

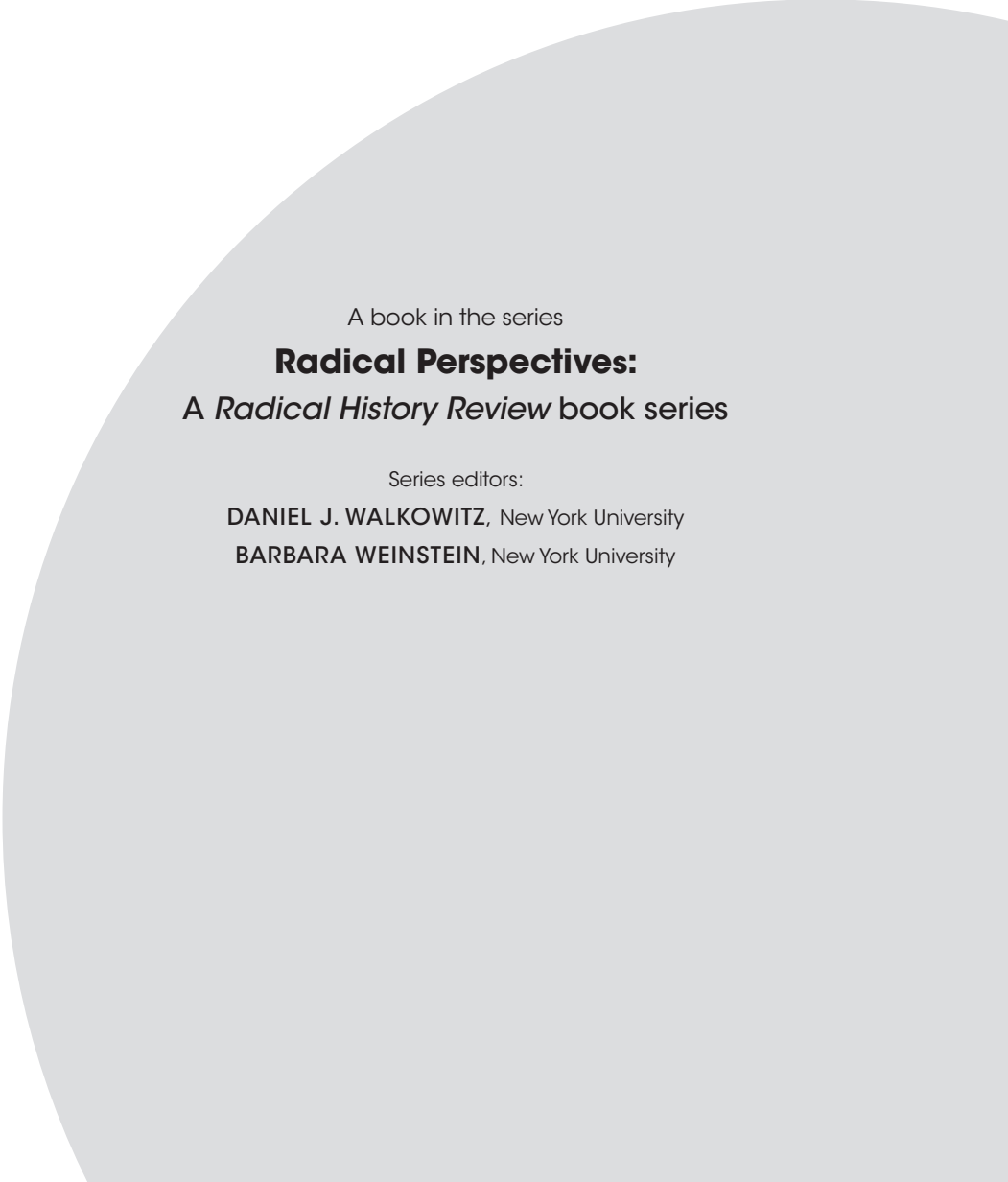


Radical Play

REVOLUTIONIZING
CHILDREN'S TOYS
IN 1960s AND
1970s AMERICA
ROB GOLDBERG



RADICAL PLAY



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Radical Play

**ROB
GOLDBERG**

Revolutionizing
Children's Toys in
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Cover photograph by the author.

