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“Iraq is a Small Purple Planet” Feminist Mothering During Wartime

The work of a “military wife” and mother during a time of war comes with a set of unacknowledged assumptions about the parenting division of labour between spouses. Despite the presence of women and single parents, the military continues to operate within a gendered model that presupposes a male breadwinner and female homemaker. The military assumes that a wife will support the soldier by replacing his domestic work when “duty calls” and he is sent away. In this personal narrative, I draw on my own experiences during my husband’s military mobilization to examine the dimensions of feminist mothering during wartime. This article considers the experience of living with contradictions, the relationship between feminist mothering and anti-war activism, the development of independence among military wives, and the difference between feminist mothering born from privilege and feminist mothering resulting from necessity. I argue that the gendered character of the division of labour during a time of war depends on an unquestioning belief in the war itself. Feminist mothering is irreconcilable with the roles of a military wife because the war machine itself is maintained through, and benefits from, a gendered division of childcare and household labour. Not only does “maternal thinking” challenge the legitimization of war, but feminist parenting challenges military assumptions that families’ sacrifices are justified.

I gave birth to my second child in late December 2002. Two weeks later, and with a five day notice, my husband’s U.S. Army Reserve unit was mobilized to prepare for the impending war in Iraq. I quickly became a “military wife,” although I was a reluctant, anti-war, and feminist one.

This is a war story, but it is not the usual war story that makes the news. This story does not take place on the battlefield, nor does anyone die in this account of the U.S. war in Iraq. This war story is not even based in the country

that experienced the war's deepest ravages. Rather, it is based in the United States, in the Midwest, in the relative calm and privilege that characterizes an average middle-class family. Despite being far from the battlefields, my reflections capture the contradictions inherent in feminist mothering during a time of war.

This personal narrative illustrates the ways in which feminist mothering directly conflicts with the position of a "military wife." The work of a "military wife" during a time of war comes with a set of unacknowledged assumptions about the parenting and work division of labour between spouses. Despite the presence of women and single parents in the military, it continues to operate within a gendered model that presupposes a male breadwinner and female homemaker (Enloe, 2000). The military assumes that spouses will be willing and able to bear the unexpected burden of living as a single parent at a moment's notice, regardless of their parenting, career and financial circumstances. In fact, I argue that the war machine itself is maintained through, and benefits from, an assumed gender division of childcare and household labour. In this context, feminist mothering takes on a particular meaning, as it involves not only equality in parenting and raising feminist children, but also active resistance to the war (see also Ruddick, 1989). In addition to questioning the goals of war, feminist mothering for me came to mean refusing to accept the gendered division of parenting that was thrust upon me by the military.

My experiences suggest that there is a difference between feminist mothering born from privilege and feminist mothering resulting from necessity. Before the mobilization, I approached feminism from a standpoint of deliberation and choice. My husband and I had feminist goals: equality in work and parenting, attachment parenting coupled with career commitment, and non-sexist childrearing. In contrast to this privileged perspective, the mobilization forced me into a position that divorced women and single parents have always faced: an independence from men resulting from necessity. In this context, as many women have done before me, I had to reach deeply into myself to find the strength to function effectively on my own with my children. This process was much more difficult than I ever envisioned.

Although living independently from men does not necessarily result in the development of a conscious feminist identity for all women, turning points such as divorce can serve as a catalyst for the development of a feminist identity (Aronson, 2000). As a result of living on my own with my children, I developed new strengths to live independently and grew into a fuller person. Feminist mothering came to include taking on traditionally masculine activities, as well as emotional independence from my husband. This is a common occurrence among military wives (Enloe, 2000), but the depth of it surprised me. After experiencing such significant transformations, I eventually realized the limits of a feminism emerging from privilege. For me, forced self-reliance created a new dimension of feminist mothering, one based on a deeper level of independence than I imagined possible.

Living contradictions

The military demands allegiance to the goals of war by its soldiers and, although more subtly, military spouses. Soldiers are barred from open disagreement with U.S. foreign policy and leadership. Military spouses, especially those on military bases, are expected to completely support the goals of the military and its interventions (Enloe, 2000). Some military families have grown more vocal in their frustrations about the war, including Cindy Sheehan, the mother of a killed U.S. soldier. In August, 2005, Sheehan received wide press coverage for her month-long anti-war protest outside President Bush's Texas ranch. However, many spouses have been chastised for not "supporting the troops" when they questioned U.S. involvement in Iraq (Gettleman, 2003). Although some military wives are open about their negative feelings about their husbands' deployment in Iraq, they are typically quiet about their criticisms of the war (Witchel, 2005). Those who protest the war have been met with outright hostility, and this hostility often effectively silences those who disagree with the war (Houppert, 2003). Indeed, silencing dissent is an essential component of the rhetoric about the war, as a 2005 Veteran's Day speech by President Bush illustrates: "Some Democrats and anti-war critics are now claiming we manipulated the intelligence and misled the American people about why we went to war. The stakes in the global war on terror are too high and the national interest is too important for politicians to throw out false charges" (BBC News, 2005).

