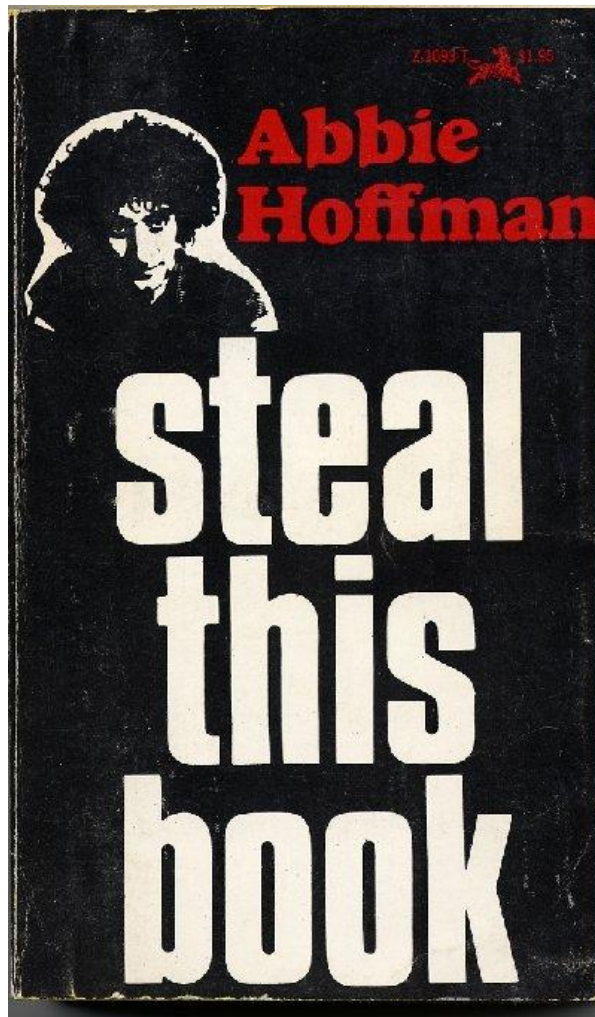


New York History pt 5: Steal This Book

Peter Gunn

December 8, 2015



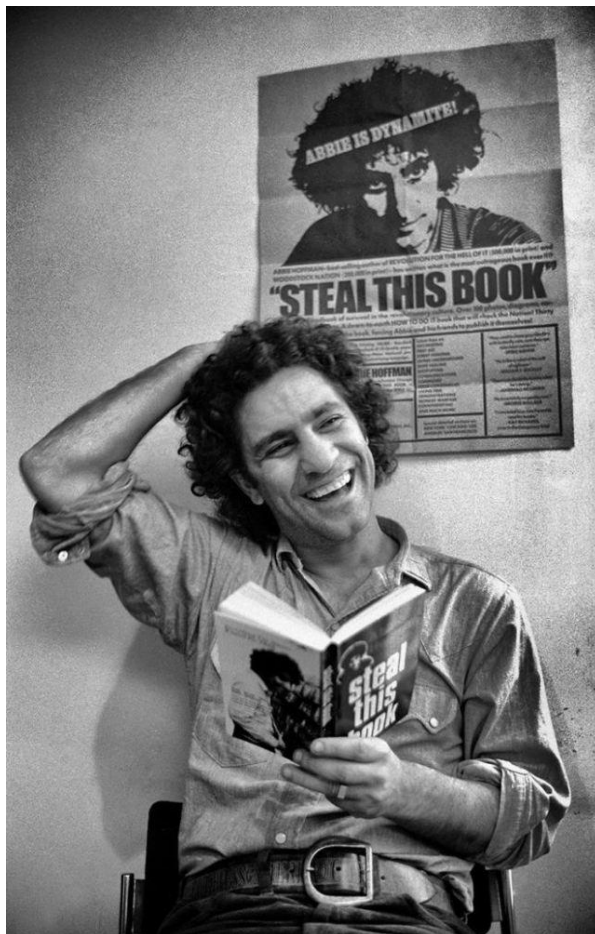
I first read Abbie Hoffman's "Steal This Book" when I was 15, in a reissued collection of his books that coincided with early 90's Woodstock nostalgia. Reading Hoffman's self-styled streetwise revolutionary patter was perfect for a high school freshman, because I was young enough not to find it all totally ridiculous.

