to appoint themselves to this mythic male pursuit, in an era that prized conformity—especially for women—above all else was nothing short of astonishing" (1). By the end of the war in 1975, Hoffmann suggests, "not only did women report on the Vietnam War, but they did so in defiance of the constraints their culture imposed on them; in the process, they helped change journalism." (8). And more: each of these women "embodies a larger dimension or deeper truth about American culture and history in the narrative of the Vietnam experience" (13).

Although women war correspondents became increasingly professional throughout the Vietnam era, fictional accounts of their experiences—Pamela Sanders' 1978 novel *Miranda* and Tatjana Soli's recent *The Lotus Eaters*—perhaps unsurprisingly—highlight the make-it-up-as-you-go adventures of the first wave of women who arrived in Vietnam early in the war.

In the mid-to-late 1960s Miranda Pickerel celebrates her thirtieth birthday in a small boat in Hawaii with her father, who has prevailed upon her to keep him company after the death of his wife, Miranda's stepmother. From this frame, the novel shifts back and forth in time as it recounts Miranda's life: her childhood in Manila, where her father works for a lumber company and where the family is interned by the Japanese in World War II; her teenaged "metamorphos[is]" into a "boy-crazy . . . werewolf of uncertain temper"; her unlikely column for a Filipino English-language newspaper—the journalism experience that will catapult Miranda, in the middle section of the novel, into Southeast Asia in the early years of the Vietnam War (54). Evoking the dissatisfaction with assignment to an innocuous women's beat expressed by several of the actual women journalists who went to Vietnam looking for the era's big story, Miranda defies her editor's instructions to write a society column. As she "ease[s] out of the gossip items and into politics and the social state of the nation," she loses her job, migrates to another newspaper, and runs into trouble there as well for missing deadlines (113). Professional disappointments only exacerbate Miranda's always-complicated personal life (casual sex; unsatisfactory affairs; the accidental death of her first real love, an American movie star). Enacting what will become a pattern throughout her young life, she flees, after convincing her paper to give her a letter of accreditation for an unlikely professional adventure: "The United States was going to war in Southeast Asia to defend the peace. The line . . . was to be drawn in Laos. . . . Where the hell was Laos?" (155). "It isn't the place for a woman," suggests Miranda's frustrated father (155). But the novice journalist, who believes that "one ought to see everything," spends the next several years in Southeast Asia as a stringer for Time-Life. The novel devotes considerable attention to Miranda's reportage on combat missions, on which she gradually demonstrates that she has the stamina and the fearlessness to keep up with the ground troops. The novel incorporates all of the roadblocks that the real-life female journalists recount: the "no latrines in the field" excuse, the Colonel who refuses to authorize "goddamn women" on combat missions, the Special Forces captain who insists that "you haven't got any business here. . . . This is war. For men only. You're supposed to be home baking brownies for us" (259, 224, 269). But after a week on patrol with the Green Berets north of Kontum, near the Laotian border, Miranda has proved herself: she matches the men drink for drink as they celebrate Christmas Eve in a Montagnard village with "warm fermented rice wine laced with urine, Tabasco, and a fifth of Wild Turkey" (271). She wrangles a python, learns to shoot "every weapon they had" (277), has sex with the Special Forces captain in a swimming hole near Dak To, and is formally welcomed into another tribe as a blood brother.

After a week, the charmed and impressed enlisted men present her with camouflage fatigues to wear on patrol, and on New Year's Day, 1963, with the Green Beret patrol outnumbered and outflanked by the Viet Cong, Miranda is dispatched, with a Montagnard guide and an M-16 rifle, to return to the base camp for assistance. By late 1963, Miranda has published her stories in *Time* magazine; parried wits with the Dragon lady Madame Nhu; and had casual sex with Zimmerman, the *New York Times* correspondent obviously based on David Halberstam, and affairs with the married bureau chief for *Time* and with the president of Indonesia. A year later, after tagging along on a near-disastrous Air Force dive-bombing run and eluding a knife-wielding Laotian princess who finds her in bed with the princess's French lover, Miranda returns to the United States with hopes for a stateside job with *Time* magazine that never materializes.

Though a more credible, if more dour, character than the callow Miranda, Helen Adams, the photojournalist protagonist of Tatjana Soli's novel *The Lotus Eaters*, shares her earlier fictional sister's ill-defined motivation for going to the war as well as her initially dubious credentials as a journalist. Helen drops out of college and travels to Saigon in late 1965 because her Special Forces brother had been killed in Vietnam the year before and her father had died in Korea in 1950, but early in the novel she rejects a suitor who offers marriage and a comfortable life in New Orleans by declaring that "I came to Saigon to escape all that." (72).

Like *Miranda*, *The Lotus Eaters* presents the details of Helen's ten-year sojourn in Vietnam within a frame. The novel opens with the fall of Saigon, in April 1975. After a decade of photographing the war, Helen has "lost faith in the power of pictures," but "the work had become an end in itself, untethered to results or outcomes" (5). Helen falls in love with Vietnam; eventually with Linh, her Vietnamese assistant; and with what she calls "the drug of war": "One stayed at first for glory, then excitement, then later it was pure endurance and proficiency; one couldn't imagine doing anything else. But there was something more . . . one felt a camaraderie in war, an urgency of connection impossible to duplicate in regular life. She felt more human when life was on the edge" (355).

