

Political prisoners and lesbian resistance

An interview with Linda Evans, Laura Whitehorn and Susan Rosenberg

By Jennie McKnight

Laura Whitehorn, Susan Rosenberg, and Linda Evans are three of six political activists being held in the D.C. jail on charges of conspiracy "to oppose, obstruct or change the foreign and domestic policies of the U.S. government through violent or illegal means." They are specifically charged with aiding and abetting the bombing of a number of military/government buildings, resulting in property damage but no injuries. Although their case has not received much attention from the mainstream press, they are well-known

Jennie: Since we're so limited for time I thought maybe you should just say what's on your mind.

Linda: One thing that's real important to me — number one — I love *GCN*. I'm so glad you have a prisoners' program. I've gotten the newspaper almost since I was busted and, of course, I'd followed it before then, but it's really important; and I've always spread it around. There are all kinds of lesbians on my floor that love to read it. We all really appreciate it.

One of the things I've felt was important about our case is that four of us are women, and it means something that women have been indicted for fighting the government. And two of us are out lesbians. Both Laura and I — from the beginning of being busted — have made that very plain in all of our public statements, and in all of the literature that we put out about the case. We have worked in the gay and lesbian community as well as around women's issues in the women's liberation movement for years and years, and to us this is very connected to why we consider ourselves anti-imperialists and are willing to fight to change the government as a whole.

I consider myself a revolutionary, trying to change things *fundamentally*. So I feel like it's important for me as a lesbian to talk to other women and other lesbians about why it is that we need such fundamental changes. Why I don't think that reforming the educational system, or welfare programs, or even people's consciousness is going to be enough. The kind of oppression that we face, as women and as dykes, is so *basic* to how the system runs. [Until we restructure our whole society] we're never going to have a chance for equality, much less liberation, much less [the ability] to really maximize our potential as human beings — to live freely with other women, and not be beat up, all the stuff that everybody that reads *GCN* is so familiar with in our daily lives.

It's important for people who feel that they can come out to come out publicly. I love National Coming Out Day.

Jennie: It's today.

Linda: It is today! I think it's real important. And everybody can't do it because of the kind of oppression that we run into over and over again. But for those of us who feel strong enough, who have the kind of sup-

Organize and Win. One of my favorite slogans is "Build to Win," which is a slogan from the Black Liberation Army. They have always had a perspective that really is about victory. It's really important that the gay liberation movement has taken that on in such a serious way — that *winning* is what we really want to do, not just make a protest or make reforms.

Jennie: You have emphasized the importance of how people experience their daily lives, could you talk about conditions here, your experience as a dyke....

Linda: One thing I'd like to talk about is AIDS. In prison the effect of AIDS is devastating. The way I've encountered it was in Pleasanton [Federal Penitentiary] where Laura and I worked together. We had made a decision [to refuse to be tested for HIV antibodies.] We felt it was worth going to the hole [isolation] over, and [we knew we faced] possibly not even getting out of the hole. A lot of times what they'll do is just keep you there until you actually do the test. Other prisoners were also [resisting the test].

But the *outcome* of the testing is what's really insidious, because people are being denied parole — they're being denied release. They're being kept in prison to *die*, instead of being released into the community. And one of the things about having AIDS in prison is that it *is* a death sentence, because there's no treatment. I mean on the street it's hard enough to struggle for alternative treatments, to try to get the FDA to release the treatments that are available, to be able to have any kind of control over your own situation.

But in prison, you're immediately isolated, so you have none of the human contact that relieves stress and that helps you have a positive attitude — which is a lot of what it takes to fight anything like that. And you have no treatment at all. You're basically isolated and left to die. And I think you probably die quicker. And your life is absolutely miserable. [People with AIDS in prison] have no programs and no hope.

Jennie: How about AIDS education efforts?

Linda: There's nothing. There is nothing. The sole piece of education that's done in the federal system is a video that is completely inadequate. I mean, I know some things about AIDS from just being part of the movement — even though I'm in prison

ing gay. And then, they're transferred into some kind of medical facility where they're isolated and left to die.

