Like Other Mothers, Like A Mother: 
Edith Neal, Peg Mullen, and Public Roles for Mothers during the Vietnam War

“Why are you making such a fuss? Why can’t you be proud, *like other mothers*, that your son was killed in Vietnam?”¹ These questions, perhaps rhetorical, were asked of an Iowa activist and quoted in a 1972 editorial in Burlington, Iowa’s local newspaper. What might it have meant to be “like other mothers” in the early 1970s in Iowa? How did being a mother relate to pride? How were expectations of motherhood changed during wartime? This presentation looks at two Iowa mothers, Edith Neal and Peg Mullen, both of whom were active during the Vietnam War. Situating these two women within a larger history of motherhood and gendered patriotism in America, I argue that each woman used maternal stereotypes, while also expanding notions of motherhood and transforming her role as a mother, in order to meet her political needs; moreover, though the women used similar means, they sought different ends. Together, Neal and Mullen highlight a transition in discourse about motherhood that occurred throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. Though differing in many regards, the two shared one important quality: neither woman was particularly “like other mothers,” and, yet, each woman sought to be *like a mother* (figure) to countless American youths.

One such woman is Edith Neal. For three years in the late 1960s, Edith Neal organized a nationwide letter-writing program to support troops who were serving abroad, becoming known to some as the “Vietnam Mail Lady.” Wanting to provide morale, she coordinated a service she referred to as the “Servicemen’s Name Clearing Bureau.” This unofficial program involved Edith advertising through materials sent by the United Service Organization (USO). Contact with a pen pal was offered to any serviceman who wished for more mail; Edith also solicited

¹ “Editorial: A Candidate to Support,” *Hawkeye Burlington*, 8 May 1972, box 1, Peg Mullen Papers, Iowa Women’s Archive, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, IA.
volunteers stateside who would, in turn, correspond with men in the armed services. She thus both facilitated written communication between others and wrote thousands of letters to servicemen with whom she had no previous relationship—efforts which led many men to call themselves her adopted sons.  

Peg Mullen, too, enlarged her maternal role to become a mother figure for many outside her kin. Among other things, she was a farmwife and mother-of-four who was motivated to become a pacifist mother, agitating on behalf of servicemen, ending the war, and, by the mid-1970s, securing amnesty for all draft dodgers.  

It was on February 20, 1970, that Peg Mullen and her husband, Eugene, received the news that their son had been killed by “non-hostile fire” while serving in Vietnam. While she already opposed the war, it was this experience—losing her son only to find out that his death was but another statistic, and a statistic rarely cited due to its accidental classification—that motivated Mullen to protest the war. She enlarged her role as a political agitator by draping herself in two cloaks: first, that of an angry mother grieving for her eldest son; and, second, that of a fiercely protective universal mother intent on saving any and all she could, regardless of any familial relationship. Though she could not save her own son, she saw a chance to save other mothers’ sons.  

Using Neal and Mullen as two case studies, this research historicizes politically divergent ways in which women donned the mantle of motherhood in public. Rather than focusing on any political differences between these two women, this work reveals that though they used different

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2 Edith Neal’s papers were donated by Cindy Duwa in 2001 and can be found in the Iowa Women’s Archives, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, IA.  
3 One journalist, C.D.B. Bryan, wrote a non-fiction book about her son’s accidental death, the Mullen family’s anguish, and Peg Mullen’s subsequent rage directed at the army and government. This book, Friendly Fire, was published in 1976, and, three years later, the premise of the book was turned into an Emmy Award-winning television movie starring Carol Burnett as Peg Mullen. Not content to let someone else write her story, much less a story with which Mullen was not entirely happy, Peg responded by publishing a memoir in 1995. See: Peg Mullen, Unfriendly Fire: A Mother’s Memoir, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1995).  
4 Margaret (Peg) Mullen first donated her papers beginning in 1993 and continued to contribute materials throughout subsequent years. They can be found in the Iowa Women’s Archives, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa.
means, they sought the same end—the end, in this case, being that they both wanted to support and protect American youths. Neal and Mullen are but two examples of how ideas of motherhood, patriotism, and participation in politics are woven together in American discourse. Their individual interpretations of maternal care demonstrate the contested roles and enduring power of motherhood—a concept that is, in one sense, a label that signifies a parent-child relationship, but, in turn, has many symbolic connotations, all fraught with generalizations.\(^5\) While Mullen re-imagined herself as a crusading mother figure to servicemen and men who refused service by evading the draft, Neal offered herself as a confessional mother to servicemen who were upset by the anti-war demonstrations and needed emotional support.

