

**The Captain America Conundrum: Issues of Patriotism, Race, and Gender
in Captain America Comic Books, 1941-2001**

by

Richard A. Hall

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Approved by

Larry Gerber, Chair, Professor Emeritus of History
Ruth Crocker, Professor of History
David Carter, Associate Professor of History

Abstract

“The Captain America Conundrum: Issues of Patriotism, Race, and Gender in Captain America Comic Books, 1941-2001” represents a comprehensive examination of *Captain America* comic books as a primary source for the study of United States history from just prior to World War II to the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Just as *Time* magazine or the *New York Times* newspaper could be used as primary sources to examine American society, mores, and culture, it is the argument of this study that comic books – heretofore considered primarily children’s literature – can also be used in this regard. Through the pages of this essentially monthly publication, accepted norms of contemporary American society can be seen, as well as (post-1960) attempts on the part of the writers and artists to influence those norms.

Within the zeitgeist of American culture, the character of Captain America has been considered a representation of strong government and ardent conservatism. The reality, however, is that the character has become increasingly just left-of-center politically, promoting strong nationalism and American leadership alongside ideas of racial and gender equality. While the 1940s and ’50s issues portrayed racial and, occasionally, gender stereotypes, as American society became more open to a more egalitarian society, those mores are portrayed – and, many would argue, pushed – in the pages of *Captain America*. By the end of the 1960s, the comic presented the first

African-American superhero, The Falcon, and a strong female secret-agent character, Sharon Carter.

Aside from the actual text and images within the pages of *Captain America*, advertisements and printed letters to the editors provide additional windows into these periods of American history. Ads promoting traditional ideas of gender roles and gender image frequent the books throughout the decades; and, beginning in the 1960s, letters from fans of the comic book provide evidence that these comic books were not simply read by children, but high school and college students, professors, lawyers, soldiers, and housewives as well. As American society swung from left to right over the decades, these changes in political climate are repeatedly addressed in the pages of this superhero comic book.

After a brief overview of the more important historiography of comic book / superhero studies, the remaining chapters proceed to examine the comic book decade-by-decade. From the hero's origins just prior to American involvement in World War II, through its brief return during the height of the McCarthy era as "Captain America: Commie Smasher," to its eventual return in the post-Kennedy 1960s as a "man-out-of-time," showing how American society had changed since the hero's inception, the pages of the various titles of the monthly Captain America comic book show America during these decades as they are popularly perceived. From the late '60s through the remainder of the century, the comic book portrays situations such as: the explosion of representation of African-Americans and the idea of the "New Woman" in the 1970s; ideas for and against the so-called Age of Reagan in the 1980s; the questionable status of the U.S. in a post-Cold War world in the 1990s; and the immediate response to the terrorist attacks of

9/11. American history unfolds in the pages of *Captain America*, reflecting society – as the best of popular culture does – while at the same time attempting to influence the thinking of its readers.

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I am also grateful to several members of the Captain America creative teams from over the decades. Mark Waid, noted comic book author and writer of *Captain America* for two runs in the 1990s has been of invaluable assistance to me both in his personal insights on the character and in putting me in contact with other Cap writers. Other writers that have been kind enough to allow me to interview them on their respective runs on the comic book include Steve Englehart (from the early 1970s), J.M. DeMatteis (from the first half of the 1980s), Marv Wolfman (from the late 1970s), and Dan Jurgens (from the late-1990s and leading up to 9/11). These gentlemen have been such a valuable resource of information on their respective runs on the comic book and their respective decades of creative input into the character.

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INTRODUCTION

Comic books from their inception at the height of the Great Depression were a derided medium. Beginning with the first “comic book,” *Famous Funnies #1* (1933), they existed primarily as a way for publishers to re-release previous newspaper comic strips, making comic books, in essence, the VHS/DVD of their day. Even when comic book publishers began to turn out original material in the late-1930s, the medium received little respect. While it was considered “glamorous” to be the writer or artist of a newspaper strip, writing and drawing comic books was considered “sub-par,” much the way movies today that are distributed “straight-to-video” are considered of low quality. That slowly began to change with the publication in 1938 of *Action Comics #1*, which featured the world’s first “superhero,” Superman.¹

The booming success of Superman comic books began what historians refer to as the “Golden Age” and led to a flurry of similarly costumed heroes in the years immediately following. The Golden Age lasted until, roughly, 1955.² Though many of those pre-World War II heroes have long since vanished in American culture, a handful have survived and thrived into the 21st century. Superman, The Batman (1939), Captain

¹Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001; Second Edition, 2003), 7; Shirrel Rhoades, *A Complete History of American Comic Books* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 9-10; Ron Goulart, *Ron Goulart’s Great History of Comic Books*, (Chicago: Contemporary Books, Inc., 1986), 7-9; Les Daniels, *Marvel: Five Fabulous Decades of the World’s Greatest Comics* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1991), 16-17; *Comic Book Confidential* Ron Mann, Dir., (Home Vision Entertainment, DVD, 1989); *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked* (The History Channel, A&E Television Networks, DVD, 2003). These are, in this author’s opinion, the very best overall histories of the comic book industry.

² Rhoades, *A Complete History of American Comic Books*, 6.

America (1940), and Wonder Woman (1941) have become mainstays in American popular culture. By 1943, these heroes, along with their contemporaries, were selling a combined total of 25 million copies a month, producing an annual profit of approximately thirty million dollars.³ Mention these characters to most Americans today, even those who have never read a comic book, and they can recount the hero and know his/her origin and even his/her more popular antagonists. Of these four heroes, most have remained fairly loyal to their pre-war origins, simply being “updated” every few years to stay in pace with changing American culture. The exception to that rule is Captain America, whose readers have seen the character witness first-hand the changes of our times, a living “anachronism” of the late-Depression era.

In 1940, writer Joe Simon and artist Jack Kirby, working for publisher Timely Comics (later to be known as Marvel Comics), created the hero Captain America. Arriving on newsstands on December 20, 1940, just under a year before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor that would launch America into World War II, *Captain America Comics #1* – the first comic to be named after its headlining hero – sold more than one million copies, competing on an equal level with its contemporary superhero comics.⁴ The front cover of the issue made its anti-Nazi message plain: the star-spangled hero is shown delivering a right-cross to German Chancellor Adolf Hitler.⁵ This reflected the serious concerns of most comic book creators, as the medium was dominated almost

³ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 31.

⁴ A note on the use of Primary Sources: Comic book “publication dates” are problematic. A comic book with a publication date of “November, 1964” would have actually hit newsstands around August of that year. The date shown as the publication date is actually the date that newsstand operators were advised to remove the magazine from their shelves. The process of writing and publishing comics – prior to the 1990s – was rather lengthy, having been drawn, inked, and edited several months earlier, with the story often conceived long before that. Found in *Marvel Chronicle*, page 9.

⁵ Mark Evanier, *Kirby: King of Comics*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2008), 50. This is an excellent biography of comic book legend Jack Kirby by a man who worked for, and learned the industry, from Kirby himself, basing his work on first-hand interviews with Kirby.

entirely by Jewish-Americans, who already understood the ramifications of a Nazi world while the rest of America sought the security of isolationism.



[Image Intro-1: *Captain America Comics #1* (March, 1941); Jack Kirby, Artist]

As for Captain America, his story was simple: Average Anglo-American Steve Rogers attempts to enlist in the US Army, only to be turned away as “4-F” (physically unfit for military service). He is then approached by secret government agents and offered an opportunity to serve his country by taking part in an experiment, approved by President Franklin Roosevelt, called “Operation Rebirth.” Agreeing to be injected with a “Super Soldier Serum,” Rogers is quickly transformed into the ultimate peak of human perfection. Thanks to the mysterious serum, Rogers now possesses Olympian speed, strength, and agility. Additionally, his military tactical abilities have been enhanced to near-perfection. Moments after the experiment’s success, Nazi agents assassinate its progenitor, Dr. Reinstein, so that the secret of the Super Soldier Serum dies with him.

With all hopes of an army of super-soldiers dashed, Rogers agrees to become a symbol of American strength around which the rest of the military and civilian populace can rally: Captain America. Dressing in blue tights striped with red and white in the middle, blue chain-mail with a large white star in the center, red gloves and boots, a blue mask with a white “A” on the forehead and white wings above the ears, and carrying a red, white, and blue shield, Captain America became the “Star-Spangled Avenger,” America’s “Sentinel of Liberty.” Maintaining a secret identity as bumbling Army Private Steve Rogers, Captain America fights Nazi and Japanese agents alongside his teenage sidekick, Bucky Barnes.⁶

⁶ Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, *Captain America Comics #1 (Volume I)*, (New York: Timely Comics, March, 1941); Goulart, *Great History of Comic Books*, 154; *Marvel Chronicle: A Year by Year History*, Catherine Saunders, Heather Scott, Julia March, and Alastair Dougall, Eds., (New York: DK Publishing, 2008), 18; Roy Thomas and Peter Sanderson, *The Marvel Vault: A Museum-in-a-Book*, (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2007), 21.

Captain America Comics remained a top selling comic book throughout World War II, with sales averaging around one million copies a month. After the war, superhero comics began to slide in popularity, giving way to cartoon characters and horror comics, as the Golden Age came to an end. The initial run of *Captain America* ended in 1949 with issue #74. Issue #75 would continue under the title *Captain America's Weird Tales*, but would not feature the character himself. By that time, young Bucky Barnes had been shot and replaced by a new, female, sidekick, Miss Liberty.⁷ The hero would return briefly in 1954. For three issues – numbered 76-78 – readers could follow the adventures of *Captain America: Commie Smasher*. This was a markedly different Captain America, much more in line with the McCarthy-esque anti-communism of the day. However, very low sales led to the quick decision to discontinue the title again.⁸

As superheroes came under fire in 1954 by religious and parents groups, professional psychologists such as Dr. Fredrick Wertham, and even the United States Senate, their future seemed uncertain and even unlikely. By the time that the comics industry gave into pressure and in 1955 created its own censoring agency, the Comics Code Authority, the only superheroes that remained from the Golden Age were Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman.⁹ What Shirrel Rhoades – and most others – calls the “Silver Age” of comics then began. In the turbulent 1960s, however,

⁷ *Marvel Chronicle*, 41, 46; Thomas and Sanderson, *The Marvel Vault*, 30; Daniels, *Marvel*, 60; Goulart, *Great History of Comic Books*, 256.

⁸ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 123; Daniels, *Marvel*, 69-70; *Marvel Chronicle*, 59; Thomas and Sanderson, *Marvel Vault*, 49; *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked* (DVD).

⁹ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 154-79; Goulart, *Great History of Comic Books*, 263; *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked* (DVD).

superheroes would make a huge comeback, due in no small part to the “Age of Marvel.”¹⁰ This “Silver Age” of comics would last until around 1970.¹¹

Previously known as Timely Comics, Marvel Comics in the early-1960s was focusing on the crime, monster, romance, and western stories that had sold well for the previous ten years. By 1962, DC Comics was enjoying success with a new title, *Justice League of America*, which focused on a team of superheroes that included Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman. Soon, Marvel chief writer, Stan Lee, was assigned the task by Marvel publisher Martin Goodman to create a similar superhero book for Marvel. The result was the birth of the “Age of Marvel.” Within two years, Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, and artist Steve Ditko had successfully created a list of comic books that would revolutionize the industry: *The Fantastic Four*; *The Amazing Spider-Man*; *The Incredible Hulk*; *The Mighty Thor*; *The Uncanny X-Men*; and *Daredevil: The Man Without Fear*. In 1964, Lee and Kirby produced *The Avengers*, a group of superheroes who would join forces to fight against threats that no single hero could handle alone; and in issue #4, they revived Captain America once more.¹²

The story behind the hero’s revival was complex. Near the end of World War II, Captain America and Bucky were sent on a mission to diffuse a Nazi super-weapon before it could be launched. Riding the missile into the atmosphere, Captain America successfully causes the missile to explode in mid-air, killing his partner, Bucky, and knocking the Captain himself unconscious. Falling into the North Atlantic, the unconscious hero was frozen into the ice, kept alive by the very Super Soldier Serum that

¹⁰ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 201; Rhoades, *A Complete History of American Comic Books*, 78-79; Daniels, *Marvel*, 80; *Comic Book Confidential* (DVD); *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked* (DVD); Thomas and Sanderson, *Marvel Vault*, 65-66; *Marvel Chronicle*, 77-78.

¹¹ Rhoades, *A Complete History of American Comic Books*, 6.

¹² *Ibid.*

had given him his powers. Decades later, in 1964, the frozen Captain was being worshipped by Eskimos when he is discovered by another World War II-era hero, the Sub-Mariner, who cuts the block of ice loose and sets it afloat in the ocean. The thawing Captain is then found by the Avengers and resuscitated, a living anachronism from another time.¹³

Once successfully brought back, the monthly adventures of Captain America would continue in *Tales of Suspense* #59. From that issue through #99, *Tales of Suspense* would provide monthly adventures for both Captain America and Iron Man. The tales of Captain America became so popular, that beginning with issue #100, *Tales of Suspense* would be renamed *Captain America*. Captain America would continue as America's Star-Spangled Avenger, often working for the American spy agency S*H*I*E*L*D (The Strategic Hazard Intervention and Espionage Logistics Directorate), under the leadership of World War II veteran, Colonel Nick Fury. Living with the guilt of surviving his teenage partner, falling in love with S*H*I*E*L*D Agent 13, Sharon Carter, teaming up with America's first African-American comic book superhero, The Falcon, and dealing with his situation as a man out of time, Captain America fought on against the forces of evil. In the early 1970s, Captain America would even find himself going up against no less a figure than himself, an alternate Captain America.

In this story line, after Captain America went missing toward the end of the war, he was replaced by a far-less-powerful duplicate. Later, in the mid-1950s, a university

¹³ It is important to note that this storyline negates the post-war adventures of Captain America – including the Commie Smasher issues – leaving continuity problems that future writers would have to address. Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, *The Avengers #4 (Volume I)*, (New York: Marvel Comics, March, 1964); Peter Sanderson, *Marvel Universe*, (New York: Harry W. Abrams, Inc., 1996), 98-102; *Marvel Chronicle*, 99; Thomas and Sanderson, *Marvel Vault*, 89; Daniels, *Marvel*, 108-110; *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked* (DVD).

history professor, having discovered that the real Cap had been missing since the war, approached the government offering to become the new Captain America. After undergoing plastic surgery and being injected with a newer, untested, and less-powerful serum, the new Captain America continued as the “Commie Smasher.” When he proved to be mentally unstable, he was placed in suspended animation by the government. He was then mistakenly awakened in the 1970s to a different world where African-Americans and women had achieved considerable advancements in social equality... a fact that the 1950s Captain America viewed as the obvious success of communism.¹⁴

Beginning with issue #134, and continuing through issue #222, the book would be titled *Captain America and the Falcon*, making the Captain America title not only the first to include reference to an African-American superhero, but also the first to have such a character essentially co-featured in the title. Throughout the remainder of the 1970s and '80s, Captain America frequently questioned his ability to continue to stand for a country whose policies he often disagreed with. On two occasions – once in the wake of Watergate, and again during the early years of the Reagan administration – Captain America resigned in opposition to what he perceived as the nation’s misguided direction, once becoming the hero “Nomad: The Man Without a Country,” and the other time retiring from the hero game altogether. During the 1990s, he would “die” and be reborn on three different occasions. As the twenty-first century dawned, it seemed that

¹⁴ Steve Englehart, *Captain America and the Falcon #153-155 (Volume I)*, (New York: Marvel Comics, September – November, 1972); *Marvel Chronicle*, 156.

the World War II hero had finally, indeed, become an anachronism.¹⁵ That would change on September 11, 2001.

The initial run (“Volume I”) of *Captain America* came to an end with issue #454 in 1996. “Volume I” of the book thus represents the original 1940s run, the three-issue return in the mid-’50s, and the resurgence in 1964 as *Tales of Suspense* that culminated in the renaming of the comic book by the end of the decade. At that point, Captain America – along with most of the other 1960s “Silver Age” heroes – sacrificed their lives in an attempt to destroy the mutant villain, Onslaught. The heroes were then “Reborn” in their own respective titles the following month, living in a mini-universe, outside of regular comic book continuity. *Captain America, Volume II*, then ran for 13 issues, through the end of 1997. Due in part to fan backlash, Captain America – and his compatriots, previously believed to be dead – returned to regular Marvel continuity with *Captain America, Volume III, #1*, in January, 1998. As the character appeared to grow increasingly irrelevant at the dawn of the 21st century, “Volume III” of *Captain America* ran for only fifty issues, ending with the issue cover-dated February, 2002. A fourth volume – focusing on darker stories often related to America’s War on Terror – ran from 2002 through 2004; and the current (fifth) volume of comics began in January, 2005 and runs to the present day.

This study focuses primarily on the texts of stories in the monthly issues of *Captain America* from 1940 through the end of 2001, but another important source that will be examined are the monthly letters columns (which began in the 1960s), where readers had the opportunity to write in to the writers, editors and artists with their

¹⁵ The information contained here comes from a series of interviews conducted by the author with *Captain America* writers Mark Waid (1995-96; 1997-98); Steve Englehart (1971-73); and J.M. DeMatteis (1980-84), conducted over a several-month period from November, 2007 to March, 2008.

comments on everything from the storylines to subjects of interest of the day. This became particularly relevant during the height of the Vietnam War and Watergate scandals. These letters provide a window into the kind of people reading *Captain America* (and comic books in general), showing that the magazines were never simply a children's medium.

Still another area of interest is the advertisements in the issues. Particularly in the 1940s and 1960s, the advertisements say much about American culture at the time. From the near-war-profiteering ads of World War II to the pro-NASA ads of the 1960s, when industry leaders believed that their primary audience consisted of children, the ads clearly attempt to target and influence that naïve young audience's approach to patriotism and life in general. It is clear, however, that by the 1960s the publishers were aware of older readers as many ads reflected topics such as body image and job training.

Particularly from the 1960s through the '90s, the character was a topic of debate among scholars as well as fans. As with Franklin Roosevelt – who, in a figurative sense, could be considered Captain America's creator, since in the comic, he is the one who approved the super soldier program – many on the left saw Captain America as a symbol of American imperialism, a red-white-and-blue representation of everything America had become: a hegemonic economic and military world power, eager to flex its muscles against any and all who would oppose it. To those on the right – particularly in the 1960s and '70s – Captain America had come to represent excessive American liberalism, pushing a social agenda that, in the 1950s, would have been considered “communist.” As with such criticisms of FDR, the criticisms of Captain America are both right and wrong. From his conception, Captain America was designed to represent the very best of

America's ideals and idealism; he was never meant to represent "America" as it actually was. This has been the dilemma that the character has addressed repeatedly through the years: who are we as a country versus who ought we to be?

Chapter One of this study consists of a brief review of the best scholarly and popular sources regarding the study of comic books in general and Captain America in particular. Chapter Two examines Captain America in the 1940s and '50s, when Cap at first represented a free country's stance against totalitarianism and intolerance. In the 1950s, that ideal was warped by the prejudices of anti-communism and fear of a World War III. Chapter Three focuses on the 1960s when the character came to represent a people who sought equality and justice for all. Chapter Four covers the 1970s, when the character shared the title with the world's first African-American hero, The Falcon. Chapter Five examines the 1980s, the Reagan Era, where the question arose: victory [over communism] at what price? Chapter Six presents the post-Cold War years of peace and prosperity of the 1990s, where Cap, no longer a symbol for any struggle, began to meld into the overall pantheon of superheroes. On September 11, 2001, however, a world held in the grasp of international Islamic-fundamentalist terrorism once more needed a leader against fear, and so Captain America once again became relevant.

Though several scholars over the decades have addressed the ideas, ideals, and issues surrounding the character of Captain America, no one to date has analyzed every issue, proceeding month-to-month, decade-to-decade, tracing the evolution of the character against the backdrop of American cultural change since the Great Depression. This study attempts to do just that. *Captain America* became much more than a beat-'em-up hero serial. While DC Comics languished in its attempt to maintain the status

quo of super heroes in the so-called “Silver Age” of comics (roughly 1960-1980), Marvel Comics – and *Captain America* in particular – became prisms through which the social changes in America were reflected.

This study will examine how Agent 13, Sharon Carter, was a much more powerful female character than most of her “super” counterparts in comics in the late-’60s and ’70s. It will spend considerable time on Cap’s partner, The Falcon, the first African-American superhero, who spent most issues dealing with the real-world issues facing African-Americans at the time. It will show, perhaps most importantly, how the comic book audience – perceived since its inception as being primarily young children – actually represented a broad spectrum of Americans: soldiers, housewives, college students and professors, and lawyers.

This study is, above all, a study of American “popular culture.” That term has always been a problematic one, at best. Daniel Bell defines it as “culture for a society, a group, or a person,” and as “a continual process of sustaining an identity through the coherence gained by a consistent aesthetic point of view, a moral conception of self, and a style of life which exhibits those conceptions in the objects that adorn one’s home and oneself and in the taste which expresses those points of view.”¹⁶ He goes on to quote Lawrence Alloway, who coined the phrase “popular culture,” and defined it as reflecting “the aesthetics of plenty.”¹⁷

At its heart, “popular culture” refers to those aspects of culture with a mass appeal, requiring no formal education or training to enjoy, appealing to all levels of society, but more often than not, to the masses. However, what counts as “popular

¹⁶ Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1976), 36.

¹⁷ Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, 72.

culture” differs from time period to time period. Whereas the study and enjoyment of Shakespeare in the twenty-first century might be considered “high culture,” one must remember that during his time, Shakespeare’s plays were written and performed for the general populace as well as for princes, making Shakespeare in late-Elizabethan England as much “popular culture” as comic books would be four centuries later.

The study of popular culture provides a window into the study of any society. Who we are and what we believe are often reflected in popular culture. Nowhere is this truer than in American comic books, and particularly “superhero” comics. Comics were often disregarded for their “escapist” tendencies. However, that very escapism – which can be defined as any form of art and entertainment designed to allow the audience to limit or shut down entirely any cerebral effort – is an important window into who the American people are and have been throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, and into a post-9/11 world. Some critics of Captain America, such as theologian Robert Jewett, have attacked what Jewett called, “The Captain America Complex” as representing the worse in American hegemonic, imperial aspirations. This study will challenge Jewett’s claims. It will argue, in contrast, that the Captain America stories in many ways celebrate the pluralistic nature of American society while challenging a jingoistic philosophy of, “my country, right or wrong.”

CHAPTER 1
APPROACHES TO THE HERO:
THE RELEVANCE OF CAPTAIN AMERICA

Scholarship concerning comic book superheroes is a relatively new field. Though mainstays in popular culture since just before World War II, comic books have often been regarded as a strictly children’s medium, “low-brow” culture. This has never truly been the case, and the target audience for comic books at the dawn of the twenty-first century, according to industry expert Mark Waid, is “25-to-40-year-old men of all socio-economic status.”¹ Though super heroes such as Captain America have experienced market highs and lows over the decades, the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, saw a dramatic rise in the popularity of superheroes. Many attribute this to the uncertainty and fear in the years following the event, not unlike the national reaction to the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.

A scholarly approach to heroes, in general, has been around for over fifty years. In his groundbreaking work *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell focused on the idea that heroes of ancient mythologies from all over the world represented certain universal archetypes.² At the time this work was published, comic books were still in their infancy and actually on the verge of disappearing as an industry due to pressure

¹ Interview by author with Mark Waid (November 17, 2007).

² Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces, Commemorative Edition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004; originally published 1949), 3.

from Congress as well as religious and parents' groups. They did, however, survive, and by the end of the twentieth century were becoming targets of considerable notice by scholars from a broad range of disciplines.

The scholarship as it stands today is made up of three distinct areas of study: overall histories of the industry as a whole; biographical studies of the individuals involved in the creation of comic books and their characters; and analysis of the actual text of comic books. The final category can be broken down further for the purposes of this study into: (1) overall analyses of comic book texts; and (2) analyses of Captain America texts specifically. Throughout these areas as a whole, very little has been done concerning the character of Captain America. To date, there have been only two major works and a handful of articles analyzing the various aspects of Captain America and *Captain America* comics. Early interpretations of the character fell far short of anything remotely reflecting the character as it existed in the original texts.

In the mid-1970s, Robert Jewett used the character to examine, define, and warn against what he perceived as increasing American national self-righteousness. In *The Captain America Complex* (second edition, 1984), Jewett examined this phenomenon, blaming to a large degree America's Judeo-Christian self-righteousness in the face of an otherwise-communist world. He chose as the symbol of this zealotry the comic book icon Captain America. Jewett updated his analysis, assisted by John Shelton Lawrence, in their 2003 work *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil*, discussing how this complex has not only survived into the twenty-first century, but thrives due to the modern War on Terror. Jewett compares the classic character to America's perceived "zealous

nationalism” and “prophetic realism,” arguing that the United States – like Captain America – “seeks to redeem the world by destroying enemies.”³

However, citing only a handful of issues spread over the decades, it becomes clear that Jewett has spent little time with the source-material of the comics themselves. Numerous individuals who have either written, studied, or consistently read *Captain America* over the decades agree that the so-called “Captain America Complex” does not reflect the character as written. These misinterpretations aside, much of the scholarship that has been published regarding Captain America has laid the groundwork for the following chapters.

Histories of the Genre

In 1970, comic book writer / artist and “pop-artist” Jim Steranko wrote his own history of the industry to that point. Most famous for his ground-breaking and controversial run on the Marvel Comics book *Nick Fury: Agent of S*H*I*E*L*D*, Steranko examined the comic book hero as modern myth, tracing similar “heroes” through time. He concludes that Captain America, more than any other character, is not a man, “but all men”... that he is the ideal of the “inner reality of man... the American truth.” He also traces a total of thirty-nine “imitators” of Captain America attempted by various comic book companies in the years since 1941.⁴ From this list, the power and sales-impact of Captain America becomes evident, granting more foundation for the argument that *Captain America* was a book of significant social importance. Steranko’s

³ Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 8.

⁴ Jim Steranko, *The Steranko History of Comics, Volume 1*, (Reading: Supergraphics, 1970), 3, 51-2.

history is brief but detailed; but it does constitute a primarily straightforward narrative geared for popular audiences.

Ron Goulart produced another popular history of the comic book industry in 1986, with *Ron Goulart's Great History of Comic Books*. Goulart's work is notable for providing a detailed biography of Major Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson, the individual hailed as the "inventor" of the comic book. He also provides an equally detailed description of the origin of the Captain America character.⁵ Though also written for a popular audience, this work does provide some valuable source information from which to begin research. Both of these general histories provide important basic information regarding the narrative history of the character and comic book of Captain America. What they lack is any real analysis of the material itself.

In 1989, Michael Mann produced a documentary film examining the comic book industry as a whole (going well beyond the traditionally recognized superhero comics). His film, *Comic Book Confidential*, showed interviews with dozens of comic book creators, writers, and artists from over forty years of the industry. The insights and memories of these individuals are a valuable resource as they not only reflect on what transpired, but the impact of what came after. Though Captain America is mentioned several times throughout the film, including interviews with Cap creators Joe Simon and Jack Kirby and longtime Cap writer Stan Lee, all mention of the character is strictly within the overall context of the unfolding of comic book history, rather than any specific points or storylines revolving around the character.

Perhaps the most in-depth analysis focusing specifically on the history of superhero comic books came in 2003, with the second edition of historian Bradford W.

⁵ Goulart, *Great History of Comic Books*, 55, 154.

Wright's *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (the first scholarly narrative history of the industry). Wright's thesis for this work is three-fold: (1) that within popular culture, as argued by John G. Cawelti, audiences prefer formulaic stories (which comic books do provide); (2) that comic books are a neglected set of primary documents (a thesis which this work hopes to further prove); and (3) that even prior to the advent of television or rock-n-roll, comic books represented a unifying mode of expression in American youth culture.⁶ Wright combines the previous method of laying out a clear narrative of the history of comic books with actual storylines and art from various comics over the decades. Mixing these with detailed analysis of his topic, *Comic Book Nation* represents the starting point from which all future serious scholarship on comic books must begin.

The same year that his second edition was published, The History Channel produced a documentary called *Comic Book Superheroes: Unmasked!*, for which Wright was a major contributor. Very similar in many regards to *Comic Book Confidential*, it, like *Comic Book Nation* combines interviews with comic book creators with the presentation of actual storylines from World War II to just after 9/11. While very general in its necessarily time-limited approach, it does work as a fine companion piece to Wright's work. Further, while Wright's and *Unmasked!*'s handling of Captain America is limited due to the volume of material covered, what does exist is vital for beginning any study of the character, his overall place within the broader context of the comic book / superhero industry, and his impact and various approaches to him over the years.

⁶ Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), xv-xvi.

Shirrel Rhoades, former publisher of Marvel Comics, produced *A Complete History of American Comic Books* in 2008. This narrative history is much more “behind-the-scenes” than its predecessors. Whereas Wright focused on the superhero comics published over the decades, commenting only briefly on the back-office politics behind the companies that produced them, Rhoades’s work focuses much more on the inner workings of the industry itself. Business decisions and editorial decisions provide some additional insight into the context of the production of the comic books discussed in the succeeding chapters. Not only were comic books written by, drawn by, sold to, and read by Americans, the businesses that produced them were run by Americans working within the often-strenuous world of a market economy.

Though most of the works cited thus far were published for popular audiences and not produced by or for scholars *per se* (Wright’s work would be the obvious exception, though appealing to both popular and scholarly audiences), all of them provide, to one degree or another, factual context within which a closer analysis of Captain America – or any other superhero comic books – can be approached. All further scholarship on comic books will have these works as primary building blocks from which to begin work. One of the key points regarding the importance of studying comic books is that they were produced by Americans, for Americans, and at specific points in American history. These original general narrative histories provide much of the context for analyzing that fact, though they do not go far into any specific title for any specified period of time. In essence, then, this study of Captain America places a specific light on a specific title, expanding on and beyond what these authors have done before.

Histories of the Creators

Another area of vital information regarding the study of characters such as Captain America is the thoughts and memoirs of the creative teams behind him over the decades. No one can begin a study of comic books in general, or Captain America specifically, without examining the life and career of former Marvel Editor-in-Chief Stanley Martin Lieber, better known as Stan Lee. From his first work in comics, writing *Captain America* beginning with issue #5 in 1941, Lee spent a lifetime gaining respectability for the comic book industry and trying to reach more mature and educated audiences. His success in this endeavor has made him a pop-culture icon. Nearing 90 at the time of this writing, Lee no longer does interviews except under very special circumstances. Fortunately, five works concerning the career and insights of Stan Lee exist to assist researchers.

First there is Lee's own autobiography, *Excelsior!: The Amazing Life of Stan Lee*, co-written by George Mair and published in 2002. Second, the 2003 documentary *Countdown to Wednesday: An Inside Look at the Comic Book Biz and How to Break In* has nearly an hour of interviews with Lee and other major comics creators regarding how comic books are created and how individuals interested in the business can enter. Jordan Raphael and Tom Spurgeon's biography, *Stan Lee and the Rise and Fall of the American Comic Book* in 2003, examines Lee's rise as a pop-culture icon and how the comic book industry has found reinvigoration in Hollywood since 2001. *Tales to Astonish: Jack Kirby, Stan Lee, and the American Comic Book Revolution* written by Ronin Ro in 2004 examines the importance of these two men in keeping the comic book industry alive after the 1950s, including one of the few accounts of the failure of the 1950s Captain America.

Finally, *Stan Lee: Conversations* (2007) represents a compilation edited by Jeff McLaughlin of several of the interviews granted by Stan Lee for various publications, discussion panels and news agencies over the course of the last forty-five years. With access to Stan Lee becoming increasingly difficult due to his schedule as a consultant for Marvel Enterprise's growing feature film franchises, and his advancing age (Lee turned 88 in December of 2010), these works will prove to be valuable resources into the mind of one of American popular culture's most historic individuals.

One aspect of American comic book superheroes that has struck a chord with scholars over the last decade has been their origins from within the Jewish-American community. Superman, Batman, and Captain America (among hundreds of others) were created during the waning days of the Great Depression by a group – primarily out of New York City – of Jewish-American writers and artists who, due to their ethnicity, could not find jobs in the mainstream media. In 2004, Gerard Jones wrote *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book*. This story of the origins of the American comic book industry – and superheroes in particular – was made possible through numerous interviews with many of those original creators as well as industry experts (so-called “fanboys”) who have made their life's work accumulating information about the birth of their favorite entertainment genre. This work provides an even closer behind-the-scenes look at the politics of the industry. With only a handful of pages dedicated to Captain America, it does nevertheless spend considerable time examining the careers of Joe Simon, Jack Kirby, and Stan Lee.

Along a similar vein is *Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, Comics, and the Creation of the Superhero* by Danny Fingeroth (2007). In this work, Fingeroth goes farther than

simply examining the origins and behind-the-scenes drama of the comic book industry. He examines how the American superhero came from a very Jewish-American psyche. As Hitler began his schemes against the Jewish populations of Europe, young Jewish-American writers created characters that were above and beyond normal human beings. They helped the oppressed and solved problems ranging from inner city turmoil to racism. Seeing the Jewish-American influence on superheroes from their inception on into more contemporary times, Fingeroth examines a particular field of race issues in superhero comics. As Simon, Kirby, and Lee all represent this group, their relationship to Captain America makes this book particularly relevant. Fingeroth points out that Captain America was a metaphor for Jews in that he – before any other superhero – focused on the dangers of Adolf Hitler and the threat he posed not only to Jews but to the world.⁷

The individual with the longest-running connection to Captain America was artist (and sometimes writer) Jack Kirby. By the time his contributions to comic books as a whole and Captain America in particular were beginning to be truly appreciated, Kirby died in 1994. In 2008, historian and close Kirby friend Mark Evanier compiled a lifetime of interviews, anecdotes, and materials to use in writing *Kirby: King of Comics*. In the introduction, acclaimed comic book (and prose) writer Neil Gaiman, states “Jack Kirby created part of the language of comics and much of the language of super hero comics. He took vaudeville and made it opera. He took a static medium and gave it motion.”⁸ As with the Lee biographies, Evanier’s work provides an invaluable window into the

⁷ Danny Fingeroth, *Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, Comics, and the Creation of the Superhero* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 58-60.

⁸ Neil Gaiman, “Introduction,” *Kirby: King of Comics* by Mark Evanier (New York: Abrams, 2008), 12.

thinking and experiences of a key founder of the comic book industry. Just one example of the type of insight that this work presents is the story of the first issue of *Captain America Comics* hitting newsstands on December 20, 1940, just nine days before President Franklin Roosevelt gave one of his more famous fireside chats, calling on the United States to become “the great arsenal for democracy.”⁹ While an important work in and of itself, Evanier’s book still does not provide detailed attention to the full run of Captain America.

Analyzing the Genre

Much of what has been done concerning analyzing comic book superheroes to date has come from disciplines other than history. One notable exception was also one of the earliest monographs placing comic books into an historical context. In *Comic Books and America, 1945-1954*, William W. Savage, Jr., places the latter half of the so-called “Golden Age” of comics into historical perspective. Published in 1990, the book promises to “enhance our understanding of the cultural context of a postwar generation of young readers,” and “to employ comic books as primary sources” (not unlike what Wright would do in much more detail and to much greater degrees of success in later years).¹⁰ Like Wright later, Savage examines several comic books in order to fully analyze his period. His analysis, however, lacks any real examination of *Captain America Comics* (though, admittedly, *CAC* during this period had already lost the larger portion of its readership and was cancelled twice). It does, however, provide ample

⁹ Evanier, *Kirby*, 50.

¹⁰ William W. Savage, Jr., *Comic Books and America, 1945-1954* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), *x-xi*.

analysis of this period, within which a deeper analysis of *Captain America Comics* can be placed.

One of the most repeated analyses of superhero comic books to date is that these colorful heroes represent to our society what the gods of ancient times represented to those societies. In two similar works published in 2007 – *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us About Ourselves and Our Society* by Danny Fingeroth and *Our Gods Wear Spandex: The Secret History of Comic Book Heroes* by Christopher Knowles – the psychological underpinnings of what makes superheroes so popular is closely examined. Fingeroth states, “A hero embodies what we believe is best in ourselves... the superhero – more than even the ordinary fictional hero – has to represent the values of the society that produces him.”¹¹ The one real weakness in Fingeroth’s analysis is that he pays no specific attention to Captain America, a character that, many would say, was specifically designed to reflect us as a people.

Knowles defines his purpose as being to “explain how superheroes have come to fill the role in our modern society that the gods and demigods provided to the ancients.”¹² Knowles describes Captain America as a messianic character: “the science hero – summoned into action to fight fascism.”¹³ Here, however, Knowles still speaks in very broad general terms regarding Captain America. He makes brief reference to his 1964 resurrection and 1980s man-out-of-time status, but offers no truly specific analysis of any actual Captain America storyline to justify or back up the claim. What remains to be

¹¹ Danny Fingeroth, *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us About Ourselves and Our Society* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 14, 17.

¹² Christopher Knowles, *Our Gods Wear Spandex: The Secret History of Comic Book Heroes* (San Francisco: Weiser Books, 2007), xv.

¹³ Knowles, *Our Gods Wear Spandex*, 131.

done is a more detailed analysis of the textual material in order to more clearly define or refute Knowles's claims.

In 2009, Mike Madrid published *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines*. The purpose of this work is to look beyond the oversexualization of superheroines to the power that they possess and portray.¹⁴ Not as much a scholarly work as an analysis by a lifelong comic book fan, the work primarily focuses on broad generalizations of women superhero characters decade-by-decade. The author examines major characters such as Wonder Woman, Supergirl, and Batgirl. The problem with this work is in its generalizations. Failing to examine supporting characters such as Sharon Carter, Agent-13 of SHIELD in *Captain America*, the book fails to provide a full analysis of each decade or to bring out the very best of how women are portrayed over time. While an adequate springboard for deeper analysis later, the shortcomings of this work make it little more than a reference source.

Analyzing the Hero

There have been in very recent years, more specific articles regarding superheroes and Captain America in particular. Another 2007 work was the article compilation *The Amazing Transforming Superhero!: Essays on the Revision of Characters in Comic Books, Film and Television*, edited by Terrence R. Wandtke. The purpose of the collection is to create “a sense of coherency by taking a very serious critical and theoretical look at superheroes as myth, commodity, and much more... [meanwhile] encouraging an enthusiastic debate enabled by the playful consciousness of a superhero

¹⁴ Mike Madrid, *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines* (New York: Exterminating Angel Press, 2009), vi.

world that is endlessly revised.”¹⁵ The articles deal primarily with the issue of what is called “ret-conning” superheroes (a term short for “retro-continuity”). Since many twentieth century hero tales go on for decades, they require from time-to-time some cleaning up of the continuity of the storylines (particularly when new stories refute something that has come before). Comic book storylines are particularly notorious for this.

For the purposes of Captain America research, the first article is of particular interest. “Retconning America: Captain America in the Wake of World War II and the McCarthy Hearings” by Jason Dittmer discusses how the 1964 Captain America story showing the superhero team The Avengers finding Cap frozen in ice since 1945 presented problems as the comics in the ’40s went on until 1949 (with a brief revival in 1954). The article represents one of four written by geographer Dittmer regarding the use of Captain America to define national identity over the decades. Dittmer’s research has covered Cap in the 1940s, ’50s, ’60s, ’90s, and Post-9/11. The most prolific scholarly writer regarding Captain America, Dittmer’s knowledge of the character and comics over the decades is surpassed by few.

The above-mentioned article proposes to document “one of the ways in which the creative staff of Captain America in order to keep the character within the bounds of an ever-changing conception of what America is and what America stands for.”¹⁶ His first article concerning Captain America was “Captain America’s Empire: Reflections on

¹⁵ Terrence R. Wandtke, “Introduction: Once Upon a Time Once Again,” *The Amazing Transforming Superhero!: Essays on the Revision of Characters in Comic Books, Film and Television*, Terrence R. Wandtke, ed (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2007), 30.

¹⁶ Jason Dittmer, “Retconning America: Captain America in the Wake of World War II and the McCarthy Hearings,” *The Amazing Transforming Superhero!: Essays on the Revision of Characters in Comic Books, Film and Television*, Terrence R. Wandtke, ed (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2007), 35.

Identity, Popular Culture, and Post-9/11 Geopolitics.” In this article, Dittmer defines his idea of using the character to explain ideas of “national identity and geopolitical scripts.”¹⁷ A similar article by Cord Scott, “Written in Red, White, and Blue: A Comparison of Comic Book Propaganda from World War II and September 11,” examines the character in regard to a national “call for intervention.”¹⁸ While examining the use of Captain America as a defining prism of national identity is, to a degree, touched upon in the current study, a deeper analysis of identity concerning societal perceptions of race and gender will be presented in the chapters that follow.

An examination of Captain America from a political / nationalistic perspective is also the topic of *Secret Identity Crisis* by Matthew J. Costello, published in 2009. Costello argues that, beginning in the 1960s, the Cold War consensus on American “identity” that had more or less united the country in the wake of World War II was coming apart, replaced with an identity “crisis.” The evidence supporting his conclusion consists of the Silver Age of Marvel Comics superheroes that developed under the editorial watch of Stan Lee beginning in 1962.¹⁹ Characters such as the Fantastic Four, Spider-Man, the Incredible Hulk, and Iron Man represented clear messages that the Cold War consensus was breaking down. Beginning in 1964, Captain America joined their numbers, having been revived from a decade of obscurity.

Of Captain America, Costello says, “Captain America is the most ideological; he is, in fact, an avatar of American ideology and, thus, offers the most direct commentary

¹⁷ Jason Dittmer, “Captain America’s Empire: Reflections on Identity, Popular Culture, and Post-9/11 Geopolitics,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 95, No. 3 (Blackwell Publishing, Summer, 2005),

¹⁸ Cord Scott, “Written in Red, White, and Blue: A Comparison of Comic Book Propaganda from World War II and September 11,” *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (Blackwell Publishing, Spring, 2007), 326.

¹⁹ Matthew J. Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis: Comic Books and the Unmasking of Cold War America* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 2-3.

on the character of Cold War America.”²⁰ Costello mixes his interpretations of Captain America throughout the Cold War with interpretations of the remainder of the lexicon of the more popular Marvel characters from the period. While many of his ideas about Captain America will be incorporated into the analyses that follow in succeeding chapters, the present study will also deal in greater detail with issues of race and gender. Like the Dittmer articles mentioned above, Costello – being a political scientist – focuses primarily on the political dimension of the comic book, largely ignoring the social and economic issues raised in the Captain America narrative. Another work published in 2009 focused entirely on Captain America. *Captain America and the Struggle of the Superhero* is a collection of scholarly essays from several disciplines, covering various areas of interest revolving around the Star-Spangled Avenger. A Foreword by noted superhero analyst John Shelton Lawrence notes, “Cap often thinks critically about the facts of history in his time, the legitimacy of commands from superiors, and how his actions are seen by others. His behavior thus bears the marks of politics and policies of the moment.”²¹ The purpose of the book is to show that “[Captain America comics] provide legitimate source material for studying American culture and history.”²²

The essays, written by a wide array of scholars from multiple fields, cover such topics as: portrayals of Nazis in the World War II comics; Jewish-American perspectives on class, race, and patriotism; representations of African-Americans; eugenics; post-traumatic stress disorder; national identity; and masculinity. Each essay provides excellent insight into the various topics discussed, but – due mainly to the limited scope

²⁰ Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis*, 13.

²¹ John Shelton Lawrence, “Forward,” *Captain America and the Struggle of the Superhero: Critical Essays* Robert G. Weiner, ed (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2009), 1.

²² Robert G. Weiner, “Introduction,” *Captain America and the Struggle of the Superhero*, 9.

allowable in an essay-length analysis – leaves room for further discussion and broader interpretation. What the collection most provides are multiple examples of how rich a source the character can be for scholarly examination.

While each of these topics will be discussed to one degree or another in the chapters that follow, a full-length study allows for much fuller analysis. What each of the previously discussed pieces lacks is a comprehensive examination of the entirety of the 1940-2002 runs of *Captain America* comic books, inclusively examining issues of patriotism, race, gender, and economics. While each of these works provides valuable insight and a strong background, the following chapters expand significantly on what has previously been done.

CHAPTER 2

BIRTH OF THE SUPER-HERO AND THE SUPER POWER: The 1940s and '50s

The period 1940-1954 was a transformative time in American history. In the waning days of a decade-long economic Depression, facing the threat of a world war, and later the potentially greater threat of the ensuing Cold War, America faced change, out of which the United States emerged as a world “super-power.” Simultaneously, pop culture saw the rise of the “super-hero” in America. These two concepts – of super-power and super-hero – would evolve congruently in the decades to come. Hannah Arendt defines the differences between “factual reality” and “political reality,” the latter relying more heavily on the power of persuasion. “Political reality” created, then, an “alternate reality” to the actual world.¹ This idea is not at all unlike the alternate realities portrayed in comic books. With the birth of this medium, political and factual reality could converge to enlighten, explain, and even educate. Comic books, then, became a medium that both reflected and attempted to influence society as a whole, as the very best of popular culture often does. America was changing, and that change was evident in the comic books of the period.²

Popular culture began its domination of the larger American culture during the Great Depression. With the advent of movie “talkies” in 1927, Hollywood boomed,

¹ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (Penguin Books, 1977), 259.

² William Savage, *Comic Books and America, 1945-1954* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 113.

creating in the 1930s some of the most beloved and classic films of all time:

Frankenstein, *A Night at the Opera*, *Gone with the Wind*, and *The Wizard of Oz* to name but a few. The power of radio was made manifest in the popularity of President Franklin Roosevelt's "fireside chats." As America proceeded into World War II and the Cold War era, pop culture continued to grow in influence. Part escapism, part social commentary, mass culture came steadily to define America. A continuity developed that would go through the war years and beyond.³ In those early years, comic books played an immediate and important role in defining that culture; this role would continue – especially with regard to youth culture – in the years to come.

The American comic book was born in 1933 with the publication of *Famous Funnies*. Originally meant to be a means of reprinting newspaper comic strips, by the end of the decade, the genre began to produce original material. The "super-hero" was born with the publication of *Action Comics #1* in spring 1938 featuring the first such character, Superman.⁴ The concept was developed primarily by the Jewish-American artist community, which at the time experienced discrimination in the traditional American publishing industry.⁵ Facing a very similar prejudice as their European

³ William M. Tuttle, Jr., "America's Children in an Era of War, Hot and Cold: The Holocaust, the Bomb, and Child Rearing in the 1940s," *Rethinking Cold War Culture*, Peter J. Kuznick and James Gilbert, Eds (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 17; Peter Filene, "'Cold War Culture' Doesn't Say It All," *Rethinking Cold War Culture*, Peter J. Kuznick and James Gilbert, Eds (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 157.