Susan Rosenberg spent almost two years in the Lexington High Security Unit — a state-of-the-art behavior modification women's prison which was closed last year when a judge ruled the conditions there were unacceptable. I was struck by the obvious toll that experience had taken on her, which doesn't come through fully when the interview is rendered in print.

Susan was also required to conduct the interview in chains. Her sentence is 58 years.

Susan: I just want to tell you I love your paper (*GCN*). I've been reading it for two years, and I like it better than probably 90 percent of the papers I read. It would be good for your readers to understand that as a group of people and as a case we're completely dedicated to gay and lesbian liberation. All of us. And it's part of who we are and our politics. But in terms of the most explicit identification I feel like Linda's has been the longest and clearest and out the most. And she suffers the most as a result of it.

Jennie: I know one of the things people would be very interested to hear about is the experience you had at Lexington. I don't know if that's something you're interested in talking about...

Susan: Yes, I did want to talk about Lexington, though I'm certainly getting tired of talking about Lexington. How can I talk about it in a few minutes? Lexington really was an experiment in psychological torture by the U.S. government against women political prisoners. The kind of forces in our government that were responsible for Lexington are the very forces that have brought this case. I would call them "counter-insurgency forces" — elements in the government that want to teach a lesson.

Lexington was an experiment, and it didn't work, in the sense that I think people in the U.S. who have some growing consciousness around human rights really struggled to expose it. The government didn't want to pursue it in quite as blatant a fashion, because it was so clear what it was. The thing is that it's been done in many countries all over the world for many years and there have been other forms of

Laura and Linda are lesbians who have been active in the lesbian/gay and women's movements. And along with Susan, they have acted in support of Puerto Rican independence and Black liberation, among other issues. I interviewed them in the D.C. jail on Oct. 11, 1988 when I was in town for the various lesbian/gay and AIDS activist events taking place that weekend. It was the first time I had ever visited the jail, despite the fact that I had lived about 10 blocks away from it for over five years. And I felt a deep sense of irony as I drove from the highly-energized civil disobedience in Rockville, Maryland — where activists were risking spending a few hours or days in jail — to see women who would spend the majority of their lives in prison.

I also felt an ambivalence about the interviews themselves, about talking only with "political prisoners." While I think the treatment these women have received sends a chilling message to those engaged in militant political activism, I also feel uncomfortable about the distinction between "political prisoners" and prisoners who are considered the "general population." It makes it easy to think that politics have nothing to do with the justice system as a whole and who goes to prison in this country.

I was not allowed to interview all three women at once, so the following are excerpts of separate interviews. They do not appear in the order in which they were conducted. The other three co-defendants in the case, who are also in the D.C. jail, are Marilyn Buck, Alan Berkman and Tim Blunk.

Because of bad communication on the part of the prison officials overseeing the interviews, Linda and I were only able to talk for a few minutes. Both Laura and Susan had said they thought Linda's comments were especially important for GCN readers because she has been such an outspoken lesbian activist.

Linda was already serving a 45-year sentence on other charges related to her activism when the conspiracy charges were brought against her. Anytime she is out of her cell she must wear handcuffs and leg shackles.

Jennie: Do you have any thoughts about the civil disobedience action to protest the lack of AIDS treatments that happened at the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) today and the new kind of militant AIDS activism?

Linda: I love it! I only wish I could have been there today. The slogan "Action Equals Life" is a really positive slogan, because to me revolution is about taking power over your own life. And you have to start wherever you can. Coming out itself is one. But for people to really band together and to act collectively in a militant way is a very empowering thing to do. That's one of the things I have watched most happily — all the ACT UP stuff, the ACT NOW coalition that has formed. Militance is part of being serious about your goals. It isn't just a protest, it isn't just symbolic. People really are trying to take power over their lives immediately, and then, eventually, politically over our society to make the kind of basic changes we need.

I just recently understood that ACT NOW meant [AIDS Coalition to] Network,



Linda Evans

clean a needle. They won't teach people how to clean works. Bleach you can't even get. So forget anything about sex education or anything about safe sex, because they just pretend it doesn't exist.

