

**consortiumblog.com**

Go to [consortiumblog.com](http://consortiumblog.com) to post comments



Google™ Custom Search

Get email updates:

RSS Feed

MY YAHOO!

Google™

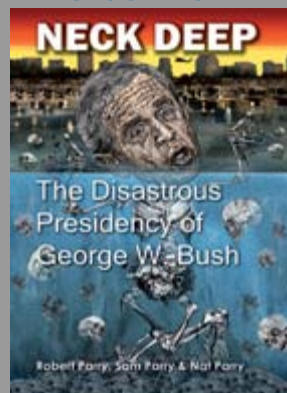
Home

Links

Contact Us

Books

**Order Now**



**consortiumnews.com**

**Archives**

**Age of Obama**

Barack Obama's presidency

**Bush End Game**

## The Original Anti-War Mother's Day

By Gary G. Kohls, MD  
May 6, 2010

Editor's Note: For most Americans, Mother's Day means ordering some flowers or buying a card to express a sentimental appreciation for one's mother, but that wasn't what the first Mother's Day had in mind.

The original Mother's Day Proclamation from poet and suffragette Julia Ward Howe was a protest against the evils of war, a call to mothers to act to prevent future wars that would exact horrific tolls on their sons and the sons of others, as Gary G. Kohls reminds us:

**In 1870 – 140 years ago – the disastrous human consequences of the American Civil War were becoming increasingly apparent, especially to the mothers of sons and the wives of husbands who had watched as these men proudly and patriotically marched off to “glorious” war a decade earlier.**

Some of these women had probably (and regretfully) participated in the pre-war flag-waving fervor that war planners and profiteers cunningly elicit from the poor and working classes who will be doing the dirty work.

Share this article

ShareThis

Email

Printer friendly

Everything changed, however, when the killing and maiming started and the permanent war wounded struggled back home with desperate needs for medical and mental health care.

Julia Ward Howe was a life-long abolitionist and therefore probably a reluctant supporter of the Union Army's anti-slavery rationale for going to war against the pro-slavery Confederate South.

A compassionate and well-educated middle child of an upper-class family, Howe was also a poet who, in the early days of the Civil War, wrote “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” using many biblically-based lyrics.

Though she later became a pacifist and a famous antiwar activist, her fervent anti-slavery attitudes inspired her to write that still famous song; and she did it in one sitting, in the pre-dawn darkness of Nov. 18, 1861.

Originally, Howe had thought of her song as an abolitionist anthem.

George W. Bush's presidency since 2007

[Bush - Second Term](#)

George W. Bush's presidency from 2005-06

[Bush - First Term](#)

George W. Bush's presidency, 2000-04

[Who Is Bob Gates?](#)

The secret world of Defense Secretary Gates

[2004 Campaign](#)

Bush Bests Kerry

[Behind Colin Powell's Legend](#)

Gauging Powell's reputation.

[The 2000 Campaign](#)

Recounting the controversial campaign.

[Media Crisis](#)

Is the national media a danger to democracy?

[The Clinton Scandals](#)

Behind President Clinton's impeachment.

[Nazi Echo](#)

Pinochet & Other Characters.

[The Dark Side of Rev. Moon](#)

Rev. Sun Myung Moon and American politics.

[Contra Crack](#)

Contra drug stories uncovered

[Lost History](#)

America's tainted historical record

[The October Surprise "X-Files"](#)

The 1980 election scandal exposed.

[International](#)

From free trade to the Kosovo crisis.

[Other Investigative Stories](#)

[Editorials](#)

However, because of some militant-sounding lyrics and the eminently marchable tune, the song soon was adopted by the Union Army as its most inspiring war song.

At the time, the Civil War also had not yet degenerated into the wholesale mutual mass slaughter made possible by the advances in weaponry that were destined to make obsolete the cavalry, the bayonet and the sword.

Grim Images

In part because of the relatively uncensored battlefield journalism of the time and the grim images of dead soldiers made possible by the invention of the camera, it didn't take too long for peace-loving, justice-oriented activists to recognize that war was the equivalent of hell on earth.

By the time the Civil War ended in 1865, 600,000 American soldiers were dead, with no accurate count of the likely much larger number of soldiers wounded, disabled or missing in action.

Women saw their sons and husbands returning home broken in body and spirit – definitely not as heroes, as had been the pre-war hope – and the minds of Howe and other women were changed about the lie that war is glorious.

The families of the returning Civil War veterans, both North and South, also discovered that many of the soldiers who had no visible scars were emotionally disabled, a problem that actually grew worse after they were home and out of "harm's way."

The healing effect of time didn't work like it was supposed to with these psychologically wounded veterans. The so-called "unwounded ones" often suffered melancholy, had nightmares, couldn't function in society and turned suicidal, homicidal and/or anti-social.

Many of the most infamous train and bank robbers and serial killers of the late 1800s got their start as Civil War soldiers, most famously the members of the James gang.

Because of normal society's inability to deal with massive numbers of war-traumatized veterans, the first "veterans homes" were constructed for the long-term care of the tens of thousands of invalided ex-soldiers who otherwise might have died homeless, hungry and helpless.

