

Let There Be Light

Mary Beth Callie

"From my own experiences, I feel strongly that the public ought to know if the Army and Navy are acting as Congressional shock troops for a vested interest in war...The people surely have some way to check the activities of civil servants — of whatever department — who use a public trust not for the benefit of their country, but primarily for the benefit of those private concerns which are motivated only by profits."

— Dorothy Detzer, 1948

In the beginning of the 21st century, as military corporations and compliant public officials continue to drive the United States into war, the WILPF Challenge Corporate Power, Assert the People's Rights Campaign finds inspiration in the efforts of "the WIL" between World War I and World War II, and particularly in the contributions of Dorothy Detzer, executive secretary of WILPF from 1920-1947. Like Jane Addams and other WILPF women, she recognized that achieving peace and freedom in the world necessitated work that exposed and challenged the relationships and practices of a militarist political economy.

Detzer's memoir of her experiences, *An Appointment on the Hill*, was published in 1948. At that time *The New York Times* described Detzer as "the most famous woman lobbyist" and *The Nation* cited her on its "Honor Roll" several times. Throughout the book, Detzer described herself as a lobbyist who suggested legislation, drafted bills, wrote speeches, and organized hearings. She also testified before Congress on behalf of WILPF and other peace organizations. As the title of the book suggests, Detzer had an extraordinary level of access to top government officials, including President Roosevelt, the Assistant Deputy Secretary of State, and members of the U.S. Congress.

During the First World War, the whole Detzer family was immersed in war activities, but for young Dorothy, Hull House became her "home front." It was at Hull House, working with Jane Addams, that Detzer was first introduced to the concept of nonviolence, and began to question the declared purpose of the War ("to make the world safe for democracy"). Subsequent years of humanitarian work abroad led her to become a Quaker, and on returning to the States, she assumed the secretaryship of WILPF.

Central to Detzer's work was her faith in the legislative process as the cornerstone of American political democracy. Despite the clumsy government machinery, the moneyed interests, and the unethical lobbyists, Detzer appreciated the work and commitment of Congress. She also had an underlying faith that "powerful interests can be checked and controlled by the will of an active and alert citizenship." But, in order to check and control those interests, she believed that citizens needed "more light." Detzer made it clear that as she lobbied on behalf of WILPF for the causes of peace and disarmament, she was ultimately a lobbyist for "light." She held that "*Light* is needed to clarify issues and to expose for the public the conflicting forces shaping a national policy" (emphasis added).

Detzer also believed that "cause lobbyists" were committed to full disclosure, as opposed to secrecy, and to the "overt practice of petition" rather than "the covert practice of concealment" common among business and government lobbyists. From the 1920s to the 1930s, the most prominent "cause lobbyists" were pacifist groups such as Fellowship for Reconciliation, National Council for the Prevention of War and National Council of Women. Like other women in WILPF, Detzer was a member of other groups.

She was probably best known as the woman who convinced Congress to pursue the Munitions Industry Investigations in 1933. Although WILPF and other peace groups had called for armament hearings since WWI, the 1932 breakdown of the World Disarmament Conference in Geneva and escalating conflict between China and Japan appear to have brought the issue to the forefront.

As an immediate response to the Asian conflict, WILPF advocated legislation that included an arms embargo for nations at war. Representative Hamilton Fish of New York also asked Detzer to organize congressional hearings on the issue. Yet after the hearings were abruptly and inexplicably cancelled, she found evidence linking the munitions industry to the State Department. An article buried in the *Washington Times* described how large quantities of nitrates — believed to be headed for the Chinese-Japanese conflict — had been shipped from the Atmospheric Nitrogen Company (ANC) in Virginia. Detzer then discovered ANC was a subsidiary of Allied Chemical and Dye Company, which was interlocked



Dorothy Detzer, executive secretary of WILPF from 1920-1947.

Courtesy, Swarthmore College archives