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# News Coverage of U.S. Mothers of Soldiers During the Vietnam War: Shedding the Image of Spartan Motherhood

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## Abstract

The press of World Wars I and II depicted patriotic mothers as Spartan-like in their support of the nation's war effort. During the Vietnam War, another maternal image emerged to share cultural space with the Spartan mother, that of the goddess Thetis who objected to her son's participation in the Trojan War. This alternative maternal symbol more closely resembles the archetypal image of the peacetime good mother, who cares for her children and resists sending them into harm's way. This study documents coverage of maternal opposition to the Vietnam War against the backdrop of coverage of US mothers of soldiers in the earlier world wars. The comparison suggests that the Great Father's failure to control the press and promote the war to US citizens provided an opportunity for Thetis' rising.

## Keywords

maternal archetypes, mothers of soldiers, press coverage, Spartan mother, Thetis, Vietnam War

## Introduction

On May 8, 1971, Louise Bristol Ransom, a mother of a Vietnam combat soldier, told the nation how she would spend Mother's Day, a day that wartime presidents regularly encouraged citizens and soldiers to honor. In a *New York Times* essay, she wrote that she would not celebrate that year; her son Mike had died on Mother's Day three years earlier. Instead, Bristol Ransom said, she and other mothers of soldiers would walk in a silent parade through the city's main street, and then attend church to pray for the war's end. Calling the war immoral, she cautioned President Nixon against underestimating "the revulsion of American mothers at the actions our sons are compelled to take..." She encouraged other mothers to action stating, "We have been silent too long" ("For Mother's Day," May 8, 1971).

Voices of mothers like Louise Bristol Ransom, which appeared in American news coverage of the Vietnam War, call to mind the voice of the mythic archetypal mother, Thetis, who, according to Homer ([15]), abhorred the idea that her son, Achilles, might die in battle. In *The Iliad*, Thetis appeared as fearful and grief-stricken over her son's participation in the Trojan War; she appealed for help from the gods and publicly shared her pain (Bell [2]). Mothers, who, like Thetis, objected to war and their children's place in it, rarely appeared in American news coverage of the nation's major twentieth-century conflicts. When they were the subjects of stories, their fears and objections were treated as isolated and were often situated within a context of contempt, ridicule or punishment (Garner and Slattery [12], [13]). The press of the First and Second World Wars drew, instead, on the image of the archetypal Spartan mother to portray the ideal American mother of a soldier. The Spartan mother raised her son to be a warrior and told him, as he went off to war, to return with his shield or on it (Pomeroy [21]). According to press accounts, the ideal mothers of soldiers during World War I and II willingly sacrificed their children for the nation's security.

Both maternal archetypes spring from the broader maternal archetype, the Good Mother. During peacetime the culture requires good mothers to care for their children and protect them from harm (Ruddick [23]). However, during wartime, the good mothers of peacetime are expected to transform into Spartan-like mothers, that is, to quietly and graciously accept the harm done to their children for the nation's sake. Scholars have observed that the wartime press has played a role in the archetypal shift (Garner and Slattery [13]).

This study examines press depictions of the mother of the combat soldier as she appeared in Vietnam War news stories and compares it with the depictions of mothers of soldiers during World War I and II as reported by Garner and Slattery ([12], [13]). We pay specific attention to mothers' voices in the Vietnam War coverage in order to explore the era's deeper, cultural "structure of feeling," that is, evidence of the feelings, values and behaviors of individuals, groups or classes that result from actual lived experiences (Williams [28], 132). Structures of feeling become apparent, according to Williams, in the tensions that arise when people's lived experiences fail to mirror culturally articulated norms and values. Bringing the period's structures of feeling, as reflected by the press, into sharper relief allows us understand what it means to be the mother of an American soldier during wartime.

Examining press accounts is justified because, according to Williams ([28]), traces of these lived experiences can be found in news narratives; the stories often include the "elements of social and material experience" of people as they function and live within the dominant culture (133). News narratives draw on mythic story forms and are part of the human storytelling experience (Bird and Dardenne [3]; Lule [18]). The values, beliefs and ideologies of a culture, embedded within news stories, provide insight into how a nation works to maintain social order and the existing power structure.

We argue that the Spartan mother image no longer dominated press accounts of wartime motherhood during the Vietnam War as it had in news narratives of earlier twentieth-century conflicts. Rather, a stronger, more vocal Thetis-like archetype emerged to share the nation's rhetorical and political space. The news media helped foster her emergence in three important ways. First, the Vietnam-era press attributed a wider range of emotions to mothers of soldiers than had the wartime press of World Wars I and II. Second, journalists straightforwardly reported on mothers' wartime complaints. The cultural reactions found in earlier war coverage, ranging from rebuke to ridicule, were largely absent. Finally, the Vietnam wartime press reported on the strategies that mothers used to draw attention to their opposition to the war. The emergence in the press of the strong Thetis archetype signaled that some mothers of soldiers were unwilling to walk in lock step with the government as they had during World Wars I and II (Garner and Slattery [12], [13]).

