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Skin in the Game: The Emergence of Family-based Anti-war Organizing in the 21st Century

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*From the Series
Peace Studies:
Edges and Innovations*

Peace Studies between Tradition and Innovation

Edited by

Randall Amster, Laura Finley,
Edmund Pries and Richard McCutcheon

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and Richard McCutcheon

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures.....	viii
List of Tables.....	ix
Foreword	x
Timothy Donais	
Acknowledgments	xiv
Introduction	xv
Edmund Pries and Randall Amster	
Part I: Enduring Questions	1
Chapter One.....	4
Revisualizing (In)Justice: Peace Studies in the Early 21st Century	
Joanna Swanger	
Chapter Two	17
The Ethics of Power and the Power of Ethics: Transformation as Power	
Diffusion	
Michael Minch	
Chapter Three	30
Skin in the Game: The Emergence of Family-based Anti-war Organizing	
in the 21 st Century	
Kelly Rae Kraemer	
Chapter Four	46
Aboriginal-Canadian Relations: Curricular Possibilities for Reconciliation	
and Peacebuilding	
Jennifer A. Tupper	

interviews, televised talking heads debated her patriotism, and celebrities headed to Texas to support her cause.

Less visible behind the glare of the media spotlight, but perhaps more interesting from a historical perspective, was Bill Mitchell, another military family member who arrived at Camp Casey to support Cindy Sheehan and demand his own accounting for the death of his son, Mike, also killed in Iraq (Peretz 2005). Together Mitchell and Sheehan symbolize a new trend in peace movement organizing that appeared in the United States in response to President George W. Bush's "global war on terror." Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, a number of family-based peace groups emerged as vocal opponents of the war on terror in general and the Iraq War in particular.

Members of these groups claim a special authority to speak for peace based on what Sheehan (2005) describes as having "skin in the game" (98). Their relatives are either victims of the September 11, 2001 attacks or members of the U.S. military serving in Iraq or Afghanistan—in other words, those from the United States who have been killed or who are fighting in the "war on terror." These family-based peace organizations—whose members include not only mothers, but also fathers, brothers, sisters, aunts, and uncles—represent a new and important expansion of the traditional motherhood theme in anti-war organizing.

Mother-based peace organizing has long served as a path to political agency for women in the United States, so when members of the U.S. military began dying in Afghanistan and then Iraq, the emergence of a "peace mom" like Cindy Sheehan could be predicted. When the U.S. goes to war, we have come to expect mothers to voice their opposition and to organize mothers' anti-war groups. Organizations like the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Mother and Others Against the War, and Another Mother for Peace are part of our history (Alonso 1993). By contrast, I have found no scholarly documentation of any family-based peace movement organizations prior to 2002. Why not? Family-based anti-war organizing represents a new, 21st Century phenomenon. This type of activism has emerged in response to the late 20th Century shift from conscription to an "all-volunteer" military and to changes in the way the U.S. fights wars in the new millennium.

Methodology

In the early years of the "war on terror," interviews with members of three new anti-war groups—September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows, Military Families Speak Out, and Gold Star Families for

CHAPTER THREE

SKIN IN THE GAME: THE EMERGENCE OF FAMILY-BASED ANTI-WAR ORGANIZING IN THE 21ST CENTURY

KELLY RAE KRAEMER

Since the 19th Century, feminist peacemakers have claimed a special relationship between mothers and peace, arguing that those who give birth to children have a particular interest in not seeing them killed in wars. Maternal anti-war organizing is a long-standing tradition. In the 21st Century, however, a number of new family-based anti-war groups—whose members include not only mothers, but also fathers, siblings, and other relatives—appeared in the United States. This chapter examines the emergence of three family-based peace movement organizations (September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows, Military Families Speak Out, and Gold Star Families for Peace) as opponents of the Iraq War. In the age of the "all-volunteer" military, when the U.S. fights wars at a distance and wartime sacrifice is limited to professional soldiers, families of those killed or at risk in war play a crucial role in making war real for the general public.

