Lifetime's Army Wives, or I Married the Media-Military-Industrial Complex

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Lifetime’s Army Wives, or I Married the Media-Military-Industrial Complex

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Lifetime’s Army Wives is its most successful serial drama to date, depicting Army families with loved ones deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq. I argue that Army Wives uses marriage to produce gendered propaganda and advance banal militarism. The program achieves verisimilitude and profitability through Lifetime’s alliances with the military-industrial complex and thus frames militarism to appeal to viewers historically the most resistant to the military: women.

Keywords Army Wives, banal militarism, gendered propaganda, militainment, military-industrial complex

During the second season of Lifetime Television’s Army Wives, Pamela Moran is doing her popular call-in radio show about the travails of being an Army wife when a listener calls to complain that she has not been able to find a job and blames Army life—the constant moves and her husband’s deployments—for the problem. Pamela replies impatiently: “You’re an Army wife. I’m an Army wife. And that means you’re always going to be playing second fiddle career-wise while your spouse is in the military…. In the Army, your husband is always going to be the senior partner.” The caller responds, “But I have a life, too!” Pamela counters, “You married a soldier. And a soldier gets sent off to war to defend our country… and we just accept it, move on, and quit complaining” (Gillis & Gyllenhaal, 2008). This exchange encapsulates the tension at the heart of the narratives of Army Wives and the relationships between its characters: negotiating marital and family relationships amid the Army’s exertion of control over the lives of its soldiers and their families.¹

When Army Wives premiered in the summer of 2007—only months after the beginning of the troop “surge” in Iraq—the public had been given precious few means by which they could show support for the troops (beyond “Support Our Troops” yellow ribbons) or gain insight into their family lives. Enter Army Wives, which accomplishes this and, I believe, a great deal more. Through its sympathetic portrayal of Army family and military life on the fictional Fort Marshall Army post in Charleston, South Carolina, the program illuminates a microcosm likely unfamiliar to many viewers—one freighted with great contemporary political and social significance. Army Wives is another in the corpus of propaganda texts rolled out

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since 2001 to both mobilize public support for U.S. military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq and burnish the image of the Army. But unlike the standard news media fare in this corpus, *Army Wives* produces gendered military propaganda using the conventions of soap opera and serial drama—genres typically intended for female audiences—in an attempt to fix meanings around Army family life. I argue that this works via the show’s constitution of two different marriages: the first weds individuals to the Army (including its regime of gender politics) to achieve homeland defense; and the second weds the Lifetime network to the military-industrial complex through partnerships and strategic alliances that extend Lifetime’s brand and construct verisimilitude about contemporary military life.

**The Banality of Militarism**

One could contend that any program titled *Army Wives* would glorify military life; however, this is not the gist of the program. Instead, its central role, I argue, is to naturalize and normalize historically specific ideologies about Army gender politics and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Due to its family-focused content, popularity, and place in the media universe, the program produces what Thomas and Virchow (2005) term banal militarism: derived from Michael Billig’s concept of banal nationalism, banal militarism refers to the “mechanisms and procedures by which the military, its necessity, and its demands for financial assets are (re)produced in a society”; referencing Hannah Arendt, they also note that banal “does not necessarily mean innocuous or without consequences” (p. 27). Thomas (2009) expands the definition to include

the wide range of public discourses, media activities and political courses of events, which imply the existence of armed forces, their visibility in public, the spending of relevant amounts of money for military purposes, and the acceptance of war as a means to resolve conflict. (p. 97)

Thomas (2009) asserts further that banal militarism encourages civilian acceptance of the “existence and mission of the military” and the “normalization of military force as state-organized and politically legitimized approach to conflicts” (p. 99). *Army Wives* legitimizes all of these elements in its showcasing of the families of Fort Marshall, largely because it features family relationships rather than engaging the politics of war directly. Family relations and the domestic sphere in general have long been considered women’s domain; this domain is also, and importantly for this piece, where life is sustained and reproduced through mundane practices: nurturing children, for example. *Army Wives* and Lifetime enhance banality in this construction of militarism by depicting quotidian, heterosexual family concerns—identifiable to many civilian viewers—intermingled with those specific to life on an Army post. This admixture of sympathetic depictions and familiar, gender-specific situations may improve audience affinity for *Army Wives* while reducing resistance to its militaristic and propagandistic content.

Military, U.S. foreign policy, and media corporate interests infuse *Army Wives* narratives, and the propaganda performed on behalf of these interests is much as West and Zimmerman (1987) theorize gender: an ongoing project that involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expression of
masculine and feminine “natures.” . . . Rather than as a property of individuals, we conceive of gender as an emergent feature of social situations: both as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society. (p. 126)

West and Zimmerman (1987) conclude by asserting that gender is a “powerful ideological device, which produces, reproduces, and legitimates the choices and limits that are predicated as sex category”; in large part, this occurs when powerful social institutions—like media—associate a “sense of ‘naturalness’ and ‘rightness’” to those practices deemed gender appropriate while disciplining others as deviant (p. 147). Army Wives’s typically heteronormative gender performance occurs in a mutually constitutive relationship with that of propaganda concerning the rightness and naturalness of Army politics, making it an especially rich venue for producing discourse that normalizes both Army-style gender and militarism.

Butler (1990) maintains that “gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (pp. 24–25). Underscoring Butler’s contention, van Zoonen (1994) “construe[s] gender as discourse, a set of overlapping and sometimes contradictory cultural descriptions and prescriptions referring to sexual difference” (p. 40); van Zoonen identifies the roles media play in this discursive constitution as “(social) technologies of gender, accommodating, modifying, reconstructing and producing disciplining and contradictory cultural outlooks of sexual difference” (p. 41). Thus, much as gender is “performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler, 1990, p. 25), Army Wives’s performative constitution of propaganda gives the “appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (p. 33) about historically and institutionally specific discourses of both gender and militarism. For example, the program takes as a given the correctness of the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan and Iraq, just as it naturalizes heterosexual nuclear families, thereby obscuring the discursive production both of these military missions and this gender- and historically specific organization of family.