In loving memory of my father,
Edwin Goldberg

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Introduction

Victoria Reiss's home in 1960s New York City was a tolerant one when it came to her sons' play, with one exception: no war toys. To Reiss, a white Barnard College graduate and mother of three boys who was active in New York's peace movement (among other progressive causes), toy machine guns were symbols of war's horrors and little else; if her sons wanted to play war with sticks, that was different. But house rules end at one's doorstep. Reiss could expect the local toy store to stock war toys, but when her family pediatrician did too—a small arsenal in his waiting room, amid the puzzles and dolls—she had had enough. As the escalating US war in Vietnam began to occupy Reiss's attention, she made her private struggle against war toys public. As the cofounder and leader of Parents for Responsibility in the Toy Industry and, later, cofounder of the Public Action Coalition on Toys, Reiss staged pickets against toy guns outside the annual Toy Fair and gave awards to shops that agreed not to stock them. From the doctor's office to the toy industry headquarters, Reiss used toys to raise uncomfortable questions about war's everyday acceptance, not in isolation from the peace movement but as her own contribution to the cause.¹

Lou Smith, meanwhile, came to toys by way of other movements transforming America in these years: civil rights and Black Power. From the Harlem office of the Congress of Racial Equality, to the Freedom Summer Project in Mississippi, to Los Angeles after the 1965 Watts Rebellion, Smith, who was Black, worked to improve the lives of his fellow Black Americans and overhaul the system that denied them equality. In the late 1960s, Smith was leading Operation Bootstrap, a unique self-help organization in South LA that set up small businesses as training sites for local men and women,

when he went searching for a large corporation to participate in the program. It was the nearby toy manufacturer Mattel, the largest toy company in the world, that answered his call. With Mattel's support, Smith and his colleagues founded Shindana Toys, with Smith as president. Employing the local Black community and putting politics into every phase of the toymaking process, Shindana revolutionized the practices of dollmaking. Thanks to Smith and his colleagues, all activists-turned-toymakers, the popular Black liberation slogan "Black Is Beautiful" would for the first time be translated into the world of children's toys.²

As it turns out, second-wave feminism had its toymakers too. In the early 1970s, Barbara Sprung, a white schoolteacher and graduate student at Bank Street College, began a part-time job for the Women's Action Alliance that changed her life and the lives of countless others. The women's movement had begun to challenge the traditional gender and sex norms in the toy business—and Sprung joined them. Bridging the teachings of child development with her existing feminist commitments, Sprung helped found the new field of nonsexist early childhood education and assigned toys a key role in the curriculum. When she couldn't find representational toys that met her socially progressive specifications—women and men in all roles, racial diversity, a variety of family structures—she followed in the footsteps of earlier progressive educators and, with the help of the Milton Bradley Company, made them herself. To Sprung, the prototypes she developed were not just for new toys but prototypes for a new society.³

What can these stories tell us about the meanings Americans attached to toys in the 1960s and 1970s? What led Reiss, Smith, Sprung, and other activists across the era's movements against war, racism, and sexism to see toys as useful tools for social change? And, finally, how did the industry make sense of, manage, and participate in this unique moment of consumer dissent and activist toymaking? In answering these questions, *Radical Play* locates a definitive moment in the production of American children's culture when the toy industry was tested, challenged, and ultimately transformed by the progressive social visions of the age. In the years between the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963 and the election of Jimmy Carter in 1976, the antiwar, civil rights, and feminist movements brought their political concerns to Toyland, turning toys into vehicles for protest and reform. As the United States escalated the conflict in Vietnam, members of the two leading women's peace groups launched an unprecedented war on war toys. In the years following the April 1968 assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Black Power community organizers and white racial liberals revitalized the Black freedom

tradition of using dolls for racial uplift and anti-racist education. And in the 1970s, white women leaders from the most influential organizations of liberal feminism attacked the toy industry for its rampant stereotyping and exclusions related to gender, race, and family structure. As the examples of Smith and Sprung attest, some of these activists went beyond protesting into the arena of production itself. By the end of the 1970s, the combined efforts of these different advocates for change had both altered what was on retailers' shelves and reshaped the interpretation of toys in American culture.

But they did not accomplish this alone. In fact, no one did more to facilitate these efforts to transform American toys and childhood than the corporate toy industry itself. In the 1960s and 1970s, that industry's leaders were almost entirely white and disproportionately Jewish, as had been the case for decades; indeed, most of the major companies I write about in the following pages were founded or cofounded by Jews and, at least during this era, led by Jewish executives (often one of the founders), including Lionel, Ideal, Fisher-Price, Hasbro, Mattel, Creative Playthings, Kenner, and Remco.⁴ In addition, while female executives ran three of the era's leading toy firms—Ruth Handler of Mattel, Lynn Pressman of Pressman Toy Corporation, and Min Horowitz of Gabriel Industries—the toy business as a whole was still largely male; the gendered term *toy man*, long used by and for professionals at all levels of the trade, was still part of industry speak. As I show, these toymakers engaged their era's social movements in diverse ways, using the tools of their trade. Some companies expressed their solidarity with activists' concerns through the creation of new products, like a liberated fashion doll, or by incorporating the language of antiwar or civil rights protest into their advertising. Others held press conferences to share their burgeoning social consciousness and apologize for past practices. One company president even left the industry's powerful trade association in protest of the association's failure to adopt a unified stance against war toys. And in a few remarkable instances, companies initiated and financed partnerships with the activists themselves. Such actions not only transformed their critics into allies, in some cases preemptively, but also empowered them to become toy entrepreneurs themselves. In the process, these toymakers created a new type of dialogue with the society around them and a theoretical win-win situation: an opportunity for producers and protesters alike to each achieve a kind of victory in the toy department. Starting in the 1960s, new groups outside the industry sought the right and the opportunity to participate in the business of children's toys. Through the public contestation and surprising collaborations that ensued, the cultural changes of the 1960s and 1970s took shape in the form of toys.