Introduction

On a hot day in August 2005, the movement to end the Iraq War gained new life when Gold Star Mother Cindy Sheehan began her vigil outside the gates of George W. Bush's Crawford, Texas ranch. Vowing to stay until the president met with her to explain what "noble cause" her son Casey had died for in Iraq, Sheehan inspired a nationwide network of support, culminating in a night of 1,627 vigils across 50 states, as reported on the website of the event's sponsor MoveOn.org. Sheehan and "Camp Casey" became an instant media sensation as reporters lined up for

and in each case membership is limited to a specific class of people, defined differently for each group, but always based on kinship with those who have been killed, wounded, or who are serving in the “war on terror.”

The first of the family-based peace movement organizations to emerge after 9/11, September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows, began with the week-long Walk for Healing and Peace from Washington to New York put together by the anti-sanctions group Voices in the Wilderness, which has been publishing anti-war statements by September 11, 2001 family members on its website. At the end of this walk, several participants issued a “9/11 Family Members Joint Statement” opposing the war in Afghanistan and inviting other family members of September 11, 2001 victims to contact them (Potorti 2003, 34-51). As presented on the group’s website, the mission statement for Peaceful Tomorrows is just three sentences long:

Peaceful Tomorrows is an organization founded by family members of those killed on September 11th who have united to turn our grief into action for peace. By developing and advocating nonviolent options and actions in the pursuit of justice, we hope to break the cycles of violence engendered by war and terrorism. Acknowledging our common experience with all people affected by violence throughout the world, we work to create a safer and more peaceful world for everyone (September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows 2013).

Founded on Valentine’s Day in 2002 by September 11, 2001 family members including David Potorti (whose brother died in the WTC) and Ryan Amundson (whose brother died in the Pentagon), the group took its name from a famous quote (Potorti 2003, 54). In his address to the Nation Institute in 1967 on “The Casualties of the War in Vietnam,” Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. claimed: “The past is prophetic in that it asserts loudly that wars are poor chisels for carving out peaceful tomorrows” (King 1967). In a book about Peaceful Tomorrows, David Potorti describes the rationale for organizing family members: “...because the killing was being undertaken in the names of their loved ones and their families, they felt something else: ownership. This war would be their war, fought in their names. This gave them the will to speak out” (21).

As of this writing, Peaceful Tomorrows’ website reports “200 members in 31 states and 7 foreign countries.” The group carries out its primary mission of public witness by speaking at schools, churches, rallies and conventions around the country and around the world, giving interviews in the media, writing op-eds and letters to the editor (8). Among other activities over the years, they have sent a delegation to Afghanistan to meet with families who had lost loved ones in the war; started a private

Peace—began appearing regularly in mainstream newspapers and on television. All three were organized around direct family connections to war and terrorism, but in contrast to long-standing anti-war movement organizing patterns, none were limited to mothers. Attracted to the personal angle, journalists seemed eager to interview members of these groups, giving them a prominence that seemed unusual for relatively small, newly created activist organizations.

In order to study the emergence of these groups on the public scene, as well as in the larger context of social changes affecting the anti-war movement in general, I decided to examine their public faces. This chapter focuses on how family-based peace movement organizations present themselves on their organizational websites, in books and academic journal articles published about them, in video documentaries, and especially through media appearances by members of each group. As of this writing the LexisNexis news database contains 505 items referencing Peaceful Tomorrows, 671 articles naming Military Families Speak Out, and 230 that included Gold Star Families for Peace. By contrast, LexisNexis coverage of the anti-war group Win Without War, a coalition of 39 major peace organizations formed in 2002 to oppose the Iraq War, includes a total of 427 items. This suggests that the newly formed organizations had a significant voice in media coverage of anti-war viewpoints.

In the course of my research I also came across a handful of news articles about two other new family-based anti-war groups in the United States: Madison, Wisconsin’s Military Families for Peace and the lobbying group Families of the Fallen for Change. I also learned of one group in the United Kingdom, Military Families Against the War, formed by British parents of soldiers killed in the Iraq War (Collins 2008, xii). Since the main concern here is on the emergence of these organizations as a reflection of broader national trends, this chapter will concentrate only on the three national family-based peace movement organizations in the United States.