A seamless fusion of militarism with the generic conventions of serial dramas and soaps— including gorgeous, antebellum settings and conventionally attractive, even glamorous, cast members—makes Army Wives a standout hybrid program in a network whose success is staked on its lineup of hybrids (Byars & Meehan, 1994–1995; Lotz, 2006; Meehan & Byars, 2000). This allows the program to shift its attention from warfare, the reason for the program’s existence and its verisimilitude, on to the personal lives and problems of the cast. Focusing on family life apparently resonates with Lifetime’s audiences and corporate partners who, as I explain in the following sections, support this latest extension of Lifetime’s brand of entertainment for women.

The Banality of Lifetime

Meehan and Byars (2000) characterize Lifetime’s programming as “telefeminist,” intended to appeal to upscale women and men. Lifetime distinguishes itself from conventional networks with programs that hybridize “male-identified genres,” such as “buddy cop shows,” and female-identified ones, such as soaps (Byars & Meehan,
1994–1995, p. 24), designed to avoid alienating male viewers while simultaneously appealing to women. In this way, Lifetime conceptualizes “working women as economically independent, but not as emotionally independent from men… hence the stress on Lifetime as feminine but never feminist” (Byars & Meehan, 1994–1995, p. 25). *Army Wives* hews to this formula by repeatedly validating Army patriarchy as well as structuring the marriages of the wives to their soldier-spouses.

But *Army Wives* features somewhat untraditional gendered story lines, too: Pamela Moran, for example, returns to the wage labor force as a Charleston city police officer once she divorces Chase, and Roland Burton takes on the role of state-side primary parent—proving to be a more competent parent than his wife, Joan, the ambitious, skilled warrior. These exceptions, however, are more postfeminist than feminist in that they represent deviations from the program’s gender-essentialist norm: a legitimation of traditional gender performance and meritocracy that renders feminism apparently unnecessary (Vavrus, 2002).


> Even without sensational murders, the lives of Army wives are the stuff of drama. These women play roles that are bound by convention in circumstances that are sometimes precarious, frequently close-knit, and too often heartrending. Yet what life is really like for Army wives has never been closely examined. (p. xi)

Her book thus follows the lives of four women—married to Army men and living at or near Fort Bragg—and their families, from late 2000 until 2003, as they navigate the challenges of Army life. With the book’s success, Biank became an unofficial spokesperson for Army families and now writes an Erma Bombeck–esque syndicated column about military life for *Operation Homefront Online*. A self-professed Army brat, Army wife, and a writer and consultant to the *Army Wives* program, Biank presents herself as a voice for Army families, whose unique needs and problems she believes are insufficiently addressed by policymakers and the military itself. Judging from comments on fan pages, *Army Wives*, too, offers some discursive support to viewers, who live with extreme stress anticipating injury or death befalling deployed family members. The need for social and institutional support and compassion in these circumstances, incomprehensible to many of us, is indisputable, and *Army Wives*, commendably, illuminates military family concerns. But the illumination is selective; it obscures the human toll on Afghan and Iraqi families, the politics of war, the military-industrial complex, and any number of problems experienced by female military personnel (such as rampant sexual harassment and abuse of female troops).

After its sixth season, *Army Wives* remains Lifetime’s most popular program and attracts TV’s most sought-after viewers: 18-to-49-year-old women (“Lifetime’s *Army Wives,*” 2011). At different times, it has been cable TV’s most-viewed drama among this same group of women (“Lifetime Orders More *Army Wives,*” 2009) and the top program on Lifetime among college students, ages 18 to 24 (“Big Show
on Campus,” 2009). During its fifth season, viewership ranged from a high of 4.8 million to a low of 3.5 million viewers (Gorman, 2011); its sixth season saw a drop to an average of 3.08 million viewers (‘‘Army Wives: Season Six Ratings,’’ 2012). The program’s popularity with women attracted the interest of Senators John McCain and Barack Obama while on the presidential campaign trail in 2008, when each candidate recorded a 30-second teaser praising military families that aired just before the second season’s premiere episode (Eggerton, 2008). Lifetime recently renewed Army Wives for a seventh season.

From the beginning, Army Wives has woven together actual and fictionalized events and people to enhance its verisimilitude. For example, with the ostensibly nonpolitical “support the troops and their families” mantra, the program has featured Jill Biden, Vice President Joe Biden’s spouse, giving a brief speech advocating for military families;7 South Carolina governor Nikki Haley, mingling at a post soiree as a means of showing support for Fort Marshall’s green initiatives; and presidential candidates John McCain and Barack Obama in 2008 appearing in the segments previously mentioned. With such intertextual weaving of fictional and nonfictional worlds, Army Wives expands the number of sites available to negotiate meaning about military family life and U.S. missions in Iraq and Afghanistan—beyond news media and into serial drama, to reach in real-time, predominantly female audiences perhaps unfamiliar with the program’s premise. And although military-focused TV programs such as China Beach, JAG, and M*A*S*H have had successful runs, they focused neither on military family life nor on wars occurring at the time the programs aired. Army Wives, on the other hand, does this as it partners with brick-and-mortar support organizations, corporations, and individuals to create sympathetic narrative commentary about the current conflicts’ impact on families.

Since 2001, tomes have been written about relations between the military and the media during the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts; such research tends to focus on news media, gaming, and film to analyze the extent to which these have circulated prowar propaganda (e.g., Kellner, 2004, 2010; McLaren & Martin, 2004; Moyers & Hughes, 2007) and, to a lesser extent, exemplified militainment (Singer, 2010; Stahl, 2010). But as a military soap opera, Army Wives also serves a propaganda function: it circulates familiar, albeit contested, maxims about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as it simultaneously burnishes the Army’s credentials as a compassionate organization that unfailingly aids soldiers and their families. From its ratings apex at Lifetime, Army Wives offers the Army—the branch of the military that has historically recruited more women and offered more employment to women than any other (Brown, 2006)—an entertainment platform from which to promote its interests. That Army Wives’ audiences are predominantly female should not be underestimated: women are at once more resistant to such messages, historically speaking, and are seldom the subjects of them in any form (Elder & Greene, 2007; Enloe, 2000; Turse, 2008).