This study expands the growing body of work on mothers and war (de Alwis [6]; de Volo [7]; Elshtain [10]; Norat [20]; Scheper-Hughes [24]; Turpin [27]), especially studies that examine press coverage of mothers of combat soldiers. Such scholarship is relatively new (Cappuccio [5]; Edwards and Brozana [9]; Enloe [11]; Garner and Slattery [12], [13]; Rodino [22]; Slattery and Garner [25], [26]; Zeiger [29]). These studies have found that the mass media helps to socialize mothers of combat soldiers into their wartime roles (Enloe [11]; Zeiger [29]), and reinforces support for conflicts like the United States–Iraq War (Cappuccio [5]). Other studies have shown that the news media have credited women like Cindy Sheehan for their anti-war effectiveness because they are mothers (Edwards and Brozana [9]) or, conversely, have attacked women's mothering skills when their anti-war rhetoric has increased (Knudson [16]).

Of importance to this study is Garner and Slattery's ([12], [13]) analysis of wartime press coverage of US mothers of combat soldiers during the first two world wars. As noted above, their analysis revealed that patriotic mothers of combat soldiers were celebrated in the press and the larger culture for their Spartan-like characteristics and behaviors. Mothers who were more reluctant to support the nation's war efforts, or who demonstrated emotion (beyond stoicism and silence), received little in the way of press coverage or were vilified when their positions came to light. Following Garner and Slattery ([12], [13]), we selected three newspapers to represent East, Midwest and Western regions of the country during the Vietnam War: the *New York Times*, the *Des Moines Register* and the *Nevada State Journal*. Only stories in which mothers were identified as being mothers of soldiers were used. All articles, editorials, poems, letters to the editor, etc., that referenced mothers of soldiers, between May 7, 1954 (when the French surrendered), and April 29, 1973 (when the last US soldiers were withdrawn from Vietnam) were analyzed. The *New York Times* had 167 stories while the *Nevada State Journal* had 22 stories and the *Des Moines Register* had 59.

The study used textual analysis to examine the news articles in order to uncover the latent story about mothers of combat soldiers embedded in the Vietnam news coverage. The process required multiple readings and a deep focus on the text and images to reveal the patterns and themes within. As Hall ([14]) noted, this process enables the identification of how images of mothers of soldiers "are invoked through the language and conventions of the press" (Lule [17], 177) and allowed these depictions to be situated within a larger political and social context (du Gay et al. [8]).

Before turning to our analysis, it is important to compare the relationship between the news media and the US government during the Vietnam War and the two world wars. The First and Second World Wars were both formally declared wars and the government, expecting the news media to be patriotic, put mechanisms in place to ensure national loyalty. During the Great War, the Wilson Administration created the Committee on War Information to oversee press censorship and generate propaganda. At the same time, the newly created Council of National Defense oversaw the mobilization of citizens, including mothers, at local levels. Similarly, President Franklin Roosevelt established the Office of Censorship during World War II to manage voluntary censorship of the stateside news media, and the Office of War Information to generate propaganda to mobilize citizens.

The United States never formally declared war in Southeast Asia; rather, the conflict evolved as an extended military engagement authorized by Congress. American involvement in Vietnam began slowly during the Cold War; military advisors were sent to the country after the French withdrawal in 1954. While there was a military draft during the conflict, the government failed to systematically use propaganda campaigns to mobilize the population, or draw on press censorship to shape war news.

## Press Coverage of Mothers of Combat Soldiers: A Comparison

We begin by reviewing the commonalities in the war coverage across three conflicts that include World Wars I and II and the Vietnam War, paying special attention to depictions of the Spartan mother archetype against the backdrop of maternal work (Ruddick [23]). We then turn our attention to the three areas in which press coverage vastly differed.

### The Spartan Mother

Most mothers of combat soldiers were described in all three wartime press narratives as engaging in the maternal work of keeping a watchful eye on their children and providing physical and emotional care. Maternal work, according to Ruddick ([23]), is grounded in preservative love and involves caring for the child physically, emotionally and socially.