Many military spouses may rationalize their support for the war because they have difficulty living with the contradictions of disagreeing with the policies while supporting their spouses. As one military wife put it during an interview with a New York Times reporter: "the people who don't agree with the war, what are they left with if that person dies? I guess they're left feeling angry.... And so maybe I haven't allowed myself to go there. Because I just *want to believe*" (Witchel, 2005, emphasis mine). A desire to "believe" in the war may directly result from a psychological need to see the risk of one's spouse's life as legitimate.

However, believing in the war is not possible for all military wives. What happens when a military wife rejects the war while simultaneously operating as a vital part of the war machine? And what happens when the military's assumptions—about the division of child care and household labour and/or one's political beliefs—do not fit with the realities of people's lives?

As a feminist sociologist, I am not a typical "military wife." My research, for example, examines young women's attitudes toward feminism (e.g. Aronson, 2003). My teaching often focuses on exposing inequalities and helping students recognize their own role in an unequal social structure. I have also been active in feminist and progressive organizations.

Nor is my husband a typical enlisted soldier. Unlike the vast majority of enlisted Reservists, (6.6 percent have Baccalaureate degrees, and 0.8 percent have graduate or professional degrees¹ [Military Family Resource Center, 2001]), he has a doctorate. My husband enlisted in the active duty Army in an

effort to “find himself” while he was in college. With a family history of military service and his desire to pursue specialized training, this decision made sense to him at the time. After an immediate change of heart, he left active duty service to complete his very lengthy contract in the Reserves. Today, the ghost of this commitment lives on, thanks to the military’s “stop-loss” policy, which prevents troops with specialized training from leaving the military despite the fulfillment of their contracts. Like other military personnel in such areas as special operations, intelligence, and some medical and engineering specializations, he had to “apply” to be discharged after his contract was completed. His application for discharge was denied.

The masculine military culture in which my husband was immersed provided a stark contrast to our feminist approach to parenting. We have worked toward equality in the household division of labour and have approached child rearing from an explicitly feminist perspective. My husband and I have always divided up household chores evenly and both of us are committed to being active and involved parents. For example, we both prioritize spending time with our children, we each took the same amount of time off of work when our first child was born, and we divide up parenting responsibilities equally. In contrast, the military is based on a “hypermasculine” culture that values extreme expressions of masculine behavior (Rosen, Knudson and Fancher, 2003; Enloe, 2000). Despite an increasing number of women in the military, the “warrior environment” pervades (Rosen *et al.*, 2003). On one occasion, one of my husband’s Army co-workers reacted with shock when he mentioned that he enjoyed cooking with his daughter. Given his particular training, he was seen as too “huah”² to engage in such feminine activities. Ironically, then, my husband was absorbed in a hypermasculine environment, while I lived for all practical purposes as a single parent and committed feminist with a demanding career. This new division of parenting and household labour was a radical departure from both my feminist values and lived experience.

My unlikely position as a military wife and feminist mother resulted in a number of contradictions, two of which I will reflect on here. First, my link to the military conflicted with my anti-war stance and activism. Second, while the mobilization pushed me into a more traditional feminine role with respect to household and child care responsibilities, it simultaneously reinforced my independence and my feminism.

“1, 2, 3, 4! We don’t want this imperialist war!”

On February 15, 2003, a remarkable opposition to the war was growing and made itself known as millions of newly mobilized peace activists took to the streets all around the world to protest the invasion of Iraq. My husband had been away for about a month, my son was six weeks-old, and my daughter had just turned four. I had not even had my postpartum doctor’s visit yet. President Bush was still seeking a United Nations Security Council Resolution authorizing the use of force against Iraq. U.N. inspectors were in Iraq, looking for

weapons of mass destruction, and said they needed more time to evaluate the situation. It was clear that there were differences of opinion among the nations of the U.N. Security Council, and that many countries (especially France, Russia and China) seemed opposed to the use of force.