Toymakers may not have understood or articulated what they were doing as “politics,” yet it was. By incorporating messages of peace or racial equality into their latest toys and marketing campaigns, they helped advance the movements’ goals of translating the sixties imagination into children’s culture.⁵ Of course, the opposite was also true: when toymakers ignored the calls to integrate the doll shelves or pushed back against demands to eliminate sexist stereotypes, they were using their power not merely to foreclose that imagination but to preserve the white supremacist, heterosexist vision of society that had long reigned in the toy industry. When a toy salesman reacted to a 1964 public demonstration against war toys with the quip “I wonder what these dames let their boys play with? Dolls?” he was not just making a joke; he was showing his commitment to a traditional conception of white masculine identity development that the substitution of a (boy’s) toy gun with a (girl’s) doll threatened to disrupt.⁶



The politicization of play in the 1960s and 1970s rested on a series of new historical developments that redefined the status of children’s toys in American life in the decades after World War II. By the time the first major mobilizations around toys erupted in the mid-1960s, American parents faced a fundamentally different and all-encompassing consumer culture of children’s toys from what they knew in their own youth. Starting in the 1950s and continuing into the next decade, large-scale structural changes radically changed how the industry did business. Thanks to new mass-production techniques and new and cheaper plastics, as well as the rise of discount stores and the more efficient model of direct distribution they enabled, the toy business could offer a larger volume and variety of toys at historically low prices. Discount stores bought wholesale, cut out the traditional middleman role of the wholesaler (or jobber) in selecting toys, and removed the sales clerks. As prices dropped, these practices also reshaped the landscape of toy shopping. Toy departments of upscale department stores, independently owned toy shops, and variety retailers remained important venues for toy buying, but they also were increasingly displaced by new toy discount mart chains such as Toys “R” Us, founded in 1957.⁷

If these trends built a new suburban consumer landscape of shopping centers and malls, the 1950s toy industry was also now able to reach potential shoppers at home. While radio had been around since the 1930s, the birth of televised advertising took that ability to a whole new level: TV not only allowed manufacturers to reach consumers in the comfort of their living rooms

but also provided an opportunity for them to visually demonstrate a product rather than just telling the family about it. By the early 1960s, when nine out of ten Americans had at least one TV in their home, televised marketing had been adopted by every major manufacturer with dreams of national sales. Moreover, with the advent of children's programming hours on the networks, advertisers could now target children directly, bypassing the mothers who had historically mediated the industry's relationship to the child consumer. This new age of child marketing, combined with the consolidation of an industry establishment made up of highly diversified national corporations hustling brand-name goods, helped create a more uniform consumer culture of play across the country.⁸ This uniformity would play a key role in the campaigns against war toys and other controversial items. For one, recognizable brands meant that toy reformers across the country could effectively target particular companies in their protests. Meanwhile, the new level of standardization in what children played with made it possible to imagine a transformation of children's socialization on a national scale.

The child-centered culture of the postwar United States also helped underwrite the politicization of playthings. On one level, this was not entirely new so much as another phase in what historians have shown was a long-standing trend in American family life: the adoption of the normative child-rearing ideals of the educated white middle class. Yet it would be hard to overstate the extent to which the new social conditions of postwar life intensified the child-centeredness of American society, including the extraordinary upturn in the birth rate from roughly 1946 to 1964. Coming less than a decade after the nation had gone from the depths of the century's worst economic slump into a physically and emotionally draining foreign war, the baby boom, writes media scholar Lynn Spigel, "created a nation of children who became a new symbol of hope."⁹ "More than ever," historian Howard Chudacoff explains, "parents put children at the center of their culture."¹⁰ Such an approach, of course, was facilitated by the economic prosperity of the 1950s, which was more widely (if not equitably) shared than any other time in the nation's history. If typical Americans exercised their new purchasing power with unprecedented spending on discretionary goods, in the context of child-centered family life, at least, few types of goods were understood to be more worthy of these dollars than toys.

That these developments supplied special fuel for the new toy-industrial complex was not lost on social observers. "Child-centeredness is necessary . . . to our toy economy," wrote anthropologist Jules Henry in his popular 1963 book, *Culture against Man*. "Take away child-centeredness from the toy

business and it would be back in the nineteenth century.”¹¹ With it, the toy economy swelled: between 1951 and 1961, retail toy sales in the United States increased by 120 percent, reaching \$1.7 billion.¹² But it was not merely that toys were something fun to buy for the kids, or even something with which to bribe or spoil them. It was also the case that toys moved to the center of the new normative ideal of intensive consumerist child-rearing at a moment when the expanding fields of social and developmental psychology were reshaping how experts and their parent readers thought about what made for a healthy childhood, including what kinds of toys would best support it.