Examples of maternal discourse is found in several sources, though this paper focuses on a few specific moments that are related to patriotism in order to contextualize Neal and Mullen. In 1914, U.S. legislators institutionalized a celebration of “the mother” with the Joint Resolution designating the second Sunday in May as Mother’s Day.\(^6\) The bill states that the “service rendered the United States by the American Mother is the greatest source of the country’s strength and inspiration.” Moreover, that bill positioned women-as-mothers with one foot in the private sphere and one in the public. By “doing so much for the home, the moral uplift and religion,” this idealized and nominally celebrated American mother does important work for “good government and humanity.” It was at this time in the early twentieth century, Kathleen W. Jones posits, that “the celebration of Mother’s Day became a secular expression of loyalty to

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\(^5\) Though looking at a different war, I echo Susan R. Grayzel’s introductory disclaimer that “any generalizations about the war and its affects on any category of social beings, such as women, are dangerous things to make. In the current state of historiography on gender and particularly women, it may be just as dangerous to employ terms such as ‘women’ and ‘identity.’” Susan R. Grayzel, *Women’s Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France during the First World War* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1999), 1.

\(^6\) 63 H. J. Res. 263, May 08, 1914, “Joint Resolution Designating the second Sunday in May as Mother's Day, and for other purposes.”
nationalist ideals.”⁷ While Jones’ claim should be tempered by acknowledging the evolution and multiplicity of reasons that individuals had (and have) for celebrating motherhood once a year, this image of a celebrated “American mother” represents an early twentieth-century, state-approved depiction of motherhood.

It is during wartime, however, that “the archetypal good mother” and “the archetypal patriotic mother” most frequently diverge.⁸ Due to women’s history of exclusion from military service and their exemption from the draft throughout its use in the U.S., women have often assumed patriotic roles other than that of citizen-soldier.⁹ Governments have seen mothers, then, as of importance parallel to soldiers. Susan Grayzel argues that motherhood “offered [women] a status equivalent to the soldier,” in part because “childbirth provided [women] with another type of embodied, authentic, pain-ridden and even life-risking experience.”¹⁰ Regardless of the reality that not all women were mothers, and not all mothers shared political views, wartime rhetoric has often “stressed the ‘naturalness’ of these normative categories, thus conveniently eclipsing other kinds of masculinity and femininity.”¹¹

Like a state’s wartime mobilization efforts or propaganda, political organizations have also essentialized maternity with regard to gender roles. An example of separatist pacifist organization, Women Strike for Peace (WSP) used informal and formal female networks to organize a national, if disparate, one-day strike in 1961; an action that evolved into a loose coalition of women agitating against nuclear arms on the basis of maternal care. Analyzing this group, Amy Swerdlow argues that these women embraced female and maternal stereotypes in

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¹⁰ Grayzel, *Women’s Identities at War*, 2, 8.
order to manipulate gender differences in the public arena.\textsuperscript{12} Embodying maternal care for humanity, WSP elevated its political position from nationalism to universalism by stressing that the group’s goal was “to end the arms race—not the human race.”\textsuperscript{13} Another separatist pacifist organization, Another Mother for Peace (AMP), also used a maternal identity to pursue political goals.\textsuperscript{14} They used maternalism to protest the war by sending a Mother’s Day card to Congress and the President that included the statement, “We who have given life must be dedicated to preserving it.”\textsuperscript{15} Both midcentury organizations took advantage of female stereotypes, like a mother’s concern for children and an aversion to violence, in order to gain more capital in American politics.\textsuperscript{16} Organizations like Women Strike for Peace and Another Mother for Peace represented, as Susan Grayzel suggests with regard to feminist pacifism more generally, “an arena where normative ideas about gender—associations of femininity with peacefulness especially rooted in maternity—came into direct conflict with normative ideas about women’s wartime status vis à vis the nation.”\textsuperscript{17}

Picking up the celebratory and patriotic threads of Mother’s Day, American Mothers, Inc. sponsored an American Mother of the Year contest, which began in 1935.\textsuperscript{18} American mothers, according to the nomination form, “must embody those traits highly regarded in mothers;

\textsuperscript{13} Swerdlow, “Women Strike for Peace,” 494.
\textsuperscript{15} \url{http://anothermother.org/history.html}
\textsuperscript{17} Grayzel, \textit{Women’s Identities at War}, 157.
courage, cheerfulness, patience, affection, understanding, and a homemaking ability." Peg Mullen intersects Another Mother for Peace and the American Mothers Committee; nominated for the American Mother of the Year in 1972 by the national chairwoman of Another Mother for Peace, Mullen’s nomination letters and the contest qualifications together reveal both the convergence and divergence of ideas about the roles of mothers. For the purposes of this paper, a framework for discursive ideas about motherhood is thus built with the incorporation of Mother’s Day, literature from the American Mothers Committee, and maternal symbolism enacted by the organizations Women Strike for Peace and Another Mother for Peace.

