Marketing Militarism to Moms

News and Branding after September 11th
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ABSTRACT

This essay uses an interpretive analysis of news media with political economy and branding research to examine a case study of how a group of newly ‘Security Moms’ became branded and pressed into profitable service for the Republican Party and the West through strong, ‘think back’ narratives that constructed identities like this one which come in and out of vogue in mainstream news media telling important stories about the public’s relationship to feminism. Since the 1990s, new stories in the United States have popularized groups of women and men seemingly heroine in the particular practices. ‘Soccer Moms’ and ‘NASCAR Dads’. For example, such identities not only serve to be profitable for corporations, they also form narratives and reinforce neoliberalism and militarizing government.

Walking through a parking lot several years ago I spotted a bumper sticker that caught my eye. “Soccer Mom and Proud of It!” it exclaimed. This bumper sticker stuck out not only because I have researched the Soccer Mom identity and how it has been used by mainstream news outlets to talk about women as a swing-voting bloc (Vavrus, 2002), but also because it underscored a phenomenon this chapter addresses. That is, the woman who drove this shiny new SUV had willingly adopted a media-generated, media-circulated label for her identity, and in the process had
given herself over to being part of the desirable Soccer Mom niche market— one that, I argue, has attained the status of a brand. That the Soccer Mom has attained the status of a brand is evident in the various sites in which that label has appeared—this bumper sticker, t-shirts, electoral politics, advertising campaigns, marketing literature that predicts women's consumer habits—and in how the label circulates culturally to define a group of women. But I am less interested in self-professed Soccer Moms than I am with a larger process: how and why groups of people are constituted and then labeled by mainstream news media and what happens to these labeled groups once they are brought into existence. This chapter's case study is based on one such group: Security Moms.

Soon after the United States had begun its preemptive war on Iraq and then President Bush had declared "Mission Accomplished," amid a massive propaganda campaign to convince the public of Iraq's Saddam Hussein's involvement in the events of September 11, 2001 (McLaren & Martin, 2004, p. 288), the Security Mom debuted in news narratives about women and electoral politics. The Word Spy website defines a security mom as a "woman with children who believes the most important issue of the day is national security, particularly the fight against terrorism" (www.wordspy.com/words/securitymoms.asp). Security Moms emerged during the 2004 presidential campaign season ostensibly to identify a group of women predicted to be a swing-voting bloc, much like the Soccer Moms of preceding campaigns (e.g., see Tumulty & Novak, 2003); but unlike Soccer Moms, Security Moms' public statements legitimated both right-wing military policy and a patriarchal gender dynamic prevalent in public discourse after September 11, 2001 (Enloe, 2007; Faludi, 2007). As this chapter will illustrate, news discourse mainly frames Security Moms as being desperate for protection, especially that offered by a strong patriarchal figure like George W. Bush, whom they claim to trust completely. In their performance of Bush administration propaganda about the War on Terror, Security Moms' media constitution encourages adherence to a historically specific, post-9/11 security regime, their fearfulness presenting a rationale for heightened state surveillance and the incorporation of surveillance and security technologies into their domestic lives (Grewal, 2006; Hay, 2006).

Media institutions in the United States continually produce new labels like "Security Mom" for human behaviors, compressing layers of complex and often contradictory practices into catchphrases: think "Mean Girls" or "Generation X," for example. Instead of taking these labels at face value, this chapter posits that the gendered life practices captured in these phrases and then circulated throughout the media in both news and entertainment are more significant than their light-hearted media treatment would suggest. Some of these labels evolve into brands as they circulate through media windows, their meanings becoming increasingly multi-layered and valuable for political institutions, political parties, polling organizations, media corporations, and the public relations and marketing industries.

Following Rakow (2010), who argues for the value of analyzing identity, my research challenges "the notion of identity as a stable and unvarying natural category
without political or material consequences” (p. 139). She cites the “rising incidences of hatred and threatened violence in response to [Barack] Obama’s election,” which illustrate starkly that the “politics of gender, race, and class are far from over.” In this example alone, it is “possible to see the contested and arbitrary nature of identity categories, as well as what is at stake in the process to define and enforce them” (p. 139). My analysis of media-constructed identities relies mainly on the news media’s own terms for them, and traces linkages between these identities and the institutions that constitute and circulate them. What I argue is that media-constructed identities come into existence as a result of a confluence of efforts by powerful and resource-rich organizations that stand to gain when these identities are perceived as prescriptive as well as descriptive. I concur with Fejes, who asserts that, “[u]pdating Foucault, it would seem that today the consumer-based media, and not the state, the church, or the scientific professions, are the far more effective creators and regulators of identities and desires” (2001, p. 207).

Constructed identities that become brands, and come in and out of vogue in mainstream news media – like Security Moms and Soccer Moms – tell important stories about both the media and the political interests that influence media content. Since the 1990s, US news media have popularized groups of women and men whose identities supposedly cohere around particular practices: “Soccer Moms” and “NASCAR Dads,” for example. I focus this chapter on a case study of Security Moms, which reveals the patterns of representations used to construct this identity as well as the political stakes in its public acceptance. I argue that this case of constituting and politicizing identity – branding – encourages governance of gendered conduct that aligns with the military and foreign policy agendas of the Bush White House after September 11, 2001.