⁴ Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 3; 8-9; Ron Goulart, *Great History of Comic Books* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1986), 11; Shirrel Rhoades, *A Complete History of American Comic Books* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 16; *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked*, The History Channel (DVD), 2003; *Comic Book Confidential*, Ron Mann, Dir (DVD), Sphinx Productions, 1988; *Look! Up in the Sky!: The Amazing Story of Superman*, Kevin Burns, Dir (DVD), Warner Home Video, 2006. Ronin Ro, *Tales to Astonish: Jack Kirby, Stan Lee, and the American Comic Book Revolution* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2004), 14. And basically everything ever written on comic books.

⁵ Danny Fingeroth, *Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, Comics, and the Creation of the Superhero* (New York: Continuum International, 2007), 14,17; Gerard Jones, *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters,*

counterparts, Jewish-American writers and artists had to find their own niche in society. The result was the American comic book and the idea of the superhero.

Super-heroes were conservative by nature, representing individual solutions to problems rather than the group-oriented pragmatism of many New Dealers. With the coming of war and the inherent conservatism of militarism, super-heroes continued down this path. Richard Polenberg argues that the rise of war put American liberalism on hold, with importance being placed on military objectives over social and systemic reform.⁶ This idea is consistent with the subject matter of super-hero comics of the war years and just beyond. Super-heroes were vigilantes, clearly taking the law into their own hands in order to achieve a justice that the system often failed to provide. Super-heroes, in fact, embodied more what President Herbert Hoover called voluntarism. As explained in 1944 by William Moulton Marston, psychologist, co-inventor of the lie detector, and creator of Wonder Woman:

[Super-heroes] satisfy the universal human longing to be stronger than all opposing obstacles and the equally universal desire to see good overcome evil, to see wrongs righted, underdogs nip the pants of their oppressors, and, withal, to experience vicariously the supreme gratification of the *deus ex machina* who accomplishes these monthly miracles of right triumphing over not-so-mighty might.⁷

While National Comics – eventually known as DC Comics – paved the way with Superman and The Batman (over time, the character would drop the “The” from his

and the Birth of the Comic Book (New York: Basic Books, 2004), viii; *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked* (DVD); *Comic Book Confidential* (DVD); *Look! Up in the Sky* (DVD).

⁶ Richard Polenberg, *War and Society: The United States 1941-1945* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippencott, 1972), 75.

⁷ William Moulton Marston, “Why 100,000,000 Americans Read Comics,” *The American Scholar* (1944), 39.

name), one of its rival companies, Timely Comics, followed closely on its heels. While dozens of super-heroes would appear over the course of 1938-1941, only a few stood the test of time: Superman and Batman, Wonder Woman, Captain Marvel (aka Shazam), the Sub-Mariner, and Captain America. Captain America debuted in *Captain America Comics (CAC) #1* in December, 1940. The first character to originate in a self-titled comic book, and appearing nearly a year prior to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Captain America began as pure, unadulterated pro-war propaganda. Comic book writer and historian Jim Steranko described him as,

Epitomizing both the grandiose flamboyancy of super heroes and the flag-waving spirit of nationalism, Captain America was the consummate chauvinist and the most absolute of certain successes... [he] was not an embodiment of human characteristics but a pure idea. He was not a man but all men; not a being but a cumulative god that symbolized the inner reality of man. He was the American truth.⁸ The product of Jewish-American creative team Joe Simon and Jack Kirby of Timely Comics, a strong anti-Nazi sentiment emblazoned the cover of that first issue with the hero delivering a right-cross to German leader Adolf Hitler.

⁸ Jim Steranko, *The Steranko History of Comics, Volume 1* (Reading: Supergraphics, 1970), 51.



[Image 1-1: *Captain America Comics #1* (March, 1941); Jack Kirby, Artist]

World War II had raged in Europe for more than a year. The United States had gone from non-belligerent to “Arsenal of Democracy.” It was clear, even at the time, the United States was on a very slow but deliberate course toward involvement in the

growing effort against Adolf Hitler. MLJ Comics had developed a hero called The Shield, who was a red-white-and-blue / star-spangled hero carrying a shield. Timely Comics Publisher Martin Goodman asked creative team Joe Simon and Jack Kirby to produce a similar hero. The result was Captain America.⁹

Joe Simon recalled, “The Nazis were a menace... maybe [Cap] was our way of lashing out against the Nazi menace. Evidently, Captain America symbolized... the American people’s sentiments. When [Jack Kirby and I] were producing Captain America [throughout 1941], we were outselling Batman, Superman, and all the others.¹⁰ Jack Kirby called the creation of Captain America during this time, “a natural thing to do.”¹¹ Simon and Kirby believed that the impressive sales numbers of *CAC* (an estimated one million copies a month) indicated that their anti-Nazi sentiments were consistent with growing American opinion.¹² Perhaps no single group of Americans was more anti-Nazi than the Jewish-American community. With notables such as Albert Einstein warning the Roosevelt administration of the dangers of a Nazi victory, and the joint plights of Great Britain and the Soviet Union, a more direct contribution by the United States, sooner or later, seemed, to many, inevitable.

Comic book sales were in the range of 40-50 million issues a year throughout World War II, tapering off only slightly in the immediate years following. They were read by “young and old, poor and rich, those who never got beyond the sixth grade and

⁹ Rhoades, *A Complete History of American Comic Books*, 33.

¹⁰ Dan Whitehead, “Kapow! A Talk with Joe Simon,” www.simoncomics.com

¹¹ “Jack Kirby,” www.geocities.com/brenni_au/JackKirby.html

¹² Fingerth, *Disguised as Clark Kent*, 57. Rhoades, *A Complete History of American Comic Books*, 33.

PhD.'s, soldiers and civilians.”¹³ American culture was forever changed by the war. The steady flow of parents away from home and into the workplace increased children’s independence, providing a natural lapse in discipline that created the modern phenomenon of the “teenager.” Juvenile delinquency soon followed.

Over time comic books were blamed for the dramatic rise in juvenile delinquency in the late-1940s. Psychiatrists disagreed over their impact on children’s behavior; but one incontrovertible point was that comic books going into the 1950s were far more violent and graphic than ever before (and in many cases, since). Under the leadership of Dr. Frederick Wertham, a social crusade built against the comic book industry, leading to Congressional hearings that nearly destroyed the medium. Wertham’s *Seduction of the Innocent*, and the industry’s decision to create the self-regulating, self-censoring Comics Code Authority, severely cramped the style of many creative teams and nearly destroyed the industry entirely. The one hero to skirt this controversy was Captain America.¹⁴

In the year leading up to World War II, Captain America – along with his teenage sidekick, Bucky Barnes – fought foreign agents, making the message clear that America itself was under siege by fascists. After Pearl Harbor, both Cap and his alter-ego, U.S. Army Private Steve Rogers, fought in all theaters of the war, from India to Egypt to England and France. From 1946-1949, however, the character devolved into a more simplistic role as general crime-fighter, with cookie-cutter storylines that were simultaneously simplistic and predictable. Cancelled in 1949, the character resurfaced for a few months in 1954 in the pages of *Young Men* and *Captain America* (subtitled

¹³ Harvey Zorbaugh, “The Comics – There They Stand!” *Journal of Educational Sociology*, Vol. 18, No. 4, (December, 1944), 199.

¹⁴ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 157-64; Goulart, *Great History of Comic Books*, 263-74; Rhoades, *A Complete History of American Comic Books*, 57-66; *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked* (DVD); *Comic Book Confidential* (DVD).

“Commie Smasher”). This revival occurred in the wake of both the Congressional attacks on comic books in general and super-heroes in particular, and the Army/McCarthy hearings on television that went a long way to discrediting the government’s anti-communist campaigns. This timing – along with the fact that the Cold War with its constant threat of brinkmanship proved too frightening to play well as escapism – led to the quick re-cancelling of the character until the post-Kennedy 1960s.

In its initial years *Captain America Comics* promoted the type of pro-war patriotism that was consistent with the mutual-sacrifice required of World War II. The pages of these comics also exhibited racism consistent with the pre-Civil Rights Movement era, while simultaneously ignoring the irony of waging a war against such ideology. Female characters, likewise, were portrayed mostly in traditional stereotypical ways, but occasionally breaking down those very stereotypes. The stories themselves also illustrated frequent, and often violent, deaths despite the fact that they were admittedly aimed at an audience of 8-10-year-old boys. These ironies expressed the transformative nature of this period in American history. The United States was a racist nation fighting racism, and a sexist nation dedicated to the ideal of equality; a nation in its pre-puberty, about to embark on the road to enlightenment that comes with growing up.

Captain America #1 began with the story “Case No.1: Meet Captain America” by Simon and Kirby. The story was written at around the same time as passage of the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940. It would hit newsstands around the same time that President Roosevelt called for America to become an “Arsenal of Democracy.”

The story begins with a discussion of the danger of “Fifth Column” spies infiltrating American society and government. President Roosevelt introduces FBI Director, “J. Arthur Grover” (a not-so-subtle allusion to real-life Director J. Edgar Hoover). Director Grover takes an Army general and his staff to a hidden laboratory where experiments on creating American super soldiers have come to fruition.¹⁵

The lead scientist, “Professor Reinstein,” injects the volunteer test subject, a scrawny youth named Steve Rogers who has just been designated 4-F (unfit for military service), with the secret serum. Before their eyes, Rogers is transformed into the very peak of human physical perfection. Professor Reinstein says, “We shall call you ‘Captain America’, son! Because, like you – America shall gain the strength and the will to safeguard our shores!” A member of the general’s staff then reveals himself to be a Nazi spy, shooting and killing Reinstein, the only person with knowledge of how to produce the secret serum. As Rogers leaps into action, the spy is punched into an electrical panel, dying what Rogers calls a “well deserved” death.¹⁶

Rogers then joins the Army as Private Steve Rogers, his alter-ego throughout the war. Early on, while changing into Captain America, Rogers is discovered by the camp “mascot,” young Bucky Barnes. Rogers then says he has no choice, now that Bucky has learned his identity, but to allow the boy to become his sidekick (using his real name, Bucky, as his super-hero name even though he wears a mask to conceal that identity). Captain America quickly becomes a rallying figure for a nation on the brink of war.¹⁷ The illogic of the sidekick’s origin aside, the overall message of the story is clear:

¹⁵ Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, “Case No. 1: Meet Captain America,” *Captain America Comics #1* (New York: Timely Comics, March, 1941).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

America must brace itself for war. After the issue hit newsstands, the creators immediately received angry calls, letters, and even death threats both from isolationists and members of the pro-Nazi “American Bund.” At one point, New York City Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia sent in the police to protect the Timely Comics staff.¹⁸ Chris Murray argues that Captain America, therefore, did not represent America itself, but rather “was a particular myth of America, a myth that had close ties to the dominant cultural discourses of the time.”¹⁹ However, Captain America did not purport in those first issues to necessarily represent how America *felt* about the war; but, rather, how it *should feel*. It was propaganda, a form of media unnecessary if the society at large already embraced the argument at hand.

In his study of Jewish influence on comic books, Simcha Weinstein claims that with the cover of *Captain America Comics #1* “the Nazi ideal of the Aryan *ubermensch* was subverted.”²⁰ However, the evidence does not support that claim. The very concept of Captain America seemed a strange dichotomy: a Jewish-created, genetically-enhanced, blonde-haired super soldier created to fight Hitler’s so-called “master race.” This could, however, be consistent with the fact that many Jewish-American writers at the time chose assimilation over ethnicity during this time: both Jack Kirby and Bob Kane changed their names to appear less ethnic.²¹ The fact that the program to create Captain America was spearheaded, fictionally, by President Franklin Roosevelt, himself crippled by polio,

¹⁸ Ronin Ro, *Tales to Astonish: Jack Kirby, Stan Lee, and the American Comic Book Revolution* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2004), 21; Mark Evanier, *Kirby: King of Comics* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2008), 54.

¹⁹ Chris Murray, “Popaganda: Superhero Comics and Propaganda n World War Two,” *Comics and Culture: Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics*, eds. Anne Magnussen and Hans-Christian Christensen (Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen Press, 2000), 146.

²⁰ Simcha Weinstein, *Up, Up, and OyVey!: How Jewish History, Culture, and Values Shaped the Comic Book Superhero* (New York: Leviathan Press, 2006), 47.

²¹ *Secret Origin: The Story of DC Comics*, Warner Home Video (DVD), 2010.

seemed to further underscore this idea that America as she was would be unable to meet the threat of Nazism; and that the country's only hope was through scientifically created super soldiers.

Major Todd A. Burkhardt, of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, has claimed that, in reality, the creation of such a super-soldier would be ethically sound only if it conformed to two set criteria: “if the enemy we oppose can be easily recognized as *evil objectified in the world which negates our right to autonomy*,” and “if the situation must be considered a *supreme emergency*.”²² In the case of Captain America and World War II, both criteria were met, making such a story ethically sound, at least by this standard. Ideologically, however, the idea remains in a somewhat grey area.

The overall concept of essentially “fighting fire with fire,” raises certain problems. If the fictional program unfolded as planned, then Steve Rogers would have been the first in an army of such super-men. As a consequence, the U.S. would simply be justifying and enhancing the viability of Nazi arguments, and arguably, simultaneously, creating a slave race; for, while Steve Rogers volunteered for the super-soldier program, and took the experimental serum of his own free will, from the point that he became Captain America, he became a soldier / representative of the U.S. government, with “free will” only insofar as any soldier, having sworn allegiance to the government and foregone many personal freedoms in the process, would have done. Placing the character, then, in the context of the times, Captain America may have seemed a plausible solution to young comic book readers (at least as plausible as an alien with

²² Todd A. Burkhardt, MAJ/USA, “Captain America and the Ethics of Enhancement,” *Philosophy Now* (November / December, 2007), 8 [emphasis in the original].

super-strength or a high-society vigilante who dressed like a bat); but in a larger ethical context, the concept of Captain America becomes much more controversial.

It is reasonable to assume that most literate grade-schoolers knew who President Roosevelt was, and were quite probably aware of the increasing war atmosphere of America coming into 1941. After more than eleven years of economic depression (the entire lives of most comic book readers) and more than a year of war overseas, the United States was a nation already socially and economically gearing for war.²³ Jason Dittmer argues, “Those reading *Captain America Comics* had access to a particular geopolitical frame, or script, that was useful for interpreting the events around them... these readers learned about the importance of nationhood to self-identification and also about the types of behavior that can bring about approval or approbation within the context of the territorial unit.”²⁴ Captain America and his adventures did promote a patriotic zeal and sense of duty to country. The idea of “patriotism” was straightforward: the enemy was “outside” and the government was trustworthy.²⁵

After World War I, the United States became more and more isolationist in its global outlook. The loss of over 115,000 American boys in just over a year of fighting was more than anyone was willing to risk again. Despite news coverage of quick and extensive conquests by Nazi Germany and Japan, many in America were unconcerned. Storylines such as those in the early issues of *CAC* presented possibilities that even the most die-hard of isolationists could not ignore: foreign threats were already present in the

²³ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 31; *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked* (DVD).

²⁴ Jason Dittmer, “ ‘America is safe while its boys and girls believe in its creeds!’: Captain America and American Identity Prior to World War 2,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, Vol. 25 (2007), 421.

²⁵ John Moser, “Captain America and the Dilemma of Liberal Patriotism,” Colloquium at Ashland University, November 13, 2009.

* *Captain America Comics*

country, endangering America's way of life. The more subtle message was that if the threat abroad was eradicated, America would be safer at home.

In the coming year, the stories in *Captain America Comics* continued to promote the patriotism of the pro-war factions while not vilifying the still significant anti-war isolationists. Stories consistently showed Nazi villains killing high-ranking military officers and civilian public officials (though numerous stories exposed public officials as secret Nazi agents as well), ultimately leading to their own deaths at the hands of Captain America and, more often, young Bucky. In the story "The Hunchback of Hollywood and the Movie Murder," Captain America exposes an actor named Talbot to be a member of the pro-Nazi American Bund. Possibly a response to the threats received at the Timely offices from this organization, the story expressed the view that this organization was anti-American and a threat to national security. Years before the Second Red Scare, and nearly a year before the nation would become unified in the war effort, the message to American youth was that some political ideologies were unacceptable in the U.S.²⁶

The anti-Nazi sentiment often came from the mouth of Captain America himself. He called Hitler the "Phewerer" or comically saluting "Heel Hitler," and calling Nazi agents "Ratzis."²⁷ The numerous images of Hitler and the Nazis (shown below) portrayed the danger of this man and his minions. Long before the concept of the "super-villain" was introduced in comic books, Hitler stood as a powerful far-reaching arch-nemesis in many super-hero comic books. Even in the decades that followed – on into present times – the comic book idea of the super-villain strongly resembles the German

²⁶ It is also important to note that other racist organizations, notably the KKK, had been equally vilified in the Superman radio program. *Look! Up In The Sky!: The Amazing Story of Superman* (DVD), Kevin Burns, Dir (Warner Brothers Home Video).

²⁷ These epithets occur throughout many of the World War II issues, beginning with *Captain America Comics* #2 (April, 1941), by Simon and Kirby.

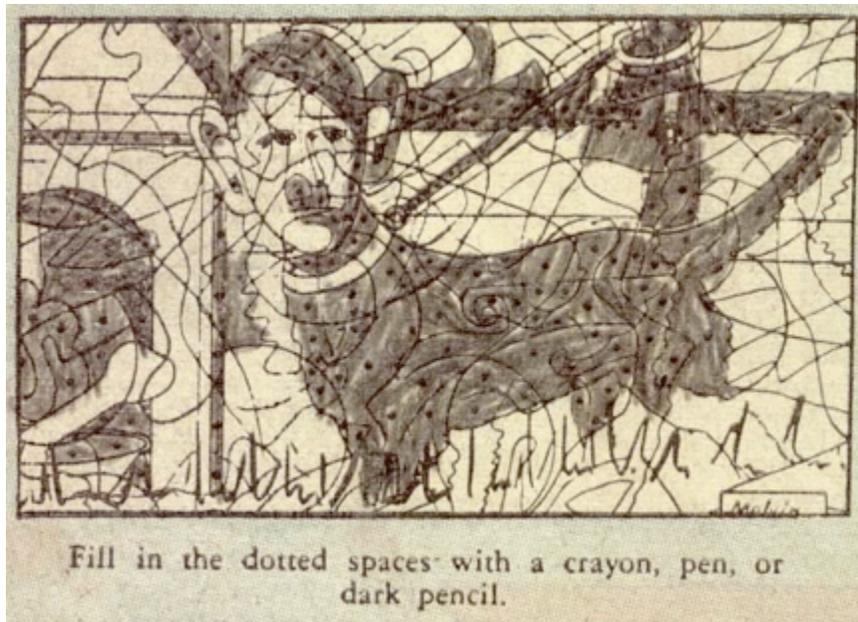
dictator. Fascist autocrats such as Dr. Doom, Magneto, Dark Seid, The Kingpin of Crime, and even *Captain America's* own Red Skull came to dominate the four-color landscape of comic books beginning during the war to become mainstays of the genre. The following images exemplify the use of Hitler as comic book super-villain; and it is easy to make the correlation between this real-life figure and the above-mentioned fictional villains (the third figure shows a completed puzzle portraying Hitler as a dog).



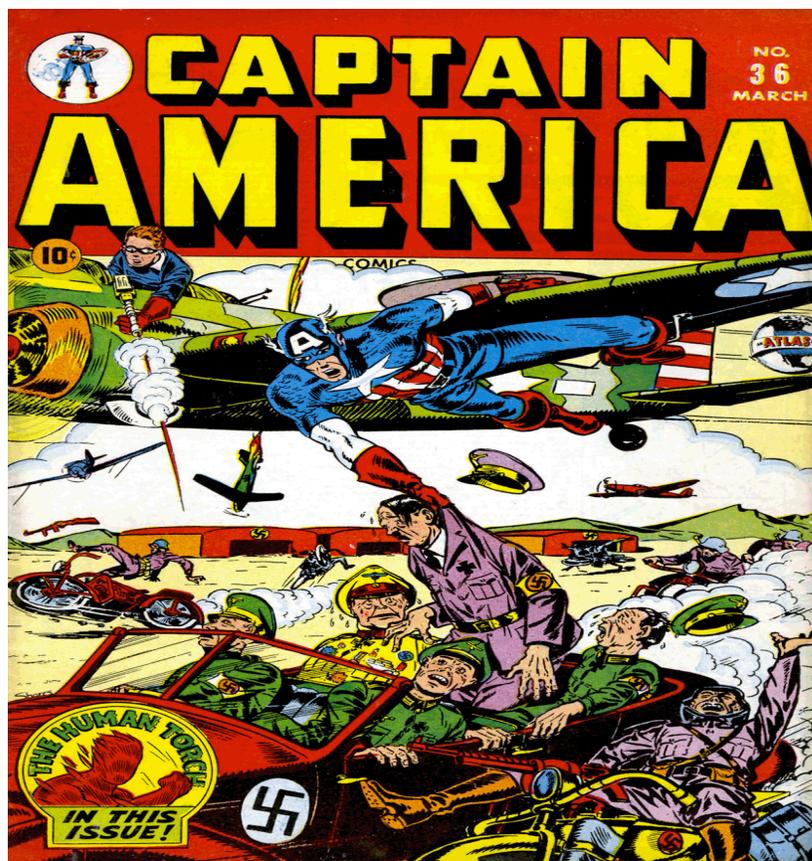
[Image 1-2: *Captain America Comics #2* (April, 1941), Jack Kirby, Artist]



[Image and 1-3: *Captain America Comics #2* (April, 1941), Jack Kirby, Artist]



[Image 1-4: Completed Puzzle, *Captain America Comics* #7 (October, 1941)]



[Image 1-5: *Captain America Comics* #36 (March, 1944), Al Avison, Artist]

Hitler was a very cartoonish villain. The uniform, the short-cropped moustache, the stereotyped accent, the homicidal tendencies and the delusions of global conquest were all consistent with what would eventually become standard in comic book supervillains. In fact, The Red Skull – introduced in *CAC#1* as well – was actually little more than a more demonized version of the German dictator. This likely blurred the line between fact and fiction with much of the Captain America audience. While clearly a threat, Hitler was never a match for Captain America (or Bucky). Therefore, he could be no match for America (or the readers). The writers and artists at Timely Comics frequently showed Hitler to be little more than an egoistical, immature bully, not at all dissimilar to what the comic book readers likely saw in schoolyards every day.

Anti-Nazi sentiment was also central in the story “Killers of the Bund,” (published six months prior to American entry into the war) where members of the American Bund threatened pro-American German-Americans. On capturing the Bund members, Cap tells them, “You’re pretty brave until someone really stands up to you and fights!... The time has come for Americans to teach you a lesson! We’ll be seeing you!”²⁸ As the United States rallied more and more to the side of the British (and by the time the issue hit newsstands the Soviets as well), the messages to young readers through their heroes’ adventures was that America must stand united against this threat.