As the “Vietnam Mail Lady,” Edith Neal acted as confessor, confidante, matchmaker, and mother. While being the Vietnam Mail Lady was something she could do from the privacy of her home, she was putting her name and idea out there into the public sphere, and, notably, into a masculine space—the military. Neal credited her inspiration for becoming the Vietnam Mail Lady to a story she had heard in which servicemen, away from home and eager to receive anything at mail call, would be crestfallen if their name was not called. After she heard this, she contacted the Pentagon for permission and then she sent magazines and newspapers to hospitals that were overseas; within the magazines and papers, she included her personal information and instructed any serviceman who wanted more personal mail to write her and she would help however she could. A subsequent advertisement sent to hospitals and military bases in Vietnam encouraged servicemen to write with the lure of “college girls, nurses [and] chicks” who were

19 1972 Nomination Form, Peg Mullen Papers, IWA.
20 Neal developed friendships with several of the men; friendships that she documented and preserved in a scrapbook she compiled. It is in these pages that some of Neal’s thoughts and recollections were recorded. Attaching photos and letters to the pages, she then scrawled a few details about each man—how long they corresponded, a detail or two about his interests, and the nicknames they used for one another. Her scrapbook is preserved at the Iowa Women’s Archive.
22 Ibid.
“waiting” to write to the servicemen. Eventually, servicemen took the initiative and wrote to her, demonstrating a desire for connection—even with, or perhaps especially with, a stranger. Neal’s efforts to find willing pen pals aside from herself took her, figuratively, out of her private space and into others’ living rooms—whether by a radio interview that aired in California, or an interview about her latest “hobby” in a women’s magazine.

Taking on the role of matchmaker, however inadvertently, there were at least seven marriages that came about as a result of her efforts. At least one married woman wrote Neal for the name of a serviceman her family could write (and, in a sense, sponsor) but most of the people Neal connected were servicemen and single women. Thus, not only was Neal enlarging her role as a patriotic mother by becoming a universal mother figure, she was also participating in a tradition in which, as Robert Westbrook describes, women were culturally constructed “objects of obligation” during wartime. Although making an argument about World War II, Westbrook’s argument about the “bargain between the protector and the protected” is referring specifically to World War II but also applies to the Vietnam War; many men who served in this unpopular war felt the need to connect either with a maternal figure or seek a love-interest with whom they could “consummate” this bargain.

Many servicemen expressed their thanks for the support Neal provided. One letter she received read, “I am addressing you as ‘mother’ because I understand, I’m your adopted son, or something like that.” After reading Edith’s advertisement, one young servicemen wrote Edith saying, “I am proud to know that there are people back in the U.S. that are willing to give up so

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23 This advertisement read: “I get 300 or more new names each week from college girls, nurses, and people from all walks of life. All wanting to write and do things for you. The ‘chicks’ are waiting. Drop me a line all about yourself… Come one- come all- any age, any race- someone is waiting- to write to you.” Neal Papers, IWA.
24 Correspondence, Neal Papers, IWA.
27 Correspondence from Johnnie E. Floyd dated October 11th, 1966, Neal Papers, IWA.
much of their time for the ‘mo-ral’ [sic] of the men in Viet-Nam.”\(^{28}\) Another, Corporal Holbert, wrote the Mayor of Cedar Rapids in 1966 to commend Neal’s actions to him and Holbert reflected that “there were times here, when I often really wondered if anybody back home really did care…all I was receiving was news of anti-Vietnam demonstrations, and I began to wonder about it all.”\(^{29}\) Corporal Holbert continued to praise Neal, writing that she was “a sort of Florence Nightingale” to himself, and surmised that she had “the same angle to other U.S. Servicemen here.”\(^{30}\) As these men demonstrate with various terms of endearment and the content of their letters, Neal embodied various maternal personas to many servicemen.