Family-based Peace Movement Organizations

The three organizations I examine here have several characteristics in common. They were all organized in the United States after September 11, 2001. They emerged in opposition to the “war on terror.” They were created by family members of people killed, injured, or at risk in the war zones of this new era. Their membership includes people who were not politically active prior to September 11, 2001 as well as some who were,

Afghan Victims Compensation fund; met with a delegation of hibakusha—Japanese atomic bombing survivors—in New York; held a ceremony at Ground Zero with families who lost loved ones when terrorists bombed a nightclub in Bali, Indonesia in 2002; and sent a delegation to Iraq to meet with families who lost loved ones in the war still being fought there today. They also organize annual 9/11 commemoration events that focus on peace.

The second family-based peace movement organization emerged when Nancy Lessin, Charley Richardson, and Jeff MacKenzie—all parents of military sons deployed to Iraq—founded Military Families Speak Out (MFSO) in November 2002 (Collins 2008, 1). The group formed with a clear identity, described on its website: “As people with family members and loved ones in the military, we know that it is our loved ones who are, or have been, or will be on the battlefield. It is our loved ones who are at risk, who have been injured or who have died as a result of this war. It is our loved ones who are returning scarred from their experiences, who are suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.”

By 2007, as U.S. and coalition military casualties in Iraq reached their peak, the MFSO site reported membership including more than 3,700 military family members, defined very specifically as “people opposed to the war in Iraq who have relatives or loved ones currently in the military or who have served in the military since the buildup to the Iraq war in fall of 2002.” The group’s activities include campaigns to de-fund and end the Iraq war; rallies, street protests, vigils, and memorials; op-eds and newspaper interviews; lobbying Congress; and statements of support for U.S. troops and military resisters. Membership in the organization began to decline after the election of President Obama, and this decline sped up after the official “end” of the Iraq War in 2011. With few remaining financial resources and a membership divided over future directions for the organization, its board of directors reported on the organization’s website that they had decided to close MFSO at the end of 2013.

The website for the third family-based peace movement organization, Gold Star Families for Peace (GSFP), founded in 2005, summarizes the group’s mission as follows:

We as families of soldiers who have died as a result of war (primarily, but not limited to the invasion/occupation of Iraq) are organizing to be a positive force in our world to bring our country’s sons and daughters home from Iraq, to minimize the “human cost” of this war, and to prevent other families from the pain we are feeling as the result of our losses. We are also hoping to be lifetime support for each other through our losses (Gold Star Families for Peace 2010).

Founding members included Cindy Sheehan, Bill Mitchell, and four others.

At the height of its activism, the group’s website listed 106 members by name. Membership was limited to family members of loved ones killed in war, especially the Iraq War. Their goals included providing support to empower those who were victimized by the invasion and occupation of Iraq; raising awareness in the United States about the true human costs of the invasion and occupation of Iraq; and reaching out to families who lost a loved one as a result of war. GSFP activities reported in the news included public speaking; support for GI resisters and conscientious objectors; and publication of essays, op-eds, poems and books. Over time the group worked closely with and eventually merged into MFSO. The website as of this writing still lists Cindy Sheehan as spokesperson, but no longer mentions other members.

Maternal Peace Organizing

My original interest in these groups arose in response to the increased appearance of fathers and other family members among the ranks of anti-war protesters as activists who were claiming to have a special insight or right to be heard based on their identity within in the family. Cindy Sheehan was not the only parent inviting and receiving national attention for her suffering and loss. In addition to Bill Mitchell, mentioned above, other relatives of soldiers spoke out against the Iraq War. For example, Carlos Arredondo first drew national attention on his birthday, August 26, in 2004, when the *New York Times* reported that he suffered severe burns after setting fire to a van outside his house, the van that brought U.S. Marines to deliver news of his son’s death the previous day. As a member of Gold Star Families for Peace, he began touring the country in a pickup truck decorated to serve as a travelling memorial to his son, Lance Cp. Alexander S. Arredondo, killed in action in Iraq.

Historically, feminist peacemakers have claimed a special relationship between mothers and peace, arguing that those who give birth to children have a particular interest in not seeing them killed in wars (Alonso 1993, 11). Groups like the Women’s Peace Party, the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, Women Strike for Peace, and Another Mother for Peace have made strategic use of our cultural veneration of motherhood to get people to listen to them. Who could deny a grieving mother the right to speak out against the war that killed her child? But there is no evidence of any U.S. peace movement organizing around other kinship identities prior to 2002.