Don't get me wrong, I have a lot of respect for Abbie Hoffman and his type of sixties radical. Societies tend to get the heroes they deserve, and so while France had the May 1968 student revolts that almost toppled de Gaulle's government and Germany had the Baader-Meinhof gang whose demise resulted in plane hijackings and prison suicides, it makes sense that America would have a showbiz savvy activist whose tongue was always in cheek, even if his heart was sincere. It's hard to think what Hoffman is best known for now (besides appearing in *Forest Gump*). Was it temporarily stopping trading on the New York Stock Exchange by throwing a wad of money onto the trading floor from the observation level? Or when he and his fellow Yippies attempted to nominate a pig for President at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago? Or attempting to levitate the Pentagon during an anti-Vietnam war march? Regardless, there is a commonality of both theater and a healthy sense of the ridiculous in all of these actions.

But, writing *Steal This Book* might be Hoffman's most famous action. A best seller and (according to Hoffman) bootlegged by the Mafia, *Steal This Book* is a wonderful artifact of the late 1960's/early

1970's. It's a guide to scamming and getting over on "straight society" in a more trustworthy and analogue era. It's very much a relic of a bilateral "us versus them" time, when the hip community of hippies was at odds with the rest of *Amerika* (the spelling used throughout the book) and maybe, just maybe, revolution was an actual possibility (and if not, then we could get a big place in the country and just get our heads together).

Strictly speaking, it is a guide to the hustles involved in getting free or cheap food, housing, transportation, medical care, phone service, and more. There are sections on drugs, combat techniques, and perhaps most interesting now, ones on pirate radio and phone phreaking that are a rare look into a pre-Internet hacking mindset. Although Hoffman was from Massachusetts, and went to college there and in California, it was in New York City where he first became a nationally known figure, so it is fitting enough there is a chapter on NYC as well.



Here are my favorite bits that due to changes either in laws, attitudes, or technology make me realize how long ago 1970 was:

Soda machines with bottles

When hitching, it's a good idea to carry a bottle opener and a straw. You take the caps off soda bottles while they're still in the machine and drink them dry without ever touching the bottle.

Air travel

One gutsy way to hitch a free ride is to board the plane without a ticket. This is how it works. Locate the flight you want and rummage through a wastebasket until you find an envelope for that particular

airline. Shuffle by the counter men (which is fairly easy if it's busy). When the boarding call is made, stand in line and get on the plane. Flash the empty envelope at the stewardess as you board the plane. Carry a number of packages as a decoy, so the stewardess won't ask you to open the envelope. If she does, which is rare, and sees you have no ticket, act surprised. "Oh my gosh, it must have fallen out in the wash room," will do fine. Run back down the ramp as if you're going to retrieve the ticket. Disappear and try later on a different airline. Nine out of ten revolutionaries say it's the only way to fly.

Abortions

The best way to find out about abortions is to contact your local woman's liberation organization through your underground newspaper or radio station. Some Family Planning Clinics and even some liberal churches set up abortions, but these might run as high as \$700. Underground newspapers often have ads that read "Any girl in trouble call - -, " or something similar. The usual rate for an abortion is about \$500 and it's awful hard to bargain when you need one badly.

Payphones

You can make a local 10 cent call for 2 cents by spitting on the pennies and dropping them in the nickel slot. As soon as they are about to hit the trigger mechanism, bang the coin-return button. Another way is to spin the pennies counter-clockwise into the nickel slot. Hold the penny in the slot with your finger and snap it spinning with a key or other flat object. Both systems take a certain knack, but once you've perfected the technique, you'll always have it in your survival kit.

Subways / Slugs

DANISH 25 ORE PIECE works in 95% of all subway turnstiles. A very safe coin to use since it will not jam the turnstile. It is 5/1000th of an inch bigger than a token.

Marijuana prices

A rough scale, say, for pot is \$20 an ounce, \$125 a pound and \$230 a kilo (2.2 pounds).