Vietnam War news stories portrayed mothers of soldiers as tending to the physical, emotional and social needs of their children. They accomplished this, in part, by keeping a watchful eye on their soldier sons' whereabouts. Like mothers in earlier wars, they used all means of communication available to learn of their children's wartime status. The *Des Moines Register*, for example, reported that one mother wanted more press coverage ("Fine Coverage," October 17, 1965), while another learned from a reporter that her son was a prisoner-of-war (POW) ("Seven Iowans Among First 159 Listed," January 28, 1973). Soldiers, knowing that mothers scoured the press for details, asked journalists to say they were alive and healthy ("4 G.I.'s in Vietnam Tell of Captivity," *New York Times*, May 10, 1964). One soldier even asked a journalist not to use his name in a story about foxholes, saying "my mother thinks I have a nice desk job over here" ("Foxholes Prove the G.I.'s Best Friend," *New York Times*, July 4, 1966).

Mothers relied on letters from soldiers themselves to stay informed ("Vietnam Raid: Close Call in an Orange Sky," *New York Times*, November 7, 1965). Some of the news reports about letters reflected the strategy that the military used in earlier wars, that is, encouraging soldiers to keep the letters home upbeat (Garner and Slattery [12], [13]). One son, for example, reportedly wrote to his mother to "quiet her fears" ("What is Too High a Price?," *Des Moines Register*, July 24, 1966). Another soldier told his mother that there was "no use for both of us to worry" ("Former Renoite Wins Medal for Viet Heroism," *Nevada State Journal*, September 7, 1966).

As did mothers in World Wars I and II, mothers of US combat soldiers in Vietnam also learned about the status of their sons through military notifications, including telegrams ("Mystery Clouds Release of 3 G.I.'s by the Vietcong," *New York Times*, November 12, 1967), letters from flight commanders ("Vietnam Raid: Close Call in an Orange Sky," *New York Times*, November 7, 1965) and home visits from members of the military ("A Midnight Knock—Then Mother Told," *Des Moines Register*, December 5, 1965). Sometimes, mothers themselves prompted military investigations and notifications about their sons ("Dissolved US G.I. Unit Sought," *New York Times*, September 27, 1967).

According to press accounts of all three wars, some mothers went beyond normal communication channels to search out information about their soldier sons. The *New York Times* reported that one mother of a US combat soldier planned a trip to Laos to inquire about her son missing in action (MIA) ("4 Airmen Not P.O.W.s, North Vietnamese Say," April 4, 1970), while other mothers arranged to visit sons who had been wounded in Vietnam

("Mother Plans Vietnam Trip," October 9, 1967). Press accounts of mothers traveling to areas near or in war zones were not uncommon across the three wars; the reason typically given was the mother's desire to check on the physical welfare of a child.

Keeping her child alive is a major component of maternal work (Ruddick [23]). The press depicted mothers in all three wars as continuing to physically care for their children despite the distance and limitations on what they could provide. Vietnam War press accounts described mothers of soldiers creating care packages that included "writing paper, gum, magazines, cookies shaped into Christmas trees, candy, nuts, and sausages" ("Upstate Hamlet's Heart is in Vietnam," *New York Times*, December 5, 1966). One mother sent her son "smoked oysters and anchovies to supplement his Army diet" ("Former Renoite Wins Medal for Viet Heroism," *Nevada State Journal*, September 7, 1966), while another was described preparing venison stew for her son, home on Christmas leave ("Cortland Honors Its Warrior Sons," *New York Times*, December 28, 1970). As in the earlier wars, the press also described mothers of soldiers as regularly knitting socks, mittens and other articles of clothing for their sons.

According to Bouvard ([4]), a mother's preservative love does not end with a child's death. Press accounts in the *New York Times* described mothers who traveled to be with the bodies of their dead sons ("Pronounced 'Dead' in Vietnam, Soldier Begins a New Life," November 3, 1967) and other mothers who fought for proper burials. For example, one African American mother was reportedly unable to bury her son in an all-white cemetery after she was given a plot owned by a white woman. A Federal District Court ordered the cemetery to bury the man ("Negro GI's Wife Sues Cemetery," July 26, 1969; "Mother of Black G.I. Slain in War Vows Burial in White Cemetery," August 23, 1970; "Court Tells Florida Cemetery to Bury Black G.I.," August 28, 1970).

Mothers of soldiers also continued the maternal work of tending to their children's spiritual and emotional needs. News narratives in the *New York Times*, for example, noted that soldiers linked feelings of comfort and safety to bibles received from their mothers. One story described a frightened GI who read from his bible as he awaited orders, telling the reporter, "My Mother gave it to me" ("G.I. Replacements in Vietnam Nervously Await Orders," June 29, 1967). Mothers reportedly cared for grandchildren so their sons and wives could have leave together ("'R & R' in Honolulu a Six-day Moment of Peace for Soldiers and Their Wives," April 13, 1970) or supported other mothers' sons home on leave ("In Courtland County They Remember the Servicemen," December 31, 1971).