Because gender is crucial to the constitution of this media identity, I utilize a feminist analysis, the chief goal of which has been articulated clearly by Riordan (2002):

Feminism seeks to understand and theorize power as it pertains not only to women, but also to other groups marginalized on the basis of their race, class, sexuality, religious background, ethnicity, age, dis/ability, etc.” (p. 13, n1)

In feminist scholarship, gender is the primary, albeit not the exclusive, aspect of interest; as Dow and Condit (2005) argue, feminism is “ultimately oriented toward the achievement of ‘gender justice,’ a goal that takes into account the ways that gender always already intersects with race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class.” Moreover, “gender justice may include but can also go beyond the seeking of equality between men and women, to include understanding of the concept of gender itself as politically constructed” (p. 449). This is, as van Zoonen (1994) has phrased it, a cultural process: “a negotiation over meanings and values that inform whole ways of life” (p. 41). Such a negotiation is evident in almost any discourse in which mothers and their conduct are central, as they are in this case study.
Because the Security Mom identity is produced and reproduced in news media, I focus on these narratives. News texts possess credibility for being straightforward, transparent reflections of reality,¹ and thus express normative lessons to viewers, listeners, and readers about how they should understand and fit into the world around them; for this reason, they are potentially significant for establishing norms in all sorts of areas: gender, race, class, politics, and so on. Consequently, news media provide fertile ground for entrenching masculine dominance and its unfortunate counterpart, feminine irrelevance, and have therefore long inspired feminist scholars to both analyze and alter news reporting about women and feminism (for an excellent and comprehensive review of the “historic dialog” between news and feminism, see Barker-Plummer, 2010).

Gallagher’s (2005) enormous (and enormously useful) report on gender and international news media reveals a number of unsettling trends in mainstream news found in 76 countries from around the world. Among other trends, she shows that women are “dramatically under-represented in the news,” that “women’s points of view are rarely heard in the topics that dominate the news agenda,” that “as authorities and experts women barely feature in news stories” (p. 17), and that “news on gender (in) equality is almost non-existent. […] Stories with a gender equality angle are almost completely absent from the major news topics of politics (3%) and the economy (1%)” (pp. 19–20). Such patterns only reinforce the legitimacy of women’s invisibility; as Gallagher points out, “if issues and people do not make the news, they can be dismissed as unimportant. They need not command public attention” (p. 28). I would add that on those occasions when gender is front and center, it is likely to take the form of an identity such as Security Mom – one that serves a marketing purpose of promoting a lifestyle, a politics, or some combination.

Some feminist scholars, myself included, have concluded that postfeminism informs media representations of women and girls (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009; Tasker & Negra, 2007; Vavrus, 2002). I have defined postfeminism as a “revision of feminism that encourages women’s private, consumer lifestyles” (Vavrus, 2002, p. 2) – one that “rejects feminism’s more provocative challenges, such as those grounded in critiques of capitalism and class privilege” and takes for granted – not to mention benefits from – the gains brought about by the first and second waves; however, postfeminism asserts that “feminism actually harms women, overall, because it gives women unrealistic expectations – that we can ‘have it all’” (p. 22).

In this chapter, I use the term postfeminism, although I recognize that Douglas (2010) departs from the term, substituting “enlightened sexism” in its place. Her rejection of the term is due to its suggestion

that somehow feminism is at the root of this when it isn’t – it’s good, old-fashioned, grade-A sexism that reinforces good, old-fashioned, grade-A patriarchy. It’s just much better disguised, in seductive Manolo Blahniks and an Ipex bra. (p. 10)

Postfeminism does indeed reveal sexism at its core and reinforces patriarchy, but it also illuminates feminism – for both positive recognition and blame. In other words,
although feminism blaming is a recurrent theme in postfeminism, it is accompanied by an implicit recognition of the gains for which feminism and feminists are responsible (Vavrus, 2010). I have found that what Gill (2007) calls a "postfeminist sensibility" pervasive in news discourse, including that which constitutes Security Moms. That is, the Security Mom brand is productive of a lifestyle used to sell a militaristic politics of motherhood in much the same way as consumer products are marketed; in this way it aims to govern private as well as public conduct by appealing to women's desires to exercise political agency and choose a politics that will best serve their family's interests.

As I will show, this identity does not arise organically or emerge from average women's everyday practices, but is instead produced as part of an Astroturf campaign (see Stauber & Rampton, 1995, for an explanation of hallmarks of and purposes for such a public relations campaign) that attempts to maternalize security to advance the agenda of the Bush White House and minimize the gender gap for Republicans. Because the influence of advertising, public relations, and marketing is strong and even ubiquitous in news today (e.g., see Bagdikian, 2004; McChesney, 2008; Potter, 2010), news media research must consider how news content is shaped by these industries as well. I have done this examining NASCAR Dads (Vavrus, 2007) and Soccer Moms (Vavrus, 2002), for example. Other feminist work in this vein can be found in King's (2006) work on cause marketing and Gunn and Vavrus's (2010) research on the marketing of menstruation-related remedies. Using a Foucauldian analysis of biopower, these latter two consider the means by which women's bodies, cycles, and diseases may become the targets of marketing campaigns that center on the production of self- and other-surveilling subjects.