Social networking

A good way to quickly communicate what's coming down in the community is to build a telephone tree. It works on a pyramid system. A small core of people are responsible for placing five calls each. Each person on the line in turn calls five people and so on. If the system is prearranged correctly with adjustments made if some people don't answer the phone, you can have info transmitted to about a thousand people in less than an hour. A slower but more permanent method is to start a Switchboard. Basically, a Switchboard is a central telephone number or numbers that anybody can call night or day to get information. It can be as sophisticated as the community can support. The people that agree to answer the phone should have a complete knowledge of places, services and events happening in the community. Keep a complete updated file. The San Francisco Switchboard (see below) puts out an operator's manual explaining the organization and operation of a successful switchboard. They will send it out for 12¢ postage. San Francisco has the longest and most extensive Switchboard operation. From time to time there are national conferences with local switchboards sending a rep.

Fake I.D.s

Almost all I.D. cards use one or another IBM Selectric type to fill in the individual's papers. You can buy the exact model used by federal and state agencies for less than \$20.00 and install the ball in 5 seconds on any Selectric machine. When you finish the typing operation, sign your new name and trim the card to the size you want. Rub some dirt on the card and bend it a little to eliminate its newness.

There are also parts in the book where I question how serious Hoffman was:

Stealing gasoline

Another way is to park in a service station over their filler hole. Lift off one lid (like a small manhole cover), run down twenty feet of rubber tubing thru the hole you've cut in your floorboard, then turn on the electric pump which you have installed to feed into your gas tank. All they ever see is a parked car. This technique is especially rewarding when you have a bus.

Using boomerangs for streetfighting

The boomerang is a neat weapon for street fighting and is as easy to master as the Frisbee. There is a great psychological effect in using exotic weapons such as this. You can buy one at large hobby stores.



Shit, I told you we should've taken the plane



Abbie Hoffman

steal this book

**over 30 publishers
rejected this book
SO.....**

STEAL THIS BOOK in Boston, Mass. at:
Book Mart, 659 Washington St. (Second aisle on the left is the best bet.)

STEAL THIS BOOK in Atlanta, Ga. at:
The Bookworm, 92 Forsyth St., NW. (Try during the noon-hour rush.)

STEAL THIS BOOK in Miami, Fla. at:
Book Fair, N.E. 20th Ave. and 163rd St., North Miami Beach. (Use washroom to hide books in clothing.)

STEAL THIS BOOK in Philadelphia, Pa. at:
Bradd Alan Book Store, Cheltenham Shopping Center, Cheltenham. (Very busy Sunday and most evenings.)

STEAL THIS BOOK in Milwaukee, Wisc. at:
Rhubarb Book Store, 1618 Wells. (Lots of blind spots.)

STEAL THIS BOOK in New York, N.Y. at:
Eighth Street Book Shop, 17 West Eighth St. (Use booster box on tables of books.)

STEAL THIS BOOK in Washington D.C. at:
Washington Circle Community Book Shop, 2147 K St. NW. (Work out of the back of the store.)

STEAL THIS BOOK in Chicago, Ill. at:
Store Front, 2578 North Lincoln. (Camera is a dummy; ignore it.)

STEAL THIS BOOK in Los Angeles, Calif. at:
Pickwick Book Shop, 6743 Hollywood Blvd. (They never check shopping bags.)

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Spraying people with made up drugs

LACE (Lysergic Acid Crypto-Ethelene) can be made by mixing LSD with DMSO, a high penetrating agent, and water. Sprayed from an atomizer or squirted from a water pistol, the purple liquid will send any pig twirling into the Never-Never Land of chromosome damage. It produces an involuntary pelvic action in cops that resembles fucking. Remember when Mace runs out, turn to Lace.

The above passage should have raised the eyebrows of anyone with a modicum of common sense, even those whose LSD experience is limited to having seen *The Trip*. In fact, the LACE section is almost proof that much of the other parts of the book were bullshit, as Hoffman later admitted LACE was in an 1986 interview with writer Andrea Juno for a book on pranks:

We held a Press Conference and demonstrated this with live hippies who fucked in front of all the press. It was a good put-on. People who knew, knew that LACE was tongue-in-cheek. It made a lot of statements- about Mace, about the Pentagon, etc.