According to Ruddick, mothers are constantly under the "gaze of the other" and judged for their maternal worth. A mother does not want to be judged negatively on the basis of her child's behavior; rather, she wants credit for trying to raise a child in a manner acceptable to friends, family and the larger culture. The Vietnam War press coverage, as in earlier wars, provided numerous stories wherein the mother worked to ensure that her son was viewed in a positive light and that the larger culture viewed him as a hero. In a profile story of a "typical" GI, a soldier's mother said her son had enlisted to get his military duty out of the way and to save for college ("An American G.I. Looks at Vietnam," *New York Times*, July 11, 1965). Another said her son, "[G]ave his life for what he believed in. He felt that if we are going to stop the Communists, we would have to do it over there" ("Last Iowan Killed in Vietnam War," *Des Moines Register*, January 28, 1973).

Some mothers also tried to explain away the apparently less-than-heroic behavior of their soldier sons. In one story, a mother said that anti-war statements attributed to her POW son were inconsistent with comments in letters home before he was taken prisoner ("Anti-war Statement by Pair," *Nevada State Journal*, December 1, 1965). The military responded that her son had been brainwashed ("Two Freed G.I.'s Say U.S. Should Quit Vietnam," *New York Times*, December 1, 1965). Another mother said her foster son, a POW, had been in favor of the war before he left, and had likely been involved in anti-war broadcasts because he was used in an enemy effort to bargain for peace ("How Families Got News," *Des Moines Register*, February 11, 1973). Still other

mothers offered emotional support for children accused of crimes. The *New York Times* reported that one mother sat through the trial and acquittal of her son accused of fragging officers ("G.I. Found Not Guilty of Killing Officers," November 15, 1972), while another mother wept as her son took the stand in his own defense in a trial related to the massacre at My Lai ("G.I. Denies Seeing Troops Kill Civilians," November 20, 1970).

As it had done in the earlier wars, the press depicted the Spartan-like mother of the Vietnam-era soldier as supporting the nation's war effort. The support was evident in the letters mothers sent to the press criticizing those who opposed the war. One mother, for example, wrote to the *Nevada State Journal* scolding war opponents as "bleeding heart do-gooders" and declaring that it might "sound 'super patriotic' and even corny, but I would rather be dead than Red. I'd rather die on my feet than live on my knees" ("How About Cong?," March 4, 1967). Another mother blamed parents for not training children to be patriotic, saying "We should wave the flag and we should be partisan for our country" ("What Do You Think?," *Des Moines Register*, November 14, 1965).

The Spartan-like mother of the Vietnam War-era soldiers demonstrated support for the nation's war effort by participating in patriotic rituals (Marvin and Ingle [19]), as did mothers of combat soldiers during World Wars I and II. According to the *New York Times*, these rituals included lighting the torch at the Statue of Liberty ("Vietnam War Opponents View Johnson's Peace Bid as 'Hoax,'" January 9, 1966), unveiling a war memorial in New York as part of a Memorial Day celebration ("Woodside to Get a New Memorial for War Victims," May 30, 1971), and receiving medals on their children's behalf ("Medal of Honor Awarded Fourth Veteran of Vietnam," June 24, 1966; "President Denies Military Victory is Goal of Vietnam," September 29, 1967). While these Spartan-like mothers said nothing of wartime misgivings if they harbored any, not all mothers appearing in these stories silently and stoically supported the nation's war effort.

## Thetis Rising

In his poem, *The Iliad*, Homer informs us of the possibility that the peacetime good mother will struggle mightily against threats of injury and death to her child, even in wartime. Those struggles, in turn, threaten the war effort. Garner and Slattery ([12], [13]) observed that the press, government and the larger culture worked together during the two world wars to encourage mothers to shift from their peacetime to their wartime roles. Without similar propaganda efforts in place during the Vietnam War, some mothers of soldiers refused to assume the mantle of Spartan motherhood.

While Spartan mothers were depicted by the World War I and II press as experiencing a limited set of emotions, primarily joy, relief or stoic acceptance of their sons' fates, some of the mothers of soldiers in the Vietnam War era, according to press accounts, demonstrated a broader range of emotions. Some stories reported on the expected maternal emotions related to joy and relief when sons missing in action or prisoners of war were found or released, fear and hope when they were not, and grief at the death of a child ("Mother Talks About Her G.I. Son Who Died in Vietnam," *New York Times*, November 28, 1969; "A Marine Returns from the Officially Dead," *New York Times*, January 31, 1973; "First 2 P.O.W's Land in U.S.," *New York Times*, February 13, 1973; "Hope Any Returning POWs Can Help Trace Missing GIs," *Des Moines Register*, January 26, 1972; "Hit Delay in POW's Return," *Des Moines Register*, November 24, 1972). Still other stories, unlike accounts in earlier wars, depicted mothers of soldiers as angry, impatient and morally at odds with the nation's war policies.