So it means that the education that is done is the most superficial. [The video offers] nothing about prevention, and only tries to alleviate some of the most mythologic aspects of people's fears about AIDS. And it doesn't do that very well. The video is like 20 minutes long, boring, done at the end of a long day of orientation, and nobody pays any attention to it.

And prisoners' efforts to educate each other about AIDS are completely opposed and squashed. I know this is true in the state system, because some of our political comrades in New York state — Kathy Boudin and David Gilbert — have tried to start these programs, and they have been immediately transferred away from the collectives of other prisoners that they were working with. So it just disperses all the energy from the program itself. [So], even though people are dying of AIDS at the highest rate in the whole prison system, there's nothing. It's an epidemic on the street, but it's really an epidemic inside also — especially in state prisons where there's probably a much higher incidence of people coming in with habits, with drug histories, etc., than in some of the places where I've been in the federal system.

Jennie: How have people with AIDS and ARC and who are HIV antibody-positive interacted with other prisoners?

Linda: They're ostracized and transferred. That's what happens. Most of the people I've met that have had AIDS or ARC in prison have been gay men, and their situation *anyway* is so abysmal, because they're used as prostitutes; they're attacked. It's very hard for them to have any kind of lasting relationships. And generally what happens is that as soon as it's found out [that they have AIDS, ARC or are antibody-positive] there's rumors about them that are very destructive. They're attacked more and ostracized more than [they were] just for be-

got set back [when the unit was closed.]

Jennie: Maybe you could talk a little bit about the specific conditions — how they contributed to what you call "the experiment" — and the physical, emotional and psychological effects they had on you.

Susan: Well, it was a sensory deprivation unit and there was what's called "small group isolation." Small group isolation has now been condemned by most human rights organizations around the world — including the United Nations — as a form of "malevolent maltreatment" — that's the terminology they use. There were five [of us] who lived together in a 16-cell underground unit for almost two years with no social contact with anyone other than the Bureau of Prisons officials. Immediate family were allowed to visit for a limited number of hours a month. No work. No recreation. No life. And I think that in a dark basement that was a hell of a thing — in the sense that you have to rely almost solely on what you have in your heart and your mind in order to survive. That's a problem for *all* prisoners, but when you're in "general population" you at least have social interaction. What they wanted to do in Lexington was bury us alive. So the conditions were designed to do that.

Fortunately for us they put three political women together, so our strength was in our unity. And we could survive that, I think, because we really *understood* why they were doing it to us. I was one of the first two women to get there, with Alejandrina Torres, a Puerto Rican *independentista* and prisoner of war. She and I were brought there together, and for the first two-and-a-half months were the only people there. When we were first brought there they told me that the only way I would be able to leave the unit [or get transferred to another prison] was if I changed my political associations and affiliations.

Jennie: Right out there?

Susan: Right out there! I couldn't quite believe it. You know, I thought, this is America. Hey, you know...I tried so hard to

get them to put it in writing. So I put it in writing and made an affidavit about it because it was just so obvious.

I still have not yet fully determined all the effects. I think the first, the main effects are physical. You get sick. You would think that you wouldn't have a lot of confrontation, being in isolation and being with the police 24 hours a day, under 24-hour visual and auditory surveillance ... *everything* is a confrontation. To get a cup of water, you know, you had to have a fight because you couldn't get it yourself. To go outside for an hour a day — which was what we were allowed — was a big fight everyday.

So the tendency is to narrow your needs more and more and more so that you don't have as much conflict. And because we were really in a rage quite a lot of the time with all this happening to us, everyone did get sick in some physical form. I lost 25 pounds there. I had a lot of vision problems as a result. And Alejandrina — she had a heart condition to begin with — significantly worsened as a result and had to be put on medication. And Silvia Baraldini, the other woman who was there — also a political prisoner — developed a rare form of uterine cancer. I wouldn't say [the cancer] was totally induced by the conditions of Lexington, but the neglect was very profound there, and it created a life-threatening situation for her.

And so we all suffered from what they call "classical" physical symptoms of solitary confinement: dizziness, heart palpitations, weight loss, fatigue — because of the inactivity and isolation. Unless you dropped something on the ground so you could hear it, it was silent. It was white. It was 11 surveillance cameras. Constant glare. And nothing.