The analysis of Security Moms in this chapter also draws on the concept of biopower: the "power over life" (Foucault, 1978, p. 139) that modern institutions seek to manage in populations by encouraging self-disciplining subjects who exercise "judgment and self-judgment concerning the normal and abnormal in relation to an identified norm" (Gunn & Vavrus, 2010, p. 118). Biopower explains a gendered brand such as Security Mom's function as a governing apparatus: the examples I provide in this chapter illustrate how the brand attempts to establish a normative discourse about family life, domesticity, and emotional labor in the post-9/11 United States using terms that emphasize the well-being and safety of the population of mothers and children it aims to govern. With such a population of parents, the discursive constitution of the power over life definitive of biopower emerges clearly with emphasis on filial responsibilities (especially pronounced for mothers). This brand thus provides a functional model of gendered conduct; by analyzing it, my goal, like Dean's, is to lay bare its "taken-for-granted character" (1999, p. 36), understand the power relations that inhere within it, and illuminate the political stakes for its incorporation as a governing discourse. The remainder of this chapter explains, first, my rationale for and use of the Foucauldian concepts of governmentality and biopower in this context, and, second, illustrates how these operate with the branding process generally, and finally, with the Security Mom brand in particular.
 Governing Gender through Brands

According to the CEO of Saatchi & Saatchi, Kevin Roberts, the goal of branding is to inspire "loyalty beyond reason" among consumers (quoted in Conley, 2008, p. 2). To achieve this, marketers use numerous means and sites to attempt consumer identification with their products and services, so that each brand appears to hail us personally, as individuals, as we aspire to reach our goals (Gobé, 2001; Turow, 2006). Lury (2004) believes that brands are "compelling object[s] of sociological concern," not least because they are "linked to practices of government and self-government" and have "regulatory effects" (p. 150) on the consumers they hail. Typically associated with consumer products, brand image is created using information gained through test marketing consumers, mining demographic and psychographic data, and scrutinizing the results of marketing surveillance conducted by services like ACXIOM and Epsilon. According to Vass (2005), imprinting a brand's aura on popular consciousness requires inundating the public with as many means of communicating its marketing message as possible, including press releases, advertisements in multiple sites, direct marketing, news stories, and face-to-face contact.

Each identity brand I have scrutinized – from Soccer Moms to NASCAR Dads to "metrosexuals" – has been featured prominently in news media for a period of at least a few months, and represents efforts by numerous organizations to constitute it, articulate it to a population, and reference it with a label that simultaneously expresses organizational goals for governance and links these to the agendas of larger organizations. Deployment of the NASCAR Dad brand, for example, benefited the news organizations that aired stories about it, NASCAR broadcasters, the hundreds of NASCAR-sponsoring corporations, various branches of the military that recruit at NASCAR races, and the Republican Party (Vavrus, 2007). Each brand encourages behaviors and desires that fall within bounds established in the circuits of exchange between these organizations. Arvidsson refers to brands such as these as "political brands," and argues that they offer "an answer to the homelessness of post-modern subjects. Like commercial brands [they profit] from this homelessness by offering a possibility for identification within a prestructured space" (2006, p. 92).

Thus, viewing constructed, gendered identities as brands may reveal the purposes for these persistently invoked and circulated constructions and how and where they articulate to governing agendas. The concept of governing conduct emerges from Michel Foucault’s later writings on governmentality (see Foucault, 1991), in which government refers to "the conduct of conduct: that is to say, a form of activity aiming to shape, guide or affect the conduct of some person or persons" (Gordon, 1991, p. 2). Government is thus not reducible strictly to domination; instead, it comprises

those practices that try to shape, sculpt, mobilize and work through the choices, desires, aspirations, needs, wants and lifestyles of individuals and groups. This is a perspective
The "space of bodies, lives, selves and persons," or a population, is a concept crucial to governmentality, as the objects of government are people and their practices, through both self- and other-regulation.

A population is constituted by a governing apparatus, which works by identifying a "population in need of calibration at the same time as it mobilizes that population to perform its own transformation" (Greene, 1999, p. 5) – often around some form of their practice, such as hygiene, reproduction, or consumer habits. Josh Gunn and I (2010) coined the term "gyniatric apparatus" to analyze advertising campaigns for three different menstruation-related drugs (Serasem, Seasonale, and Remifemin) that, we argued, together resulted in a "life-long project – from menarche through and beyond menopause" of medicalized self-surveillance and perpetual transformation (p. 113). As we will see, news media hail mothers as a population "in need of calibration" – one whose personal and familial safety has been compromised by terrorists and must therefore be recuperated; recalibration in this context appears possible only when mothers capitulate to the post-9/11 logic of security as the best means to protect their families.

In this view, a population transforms not because of overt manipulation but because of a perception that it is pursuing self-fulfillment by exercising freedom and choice (despite its choices being constrained within the bounds set by the very institutions that benefit from its actions) (Dean, 1999, p. 32; Graham, 1997). As Rose (1996) points out:

Contemporary practices of subjectification [...] put into play a being that must be attached to a project of identity, and to a secular project of "life-style," in which life and its contingencies become meaningful to the extent that they can be construed as the product of personal choice. (p. 195)

Governing objectives guiding the Security Mom lifestyle are produced by interactions between numerous institutions: news organizations, TV networks, advertisers and marketers, think tanks, and political parties, all of which contribute to the discourse exhorting mothers to choose the Republican Party as a means of fostering both familial and national security. Nor are such appeals at all accidental; rather,

[It is the expertise of market research, of promotion and communication, underpinned by the knowledge and techniques of subjectivity, that provides the relays through which the aspirations of ministers, the ambitions of business, and the dreams of consumers achieve mutual translatability. (Rose 1996, p. 162)]

The Security Mom brand embodies one such relay, and aligns neatly with the ministerial aspirations of the post-9/11 Bush White House, and the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security, as well as the business ambitions of corporate news
media outlets perpetually in search of affluent demographic groups to which to pitch their narratives and, most importantly, their sponsors’ wares (Bagdikian, 2004; McChesney, 2008). Whether any consumers’ dreams were realized as a result of the Security Mom brand’s existence is less certain.