In that same issue, in a story entitled “The Gruesome Secret of the Dragon of Death!” Captain America faced a threat to the island territory of Hawaii. Captain Okada, Oriental Master of Evil, a villain from an unnamed “Asian nation,” commands a dragon-shaped submarine that intends to destroy the American Pacific Naval fleet in Hawaii by

²⁸ Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, “Killers of the Bund” *Captain America Comics #5* (New York: Timely Comics, August, 1941).

causing the eruption of a Hawaiian volcano.²⁹ Here popular fiction portends an event that would happen in reality six months later with the surprise Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor (an attack in which at least one submarine was used). The line between fact and fiction was thus further blurred, but ultimately having the effect of legitimizing even more the comic book super-hero in the eyes of the comic's young readers.

In another precursor of the conflict ahead, in *Captain America Comics #11* (which appeared in November, 1941), the monthly newsletter of the Captain America fan club, Sentinels of Liberty, advised members of the Sentinels to practice “spotting airplanes” in order to “assist the air-raid wardens in case of war.”³⁰ Though Pearl Harbor was still weeks away, the comic reflected a climate in America of vigilance and a strong belief in the inevitability of war, even though at the time there was still a strong anti-war, isolationist sentiment throughout the country. Mobilization in favor of the Allied war effort was well underway, but an all-out American declaration of war – or even the threat of major foreign attack – was by no means necessarily certain.

The first issue of *Captain America Comics* to be published after Pearl Harbor was number thirteen (though no publication date was printed). A logo on that cover read “Remember Pearl Harbor” and with it was an image of Captain America punching a Japanese general and saying, “You started it! Now – We’ll Finish It!”³¹ Furthermore, there was an ad for U.S. savings bonds on the title / contents / credits page. The event that Captain America and Bucky had forewarned and predicted through their adventures

²⁹ Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, “The Gruesome Secret of the Dragon of Death!” *Captain America Comics #5* (New York: Timely Comics, August, 1941).

³⁰ “Sentinal of Liberty Newsletter,” *Captain America Comics #11* (New York: Timely Comics, February, 1942).

³¹ Stan Lee and Al Avison, *Captain America Comics #13* (cover) (New York: Timely Comics, NO MONTH ANNOTATED, 1942).

for a year had finally come to pass. America was at war. As American boys deployed to overseas stations of duty, care packages began to follow shortly thereafter. A must-have in many care packages was comic books. Soldiers became a growing demographic in comic book sales.³²

Though post-Pearl Harbor America has always been portrayed as united in its war effort, one story of Captain America in the spring of 1942 suggests that there was some fear that there remained threats to the nation's unity; and, indeed, some like Ohio Senator Robert Taft did openly oppose the war as late as 1942.³³ In the story "The Tunnel of Terror," Nazi Bund agents, disguised as American sailors, mingle among the populace complaining about America and hailing the Axis powers in an attempt to breed discontent with the war effort. Captain America calls the agents "UnAmerican" and "Kraut[s]," warning the people (and the readers as well), "Now that we've licked this Nazi fifth column plot, folks, you can see how important it is not to believe planted rumors, fake reports and terror propaganda! If London can Take It... We Can! So keep calm... do your duty... and America will triumph!"³⁴ Stan Lee, writer of these post-Pearl Harbor issues of *CAC* admitted that he was voluntarily using the comic books as pro-war propaganda.³⁵

In that same issue, Timely Comics posted an ad showing Captain America asking readers to buy fewer comics, instead sending their ten cents to "Captain America's War Fund." Timely promised to match every dime sent and to send the funds to the Treasury

³² Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 31; *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked* (DVD); *Comic Book Confidential* (DVD).

³³ H.W. Brands, *American Dreams: The United States Since 1945* (New York: Penguin Press, 2010), 35.

³⁴ Syd Shores and Al Avison, "The Tunnel of Terror," *Captain America Comics #15* (New York: Timely Comics, June, 1942).

³⁵ Interview with Stan Lee, *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked* (DVD).

Department for the war effort. In order to emphasize the importance of every dime, the monetary contribution was broken down to make it clearer to the readers:

485 dimes = 1 M-1903 rifle
35 dimes = 1 haversack
25 dimes = 1 hand grenade
70 dimes = 100 bullets
55 dimes = feeding 10 soldiers for one day
350 dimes = 10 bayonettes³⁶

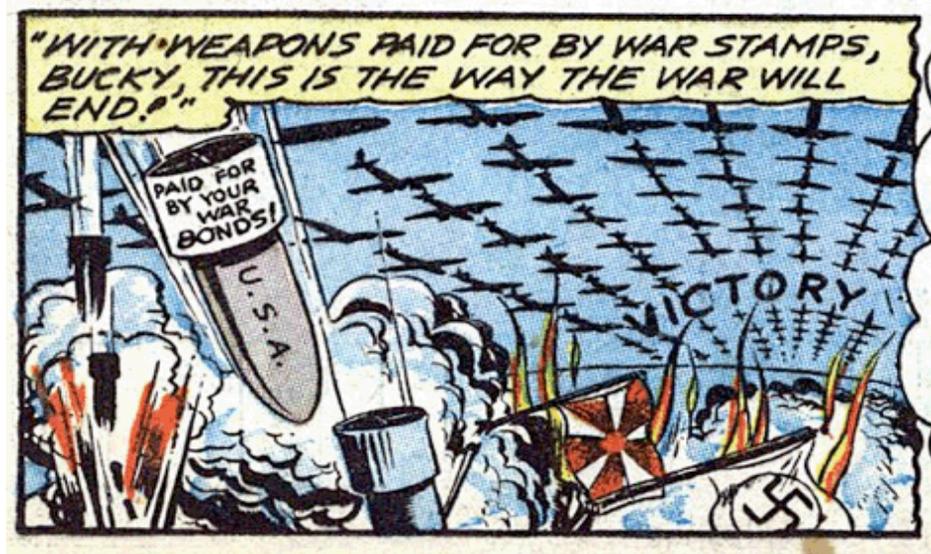
This ad showed the unifying aspect of World War II, but it was consistent with the spirit that had been encouraged in New Deal America. Beginning with the call to fear nothing but “fear itself,” and continuing throughout the 1930s in the fireside chats, Roosevelt had created an America used to the idea of pulling together to face monumental problems. Months later, an ad would feature a letter from Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau urging readers to buy savings stamps for ten cents apiece.³⁷ Everyone, even children, was asked to sacrifice and join in the war effort. Even more so than in World War I decades before, the entire country went to war together in some form or fashion.

In the story “Your Life Depends On It: A Special Captain America Feature,” the reader was exposed to a nightmare scenario portraying Nazi and Japanese agents encroaching on American shores. Captain America uses these images to express the importance of buying war stamps, showing a pile of stamps transforming into weapons. The story ends with Captain America telling the reader, “This is the way the war will end!,” showing the reader an American bomb [see image below].³⁸

³⁶ “Attention Americans!” *Captain America Comics #15* (New York: Timely Comics, June, 1942).

³⁷ “Letter from Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau” *Captain America Comics #18* (New York: Timely Comics, September, 1942).

³⁸ Stan Lee and Al Avison, “Your Life Depends On It” *Captain America Comics #19* (New York: Timely Comics, October, 1942).



[Image 1-6: *Captain America Comics* #19 (October, 1942), Al Avison, Artist]

Three years before the first atomic weapon was dropped on Japan, and years before anyone other than those directly involved in its research would be aware, the writers of *Captain America Comics* already conjured images of how the war would ultimately be won. On the one hand, this is consistent with the science-fiction nature of super-hero stories (rockets and such being commonly used in storylines); but on the other hand, in retrospect, the image seems prescient of impending American power. Although America had proven throughout 1941 that it could accomplish great things industrially when the situation called for it, the idea that America could create the weapons necessary to destroy the Axis powers still seemed, at this point, highly unlikely.

On close inspection of the above image, several bombs are being dropped on both the Japanese and Nazi flags. However, from a post-war perspective, it is difficult not to focus on the one, prominent bomb and the colorful Japanese flag. This is, indeed, how the war would end, though at the time the image was published, Allied victory was by no means certain. The turning of the tide in favor of the Allies in both theaters of war was

just beginning to happen as this issue hit newsstands. It is not difficult to imagine a child reading this issue while sitting on the floor of a suburban American home, looking up to see an adult holding a newspaper reporting Allied victory at Midway Island.

Reality and comic book appeared to coalesce once more in issue number twenty-one (December, 1942). In “The Creeper and the 3 Rubies of Doom,” the “last neutral country in Europe” (the fictional country of Alslavia) is due to sign a treaty with the United States. The Nazi villain, The Creeper, is determined to undermine the peace effort. Though captured by Captain America, The Creeper escapes, prompting President Roosevelt to call “J. Edgar” to put “every available man” on finding the villain. The culprit is ultimately exposed as the U.S. Ambassador to Alslavia.³⁹ By this point, the overwhelming majority of stories in *CAC* had devolved into a repetitive equation: a new villain appeared; an American businessman or politician would call for Captain America to stop him; Cap and Bucky would do so; the villain would be exposed as the very individual that called for his capture.

While the storyline subject matter seemed repetitious and the product of “cookie-cutter” mass production, it points out two key facts of the period. First, by this time many of the artists and writers had left the comic book industry to join the war effort. Jack Kirby became a graphic designer for the Army; and Stan Lee would soon leave Timely to join the Army as well. Therefore, *Captain America* and other comics were deprived of much of their creative talent. Second, because the demand for super-hero comics had reached such a fever pitch, with publishers creating more and more titles to

³⁹ Syd Shores and Al Avison, “The Creeper and the 3 Rubies of Doom” *Captain America Comics* #21 (New York: Timely Comics, December, 1942).

meet the demand with fewer and fewer creative resources, originality in story-telling was necessarily sacrificed to meet the deadlines for sales.

In that same late-1942 issue, a very different type of story did appear, titled “Satan and the Sorcerer’s Secret.” Watching from the pits of Hell, Satan decides that he can now conquer Earth as it is distracted by the chaos of war. Captain America is forced to fight Satan. Ultimately, the Devil is defeated by the light of “American good” in Cap’s eyes. Satan admits defeat and leaves. The message here – also pro-war – is clear: the United States is good; and good will always conquer evil.⁴⁰ The connection to fighting Nazism was also clear, since Hitler by this time was seen by the free world as the Devil himself.

Adolf Hitler came to power through regular constitutional channels in Germany in early 1933, shortly before Franklin Roosevelt became president. Both faced countries in economic crisis. Both faced the option of confronting those threats with dictatorial powers. While Hitler pounced on this option, Roosevelt resisted it, trusting instead in the power of democratic institutions and his own considerable political persuasive powers. If one sees the Devil as the temptation of power, Roosevelt represented the righteous resistance to that temptation. This faith in the process found fruition with ultimately four elections to the highest office in the land.⁴¹

Hitler represented the opposite choice. Many have quoted Hitler as saying that the larger the lie, the more people will believe it. The writers of *Captain America Comics*

⁴⁰ Syd Shores and Al Avison, “Satan and the Sorcerer’s Secret” *Captain America Comics* #21 (New York: Timely Comics, December, 1942).

⁴¹ Jonathan Alter, *The Defining Moment: FDR’s Hundred Days and the Triumph of Hope* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 5-8.

showed this aspect of the Fuehrer's personality, and cited this infamous quote. In the image that follows, Hitler explains the use of lies:



[Image 1-7: *Captain America Comics* #22 (January, 1943), Al Avison, Artist]

In this story, “Captain America Battles the Reaper!,” Hitler sends his agent, The Reaper, to the United States to sway American resolve against the war effort. Again, the comic suggests that anti-war sentiment at home is dangerous and must be guarded against. At the story’s conclusion, Captain America tells the people, “Men like the Reaper have always been able to fool some people – which is why we should all trust our

leader and not listen to rabble-rousing trouble-makers.”⁴² A close look at the image above illustrates two points: (1) Hitler is again portrayed as a madman as is seen clearly through the maniacal eyes during his short speech; and (2) the agent, Reaper, carries both the name and the traditional scythe of the Grim Reaper, the symbol of death. Madness and death were portrayed as synonymous with Nazism to Americans.

Every cover of *CAC* during the war years featured the heroes battling either Japanese or Nazi forces. Many advertisements also promoted the war effort; though they could equally be considered in some cases as war-profiteering. Throughout 1943, advertisements appeared for “Junior Air Raid Warden Kit[s]” and a writing kit and instructional manuals for writing “better letters” to soldiers in the field. Late that year, an announcement appeared that Timely Comics had decided to stop producing badges for the Captain America fan club, The Sentinels of Liberty, donating the metal instead to the war effort. Whether from noble intentions or not, the comic portrayed to its young readers that dedication to the soldiers in the field was sacrosanct.

Captain America also highlighted the unity of the Allies. In the story “Frozen Death” the Red Skull plots to destroy every factory in the “United Nations.”⁴³ Later that year, in the story “Auction of Death,” an unknown weapons dealer proposes – to both Axis and Allied powers – an auction on a weapon that he promises has the capability of destroying the world. The Axis leaders show their villainous natures by distrusting even each other. President Roosevelt tells Captain America, “We don’t want that weapon...

⁴² Syd Shores and Al Avison, “Captain America Battles the Reaper!” *Captain America Comics* #22 (New York: Timely Comics, January, 1943).

⁴³ “Frozen Death” (No Creative Team Credited), *Captain America Comics* #37 (New York: Timely Comics, April, 1944).

The United Nations would never resort to so horrible a thing!”⁴⁴ The Americans and Russians do, however, arrive at the auction to place bids in order to provide more time for Captain America to find the weapon, which the hero, of course, does. In retrospect, it seems ironic that the same president of the United States making such a claim about Allied war strategy actually approved the Manhattan Project that led to the birth of atomic warfare.

By fall 1944, Allied forces were entrenched in France, and Germany was only months away from total surrender. During this time, Timely Comics published a letter from General H.H. Arnold, Commanding General U.S. Army Air Forces, in the pages of *CAC*. This letter urged any young readers who held “summer war job[s]” to quit those jobs and return to school in the fall.⁴⁵ From 1940 to 1944, the number of school-age teens holding jobs went from 1 million to nearly 3 million.⁴⁶ With victory in Europe so clearly and closely at hand, the issue of American servicemen coming home in need of jobs was already a factor worth government consideration. Having finally come out of the Depression, fear of its return was real and palpable by late 1944. Many of the nearly thirteen million soldiers engaged in the war effort would be home within the year, and many of the wartime jobs promotions like the Braceros program and Rosie-the-Riveter advertising would soon begin to be reversed to open jobs for American men.

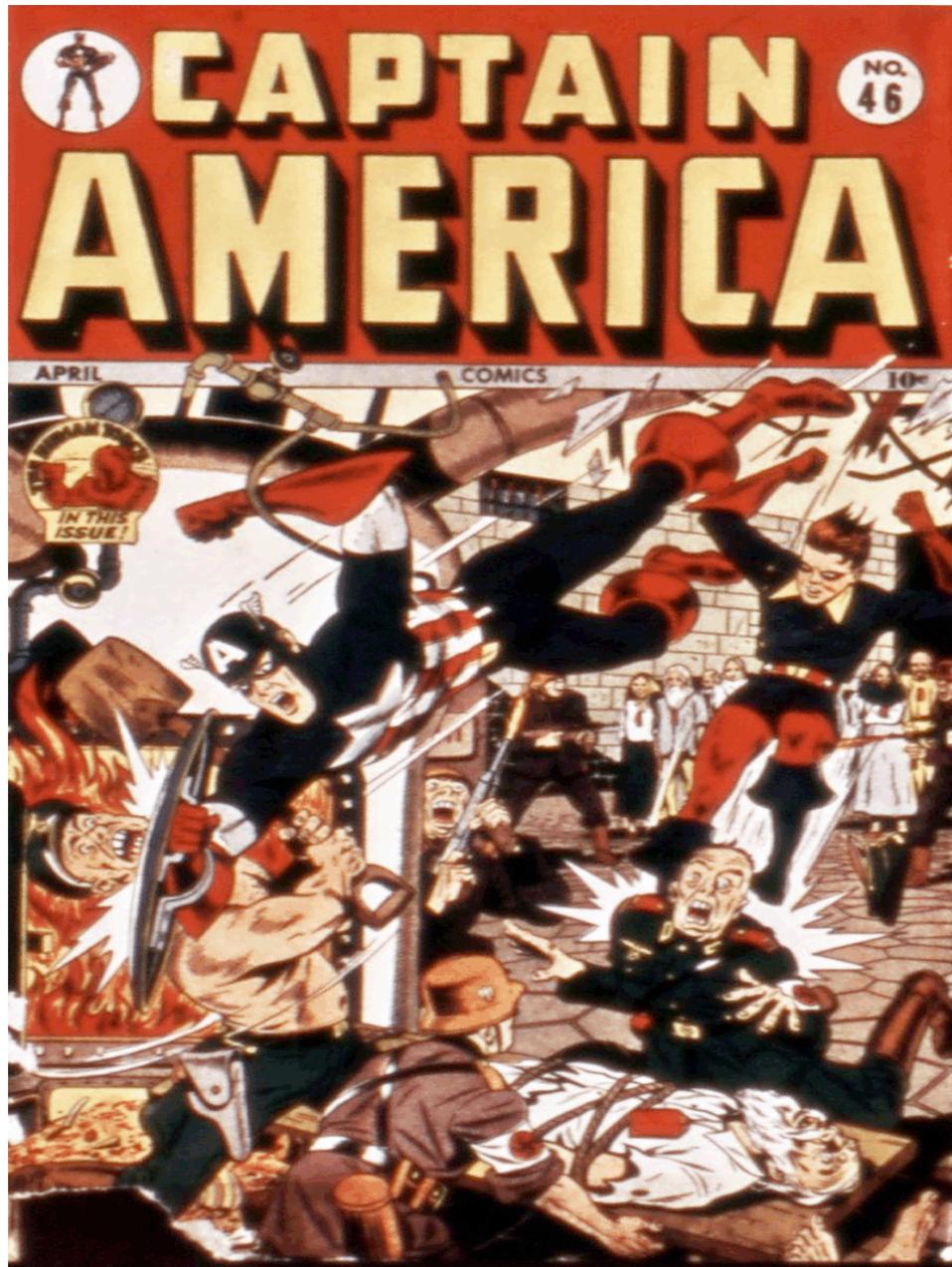
As German territories came more and more under Allied control, the atrocities committed against European Jews and others finally came to light in the media. This horror did not escape the creators of *Captain America Comics*. In one of the last issues

⁴⁴ “Auction of Death” (No Creative Team Credited), *Captain America Comics* #40 (New York: Timely Comics, June, 1944).

⁴⁵ “Important Message... From General [H.H.] Arnold, Commanding General U.S. Army Air Forces” *Captain America Comics* #43 (New York: Timely Comics, December, 1944).

⁴⁶ Polenberg, *War and Society*, 79.

published before Germany's surrender, the cover illustrated – though in as tamed a fashion as possible – some of these atrocities:



[Image 1-8: *Captain America Comics #46* (April, 1945), Artist Unknown]

Though not specified as Jews – and no corresponding story existed on the pages within – the image of Nazis placing people in ovens was a powerful one. Captain America and

Bucky rescuing these people from the ovens was consistent with reports of the Allied forces doing the same throughout Europe during the same period.

By spring 1945, Captain America's adventures were no longer war stories, but his mission against the Nazis continued. In the story "Captain America Battles the League of Hate," Nazi agents come to the United States disguised as medal-bearing American veterans, pushing for vigilante tactics against "foreigners." Their purpose is to earn the trust of the American people through their alleged war service and raise public ire against the growing internationalism of the post-war period.⁴⁷ Again, this story would be prescient as some, like future Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy, would go on to lie about their war records to earn a position of trust, only to use that trust to attack Americans who, in most cases, were innocent. International cooperation with the communist Soviet Union – though backed by government propaganda during the war – would cause many Americans to be wary in the post-war period of the influence the close association with communism could have on the American way of life. The fear of the Second Red Scare was as real as that portrayed in this late-1945 story.

One of the most controversial decisions of any leader in American history was Truman's decision to drop an atomic bomb on Japan in the summer of 1945. A story written before the August, 1945, bombing and hitting newsstands around September, illustrated Japan using "atom water" that causes massive explosions that kill many Allied soldiers without risking any Japanese soldiers. Captain America deduces the motive of such a weapon, "By using the 'atom-water' you save thousands of soldiers and weapons

⁴⁷ "Captain America Battles the League of Hate" (No Creative Team Credited), *Captain America Comics #49* (New York: Timely Comics, August, 1945).

for fighting us!... At the same time you hope to raise Japanese morale on the home front.”⁴⁸ After successfully destroying the Japanese weapon, Cap is proud to learn from boasting American officials that the U.S. has just perfected an atomic bomb that will “end the war immediately.” Neither the hero nor his U.S. Army companions see the irony.⁴⁹

Captain America’s justification of the use of atomic weaponry exactly mirrored that provided by the U.S. government in the wake of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Atomic weapons saved American lives, both by ending the war more quickly and by alleviating the need for an all-out invasion of Japan. The morality of such use was controversial at the time and has increasingly been so through succeeding generations. However, for young readers who may have been confused at the time, Captain America’s words likely proved to be a calming influence.

Captain America and Post-War America

Once the war was over, the need for Captain America’s alter-ego, Steve Rogers, to remain in the Army was gone as well. For several issues in 1946, Steve and Bucky were shown in civilian attire with no explanation of what they were now doing. Finally, with the return of Stan Lee from his own military service, Steve Rogers’s private life was finally explained in “The Private Life of Captain America.” This story reveals that prior to signing up for the experiment that transformed him into Captain America, Steve Rogers had been a public school teacher. Now, in the post-war period, Rogers gets a job

⁴⁸ “Mystery of the Atomic Boomerang” (No Creative Team Credited), *Captain America Comics* #51 (New York: Timely Comics, December, 1945).

⁴⁹ Ibid.

at the Lee School teaching geography.⁵⁰ Just as the millions of men returning from the frontlines of Europe and the Pacific, Captain America must return to a civilian mindset. In his new guise, Rogers – as Captain America – must first deal with a juvenile delinquent.

In the aftermath of the war, and increasing almost exponentially throughout the rest of the decade and on into the early 1950s, juvenile delinquency became an issue that parents, teachers, spiritual leaders, academics, and even politicians took more and more seriously. Much of this anxiety was a result of the Cold War. The United States had become a world super-power, and it competed against a system that promised equality and freedom from want. The consumer conscious U.S. found these aspects of communism challenging to compete with. How does a culture promote individualism and the rewards of personal achievement while at the same time promising to meet the needs of all the people? The ambiguities of the American ideal doubtless left many of its youngest citizens confused and uncertain as to what moral path to follow. Many critics saw comic books as the wrong source of moral direction for America's children.

The campaign against comic books was spearheaded to a large degree by Fredric Wertham, a renowned German-American clinical psychologist who spent much of the post-war period researching the causes of juvenile delinquency. Due to his strong stance against comic books and his push to censor or even outlaw them altogether, Wertham has been compared to Senator Joseph McCarthy.⁵¹ The key difference was that Wertham appears to have been genuinely concerned about the welfare of children, and based his

⁵⁰ Stan Lee and Al Avison, "The Private Life of Captain America," *Captain America Comics* #59 (New York: Timely Comics, November, 1946).