Hoffman's antics in the name of left wing activism may have made him both an FBI target and a boogiemer in the hearts of Nixon's silent majority, but *Steal This Book* also made him some enemies in the underground, specifically members of San Francisco's Diggers, a group that pioneered the mixing of performance art tactics and community activism. The Diggers saw Hoffman as someone who put his personal media profile above the needs of the movement. As Digger Peter Coyote explained in multiple interviews taken from the Digger.org archive:

Abbie, who was a friend of mine, was always a media junky. We explained everything to those guys, and they violated everything we taught them. Abbie went back, and the first thing he did was publish a book, with his picture on it, that blew the hustle of every poor person on the Lower East Side by describing every free scam then current in New York — which were then sucked dry by disaffected kids from Scarsdale.

Digger founder Emmett Grogan put across a similar sentiment in a 1971 interview with Tom Fitzpatrick of the *Chicago Sun-Times*:

"Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin have never done anything for the people," Grogan was saying now. "He got all that stuff he put in Steal This Book from us and the only thing it did was to reveal the way poor people steal to exist.

This point is most obviously demonstrated in the section where Hoffman tells the locations of every free soup kitchen in New York. In light of the Digger criticisms, you can perfectly picture weekend hippies lining up next to Bowery bums strictly for the thrill of it:

Other free meals can be gotten at the various missions.

Bowery Mission – 227 Bowery (674-3456). Pray and eat from 4:00 to 6:00 PM only. Heavy religious orientation.

Catholic Worker – 36 E. First St. Soup line from 10:00 to 11:00 AM. Clothes for women on Thursday from 12:00 to 2:00 PM. Clothes for men after 2:00 PM weekdays. Sometimes lodging.

Holy Name Center for Homeless Men – 18 Bleeker St. (CA 6-5848 or CA 6-2338) Clothes and morning showers from 7:00 to 11:00 AM.

Macauley Mission – 90 Lafayette St. (CA 6-6214) Free room and board. Free food Saturdays at 5:00 PM. Sometimes free clothes.

Moravian Church – 154 Lexington Ave. (MU 3-4219 or 533-3737) Free spaghetti dinner on Tuesday at 1:00 PM.

Quakers – 328 E. 15th St. Meals at 6:00 PM Tuesdays.

Wayward – 287 Mercer St. Free meals nightly.

At the time of *Steal This Book's* publication, criticisms were not coming from many other corners. Hoffman was a star in the underground, occupying a rare space in the American social landscape, mixing with artists, poets, writers, musicians, and political activists (and somehow having a foot in all of the above camps). He recorded an album, palled around with John Lennon, had his vasectomy filmed by Larry Rivers, and appeared on the cover of the *National Lampoon*.