Historian Harriet Hyman Alonso (1993) reports that women's peace groups in the United States traditionally organized around "the idea that women, as the childbearers of society, have a particular interest in peace—namely, not wanting to see our offspring murdered either as soldiers or as innocent victims of a war" (10-11). This motherhood theme has served many purposes, perhaps most importantly giving women a powerful political platform from which to speak for peace by highlighting our unique relationship to the topic. In the days when women did not have the right to vote, the maternal connection to military offspring gave women a political voice on matters of war. Nearly a century after women became legal voters, this theme retains its appeal, as exemplified by the attention given to "peace mom" Cindy Sheehan.

Peace studies scholars are familiar with the long history of mother's peace movements. From Julia Ward Howe's 1873 call for a "Mother's Day for Peace", to Sara Ruddick's groundbreaking 1989 philosophical work, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, to Argentina's Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, maternal organizing is a familiar part of global peace movement history. Even more than a decade after the notion that women, as givers of life, are naturally peaceful began to be challenged on grounds of essentialism, U.S. activists responding to George W. Bush's war on terror revived the Vietnam War era group Another Mother for Peace (Another Mother 2003). Still others, inspired by Howe's 19th Century movement, formed a new group called Mothers Acting Up to continue maternal peace work for a new generation (Osnes 2005, 81).

Mothers' peace organizations have traditionally organized around three claims. The first claim is biological: the potential to bear children gives women a natural aversion to war and a right to speak for peace. The second claim is tied to suffering: women, as mothers, experience a unique kind of suffering in war through the risk to their children. The third claim centers on responsibility: the ability to carry children and give birth obligates women to preserve life and protect all children (Alonso 1993). Interestingly, the family-based peace groups I am studying organized around a strikingly similar set of claims, expanded in new and interesting ways for the 21st Century.

Family-based Peace Movement Organizing

What gives family members a special authority to speak for peace? The claims made by family-based peace movement organizations in this regard reflect variations on the same three themes found in mothers' peace organizing. First, biology: having loved ones killed on September 11, 2001

or serving in Afghanistan and Iraq means family members have a special stake in the "war on terror." Cindy Sheehan (2005) very clearly spelled out one way kinship gives family members of both MFSO and GSFP a right to speak out: "The people who send our young, honorable, brave soldiers to die in this war have no skin in the game. They don't have any loved ones in harm's way" (98). David Potorti (2003) noted that the kinship identity of Peaceful Tomorrows grew from the situation they found themselves in, as family members whose private mourning was a public event. He wrote, "Some of us, recognizing the public nature of our losses, chose to redeem them by making public statements that frequently were at odds with conventional wisdom about what families of the victims must be feeling" (7). Claire Andre, MFSO member and wife of a Navy officer deployed to Iraq, describes the difference between family members and other anti-war activists, saying, "...I felt like they were more theoretical. They didn't have a personal investment" (Collins 2008, 70).

Second, when it comes to suffering, the families of soldiers and 9/11 victims claim to experience a unique kind of agony in these wars through the sacrifices of their loved ones. MFSO members suffer along with their kin who survive the war. For example, on December 14, 2008, MFSO member Tim Kahlor told Los Angeles Times staff writer David Zucchino that he experienced "secondary PTSD" when caring for his veteran son Ryan, who returned traumatized from the Iraq War. Peaceful Tomorrows member Kelly Campbell, whose brother died in the World Trade Center, found suffering could form a common bond among war victims: "In Kabul, I met families with the familiar look of shock and pain that my family members wore after Craig's death... We met Afghans who told us, the families of September 11 victims, 'I am so sorry for your loss; your pain is our pain'" (Potorti 2003, 121). Cindy Sheehan (2006) describes herself as a "broken-hearted mom" (48).

The third claim of family-based peace movements, a sense of responsibility, appears in members' belief that their experience of kinship-based suffering, and especially loss, obligates them to speak out to prevent others from experiencing the same anxiety, fear, and tragedy. GSFP's Carlos Arredondo identified his mobile memorial to his son as "my burden" and told *New York Times* reporter Trymaine Lee on February 1, 2007 that he would mourn his son publicly as long as there were soldiers fighting and dying in Iraq. He added, "Some people say I'm dishonoring my son by doing this, but this is my pain, my loss." MFSO member Linda Waste, mother of three Iraq war veterans and grandmother of two more, told Jane Collins (2008): "If I'm quiet, I'm as guilty as those other people who say nothing. I have to talk about it ... This is one thing people don't

think about, what we go through as parents, spouses, siblings” (150-151). GSFP member Kevin Lucey, whose son Jeffrey committed suicide in 2004 after serving in Iraq, feels obligated “... to try to do something to make people understand what this is all about” (171).