Arvidsson describes brands as “complexes of information that enter into the informational flows of daily life and direct and anticipate it in particular ways.” Further, what makes consumer brands effective is also the case for identity brands like the Security Mom: “like many other forms of contemporary governance, [brands] rule through the freedom of its [sic] subjects, empowering them in particular directions” (2006, p. 127). As I will demonstrate below, news media constitute Security Moms as subjects whose political affiliations ebb and flow as domestic and geopolitical conditions change: when Bill Clinton was president, so-called Soccer Moms were represented as Democrat-voting liberals; after 9/11, their label changed to Security Moms, and they were cast as safety-obsessed Republicans (some newly so, having just abandoned the Democrats), voting to protect themselves and their families from terrorists. Even once this campaign was over, vestiges of this brand remain in public discourse (e.g., though not necessarily called out by name, Security Moms live on in Sarah Palin and the “Mama Grizzlies” she represented during the 2010 midterm election season).

The Politics of Motherhood in the Post-9/11 World

Two chief aspects of Security Moms highlight their brand as productive of governing and self-governing gendered conduct: first, their willing submission to patriarchal power, and, second, their intense fearfulness about terrorist attacks that, they assert, pose the greatest threat to the sanctity of their home and family. The Security Mom brand maternalizes “power over life” as a governing apparatus that recalibrates Soccer Moms; by shifting their gender and electoral politics to the right, normalizing the militarization of their everyday lives, and performing propaganda, the Security Mom represents a media makeover and political transformation for this population. Using these elements, news media craft a brand identity that renders mothers as uniform supporters of President Bush, his administration’s policies, the war, and the military, all in the name of security at home.

As a generic modifier, the term “security” denotes safety and comfort, but its use after September 11, 2001 obliquely calls up a construct that has become articulated to the US’s anti-terrorism policies. That is, since the attacks on the United States that occurred on September 11, 2001, “security” has become an enthusiastically utilized, yet vigorously contested, term that now connotes those activities begun by the Bush administration (and mostly continued by the Obama administration) as part of the “War on Terror”: wiretapping; Internet and other digital surveillance; no-fly lists; preemptive war; and a heightened militarization of society, among others (Grewal,
2006; McLaren & Martin, 2004). As it is constructed in media texts, the Security Mom brand legitimates these measures and, by referencing the new brand’s once-liberal Soccer Mom qualities, models how and why other concerned mothers might recalibrate their politics, too. This brand justifies patriarchal masculinity, sanctioning it as acceptable – even necessary – to make home and the homeland safe from external threats.

Time magazine’s early coverage gave Security Moms their most visible debut. “Goodbye, Soccer Mom. Hello, Security Mom,” the June 2, 2003 cover headline trumpeted, as the story inside presented the Soccer Mom as having “morphed into Security Mom” (Tumulty & Novak, 2003, p. 1). Time’s initial narrative sets the tone for subsequent treatments of Security Moms, which hew to the same formula and style of expression: using passive voice, reporters disavow any responsibility they or other journalists may have for constructing and propagating the identity while they simultaneously assign it specific qualities, often relying on only the slimmest – or no – evidence:

Swing voters have always been elusive creatures, changing shape from election to election. The profile and assumptions about them in one contest seldom apply to the next one. This axiom is proving true again with that most-talked-about slice of American political demography: the Soccer Mom. Since 9/11, polls suggest she has morphed into Security Mom – and that development is frightening to Democrats, who have come to count on women to win elections. (Tumulty & Novak, 2003, p. 1)

Even while they claim no responsibility for its emergence, the reporters personify this alleged new bloc, ascribing qualities to its members and providing readers a sense of its members’ politics:

She used to say she would never allow a gun in her house, but now she feels better if her airline pilot has one. She wanted a nuclear freeze in the 1980s and was a deficit hawk in the 1990s, but she now believes the Pentagon should have whatever it wants. Her civil liberties seem less important than they used to, especially compared with keeping her children safe. She’s someone, in short, like Debbie Creighton, a 34-year-old Santee, Calif., mother of two who voted for Bill Clinton twice and used to choose the candidates who were most liberal on abortion and welfare. “Since 9/11,” Creighton says, “all I want in a President is a person who is strong.” (Tumulty & Novak, 2003, p. 1)

The Security Mom articulates the ideology of post-9/11 security and all it has come to encompass, to a gendered practice – being a good mother – in news coverage that draws from, deepens, and extends the historical experience and knowledge of that gendered practice. When media texts yoke “mom” to “security” during this tumultuous time in the United States, the historical specificity of both terms must be considered. Here “mom” reverts to a traditional, patriarchal motherhood: one that cedes responsibility for her safety and that of her family to a strong, male figure – President Bush – in the interest of their domestic security (see Faludi, 2007, for a book-length
analysis of the resurgence of intensely patriarchal protection narratives circulating since September 11, 2001). In the context of political news stories, “mom” naturalizes family and domestic caretaking responsibilities as those properly belonging to women, whose parental fears and concerns after the September 11 attacks are adroitly exploited in this discourse.