Though Helen lingers in Vietnam longer than most of the women journalists on whom she is modeled, and her romantic commitment to a Vietnamese man is apparently unprecedented, the details of her experiences bespeak the research of her story's author, who appends to her novel the statement that "this is a work of imagination inspired by real people and events" and a bibliography of books about Vietnam, including Dickey Chapelle's 1962 autobiography about her early career, *What's a Woman Doing Here?*, and Kate Webb's memoir about her brief experience

as a prisoner of war (387). Indeed, many of Helen's experiences and characteristics mimic elements of the Vietnam experiences of Chapelle, Webb, Beverly Deepe, Elizabeth Pond, and the other female journalists who relate their stories in *War Torn* or are included in the non-fiction accounts by Hoffmann and Elwood-Akers. The doomed relationship with the married reporter; the incapacitating fear the first time under fire; the slow progress toward professional success. When she finally convinces a reluctant military command to let her go on a combat mission, Helen, who jettisons her flak jacket so that she can keep up with the patrol but wears a flower in her bush hat and (like Dickey Chapelle) pearl earrings, photographs dying GIs with the film that she protects in condoms. When she takes photos of an ARVN captain executing a Vietnamese peasant—despite the angry ARVN's threat to kill her—she is dismissed from the patrol. But the photos that get her ejected from combat land on the cover of *Life* magazine, and *Life* introduces Helen as “their first woman combat photographer for the Vietnam war” (141). Soon, Helen becomes the story, and “photo teams from the States wanted to go out and photograph her photographing the war.” (143). Helen resists the celebrity—and thus avoids the questionable media attention that real-life correspondents Denby Fawcett, Beverly Deepe, and their colleagues received in an October 1966 *Time* magazine profile entitled “Correspondents: Femininity at the Front.” The *Time* article introduces “tanned and shapely blue-eyed blonde” Fawcett, who is “one of Saigon's most eligible females, (though) she has little time for socializing” because “she is usually chasing down front-line action. When Viet Cong bullets began spattering around her near Danang, she took pictures first, cover second.” On a search-and-clear mission with the Green Berets, the article notes, French correspondent Michele Ray “got leeches on her long, lovely legs” while the Green Berets got fifteen Viet Cong. Unlike Helen Adams, the real correspondents apparently welcomed the press attention: “Once the sound of a not-too-near mortar shell prompted four Marines to fling themselves over [Fawcett] ‘protectively.’ Says she: ‘They’re always doing cute things like that in the field.’” And Beverly Deepe accepts the soldiers’ expectation that she “be a living symbol of the wives and sweethearts they left at home. Always it’s more important to wear lipstick than a pistol,” she admits. Perhaps the most enduring consequence of women’s presence in the Vietnam press corps is the impossibility of imagining today that Lara Logan or Christiane Amanpour would expound in print on the necessity of wearing lipstick while under fire.

Though Helen Adams resists becoming a celebrity journalist in *The Lotus Eaters*, by the end of the war and her long dalliance in Vietnam, she is a legend; the male journalists call her “Helen of Saigon” (5). Like long-lived soldiers who have

beaten the odds, she is rumored to be charmed. The novel is not entirely clear—as Helen herself is not—why she has come to Vietnam and stayed so long. In part, she is there because “if it’s not photographed, it didn’t happen.” (68) At her best, she feels that she is “at the source of history in the making,” and, borrowing a phrase coined by Dickey Chapelle, “an interpreter of violence.” (251). But by the end of the war, she recognizes that she has lingered in Vietnam because “like a snake swallowing its own tail, war created an appetite that could be fed only on more war” (352). In the title of the novel, the book’s epigraph, and references (such as “Helen of Saigon”) throughout, Soli summons Odysseus and Homer’s saga of the warrior who is delayed and distracted as he journeys home from the fields of fire. The post-Vietnam lives of the journalists who recount their stories in *War Torn* varied dramatically. Some, like FitzGerald and Webb and Emerson returned, like Odysseus, to tell the story of war. Some, like Edith Lederer, went on to report on later wars from other dangerous spots around the world. Others retired from journalism and have lived more conventional lives. Most have testified to the lingering power of the episode in their lives. More culturally and socially significant are the persistent effects of their experience in our lives. As Hoffmann writes, “in Vietnam, women established that their skills, courage, and fortitude entitled them to be considered for any newsroom assignment. What distinguishes these Vietnam-era journalists from their predecessors who covered earlier wars are their numbers and their success in creating a widespread acceptance of the female war correspondent” (5).

The story of female correspondents in Vietnam is largely absent from scholarly histories and commentaries on the role of the press in the war. William Hammond virtually ignores women reporters in his 1998 study, *Reporting Vietnam*. In his 1995 book, *Once Upon a Distant War: David Halberstam, Neil Sheehan, Peter Arnett—Young War Correspondents and Their Early Vietnam Battles*, William Prochnau writes briefly about Marguerite Higgins, Beverly Deepe, and Pamela Sanders (whom he calls a “one-woman Christmas show”), but he essentially dismisses the women’s presence in the press corps with the conclusion that “vagabonds, adventurers, wanderers, and drifters of all sorts found quick, if not enriching, piecework in the backwaters of Southeast Asia” (206-7, 114). Contemporary female journalists like Lara Logan may continue to struggle to convince producers and editors that they can effectively report from dangerous locales, but their campaign was advanced immeasurably by the redoubtable women who brought you the Vietnam War.

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