According to Ruddick (1989, 105–106), mothers are provoked "to reflect on [their] own moral principles" when they observe dilemmas in their children's lives, and news accounts in the *New York Times* suggested mothers were aware of the dilemma that war created for some of their children. One mother told a reporter that her son fled to Canada rather than be inducted, calling the war immoral. He later reported for service and died in Vietnam. His mother observed that he had applied the principles he had been taught and "found himself at odds with his country and its policies on war" ("A Reluctant G.I.'s Life and Death," January 28, 1973). For similar

reasons, another mother forbade her son to register and encouraged other mothers to do the same ("A Mother on Coast Forbids Her Son, 18, to Register in Draft," October 22, 1968). These stories suggested that the mothers viewed war as a problem because it contradicted the maternal work in which they had been engaged.

### *Complaints*

According to Ruddick ([23], 116), mothers will often "display a sturdy independence of mind and the courage to stand up for their children even when this means standing against Fathers they love or fear." Press accounts indicated that mothers were willing to challenge the archetypal Great Father, that is, Uncle Sam, on a range of issues, suggesting that they recognized the need to engage in the struggle, rather than avoiding it and rendering the problem invisible.

During both earlier wars, when mothers were depicted as complaining about the physical, emotional and moral care their sons received during the conflicts, the press often portrayed Uncle Sam as reacting in patronizing ways, telling mothers that the government and military had things under control (Garner and Slattery [12], [13]). While similar complaints were heard from mothers during the Vietnam War ("Tells of Painful Ride with Gear During Bivouac," *Des Moines Register*, May 15, 1966; "Her G.I. Son Dead of Meningitis, Mother Blames Fort Dix Care," *New York Times*, March 27, 1969; "4 Ex-GI's Report Vietnam Drug Use," *New York Times*, March 21, 1970), the press coverage indicated that mothers' complaints extended beyond the care their sons received in the service to the government's war policies and the war itself. The *Des Moines Register* cited one mother as critical of the government's lack of across-the-board fairness in its draft policies. She said that politicians should be willing to sacrifice their children if the children of others were to be drafted ("G.I.'s Mother Replies to Smith, Simone," January 30, 1966). Similarly, a mother wrote to the *New York Times* that thousands of mothers wanted the Vietnam conflict brought to the conference table ("Letter to the Editor," March 25, 1965). In another story, mothers of missing servicemen claimed the government's policy of determining that MIAs were dead was based on "pure speculation and guess work" and they sought an injunction against the military from issuing further death findings until new procedures were established ("U.S. Court Curbs Death Notifications for Missing G.I.'s," *New York Times*, July 21, 1973).

Mothers also expressed concern about the government's lack of emotional support for their returning soldier sons. News narratives in the *New York Times* reported, for example, that a mother tried for months to get psychiatric help for her veteran son, to no avail. He killed the parish priest to whom she turned for help ("Priest Slain After Counseling a Veteran is Buried in Jersey," December 30, 1971). Another mother reportedly complained that her son suffered from battle fatigue as he saw the faces of Vietcong soldiers he helped to kill, yet he had been refused psychiatric help at a veteran's hospital ("Veteran of Vietnam Seized Shooting at Passing Cars," July 8, 1965). These stories indicated that mothers were dissatisfied with the care their children were receiving and rather than assuming the stoicism and silence of Spartan motherhood, like Thetis, they willingly vocalized their distress.

For some mothers of Vietnam-era soldiers, their feelings manifested themselves as anti-war activities, which included organized protests, challenging the status quo through the courts and taking over some of Uncle Sam's assumed wartime obligations. We turn to that discussion next.

### *Strategic acts to end the war*

Women have a long history of organizing, often using their abilities to "compensate for their second-class citizen status" (Alonso [1], 20). Their nineteenth-century efforts resulted in the temperance movement, the rise of social work and suffrage. Women, including mothers, organized a pacifist movement before World War I, but were silenced once the war began. During the two world wars, their organizing efforts were aimed at meeting the physical, emotional and morale needs of soldiers (Garner and Slattery [12], [13]). While mothers continued maternal work during the Vietnam War, some mothers organized specifically to bring an end to the conflict.



Picketing and protesting were among the tactics mothers used to challenge the archetypal Great Father on behalf of their children. The *New York Times* reported, for instance, that a group called Concerned American Mothers planned to march at the White House to end the war ("Mothers to Protest War," July 13, 1970). The previous month, more than 100 mothers joined a mother of a dead soldier at a local cemetery to support her war opposition. The group, according to the story, included members of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and American Mothers Unlimited ("Mothers Mourn in L.I. Cemetery," June 7, 1970). In another story, the *New York Times* portrayed a mother as a "one-woman picket line," when she protested at the White House for the release of her son, in jail for refusing to register for the draft. She said that he had been on a hunger strike for 11 days and "looks like a corpse" ("Mother Pickets White House," May 21, 1957).