This article is based on a feminist analysis of the 81 episodes from Army Wives’ first five seasons, which has two parts: (1) an examination of the simultaneous discursive production of both gender and militarism through the propaganda themes that run through its multiple episodes and seasons and (2) an examination of the program’s political economy. And although instances of gendered propaganda performance abound in the program, the examples I include here are both representative of the forms such performance takes and also compose significant plots and subplots—some spanning several episodes and even seasons. I argue that Army
Wives deploys the device of marriage to frame the military missions in Iraq and Afghanistan so as to encourage acquiescence to these missions’ continually shifting ends: for example, instead of searching for weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) in Iraq (the stated purpose of the invasion of 2003), the troops of Army Wives often engage in “soft power” activities typically associated with a feminine approach to diplomacy and foreign policy (Nye, 2008), such as building schools, rescuing dogs, and ensuring that Iraqi children get the medical care they need. Pamela Moran’s exhortation to her caller to “accept,” “move on,” and “quit complaining,” is writ large in Army Wives, which encourages viewers to do the very same about military policy; that is, viewers are regularly treated to object lessons suggesting that criticizing Army policy is tantamount to becoming the “complaining” wife represented by Pamela’s caller. Historically, downgrading structural critique to “complaint” is a method used to diminish feminist criticism of patriarchal power, effectively disarticulating the political from the personal. Although Army Wives is only one TV program (with a spin-off, Coming Home), its clear and direct support of these wars and their shifting missions—alongside Lifetime’s strategic partnerships and synergistic relationships—link it to brick-and-mortar life practices and institutions that multiply its message, deepen its roots in the media-military-industrial complex, and produce banal militarism.

Married to the Army

The marriage Army Wives showcases most visibly is that between soldiers and their spouses and the Army, including its gender politics. The excerpt from Pamela Moran’s radio show in this article’s introduction is a particularly illustrative segment. Just as Pamela does in her radio advice, many other Army Wives episodes include references to soldiers’ deployments having the most virtuous of goals: protecting the United States. Because the official rationale for getting into and staying in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq has been controversial—the connection between faraway battles and defense of the United States unclear—that many Army Wives episodes include such references, and seemingly to reinforce the rationale for staying in a marriage, is significant. Constructing soldiers as ever heroic and self-sacrificing, Army Wives’ not-so-subtle message is that both warriors and the Army must be defended as partial compensation for soldiers’ sacrifices; to question their work is to betray profound, even unforgivable selfishness.

This message accords with what Stahl (2010) argues about “support-the-troops” rhetoric, which has circulated widely since the 1991 Persian Gulf war: it directs “civic attention away from debates about legitimacy and toward the war machine itself...extolling mindfulness and gratitude for those volunteer servicemen and women who have been ordered into harm’s way” (p. 29). Thus, the “choice” on offer here is “either stand with official policy or stand against the soldier” (p. 30). But Stahl’s analysis overlooks how war critics since Vietnam have nuanced their message to more clearly support the humans involved in war—troops included—while arguing against the bellicose mind-set and policies that make war possible; to wit: for years, front yards in my community sported signs with the imperative to “support the troops—bring them home now.” Although Army Wives expresses no such criticism of war, in every episode it foregrounds the concerns of soldiers and their families in situations that appear to be outside of politics (and discourse), thus making support of the troops apparently uncontroversial, even foreordained.
Army Wives weaves troop-supporting rhetoric into virtually every episode, at times using a heavy hand to drench scenes in patriotic symbolism while at others utilizing more subtle devices, which are clear in message nevertheless. One of the former such episodes occurred during the first season: as Fort Marshall holds its annual Fourth of July picnic in a large park on post, soldiers quietly sneak out for their deployments; while their families strain to enjoy the event, music from “America the Beautiful” plays and sunlight filters gently through the leaves on the tree branches above them. The post commander’s wife, Claudia Joy Holden, addresses the picnicking group. She lauds the heroism of the U.S. military, telling the crowd that it is “still protecting the rights guaranteed by our forefathers...every minute of every day” and asserting that soldiers’ battles go beyond religion, race, or gender. They’re the defenders of us all. They’re the defenders of our differences.... Together [soldiers and their families] we fight for our freedom.... I am proud of the role we play in maintaining peace...in our country and throughout the world. I am proud to call myself an Army wife. (Hicks, Biank, & Kretchmer, 2007)

Other references to homeland defense are embedded in story lines where they could easily go unnoticed. For example, season three sees Pamela growing increasingly unhappy about her Delta Force husband Chase’s long absences, which come with no warning, require immediate departure, and are accompanied by enforced silences about his work. However, his success with Delta has meant that the family is eligible to move to a larger house. Because Pamela’s two children are increasingly restive sharing a bedroom in their too-small house, she jumps at the chance to move—though Chase is deployed when this happens. In one scene, Roxy and Pamela walk through Pamela’s front door as they bring boxes into the new house. Pamela complains about Chase’s absence for yet another of their moves: “that man is useless.” Roxy retorts sarcastically: “Right, just when you need him he’s off risking his life for our country!” Pamela, realizing the trivializing nature of Roxy’s comment, sighs, “Exactly...dereliction of domestic duty” (Stanley, Stanley, Biank, & Peppe, 2009). Any complaints about the difficulty of moving without her husband’s help are swiftly buried under Roxy’s retort that suggests to Pam she must not assert her needs; instead, she must suppress them to show respect for her husband, who represents both the Delta Force mission and the Army. These two scenes defend at least two commonsense notions about the current wars and about gendered labor: first, that soldiers are fighting over there to protect us, over here—an arguable point that foreign policy and military experts have debated since the U.S. assault on Afghanistan began in 2001 (e.g., Johnson, 2008, 2011); second, that wives properly bear responsibility for the home front while their husbands are deployed to other lands.