Conservative media commentator Michelle Malkin’s inflammatory manifesto in USA Today several days before the Democratic Party’s national convention in July 2004 fleshed out the Security Mom further:

I am what this year’s election pollsters call a “security mom.” I’m married with two young children. I own a gun. And I vote. Nothing matters more to me right now than the safety of my home and the survival of my homeland. I believe in the right to defend myself, and in America’s right to defend itself against its enemies. I am a citizen of the United States, not the United Nations. [...] What I want is a commander in chief who will stop pandering to political correctness and People magazine editors, and start pandering to me. (2004, p. 11A)

Malkin’s demand further set the tone for media coverage of Security Moms, who granted interviews to television programs, print media outlets, and radio news shows throughout the 2004 campaign season, when their votes were sought by Democrats and Republicans alike. Although Malkin’s extreme-right political position was not the only one these media Security Moms held, in television news it dominated and defined these mothers by virtue of the fact that more of them appeared to echo that position than any other (Malkin is, by her own account, a Soccer Mom too [Grewal, 2006, p. 32]). Malkin’s op-ed and reporters, too, thus reproduce the commonsense view that, en masse, these women had moved rightward on the political spectrum after the attacks of September 11, 2001, had disrupted their halcyon days as Democrats, when they could simply enjoy their children’s soccer games without fear.

The Security Mom’s nurturance is thoroughly steeped in militarism and pro-Iraq War sentiment, but by 2004, US voters were expressing increasing dissatisfaction with the Iraq War, particularly its seeming endlessness and ever-increasing casualty count (Harris & Muste, 2004, p. A4). The Security Mom brand thus legitimated unpopular Bush administration war policies by personifying support for them and then articulating that support to a group of mothers who, in recent history, had consistently supported Democratic – not Republican – presidential candidates (since the 1980s this gender gap has plagued Republican candidates; the 2004 election was no different [Gender Gap, 2004]). The Security Mom accomplished this in part by fusing maternal nurturance with the public and private logic of the post-9/11 security apparatus in the United States, and clearly expressing the belief that only George W. Bush could keep them safe.

As I noted earlier, Security Moms are likely the product of an Astroturf campaign – one designed to popularize policies that, at the time the brand emerged, were becoming deeply unpopular among the US public. Both the Center for Media and
Democracy’s “Source Watch” and the Institute for Policy Studies’ “Right Web” (both media source monitoring organizations) have revealed that the term “security mom” was created and spun by a group called Family Security Matters (FSM). FSM is a front group for the Center for Security Policy, a “hawkish security policy and think tank and advocacy group” that advocates US military interventions, such as attacking Iran as a means of achieving stability in the Middle East (Source Watch, 2008, p. 1). Soon after it was formed, FSM “claimed to represent ‘security moms’” and acted to “communicate to American women what we need to know” (Source Watch, 2008, p. 1). The founder of FSM and its chief spokesperson is Carol Täber, who also sits on the board of the right-wing Independent Women’s Forum (Right Web, n.d., p. 1). Another spokesperson for the group, Gay Bryant, describes FSM as a “non-profit, non-partisan communications initiative formed by a group of passionate women.” Their role, she continues, is to “build grassroots efforts and resources for making the Security Moms’ voice heard in the White House and on Capitol Hill” (Source Watch, 2008, pp. 1–2).

So whereas her male counterpart, the NASCAR Dad, is both ideological and commercial (see Vavrus, 2007), the Security Mom’s brand identity is much less a site for the showcasing of consumer commodities than a pitch for mothers to embrace Bush administration policies, politics, and propaganda – decidedly difficult to sell to people otherwise disinclined to support military expenditures and militarization (as Security Moms were said to be prior to September 11, 2001).

The brand also permits feminist politics (embodied by Debbie Creighton, among others) to be disarticulated from progressive second-wave goals of dismantling patriarchal laws and practices, and rearticulated to an ideology constituted of markedly patriarchal and militaristic policies and practices. Because Security Moms are former Soccer Moms (read: liberal), they lend credence to the notion that feminism and other liberal positions on issues are impractical and even dangerous after September 11. Ironically, their ability to be Soccer Moms at all is possible, as Grewal (2006) points out, only because successful feminist agitating to pass Title IX resulted in “a huge influx of girls and women into recreational activities as well as increased school and college athletic opportunities for them” (p. 33). Such a political erasure is a classically postfeminist denial of the importance of feminism in women’s lives today, as is the accompanying expressed desire to be led by a “strong” and patriarchal male figure.

Thus (and not surprisingly given their hawkish think-tank origins), Security Moms in news media are shown as mostly white, mostly Republican, 18- to 49-year-old fiercely protective mothers living in traditional, nuclear family households. They are referred to as “target demographics,” revealing their potential usefulness for marketing unpopular policies. Although a few Democratic and undecided Security Moms appear in news stories, they are far outnumbered by Republican women. Describing Security Moms, broadcast and cable news programs ascribe these qualities to them: “More than any single issue, security has defined that battle for women voters and has created a new swing group, the security mom” (Capus, 2004); “[c]oncern about terrorism and the safety of their young families has turned these soccer moms into security moms” (Cable News Network, 2004). What’s more, Security Moms know
that “during crises [...] mommy issues often take a backseat to security” (Eldridge, 2003). “The women who are worried about the war in Iraq are worried about the safety of their own families. And they accept the idea that we are fighting over there to protect ourselves over here” (Fischer, 2004). They are “voting this year not only for a president but for peace of mind” (Capus, 2004). FSM's Carol Taber defines Security Moms “both demographically and psychographically. Demographically she's a woman with children in the household. [...] Psychographically, when they go to the polls, they have the A Number 1 concern, the safety and security of their children and they're going to be voting on this issue” (Eldridge, 2004).