The press reported that mothers also drew on the cultural symbols routinely used to make war more acceptable in their effort to end the war. For example, American mothers of slain combat soldiers have historically received totems such as medals, the American flag and the Gold Star in exchange for their "blood sacrifice" (Marvin and Ingle [19]). During the Vietnam War, the *Des Moines Register* reported that an 84-year-old Gold Star Mother led a protest urging soldiers to stop fighting and go to prison instead, saying her son "died in vain" ("10,000 Protestors Parade," November 21, 1965). Similarly, the paper reported that a group calling themselves "The National Gold Star Mothers, Inc." said that while they would support the president and his military policies, they opposed the war ("Gold Mothers," September 26, 1965). The *New York Times* described a mother who returned medals awarded posthumously to her son by the South Vietnamese government. She said she would keep those given by the US government because they had more meaning, adding that, "the United States Government is awarding a great many medals to make parents feel better" ("Mother of Slain G.I. Returns Medals to Saigon," May 24, 1969).

Throughout the conflict, the *New York Times* reported that Presidents Johnson and Nixon singled out mothers of soldiers for recognition on Mother's Day, reminding the country that children must be raised for citizenship ("Johnson Calls on Nation to Mark Mothers Day," April 29, 1965; "Mother's Day Proclamation," May 12, 1972; "Nixon Hails Mothers Day," May 12, 1973). Nonetheless, Mother's Day afforded mothers another symbol around which to express their opposition to the Vietnam War. The *New York Times* reported that mothers of soldiers joined in campaigns to bombard government leaders with Mother's Day cards that said mothers did not want gifts, rather, they wanted an end to the killing. One mother reportedly said "Keep your flowers and your perfume on Mother's Day, give us back our sons and get us out of Cambodia" ("Turning Tribute to Mothers to Boycott for Peace," May 8, 1970). The news story also reported that the mother was part of a thousand-woman Mother's Day march in front of Senator Jacob Javits' office demanding an end to the war. Louise Bristol Ransom, mentioned at the beginning of this paper, called her son's life "wasted," saying that the United States had not gained from his death ("For Mother's Day," May 8, 1971).

Still other mothers used the legal system to call attention to their cause. Stories reported that they hired attorneys to defend their children when they would or could not fight. One mother, for example, hired New York attorney William Kuntsler to defend her son because he could not kill people in Vietnam. She said that her son "took his training, he tried, but he just can't kill these Vietnamese people. He will do anything in service besides kill" ("Yank Wouldn't Kill in Viet," *Des Moines Register*, May 22, 1966). The *New York Times* described a mother who hired attorney Theodore Sorenson, an advisor to President Kennedy, to argue in a US Court of Appeals on behalf of her son (who had orders to go to Vietnam) that the war was unconstitutional ("Sorenson Argues Case for G.I. Here," June 18, 1970).

Thetis-like mothers put pressure on the government to end the war in other ways. One mother was described as gathering support for the purchase of a series of billboards with a message to President Nixon to withdraw from Vietnam. She was among the families of POWs who had reportedly been encouraged by the government to stay silent on the issue. According to the news story, the families were "torn" between doing what they could to get

the POWs released while not harming the government's effort ("In Courtland County They Remember the Servicemen," *New York Times*, October 31, 1971).

Finally, some anti-war mothers organized to do work typically associated with Uncle Sam. According to one news story, mothers of soldiers missing in action stood vigil at the Paris peace talks in 1971; a year and a half earlier two US war wives and a soldier's mother-in-law met with members of North Vietnam's delegation at the Paris peace talks for more than an hour. The North Vietnamese told them that Hanoi would not release US prisoners until American troops were withdrawn and the war ended. They urged the women to protest the war ("U.S. Women Stand Vigil at Peace Talks in Paris," *New York Times*, May 28, 1971; "Hanoi Aides in Paris Bid U.S. Wives Protest War," *New York Times*, October 16, 1969). In a series of stories, the *New York Times* reported that despite State Department opposition, one mother accepted an invitation from North Vietnam to travel to Hanoi with a peace group to pick up her son, one of three US soldiers released from a prison camp. The mother, along with anti-war activists, planned to escort the POWs back to the United States and asked that the military let them spend time with their families before repatriation. Military officials reportedly boarded the plane in New York to take the three soldiers to a military hospital. The mother, who had picketed the White House and Congress for four years to end the war and bring her son home, broke down in tears saying she had not cried "since the day you called me and said my son was shot down." That, in turn, upset her soldier son who told the officers that they "may have pushed this a little too far." One Washington official said of the military's handling of the incident, "I told them not to do it" ("3 Freed P.O.W.'s Return," September 29, 1972; "Freed Pilots Fail to Arrive in Laos," September 24, 1972; "Hanoi Frees 3 P.O.W.'s," September 18, 1972; "2 Antiwar Activists Are on Way to Hanoi for P.O.W. Escort," September 16, 1972). Taken together, these press accounts suggest that the anti-war efforts of these mothers reflected, in principle, the efforts of the goddess Thetis, mother of Achilles, who also objected to her son's participation in war. The mothers used any means available to end a war they believed conflicted with the maternal work they had done in raising their children. Like the archetypal Spartan mother portrayed in the earlier conflicts, they continued their maternal work during wartime but, unlike the Spartan mother, they were unwilling to silently watch as their children were sent into harm's way.