Performing Propaganda

Propaganda has been an integral part of modern military campaigns since World War I (Andersen, 2006), referring to direct and indirect efforts to mobilize various populations both to accede to the necessity of war (often by demonizing opponents) and encourage home-front efforts, such as buying war bonds or planting victory gardens. Snow (2002) defines it as “systematic and deliberate attempts to sway mass
public opinion in favor of the objectives of the institutions (usually state or corporate) sending the propaganda messages” (p. 21). Sussman (2010) posits that

the point of propaganda is not necessarily to deceive but rather to internalize or reinforce in the audience deference to the authoritative status of a particular advocacy bearing a clear or implicit rationale or policy prescription that on some level requires the audience’s participation or consent. … [P]ropaganda implies a relationship of asymmetrical power between the interest that the propagandist represents and the audience to whom the message is addressed. (pp. 117–118)

Ellul (1965) adds that the aim of propaganda is “orthopraxy,” which is “the active or passive participation in its actions of a mass of individuals” (p. 61). Propaganda campaigns since the “War on Terror” began in 2001—in the attempt to rout Al Qaeda from Afghanistan, and with the Bush administration’s repeated attempts to convince the U.S. public that Iraq sponsored the Al Qaeda attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center—have focused on gaining and maintaining public support for these wars using news media. Media researchers and journalists alike have reached consensus that the U.S. news media played a vital role in circulating numerous uncritical stories that later proved false, their sources planted by Bush administration officials to create a seeming necessity and urgency for war (e.g., Andersen, 2006; Bonn, 2010; DiMaggio, 2009; Kellner, 2004; McLaren & Martin, 2004; and Moyers & Hughes, 2007).

Army Wives plays a role in extending this propaganda campaign by casting it into soap opera form and timing it propitiously: it premiered in 2007, well after the first stages of these wars but just after the so-called surge of troops to Iraq was rolled out; at this time, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq had been going on for six and four years respectively and, according to numerous polls conducted nationally, had been losing the support of the public, troubled by the thousands of casualties and injuries they had incurred (Keeter, 2007; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2008). Army Wives propaganda thus serves a slightly different (yet no less important) function than that appearing earlier: to maintain acceptance of the surge and the ongoing campaign in Afghanistan by illustrating Army life’s heroic possibilities and Army goodwill projects—particularly those enacted by women on behalf of others—and to promote Army gender politics, all situated in the most banal of TV genres: the soap opera. Early in season one, for instance, Trevor is at the swimming pool on post with sons TJ and Finn, when the 5:00 p.m. bugle begins to blow “Taps.” Trevor, along with everyone else at the pool, stands up, places his hand on his heart, and faces the flag for the duration. TJ and Finn, playing, fail to observe this act. Immediately after “Taps,” in a clear fusion of patriarchy and patriotism, Trevor explains sternly to both sons that they must salute the flag with hands over hearts each day at 5:00 when they’re on post: “In doing that, you’re honoring your country, the Army, and me, your father” (Johnson, Biank, & Liddi-Brown, 2007).

For the mothers and spouses on the program, standing in the way of either their children or their deploying husbands and wives—even to complain or worry visibly—is to prevent children and spouses from reaching the heroic self-actualization that awaits each soldier in theater. (The program is suffused with references to heroes and heroism, used routinely to describe soldiers.) Numerous
episodes—about Joan Burton, Trevor LeBlanc, and Chase Moran, for example—include dialogue about and between characters whose core identities are defined entirely by being soldiers. During season three, newly promoted General Michael Holden offers Joan Burton (the mother of an infant) the opportunity to be his second in command at Fort Marshall and therefore remain close to her baby. But Joan, thriving as a combat strategist and leader, is conflicted about whether to stay on post and be an involved parent or to lead her brigade in Iraq. After thinking it over, she calmly tells the general, “Sir, I respectfully request the privilege to deploy” (Stanley et al., 2009). Later, she leads her troops out of a firefight to safety, sustaining a facial wound and traumatic brain injury in the process. In response to Roxy LeBlanc’s complaints about husband Trevor’s upcoming deployment, one of her friends notes tartly that “the Army’s his identity; take it away and what’s he got?” (Johnson et al., 2007). Then, in season two, Trevor spots and kills a sniper in a crowded bazaar in Baghdad before the sniper can shoot anyone. He earns a Silver Star and a hero’s welcome upon his return, thus demonstrating that Roxy’s concerns about his deployment might have had grave consequences if Trevor had submitted to them.

**Rewriting the Real World**

To enhance its verisimilitude, many *Army Wives* episodes reference and reframe events that have occurred in the brick-and-mortar world to cast the Army in a favorable light. The episode in which the Fourth of July picnic scene appears serves both purposes, as its primary plot revolves around the issue of “friendly fire,” an Orwellian term used for accidental attacks by and on a battalion’s own troops. Former St. Louis Rams football player Pat Tillman was perhaps the most well-known victim of friendly fire in these current wars, and the incident’s treatment in the press casts the Army in a less than flattering light: commanding officers appeared eager to cover up rather than investigate his death (Krakauer, 2009). In the *Army Wives* friendly-fire episode, Hannah White, whose husband was killed in battle and is an old friend of Claudia Joy Holden, appears for a visit just as news emerges that she plans to testify in front of a congressional committee to challenge the Army’s account of her husband’s death, bringing to the committee evidence showing that her husband was killed by friendly fire. Word of Hannah’s plans spreads quickly through the Fort Marshall grapevine and causes great dissension; the wives line up to support or disparage Hannah. Denise Sherwood is adamantly opposed to Hannah’s testimony, exclaiming, “We are at war! Mistakes like this happen. We need to support our troops. The last thing we need is a wife testifying in front of Congress!... Nothing she says to Congress is going to bring her husband back” (Rottenberg, Zuritsky, & Kerns, 2007).

Those who believe Hannah should testify maintain that she is doing so to get to the bottom of her husband’s death, while those opposed believe her appearance is a publicity-seeking effort that dishonors her husband and has no merit: once the Army has rendered its verdict, the case should be closed. In the Holden household, Michael tells Claudia Joy that Hannah—who is staying at their house—must leave because he cannot be seen with a critic of the Army. Claudia Joy agrees, reluctantly, telling Michael, “You’re right. We have an obligation to the Army.” When she tells Hannah that she must leave their house for this reason, Hannah, upset, justifies her decision: “I think they’re lying to me, Claudia Joy. Can’t you understand that?”
Claudia Joy replies: “Yes, I do. But I have to support my husband.” Hannah replies, “I have to support mine.” In this way, a much larger and more troublesome problem of friendly fire, which includes the Army’s record of covering up such incidents, is reduced to preserving the stature of husbands, even posthumously. This narrative arc also suggests that criticism of the Army, and not friendly fire, poses the more serious threat to troops.