That cold day, I went with my children and my parents to a large peace rally in Detroit. We made our own signs: "Military Family for Peace," and "Bring our Daddy Home." My daughter came up with her own message to President Bush, which she wrote on a small sign, just the right size for her to carry: "Don't Do It." I was both excited and nervous about attending the rally. It was among my first postpartum outings, I was filled with a burning sense of purpose, and I was fiercely proud of our signs. At the same time, I felt awkward about my role as a military wife and its implications for my anti-war position.

In the middle of the rally, the stroller started to move. The baby was waking up! It is probably only new nursing moms who remember the fear of being in public when their newborns woke up after a long period of time, very hungry and ready to nurse. In those early days, breastfeeding was very difficult, since my young son had a hard time latching on properly. With the protesters still loudly chanting "1, 2, 3, 4! We don't want this imperialist war!" it was time for us to make a hasty exit so that I could nurse him in the car.

While loading the trunk with our home-made peace signs, the stroller, diaper bag and other baby paraphernalia, my father was confronted by a menacing-looking man who was standing near our car. "Why did you join the military if you didn't want to kick butt?" he snarled, referring to one of our signs. At first, my dad ignored him. "You're a coward," he persisted.

My dad finally replied: "This is not a good use of people's lives. You can't go bring democracy to someone else."

The man continued: "You look like an intelligent man, but I'm here to tell you that you're stupid." My dad got into the car, and I quickly locked the doors. At that moment, my four-year-old started screaming for a snack. The man continued to yell at our car, standing frighteningly close to us. We avoided eye contact, and pretended we could not hear him screaming, but he walked right in front of our car. Arms raised, he yelled "What about this?!" He had unzipped his jacket to reveal a black "POW MIA" shirt. "What about the POWs?!" And then, as quickly as he came, he was gone, apparently off to attend the boat show that was taking place down the street.

This confrontation captured the contradictions inherent in opposing the war as a military spouse. Average Americans, not to mention those with ties to the military, tend to link support for soldiers with support for the war. I noticed this conflation regularly, from the confrontation at the peace rally to the "No War" lawn signs that were taken down or replaced with American flags at the onset of the war. Disentangling support for the troops and support for the war reveals the emotional contradictions of being a feminist "military wife." Although I supported my husband and other soldiers, I was outraged about the war and my own powerlessness to control its direct impact on my life. I was also

afraid every day that my husband would be sent somewhere where he would be killed. Finally, I was angry that support for the troops was equated with support for governmental policy. My yellow ribbon-covered tree and "Peace" lawn sign might have puzzled the average American, but they seemed perfectly harmonious to me.

Despite the presence of organizations that explicitly oppose the war while supporting the troops (including Veterans for Peace, Military Families Speak Out, and Gold Star Families for Peace), I am an anomaly among people I know as a result of my anti-war military spouse role (see also Aronson, 2004). Consequently, I often feel compelled to tell people about my position on the war because I want to distance myself from the assumptions often made about military wives: that they blindly support military policies and put a positive spin on the difficult absence of their spouses. At times, I have been concerned that acquaintances will think that I conform to the sexist assumptions of the military: that I put my husband's career above my own or that we are not committed co-parents. On some level, I also think I tell people about my anti-war stance because I wonder if my "military wife" status will raise questions about my progressive and feminist credentials. I approach the war, like many of my colleagues and friends, from an intellectual position, but also as someone with a loved one who participated in it.

On an intellectual level, my feminist and maternal sensibilities make me feel strongly that war represents a hierarchical masculine desire for power over others. The debate about whether women and/or mothers are more peaceful than men notwithstanding, I felt a responsibility as a feminist mother to actively resist the war. My standpoint especially applied to the preemptive Iraq war, which was not a response to an attack but an aggressive invasion of another country. The masculine ethos of the Iraq war was exemplified by President Bush's "bring them on" macho challenge in the summer of 2003 to those who might attack U.S. soldiers in Iraq (*USA Today*, 2003). In contrast to this ethos, philosopher Sara Ruddick (1989) has argued that "maternal thinking," resulting from the work of mothering (especially feminist mothering), can make an important contribution to peace activism. As she puts it: "mothers who acquire a feminist consciousness and engage in feminist politics are likely to become more effectively nonviolent and antimilitarist (Ruddick, 1989: 242)." As a military spouse, I also believe that the sexist assumptions of the military undermine feminist parenting, a point I will examine next.