Perhaps more important than anything she did for, or said to, the servicemen, the letters reveal the high value they placed on the fact that she was a ready and willing listener. In a letter Edith received in 1967, one man opened up about his encounters with death, “It wasn’t the first time that one of my boys fell but it was the first time that I lost more than two at the same time.”\(^{31}\) This man then reflected that, “It’s funny, I haven’t written enough letters in the last five years to use up a ten cent tablet and here I’ve been running on like there ain’t no end.”\(^{32}\) The fact that Neal could provide such an opportunity to write, particularly without the fear of upsetting family members, is demonstration of the void Neal filled. It does suggest, however, a more passive role of motherhood in which listening, not lecturing, appears to be the characteristic about Neal that was so commended by the servicemen. Peg Mullen, in contrast, may have listened and commiserated with young men—servicemen or not—but her idea of maternal care had less to do with listening, and everything to do with lecturing or protesting in public.

\(^{28}\) Letter from Johnny Olney to Edith Neal, Edith Neal Papers, IWA.  
\(^{29}\) Letter from Corporal Holbert, November 2, 1966, Edith Neal Papers, IWA.  
\(^{30}\) Ibid.  
\(^{31}\) Letter from Gavin, January 25, 1967, Edith Neal Papers, IWA.  
\(^{32}\) Ibid.
Though thousands of mothers received similar notifications of their children’s deaths or injuries, Peg Mullen transformed her private grief into public rage; in doing so she re-interpreted her private role as a mother into a public role as a mother figure. Later, a friend wrote of Mullen that she was able to turn her grief into action because she reacted to her son’s death by, in his words, “conducting an almost one woman campaign to end the Vietnam War and to obtain justice and aid for servicemen.”

Mullen, in fact, described her immediate response to Michael’s death as a way to work out her grief and she wrote that, “I decided to help bring an end to the Vietnam War. It never occurred to me that an Iowa farmwife couldn’t accomplish what had eluded three presidents.”

Mullen’s version of motherhood entailed protectiveness and activism. In a personal letter Mullen wrote, “Then today a clipping from the New York Times, Arnold Toynbee saying only the mothers of the United States had the power to end the war—only they were not afraid of the Pentagon.” This article, penned by British historian Arnold Toynbee, argued that celebrating gender difference was an effective tool when criticizing American military policies. Toynbee concluded: “The Pentagon versus the mothers of America… I believe this is a battle the Pentagon cannot win. In the mothers of America I do still see some hope for the world.”

If Neal represented, in part, an idealized, nurturing mother, Mullen epitomized an angry mother. Writing in 1970, Mullen predicted: “I shall be an angry mother for all my life, simply because I failed my son in not fighting with every dime I had to save him from his senseless death.”

33 Tam Kirby nomination letter to American Mothers, Inc., 17 February 1972, Peg Mullen Papers, IWA.
34 Mullen, Unfriendly Fire, 30.
35 Peg Mullen letter to Richard P. Cummins, 12 May 1970, Peg Mullen Papers, IWA.
37 Mullen, Unfriendly Fire, 30. Along with her dedication to end the war, Mullen devoted herself to finding out how her son was killed by “non-hostile” fire, which meant it was an accidental death at the hands of American troops. Current public government records simply say that his death was due to non-hostile and accidental causes. See: Michael Eugene Mullen, National Archives and Records Administration. U.S., Vietnam War Military Casualties,
from disaffected servicemen, family members of deceased servicemen, and men who evaded the
draft; she reflected that, “these young men are all my adopted sons.” Like Neal, Mullen was a
mother who viewed other boys as her adopted sons. While some critics dismissed Mullen as an
irrational mother rather than a strong mother, Mullen never denied the fact that she was angry.
Mullen’s emotions fueled her activities, and her acceptance and validation of her right to be
emotional was in contrast with stereotypically rational men in politics.

Both Neal’s and Mullen’s actions fit within the public discourse, which Susan Grayzel
argued often “emphasize[d] women’s unique and more traditional roles as mothers, wives, and
sweethearts—sources of emotional and moral support.” Emotional and moral support, however,
were occasionally better supplied by strangers than family members. With the Vietnam War as
the set in which new roles of motherhood were worked out, Neal opened her home (and mailbox)
to strangers in need of support while Mullen reinterpreted her own role as a mother to expand her
responsibilities in order to preserve and protect life. While Neal sought to protect the emotional
needs of those serving in Vietnam, Mullen worked to protect men who dodged the draft and
prevent future men—other women’s children—from having to serve in the first place. Despite
numerous differences, neither woman was particularly like other mothers and, yet, each woman
sought to be like a mother to countless American youths.

38 Mullen, Unfriendly Fire, 16.
39 Grayzel, Women’s Identities at War, 49.
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