A large part of this was a midcentury shift in the professionals’ definition of childhood well-being, as older concerns about physical health in a prevaccine age gave way to a new postscarcity preoccupation with psychological health, cognitive growth, and personality formation. Historian Leila J. Rupp has described the situation well, writing that “the 1950s brought a new emphasis on the quality of child-rearing, including . . . a popularized Freudian notion of the crucial importance of a child’s first years, and the emergence of a new corps of child-rearing experts . . . who warned of the dire consequences of anything less than full-time attention from a mother for her children’s well-being.”¹³ Whereas previously only the Freudians looked at early childhood, now virtually all of the human and behavioral sciences turned their attention to the child as a subject of study in the 1950s, especially when it promised to help solve thorny social problems like racial prejudice or the potential for homegrown fascism, as prominent intellectuals like anthropologist Margaret Mead and sociologist David Riesman believed it did.¹⁴ By the early 1960s, the so-called cognitive revolution in psychology would be underway, with sweeping new pronouncements on the importance of the preschool years for all future learning. The new psychology not only popularized developmental theory as never before; it also directly inspired a wave of new federally funded programs as diverse as Head Start (1964) and the pioneering public television show *Sesame Street* (1969).¹⁵

As for attitudes about play, the emphasis on the first few years of life only added to the heightened anxiety over toy selection that came with so much focus on the child along with the potentially confusing abundance of choices in the aisles.¹⁶ This focus helps explain why Dr. Benjamin Spock, the most famous child-care adviser of the period, devoted three of his magazine columns exclusively to toys in the period 1961–64 alone—this after not a single piece on toys in the previous decade and a relatively short section on the topic in his best-selling *The Commonsense Book of Baby and Child Care* (1946).¹⁷ The noted psychologists Ruth M. Hartley and Robert M. Goldenson likewise left

no question as to the high stakes of toys in their own guidebook, *The Complete Book of Children's Play* (1957): "When we buy toys, we are investing as surely as when we buy stocks, and the commodity we are investing in may be more important than shares in a concern."¹⁸ Such heightened awareness about toys' importance in the lives of children was not lost on the industry. According to a 1964 editorial in the venerable trade magazine *Playthings*, nothing was more crucial to future sales than "awareness of the tremendous increase in the number of college-educated mothers, young women who approach the task of selecting toys for their youngsters in a much more thoughtful and sophisticated manner than was the case with most mothers a generation ago. . . . Many . . . have taken wide-ranging liberal arts, child-psychology, and home economics courses as important parts of their curricula. . . . They're more aware of the function of toys in the development of their children along physical, psychological, and social lines."¹⁹ But perhaps the toymaker A. C. Gilbert Jr., reflecting on the same cultural trend in *Playthings* just a couple of years earlier, said it best: "Who is not toy-conscious today?"²⁰

Such toy-consciousness would continue to fuel the industry's remarkable growth, but it also would be responsible for the most embattled decade in the history of the trade. During the 1960s and 1970s, Americans involved in diverse social justice movements, from peace to Black Power to women's liberation, would tap into these new discourses on toys and play as well as older ones. As people engaged in trying to change the world, however, it was in the spirit of their age to ask a very different set of questions from those of mainstream experts: What are these toys teaching the young about the world around them? What are toys teaching them in terms of values to live by? Some looked with fresh eyes at their own kids' playthings. Some studied consumer catalogs and investigated the local toy aisles. Others revisited their own toy memories, recalling how few dolls or promotions featured anyone who looked like them; how it felt to be excluded from the industry's polished image of white American childhood; and how much the toy landscape hadn't changed since. The closer they looked, the more they felt that the only values that the toy industry was communicating were those of the status quo.



Three goals drive this book. One is to expand our understanding of 1960s and 1970s progressive and radical politics by returning the reform of children's media culture, seen here as a contested process involving a wide range of social, political, cultural, and industry actors, to a more prominent place in the narrative.²¹ I see toys as central to a new politicized parenting discourse

of “progressive parenting,” an ideology first developed by psychologically oriented activist parents and left-leaning child experts in the 1930s and 1940s that combined the teachings of Sigmund Freud and progressive education with the social justice politics of the Popular Front.²² Largely relegated to families on the left during the heyday of Popular Front culture, progressive parenting reemerged in the 1960s and 1970s with a new emphasis on bringing the commercialized world of children’s popular culture in line with left-liberal values. These projects took a variety of forms, from the advent of watchdog groups such as the Council on Interracial Books for Children and Feminists on Children’s Media to the development of innovative multimedia products like the award-winning 1972 record album *Free to Be . . . You and Me*, which was financed by the Ms. Foundation for Women. Together, they revised the fields of children’s material and visual culture to be more racially and ethnically diverse; less bounded by conventional gender, sex, and family stereotypes; and consciously committed to fostering understanding and empathy around issues of identity, equality, and justice.²³ As I show, the efforts across different activist communities to transform the world of toys, starting in the early 1960s and reaching its height a decade later, would be a key aspect of this child-centered cultural movement and, arguably, one of the chief factors in propelling the new politics of parenting into the liberal mainstream.