Feminism and independence

Both the family and the military have been called "greedy institutions" (Segal, 1986) because they "make total claims on their members" and "seek exclusive and undivided loyalty" (Coser 1974: 4). Generally, it is the family that is expected to adapt to the needs of military obligations. Being part of a military family "guarantees conflicts between work and family" as a result of relocation, uncertainty about length of time away, and family separation (Booth, Falk,

Segal and Segal, 2000: 320; Segal, 1986; Pittman, 1994). Dual earner families, especially those at difficult stages of family life (such as recent marriage, pregnancy, childbirth, or the presence of young children), may face especially great challenges reconciling the demands of these two greedy institutions (Segal, 1986; Bourq and Segal, 1999).

In the U.S., nearly two-thirds of women with preschool aged children work outside the home (Hochschild, 2000). These women are employed in all types of jobs, including the military. Currently, 17 percent of Reservists are women (Military Family Resource Center, 2001). Despite this historical increase in the number of women in the military (Military Family Resource Center, 2001), it operates within a gendered model that assumes a male breadwinner and female homemaker (Enloe, 2000). For example, the wives of active duty soldiers and officers often have difficulty developing their own careers, as they move frequently as a result of their husbands' transfers (Witchel, 2005). Women who live near military bases, and military wives in general, have lower annual earnings and higher rates of unemployment than other women (Booth *et al.*, 2000; Segal, 1986).

It is assumed that military wives will support the soldier by replacing his domestic labour. In my case, the household and child care work represented a particular burden because my husband and I had previously strived for equality in the division of labour. Even more than I had imagined, it was extremely difficult to juggle single parenting and a career. With only occasional exceptions, all babysitting time was used for work (either paid or unpaid), and all non-work time was used for childcare. It was particularly challenging to combine academic work with my "intensive" approach to mothering (Hays, 1996), such as breastfeeding and not wanting to let my baby cry himself to sleep.

With both of my children, I practiced attachment parenting, but the experience of mothering each child was quite distinct. For six months during her infancy, my eldest child's reflux and stomach pain made her cry for several hours each night. During this period, my husband and I took turns holding, comforting, and walking with her. One of us would hold her for a period of time and we would pass her off to the other when we became exhausted. Although I nursed on demand, my husband helped get her to sleep. When my second child was colicky, I relied extensively on the assistance of my own parents and babysitters. As a result of his stomach pain, my son had difficulty getting to sleep and staying asleep. The most effective method was a technique my dad perfected: he danced vigorously to extremely loud rock music while holding the baby over his arm like a limp rag doll. At one point, I realized that my dad had become my son's "#2": he had replaced my husband as the second caretaker. Despite a great deal of help, however, my son's colic was ultimately my responsibility. Although my dad effectively got the baby to sleep, it took him a long time to learn the art of arm-to-crib transfers, and his abrupt style often resulted in immediate waking and a new initiation of the nursing-burping-transferring-to-cradle cycle. When my son woke every three hours in the

middle of the night with pain, the nursing and dancing tasks ultimately fell to me alone.

I hired a babysitter not only when I worked at my job, but at times when I needed an extra pair of hands to take care of the children. This is obviously expensive. Although many private companies make up the difference in pay between a Reservist's regular salary and military salary, they are not required to do so by law. My husband's employer did not make up the pay difference. For military parents who work, one would expect that increased childcare would be necessary to cover the labour of the absent spouse. In fact, at least one-fifth of American dual earner couples work different shifts on their jobs in order to care for their children without relying on day care (Hochschild, 2000). However, this labour inside the home goes unacknowledged by the military, which does not provide compensation to soldiers' families for their absence. The "separation pay" (about \$100 a month) that is provided only recognizes minimal extra expenses as a result of maintaining two households. The unspoken assumption of the breadwinner/homemaker model is that the military wife will pick up the household and childcare labour of the absent soldier without complaint or difficulty. As elsewhere, homemaking and child rearing are not considered worthy of compensation.

In addition to the strain of childcare adjustments, mobilization can cause significant emotional stress for families. The family disruption resulting from the soldier's absence can strain marriages, cause depression in both military personnel and their spouses, and lead to distress among children (Figley, 1993; Wood, Scarville and Gravino, 1995; Ford *et al.*, 1993). Spouses may even report more problems and lower morale than enlisted soldiers (Paulus, Nagar, Larey and Camacho, 1996). Difficulty adjusting to a partner's absence has been found to be especially pronounced among parents with infants and women who were pregnant at the time of deployment (Wood *et al.*, 1995). The first Gulf War (the "hundred hour" war), which was far shorter, less deadly, and more "successful," led to divorce rates of 50 percent at Army bases (Gettleman, 2003). In this war, divorce rates doubled between 2001 and 2004 (Leland, 2004). Veterans returning from the first Gulf War were more likely to report moderate or severe family adjustment problems than moderate or severe war-zone stress responses (Figley, 1993). These problems were particularly acute for Reservists, who were forced to abruptly leave their non-military lives (Figley, 1993).