⁵¹ Jeffrey A. Brown, *New Heroes: Gender, Race, Fans and Comic Book Superheroes* (University of Toronto, 1997), 74.

criticism of comics on his belief in the scientific validity of his conclusions. Those conclusions, published in academic articles in the late 1940s and culminating in his infamous study, *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), blamed comic books for the rise in juvenile delinquency in the post-war years. Though Wertham cites several examples throughout his published research of individual teens whose behavior could have been attributed to the comic books they read, Wertham himself did not provide any notes or specific citations from which researchers could affirm or discredit his claims.⁵² Decades later, in a 2002 interview with The History Channel, Stan Lee argued that Wertham's suggestion that all juvenile delinquents read comics and, therefore, that comics led to juvenile delinquency, failed to note that all juvenile delinquents also drank milk but no one was arguing that milk caused juvenile delinquency.⁵³ However, at the time, many American parents, teachers, and religious leaders felt the same way, particularly taking into consideration the decline of super-hero comics in the post-war years, which were being replaced in the medium by increasing sales of crime and horror comics.⁵⁴ Not everyone agreed with his conclusions.

In 1945, the Child Study Association, made up of comic book editors, published a report that comic books, if properly supervised, posed no threat to children. Dr. Benjamin Spock, in *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*, concurred that comic books could be good for children. Additionally, Gershon Legman, in *Love and Death: A Study in Censorship*, blamed censorship boards for the societal ills that

⁵² Among the many who have commented on Wertham and his presentation of evidence, two key works are: David Hajdu, *The Ten Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 230-2; and Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 157-8.

⁵³ Interview with Stan Lee, *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked* (DVD).

⁵⁴ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 154; *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked* (DVD); *Comic Book Confidential* (DVD).

Wertham associated with comic books.⁵⁵ Professor of Education Frederic Thrasher stated,

Wertham's dark picture of the influence of comics is more forensic than scientific and illustrates a dangerous habit of projecting our social frustrations upon some specific trait of our culture, which becomes a sort of 'whipping boy' for our failure to control the whole gamut of social breakdown... it may be said that no acceptable evidence has been produced by Wertham or anyone else for the conclusion that reading comic magazines has, or has not a significant relation to delinquent behavior.⁵⁶

The conclusion drawn by these arguments is simple: the fact that most juvenile delinquents read comic books did not equate to most comic book readers being juvenile delinquents. Despite these protestations to Wertham's claims, the crusade against comic books gained significant momentum as the 1940s drew to a close; and by 1954 it gained an ally in the form of the U.S. Senate.

The biggest complaint concerning the super-hero comics was what Wertham defined as the "Superman Complex," or the joy one feels when seeing people physically punished repeatedly. He also suggested that Batman and Robin represented a homosexual fantasy, citing two young boys who claimed to be aroused after reading the comic book.⁵⁷ Horror and crime comics, of course, were more disturbing with their constant references to and images of violent death.⁵⁸ This, however, was not unique to that genre of comics, and the criticism – of the violence of comic books, at least, – was, to a certain extent, legitimate. Throughout the first year of *Captain America Comics* the villain in each story would meet an often violent death; and, more often than not, this

⁵⁵ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 89,91.

⁵⁶ Frederic M. Thrasher, "The Comics and Delinquency: Cause or Scapegoat," *Journal of Educational Sociology*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (American Sociological Association, December, 1949), 195, 205.

⁵⁷ Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1972, c1954), 12, 39, 72.

⁵⁸ David Hadju, *The Ten Cent Plague: The Great Comic Book Scare and How It Changed America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 97; Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, Picture inserts.

death would be dealt by the young Bucky Barnes, with Captain America describing the death as justified. As mentioned earlier, in the very first story introducing Captain America, the Nazi spy who kills the scientist responsible for creating Captain America trips and falls into an electrical panel, dying in the process. Cap calls his death “well deserved.”⁵⁹

In the second story of that same issue, the villain proposes to kill a U.S. Navy admiral prior to a scheduled speech in front of naval officers. As the curtain is drawn for the speech, the admiral’s body is seen hung like a scarecrow with a bullet hole clearly on his forehead.⁶⁰



[Image 1-9: *Captain America Comics #1* (March, 1941), Jack Kirby, Artist]

⁵⁹ Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, “Case No. 1: Meet Captain America,” *Captain America Comics #1* (New York: Timely Comics, March, 1941).

⁶⁰ Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, Untitled Story, *Captain America Comics #1* (New York: Timely Comics, March, 1941).

The Admiral's eyes are open, blood still coming from the bullet hole in his forehead. The crowd's reaction is violent as well: "Get the Dirty Killer!;" and "Lynch Him!" This comic was marketed toward 8-10-year old boys. This image was consistent with images in the first year's issues of *CAC*. As mentioned earlier, as most of the villains from those early stories died at story's end, it was often Bucky who killed them. The young hero took apparent delight in killing America's enemies; and Captain America had no qualms about such an end, seeing death as befitting their criminal activities.

Still another issue portrays the Red Skull hanging two people he suspects of being the real Captain America and Bucky. Though imposters, their deaths were just as gruesome.



[Image 1-10: *Captain America Comics* #3 (May, 1941), Jack Kirby, Artist]

These were the types of images and messages that Dr. Wertham and his supporters opposed. Though the images of violence in Captain America's adventures, specifically,

would lessen over time, the nature of super-hero adventures, which involved physically intervening against evil, required a degree of inherent violence. Even in one of the final issues of *Captain America* in 1954, one story shows Captain America punching the villain into unconsciousness and leaving him to burn alive in his own lair.⁶¹ An interesting point concerning the graphically violent nature of these early Captain America stories is that when one compares them to the other iconic hero / teenage sidekick team, Batman and Robin, during this same period, no such degree of violence is present. Batman, the dark vigilante, captured criminals and turned them over to proper authorities. Captain America, arguably representing official authority as an agent of the U.S. government, distributed judgment and execution without remorse.

There is evidence that at least Timely Comics attempted to address this concern as the anti-comic book mania gained momentum in 1948. The publisher hired as its “Editorial Consultant” Jean Thompson, MD, psychiatrist, and member of the Child Guidance Bureau, New York City Board of Education.⁶² This move, however, would not benefit Captain America for long. The last appearance of the hero in the 1940s came in issue number seventy-four in summer 1949. The next issue was retitled *Captain America’s Weird Tales*, though the character was not featured either on the cover or in its pages, the stories being entirely of the horror genre. Beginning with issue number seventy-six, the title was permanently changed to *Weird Tales* and became a monthly horror comic.

⁶¹ Stan Lee and John Romita, Sr., “The Betrayers!” *Captain America* #76 (New York: Atlas Comics, May, 1954).

⁶² Production Credits, *Captain America Comics* #69 (New York: Timely Comics, November, 1948).

By 1950, the fear of communism at home was at a fever pitch, exacerbated by fear-mongering politicians such as Senator McCarthy. In a 1950 speech in West Virginia, McCarthy discussed his concerns about communists infiltrating the highest levels of American government and his belief that the struggle against communism was a moral one:

The real, basic difference, however, lies in the religion of immoralism – invented by Marx, preached feverishly by Lenin, and carried to unimaginable extremes by Stalin. This religion of immoralism, if the Red half of the world wins – and well it may – this religion of immoralism will more deeply wound and damage mankind than any conceivable economic or political system.⁶³

The United States, therefore, faced a threat every bit as real and dangerous as that posed by Hitler a decade before. Having defeated that previous enemy, there was every reason to believe that victory over the current foe was just as possible. McCarthy's supporters contended that victory required a concerted national effort.

As the United States faced the new threat – exaggerated though it may have been – of expansionist international communism, such a patriotic and masculine hero as Captain America seemed a good fit with the political climate.⁶⁴ In the immediate post-war years, the American consensus was that the United States was a virtuous nation, and that her mores were superior to those of the communists and that Americans could not ignore the rest of the world.⁶⁵ Loyalty oaths, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), and Joe McCarthy helped to create an atmosphere of fear and paranoia not at all dissimilar to that suggested by the “fifth column” spy storylines of pre-

⁶³ Joseph McCarthy, “The Threat of Domestic Communism,” Speech delivered February 9, 1950, *Congressional Record, 81st Congress, 2nd Session, 1950, Vol. 96, Pt. 2, 1954-57*

⁶⁴ K.A. Cuordileone, “‘Politics in an Age of Anxiety’: Cold War Political Culture and the Crisis in American Masculinity, 1949-1960,” *The Journal of American History, Vol. 87, No. 2* (September, 2000), 516-18.

⁶⁵ Matthew J. Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis: Comic Books and the Unmasking of Cold War America* (New York: Continuum Books, 2009), 32-3.

war Captain America stories. In 1954, as the U.S. Senate held subcommittee meetings on the dangers of the comic book industry with Wertham as its star witness, Stan Lee re-introduced Captain America to a new generation of comic book readers as “Captain America: Commie Smasher.”⁶⁶



[Image 1-11: *Captain America* #76 (May, 1954), John Romita, Sr., Artist]

⁶⁶ Ro, *Tales to Astonish*, 51.

This incarnation of the hero, similar in most ways to the World War II character, represented this idea of American consensus in the face of growing international communism. Research suggests that American children after World War II, inundated as they had been with a constant bombardment of calls for patriotism and vigilance against America's enemies as evidenced in the pages of *Captain America Comics*, were ready to continue doing their duty after the war.⁶⁷ The new Captain America reflected that reality. The approach taken by the character toward the threat of communist agents here at home was consistent with that taken toward Nazi agents before and during World War II.

The subtitle, "Commie Smasher," and the extreme scarcity of accessibility to surviving copies of those three issues, has led to the supposition that these stories reflected the rabid anticommunism of the day, McCarthy-esque in all but name. While they did promote anti-communism, portraying communists as dishonest and in every way the same as Nazis a decade before, communists were not shown to be any more sinister or threatening than those earlier villains. This is consistent with the thinking of the time, that totalitarianism was totalitarianism, whether clothed in rightist Nazism or leftist communism.⁶⁸ This leads to a rather confusing aspect of the immediate post-World War II years (roughly 1946-1954): with left defined as right and vice versa, the definitions of clear political parameters becomes difficult. Radically conservative fear tactics utilized to allegedly enforce personal freedom seem inconsistent with ideas of liberalism more

⁶⁷ William M. Tuttle, Jr., "America's Children in an Era of War, Hot and Cold," 27.

⁶⁸ Les K. Adler and Thomas G. Paterson, "Red Fascism: The Merger of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia in the American Image of Totalitarianism, 1930s-1950s," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 75, No. 4 (American Historical Association, April, 1970), 1046, 1063.

clearly defined by the Civil Rights Movement and the overall populist atmosphere of the 1960s.⁶⁹

With Cap's return, the character Betsy Ross – last seen as Cap's partner “Golden Girl” at the end of the 1940s – was now a reporter, no longer a secret hero or knowing anything of Captain America's secret identity. This new story portrayed her as the victim of false accusations of being a communist spy. Ultimately, Captain America proves her innocence, exposing her co-workers as the real traitors.⁷⁰ This storyline reflected the political atmosphere by 1954: accusations of communism did not require any manner of hard evidence; the mere suspicion was enough to ruin lives and careers. Just as in World War II, however, domestic threats were seen as being as real as threats from abroad.

Nevertheless, the hero's approach to foreign enemy agents in 1954 was consistent with his World War II adventures, with a strong focus on sacrifice – even of personal liberties – for the greater good of national security. A twenty-first century perspective on the realities and degree of the communist threat in the 1950s provides a dramatically different perspective, but for the time Captain America's crusade against communist influence within the U.S. served what would have been considered a liberal agenda of promoting personal freedom and democracy against yet another foreign threat to those founding principles, and was not necessarily inconsistent with the anti-communism of many 1950s-era liberals.⁷¹

Taken out of that context, Captain America in 1954 may have appeared to represent a dramatic contrast to the principles that the character espoused in all other

⁶⁹ Richard H. Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), vii-viii, 3, 145, 401.

⁷⁰ Stan Lee and John Romita, “The Betrayers!” *Captain America* #76 (New York: Atlas Comics, May, 1954).

⁷¹ Brands, *American Dreams*, 45-6.

decades since its inception. This is an issue that will be discussed more fully in the analysis of the 1970s, where writer Steve Englehart was given the task of explaining away this seemingly more radically conservative version of the character. Englehart's solution would be to explain away the "Commie Smasher" Captain America as having been someone other than the original Steve Rogers, someone influenced by the reactionary politics of his day (and additionally warped by a more unstable Super Soldier Serum). Within the overall context of the "life" of the character, therefore, the Commie Smasher issues do represent at least a partial contradiction to the liberal (or slightly-left-of-center) ideology that Steve Rogers came to represent, but the anti-communist Cap never engaged in the kind of anti-liberalism associated with extreme McCarthyism.

At the time, though, Captain America and Bucky were once again called upon to protect America from all foreign threats. Though only three issues in its run, communists in all corners of the Cold War were portrayed: the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, North Korea, and even Vietnam. Re-booting the series where it left off numerically with number seventy-six, Steve Rogers and Bucky (who had been severely wounded and taken out of action permanently in 1947 but returns here alongside Captain America) have re-enlisted in the Army to face the growing menace of international communism. In "Come to the Commies," the two are stationed in Vietnam, months before the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu and over a year before President Eisenhower sent the first military advisors to the region. The North Vietnamese are using kidnapped Americans to broadcast forced statements against the French war effort. In order to rescue the Americans, Captain America pretends to acquiesce to communist demands that he disavow the United States over the radio, but at the last minute exposes the communist

ruse over the radio, telling his captors, “Real Americans Never Turn Red!”⁷² He concludes with a warning (presumably to the reader), “Beware, commies, spies, traitors, and foreign agents! Captain America, with all loyal, free men behind him, is looking for you, ready to fight until the last one of you is exposed for the yellow scum that you are!”⁷³

Again the pages of *Captain America* were prescient in their foretelling of future events. Relatively insignificant in the eyes of most Americans in 1954, Vietnam was already seen by Stan Lee and the now-renamed Atlas Comics as a front in the war against international communism. Months before the Geneva agreements that would divide the country, north and south, and years before large numbers of American troops would be sent to the region, Captain America already battled against the growing communist threat in Indo-China. His ability to so easily fool the communists presented the enemy philosophy as appealing only to weak-minded and unintelligent people. Again, though, just as before World War II, the threat to America was shown to be just as much Asian as European.

In a story entitled “You Die at Midnight,” an American engineer is coerced by communist agents to steal the plans for a “midget atomic engine.” The agents threaten to kill the engineer’s blind son if he does not comply. The boy prays for Captain America to help, and the hero – inexplicably – hears the plea and complies. Cap follows the engineer, waiting first to see if the man makes the right decision before helping him.⁷⁴ Here, the hero’s help depends on the victim making the right decision of country over

⁷² Stan Lee and John Romita, Sr., “Come to the Commies,” *Captain America* #76 (New York: Atlas Comics, May, 1954).

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Stan Lee and John Romita, Sr., “You Die at Midnight!” *Captain America* #77 (New York: Atlas Comics, July, 1954).

family. Though Captain America does not say he would not have helped in any circumstance, he does tell Bucky that he waited to see what decision the engineer made. Since 1947, the issue of loyalty had been central to the anti-communist campaign, as both the Senate (primarily under McCarthy) and HUAC questioned the loyalty of hundreds of Americans.

Though some questioned were no doubt communist agents with sinister designs, many innocent people had their lives destroyed by the accusations of communism. Ironically, American citizens were expected to place devotion to government over devotion to family or friends, even though this was exactly what communists were accused of doing. This lesson was central to the next story “The Man With No Face.” Captain America works with a Chinese-American police detective, Wing, who is investigating attempts to coerce loyal Chinese-Americans to send goods and money to communist China in order to safeguard relatives still living there. The villain – the aforementioned “man with no face” – is discovered to be the twin brother of Detective Wing, illustrating the divisive nature of communism.⁷⁵ Family ties came second to the state.

The final story in that same issue focused on North Korea. As North Korean prisoners remained in South Korea in the wake of the 1950-53 conflict, communist agents were poisoning the prisoners in order to make the United Nations look bad. Captain America gets needed medicine through to the prisoners, announcing at the end, “The United Nations are the only ones who can cure what ails [the communists]... with

⁷⁵ Stan Lee and John Romita, Sr., “The Man With No Face,” *Captain America* #77 (New York: Atlas Comics, July, 1954).

freedom and democracy.”⁷⁶ These Asian stories are important as they show that Cold War fears went far beyond Soviet communism. With the U.N. police action in Korea essentially ended and Vietnam still ahead, the issue of East Asian communism was still shown in these stories as a threat equal to that presented by the Soviet Union.

Bradford Wright argues that “times had changed since 1945, but these anticommunist superheroes [Captain America, and his Timely / Atlas Comics contemporaries Human Torch and Sub-Mariner] had not changed with them;” so that the return of these heroes as forces against anticommunism was not successful.⁷⁷ In the overall context of the 1950s, the competition coming from the new rock-n-roll music and, even more so, television, were obviously contributing factors as well. These two entertainment genres did not preach politics at the audience to the extent the Atlas Comics heroes of the period did. Super-hero comic books, then, ceased to be escapist entertainment to the degree that these other forms successfully did.

The issues of the “Commie Smasher” Captain America treated communist spies just as they did Nazi insurgents before and during World War II. The message being portrayed was not inconsistent with President Harry Truman’s own interpretation of the growing conflict:

“One of the primary objectives of the foreign policy of the United States [in 1947] is the creation of conditions in which we and other nations will be able to work out a way of life free from coercion. This was a fundamental issue in the war with Germany and Japan. Our victory was won over countries which sought to impose their will, and their

⁷⁶ Stan Lee and John Romita, Sr., Untitled Story, *Captain America* #77 (New York: Atlas Comics, July, 1954).

⁷⁷ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 123.

way of life, upon other nations.”⁷⁸ The United States needed international stability to promote its own economic – and even political – stability at home.⁷⁹ The system of communism was inconsistent with this stability. Freedom and personal liberty, by American standards, were best supported by democratic capitalism, which alone was portrayed as a system free of coercion. If freedom of choice were guaranteed, capitalism would surely be the choice of other nations.

Matthew Costello points out that until 1954, the anticommunist crusade represented an ideological consensus in America.⁸⁰ Communism was godless. It denied its people the freedoms of choice that democratic capitalism promised. It threatened to take such freedoms away from the rest of the world. Communism was, in every way, the exact same threat as that posed by Nazism more than a decade earlier. It is reasonable, then, that the threat would be presented in a similar way in the comic books. The failure of Captain America’s return in 1954 seems to have been less about opposition to the promotion of anti-communism and more the product of the overall fall in demand for super-hero comic books in general.

While World War II saw the birth of dozens – if not hundreds – of costumed super-heroes, all but three (Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman) were cancelled by 1950, replaced instead by romance, crime, horror, and funny animal / cartoon-inspired comics. Superman survived primarily due to the popular radio and television programs featuring the character. Batman survived in large part due to his connection to the Superman comic books and radio shows; and Wonder Woman continued because the

⁷⁸ Harry S. Truman and Dean Acheson, “The Cold War To Be A Moral Crusade,” (“The Truman Doctrine”) Speech delivered March 12, 1947, *Congressional Record*, 80th Congress, 1st Session, 1980-81.

⁷⁹ John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 353.

⁸⁰ Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis*, 50-1.

contract between National (soon to be DC) Comics and Wonder Woman's creator, William Moulton Marston, required the company to continue to publish at least four issues of Wonder Woman comics a year or lose its rights to the character.⁸¹ Super-hero comics, in general, were no longer popular with young people. Their influence was replaced, as just mentioned, by rock-n-roll music and television.

In the last story of the last issue of *Captain America* in the 1950s, Stan Lee focused on the growing power of television. In "The Hour of Doom," American youth were being swayed by a new television hero, Chuck Blayne, who is secretly a communist agent. Again, the agent's intent is to sway American youth against the international cooperation of the United Nations. Captain America discovers the plot and forces the culprit to confess on television. The hero then tells the audience, "Americans play not to win, necessarily, but for the sake of good sportsmanship and fair play... which Nazis and Reds know nothing about at all."⁸² Again, the reader is made aware of the similarities of communism and the old enemy of World War II.

The growing power of television was the crux of the story. The irony here was that the final Captain America story of the decade would emphasize the power of the very medium that would overpower comic books in the hearts and minds of American youth by the end of the fifties. While comic books were the same price as during the war, ten cents per issue – cheaper, actually, when cost-of-living adjustments are considered – television was free. Additionally, television did not require any action on the part of the audience (such as reading and using imagination to fill in story gaps). A new generation

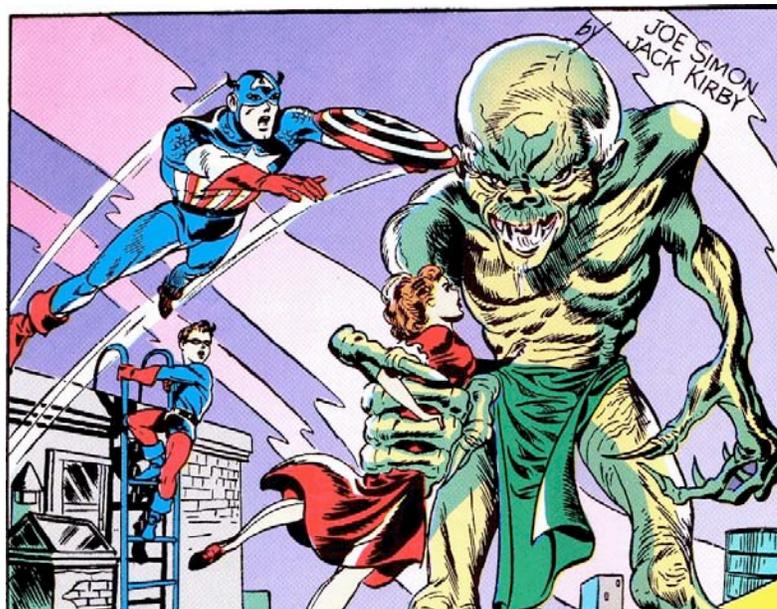
⁸¹ Francine D. Valcour, *Manipulating the Messenger: Wonder Woman as an American Female Icon* (Arizona State University, 2006), 150; *Comic Book Confidential* (DVD); *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked* (DVD); and *Look! Up in the Sky!* (DVD).

⁸² Stan Lee and John Romita, Sr., "The Hour of Doom," *Captain America* #78 (New York: Atlas Comics, September, 1954).

of American youth, exposed to the post-war abundance of living in the world's primary super-power, was seduced by forms of entertainment that were decreasingly "hands-on," especially what was dubbed "the idiot box."

Race and Gender

Examining these early issues of Captain America stories from a different perspective, one aspect of World War II-era and post-war comic books that has been the subject of some discussion is the racist portrayals of Japanese during the war. While true, these images were not at all unlike those in propaganda posters from the Ad Council or in the general popular culture. This does not excuse their use, however. The presence of these images, enhancing as they did the images portrayed in government propaganda posters and elsewhere, additionally enhanced the veracity of the image in the minds of the young readers. One of the earliest images of East Asians came in a story entitled "Captain America and the Ageless Orientals Who Wouldn't Die!!"