A second goal of the book is to place business and the culture industry at the center of our understanding of the era’s familiar cultural upheaval and spirit of dissent.²⁴ Consumer pressure, public protest, and critical shifts in American attitudes about war, race, and gender during the 1960s and 1970s provoked major changes in the toy industry’s relationship to the world outside its institutional walls. One of them was that toymakers were forced to publicly reckon with, perhaps for the first time, their status as entrepreneurs of ideology—as producers of values and not just products. But perhaps the most surprising new development was that the proponents of a more socially conscious toy trade came not only from the ranks of political groups and child advocates but also from within the industry. Manufacturers, advertisers, and industry boosters alike consciously blurred the line between organizing markets and fostering movements. In doing so, they became the willing accomplices to their critics.

Finally, this book makes the claim that toys produced for children not only illustrate cultural change but also help shape it. Accordingly, I treat cultural objects that are often relegated to collectors’ guides as historical subjects in their own right. A doll named Barbie has a role in this story, but it is a minor one compared to dolls with less familiar names such as Baby Nancy and Derry

Daring. For decades now, historians of consumer culture have drawn on the work of symbolic anthropologists to study the histories of a variety of cultural things, including toys and other childhood objects, and the different ways people have used them to construct identities and social relations.²⁵ Taking as a guiding premise Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood's definition of consumption as "the very arena in which culture is fought over and licked into shape," this book aims to underscore the importance of both the fights over meanings and the objects of struggle themselves—the actual shapes into which culture is licked.²⁶ By analyzing the material culture of toy design alongside other artifacts of promotion and merchandising such as toy packages, I show how the various debates, exchanges, and interactions between pressure groups, manufacturers, marketers, and experts in the 1960s and 1970s remade the forms as well as the meanings of American children's culture.



"In the postwar years—the nearly two decades between the end of World War II and the assassination of John F. Kennedy—a cluster of powerful conservative norms set the parameters of American culture," writes historian Andrew Hartman.²⁷ Those norms, which together make up what Hartman has called "normative America," encompassed some of the most enduring ideologies of patriarchy, white supremacy, and heteronormativity: everything from the belief that women should be married and out of the workforce, to a patriotic faith in American exceptionalism, to an idealized projection of the national character that left out its singular racial and ethnic diversity.²⁸ With Barbie dolls and Burp Guns at the top of its best-seller list on the eve of the sixties, the American mass-market toy industry was essentially in the business of reproducing it all, in miniature. Could the world of toys be not just remade but repurposed for the goals of the 1960s and 1970s left, such as countering pro-military values, dismantling anti-Black racism, promoting a more egalitarian, unisex vision of human potential? At different times and in different ways, activists from across the era's radical cultural and political mobilizations said yes and set to work to transform the business of toys. To their surprise, the toy industry joined them.

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Parenting for Peace

On the morning of March 9, 1964, the offices and sales rooms of the Toy Center complex in Midtown Manhattan were bustling with activity, as toy-makers from virtually every US company prepared for their most anticipated day of the year: the opening of the weeklong American Toy Fair, the industry's annual tradeshow since 1903. If the Toy Fair had always been important to the business, in recent decades it had emerged as a make-or-break event for what had become a nearly \$2 billion consumer industry. In floor after floor of manufacturers' showrooms, retail buyers from around the country and the world—including owners of small toy shops, buyers for national discount chains and department stores, and regional wholesalers—browsed, inspected, and judged the commercial prospects of the newest product lines. If they liked what they saw, they placed orders, effectively determining a significant share of their inventory for the months to come. The toys that generated the most buzz and sales at the Toy Fair frequently went on to become the year's best-selling items.