Come on, inhale and stop shoving

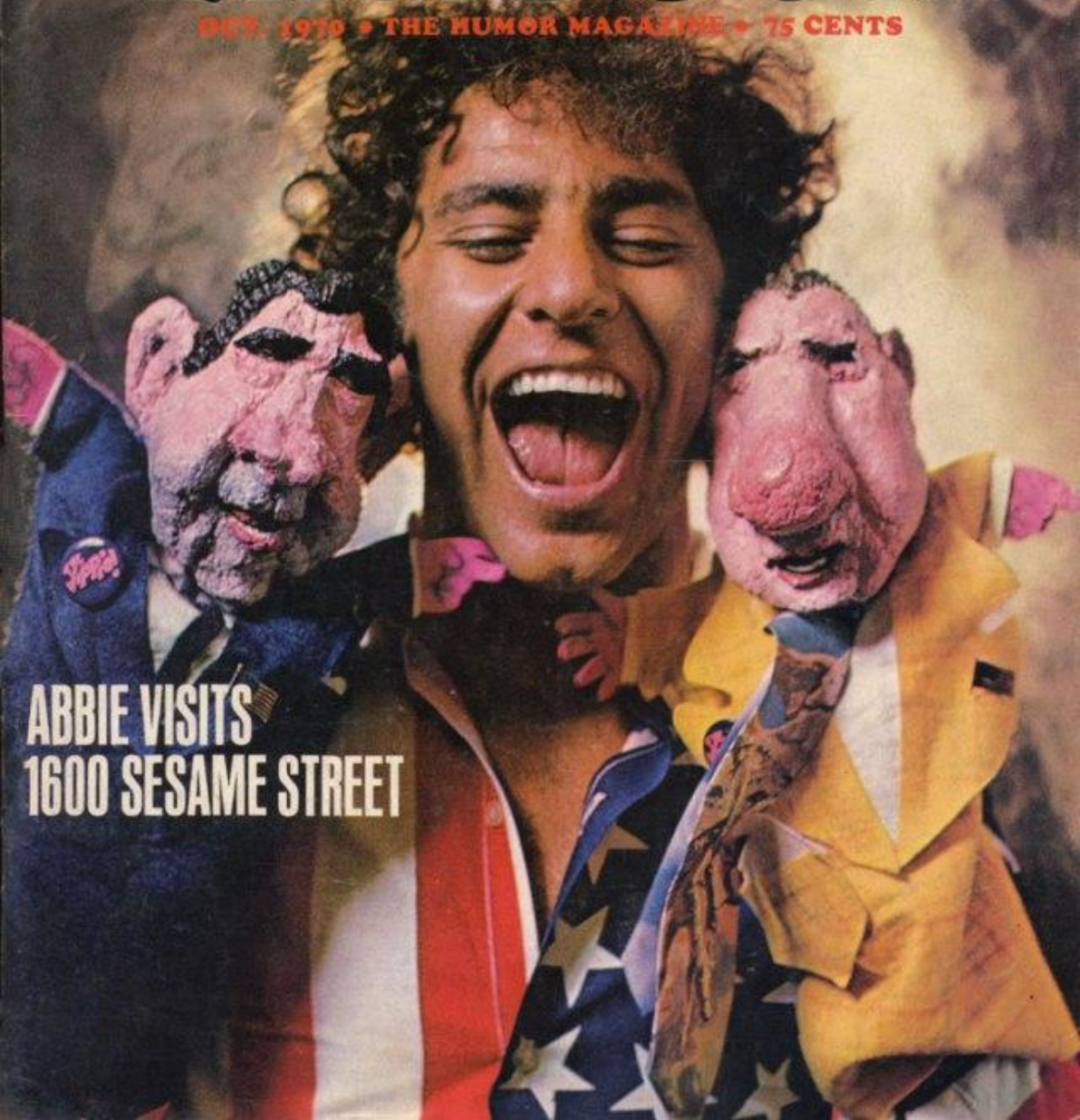


IND
**EXCLUSIVE:
The Day They Shot Agnew
in the foot!**

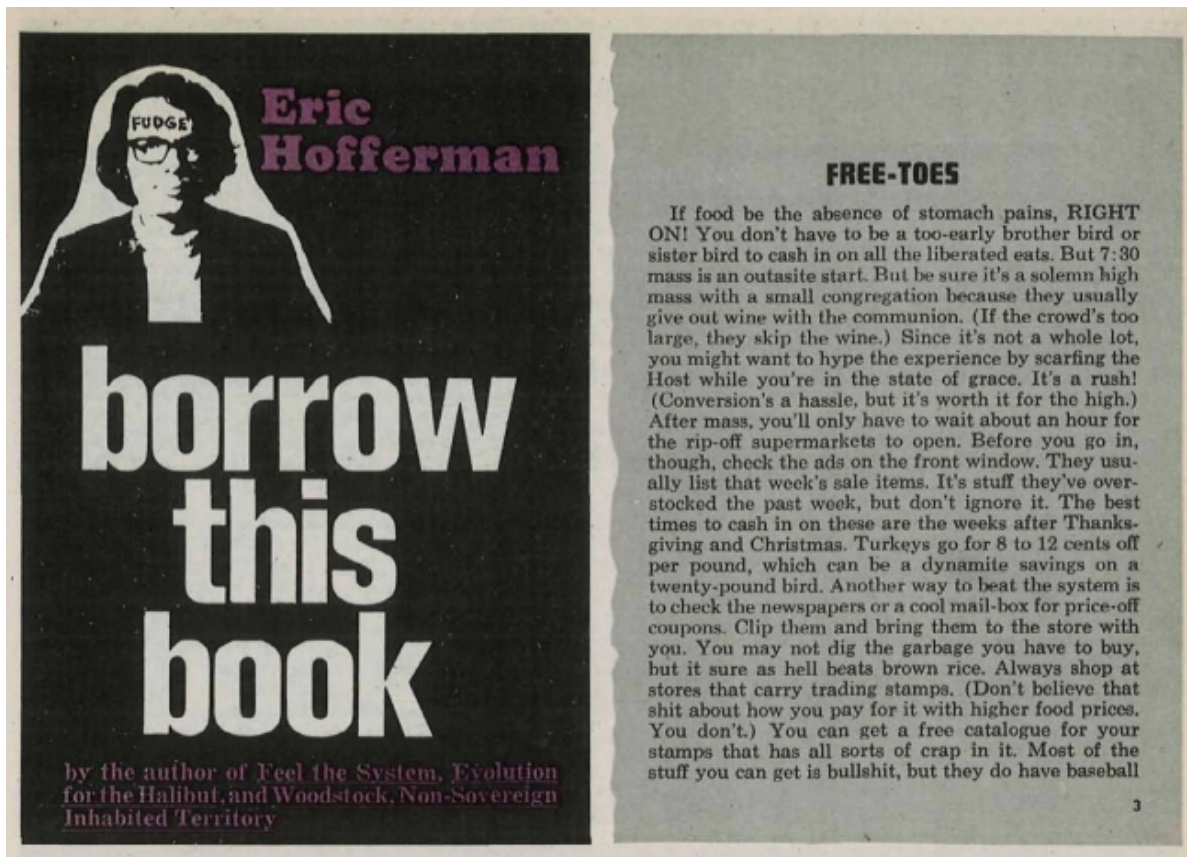
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But, there was something about the mixing of earnest (and naive) revolutionary messages and vaudeville hucksterism that began to rub people other than the Diggers the wrong way. More criticisms coming from within the counterculture appeared a few years later when *National Lampoon* parodied *Steal This Book* in a multi-page article called *Borrow This Book* in their May 1973 issue. The humor is cutting; parodying both the look of the book and Hoffman's streetwise-dude-on-the-corner writing voice, and painting the 60's generation as spoiled and childish.



Original:

Satire:

This idea of attacking both the establishment and the underground has all the hallmarks of Michael O'Donoghue, the *Lampoon* writer most responsible for pushing the magazine away from a 60's mindset and into something much more nihilistic and cynical. To O'Donoghue, John Lennon was just as legitimate a target as