Members of Peaceful Tomorrows have had to struggle with a special sense of obligation to speak out, rooted in the painful public appropriation of their very personal bereavement. According to David Potorti (2003): “Our losses were not simple murders, but international incidents, symbols, and public events. Billions of people experienced the exact moment of our loved ones’ deaths. And whether we liked it or not, their deaths would become public property. They would be invoked on any number of occasions, for any number of purposes, by people we didn’t know, and in many cases, didn’t agree with or care for” (7). Forming an organization gave them a platform on which they could stand up for peace in memory of their kin whose deaths were being misappropriated in the push for war.

As early as September 14, 2001, Phyllis and Orlando Rodriguez, whose son Greg was missing after the World Trade Center collapse, emailed an anti-war statement titled “Not in Our Son’s Name,” which quickly went viral (22-23). Rita Lasar’s brother Abe Zelmanowitz died on the 27th floor of the World Trade Center’s North Tower after choosing to stay by the side of a wheelchair-bound co-worker. After President George W. Bush mentioned Zelmanowitz in a speech at the National Cathedral, Lasar sent a letter to the editor of the *New York Times* asking for peace in her brother’s name (27). Both the Rodriguezes and Lasar subsequently joined Peaceful Tomorrows.

Clearly, kinship claims have been used as the basis for a compelling call to anti-war activism since September 11, 2001, just as motherhood has been used for more than a century. Still, if all family members can claim unique forms of biological connection, suffering, and responsibility in relation to wars, why were these claims only made in the name of mothers prior to September 11, 2001?

Changes in Military Service and the Experience of War

Whereas modern war from the era of Napoleon well into the 20th Century increasingly relied on mass participation of citizens—first as soldiers, then as workers in a mobilized economy, and finally as casualties when the distinction between combatants and non-combatants eroded—relatively few people participate directly in today’s postmodern wars (McInnes 2002, 70-71). We live in an era in which wars involving

Western democracies are fought at a distance, becoming unreal for most citizens, who experience no direct consequences.

Numbers by themselves do not tell the story. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA), some 16.1 million Americans served in World War II; 1.7 million served in Korea; 3.4 million served in Vietnam, even though class and race privilege exempted many. For Iraq and Afghanistan, numbers are harder to find, as the DVA still notes only that these are “ongoing conflicts” (DVA 2010). *ABC News* reported 2.3 million had been deployed to one or both as of August 30, 2011.

While millions continue to serve, however, the real difference between today’s wars and those of the previous century appears when we examine who serves in the military today. Following the Vietnam War and the mass protests it inspired, the U.S. government abandoned military conscription; the last lottery occurred at the end of 1972 (Bacevich 2013, 204). With a national population over 300 million, today’s fighting force represents less than 1% of the total number of citizens. Colin McInnes (2002) points out that when wars were fought by citizens called to duty, soldiers were no longer seen as simple material resources to be spent in war, but as people who were “part of the body politic and deserved to be treated well...” (17). When wars are fought abroad, and without a military draft, this leaves only a very small part of the population touched by the actual fighting.

The shift from conscription to voluntary service also changed the demographics of those who serve. Draftees are generally very young and usually not married, whereas career soldiers tend to stay in the service longer, marry, and often have children or other dependents (Bacevich 2013, 59). More than 403,000 women are also serving in the active duty and reserve military today (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs 2011, 5), so soldiers are likely to be daughters, wives, and mothers. Additionally, today’s force is shaped in part by an economic, or backdoor draft, which uses promises of job training, education through the GI Bill, and other economic incentives to lure the working class, the rural poor, and minorities to “volunteer” in numbers disproportionate to their presence in the general population (MacLeavey and Peoples 2009, 891).