The Toy Center, founded in 1925, was originally not a place but an organization—a promotional agency, headquartered inside the famous Fifth Avenue Building in Manhattan's Flatiron District, whose chief mission was to transform that office building into “a concentrated central point for the toy industry.”¹ Over the course of the 1930s and 1940s, the agency's officers, all of them toy executives, did just that. In fact, they carried out their mission so successfully that the Fifth Avenue Building, with its iconic street clock at the entrance, soon acquired a second name among New Yorkers: the Toy

Building. By 1946, the Toy Building housed (according to a Toy Center publication) “the sales rooms of a majority of the leading manufacturers and sales agents”; the offices of the Toy Manufacturers of the U.S.A., Inc. (TMA), the industry’s trade association; and a host of club-like amenities for its member manufacturers and visiting dealers, including a barber shop, restaurant, and massage parlor.² By the 1960s, the Toy Center organization had extended its management operations beyond the Toy Building to another large office tower on the corner of the next block to the north; thanks to the fully enclosed pedestrian bridge connecting it to the Toy Building at the ninth floor, toymakers could travel throughout the new Toy Center complex without having to go outside or cross a street (see figure 1.1). Meanwhile, the Toy Building’s owners decided to stop renewing leases for occupants unaffiliated with the toy business, bringing the original dreams of the Toy Center founders closer to reality.³

It was also during the post–World War II years that the TMA decided to take advantage of the industry’s extraordinary geographical concentration of manufacturers and hold the annual Toy Fair on site. Yet even the Toy Center’s two interlinked buildings were soon insufficient at Toy Fair time to contain all the new products, not to mention the throngs of toy buyers and dealers, that accompanied the industry’s postwar boom. And so, the TMA had begun taking over the nearby New Yorker Hotel to house additional Toy Fair showrooms. With ten thousand visitors expected over the course of the week, the 1964 event was certainly going to require it.⁴

Among the thousands who came by subway or taxi to the Toy Fair’s opening day was a group of six white women, some with young children in tow.⁵ Unlike everyone else who arrived that morning, however, they never went in. For they were not there to place orders but to protest. Identifying themselves to the press as representatives of a newly formed coalition called Parents Against the Encouragement of Violence, they had come to publicly oppose the industry’s recent proliferation of toy guns and other so-called war toys—a category that included everything from plastic grenades to miniature tanks and soldiers—in department stores, supermarket aisles, and television commercials (see figure 1.2). “Parent, Parents, we ask you . . . please don’t give our children toys of violence,” stated the yellow printed handbills they gave out to everyone entering the buildings or walking by. “We’re troubled about the effects of toy guns and weapons on children—are you? We’re troubled at the climate of violence all around us—are you? . . . Before our children grow up to accept violence as just part of life . . . THINK! DON’T BUY! DON’T GIVE!”⁶ Nothing like this had ever happened before. As toymakers and buyers

The Street of the Toymakers



a street more than two miles long

If all the corridors of both buildings that comprise the greatest toy center in all the world could be placed end to end, they would now form a street more than two miles long.

And, on either side of that "street", in this one convenient and internationally famous location, is the world's greatest concentration of beautiful permanent showrooms for TOYS, HOBBIES, JUVENILE FURNI-

TURE, SPORTING and WHEEL GOODS and CHRISTMAS DECORATIONS.

All of this is for your convenience Mr. Buyer, Mr. Manufacturer and Mr. Sales Representative.

Come, see the world of toys in two miles of exciting showrooms and, while you're here, be sure to see the "view from the bridge" — it's thrilling.

The Toy Center of the World



200 FIFTH AVENUE
NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10010



HELMESLEY-SPEAR, INC., MANAGING AGENT, ROOM 1501, 200 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK, N.Y. 675-3955

- 1.1. By the 1960s, the vast majority of US toy manufacturers leased showrooms and/or office space in one of the Toy Center's two linked buildings in New York City. The one known by the industry as the Toy Building is on the left. Advertisement from *Playthings*, February 1958. Courtesy of Todd Coopee.



1.2. A group of women calling themselves Parents Against the Encouragement of Violence protests war toys outside the annual Toy Fair in New York City in early March 1964. Photograph from *Toy & Hobby World*, April 4, 1964.

entered the Toy Fair buildings that morning, they were met by demonstrators, not salespeople, holding picket signs that read “Let’s Disarm the Nursery.” More of an invitation than an objection, the slogan reflected the protesters’ hopeful conviction that consumers and manufacturers could perhaps find common ground.⁷

The Toy Fair protest was just one manifestation of a national movement of anti-war toy action committees that had coalesced in the months after the November 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy. While a number of civic and religious groups would participate in the era’s reinvigorated campaigns against war toys, most of the organizational momentum and leadership came from two national organizations: Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), the oldest female-led peace organization in the country; and Women Strike for Peace (WSP), the youngest, and whose members were responsible for organizing the event.⁸ In the months that followed the Toy Fair demonstration, the combined initiatives of WILPF and WSP would flower into the largest and most concerted agitation over toys in US history. As one element of that agitation, WILPF and WSP activists in New York City would make the picketing of the Toy Fair an annual tradition for the rest of the decade.