## Uncle Sam: The Great Father

The press coverage of mothers of soldiers during the first and second wars told a story of the Great Father as being completely in control of the war machine and the nation's morale (Garner and Slattery [12], [13]). The Vietnam War-era press, likewise, reported on ways that Uncle Sam made an effort to manage maternal morale. For instance, the *New York Times* reported that the military told soldiers to write to their parents, telling them "of course ... you are having a wonderful time" ("Scraps of Paper from Vietnam," October 18, 1970). The newspaper also reported that the mortuary that processed dead soldiers worked with "reverence" and screened the dead men's belongings to avoid "upsetting" mothers or wives ("Staff of the U.S. Mortuary in Vietnam Works with Care and 'Reverence,'" August 28, 1970). Earlier in the war, the newspaper reported that the Army was pushing for tougher training, admitting that it was "often tempered by visions of mothers writing to Congressmen to complain that Junior is being subjected unnecessarily to danger." The solution was to tell mothers that, "this sort of training is insurance for survival" ("Training of Army Held Unrealistic," August 27, 1954).

Despite the Great Father's deference to maternal thinking and attitudes, he had the final word in some of the stories. For instance, he jailed a war resister whose mother said that she forbade him to enter the service. Uncle Sam blamed the young man's mother and lawyer for what happened, saying his mother apparently needed publicity and his lawyer failed to tell him that his actions would "be like buying a one-way ticket to the penitentiary" ("Former Resister Awaiting Draft," *New York Times*, February 1, 1970). Uncle Sam also responded to anti-war activists who complained about the military's repatriation policy, a policy that required each POW to spend time in a hospital before seeing families or journalists. The activists, according to the story, claimed the

military wanted to take control of the returnees. One government official insisted that the move was for the good of the men, adding, "If we take flack, so be it" ("War Foes Assail Plans on P.O.W.'s," *New York Times*, December 10, 1972).

In other instances, the Great Father in the Vietnam War press coverage did not have the final say. For example, the press reported that the military finally agreed with a mother's complaint that her son should not be inducted two days before Christmas. The Army refrained from shipping draftees to Army reception centers between December 23 and 26 ("Christmas Reprieve Given to Inductees by the Army," *New York Times*, December 4, 1965). Coverage also revealed that the government understood that the citizenry's dissatisfaction with the war would lead to diminished support by mothers of soldiers which, in turn, would create problems for the military. According to the *New York Times*, the military worried about growing dissidence by South Vietnamese about the war and the effects on public opinion at home. Said one US officer, "It's going to be damned hard to justify to American mothers the sending of their boys to Vietnam unless those people out there get together" ("Pentagon is Worried by Dissidence in Vietnam," May 22, 1966). In addition, the North Vietnamese reportedly used mothers of soldiers in their propaganda. According to the *New York Times*, a pamphlet originating in Hanoi showed a picture of an American mother holding a sign saying, "My son died in vain. Don't fight. Go to prison." Alaskan Senator Ernest Gruening reportedly echoed the mother's feelings, saying that US soldiers had "been mistakenly sacrificed on behalf of an inherited folly" ("Hanoi Issues a 'Black Book' on U.S. in Vietnam," July 26, 1966).

The Great Father as depicted in the Vietnam War press narrative was not as all-powerful as he had been portrayed in the earlier wars. The US government and military had a more difficult time managing the war and citizen morale as the war dragged on. Convincing the nation, including mothers of soldiers, that the war was necessary was an ongoing effort. President Johnson defended the war on the Fourth of July, 1965, saying that American soldiers could not be "tucking tail and coming home" ("How Johnson Makes Foreign Policy," *New York Times*, July 4, 1965). According to another report, Johnson acknowledged the grief reflected in the eyes of "mothers, brothers and sisters" as he crossed the country. He said that unity would make the path to peace easier and that the "enemy needs to see patience, not cracks in courage" ("Johnson Appeals for Unity on War," *New York Times*, November 11, 1967). But unity was not forthcoming. In 1972, President Nixon criticized opinion leaders in the nation for not supporting his war policies, saying he wanted an honorable peace ("President Says 'Opinion Leaders' Failed Him on War," *New York Times*, October 17, 1972). In 1975, the fall of Saigon marked the end of a failed war by the US government.