[Image 1-12: *Captain America Comics* #2 (April, 1941), Jack Kirby, Artist]

The creatures illustrated above represented a race of super-men from Tibet. The yellow skin, slanted eyes, and fanged teeth and pointed ears were consistent with all images of the Japanese enemy throughout the war years. Japanese would be repeatedly referred to as both “Japs” and “Nips.” Captain America would go farther, referring to Japanese later as “Yellow Rats,” “Yellow Monkeys,” and “Nippo.”⁸³ Though considered acceptable at the time, particularly once America was at war with Japan, the possibly unintended result was to create the ideology among young people that non-whites were in some way or other less than human, devaluing their lives.

Does total support of a war effort require utter hatred of the enemy and the devaluing of them as a people? By contrast, does respecting an enemy as human beings give them value so that taking their lives becomes problematic and ethically questionable? Does war promote hate and, therefore, become an ethical issue rather than a political one? These are all questions posed by the World War II images of Japanese – and Germans to a lesser extent – in the pages of comic books considering that they were, at the time, primarily a children’s entertainment medium.

While racist stereotypes of Asians could be explained away by the war climate, negative or non-existent images of African-Americans could not be. In the seventy-eight issues of Captain America stories produced from 1940 through 1954, there were only two African-American characters depicted in any way. This is consistent with the observation of Christian Steinmetz that “African-Americans... were completely absent from the text [of World War II comics] [as they were equally] invisible in [overall]

⁸³ No Creative Team Credited, “Tojo’s Terror,” *Captain America Comics* #42 (New York: Timely Comics, October, 1944).

American culture.”⁸⁴ The first had no dialogue – though he would become a recurring character in *Captain America Comics*’ sister magazine, *Young Allies* – and was a member of the young “Sentinels of Liberty,” a group of young patriots headed by Bucky (and representing the real-life fan club of the same name).



[Image 1-13: *Captain America Comics* #5 (August, 1941), Jack Kirby, Artist]

While the white boys are dressed in what might be considered normal attire, the black child wears a Cab Calloway-style zoot-suit. His skin is so dark that his only visible features are the whites of his eyes and thick lips. While grossly offensive by modern standards, the image was consistent with the traditional, demeaning, but widely-accepted Jim Crow, *Amos and Andy*-esque popular image of African-Americans in white American culture at the time. At the same time, the image also suggested that the Sentinels of Liberty were an equal-opportunity organization.

This dichotomous mixture of racism and inclusiveness was not inconsistent with Depression-era popular consciousness. The young black character’s name was later

⁸⁴ Christian Steinmetz, “A Genealogy of Absence of Evil: Tracing the Nation’s Borders with *Captain America*,” (Master’s Thesis, Georgia State University, 2008), 198.

revealed to be “White Wash.”⁸⁵ It is not clear what this name was supposed to mean. One possibility is that the character’s inclusion in the Sentinels of Liberty was meant to whitewash white America’s general exclusion of African-Americans through segregation and overt racism throughout the country. Another possibility, especially considering official government policy regarding African-Americans in the military, was that his presence whitewashed the fact that African-Americans were seen as inferior to whites in times of war and relegated to secondary status. Jason Dittmer suggests that it is more likely consistent with the tradition in popular culture of “naming black characters names that highlight their race.”⁸⁶

Over a year later, the only other African-American in the pre-Civil Rights Era issues of Captain America appeared. A wealthy white woman’s black butler is sent into the basement of what is believed to be a haunted house:



[Image 1-14: *Captain America Comics* #19 (October, 1942), Al Avison, Artist]

⁸⁵ Advertisement for *Young Allies* magazine, *Captain America Comics* #14 (New York: Timely Comics, May, 1942).

⁸⁶ Richard Hall, Interview with Jason Dittmer, December 28, 2010.

The butler, Mose, then goes to the cellar, stating, “Dis Ole Man Am Scared!” Here is yet another grossly offensive stereotype that reflected portrayals of African-Americans in popular culture at the time. The afore-mentioned popular radio program *Amos and Andy* portrayed this stereotype, and both were not only accepted but widely embraced in American culture during the period. There were literally no non-white heroic figures during this period; racial and ethnic minority men were either villains or victims.

Women fared somewhat better. Just as Rosie-the-Riveter inspired women to go into the workplace, shrewd villainesses outsmarted Abbott and Costello, and Lois Lane worked alongside Clark Kent in comic books and on radio, so, too, women in the pages of *Captain America Comics* – both good and evil – represented a new American womanhood. From the beginning of the medium, comic book creators and publishers concerned themselves with how best to appeal to the female market. Super-heroes targeted primarily male audiences, emphasizing the masculine. Bulging muscles, solving problems with violence, and saving damsels in distress were heroic qualities as old as Greek myths. The origin of Captain America emphasized this even more. Steve Rogers could not be a hero, serving his country, as he was. Only after taking the “strange, seething liquid” that gave him his Olympic physique could he become Captain America.⁸⁷ This was even more ironic considering that *CAC#1* also portrayed real-life U.S. President Roosevelt, whose struggle with polio was widely known (though the degree of his incapacity was not). By December 1940, America had struggled and overcome an overwhelming challenge; the young readers introduced to Captain America

⁸⁷ Simon and Kirby, “Case No. 1: Meet Captain America,” *Captain America Comics #1* (March, 1941).

were being told that only with great physical ability could such success be achieved. Comic books enhanced the traditional stereotypes favoring men.

Aside from the Greek goddesses of old, women were not heroes. The popular view of women in World War II-era / male-dominated American culture was that they were to be protected, even to the point of being dominated. In a study of masculinity in American culture, Anthony Easthope defines three categories by which to define gender: body image; social roles; and the internalization of those roles.⁸⁸ As had already been established by Superman and Batman before, the super-hero was a man of exceptional physique. The message here was that true men were physically superior, and that the more muscular, the more manly.⁸⁹ Easthope also concludes that “patriotism,” the dominant ideology leading up to and continuing after the war, was “implicitly masculine.”⁹⁰ Captain America exemplified above all other comic book heroes the very image of masculinity at the dawn of World War II.

That image, however, was beginning to change by 1940. As recently as 1939, widely popular movies such as *The Wizard of Oz* and *Gone With The Wind* portrayed strong, heroic women. Only Dorothy’s cleverness led to final victory over the Wicked Witch of the West. Scarlett O’Hara, while every bit the traditional Southern belle, relied on her own cunning to achieve her goals, even successfully defending herself against a Union soldier. Similarly, the numerous roles of Joan Crawford during this period support this argument.⁹¹ As America slowly approached the time when women would be asked

⁸⁸ Anthony Easthope, *What A Man’s Gotta Do: The Masculine Myth in Popular Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1986), 2.

⁸⁹ Easthope, *What A Man’s Gotta Do*, 52.

⁹⁰ Easthope, *What A Man’s Gotta Do*, 57.

⁹¹ Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 81, 192-94, 255-6.

to come out in the hundreds of thousands to do “men’s work” for the war effort, American pop-culture already considered the possibility that women could do anything that men could do.

In the very first issue of *Captain America Comics*, the secret laboratory conducting the super soldier experiments was protected by a female agent, identified only as Agent X-13. While actually young and beautiful, Agent X-13 disguised herself as an elderly woman. She guarded the entrance to the lab, armed and prepared to kill any unauthorized personnel.⁹² She did not require any male back-up. The government clearly trusted her to perform this duty on her own. When placed in the larger context of pop culture – particularly pop culture targeted at children – this female government agent expressed to American children the idea that women were as capable, and with as much intestinal fortitude, as men.

Most comic book super-heroes had “girlfriends,” women whom the hero secretly loved (and who secretly loved him back). In the case of Captain America, this character was Betty Ross (later re-named “Betsy Ross”). Betty, too, was a “Special Investigator for the U.S. Government.”⁹³ Once the war started, Ross joined the Women’s Army Corps (WAC) as a lieutenant, at one point scolding Private Rogers for forgetting to salute her. He responds with a snappy salute, saying, “Sorry, Sir! [I] mean Ma’am!”⁹⁴ In a military still segregated by both race and gender, the concept of women officers was still new. Steve’s initial “Sir” was reminiscent of the old Navy tradition that women were bad

⁹² Simon and Kirby, “Case No. 1: Meet Captain America,” *Captain America Comics #1* (March, 1941).

⁹³ Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, “Captain America and the Ageless Orientals Who Wouldn’t Die!,” *Captain America Comics #2* (New York: Timely Comics, April, 1941).

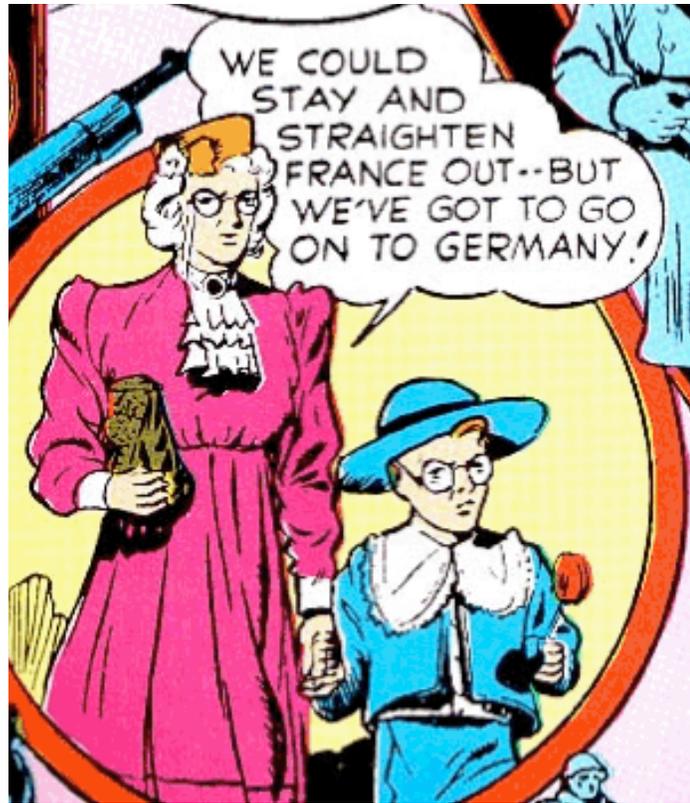
⁹⁴ “The Master of the Killer Mongoose,” No Creative Team Credited, *Captain America Comics #33* (New York: Timely Comics, December, 1943).

luck on board ship, so that women on board naval vessels were referred to as “sir.” The military was still a man’s purview, and the presence of a woman was a relatively new experience.

Old stereotypes died hard, as the pages of the comics from this period frequently demonstrated. In “Trapped in the Nazi Strong-Hold,” Captain America and Bucky are sent to Germany to rescue an American financier, Henry Baldwin, who has promised to financially back the British war effort. Cap and Bucky disguise themselves as an elderly woman and a young boy in a “Little Lord Fauntleroy” outfit, which Bucky refers to as a “sissy suit.”⁹⁵ This comment suggests the disparaging attitude of young people at the time – and still today – toward boys who were not “masculine.” In the very next issue, undercover on a Hollywood movie set, Bucky would once more find himself in such a “sissy outfit.”⁹⁶ Comments such as these only exacerbated the popular image of manliness and derision of anything that strayed from that image.

⁹⁵ Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, “Trapped in the Nazi Strong-Hold,” *Captain America Comics* #2 (New York: Timely Comics, April, 1941).

⁹⁶ Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, “The Hunchback of Hollywood and the Movie Murder,” *Captain America Comics* #3 (New York: Timely Comics, May, 1941).



[Image 1-15: *Captain America Comics* #2 (April, 1941), Jack Kirby, Artist]

Again the image of an elderly woman – as opposed to the possibility of an equally elderly man – was seen as the least threatening to potential enemies. The image was reinforced by the bright pink dress worn by Cap. Pink was a feminine color, and one that no man would ever wear. In the last issue to hit newsstands before Pearl Harbor, Cap and Bucky were once more placed in female costumes when they and some of their fellow soldiers are forced, inexplicably, to dress up like vaudevillian showgirls. When Sergeant Duffy orders Steve Rogers on stage in his costume, Rogers mockingly blows the sergeant a kiss and says, “Yes, Sargy Darling!”⁹⁷ This second portrayal of Captain America in women’s garb was more comical in nature, reminiscent of the cross-dressing antics of Bugs Bunny, of movie cartoon serial fame. Still, the clothes made the man, and Steve’s

⁹⁷ Stan Lee and Al Avison, “The Terrible Menace of the Pygmies of Terror,” *Captain America Comics* #12 (New York: Timely Comics, March, 1942).

behavior in women's clothes required a more feminine persona. Interestingly, both times that Captain America wore women's clothing, he continued to smoke his pipe, a reminding wink and nod to the reader that Cap was, at heart, still all man.

Before the war ended, the publishers of *Captain America Comics* began to more seriously target women – or at least girls – as the number of advertisements aimed at female readers increased over time. At the end of 1943, one advertisement promoted the book *A Complete Guide to Charm* “For Every Girl Who Wants to be Lovely.”⁹⁸ In 1944, Timely began publishing *Miss America Magazine* for teenage girls, promoting make-up tips, romance stories, fashion suggestions, etc. By 1948, advertisements emerged promoting weight loss drugs targeted specifically at women. In 1949, a full-page advertisement presented the “Triolette,” a three-in-one uplift bra, waist “nipper,” and garter belt for \$5.95; and the “All Nylon Girdle” for \$2.98.⁹⁹ Also, in 1954, an ad promoted “20 Dresses for \$3.50,” with other assorted women's garments.¹⁰⁰ These suggest that marketers believed that women, at some point, at least opened these superhero comic books, either as mothers of young readers, girlfriends of older readers, or female readers themselves.

Another key point that suggests publishers increasingly considered female readers was the emergence of “Golden Girl” in 1947. In his study of post-war comic books, William Savage concludes that post-war comic books were sexist in nature, and that “The search for a strong female character could stop with Wonder Woman.”¹⁰¹ Jane Sherron

⁹⁸ Advertisement, *Captain America Comics* #36 (New York: Timely Comics, March, 1944).

⁹⁹ Advertisement, *Captain America Comics* #70 (New York: Timely Comics, January, 1949).

¹⁰⁰ Advertisement, *Captain America* #76 (New York: Atlas Comics, May, 1954).

¹⁰¹ Savage, *Comic Books and America*, 77-8.

de Hart discusses a “rolling back” of gender roles after the war.¹⁰² America in the Cold War pushed a “ ‘tough’ anticommunism, along with a nuclear family secured by the male breadwinner and the female homemaker.”¹⁰³ The whole anti-communist agenda was one of powerful masculinity over the liberal-leaning equality of communism.¹⁰⁴ One aspect of the anticommunist crusade was an emphasis on social stability, something that emerging gender equality threatened, changing the family – and therefore community – dynamic forever.¹⁰⁵ The emergence of the heroine Golden Girl, however, partially refutes this idea.

Women in popular culture in the post-war years had a difficult role. On the one side, women were expected to return to their traditional homemaker role, while World War II had opened the door for women in the world of industrial workers, a very “masculine” role traditionally. Wonder Woman in the 1950s presented an example of this complicated position as both hero and girlfriend, “challenging the dominant ideology [of women’s roles of wife and mother];” and representing “everything a girl should not want to be.”¹⁰⁶ Golden Girl, by being both hero and, in her personal life, professional teacher, represented the direction the new woman was taking. Even in her aggressiveness in her affection toward Captain America, it was clear that the traditional roles and perceptions of women were changing, and the youth of the late 1940s were seeing that change reflected in the comic.

¹⁰² Jane Sherron De Hart, “Containment at Home: Gender, Sexuality, and National Identity in Cold War America,” *Rethinking Cold War Culture*, Peter J. Kuznick and James Gilbert, Eds. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 128.

¹⁰³ Peter Filene, “ ‘Cold War Culture’ Doesn’t Say It All,” 157.

¹⁰⁴ Cuordileone, “ ‘Politics in an Age of Anxiety,’” 518.

¹⁰⁵ Schrecker, *The Age of McCarthyism: A Brief History With Documents*, 13.

¹⁰⁶ Francine D. Valcour, *Manipulating the Messenger: Wonder Woman as an American Female Icon*, (Arizona State University, 2006), 146; Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, 117. (Respectfully)



[Image 1-16: *Captain America Comics #66* (1947), Artist Not Credited]

Though her presence in the 1940s was short-lived due to the decreasing sales of super-hero comics in general, Golden Girl did represent a strong female character. In a story titled after her, Bucky was shot by the villainess Lavender – the only female villain of this period – and rushed to the hospital. As the young hero fought for his life, Cap reveals his secret identity to [now] Betsy Ross. With Bucky apparently permanently out of action, Betsy trains with Cap and becomes Golden Girl, helping Cap capture Lavender. In the excitement of their victory, Betsy pins Cap to the wall to kiss him. Cap scolds,

“Here Now! That’s no way for a seasoned crime fighter to Act!” Then, on second thought, he grabs her and kisses her himself.¹⁰⁷ The story concludes with the announcement that Bucky cannot return to action any time soon, and Golden Girl will take his place. This suggests that the story was written – or at least conceived – by Stan Lee, who has repeatedly said that he strongly disagreed with the idea of teenage sidekicks.¹⁰⁸

For the remainder of Captain America’s 1940s run, Betsy Ross would fight alongside Cap both as heroine and in her civilian guise as a math teacher at the Lee School. Here was a character who could fight alongside Captain America in battle, work alongside him in the civilian world, and even take the initiative romantically (or at least try). While still seen as a “sidekick” rather than a “partner,” the fact that she was there at a time when women from the war years were asked to return to the home and leave the public sphere to men suggested that the ceiling had been cracked by the war. Young readers were being told that women could stand side-by-side with men in any arena.

The American attempt to contain communism abroad led to what Elaine Tyler May has dubbed “domestic containment.” The only way to truly defeat communism was to keep American ideology embedded in the American family at home. This role fell to women. While adding to the overall consensus of anticommunism, the new emphasis on family also closed the door to progressive activism begun during the war and embodied by Rosie the Riveter.¹⁰⁹ The need for the protective mother figure at home became

¹⁰⁷ “Golden Girl,” No Creative Team Credited, *Captain America Comics #66* (New York: Timely Comics, 1947 [No Month Given]).

¹⁰⁸ Ro, *Tales to Astonish*, 47; *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked* (DVD).

¹⁰⁹ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: BasicBooks, 1988), 14.

increasingly important after the war with the beginning of the Nuclear Age.¹¹⁰ At the beginning of American involvement in World War II, the comic books suggested that readers learn to spot enemy aircraft. With the advent of nuclear bombs, and eventually rocket technology, no one was more aware of the frightening possibilities than the readers of comic books. The comforting protection of a maternal figure at home was never more needed in the eyes of American culture as a whole. The role of “housewife,” therefore, was just as heroic in its own way.¹¹¹

Additionally, some scholars suggest that many writers saw a “crisis of masculinity” in the 1950s, and that this lack of manliness was perceived as a threat against America’s ability to fight communism.¹¹² This analysis fits into the 1954 storylines of Captain America. The only woman visible in these stories was Betsy Ross, and her regression from fellow-hero to once more helpless victim appears to represent this need to reassert the supremacy of men as the heroes who save the day. Laura McEnaney suggests, “No matter how essential home protection, welfare provision, and patriotic motherhood were to a self-help defense effort, women’s place in it would always be secondary, tenuous, and conditional.”¹¹³ Men, of course, rationalized this by emphasizing the maternal instinct of women and their clear superiority in raising children with strong senses of decency, morality, and self-respect. Popular television programs such as *Leave It To Beaver*, *Ozzie and Harriet*, and *Father Knows Best* underscored this perception.

¹¹⁰ May, *Homeward Bound*, 23; Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 127.

¹¹¹ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 110.

¹¹² Joanne Meyerowitz, “Sex, Gender, and the Cold War Language of Reform,” *Rethinking Cold War Culture*, Peter J. Kuznick and James Gilbert, Eds (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 106; Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis*, 55.

¹¹³ Laura McEnaney, *Civil Defense Begins at Home: Militarization Meets Everyday Life in the Fifties* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 122.

The progression of women's accepted roles in society from the waning days of the Great Depression to the advent of the Civil Rights Movement was a proverbial roller-coaster. On the one hand, wartime service – both as industrial worker and military volunteer – projected the image that women could handle the same challenges as men; but the perceived needs of a post-war economy and the growing Cold War necessitated the return of women to their traditional spheres. Yet the seeds sown in World War II and watered by the subsequent Civil Rights Movement were creating a new women's movement that would make great strides for women.

Captain America was one of the original so-called super-heroes. He emerged as part of a growing effort at home to urge the United States into the alliance against Hitler's Germany. The comics of World War II reflected wartime society in America, promoting patriotic zeal in their young readers, while further reinforcing traditional stereotypes of that society. The transformative nature of the war, only slightly evident in the post-war comics, saw the birth of America's super-power status. Comic book hero and political reality often seemed to merge, with the fantastical tales of the comic book often foretelling political events in the making.

The short-lived run of *Captain America* in the 1950s reflected the waning influence of super-hero comic books in the overall market, a market further affected by widespread social activism against the industry as a whole. Super-heroes, however, were far from gone for good. With the *de facto* banning of horror and crime comics, the

market shifted once more toward super-hero storytelling.¹¹⁴ In 1959, super-heroes would return in a big way; and in 1961, the once Timely / Atlas Comics became Marvel Comics, and revolutionized comic book super-hero storytelling. A key factor in that revolution was the return of Captain America. The hero of World War II and later “Commie Smasher” would change with American society once more, facing a new era of societal change and continuing to reflect an evolving super-power.

¹¹⁴ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 183; Goulart, *Great History of Comic Books*, 275; Rhoades, *A Complete History of American Comic Books*, 69; Daniels, *Marvel*, 84; *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked* (DVD); *Comic Book Confidential* (DVD).

CHAPTER 3

THE HERO REBORN: CAPTAIN AMERICA IN THE 1960s

The conformity of anti-communism in the 1950s gave way to a “New Frontier” in the 1960s. The decade began with hope for a brighter future with the election of John F. Kennedy to the American presidency. That event, and the success of the Civil Rights sit-in at Greensboro, North Carolina, in February, 1960, would usher in the period that historians have dubbed “The Sixties.” This would be a period of dramatic expansion of civil rights for African-Americans, women, Hispanics, and other minority groups. That expansion, however, would come at a price. The sixties also represents one of the most violent periods of American history. The assassinations of John and Bobby Kennedy, bookending those of Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, and finally of Martin Luther King, Jr. would lead the youth of the decade down a path of increasingly violent protest against “The Man.” It was during this period of turmoil that the comic book superhero would make a dramatic and permanent return in American popular culture. As in the 1940s and ’50s, Captain America comic books present a microcosm of the changes in American society while still addressing issues of patriotism, race, and gender.