The intersecting identities and commitments of WSP and WILPF women made them uniquely suited and primed for the job of taking on a largely male-dominated industry and publicizing their cause far beyond pacifist quarters. They were advocates for nuclear disarmament and internationalism. They were mothers and consumers on behalf of children. They were disproportionately from the educated classes, well versed in child development and psychology, and socially and professionally connected to some of the most prominent liberal reformers, intellectuals, and experts of their day. Through toys, they would unite the moral priorities of the postwar antinuclear movement with the social conscience of progressive parenting, a politicized child-rearing model that combined the social justice, interracialist, and internationalist orientation of the 1930s and 1940s Popular Front with both Freudian psychology and progressive education’s belief in the power of play.⁹ “Play is serious business,” stated Dr. Spock in *The Commonsense Book of Baby and Child Care*.¹⁰ In the early 1960s, the women’s peace-and-justice movement would give Spock’s wisdom, trusted by millions, a new political twist.¹¹

The case against war toys reflected a variety of ideological stances and intellectual sources, ranging from pacifism to the social sciences to early childhood theory. From the peace movement, activists brought their ardent moral aversion to the military as an institution and symbol, an aversion intensified

by the arms race. From developmental and social psychology, they brought a commitment to scientific child-rearing in the name of producing what postwar experts called the healthy personality. And from the “progressive education” movement, they seized on a half century of writings on using carefully directed childhood play, along with the right set of toys, to cultivate creative, democratic citizens; according to adherents of this developmental model, highly realistic war toys overdetermined children’s all-important fantasy play, impoverishing their imaginations and limiting the development of creativity.

The movement against war toys was also a product of its specific historical moment in the Cold War, a moment defined by militarized civil defense drills and the brush with nuclear annihilation brought on by the October 1962 Cuban missile crisis. In the eyes of the era’s toy reformers, the nuclear age’s threat to humanity required the popular rejection of militarism not only in the streets but also in the home. While the white middle-class nuclear household was often invoked as the first line of patriotic defense against the perceived menace of Soviet Communism, this particular group of middle-class women alternatively staged the home as a demilitarized zone, articulating a radical vision of how parents and children might relate to the political and existential threats of the era. In doing so, they repurposed the patriotic terms of postwar domesticity—that is, the appeal to scientific motherhood, the reliance on psychological experts, the centrality of consumer goods to the American Way of Life—to shatter, rather than fortify, the Cold War consensus.¹² Joining the politics of peace to the politics of parenting in an era when good childhoods became inextricably tied to good toys, they set the terms for the politicization of play for a long time to come.



Organized opposition to war toys was not exactly new in the spring of 1964. Concerns about this perennially popular class of playthings were as old as the peace movement itself, and usually coincident with surges in pacifist activity. In the nineteenth century, the American Peace Society had protested them, as had the Department of Peace and Arbitration within the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU).¹³ After World War I, and the subsequent birth of the modern toy industry, the newly formed US section of the worldwide WILPF (founded in 1919) took over leadership on the issue; in one early campaign of 1922, the Palo Alto, California, branch called for toy manufacturers and parents to “Disarm the Nursery.”¹⁴ In the four decades that followed, anti-war toy activities became a recurring, if also “sporadic and localized,”

part of WILPF's peace-education programming, rising and falling alongside spikes in toy-gun production and shifting political winds.¹⁵

Yet, for all these efforts, which were at times joined by like-minded groups such as the Society of Friends (Quakers), criticism of war toys at the dawn of the 1960s was largely relegated to pacifist quarters. Even within the WILPF National Office, which had probably spent more time and energy than anyone else on the issue over the years, activists were not yet ready to make unequivocal claims for what toys did or didn't do to children. A WILPF pamphlet titled *Junior Disarmament*, published around 1960, revealed as much when it stated that "the first thing that can be said about toys, good or bad, is that they are less important than they seem."¹⁶ Their genuine concerns about children's moral and political socialization notwithstanding, few in the broader antiwar and nuclear disarmament movement—and even fewer outside of it—were likely to rank toys among the most pressing problems of war and peace in the post-Hiroshima era. That would soon change, not because child psychologists came to new conclusions about toys' significance in children's emotional, intellectual, or moral development but because activists did. By the decade's end, the same WILPF National Office responsible for *Junior Disarmament's* relatively cautious position on toys would assert that "toys, the learning tools of childhood, are literally a life and death matter."¹⁷ Nor would they be alone in framing the impact of toys in such weighty terms.

What changed and when? What convinced these activists in the 1960s that war toys were perhaps *more* important than they seem? And why did so many people, including influential child-rearing experts and even major toy manufacturers, not only begin to listen to these old arguments with new interest and concern but also, as we shall see, join the anti-war toy crusade?