## Conclusion

While press coverage of the Vietnam War followed some of the same patterns established during earlier wars, the Vietnam War-era press never fully functioned as part of the wartime machinery. Journalists criticized the news that soldiers themselves received about the war, saying that the military "muted, twisted or mangled" much of it and that mothers "probably know more about the whole fight than [the soldier] does" ("How the G.I.'s in Vietnam Don't Learn About the War," *New York Times*, April 12, 1970). In serving to chronicle the war, rather than actively participate in its execution as it had in earlier wars, the Vietnam War-era press allowed room for the archetypal image of Thetis to emerge in its narrative about mothers of soldiers. This Thetis-like image could serve as an alternative to the Spartan-like role model typically presented to mothers of combat soldiers. Like the Spartan mothers, she continued her maternal work of caring for her children during wartime, but refused to be silenced about accepting her son's fate. Instead, she actively sought an end to the conflict that she felt was unjust and unnecessary.

The reasons that the press coverage of mothers differed between the Vietnam War and earlier wars are at least threefold. The first reflected the way that the government and the military orchestrated the war. The Vietnam-

era press was not encumbered with the same wartime constraints placed on the news media during the First and Second World Wars, particularly in the area of censorship. The War Powers Act of World War II, for example, led to the creation of the US Office of Censorship but, since Congress never formally declared a war in Vietnam, wartime restrictions on First Amendment freedoms were difficult to enforce. In addition, the Vietnam War administrations failed to "draft" mothers into its war effort with propaganda messages like those created in the earlier wars. Thus, the mobilization of American mothers of soldiers was not a part of the wartime narrative created by the Vietnam-era press.

At the same time, second-wave feminism was emerging as a force during the Vietnam War era. First-wave feminists, together with pacifists who appeared in the national spotlight prior to the First World War, had raised questions about the wisdom of sending children into conflict. However, the wartime mechanisms created by the Wilson Administration effectively put an end to their efforts, and drew them into war work. Feminists willingly set aside their own interests, hoping that they would receive credit for participating in the national cause and win the right to vote. By the time that the Vietnam War unfolded, women had won that right to have their voices heard. Some were willing to risk the backlash, using their political muscle in the public sphere to bring their children home.

The American cultural landscape was shifting during the Vietnam War era and the turmoil created by the civil rights and free speech movements may have also paved the way for mothers of soldiers to publicly speak their hearts. Mothers may have found the culture of turmoil to be a more welcoming venue in which to express their views than the political and social circumstances in which mothers of soldiers found themselves in earlier wars. The nation's press, lacking the usual wartime constraints, was able to cover the mother who was at odds with the war effort, fairly and without reprisal, thus allowing her to retain her moral authority as mother.

More scholarship is needed before we can say if and under what circumstances mothers of soldiers willingly embrace the status of Spartan motherhood. Unlike the stories appearing in the tightly controlled press of the earlier world wars, news coverage of Vietnam War-era mothers suggests that the shift to the wartime role of the Spartan mother may not necessarily come naturally to mothers, particularly since their peacetime role is consumed with nurturing their children physically, emotionally and socially. The reports of the contrasting maternal views among mothers themselves point to the underlying structure of feeling that reflected uncertainty and tangled emotions about the mothers' wartime role. The Vietnam War-era narrative of the soldier's mother indicates that the concept of patriotic motherhood is more complex than suggested by the image of the Spartan mother appearing in the press coverage of earlier wars.

The press narrative of the Vietnam War, particularly as it relates to mothers of soldiers and when compared to similar coverage of the world wars, serves as a cautionary tale. The comparison, when considered in a historical context, speaks to the importance of managing the press during wartime, via censorship and propaganda, if the government waging the war wants to avoid dissent; it is difficult to win a war abroad when fighting one at home. We are not proposing that there is never a just war. At the same time, the press narrative points to the need for mothers to speak their hearts in peacetime, before bullets start to fly. Failure to thoughtfully consider a citizen's roles, in peacetime as well as wartime, leads to the danger of falling into the trap experienced by one American mother of a soldier killed in Vietnam. She told a reporter that she wished she had participated in peace organizations prior to his death, "because I have learned from tragic experience ... my children live or die, whichever the world decides" ("Mothers Mourn in L.I. Cemetery," *New York Times*, June 7, 1970).

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