In my case, we were lucky because my husband was not deployed overseas. He was instead responsible for training other Reservists to serve in Iraq, as well as occasionally serving as an Army representative at funerals for soldiers. Despite our luck, the mobilization was a major disruption to our lives. Nursing was not yet well established, we had no visible routine or schedule, and my four-year old daughter was distressed by the amount of energy a new baby took from her only remaining parent. The entire period of the mobilization was characterized by constant crisis. The workload of combining my career and single parenthood, the uncertainty about when he would return, our sense that our

lives were out of our own control, and my hostility to the war that had taken him away, resulted in a continuous feeling of tension and strain. Since we had always shared parenting responsibilities, I was shocked by the sheer workload of having sole responsibility for the well being of my children.

While meeting the physical needs of my children was challenging, it was the emotional needs that became overwhelming at times. In addition to a colicky baby, my four-year old daughter had great difficulty adjusting to the new situation. In fact, she developed a sleep disorder during this period. One night, I heard her in her bed desperately searching for a picture of her with her father that I had placed in a special holder: "Where is my picture of Daddy? I know it was here. . . . Where can it be?" I helped her find it under her pillow. After I left the room, I heard her talking again: "Daddy's going to die. I'm going to die." Shocked by her words, I went back in her room and we talked. She asked me, "Why did George Bush send Daddy away? Is there going to be a war in Iraq?" We discussed that Iraq was far away, and that Daddy was very close by in the United States. I told her that he was safe and he was not going to Iraq. "Iraq is a small purple planet," she told me. After I left her room, she sang a song with following words: "Daddy's not going to die. Why does George Bush want a war?"

It was moments such as these that crystallized my sense that feminist mothering was irreconcilable with my role as a "military wife." Reassuring my daughter about her father's safety was, in fact, a lie because his role in the military meant that his safety was never guaranteed. It was also disingenuous because my reassurances to her conflicted with my anti-war "maternal thinking" (Ruddick, 1989). As a result, the act of comforting my daughter ultimately served the goals of the war.

Although military bases provide important family supports to the military spouses who are left behind when the full-time soldiers get deployed (Witchel, 2005), little is done to assist the spouses of mobilized Reservists, who are often perceived as "second-class citizens" by active duty troops (Ford *et al.*, 1993). Even before 9/11, Reserve and National Guard units were mobilized at increasing rates as a result of the decline of the number of active duty troops (Enloe, 2000). Since the war in Iraq started, as many as 34% at any one time of the deployed soldiers have been Reservists. This has led to a concern in the military that the frequency and length of mobilizations are "beginning to stress the Reserve force" (Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs, 2004). The reason for the Army's concern is largely rooted in worries that soldiers will not reenlist (Enloe, 2000).

About two months after the mobilization, I got a letter from the Family Program Office of the Army, inviting me to come to a meeting for military families to discuss issues related to deployment. We were to talk about such issues as what to expect during the mobilization process, family issues, and health care. Children were not welcome at the meeting, yet there was no child care provided. Refreshments were provided, however. The closest meeting

place was two hours away, and I was shocked to see that the meeting dates had already passed by the time I had received the mailing. It is important to recognize, however, that these program offices are typically run on the volunteer labour of the military wives of officers, who are pressured by the military into such uncompensated work (Harrell, 2001). My only other contact with the military was a letter and questionnaire that arrived from the USAR Family Program Office six months after the beginning of the mobilization. It sounded five months too late:

Don't feel like you're alone. The Army Reserve has staffed a USAR Family Program Office to help you. We're here to provide information, referral, outreach and assistance to family members of the United States Army Reserves. Our primary mission is to serve you and be your Army contact. We will assist you with questions and concerns about mobilization and remain in contact with you on a regular basis throughout the mobilization process. We will supply you with the necessary publications and workshops you need and give you feedback through surveys to ensure you are receiving the adequate assistance you need.... We look forward to serving you and your family.