Since today’s service members are professionals who have chosen military careers, when the U.S. goes to war abroad, few citizens are affected. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq fit the pattern described by McInnes (2002) in which wars are fought by choice, rather than strictly in self-defense against invasion; they are also fought far from home, and by a small number of representatives, rather than by society as a whole. With a permanent war economy fueled by the military-industrial complex, there is no need to mobilize on the “home front.” In these wars, in addition to no

America's Diane Sawyer: "But why should we hear about body bags, and deaths, and how many, what day it's gonna happen, and how many this or what do you suppose? Or, I mean, it's, it's not relevant. So why should I waste my beautiful mind on something like that?" (Sawyer 2003). Her comments mirrored her son's policy as president, encouraging the American people to continue living their lives "as if there were no war" (Bacevich 2013, 29).

This example from the President's family perfectly illustrates McInnes' argument that "For the majority in the West, war has become a spectator sport" (2). Those who lost family members to the September 11, 2001 attacks and the two wars that followed feel this difference acutely. Cindy Sheehan, the most visible member of Gold Star Families for Peace, told the *Washington Post's* Evelyn Nieves on February 22, 2005 that when she tells people her son died in the war, they frequently ask "What war?" Sheehan's anger comes through very clearly when she tells the story of an encounter with a TV producer, who thought the Crawford encampment was well-timed since nothing else newsworthy was happening at the time. When Sheehan pointed out the deaths of twenty-four soldiers in Iraq that same week, the producer "...replied, 'Well, you know what I mean.' No, I didn't know what she meant. Iraq should be on the front page of every paper and the lead story of every news program, whether there is a mom sitting in a ditch in Crawford or not" (9).

Like Sheehan, members of all three family-based anti-war groups routinely cite this change in the way the general public experiences war as a prime motivator of their anti-war activism. According to MFSO co-founder Nancy Lessin, "What we're seeing is that only a few are forced to really bear the burden of this war, and that's why people have gone along with it, and allowed it to continue. It's not because they think it's right, but that it doesn't affect them" (Collins 2008, 6). Dinah Mason, a veteran, a Daughter of the American Revolution, and the mother of a daughter who served in Iraq expressed to Jane Collins her personal disappointment that members of the DAR do not serve in today's wars (11).

Altogether, twenty-four out of twenty-nine MFSO members interviewed by Collins make reference to this sense of isolation. She eloquently summarizes their experience: "War is not an abstraction to these families. War is horror, destruction, and death. The families express a deep need to get this reality across to others... The failure of most Americans to pay much attention to the war is a powerful motivator for these families' activism. Over and over, the families reveal their outrage at the indifference they encounter" (205). Unlike their fellow citizens, members of military families are not mere spectators in today's wars.

drafts, there are no Rosie-the-riveters, no rationing, and no massive shift from a peacetime economy to wartime production. McInnes argues that these significant changes in who fights Western wars have led to a major shift in how most citizens experience wars: we have become the audience in an era of "spectator-sport warfare" (2).

This shift of citizens from participants to spectators has important consequences in wartime, because spectators remain at a great distance from battle zones. McInnes points out some consequences: "They may empathize but do not experience; they may sympathize but do not suffer. Nor is there any real threat of their suffering directly" (29). When the armed forces are professionalized and soldiers choose to serve, war becomes "an occupational hazard" (75), thereby potentially exempting society from accountability when soldiers are wounded, traumatized, or killed. Spectator-sport warfare legitimates the sacrifice of professional warriors on battlefields.

Their sacrifices, however, are not wholly ignored. In 1936 Congress legislated the annual recognition of the last Sunday in September as Gold Star Mother's Day to celebrate the courage and patriotism of mothers who sacrifice their sons to the country's wars. Each year, including throughout President George W. Bush's two terms in office, a presidential proclamation is issued by the White House. Interestingly, President Obama appears to have amended the tradition to include families. Every year since his inauguration in 2009, the White House proclamations celebrating this day use the title "Gold Star Mother's and Families' Day" and refer to the sacrifices made by mothers and families of military service members who died in war (Obama 2009). In everyday life, however, it is generally only these family members who are left to mourn the nation's war dead.