This episode ends with Hannah beginning her testimony before Congress: “My name is Hannah White. I was an Army wife for twenty-two years. I want you to know that I believe in the U.S. Army and all that it stands for” (Rottenberg et al., 2007). Hannah’s and Claudia Joy’s responses divert attention from the Army’s response with the suggestion that even if the Army has covered up her husband’s death, Hannah remains a supporter of it “and all that it stands for.” This episode also serves to illustrate the subtitle of Biank’s book, *The Unwritten Code of Army Wives*—a code that guides the program’s debates and interpersonal conflicts. Whereas most problems are resolved by swearing undying fealty to one’s spouse (usually husband), Hannah White’s conflict is more complicated as it tests both marital and Army fidelity. When Hannah eventually assures her congressional audience that her belief in the Army is unshaken despite its treatment of her husband’s death, she upholds her commitment to both marriages. Notably, this episode aired during the Iraqi troop surge. The program’s sympathetic portrayal of the Army and its families’ support of it and “all that it stands for” presents a pro-Army position as it poses a strong refutation of waning public support for military intervention. After all, if war widow Hannah White remains supportive of (and married to) the Army, shouldn’t civilians too?

*Selling Soft Power*

Prideworthy actions of the Army are numerous on this program, but they are not usually about fighting and dying honorably; rather, they concern the Army’s benevolence through soft power acts that ultimately replaced the goal of seizing WMDs: the original justification for entering into a preemptive war with Iraq. In a narrative arc that spans seasons three and four, Joan Burton is injured by an improvised explosive device (IED) blast in Iraq as she heroically leads her troops out of a firefight, resulting in her temporary blindness. Once she recovers her sight, Joan is sent to a location where a school is being built—shoddily, using corrupt contractors. Her orders are to intervene and hire trustworthy workers to build the school correctly, a task she excels at despite the Iraqi men’s discomfort with taking orders from a woman. Joan and her troops clean up the mess, get the project back on track, and are rewarded by being sent home.

Season three also includes the story of Haneen, an Iraqi girl who needs hand surgery as a result of an injury incurred in a battle between U.S. and Iraqi troops in her home (which killed everyone else in her family). Haneen comes to the attention of Roland Burton, at that time a psychiatrist working at Fort Marshall’s Mercer Hospital; Roland persuades Claudia Joy and Michael Holden to take in Haneen while she undergoes and recuperates from the delicate surgery at Mercer. Claudia Joy and daughter Emmalin tend to Haneen, preparing Iraqi food and placing a prayer rug in her bedroom. Haneen is hesitant to have the surgery, questioning why she was spared while the rest of her family was killed. Roland assures her that her family would want her to be alive, and Haneen reluctantly agrees, never blaming...
the United States or the Army for what has befallen her family. Instead, she blames the Iraqis—“my people”—and is profoundly grateful to the Holdens and the U.S. Army for repairing her hand and then returning her to Iraq (Biank, Schuur, & Ludwig, 2009). Similarly, after season one, the Army does the right thing by aiding soldiers with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), suicidal depression, and painkiller addictions, and also refusing to locate a toxic waste dump at Fort Marshall and risk contaminating homes and residents. On Army Wives, the Army’s mission is always already an upstanding one—much as gendered identities appear to “preexist the deed” of their performance, as Butler explains.

These characters and plots, dominated by female cast members, construct a virtuous Army, perhaps as a response to criticisms of the military when these problems have occurred in the real world.10 Outside U.S. borders, the Army acts as a responsible world citizen, aiding Iraqis in their quest to get good health care and helping rebuild the country’s schools. (That the schools would not need rebuilding if the United States had not bombed them goes without remark.) Such acts of feminized soft power offer a stark contrast to the aggressive and violent tactics of masculinized hard power with which the Army has been historically associated. Army Wives thus performs two forms of gendered propaganda: embracing the military mission as it morphs into a feminized form over time and showing the Army in the most favorable light. These explicit and subtle performances normalize and naturalize support for the Army and its use of soft power, as well as wed soldiers and their families to the Army—a somewhat flawed but ultimately redeeming spouse. And although this marriage is depicted as far from perfect—the Army spouse making unreasonable and even life-threatening demands—its participants repeatedly renew their vows to it throughout the seasons of Army Wives.

Married to the Complex

Along with their news counterparts, entertainment media have historically played an important role in the reproduction and construction of promilitary, prowar ideology (Boggs & Pollard, 2007; Kellner, 2010; Robb, 2004; Stahl, 2010). And although the Army Wives title suggests that it, too, may do this, what may be less obvious is how the program’s characters and narratives manifest efforts by the Pentagon to influence everyday domestic life through banal militarism. This is the basis of what I assert is Army Wives’ second marriage: that between Lifetime and the military-industrial complex. This term, of course, is President Eisenhower’s, coined 50 years ago to indicate his growing concern that the desires of the military and businesses that profit from war would eclipse the needs of society during peacetime. David Barstow (2008b) of the New York Times uses the term military-industrial-media complex for the collusion of retired military officers and TV news media in reporting on wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Each entity in this partnership profits from nondisclosure of conflicts of interest: the numerous retired military officers provide expert commentary to news media and also serve on the boards of directors of various defense contractors; media corporations are commercially and institutionally interconnected with—or owned by, in the case of NBC and General Electric—defense contractors. None of the parties in this collusion reveals that encouraging the war effort (as Barstow shows they have) allows them to profit financially and professionally. It is in the sense of these antecedents that I use the term media-military-industrial complex, where media refers to Lifetime. Far from fading into obsolescence, as
Eisenhower had hoped, this complex has grown into a behemoth with ever more numerous means of influencing media content, in large part due to the military’s own promotional machine (Barstow, 2008a; Turse, 2008).