Many of these unfortunates were diagnosed as having "Soldiers' Heart," also known in the Civil War era as "Nostalgia," a commonly incurable malady better known today as "Combat-Induced PTSD" (posttraumatic stress disorder).

The horrors of the Civil War even changed those the conflict made famous. Speaking to a graduating class of military cadets years later, Union General William Tecumseh Sherman uttered his famous truth about the nature of warfare as part of a rebuke to the era's "chicken-hawks," people who call for war without having experienced it.

"I confess without shame that I am tired and sick of war," Sherman said. "Its glory is all moonshine. It is only those who have neither heard the

shrieks and groans of the wounded, who cry aloud for more blood, more vengeance, more desolation. War is Hell.”

By 1870, Julia Ward Howe had been deeply affected both by the ongoing agonies of Civil War veterans and the carnage occurring overseas in the Franco-Prussian War. Though very short, that war resulted in almost 100,000 killed in action plus another 100,000 lethally wounded or sickened.

### The First Mother’s Day

So, as a humanist who cared about suffering people – as well as a feminist and a suffragette who advocated social justice – Howe penned her “Mother’s Day Proclamation” in 1870 as an appeal to mothers to spare their sons and the sons of others from the depredations of war.

The Mother’s Day Proclamation was partly a lament for the useless deaths and partly a call to action to stop future wars. The call was directed, not to men, many of whom may have felt proud for their “service,” but to women, who often have proved more thoughtful and humane about issues of human suffering.

Then, on June 2, 1872, in New York City, Julia Ward Howe held the first “Mother’s Day” as an anti-war observance, a practice Howe continued in Boston for the next decade before it died out.

The modern Mother’s Day, with its apolitical message, emerged in the early Twentieth Century, with Howe’s original intent largely erased from the mainstream consciousness. Howe’s vision of an antiwar mother’s call to action was watered-down into an annual expression of sentimentality.

Like most other holidays (including religious ones), Mother’s Day in capitalist America has been transformed into just another expectation of gift-buying and gift-giving.

What was originally a call to mobilize outraged mothers to keep their sons and husbands from going off half-cocked to kill and die for some corporate war profiteer or other, became just another opportunity to market non-essential consumer goods.

Note in Howe’s proclamation below how strongly she felt that wives and mothers should never have to be put in the position of comforting or applauding their soldier-husbands or soldier-sons when they come home from war “reeking of carnage.”

In her view, the prevention of such “reeking” was so much simpler than the attempt to reverse the consequences of the “carnage” of war.

Howe also felt that mothers should never allow war-making institutions to make killers out of their sons whom they had raised to be ethical, humane people with love for humankind.

One must wonder, too, what Howe meant when she referred to “irrelevant agencies.” One can only assume that the same American military, governmental, corporate and bureaucratic agencies that have been messing things up in Iraq, Afghanistan, New Orleans, the Gulf of Mexico

and all over the world were also operating in the last half of the 1800s.

Wall Street and the military/industrial/congressional/media complex – the entities that dominate U.S. policymaking today – were probably in operation then, too, though surely with less exorbitant salaries, bonuses, contracts and cost overruns.

Given the ongoing horrors of war, perhaps it's finally time for people of good will to recall Julia Ward Howe's peacemaking vision on this Mother's Day, 2010.

Julia Ward Howe's Mother's Day Proclamation of 1870:

"Arise then, women of this day! Arise, all women who have hearts, whether your baptism be that of water or tears!

"Say firmly: 'We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies.

Our husbands shall not come to us, reeking with carnage, for caresses and applause.

Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have taught them of charity, mercy and patience.

We women of one country will be too tender of those of another to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs.'

"From the bosom of the devastated earth, a voice goes up with our own. It says, 'Disarm, disarm!'

The sword of murder is not the balance of justice. Blood does not wipe out dishonor, nor does violence indicate possession.

As men have often forsaken the plow and the anvil at the summons of war, let women now leave all that may be left of home for a great and earnest day of counsel.

Let them meet first, as women, to bewail and commemorate the dead. Let them solemnly take counsel with each other as to the means whereby the great human family can live in peace, each bearing after his own time the sacred impress, not of Caesar but of God.

"In the name of womanhood and of humanity, I earnestly ask that a general congress of women without limit of nationality may be appointed and held at some place deemed most convenient and at the earliest period consistent with its objects, to promote the alliance of the different nationalities, the amicable settlement of international questions, the great and general interests of peace."

Dr. Kohls is a retired physician who writes about issues of war and peace.

To comment at Consortiumblog, click [here](#). (To make a blog comment about this or other stories, you can use your normal e-mail address and password. Ignore the prompt for a Google account.) To comment to us by e-mail, click [here](#).

To donate so we can continue reporting and publishing stories like the one you just read, click [here](#).

---

 [Back to Home Page](#)

Consortiumnews.com is a product of The Consortium for Independent Journalism, Inc., a non-profit organization that relies on donations from its readers to produce these stories and keep alive this Web publication.

To contribute, [click here](#). To contact CIJ, [click here](#).