You know, the body goes before the spirit. And it definitely happened to us. And I can only think and say that all the efforts to expose Lexington and to stop it really made a difference.

I think it's harder to talk about the mental level. But I think fundamentally we were able to sort of *resist* what their designs were because they had a group of us together. And it meant that we could reinforce our womanness. That was a very big deal, that we were women and we wouldn't let them take that away from us.

Jennie: Did you have any ability to communicate with each other?

Susan: Yes, all the time. And we did. And we



(L-R) Alejandrina Torres, Susan Rosenberg and Silvia Baraldini in the Women's High Security Unit at Lexington

have any contact with other prisoners?

Susan: The thing that's weird about it is that we [Susan and Linda] live in general population units although we are locked up in our cells. So we are in solitary confinement in the physical space, but there's a hole in my door that's three feet wide by six inches; and I live right next to the shower, so 140 people walk by. It's a strange way to live, but it's definitely a social environment. I've seen more people here in four months than I have in four years of prison.

Jennie: As a political prisoner, what's your experience been here with general population prisoners? And how are you treated differently by the people who run the jail?

Susan: [Well, here's an example of our experience.] This is a Black city and a Black jail. Out of 140 people on my block, there are six white women prisoners. That's it. So when we got here, the administration put out to the general population — they actually had meetings on the tiers where we were going to be housed — that we were in the Ku Klux Klan, and that we were rightwingers and that we had tried to bomb Jesse Jackson.

administration should take us out of special handling.

So the prison administration and the U.S. government understand that they have to keep us isolated. In this situation, doing that actually backfired because it drew more attention to us. But you know that's how it always works with these people [officials]. They're smart and they have state power but they're also stupid.

Laura Whitehorn is the only one of the three who was not shackled when we met. She is not subject to this "special handling," in part because she is not actually serving time for a conviction. She has been held for over three years awaiting trial, which means she has spent more time in pre-trial detention than any other political prisoner in this country.

After we met, Laura sent GCN a couple of her poems and a copy of the solidarity statement she and her five co-defendants wrote which was read at the lesbian and gay rally held outside the Dept. of Health and Human Services Oct. 10. The interview picks up here after Laura described her early involvement in feminist activism in Boston including a story on the signing of a Man

who gets arrested, who's on drugs because they have no options in their lives, women separated from their children, prostitutes who shouldn't be locked up at all.... [I feel] also, however, a great joy in being with women.

Another thing, of course, is that lesbian relationships are so distorted in prison — for many, many reasons. The prison police permit [lesbian relationships] to a certain extent. As long as you'll do certain things, like [take on] roles.... The prison police are the mothers and fathers and we're the babies. Also you're in a position of intense vulnerability because if you get a disciplinary report for homosexuality, it's considered a very serious act. Sex is permitted, but sexuality is smashed.

Jennie: As long as we're on the subject of your interaction with other women prisoners, what's it been like to be a "political prisoner"?

Laura: Well, I was locked up for a year or so in general prison population with regular prisoners. So I wrote to friends and asked them to send me some political literature to hand out. But most of it was irrelevant to the other prisoners. The only thing that



Susan Rosenberg

sang. We did as much as we could to have a collective life of resistance to what they were doing.

Jennie: You have written about the sexual violation of women prisoners...

Susan: They really did that at a heavy level in Lexington. Before Alejandrina and I were moved to Lexington they did a forced rectal and cavity search of us. It was an actual attack on us. I think they knew that there was no contraband. They told us that they were doing it because they were looking for contraband. We asked them to do an X-ray — which is an option in the Bureau of Prisons so that you don't get sexually abused by them. It was a very serious, painful, disgusting experience, and it took five women to subdue us enough for them to conduct this ridiculous search — which wasn't a search at all. I think the point of it was to create some kind of terror so that when we got to Lexington we and the other women there lived with the *threat* of that happening at any point along the way. And the sexual harassment and invasion at Lexington was a constant thing.

Jennie: You said you were essentially in isolation here [in the D.C. jail] now. Do you

So in the beginning we felt very threatened. And of course it's a *total* affront to us, since the opposite is what we're about and what we stand for.