From mainstream media to consumer products, the military touches an extensive range of objects and services readily available for civilian consumption. Its magnitude has grown so greatly since President Eisenhower’s warning that military reporter Nick Turse (2008) refers to it simply as “The Complex,” a shorthand phrase for its contemporary incarnation: the “military-industrial-technological-entertainment-academic-scientific-media-intelligence-homeland security-surveillance-national security-corporate complex” (p. 4). Tracing the expansion and influence of The Complex, Turse (2008) argues that it

uses all the tools of the modern corporation: publicity departments, slick advertising campaigns, and public relations efforts to build up the armed forces, which are, of course, its raison d’etre. With an all-volunteer military embroiled in two disastrous wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the armed forces have had to ramp up advertising, marketing, and product-placement efforts to attract ever more reluctant recruits. (p. 18)

Der Derian (2009) refers to this as the military-industrial-media-entertainment network, or MIME-NET, to indicate its vastness across space and time, as well as its Matrix-like social effects. For its part, the Pentagon maintains control of media representations through its Entertainment Office. In a post on the Armed with Science blog, the office’s current director, Phil Strub (2010), explains that producers

still very much want U.S. military production support—even though it comes with strings attached…. For example, filmmakers must also send us the[ir] scripts. These ultimately have to present a reasonably realistic portrayal of the military…. If filmmakers are willing to negotiate with us to resolve our script concerns, usually we’ll reach an agreement. If not filmmakers are free to press on without military assistance.

In accordance with this arrangement since its second season, Army Wives submits scripts to the Pentagon in order to use Charleston’s Air Force base as a backdrop for filming on-post scenes and for employing its Air Force reservists as extras (O’Connor, 2008). The city of Charleston has also bestowed Army Wives with tax breaks to maintain the program’s base in Charleston, a controversial practice continued by the South Carolina legislature after members of the cast lobbied in favor of it (Cieply, 2011; Smith, 2010). To sustain its militaristic realism, Army Wives could be expected to pull its punches at times and self-censor, just as Strub insists film producers must if they want military cooperation with the program.

Such influence on the film industry has been documented extensively in David Robb’s Operation Hollywood (2004), which enumerates examples starting in 1927 of filmmakers calling for military assistance to make their films more realistic—and getting that assistance only after modifying their scripts to adhere to strict rules about casting the military in a positive light, arrangements he refers to as quid pro quo. In an interview, Robb asserts that all concerned—even the Writers Guild—believe this arrangement to be a mutually beneficial one. However, he cautions that in this “chronic sanitization of the military and what war is” the losers are “the
American people. They’re being saturated with military propaganda in their mainstream movies and TV shows, and they don’t even know” (qtd. in Fleischer, 2004, p. 7).

The arrangement *Army Wives* has with the Pentagon improves its military verisimilitude, but to succeed commercially it must possess other attributes as well. For it to retain its premiere spot in a cable network, it must continue to resonate with sponsors and audiences and enrich Lifetime’s brand. In turn, Lifetime’s ability to thrive as a media corporation in today’s economy also depends on strengthening its brand through strategic alliances with its sibling divisions and other corporations to create synergy; as Bronstein (1994–1995) points out, it has been quite successful at achieving this. Lifetime’s current owner is A&E Television Networks—a joint venture between the Hearst Corporation, Disney-ABC Television Group, and NBC-Universal (“A&E Television Networks,” n.d.), each of which has a successful track record in making strategic alliances and coordinating them synergistically.

In promotional segments aired during *Army Wives*’ fifth season, Lifetime highlighted these relationships; perhaps its most valuable is that between Lifetime and Outback Steakhouse, a national restaurant chain whose president states, “The sacrifices that our troops and their families make so that we can enjoy the freedoms we have in the United States is something Outback employees have recognized and appreciated since we opened our doors twenty-two years ago” (“Outback Steakhouse to Support U.S. Troops,” 2010). For one month during spring 2011, Outback offered a special “Red, White, and Bloomin” menu whose $1 million proceeds were directed to Operation Homefront, the organization for which Tanya Biank is a spokesperson (“Outback Steakhouse Presents,” 2011). As part of this promotion, Outback Steakhouse bused in Army spouses from nearby Fort Stewart to be feted at a thank-you luncheon at the Outback Steakhouse in Savannah, Georgia, hosted by Brian McNamara—the actor who plays General Michael Holden on *Army Wives*. In the advertisement for this event (airing between *Army Wives* segments), McNamara tells these Army spouses, “We are incredibly honored to be telling your stories, considering what you do for us and what you do for the troops” (“Real Army Wives Surprise Part 2,” 2011). Following his speech, McNamara presents Operation Homefront with a $10,000 check from the *Army Wives* program.

Lifetime has initiated other promotions for Army wives through its *Army Wives* Give Back program, in which cast members team up with viewers to visit Army posts and provide Army families with donations and gifts. Each of these is a two-minute “branded content segment meant to pay tribute to military wives” (Tanklefsky, 2009). Cast members have also paired up with actual Army wives to visit wounded soldiers at Walter Reed Army Medical Center (“Heroes at Walter Reed,” 2008), and the program has hosted contests for military spouses in which the winner received a makeover from *Project Runway* (another Lifetime program) or a pink Ford Mustang identical to one featured in an episode of the program boosting breast cancer awareness. With these extratextual practices, *Army Wives* stamps a Lifetime-specific gender brand (Lotz, 2006) on its rendering of military life while simultaneously feminizing The Complex.

In 2011, Lifetime spun off a militainment reality program from *Army Wives* titled *Coming Home*, which in its first season immediately followed *Army Wives* on the Sunday evening lineup. *Coming Home* features homecomings of military personnel in staged venues to surprise their family members. One episode, titled “Daddy’s Little Girl,” is described this way: “We surprise a 12-year-old girl with
the Navy father she hasn’t seen in months at the violin concert of her dreams—and there isn’t a dry eye in the house” (“Coming Home Episode Guide,” 2012). On the Coming Home Web page—next to an ad for Army Wives—one can view full or partial episodes, see real-life homecoming videos, or learn more about “special military organizations,” such as the Red Cross, USO, and Operation Homefront.