Richard Nixon, as he explained in a 1983 interview, "At the time, humanity was split into two groups: hippies and pigs. We could just stand in the middle and snipe." However, the piece was not written by O'Donoghue, but by future conservative P.J. O'Rourke. Considering O'Rourke went from writing for a hippie underground newspaper in Baltimore to reviewing luxury sedans for *Car & Driver* in about 10 years, we can perhaps see this moment as a turning point when the younger brothers of the 60's generation turned on their elders.

So, it took two years for *Steal This Book* to go from cutting edge to cornball, and by Internet-era standards that's a lifetime. At the time *Steal This Book* was written, it was rejected by countless publishers: who would want to publish a book that's a guide to getting over and criminality? But, every scam-centric piece of media, from the articles I read on some listserv in 1992 about getting free sodas

FREE BLIND MICE

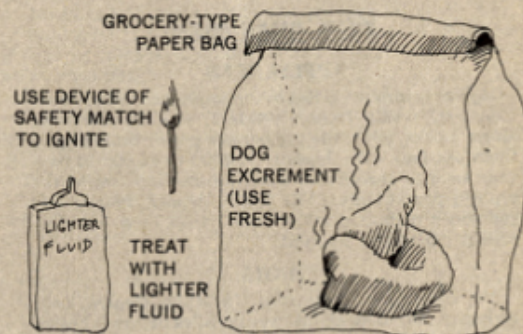
Trashing is when we destroy the bullshit materialism of the straight world. It's our way of expressing rage against poverty.