That the terms “demographic” and “psychographic” appear here suggests that the Security Mom’s greatest value lies in her ability to market a lifestyle to both women and news media outlets: one that reproduces and reinforces Bush administration claims about war and homeland security, and recapitulates planks in the 2004 Republican platform. Again a spokesperson for FSM, Carol Taber reported that her organization had conducted focus groups with undecided female voters. On the subject of the security of their families (which she claimed was their “A-number 1 concern”) she said,

President Bush scores very well here because they really do see him as a strong and resolute leader. But they don’t see the same thing in John Kerry [...] Some women said about Mr. Kerry, I don’t trust him. Some said I don’t know what it is about him; I just don’t like him. Some women said he looked sneaky. [...] Some women said he’s too rich to be president. [...] they saw President Bush [...] as very strong, very consistent, and a defender of America and American families. (Eldridge, 2004)

Throughout Security Mom news coverage, commentators and guests present the act of acceding to President Bush’s benevolent patriarchy as both inevitable and desirable, as Bush is the most trust-inspiring presidential candidate featured in these news stories whereas John Kerry is viewed with suspicion. One Security Mom with a military husband, for example, told CNN that she thought President Bush was the candidate who would do the right thing by the armed forces. She said, “in my heart I know that President Bush is looking out for these guys. I mean, in his heart he's doing what he thinks is best” (Cable News Network, 2004). Although she wasn’t referring specifically to Security Moms, Cynthia Enloe aptly explains the phenomenon voiced by these women: “[I]t is much easier to claim the authority to speak for others if one can claim to be The Protector; it is much easier to be silenced and to accept that silencing if one absorbs the self-identity of The Protected” (2007, p. 60). Although these Security Moms are not literally silent, they cede their right to vocalize criticism when they capitulate to the paternalism of the president, who by then had accumulated a long record of intolerance to criticism of his administration (McLaren & Martin, 2004).

In this discourse, George W. Bush emerges as The Protector and Good Father, the preferred alternative to John Kerry’s First Husband. But by also mixing incestuous
metaphors and using language such as “wooing” and “courting,” the same discourse presents both Bush and Kerry as suitors pursuing Security Moms as if they were potential romantic partners. For example, one Fox correspondent exclaimed that “the courtship is on” (Eldridge, 2003). And on The Early Show, a correspondent noted that both candidates appeared with their wives in televised interviews with Dr. Phil, an effort for President Bush to “win more women over” and for Senator Kerry to “try to win them back” (Neufeld, 2004). The gendered dimension of this coverage plays into traditional expectations about male protectiveness and female vulnerability that Faludi (2007) and Enloe (2007) argue have prevailed in public discourse since September 11, 2001; the attacks of that day and responses subsequent to them reactivated and intensified a narrative in which Security Moms play the part of women seeking protection from terrorists for themselves, their children, and their country.

Enloe’s term “militarized motherhood” (2000) describes the exploitation of mothers by warmakers eager to garner ideological and material support for the armed forces – a practice that goes as far back as the Revolutionary War. Militarized mothers aid in the process of recruiting bodies to fight wars because, despite military service being imbued with resonant symbols of masculinity and national pride, military recruitment is still a difficult business – particularly with an all-volunteer military attempting to win simultaneous wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (since 2004, the military has had problems meeting recruitment goals) (see Cooper & Jaffe, 2004; Moniz, 2005). Enloe argues that, historically, this situation invites “[r]ecruit-hungry government officials” to wield more than the idea of masculinized, militarized citizenship. They have needed to craft and deploy a specially honed concept of motherhood. Designing militarized motherhood, however, also requires marginalizing or suppressing alternative notions of motherhood. (2000, p. 247)

Indeed, the 2004 Security Moms displace in news stories the once ubiquitous (and liberal) Soccer Moms, attempting to secure maternal allegiance both to the GOP and to the War on Terror. Security Moms perform as exemplary militarized mothers, exhibiting obedience to what the commander in chief asks of them and trust that he is doing what’s best for them, their loved ones, and their country. The contemporary militarized mother, however, is not asked to relinquish her children to the war effort; instead, individuals and groups ancillary to the military attempt to persuade her capitulation to the rationale underpinning the War on Terror and ideological support for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is worth noting that no Security Mom in these news stories raises questions about the wars or national security policy, despite the public’s increasing skepticism and doubt about both during this time.

With respect to their children, Security Moms appear neurotically fearful. One fretted that, “I watch my kids go to school and I hope they come back” (Capus, 2004). Another echoed her paranoia, “I don’t let my kids go anywhere. I’m – you know, we’re talking about going on vacation. Where can we go? How do we get through the
airport? How do – where is a safe place?” (Neufeld, 2004). Michelle Malkin’s manifesto included this confession that showcases not only her neurosis, but also her ability to echo a Bush administration talking point (Nichols & McChesney, 2005) to connect two figures – Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein – whose alleged collusion justified war on Iraq:

I make my husband take his cell phone with him everywhere – even on a quick milk run or on a walk to the community pool. We have educated our 4-year-old daughter about Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein. She knows that there are bad men in the world trying to kill Americans everywhere. [...] And at night we ask God to bless our troops as they risk their lives trying to kill the bad men before they kill us. (Malkin, 2004, p. 11A)