In the immediate aftermath of the Wertham crusade against superheroes, it appeared that the days of the comic book superhero might be over. However, DC Comics was still having some success with its three primary pre-World War II characters

Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman. This was due in large part to the phenomenal success of the television series *The Adventures of Superman*. By the time the series ended in 1958, with the untimely death by apparent suicide of its star, George Reeves, DC had already begun a plan to resuscitate the genre with revamped, modernized versions of some other Golden Age characters: the Flash, the Green Lantern, and Hawkman. By 1960, these heroes were appearing monthly as a superhero team called *Justice League of America*. In 1966 television-lightning would strike again for DC, with the popular, campy *Batman* series. That same year, Marvel made its television debut when Grantray-Lawrence produced five weekly half-hour semi-animated episodes of *Marvel Superheroes* (starring Captain America, The Incredible Hulk, Iron Man, Thor, and the Sub-Mariner).¹ By that point, the “Silver Age” of superhero comics had begun.²

Timely Comics, which had changed its name to Atlas Comics in the '50s, was now called Marvel Comics. Following DC's success with *Justice League*, Marvel Editor-in-Chief Martin Goodman called upon head-writer Stan Lee to create a new team of heroes to cash in on the apparent return of the superhero. What resulted was what has been called “The Marvel Age of Comics.” With heroes like *The Fantastic Four*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *The Mighty Thor*, *The Amazing Spider-Man*, and *The X-Men*, Lee and his creative team of Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko, and others created a new kind of hero.

¹ *Marvel Chronicle: A Year by Year History*, Catherine Saunders et al, Eds. (New York: DK Publishing, 2008), 101.

² *Comic Book Confidential*, Ron Mann, Dir., Home Vision Entertainment (DVD), 1989; *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked*, A&E Television Networks (DVD), 2003; Les Daniels, *Marvel: Five Fabulous Decades of the World's Greatest Comics*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1991), 78-80; Bradford Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of America Youth Culture*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001) 182-87; Shirrel Rhoades, *A Complete History of American Comic Books*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 6.

Beginning with the Marvel Age, superheroes would be shown as more three-dimensional, having personal problems and deep psychological issues to overcome.³ Some of these heroes – Spider-Man and Hulk in particular – would become icons of the Counterculture.⁴ By mid-decade, Lee and Company would introduce the world’s first black superhero, the African King T’Challa, known as the hero “Black Panther” (it is important to note that, though Black Panther was the first black superhero, he was not *African-American*; such a character would appear later in the pages of *Captain America*).⁵ Through this new type of comic book superhero, Marvel Comics elevated comics to the level of modern mythology, reflecting the evolution of the American people and America’s role as the world’s dominant superpower.⁶ Further, the new Marvel heroes were the offspring of the Cold War, just as their predecessors – including Captain America – were products of the Great Depression.⁷ Into this climate of change, and hot off the heels of the assassination of President Kennedy, Marvel would revive the Sentinel of Liberty once more. Like Captain America, President Kennedy was a hero of World War II. The return of Captain America just weeks after the shooting in Dallas was a symbol that the heroism and idealism of that war, and the slain President, lived on.

In *Strange Tales #114* (cover-dated November, 1963), “Captain America” was brought back in a short story featuring the new Human Torch. As the story unfolded, however, “Cap” was revealed to actually be the villain The Acrobat. Lee used the issue to test the waters to see if readers would be interested in seeing the return of the real

³ Ibid.

⁴ *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked*.

⁵ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 237.

⁶ “What Is A Myth?,” <http://www.history.com/content/starwarslegacy/what-is-a-myth>.

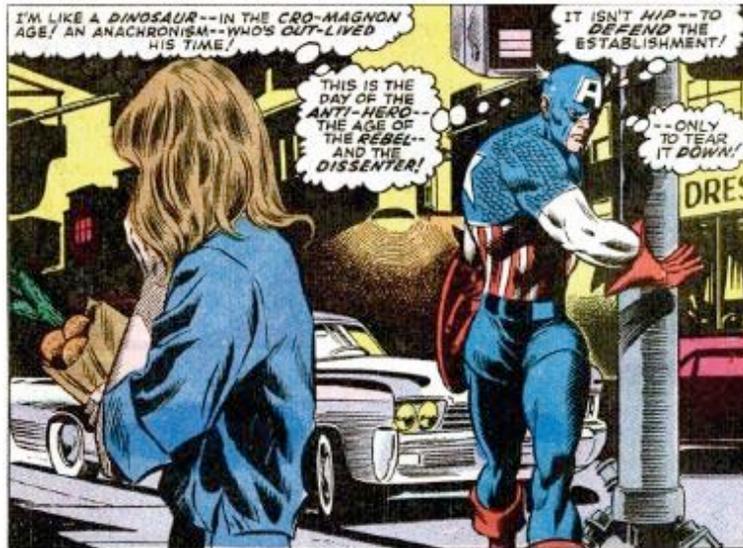
⁷ Matthew J. Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis: Comic Books & the Unmasking of Cold War America* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 61.

Captain America. Finally, in *Avengers #4* (cover-dated March, 1964, but hitting stands in December of '63), the real hero of World War II was revived after having spent the last twenty years frozen in ice (according to the new continuity of the character, and ignoring the 1944-54 comic books featuring the character), kept alive by the very super soldier serum which gave him his Olympian strength, speed, and agility. Discovered by the Avengers – a new team of relatively second-tier heroes brought together by the Norse god Thor to fight threats that no single hero could handle alone – Captain America was soon given monthly adventures of his own. In *Tales of Suspense #59* (cover-dated November, 1964), that magazine began presenting the monthly adventures of both Captain America and fellow-Avenger Iron Man, each hero making up half of each issue.⁸ Captain America sharing a title with another hero can be interpreted to mean that the editors at Marvel were not yet convinced that the World War II hero could carry enough of a following to garner a book of his own.

Unlike his fellow-pre-World War II heroes – Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman – Captain America would be reintroduced as a living anachronism, a Rip-Van-Winkle out of time with his contemporaries. Those other Golden Age heroes had long since been “re-imagined” or “re-booted” in order to keep pace with changing times (a policy that DC Comics would continually repeat throughout the following decades). The adventures of Captain America would be different. Captain America would be one continuous story from 1941 to the character’s death in 2007 (with a brief year-long divergent continuity in 1996). This continuity is what makes *Captain America* comics so relevant to the study of history during this period. The character “lives” through the

⁸ *Marvel Chronicle: A Year By Year History*, 95-103.

decades along with his readers without being “reintroduced” or “reinvented” every five-to-ten years.



[Image 3-1: *Captain America* #122 (February, 1970), Gene Colan, Artist]

The panel above, perhaps better than any other, portrays Captain America’s ordeal. He is confused as to what his place is in the 1960s, since the youth of America obviously look up to a different type of hero. As Gene Colan’s artwork underscores, even the woman walking by seems to not notice the red-white-and-blue-clad Avenger. The world goes on without him, just as it had for twenty years while the hero was frozen in ice. However, as he points out in the panel which followed this one, the same “system” that produced all of the injustices that the youth of the 1960s opposed was also the system that produced Kennedy, King, and others. This panel is important as an example of the outsider looking in. Through this relic of the 1940s, the reader can also remove himself long enough to take in what Cap is saying about American society. Whereas an older person who happened to live during World War II might see the youth movement of the sixties through aged eyes of life experience, Captain America still sees

with the eyes of youth, and the reader is shown just how much society has changed in that short period.

Captain America's World War II character would actually come to define him. Throughout the 1960s, Stan Lee and Jack Kirby – the creative team on *Tales of Suspense* and *Captain America* until 1970 – would struggle with this idea, both playing on his anachronistic nature while at the same time trying not to overplay it. Most of the storylines during this period had little to do with what was going on in the real world. This, however, provided some window into the time. As with most other superhero comic books, Captain America, at first, had monthly adventures of fighting supervillains-of-the-month in straight-up and simplistic hand-to-hand combat. The use of the hero in this fashion is, in itself, telling. In the Cold War consensus left over from the 1950s, the world – particularly to younger readers – was a scary place of possible nuclear war, a world that screamed for heroes.⁹

Captain America, however, spoke to this need even more so than the Man-of-Steel. In his red-white-and-blue uniform and powerful defensive shield, the message was simple: America will protect you. The timing of the character's return is also symbolic of this. By December of 1963, the "sixties" had not yet taken its radically leftist turn. Though embraced by the left today, the Kennedy years were very much a continuation of the consensus of the Eisenhower '50s. Kennedy's economic policies were conservative, his stances in Vietnam and Cuba represented a continuity of American anti-communist policy. Even Kennedy's Civil Rights Bill – which would become the landmark Civil Rights Act the year following his death – came about after three years of the Kennedy Administration desperately trying to avoid the topic. Only the televised brutality of the

⁹ Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis*, 2-3; Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 184.

May, 1963, “Children’s March” in Birmingham, Alabama, succeeding in forcing the President’s hand on the issue.¹⁰

In his study of Marvel Comics as representing the break-down of 1950s Cold War consensus, Matthew Costello argues that Captain America represented the connection of the liberal sixties to the New Deal Roosevelt years of World War II. Along similar lines, Jason Dittmer argues that, since the Captain America “Commie Smasher” of the fifties was later explained away as having been a different person, this connection between liberal eras for Captain America is clear.¹¹ Over time, that would be the case; but when Captain America first reappeared in 1964, the reader can still see traces of the “Commie Smasher” in his monthly stands against criminals, fascists, and would-be world conquerors. Comic books began appealing to older audiences – primarily teenage high school and college students – by mid-decade. Once that happened, the character began to take a clearly leftist shift. Rather than representing the much older “Silent Majority” of Americans, the magazine clearly represented American youth culture as the decade proceeded.

By 1968, not only would *Captain America* continue to mirror its times, but moreover letters written by fans through the decade demonstrated that superhero comic books were definitely no longer simply the purview of children. This is, perhaps, the most important aspect of the 1960s Captain America comic books from a perspective of historical research. Articulate adults would use the letters page to debate the American

¹⁰ Glenn T. Eskew, *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 318; Terry H. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 71-72.

¹¹ Jason Dittmer, “Retconning America: Captain America in the Wake of World War II and the McCarthy Hearings,” *The Amazing Transforming Superhero!: Essays on the Revision of Characters in Comic Books, Film and Television*, Terrence R. Wandtke, Ed. (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2007) 41.

idea of patriotism. By the end of the decade, *Captain America* comics would introduce the world's first African-American superhero, The Falcon, who would be a major character in the comic throughout the 1970s.¹² Also, Cap's love interest, Sharon Carter, Agent-13 of SHIELD (the acronym for the international spy organization, Supreme Headquarters International Espionage Logistics Directorate, originally a US-based spy agency; over time it would be presented as being more internationally operated), would prove an attempt on the part of Marvel to define the modern woman hero.

Artistically, *Tales of Suspense* and *Captain America* in the sixties were drawn by Jack "King" Kirby. Co-creator of Captain America in 1940, Kirby returned to Timely (/Atlas/Marvel) Comics in the late 1950s. Part of the creative team that ushered in the "Marvel Age," Kirby was at the peak of his talents in the 1960s. As explained by Stan Lee, Kirby would be given a general outline for a story, and he would draw out what would become the actual narrative. What made Kirby stand out among comic book artists of his day was that he paid as much attention to drawing a street sign as he did to his heroes and villains. No element of the panel was beneath his notice. As such, the pages of the comics he drew – like *Captain America* – sprang to life for the reader. Every fight scene was carefully planned out, showing Captain America's battle prowess. Most important, however, was the use of Captain America's shield. As much an offensive weapon as a defensive protection, Kirby's use of the shield in battle symbolized, as it had decades before, that America was as much a fighting force as a stalwart of defense.¹³

¹² Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 237.

¹³ *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked* (DVD).

By the end of the decade, Kirby had dropped *Captain America* and was briefly replaced by pop-artist and former magician Jim Steranko. Steranko – known more for his work on *Nick Fury: Agent of SHIELD* – became famous for his use of surrealism in comics. His artwork appeared to blur the line between *avant-garde* art and live-action. Like Kirby, his art did as much to tell the story as did the script. For example, in *Captain America #111* (cover-dated March, 1969), Cap orders his new sidekick, Rick Jones, to “watch” how he moves in battle training. While a novelist would be forced to rely on the reader’s “theater of the mind” to get the story across, the comic book artist brought the unspoken narrative to life.¹⁴ This is evident in the example below.



[Image 3-2: *Captain America #111* (March, 1969), Jim Steranko, Artist]

By using multiple panels, it is clear – due to the comic story process – that some time is passing; but the way Steranko used panels, four distinct poses come across as one fluid movement.

¹⁴ Robert C. Harvey, *The Art of the Comic Book: An Aesthetic History* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 165-6.

The discourses on patriotism and modern interpersonal relationships presented in the adventures of Captain America during this decade reflect a society that was no longer certain of its political “rightness” in war, or of the gender dynamics of its romantic or even inter-professional relationships. The letters written by fans indicate that individuals of all ages, political persuasions, educational backgrounds and both sexes read the adventures of Captain America at this time. Likewise, advertisers became aware that a wide variety of individuals were reading Marvel Comics, though not, perhaps, in equal numbers.

The 1960s began with the hope and drive of the youth of America, and ended with the victory of the “Silent Majority” of middle-age / middle-class America. Though ushered in under the conservative leadership of Dwight Eisenhower, and ending under the even-more conservative leadership of Richard Nixon, American society in the intervening ten years became known for its liberal movements and developments. Social and political advances were made for women and minorities. Television at the time mirrored this change. From early episodes of *The Twilight Zone* in 1960, focusing on the fear and paranoia of the 1950s, to the successful run of *Rowan and Martin’s Laugh-In* in 1969, openly deriding and satirizing American political culture and society, these changes can also be seen, though more subtly, in comic books of the period.

Captain America’s early adventures in the ’60s showed the hero newly-awakened from World War II, exposing the reader to a psychological phenomenon common in all veterans, particularly during this period: survivor’s guilt. By the end of the decade, Cap became uncertain as to where his loyalties should lie. Should he question authority as

this younger generation seemed intent on doing? If so, what would that say about him, or about America?¹⁵

The letters columns and editorials in each month's issues of the various titles involving the adventures of Captain America, reveal much about America in the 1960s. Children and adults, college professors and students, housewives and military personnel, conservatives and liberals all wrote in to the creative team behind Captain America. Through them, what is seen is an America uncertain as to what "patriotism" meant, and how it should be practiced. There was a division among the American people, as early as 1965, on the war in Vietnam, an issue that would come to define the decade. By 1970, readers were using the letters column as a pre-internet chat-room, debating issues passionately and articulately, responding and counter-responding to each other's letters. Like his political progenitor, Franklin Roosevelt, Captain America appeared to be too liberal to conservatives and too conservative to liberals, ultimately representing the political "middle ground," that, in fact, has always defined America as a whole. This ability to appeal to both ends of the political spectrum was evident in the fan letters printed in the 1960s issues of *Tales of Suspense* and *Captain America*.

Comic book editors began printing fan letters in monthly letters columns in 1958. The original intent was that fans would write in with what they liked or disliked about the comic, and the editors would alter what they were doing to please the fans. When Captain America finally returned in the pages of *Tales of Suspense*, letters concerning his and Iron Man's monthly adventures were printed in the columns "Mails of Suspense." In

¹⁵ Stan Lee and Gene Colan, "The Sting of the Scorpion!," *Captain America* #122 (February, 1970), (Marvel Comics – DVD-ROM).

dispelling the myth that comic books were a children's medium, no evidence is stronger than the letters columns of this period. Some letters were printed without names; others were printed with names that were obviously made-up; but clearly many were written by mature adults.

In the December, 1968-dated "Stan's Soapbox," – a monthly editorial column written primarily by Lee beginning in the late-60s and continuing throughout the 1970s – Lee argued for comic books as being a communications medium equal to television and movies.¹⁶ In actuality, in comparison to other communications media of their day, comic books were, in some ways, superior. Comic books allowed both the moralizing of storytelling of movies and television along with the editorializing and reader response of daily newspapers and magazines. This could be an important reason why they resonated so much with college students of the period. The obvious downside was the speed with which the comics were produced. While a television series like *Laugh-In* could go from writer-to-screen in a week, comic books often took six-to-eight months to go from writer to artist to publisher to distributor to the local newsstand. As such, many letters were likely not printed due to the fact that their subject matter would date the book more than the comic companies may have liked (preferring to maintain the illusion to their readers that the material in front of them just came out that month). However, some topics, particularly ideas of patriotism, were not bound by time constraints and became a popular subject in the letters columns.

¹⁶ "DECEMBER, 1968," *Stan's Soapbox*, 18. This comes from a collection of all of the monthly "Stan's Soapbox"-es in one edition, published in 2008. Though these editorials did appear in each month's issue of the various Captain America books, they also appeared in all of the other comics published each month. As such, rather than citing the "Soapbox" entries from just the Cap comics, I have chosen to cite them from the collected work.

Originally intended as a means of announcing and promoting upcoming Marvel events, fans intently requested that Lee use the “Soapbox” to focus on and editorialize about the social happenings of the day. As the sixties became more and more volatile, these requests became so constant that Lee eventually acquiesced, though in very general terms (more than likely so as to not anger fans from either side of the political spectrum). A fan base that relied so heavily on its monthly superheroes for a moral compass in what seemed to many an increasingly immoral world desperately sought words of comfort from their favorite writer and – in the minds of many Marvel fans – philosopher.¹⁷

Of all the issues that could be discussed in Captain America comics, patriotism continued to be the most obvious. What made it so prevalent an issue during the sixties was that, by the time President Kennedy was killed, it was no longer clear what that word was supposed to mean. Did the patriot respect the decisions of his government and follow where led (“Our country, right or wrong!”); or did the real patriot stand up and rebel when the actions of government no longer reflected the will of the people? More importantly, what if the will of the people was not “right”?

¹⁷ *Stan’s Soapbox: The Collection*, Brian Cunningham, Managing Editor (New York: Marvel Publishing, 2009), Introduction.



[Images 3-3 and 3-4: *Captain America*#s103 and 104 (July and August, 1968), Jack Kirby, Artist]

The above panels represent what Captain America believes about his country and its place in the world. The “myth” referred to in the first panel is “equality.” Red Skull – seen falling from the final blow in the first panel – had just called Captain America a

“fool” for believing in the American dream, declaring that “equality” in America had always been and would always be a “myth.”¹⁸ Whereas the Red Skull of the '40s and '50s was merely a power-hungry villain, the Skull of the '60s – and beyond – was bent primarily on destroying the heart and spirit of America in general, and Captain America specifically.

Never claiming American perfection, Captain America was beginning to stand for what America *could* be. Unchanged since World War II, Cap believed that America still stood for the oppressed, as a shining example of liberty. Though not yet addressing the race issues of the day, it is clear that Captain America – at least through the eyes of his writers, artists and editors – was committed to the ideals of that bygone, war-torn “greatest generation,” though it might not have been as easy to address the problems then in realistic comic scenarios. Fan letters indicated the “correct stand” on patriotism was unclear for readers of *Captain America*. Danny Fingeroth posed the question, “Does might make right – for superheroes and for the rest of us?” Ultimately, he concluded, “the hero’s values are the society’s values.”¹⁹ In fact, these questions came to define *Captain America* from Vietnam to 9/11.

In the fall of 1964, though only two issues into his return run, readers were already adamant that Cap get involved in the war in Vietnam, as he had against the fascists in World War II. Lee and the rest of his creative team at Marvel did not want to touch the war in Vietnam. Though popular support for the war was still strong in late-1964 and on into 1965, Lee himself was troubled by the war, not entirely certain that the communists were the enemy that had been portrayed in the 1950s, and not entirely clear

¹⁸ Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, “The Weakest Link,” *Captain America* #103 (New York: Marvel Comics, July, 1968).

¹⁹ Fingeroth, *Superman on the Couch*, 156, 160.

on why America was in Vietnam at all.²⁰ The character, however, was Captain America... and America was at war.

Tales of Suspense #61 (dated January, 1965) would see Cap's only foray into Vietnam. This story would have been written just after American Airman Everett Alvarez became the first American naval aviator to become a POW in the war in August of 1964.²¹ In a story entitled "The Strength of the Sumo," Captain America went to Vietnam, but not, as fans had requested, to take part in America's involvement in the war. In fact, no American forces would be seen in the issue. Cap would, instead, infiltrate North Vietnamese forces, and fight his way to rescue a US Army pilot named Jim Baker. Baker's brother, as it turns out, had rescued Cap during World War II. Cap was now repaying that debt. Though successful in his mission – and though he appears to confuse the North Vietnamese with their South Vietnamese cohorts, the Viet-*cong* – Cap takes no clear side on the war.²²



[Image 3-5, *Tales of Suspense #61* (January, 1965), Jack Kirby, Artist]

²⁰ Interview in *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked* (DVD).

²¹ "Alvarez, Everett," <http://pownetwork.org/bios/a/a038.htm>.

²² Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, "The Strength of the Sumo," *Tales of Suspense #61* (January, 1965, Marvel Comics Group), (DVD-ROM).

Though Cap takes no stand on the war itself, the imagery is clearly anti-Vietnamese. The Vietnamese soldiers and officers drawn by Kirby share many of the characteristics of his World War II Japanese enemies: buck-toothed with “Fu-Manchu” moustaches. Before he can free his friend, Cap is forced to fight a sumo-wrestler (inexplicably part of this North Vietnamese encampment). Another unexplained aspect of the story is the fact that Airman Baker has a deep gray complexion. It is not clear whether the gray-ish color is meant to present the character as black or ill (or both). So, whereas the script did not make a political stand, the imagery drawn by Kirby clearly provided the idea of Vietnamese as a dangerous “other,” whose treatment of American prisoners-of-war led to malnourishment. Lee managed, then, to appease reader requests – seeing Captain America in combat against America’s enemies – without directly promoting the war itself.

Beginning with the March cover-dated issue #63, Lee and Kirby would return Captain America to World War II, telling untold tales of Cap’s adventures during that more-romantic period. This appears to have been an attempt to appease those readers who wanted to see Cap in actual battle action, without having to get the character involved in the growing controversy over Vietnam (and more than one fan letter suggested this as being the case). Another interpretation of this decision would be that it allowed Lee and Kirby to re-introduce Cap’s World War II nemesis, the Red Skull, a power-mad Nazi terrorist dedicated to Adolf Hitler. Providing a more detailed origin of the Skull, these World War II stories set the stage to bring the Nazi up-to-date, and into regular 1960s continuity. During these stories, several Golden Age fans wrote in to the

letters column to tell of their life-long love of Captain America, and how they were still reading the comics after all these years.

These World War II stories can also be seen as an allegory for America's involvement in Vietnam. Were our reasons for fighting the same? Cap reminded the reader of what America fought for two decades earlier, when, speaking to another American soldier, he said, "We EACH serve freedom in our own way... and liberty is its own reward."²³ In the last World War II adventure of the 1960s run, Cap and Bucky discover an American scientist who has thrown in with the Nazis, ultimately costing him the life of his beloved sister. In response, Cap said, "In a war, Bucky, many people suffer! It isn't necessary to be in the armed forces to be a casualty!"²⁴ This statement reflected many aspects of the war in Vietnam, from the families of those who did not return from Southeast Asia, to those who felt guilt over refusing their country's call, permanently scarred by an event that a growing number at the time believed America should never have become involved in. A less-direct form of "casualty" was the political casualties of the war. Both President Johnson and Vice President Humphries became unintended political casualties of the increasingly unpopular war.