Our determination to crush amerikkkan imperialism really shows when trashing is combined with street theatre to educate the People. Putting a cow up in the top of a steeple can make it clear to workers and students how the masses have been misled by fascist religious leaders. And tipping over outhouses is a far-out way of saying "we're not taking any more shit."

For raising consciousness on a one-to-one level, try calling people up at random and say that you're taking a survey. Ask them if one of their capitalist kitchen appliances, built by exploiting the labor of the working class and people of color with natural resources ripped-off from our third-world brothers and sisters by the forces of neocolonialism, is running. When they say yes, yell, "Then you'd better go catch it!" and hang up.

Ordinary soap can be used to print revolutionary messages on windows, and you can make a powerful Bronx cheer by cupping your hand over your mouth, placing your tongue into the empty palm, and blowing hard.

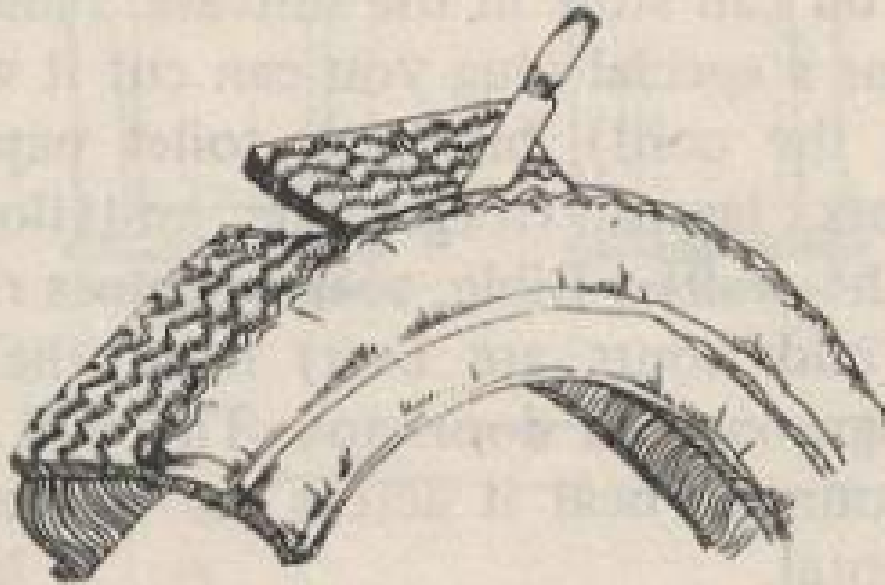
Teach imperialist warmongers the bitterness and frustration of life in puppet fascist dictatorship South Vietnam by putting salt in the sugar bowl and short-sheeting the bed; and bring the reality of suffering in



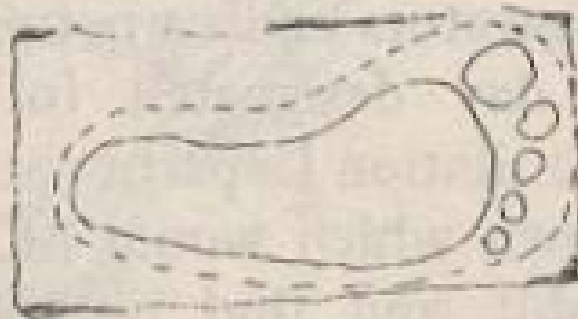
devastated Haiphong home to them by tying tin cans to their dogs' tails.

Fight sexism by rubbing indelible ink onto the eyepiece of a miniature "French postcard" viewer and instruct your brothers and sisters in the Movement to express their solidarity with the power-to-the-people handshake by wearing a small electric hand-buzzer.