Security Moms thus legitimate a gated community mentality, justifying a divided society in which “They (the “bad men”) are separated from Us (Americans and “our troops”), thereby minimizing the threat They pose to Us (Low, 2003, p. 139). Moreover, they set out the rationale for mothers – good mothers, that is – to deploy all those surveillance technologies marketed to quell the fears of anxious parents when they are away from their children. Katz (2001) refers to this as the “child protection industry” (p. 48), and notes that it is

part of the $1.1 billion home surveillance industry brought about by the migration of spy technologies and logistics across the domestic frontier. Its products enable parents to monitor from afar their children, childcare workers, and others interacting with their kids. (p. 48)

Security Moms voice fears that because even home is not a refuge from terrorists, mothers must be fully committed to taking every protective measure possible. Perhaps they will move to a gated community or introduce security technologies such as GPS devices in their children’s clothing (Goodman, 2007) or nanny cams (Rodino, 2005). To quell their fears, they expand their homes and childcare practices to include security technologies, thus increasing their own surveillance capabilities and optimizing their ability to protect their families. Further, these technologies potentially improve their capacity for biopower, for which they have been assigned responsibility by dint of being mothers. This news coverage thus has a dual propaganda function: to sell the so-called War on Terror and rationalize the defensive actions, services, and products perceived as necessary to metaphorically transform home into a modern fortress from which to guard against terrorists.

In addition to this performance, news media constitute Security Moms as a synecdoche for how “everything changed” for the United States after September 11, 2001; as such, they legitimate tactics used in the so-called War on Terror, including the War on Iraq and everything else falling under the sign of “security” at this historical moment. One reporter used an image evocative of the security checkpoints at airports to claim that Security Moms are on one side of a “security threshold” that
Democrats will have to “pass” before they could even hope to gain or regain Security Mom support (Guarino, 2003). During the 2006 Congressional election season, another Security Mom, this one a former co-director of the group “Security Moms for Bush,” asserts that

moms have a choice this November when they go into the voting booth. They can choose to vote for officials who have supported programs such as the NSA surveillance program, CIA detainee program or the PATRIOT Act – the programs which have made this country safe and not have an attack in five years – or they can vote for those who have sought to undermine or even rejoice when they killed those programs. (Fox Broadcasting Company, 2006)

That this Security Mom is open about her conservative political stance and appears on a Fox news program makes her statement predictable; what is less predictable is that this meme is woven throughout Security Mom discourse, even that emanating from purportedly nonpartisan outlets such as CBS, NBC, and PBS.

The Security Mom embodies attributes and beliefs that govern conduct by making controversial policies seem practical, rational, and sensible for women to embrace. Connecting a policy – or even a war – to maternal love justifies it, enhances its attractiveness, and dulls its controversies, which, in the case of war on Iraq, concern the grounds for conducting a preemptive war, the use of torture in interrogations, and the attempts to quash dissenting views on the war. For their potential to obscure these controversies or make them palatable, Security Moms in 2004 become part of the right’s strategy to eke out enough public support for an increasingly unpopular war to push President Bush to a second term. After the 2004 election, their reemergence in 2006, 2008, and again as Mama Grizzlies suggests a continuing need to buttress neoconservatism and cast in a positive light those Bush administration policies that have been subjected to public scrutiny and protest (e.g., the NSA’s wiretap program, to which the Security Mom above refers, was made public in December 2005 by James Risen and Eric Lichtblau of the New York Times – to widespread public dismay and White House chagrin). This is exemplified in a CBS Evening News segment on 2006 Security Moms, which introduces Julee Floyd – the main Security Mom in the piece – with this comment: “since September 11, there has been a serious side to almost every decision mom Julee makes.” Ms. Floyd elaborates: “I would say after 9/11, you know, there are all sorts of issues that you start thinking about. What if I was on that plane? What if I was on that building? What if my child ended up being in that building?” (Hartman, 2006). On Fox News, the former Security Mom for Bush co-captain ends her entreaty to voting mothers this way:

Look, moms have a choice: When they go to the voting booth they can choose to wake up in a country where they get up in the morning and worry about whether or not they are going to get their kids to school on time or wake up in a country like Israel, where it is a leap of faith to put their kids on the school bus every morning or take them to the pizza parlor or the mall. (Fox Broadcasting Company, 2006)
The rhetoric of choice imbibes Security Moms’ sentiments; in this example and elsewhere mothers can opt for the post-9/11 security state to protect children or risk the United States turning into a “country like Israel.” Such a sentiment illustrates well the notion of governing conduct through choice and freedom, and it is not difficult to see that no real choice is being offered here: mothers must support the candidate and party promising to best protect their families. Rodino argues that this is how *matres bellicosae* have functioned historically, and that their contemporary incarnation as Security Moms “demonstrates the durability of maternal constructions that advocate destruction in the name of preservation” (Rodino, 2005, p. 383). Such is the paradox of the Security Mom: as she accepts war and the trappings of a security state to ensure that her children live safely, she consigns Iraqi children (and adults) to life in a war zone and all that entails.

**Conclusion**

The story of the Security Mom is a cautionary tale for news audiences, feminists, and anyone else concerned about achieving gender justice, for it plays a role in reproducing the (masculine) protector/(feminine) protected dichotomy that Enloe (2007) identifies. Such a dichotomy is fraught with problems, not the least of which is that the protected’s natural habitat is the domestic sphere – that is, the sphere of life where caring matters more than strategizing. Consequently, the protected is feminized insofar as the protected needs somebody who can think strategically and act in her (the protected’s) best interests. (p. 61)

I would add that such a structure also vests protectors with exclusive rights to understanding national security matters, and therefore sole province over and responsibility for protecting mothers and their children – in this case, from terrorism.

