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Patriotic Motherhood and the Iraq War

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She plays a familiar character in our nation's war stories and she has a warm place in our nation's heart. She is the patriotic mother, a cultural symbol of bravery and sacrifice, stoicism and silence. Her image may reflect our historical understanding of the mothers of combat soldiers, but the story the national press tells about the mothers of U.S. soldiers in the Iraq War does not quite match these cultural expectations.

This mismatch of the patriotic mother has a long and sketchy history. The ideal is grounded in the early Republic when mothers were expected to raise children to be good citizens. They worked in the privacy of their home and had no political voice. Women began moving into the political sphere as the industrial revolution moved into full swing. They engaged in "municipal housekeeping," or the task of promoting morality in the public sphere, through the Temperance

Union and Chicago's Hull House, for example. At the same time, these activists pushed for the vote.

Some of the activists, many of them mothers, also began opposing the draft in the run up to the First World War. In response, the Wilson Administration mounted a propaganda campaign that painted a patriotic mother as one who came around to her son's point of view that he should join the military and fight for the country.

Two best-selling authors furthered this image of the patriotic mother during World War II. Philip Wylie, in his book Generation of Vipers, distinguished between "good mothers" and "moms." He blamed "moms" for the fact that some men were reticent about the draft. "Good mothers," he said, had raised their sons to be willing soldiers. Psychiatrist Edward Strecker, in his work Their Mothers' Sons: A Psychiatrist Examines an American Problem, complained about those mothers whom he said had refused to untie the "silver apron strings." He accused them of "poor mothering" when soldiers were discharged for "psychoneurosis" during the Second World War. In more recent conflicts, mothers who have publicly raised questions about the war and their sons' place in it, like Peg Mullins during the Vietnam War, and Cindy Sheehan during the U.S. Iraq War, have appeared as lightning rods for public criticism.

More recently, a study in Critical Studies in Media Communication examined how the national press has depicted mothers in the current Iraq War, and how closely that depiction mirrors the image of the patriotic mother. The study examined the New York Times, the Washington Post, and USA Today during three time periods in 2003, 2004, and 2005.

The study found that mothers of soldiers received little coverage during that time-frame. Journalists did not distinguish between good mothers and bad mothers in the stories in which mothers did appear. Rather, they portrayed soldiers' mothers as continuing to care for their children despite the fact that they were adults. Stories portrayed mothers as constantly monitoring their environments for news of their children. Mothers cared for their sons and daughters physically through care packages and the like. They supported their children emotionally and spiritually in letters, phone calls, and on the web.

Journalists wrote stories in which mothers spoke of their sons and daughters as socially responsible human beings, people worth knowing. When a son or daughter died, mothers were depicted as speaking of their children in ways that reflected heroism. Mothers in these stories were not criticized as overbearing for continuing to care for their children. The overall image conveyed in the stories was that their behavior was natural.

Journalists portrayed mothers as uniformly supportive of their soldier sons and daughters, but as having a range of opinions about the country's war effort. Many mothers believed that the United States military should be fighting in the Middle East. Others opposed the war. Some mothers criticized the war by formally protesting. Others did so in a less public or organized way. Journalists told stories in which mothers criticized the country's war effort voicing their opinions in their living rooms, their kitchens, at church functions and in the workplace. These stories run counter to the image of the archetypal patriotic mother who is stoic and silent. One mother told a reporter of a "code of silence," but she was too willing to risk negative public reaction by speaking out against the war.

The stories, read separately, reveal the events related to war as they unfold. Read together, with specific attention paid to mothers of soldiers, the coverage suggests that mothers have much to say about war and their son or daughter's place in it. Their reactions are not necessarily predictable or fixed.

This study does not say whether journalists are telling a different story about mothers of soldiers than they have in the past or whether mothers may be more willing to say what is on their minds. It does however, raise the possibility that our cultural assumption that mothers have nothing to say is wrong.

Mothers of soldiers are among those who experience the effects of war in a way that most of us do not. Clearly they have much to tell the nation about their experiences. So do others who love and care about soldiers, including fathers, siblings, spouses and children. Listening to their voices is critical if the nation is to understand the true impact of war when it is waged.

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