The enclosed questionnaire asked a series of questions to which I unambivalently answered "no," including: "Have you received monthly calls/emails from any Family Readiness Group members' telephone tree?" "Were you provided a point of contact at your soldier's unit for concerns, questions and emergencies?" Thus, in my experience, the presumption of the breadwinner/homemaker model of the military did not include as a key component adequate emotional or informational support. This social support can be a key in helping to buffer the negative mental health effects of stress experienced by military wives when their husbands are away (Rosen and Moghadam, 1988).

At the same time as my husband's absence pushed me into a more traditional feminine role on many levels, it also served to reinforce my feminism and my sense of independence. Although my spouse and I had always made every life decision together, I now had to make them without his input. Before the mobilization, we had shared the power of decision-making. During the mobilization, I hired and fired babysitters, enrolled my daughter in new preschools, tried remedies for colic, re-mortgaged our house, and tried to solve the sleep disorder my daughter developed during this period. Although my husband and I had lived together for many years, I eventually learned to live alone with my children.

Military wives have often experienced an identity shift when their husbands went to war. However, they often do so in a way that is not explicitly feminist and is submissive to the goals of war. For example, during World War II, the government promoted women's work as their patriotic duty and encouraged companies to lay women workers off from their jobs when the men

returned home from the battlefields (Coontz, 1992). This situation may result in a "split personality" for military wives: "when her husband is at home, the military wife is a Donna Reed mom, raising the children and deferring to Dad. When her husband is deployed she becomes Rosie the Riveter, fixing toilets, paying the bills and cutting plywood to protect her house against a hurricane" (Witchel, 2005: 64). My own experiences reveal that my husband's absence strengthened my commitment to feminist mothering, as I took on new roles in my family and developed new strengths to live independently with my children.

The end and the beginning

After nine months, my husband was demobilized as a result of an injury incurred during the mobilization. The rest of his unit was extended beyond the initial one-year call up. He came home and started to pick up the pieces of his life: a job he left abruptly, a son he hardly knew, a daughter who had experienced distress about his absence, a partner who had learned to live independently, and his own physical pain.

The military's presumed traditional division of labour depends heavily on an unquestioning support for the goals of the war. In order for the system to work, military spouses need to be willing to view the potential sacrifice of their spouses' lives in terms of some higher cause. They must also be willing to donate their own household labour for the benefit of our "national security." In other words, one of the implications of the gendered division of labour assumed by the military is that the sacrifices that spouses make are both worthwhile and justified. In fact, the gendered character of the division of labour during a time of war depends heavily on an unquestioning belief in the war itself. When someone questions the necessity of war, one's sacrifices are in vain from the very beginning. As I questioned both the goals of the war and the assumed gender division of labour, the "military wife" role clearly contradicted with my feminist approach to mothering. Feminist co-parenting came to a grinding halt as a result of the traditional parenting assumptions imposed upon me by the military. At the same time, my feminist identity as a parent grew stronger as it was more profoundly based on necessary independence rather than privilege.

As I reflect on this experience, I realize that whenever we talk about mothering, we also need to talk about fathering. The military's treatment of mothers cannot be viewed independently from its treatment of fathers. In the assumption that the wives of soldiers have primary responsibility for the children, there is a corresponding assumption that those soldiers who are fathers are not vital and necessary to the growth and development of their children. The breadwinner model assumes an absent, distant and uninvolved parent rather than one who is equally invested and involved in their children's lives. This view has resulted in extensions of deployment periods, the denial of visits home, and the attitude that it is acceptable for soldiers who are fathers to be away from their children for months, and even years, on end. While the work of mothering during a time of war places an unreasonable and invisible burden

on the mothers left behind, it also places an invisible burden on the fathers called away. Within the masculine ethos of the military, much of this burden remains unexpressed and unchallenged.

As the war in Iraq drags on with no end in sight, and as deployments are extended while the death toll rises, military families continue to face the strains of separation. These stressors will wear on even the best marriages and most tolerant children. For those of us who opposed the war in the first place and yet had to contribute our labour to it, the continued loss of life in Iraq is particularly troubling. For the military spouses who initially supported the war and have “kept the home fires burning,” one has to wonder how long their patience will hold. As public opinion slowly shifts, perhaps military wives will begin to add their voices to the public debate on the war. For those of us who opposed the war in the first place and yet had to contribute our labour to it, the contradictions that have filled our lives are not only personal, but are deeply political.

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¹A mobilization of this size disproportionately places a burden on the poor and working class who comprise the bulk of the so-called “all volunteer” military. This has lead journalists to charge that the composition of the military is “requiring what is, in essence, a working-class military to fight and die for an affluent America” (Halbringer and Homes, 2003).

²Military slag roughly equivalent to “tough.”

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