Circulation of the Security Mom brand thus reproduces and rationalizes patriarchal “family values,” pro-war propaganda, and maternal fearfulness that justifies Bush White House policies and politics. The corporate news media go along with assertions about Security Moms, never disclosing (and perhaps not knowing) that the source for this construction is a front group for a right-wing think tank, one that promotes Bush administration policies. The Security Mom is not the first example of a media construction being deployed to govern maternal conduct (see Douglas & Michaels, 2004, for many other examples); nor is it the only example of an attempt to militarize mothers, as Cynthia Enloe (2000) has shown. However, the Security Mom’s politics of motherhood is taken up in news reports with such ease and credulity that this example should serve as a reminder to regard news constructions of motherhood with skepticism.
Such wholesale promotion of front groups’ messages as news has become a common media practice, as investigative reporting budgets at many outlets have been cut to the bone if not eliminated entirely (McChesney, 2008; Potter, 2010). However, this should not excuse these outlets for being played in this way and, inadvertently or inadvertently, participating in the circulation of Bush administration propaganda to elicit from this target population “loyalty beyond reason.” This brand is hardly a neutral description of a population’s actions and beliefs; instead it accords with a controversial ideology and set of policies whose chances of acceptance by a dubious public may have benefited from being performed by mothers.

On the other hand, this case study also suggests that the maternal voting public is dubious about enlisting as Security Moms, despite Family Security Matters’ best efforts to influence their hearts and minds. That is, although news outlets have uncritically adopted the Security Mom brand and constructed an intensive campaign around it, the women to whom this campaign was marketed appear to have been much less receptive to its claims and premises; in other words, this branding campaign was at least a partial failure. To reiterate note 3 below, Elder and Greene’s election post hoc data analysis revealed that “[m]others, like women overall, were distinctive in being less supportive than men on most defense and war-related issues in 2004” (2007, p. 11). Their data show that the gender gap this campaign attempts to redress resisted think-tank machinations and instead remained about the same in 2004 as it had in prior election years. This is but one example from this time period that illustrates a stark difference between what the news media and the general public are willing to accept about rationales for war and national security policy. For example, while US news media beat the drums of war loudly and persistently in late 2002 and early 2003 (something that many reporters and even then Secretary of State Colin Powell have issued post hoc regrets about having supported [see Moyers, 2007]), protests against the United States going to war in Iraq erupted globally. After a weekend of such protests in February 2003, which brought hundreds of thousands of people into the streets, President Bush responded with the following: “Size of protest – it’s like deciding, well, I’m going to decide policy based upon a focus group” (Purdum, 2003).

To dismiss the hundreds of thousands of people opposing war as a “focus group” expresses at the very least the anti-democratic sentiment that marked President Bush’s two terms in office. But it also points to a perhaps unconscious gesture indicating the important role marketing and branding played in the Bush administration’s attempts to sell the Iraq war as a product (Solomon, 2005, documents this in great detail). The Security Mom branding campaign fits in well with the larger Bush propaganda-marketing campaign, and further articulates consumerist notions of “freedom” and “choice” to war policy in an attempt to win public consent to fight a war large segments of the public opposed. Despite this brand’s ultimate failure, we will doubtless witness other such attempts to exploit maternity and govern a population through bumper sticker slogans. If nothing else, this chapter suggests why we might want to look more closely at a bumper sticker with “mom” on it to discover who or what is sitting in its driver’s seat.
NOTES

1 See Meehan (2005) for a discussion of the endurance of the metaphor of TV as a window on the world, and how TV industry economics render this view meaningless.

2 To be clear: I do not ascribe these qualities to women myself; rather, I provide examples from the news media’s discourse about them to illustrate the assumptions conveyed about women labeled Security Moms and their political tendencies.

3 Political scientists Elder and Greene — who used National Election Study data from the 2004 campaign to investigate the Security Mom and NASCAR Dad constructions — conclude that there is “no support whatsoever for the idea of ‘Security Moms’” (2007, pp. 10–11). Moreover, their data show that, in 2004, women were significantly less likely than men to support increases in defense spending and spending on “the war on terror,” that women were less likely than men to think the Iraq War and the war in Afghanistan were worth it and less likely to think that the Bush administration had made the country more secure. Thus, the “Security Mom” label was not only inaccurate, it also misrepresented the position of mothers to some extent. Mothers, like women overall, were distinctive in being less supportive than men on most defense and war-related issues in 2004 (Elder & Greene, 2007, p. 11). Their study affirms the Security Mom brand’s propaganda function: it attempts to mold and sculpt women’s politics to adhere to Bush administration policies and the Republican National Committee’s agenda as Bush (and Republicans before him since Ronald Reagan) faced the prospect of a large gender gap in the November 2004 election (Center for American Women and Politics, 2004). The fact that four years later, in 2008, these brand qualities and values could be condensed into one high-profile person — vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin, who would go on to almost single-handedly energize her party’s conservative evangelical base — shows that the brand’s value lay primarily in its ability to showcase and glorify the ideology of a party whose policies had grown unpopular (to say nothing of disastrous) over the preceding eight years of its dominance.

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