Given the fear induced by the administration about us, it took a long time for us to break that down. I ended up standing at my door listening to a guard talking to a group of women about how I was in the Klan and screaming at the top of my lungs, "This is a goddammed lie! We're in prison because we're against racism, we're against this system and everything that you as a guard stand for!" Everybody on the block turned around and looked, and over the next week, people started to come to my door and say "Who the hell are you? What are you doing here?"

I would say now people have a lot of respect for us, and understand better. We have to struggle; we have to organize. And that's part of why they put us in isolation — in the control units — because they know we represent something different. The population sees that. At this point, people come by and we have a lot of good talk. We've given out books. In that sense I feel very good. When we were petitioning the judge around our classification, 60 women on our block signed a petition saying that they didn't feel afraid of us and they thought that the ad-

Day in 1971. The action led to the establishment of a women's center in Cambridge.

Laura: It was in [the early 1970's] that I came out. I didn't really recognize my oppression as a woman first. First I recognized in my life that I hated racism. I was part of the civil rights movement, and then in the '70s after being in the anti-war movement and supporting the Black Panther Party, I recognized that it was my own oppression as a woman that had opened me up to identifying with other oppressed peoples — to hate injustices like racism. For me coming out was a very political act.

Jennie: How has your being a lesbian affected your incarceration?

Laura: Two ways, I think. One is: because I'm a lesbian, my politics are so living and breathing to me. It's like I'm fighting for my life. I identify with the struggles [of AIDS activists] that are going on in the streets of the city right now today, because we're fighting for our lives....

The other thing is that because I love women so much, being incarcerated with women is a very painful experience. The oppression of women is so raw and blatant:

when I re-read them, I couldn't understand them either. So I had to communicate who I was through how I acted.

In here [D.C. jail] it's been even more interesting. The jail refers to us as terrorists, telling the other prisoners that we are dangerous. People weren't permitted to speak to us. They told lies to people about who we were. They told them that we had threatened Jesse Jackson's life.

But some of the women knew me from other jails and knew that that wasn't true. And then as people began to be curious and began to talk to us, it became clear that that's not who we were. We spend a lot of time pointing out that it's the government that kills and does things illegally, and is allowing people to die of AIDS, etc.

There's a continuing attempt to keep us divided from other prisoners. It's so hard for them to do this because of our burning passion to talk to people about who we are, and also because the prisoners here have a lot of heart. They're not afraid. When we were first in here there were signs up that said: "Do not go near Cell 1." And people would do it anyway. It's a learning experience for us too....

They lead us around in shackles, trying to make us look — even to the other prisoners

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Laura Whitehorn

JEB

JEB

Prisoners

Continued from centerspread

— as if we were dangerous. It's part of the government's way of saying there are no social movements in this country. There are no injustices, therefore there are no political prisoners. There are just dangerous terrorists and criminals. That's the basic thing — more than the actual prison conditions. That's how they try to keep us separated from each other too.

...We're down the hall from Oliver North's trial. He goes into the courtroom wearing a flag. They're putting cameras and a bullet-proof shield in our courtroom and we're wearing chains. We're surrounded by marshalls, brought to the court by helicopters, and sirens and all.... The message to the movement is that if you really struggle, you're going to get squashed.

Jennie: I was at the civil disobedience at the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) this morning where the goal was to "seize control" of the FDA. Have you got any thoughts about the recent AIDS activism and its sense of urgency?

Laura: I have great respect... When I opened the *Washington Post* the other day and saw the picture of the Quilt, I just started to cry immediately. I think that's been very moving.... The gay movement is involved in this struggle for the right to live.

I'm so excited about the demonstration today. I feel like the gay movement over the last year has supplied a tremendous shot in the arm to the whole anti-imperialist movement, saying when you fight for your life, you *fight* for your life. And that's basically what we're talking about. For the past 20 years I've tried to dedicate myself to not sitting back and watching things that are illegal and immoral, but trying to do something about it. That's why we say "Resistance is not a crime." That's sort of our slogan.