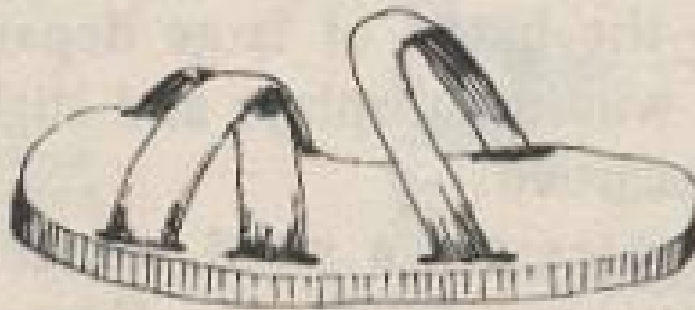
Fascists who want nothing more than to stamp out the world revolution can be vamped on by filling a paper bag with dog excrement and squirting lighter fluid on it. Set the bag on a fascist's front porch and light it, then ring the doorbell and run away. When he comes outside, all he'll see is a flaming paper bag, so he'll stomp on it much the way that he would like to



CUT A GOOD-SIZED HUNK OF TIRE

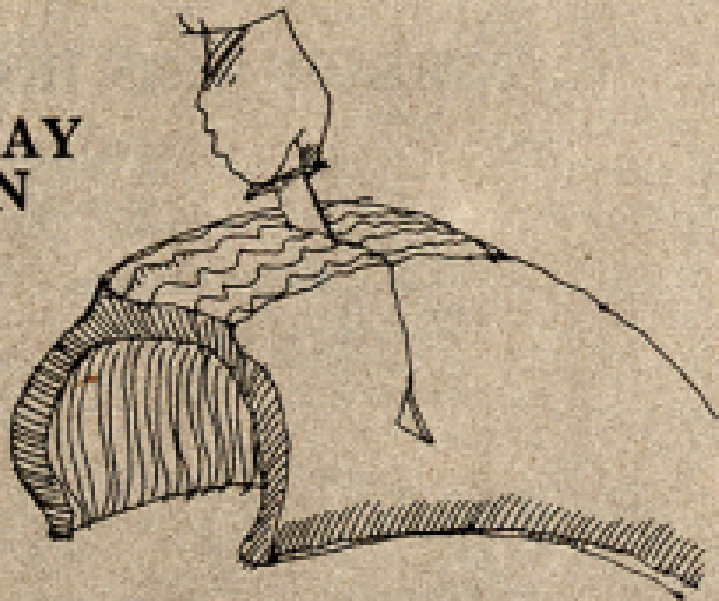


TRACE YOUR FOOT, LEAVING ABOUT 1/2" EXTRA

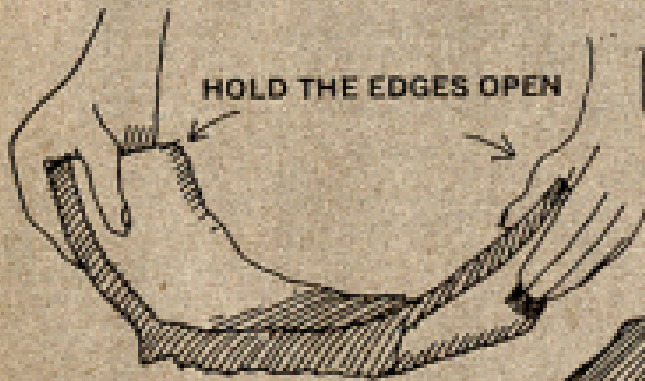


STRAPS MADE FROM INNER TUBE

**SLICE AWAY
A SECTION
OF TIRE**



HOLD THE EDGES OPEN



VOILA! WINTER, DO YOUR WORST

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from vending machines, to youtube videos on how to crack Photoshop, to even the dopest list of hotel room hacks on Buzzfeed is directly descended from *Steal This Book*. We have become a culture dedicated to knowing the ins and outs of every situation and getting that hidden edge (even if it's something as mundane as the menu at In-N-Out Burger) and it can all be traced back to *Steal This Book*. It opened the doors on the ideas that secret knowledge can only be secret for so long (and thus anyone can buy into the underground) and that the people who have the money and the power (aka "the establishment, man") will always be playing a game of catch-up with the masses.



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