This isolation from mainstream society resonates in the words of military family members who have joined family-based peace movement organizations. MFSO member Nan Beckwith, whose son is a Marine, says: "I'm for bringing back the draft. I want you, that supports this war, you, who says 'They're fighting for our freedom,' I want you to feel my pain" (Collins 2008, 75). Anne Chay, whose son served in Iraq, points out the differences between the Vietnam War, in which so many on the home front watched their loved ones go off to kill and die, and the Iraq War, in which so few carry that burden (87).

On March 18, 2003, two days before United States troops invaded Iraq on her son's order, former First Lady Barbara Bush inadvertently illustrated the depths of this problem, by displaying her own indifference to the suffering of professional soldiers. She asked *Good Morning*

Unlike military service members, those who died in the September 11, 2001 attacks were not “volunteers.” In this case, McInnes argues, the unwritten rules of spectator-sport warfare were violated and those who were meant to be spectators (i.e., Westerners) were attacked (3). Ultimately, however, their deaths became spectacle, once again turning the rest of the population into merely an empathetic audience, “watching rather than participating” (152)—except for their family members, who felt the impact personally. Like members of the military family groups, members of September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows, describe a sense of isolation from their fellow citizens who did not lose anyone on that day or in the wars that followed.

However, when members of Peaceful Tomorrows traveled to Kabul in January 2002 to meet Afghan families who had lost love ones in the war unleashed to avenge the 9/11 attacks, they found “...everyone we met in Kabul was easier to talk to about our losses than people in the United States, because everyone there knows what it’s like” (Potorti 2003, 67). In media interviews, they also frequently describe the special bonds they feel with hibakusha, with Iraqis who lost loved ones in the Gulf War and the Iraq War, and with all who suffer bereavement through war.

Why Do These Movements Matter?

The changes in the nature of war led Michael Ignatieff (2000), in his study of Kosovo, to ask a question that’s crucial to contemporary peace movements: “If war becomes unreal to the citizens of modern democracies, will they care enough to restrain and control the violence exercised in their name” (4)? The impunity with which the Bush and Obama Administrations and their allies have been able to prosecute the so-called “global war on terror,” and the Iraq War in particular, suggests that the answer to Ignatieff’s question may be: “No, citizens of democracies in the age of spectator-sport war will not care enough to restrain and control the violence exercised in their name.”

Yet despite the apparent success of spectator-sport war in dulling opposition, Paul Joseph (2007) has recently published a book in which he argues that Americans are, in fact, becoming more peaceful. Joseph’s research provides substantial evidence that when the costs of war are made real, tangible, and visible, a clear majority of citizens will oppose it. Although few participate in war these days, U.S. citizens may regard even one death as too many. This suggests an answer to the peace movement’s dilemma. Spectator-sport war thrives by making war unreal, so actions that

make the costs of war real, visible, tangible, and unacceptable, can turn spectators into opponents.

Family-based anti-war groups therefore may play a key role in efforts to end war and seek peaceful alternatives. As Collins (2008) reports, “They are trying to bridge tremendous gaps in understanding between Americans who barely pay attention to the war and those who can rarely stop thinking about it” (207). During Cindy Sheehan’s vigil in Texas, Bill Mitchell echoed this sentiment when he told *The LoneStar Iconoclast*, “Sometimes we’ll tell people that our sons died in the war, and they go: ‘What war?’ (44) ... This is the work I do now—to tell my story and to bring the reality, the pain of this war, back to people in America” (44–45). United Methodist Pastor Myrna Bethke, whose brother died in the World Trade Center attack, writes that after September 11, 2001, she found a new identity as a family member: “Knowing firsthand the grief of September 11 has led to my commitment to working toward peaceful resolutions to the world’s differences. We work for a world in which parents are not called on to identify the remains of their children, and children do not have to speak for the loss of their family” (Potorti 2003, 136).

Evidence of the power these families have to influence others can be seen in the tremendous outpouring of support for Cindy Sheehan’s Crawford, TX, vigil in 2005 as described at the start of this chapter. Her public grief made the costs of war visible, real, personal, which may explain why she received such astounding and widespread public support at a time when the anti-war movement as a whole had little resonance with the general public. In the era of spectator-sport war, families of those at risk or killed in the war on terror, those with “skin in the game,” can play a crucial role in making war real for the rest of us who remain far from war zones, but know the love that comes with being mother, father, husband, wife, son, daughter, or grandparent.

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