One of the first sparks in this new chapter of toy activism was ignited when Mary Ellen Fretts, state president of Ohio WILPF, wrote to her organization's National Board in Philadelphia in October 1963. Sharing what she described as widespread concern among Ohio women over the "new crop" of war toys in the national marketplace, Fretts was curious to know whether "the National Board might help us to organize and popularize some sort of concerted action which might strike at the entire problem of childhood education through toys." She continued: "It seems like a difficult project since all manufacturers will sell as long as the public will buy; yet perhaps it can begin in neighborhoods and then go directly to the headquarters of toy-making, with protests and constructive criticisms."¹⁸ One month later, Fretts's call for concerted

action was circulated to peace educators around the country when Bess Lane, the new chair of WILPF's National Committee on Childhood Education, sent a memorandum to branches nationwide. "The Childhood Education Committee of WILPF is working on a project for which we are seeking help from the membership," Lane stated. "The project is called (temporarily) *Operation War Toys*. We are eager to provide some help in this area because of our own concern and the concern of large numbers of parents over the number, kinds and availability of 'death-dealing' weapons for children." After quoting liberally from the recent letters she had received, Lane closed by expressing her "[hope] that each of us will find the time and the opportunity to do something, however small, to help change the trend from the emphasis on violence in toys to an emphasis on those toys that may lead to constructive ways of living and learning."¹⁹

At almost exactly the same time, members of the country's other female antiwar organization, WSP, began contacting their group's leadership with similar concerns. "The step from atomic weapons to toy guns is not really a very large one," wrote Rita Morgan to WSP cofounder Dagmar Wilson in December 1963, and "the connection should be made clear."²⁰ Three months later, the organization's national newsletter, *Memo*, printed a letter from a member of Oakland WSP calling for a national effort: "We are anxious to reach [WSP] all over the country," she wrote, "urging them to write to manufacturers . . . and local toy dealers . . . to emphasize that we will not buy where we see extreme war toys displayed."²¹

The announcement of Operation War Toys and WSP's own parallel initiative met with an outpouring of interest from members of both groups—some of whom were active in the two at once. As news of the WILPF campaign spread through memos, phone chains, and word of mouth, Childhood Education Committees in branches across the country—including Ann Arbor, Minneapolis, and Buffalo—commenced a new era of anti-war toy protest and outreach. Meanwhile, the national office's Childhood Education Committee created the organization's first Subcommittee on War Toys, as if to indicate to members nationwide that this was not a fleeting campaign. And while WSP activists did not benefit from having an established education wing, local chapters swiftly formed special toy action committees, including groups in San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia, Detroit, and Cambridge. Two WSP members also founded an information clearinghouse to distribute campaign news, educational resources, and activist tools for citizens who wished to get involved in the anti-war toy opposition. Within a few months of the initial calls to action, the combined forces of WSP and WILPF

had accomplished a great deal. They had spawned a nationwide network of toy activists, built the basic elements of a shared movement apparatus, and integrated their campaigns into the existing structure of their organizations.

The urgency of these calls to organize and the scope of their activities were unprecedented. At a time when WILPF was working on African American civil rights and WSP was just coming out of its successful lobbying campaign for a nuclear-weapons testing ban and turning its attention to the growing US military presence in Vietnam, the turn to children's play, often seen as trivial, might seem out of place. Yet to the women spearheading this new movement, like Rita Morgan, US militarism found expression in multiple forms, large and small, and they were all of a piece. To wage a battle against the nuclear arms race yet not speak out against what WILPF leader and sociologist Elise Boulding dubbed "the toy race"—her name for what she and others perceived as the competition among toymakers to make the most death-dealing pretend weapons—was to neglect the role of culture in producing citizens who either accept or refuse their nation's military belligerence.²²

Several converging factors, commercial as well as political, help explain the eruption of protest at this particular moment, not to mention the sense of urgency that energized it. For one thing, the "new crop" of war toys described by Mary Ellen Fretts and others was a bumper one, indeed. In December 1963, the *New York Times* reported that the toy trade "had produced a larger than usual assortment of toys with a military appearance."²³ The character was shifting too. As one writer observed in the *New Republic* in December 1962, "the emphasis is on achieving a nuclear capability," this two months after the Cuban missile crisis.²⁴ Some manufacturers were boasting about such investments, like the official from Aurora Plastics Corporation who claimed his company's "output of military and naval equipment could supply all of NATO's needs and then some."²⁵ Likewise, Mattel's Guerrilla Gun Set, introduced in 1963, shrewdly played off the latest developments in the Kennedy administration's policy of "limited war" in Southeast Asia. According to an item in the trade press, the set included "everything needed for make-believe guerilla warfare," from a machine gun and camouflaged poncho to a green beret, which had just become the official headgear of US Army Special Forces the previous year (hence the nickname the "Green Berets").²⁶ As one Mattel ad stated, "It's just like the outfit used by real jungle fighters."²⁷ So was Transogram's new Combat Medical Kit. As a promotion summed up the newly militarized landscape of play, "This year the toy business has turned khaki . . . and we're always 1A"—the military draft's code for immediate availability—"when it comes to marching ahead."²⁸