One organization absent from this Web site is Military Families Speak Out (MFSO), which has a different view of how best to support the troops. The MFSO Web site explains that it is an organization of over 4,000 families across the US and around the world who are opposed to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and have a loved one currently serving in the military, who has served in the military since 9/11 or who has died as a result of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. As people with loved ones in the military, we have both a special need and a unique role to play in speaking out. It is our loved ones who are, have been, or will be on the battlefront. (Military Families Speak Out, n.d.)

Another group with similar objectives is Gold Star Families for Peace, which works to end the wars and comprises “people who lost a member of their family in the Iraq War” (Gold Star Families for Peace, 2012).

MFSO and Gold Star Families for Peace clearly question the mission of the Army. Conversely, Lifetime portrays Army life as if it were sculpted by the Army's public relations office: in its mise-en-scène, Army wives maintain steadfast support for the Army despite the unimaginable pressures it exerts on their lives—and even after a spouse's death by friendly fire is covered up or a child is killed in battle. Toward the end of the Hannah White friendly-fire episode, for example, the community of Fort Marshall wives tries to mend fences (Rottenberg et al., 2007). Roxy, the newest Army spouse, seizes the microphone at a troop care package assembly event and shouts that this situation is their worst nightmare, “So why’re we fightin’? We’re in this together!” Pamela, who has been one of the most vocal supporters of Hannah’s testimony before Congress, takes this to heart and goes to Mercer Hospital to find nurse Denise, with whom Pamela fought when defending Hannah’s testimony to the other wives. Apologetic, Pamela tells Denise, “Look, I’m opinionated, and I’ve got a big mouth.” Pamela trivializes her opposition to the Army as just her opinion, personalizing and subordinating it in favor of her friendship with Denise. She is an Army wife who has learned her place and internalized the “unwritten code” first documented by Tanya Biank and performed in each episode of Army Wives.

This incident is noteworthy not only for the role it plays in performing Army propaganda but for the way in which it typifies Lifetime’s rendering of female characters, interpersonal conflict, and narrative formulas: while as a soap Army Wives is ideal for producing banal militarism, it is also a boon to Lifetime, whose brand benefits from its ratings and with this simultaneous reinforcement and extension of its signature qualities (Lotz, 2006). This fusion of propaganda and brand ensures that both the Lifetime channel and Army Wives receive a positive reception from a group of women prized mainly as consumers. Thus, among the program’s many advertisements, for example, is a pitch for “Kraft, the American cheese” (emphasis in original). And during Army Wives’ sixth season, an extended Outback Steakhouse ad features a female combat helicopter pilot who explains how she thrives in her combat role but enjoys a meal at Outback after a tour of duty.
The consumer orientation is crucial to consider here, as securing this demographic group’s attention is vital to the continued success of Lifetime. The words of former NBC-Universal president and CEO Jeff Zucker reveal the goal of women’s programming and network attempts to establish synergy between properties. Although he was talking about a different network, Zucker’s assertion applies to Lifetime as well (particularly with NBC-Universal’s ownership stake in Lifetime):

When we go to market, we’re selling young women and affluent women in a way that virtually no one else can when you look over our properties. We go to market with a suite of assets that is unmatched in the female demographic. (Quoted in Becker, 2007)

The women being sold in this audience market are “upscale, educated… ‘affluencers’” (Becker, 2007), a group whose attention Lifetime now captures.

The ability to appeal to such consumers is central to Lifetime’s programming decisions: as Bronstein (1994–1995) demonstrates, Lifetime designs programs that “create profitable synergies among their divisions” (p. 216) and “generally follows programming practices that serve its corporate and advertisers’ interests first” (p. 234). In the case of Army Wives (and Coming Home), those sponsors include the Army and its multiplicity of sanctioned support organizations, Outback Steakhouse, USAA insurance, Lifetime’s subsidiaries and sibling organizations, and the many advertisers that have found the audience of Army Wives to be a loyal group of affluencers. And although Lifetime suggests that its fare is for all women, it, like most media corporations, has a narrow conception of the category; most of the women who appear in Lifetime programming are “white, heterosexual, thin, young, and financially secure” (Bronstein, 1994–1995, p. 234).

Thus, Lifetime has made Army Wives crucial to solidifying its brand, while it makes a profitable connection to the military-industrial complex. Extending Lifetime’s brand with Army Wives and Coming Home also allows the Army (and perhaps other branches of the military) to make inroads with women, thus far a leery group of potential recruits. Whether as mothers or future recruits themselves, women and girls do not flock to the military the way men and boys have (Enloe, 2000). Finessing a hybrid program, Army Wives opens up the relatively unknown world of military life and situates it within Lifetime’s woman-attracting dramatic form, which has proven to be financially successful almost since its inception. This wedding benefits both the Army and Lifetime, as each exploits women for its own profitability.

Conclusion

Robin Andersen (2005) notes in her analysis of gender in news coverage of the Iraq war that “[g]endered conventions used to tell the stories of war make war acceptable to the public while they reinforce a society based on gender inequality and the violence that promotes war” (p. 370). Although she is referring specifically to news stories, the same can be said of Army Wives and its treatment of the women (and men) who provide support for deployed soldiers and officers. It is thus an ideal vehicle for the diffusion of banal militarism. The cast of Army Wives never questions war or violence—even when ample opportunities, such as the death of a husband or son, arise to do so. And while Army Wives touches weekly on difficult subjects, such as
injured soldiers’ painkiller addictions and marital infidelity among spouses separated by war, it also makes the larger context for these problems glaringly absent. Neither soldier nor spouse ever voices doubts about the military mission in Iraq or about the deprivation the branches of the military—and their stateside families—experience. This is despite news coverage of these very subjects (see, for example, Dana Priest and Anne V. Hull’s Pulitzer Prize–winning *Washington Post* series from 2007 on the horrific conditions experienced by wounded soldiers recovering at Walter Reed Army Medical Center) and of alternatives to war espoused by some military family groups, such as Military Families Speak Out. Noteworthy, I believe, is Amanda Holden, the teenage daughter of Fort Marshall’s then second in command, Michael Holden. Amanda, the one character on *Army Wives* who voiced opposition to the war and even participated in a peace rally, was killed when a suicide bomber attacked a Fort Marshall bar at the end of the first season.