Sisterhood is Powerful

Brenda has one cigarette, and shares it with a woman she's never seen before, who sits on her bedroll, abscesses freshly bandaged, thin



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And I, the communist, have learned to give not just the easy things but the hard, to give what I didn't think I had enough of, to give of myself. The only commodity left to me. you'd have to see it to believe how sisterhood is powerful.

Laura Whitehorn ☐

Chicago

Continued from page 3

ineffective and unwilling to take a strong stand on issues of importance to the community. "The bill's passage changes all that," said Garcia. "He needed to prove his ability to get council votes and he needed to connect with the community. He did both."

Despite Evans' long time support for the bill and Sawyer's recent support of the bill, activists say many white gay men and lesbians may vote for white candidates Bloom or Daley. "The community is still deeply divided along racial lines," said Garcia. Other activists told GCN that Daley and Bloom hope to capitalize on divisions among lesbian/gay, Black and other progressive voters to elect a white candidate.

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Safer Sex and Drug Use Guidelines

Assessing individual risk for AIDS and other illnesses is the first step towards using safer sex and drug use guidelines. Only you and your partner(s) can decide how much risk is acceptable — take stock of your sexual and drug use histories.

Be aware that the highest concentrations of HIV (the virus widely thought to cause AIDS) are found in blood and semen. The most common routes of HIV transmission are through sharing needles and unprotected anal or vaginal intercourse.

GCN's guidelines come from a wide variety of sources aimed at various communities concerned about the AIDS epidemic and health in general. We want to confront the prevailing "no sex is best" attitude and present an approach that is as sex-positive as possible.

Information for gay male, lesbian and bisexual communities

Safer sex can include: massage, hugging, kissing, erotic talk, phone sex, masturbation (solo, pairs and groups), using your own vibrators, dildos or other sex toys and s/m, butch/fem role-playing, fantasy scenes, bondage and other activities that do not involve the exchange of semen or blood (including menstrual blood).

Do not allow a partner's semen or blood (including menstrual blood and blood drawn from piercing, cutting or shaving) to enter your vagina, anus, mouth or breaks in your skin.

Use condoms for fucking (anal and vaginal intercourse), for licking/sucking penises and for covering dildos and other sex toys. Use water-based lubricants. Use latex barriers (dental dams or other plastic/latex materials) between the genital area and mouth when licking/sucking cunts and assholes. Be especially careful to avoid the exchange of menstrual blood. Using nonoxynol-9 or other spermicides with condoms and latex barriers may add extra protection.

For finger-fucking or fisting (anal or vaginal

lubricants.

Alternative insemination may put you at risk. Be sure to discuss risk for AIDS with potential donors or sperm bank.

Be aware that some risk of exposure to immune-suppressing infections (such as mono and amoebiasis) may be associated with rimming (anal-oral contact) — use a latex barrier. Risk may also be associated with watersports (urine) or feces in the mouth, rectum or in open cuts. If you share dildos, vibrators or other sex toys, use condoms or clean toys with hydrogen peroxide.

Your body's ability to fight all disease, including AIDS and its related illnesses (such as Kaposi's Sarcoma and pneumocystis carinii pneumonia), may be benefitted by general good health — good nutrition, lots of rest, exercise and nonabuse of alcohol, poppers and other drugs.

If you use IV drugs, follow the guidelines below.

Intravenous drug use

Do not share works (needles, syringes, droppers, spoons, cottons or cookers).

Do not re-use needles; use fresh cottons each time.

If you must share or re-use your works, clean them as follows: dip needle and works into 100 percent bleach, draw up and release three times, dip needle and works into water, draw up and release three times (in an emergency, rubbing alcohol, vodka or wine can also be used). As an alternative, boil works in water for at least fifteen minutes. Use a fresh solution each time you clean your works.

Resource phone numbers

National AIDS Hotline: 1 (800) 342-7514
AIDS Action Committee (AAC) Boston: (617) 536-7733
Latino AIDS Hotline (bilingual), Boston: (617) 262-7248
AIDS Action Committee (AAC) IV Drug Use Taskforce, Boston: (617) 437-4200
Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), New York: (212) 807-6655
National Minority AIDS Council (NMAC), Washington, D.C.: (202) 544-1076
Women's AIDS Network, San Francisco: (415) 864-4376