As noted, numerous episodes of *Army Wives* feature characters mouthing the mantra that the Army’s missions in Iraq and Afghanistan are “keeping us safe at home.” Thus, anything the wives and Roland do must be considered in light of the sacrifices their soldier-spouses make while deployed. Marital fidelity is one such crucible, and it is on that all judgments of fellow Army spouses are based. When Denise and Frank separate during season two and Denise has a romantic relationship with one of her former patients, it is not the professional breach of ethics her friends are concerned with; it’s her infidelity to Frank (or, as Roxy puts it, her “cheatin’ on her husband”). According to Biank’s book and the program, soldiers believe that a stateside spouse’s infidelity is the worst possible affront to a deployed spouse; this message is conveyed repeatedly from Lifetime to *Army Wives* viewers, too, perhaps to solidify additional support for its marriage to the military-industrial complex.

Lifetime’s rendering of *Army Wives* is also a sales pitch, selling military life and endless war via soap opera to the wary public and marrying off Lifetime’s “affluencers” to this complex. Although this arrangement confers numerous benefits to Lifetime’s brand, its corporate partners, and Operation Homefront, for example, benefits accruing to military spouses are unclear at best. The idea that Army wives should quietly acquiesce to whatever the Army requires of their spouses and families is problematic at every level: although military personnel are expected to follow the orders of their superior officers, this is not required of civilians, nor should it be if robust discussions about the military are to be had. As the Military Families Speak Out Web site indicates, military-family dissenters do exist, and they take issue with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and with being silenced. They also have a different idea of how to support the troops: pull them out of war zones and bring them home. Unfortunately, *Army Wives’* object lessons for military families, especially wives, encourage the continuation of this political suppression—even embedding it into the unwritten code of marriage. *Army Wives*, in its use of extratextual elements, including brick-and-mortar political figures, events, and settings, surely contributes to public understandings of military family life—particularly because treatments of this topic are virtually absent from other popular media. Through *Army Wives’* dual marriages, the putatively prowoman Lifetime network encourages women’s capitulation and fidelity to the Army and to the media-military-industrial complex—a union that gives new meaning to the term *shotgun wedding* and likely has President Eisenhower turning in his grave.
Notes

1. Although its title implies that the program is about wives, one of the main cast members is a husband: psychiatrist Roland Burton, married to Lieutenant Colonel (later promoted to colonel) Joan Burton. Following the program’s and book’s title, I use the term wives, but this should be understood to include Burton as well. The other wives are Claudia Joy Holden (wife of Brigadier General Michael Holden, later promoted to general), Denise Sherwood (wife of Major Frank Sherwood, later promoted to lieutenant colonel), Pamela Moran (wife, ex-wife, and then wife again of Chase Moran, Delta Force), and Roxy LeBlanc (wife of Private First Class Trevor LeBlanc, later promoted to sergeant).

2. There are a couple of important exceptions to this across the six seasons of Army Wives. One of the ongoing narrative arcs of season six, for example, focused on the relationship between a lesbian couple, Charlie and Nicole, who fight Army and family prejudice to legitimate their relationship, eventually marry, and adopt a child.

3. I use serial drama and soap opera interchangeably based on Geraghty (2005), who points out that contemporary TV research relies on an expansive definition of soap opera narratives as “extended, complex, and interweaving stories; a wide range of characters, allowing for different kinds of identification; the delineation of an identifiable community, paying attention to domestic and familial relationships; and an emphasis, often expressed melodramatically, on the working through of good and evil forces within a family or community” (p. 313). Army Wives fits this definition to a tee.

4. Lifetime Television claims to offer “the highest quality entertainment and information programming content that celebrates, entertains and supports women” (“About Lifetime,” 2012).

5. Lotz (2006) notes such postfeminism is recurrent in Lifetime’s serial dramas.

6. Operation Homefront’s mission statement explains that it “provides emergency assistance and morale to our troops, to the families they leave behind and to wounded warriors when they return home” (Operation Homefront, 2012).

7. This preceded Biden’s and Michelle Obama’s initiative to support military families, announced earlier in 2011 (Sherr & Murphy, 2011).

8. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for making this important point.

9. An important exception to this pattern appears in season five, when Denise and Frank Sherwood’s son, Jeremy, is killed during battle in Iraq. As the Sherwoods grieve their son’s death, they learn that he died honorably and even sacrificially, fighting to prevent other casualties. Although this does not eliminate their deep feelings of loss, it appears to ease the Sherwoods’ grief somewhat. The program uses Jeremy’s death to veer away from Denise and Frank possibly having an experience like Cindy Sheehan’s, in which they would transform their grief into antiwar activism. To wit: at a group grief counseling session, another mother whose son is killed in battle expresses anger toward the Army and the senselessness of the war that had killed her son. Frank storms out of the session, refusing to empathize either with this mother or where she places the blame for her son’s death.

10. The toxic waste dump episode, aired during season four, was likely a reference to the contamination of Camp Lejeune, a Marines base in North Carolina where toxic volatile organic compounds (VOCs) infused the water supply between the mid-1950s and late 1980s, leading to numerous health problems and even deaths of residents there. This episode perhaps serves as a reminder that in this instance, at least, the Army bests the Marines.

11. I use collusion advisedly, as it is that which best describes this relationship; in a scene from the documentary film Why We Fight—which details the contemporary military-industrial complex—collusion is the term used by a representative of the massive defense contractor Kellogg, Brown, & Root (KBR) to describe that corporation’s relationship with the military (Jarecki, Shipman, & Jarecki, 2006).

12. The Lifetime Web site also touts its good works in this regard with a guide of all the episodes that have dealt with difficult subjects, along with methods for helping veterans who may be experiencing mental and physical problems (http://www.mylifetime.com/my-lifetime-commitment/shows).
References