SHIELD – the high-ranking government organization answerable, apparently, directly to the President of the United States – became an important part of the Captain America narrative in the 1960s. So obviously a symbol of his country – and just as obviously an agent of the government – it was unclear on Cap's return exactly for whom he worked. How did Steve Rogers pay his rent? Clark Kent/Superman was a newspaper

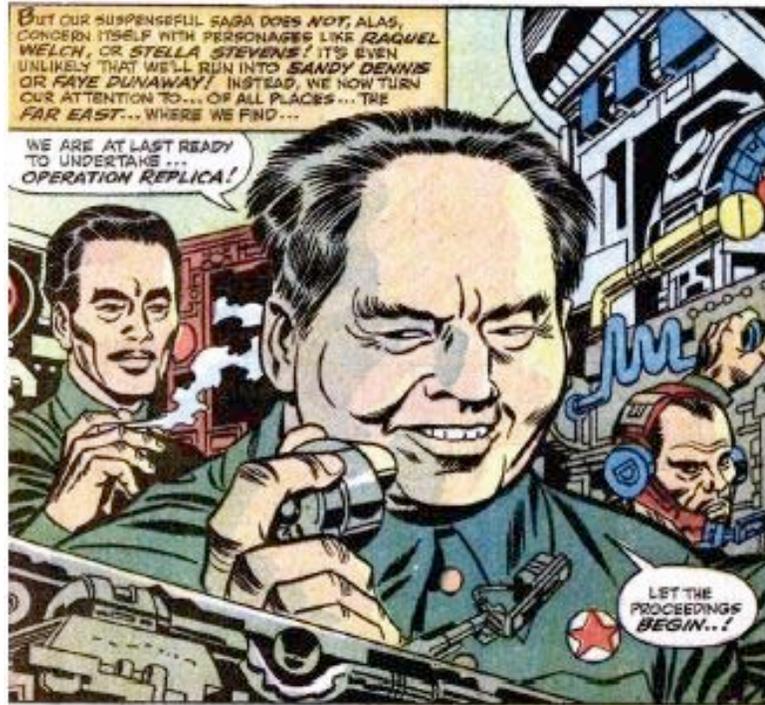
²³ Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, "The Sentinel and the Spy," *Tales of Suspense* #68 (August, 1965), (Marvel Comics, DVD-ROM).

²⁴ Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, "... When You Lie Down With Dogs...!", *Tales of Suspense* #71 (November, 1965), (Marvel Comics, DVD-ROM).

reporter. Bruce Wayne/Batman was a multi-billionaire. Diana Prince/Wonder Woman was a secretary in the Women's Army Corps. Though never apparently an "official" member of SHIELD, it does become clear that the spy organization passed on orders to Captain America and represented his chain-of-command, at least to a degree. The Director of SHIELD was Colonel Nick Fury, another veteran from World War II, whose aging was slowed by some other government-sanctioned serum similar to the Super Soldier Serum. From 1966-on, SHIELD, Fury, and Sharon Carter (SHIELD Agent-13) were regular characters in Cap's ongoing adventures. The multi-issue storyline introducing Agent-13 also introduced another important Captain America villain: Batroc the Leaper, a French mercenary. This villain subtly underscored a major difference in Cap's world: the enemy is no longer simply Germany, Japan, or Italy. In the uncertain world of the Cold War, our enemies may even speak the language of an ally.

Reality and comic books collided with *Captain America #106* (dated October, 1968). That issue told the story of a Hollywood film company that was making documentary-style films rewriting World War II history, and portraying Captain America as a cold-blooded killer. Ultimately, it was not a comic book villain behind the plot to discredit Cap, but rather, the People's Republic of China and, more specifically, its leader Mao Zedong. China's goal was to discredit Captain America – eventually replacing him with a robot copy, or Life Model Decoy (LMD) – to make the West distrust its own heroes and leaders. The American Hollywood producer behind the films, who was eventually killed, demonstrated the moral of the story: "Nothing Good Can Come of Treason and Betrayal!"²⁵

²⁵ Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, "Cap Goes Wild!," *Captain America #106* (October, 1968), (Marvel Comics – DVD-ROM).



[Image 3-6: *Captain America* #106 (October, 1968), Jack Kirby, Artist]

An interesting point as far as the choice of a real-world enemy is that he is Asian. The Cold War and arms race with the Soviet Union was still as dangerous as ever, particularly by 1968 when Leonid Brezhnev had secured power at the top of the Soviet Politburo, having long-replaced the more liberal Nikita Khrushchev. Rather than a Soviet or Eastern European enemy, Lee and Kirby chose the most powerful Asian communist in the world. This displays a clear message to the reader: Asian communism is currently our main enemy. Six months after the Tet Offensive, and CBS-TV News anchorman Walter Cronkite – “the Most Trusted Man in America” – having declared that victory in Vietnam was no longer possible, the real-world-mimicking Marvel Comics universe still viewed Asians as the most dangerous and aggressive enemy of the United States.

Though Chairman Mao might not be recognizable to most eight-to-ten-year-old readers, more mature readers would have likely recognized the Chinese Communist

dictator. This shows that the writers and artists of *Captain America* during this period were aware that they were reaching an older audience. Several of the letters from the decade also back-up this demographic reality. One early letter writer discussed how he preferred the “new” Cap to Golden Age Cap, and requested that Bucky be brought back as well. This letter suggests an older reader, at least a reader with access to the older comics.²⁶ The following month, Mrs. E.J. Schlee wrote that she was a fan of Cap as a girl in the 1940s and now read the newer adventures.²⁷ The very next month, two more readers, Jerry Pritchett and Derrill Rothermich (the latter from the University of Missouri) wrote of how they missed the Golden Age Cap.²⁸

The overall conception of comic books has traditionally been that they were / are a medium directed primarily at children. The concept of the “superhero” being one more associated with the imagination and playfulness of childhood. If that were the case, the analysis mentioned above would be nonsensical. In the 1960s, the printing of fan letters exposed a much more mature audience than anyone had previously thought possible. The following examples show the maturity and reflective nature of the readers of the Captain America adventures, and, through them, a window of the emerging ideas of patriotism in the sixties.

In early 1966, Joseph Martinez, of Chicago, wrote “Captain America is the epitome of the American way of life. He exhibits patriotism, he displays an unquenchable desire for freedom, and he is a model of physical fitness that we as Americans should strive for in life... Why [doesn’t Marvel] use Cap as a voice to

²⁶ “Mails of Suspense,” *Tales of Suspense* #64 (April, 1965), (Marvel Comics – DVD-ROM).

²⁷ “Mails of Suspense,” *Tales of Suspense* #65 (May, 1965), (Marvel Comics – DVD-ROM).

²⁸ “Mails of Suspense,” *Tales of Suspense* #66 (June, 1965), (Marvel Comics – DVD-ROM).

distribute the importance of fitness to your readers?”²⁹ It would appear that this reader was not yet aware of how Captain America gained his strength and prowess; but it is equally clear that some were already embracing Captain America as a hero whom Americans could admire.

The following month, Paul Gurian, of Lake Forest College, wrote, “... your magazines are not merely satires, but a neo-blatant ‘put-on.’ In a community of scholars, it is of paramount importance that one support his theory with certain references to the work or works in question.” He then referred to Cap’s “basic Hobbesian” traits – “preservation of self in any situation where the potentiality of death appears reasonably certain...” – and signed off, “Viva la Renaissance des Comic!”³⁰ At least some members of the college set were clearly Captain America fans during this time period. The next month, Ronald Lindenboom, of the Men’s Graduate Center at Duke University, wrote another fan letter hailing Captain America. Some letter writers ultimately became important comic book writers and editors, such as Marv Wolfman and Ralph Macchio, both of whom would go on to work for Marvel Comics in the decades to come.

Beginning in *Captain America* #110 (dated February, 1969) and continuing on into the 1970s, an interesting phenomenon happened in the pages of “Let’s Rap with Cap!” (the name of the letters column once the name of the title changed from *Tales of Suspense* to *Captain America*). A letter from Californian Albert Rodriguez called Captain America a “conservative” and “warmongering” anachronism from World War II.³¹ This comment, though similar to dozens that had come before, would set off a series

²⁹ “Mails of Suspense,” *Tales of Suspense* #77 (May, 1966), (Marvel Comics – DVD-ROM).

³⁰ “Mails of Suspense,” *Tales of Suspense* #78 (June, 1966), (Marvel Comics – DVD-ROM).

³¹ “Let’s Rap With Cap!,” *Captain America* #110 (February, 1969), (Marvel Comics – DVD-ROM).

of responses and counter-responses that show that many readers of *Captain America* thought deeply about the content of the comic book, seeing it as much more than simply escapist stories.

Four months later, the discussion continued. Rick Ellrod, from Maryland, in direct response to Rodriguez, said, “I believe that if the ‘day of the patriotic fighter is gone,’ it should return.” Along a similar vein, Michael Higgins, from New York, wrote, “[Cap] is a very strange mixture of individualism and statism [*sic*] in that, when he lectures on freedom, he seems to be talking about the nation rather than the people... Cap is no Wallace, no demagogue of reaction...”³² Readers of *Captain America* represented both extremes of the political spectrum, making the magazine one of the few mediums in popular culture that could make such a claim.

Three months after these initial responses, Garrett Everett, from Georgia, rebuffed Rodriguez’s original statement, claiming that Cap stood for the very idealism that Rodriguez, himself, supported. In that same issue, Steve Gerber, of Missouri, responded to Ellrod and others, stating, “patriotism, as the word is accepted in America, is simply too narrow an outlook.” Gerber went on to mention Marshall McLuhan’s concept of the “global village,” stating that ideally America would become the leader of a global society, not as a stalwart superpower intent on maintaining its hegemony in a divided world. In his editorial response to this letter, Stan Lee agreed with Gerber on all counts. Additionally, John Hall, of Chestnut State University, called Cap a “‘super-patriot,’ in the pejorative sense.” These comments sparked months of further discussion.³³

³² “Let’s Rap With Cap!,” *Captain America* #115 (July, 1969), (Marvel Comics – DVD-ROM).

³³ “Let’s Rap With Cap!,” *Captain America* #118 (October, 1969), (Marvel Comics – DVD-ROM).

In *Captain America #122* (which would have hit newsstands around November of 1969), Douglas Scott, the Station Manager of WMCO-FM Radio in Pennsylvania, challenged Gerber's arguments. He insisted rather that until a global Utopia was achieved, a strong defense against America's enemies was required. Similarly, Jeff Chown of Michigan, rejected Gerber's views, claiming that the current fight in Vietnam was "for the best of all mankind." Further, Canadian Jeffrey Morgan defended Cap's use of "violence" as being for the defense of "free people everywhere."³⁴ These columns go far in disproving the theory that comic books were a children's medium. As mentioned earlier, *Captain America* attracted readers from both liberal and conservative ends of the political spectrum, inspiring and angering both simultaneously. The examples provided present merely the beginning of the political debate in *Captain America*. What began in the late 1960s would continue on through the Watergate era.

Based on analyses of the stories and letters columns, this transition from '40s "funny books," to '70s stories of social significance appears to have happened somewhere around 1968. Where, then, did Captain America stand on the issue of "patriotism" in the 1960s? Unlike the decades before, patriotism – according to Cap's quotes listed above – was no longer about answering your country's call for service. Neither radically left or right, Captain America stood where most Americans usually stand: in the political center. The use of force, while not the preferred option, was one that must be considered nonetheless.

³⁴ "Let's Rap With Cap!," *Captain America #122* (February, 1970), (Marvel Comics – DVD-ROM).

If the war in Vietnam was a major defining aspect of the sixties, the African-American Civil Rights Movement was equally so. As it was mid-decade before the editors were fully aware that mature readers were reading their comics, social issues did not become a mainstay in comic books until well into the latter part of the decade. There were no references to civil rights in the pages of Captain America other than the introduction in 1969 of the Falcon. However, this, alone, was significant. The Falcon was the first African-American comic book superhero. Following the success of the first black superhero, the Black Panther, the question must have been posed: is America ready for an African-American hero?

Two years earlier, in the *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, a presidential commission headed by Illinois Governor Otto Kerner examined the growing discontent and militancy in the black community. The report concluded that “Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white – separate and unequal.”³⁵ This, to a degree, could be seen in the Marvel Comics. Though Black Panther was a superhero and fought alongside other heroes like the Fantastic Four and the Avengers, he was very much “separate and unequal.” He was not American. He was African, a monarch of the fictional sub-Saharan nation of Wakanda.

Dan Taylor, of Washington state, in a 1968 letter, hailed the Black Panther as a great “Negro hero.”³⁶ This example represents what should be an extremely important aspect of popular culture studies: past usage of language by modern connotations. Instead, the language must be allowed to open a window into who we were, what we thought, and how we expressed that thought at the time. The term “negro” is considered

³⁵ *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, portions of the final report reprinted in *The Many Sides of America*, 115.

³⁶ “Let’s Rap With Cap!,” *Captain America #103* (July, 1968), (Marvel Comics – DVD-ROM).

unacceptable for usage in the twenty-first century, and therefore may cause the casual researcher to see its usage from an earlier time as equally inappropriate. It represents, however, the language of the day. Martin Luther King, Jr., in fact, used the term in nearly every speech he gave throughout the decade.

In a story titled “Now Begins the Nightmare!” (*Captain America #115*; dated June, 1969), the Red Skull uses the reality-altering Cosmic Cube to swap bodies with Captain America. Though the story of the body-snatching Skull goes through issue #119 (making it the longest Cap story to date), issue #117 is perhaps the most significant for introducing the Falcon. A young man from the city streets of Harlem, Sam Wilson was always fascinated by birds. Eventually, he bought and bonded with a falcon named Redwing. Later, he was hired by a group called the Exiles – actually henchmen of the Red Skull who had been exiled to an island for punishment for their failures in service to him – who wanted a hunting falcon. Once Wilson discovered the dubious nature of his employers, he escaped into the island’s hills. While on this island of exiles, Sam Wilson met the body-swapped Captain America. With the aid of the Falcon, Captain America is able to regain his identity when the terrorist group AIM [Advanced Idea Mechanics] destroys the Cube, apparently killing the Skull in the process.³⁷ After returning to New York, the Falcon decided to become Captain America’s partner, while his alter-ego, Sam Wilson, decided to become a social worker in Harlem.

In the century since the end of slavery, African-Americans were forced into a second-class status in American popular culture; but their presence was still strongly felt. Beginning with the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, as white America began to

³⁷ Stan Lee and Gene Colan, “Now Falls the Skull!,” *Captain America #119* (November, 1969), (Marvel Comics – DVD-ROM).

embrace African-American art, music, and literature, through the desegregation of college and professional sports during the 1940s through the 1960s, and especially with the rise of rock-n-roll music in the 1950s, white Americans were – subconsciously or not – beginning to embrace their fellow citizens of color. The mass media of popular culture in the 1960s, however, still represented a glass ceiling. Big stars such as Sammy Davis, Jr., still had to enter clubs from the rear. With the successes of the Civil Rights Movement, time was long overdue for African-Americans to have their own heroes.³⁸

It is difficult to defend the comic book industry as meeting this demand, though Marvel Comics did lead the way with the Black Panther. While white superheroes had been “leaping tall buildings in a single bound” for decades, the first African-American hero had one ability: he could communicate with birds, more specifically, one bird, his pet falcon, Red Wing. While it was significant for readers to see a black man in superhero tights, slugging it out against the Red Skull alongside Captain America, the reader was always aware that the one with true superior abilities was the white hero.

³⁸ *Baad Asssss Cinema: A Bold Look at '70s Blaxploitation Films*, Isaac Julien, Dir., Minerva Production, IFC (DVD), 2002.



[Image 3-7, *Captain America* #117 (September, 1969), Gene Colan, Artist]

In the essay, “Not Just Another Racist Honkey,” Ora McWilliams pointed out several other aspects of the character that could be interpreted as keeping the Falcon in a lesser status: his first appearance in a “jungle atmosphere”; the fact that he was “shirtless among the foliage”; the fact that his animal powers give him a more “primal” identity, being a mediator between the human and animal worlds (an alleged allegory for being the mediator between the white and black worlds). Placing Wilson in Harlem also made him a stereotype. Likewise, McWilliams argues that the fact that Sam Wilson grew up raising

pigeons (suggesting that pigeons are the African-Americans of the bird world) made him lesser than someone who raised eagles or hawks.³⁹

While these arguments are certainly valid, other aspects of the story must be considered. All superhero stories require a large degree of suspension of disbelief. One has to accept that a person can fly, or speak to animals, or survive decades of being frozen in ice. However, the world in which the superhero lives needs to be as grounded in the readers' reality as possible. First, therefore, in order for the suspension of disbelief necessary for comic book superheroes to be feasible, it would have seemed odd for a poor inner-city kid (of any race) to have access to eagles or hawks. Second, placing Sam Wilson in Harlem opened the door for the writers to address inner-city issues that were happening in the real world, such as the riots in Watts and the rise of the Black Power movement and Black Panther Party. Had Wilson been placed instead in Westchester, he would have been less relatable to the average African-American reader, and would have given white readers an unrealistic view of the plight of African-Americans in the late 1960s. The challenge in all popular culture is to examine social issues without completely stereotyping, so as not to limit one's audience. A close analysis of Falcon through the decades shows the skill with which Marvel's writers attempted to do just that.

According to Eric Greene, the national American mythology is deeply rooted in race conflict, from European/American conflict with the native peoples of America, to the relations between black and white, beginning with two-and-a-half centuries of slavery and continuing through a century of Jim Crow. In his ground-breaking study of the 1960s *Planet of the Apes* films, he states, "one of the fundamental structures of American

³⁹ Ora C. McWilliams, "Not Just Another Racist Honkey: A History of Racial Representations in Captain America and Related Publications," *Captain America and the Struggle of the Superhero*, Rob Weiner, Ed., (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009), 71.

myth has been the idea that national progress and democracy are achieved through the conquest of ‘savage’ and ‘primitive’ non-Whites by advanced and civilized Whites.”⁴⁰ According to Greene, true equality in American society is hindered by the idea that such equality cannot exist without an outbreak of violence from those who did not have power, wanting more.⁴¹ The Falcon is accepted by Sharon Carter and SHIELD, not because of his accomplishments, but because Captain America wills it so. Though a “partnership” on paper, it is always clear that Captain America holds the power in the relationship, in more ways than one. African-Americans, like women, homosexuals, and other minority groups, were clearly still “the other.”

When comparing Cap’s storylines concerning race to his other World War II contemporaries, Marvel and Captain America were more in touch with their times. Neither the Superman nor Batman books dealt with the issue of African-Americans in society until the 1970s, and even then nowhere to the degree that Marvel did.⁴² Though *Wonder Woman* did introduce the character of Nubia, the African Wonder Woman, in 1969, that was still years behind Marvel’s African King, the Black Panther.⁴³ By the time these other books addressed the splintering race issue in America, Captain America and the Falcon were already dealing with the problem, as will be seen in the next chapter.

Lee was reluctant to express his opinions on the spiraling problems facing America. He made his – and Marvel’s – purpose plain in his first “Soapbox”: “... to entertain you!... if we can also do our bit to advance the cause of intellectualism,

⁴⁰ Eric Greene, *Planet of the Apes as American Myth: Race, Politics, and Popular Culture* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), viii.

⁴¹ Greene, *Planet of the Apes as American Myth*, xii.

⁴² Richard Hall interview with Mark Waid via email (March, 2009).

⁴³ Francinne D. Valcour, “Manipulating the Messenger: Wonder Woman as an American Female Icon” (PhD. diss, Arizona State University, 2006), 318.

humanitarianism, and mutual understanding... and to toss a little swingin' satire at you in the process... that won't break our collective hearts one tiny bit!"⁴⁴ Though he promised fans that he would comment on the issues of the day from time to time, he never quite did. What he did was to occasionally mention that bigotry is bad, and that we must all love one another, and that meant everyone.

In the issues dated September, 1968, in response to a fan's request that Lee editorialize more on major issues, the Soapbox responded, "we'd like to go on record about one vital issue – we believe that Man has a divine destiny, and an awesome responsibility – the responsibility of treating all who share this wondrous world of ours with tolerance and respect – judging each fellow human on his own merit, regardless of race, creed, or color."⁴⁵ As an example of how fans were beginning to need more than that, in that same month's issue of *Captain America*, self-proclaimed "number-one-fan" Wayne Warfield, of Maryland, wrote of the great idealism expressed in Cap: "Captain America may be only a comic to most, but it should be a symbol to all."⁴⁶

As the comic entered the 1970s, race issues would become more prominent; during the 1960s, however, the writers appear to have been uncertain how to address such questions. Of course Captain America would stand for equality and justice for all. Perhaps this issue can best be seen through the World War II-flash-back stories of the mid-'60s, reminding the reader that a generation ago, we as a people fought a war against bigotry and hatred, and Captain America was the symbol of that tolerance and egalitarianism.

⁴⁴ "MAY, 1967," *Stan's Soapbox*, 5.

⁴⁵ "SEPTEMBER, 1968," *Stan's Soapbox*, 14.

⁴⁶ "Let's Rap With Cap!," *Captain America #105* (September, 1968), (Marvel Comics – DVD-ROM).

Gender issues are much more prevalent in *Captain America* during the 1960s. Agent-13 is a much more powerful, self-reliant, and independent female character than any of her comic book contemporaries – notably, Wonder Woman, Batgirl, or Supergirl. The issue of “what is a ‘woman’s place’?” in society is one that Captain America struggles with in his “new life” in the 1960s. Another key focus of gender studies, that of “agency,” is a recurring issue that the team of Lee and Kirby deal with throughout the latter half of the 1960s. Though actual “women’s” issues were not as directly addressed as African-American issues would be in the ’70s, much can still be ascertained from examining the monthly issues of the magazine.

Women were consistently referred to as “ladies,” “girls,” or “dames,” particularly by SHIELD Director Nick Fury – which is ironic since he appears to be the most liberal in regard to his opinion of women in the espionage game. Stan Lee, responding to a letter from Army wife Evelyn Winkle, calls housewives “little women” (another common phrase of the period).⁴⁷ Usage of these words exemplifies part of what the women’s movement was fighting against. These were the popular terms of the culture of the time, and it was the culture that needed changing.

Issue #75 first introduced fans to the character Sharon Carter, “Agent-13” of SHIELD. This character would be Cap’s love interest for most of the next several decades. Unlike Superman’s own love interest, Lois Lane, or Batman’s sometime paramour, Vicki Vale, or even Wonder Woman’s soldier-love Steve Trevor, Sharon Carter does not need to be rescued by her hero boyfriend, though she occasionally is. In fact, Agent-13 saves Captain America as often as the reverse occurs.

⁴⁷ “Let’s Rap With Cap!,” *Captain America #104* (August, 1968), (Marvel Comics – DVD-ROM).

Issue #77 once more flashed-back to World War II. Cap thinks back to the “girl he left behind.” She was a member of the French resistance during the war; and though Cap never learned her name, this was the first woman he had loved. In a telling remark – and one he would use again and again with current girlfriend, Sharon Carter – Cap exposes his opinion of the “proper” role for women, “[Heroics] isn’t women’s work!” Though clearly reflective of a World War II-era mindset, when women represented something that had to be protected and cherished, not all that much had changed by 1966. Though the National Organization for Women (NOW) was founded that year, symbolizing the development of the modern women’s movement, an analysis of the popular culture at the time suggests a national attitude similar to that of twenty years before: women were to be protected by men, not working – or fighting – alongside them.⁴⁸ This is what women of the new movement fought against, a change that Agent-13 in the comics represented.

Though revolutionary in the comics, the idea of women super-spies had already been widely accepted in popular culture. Perhaps the most famous example was Emma Peale, smart, sophisticated, and, yes, sexy, superspy in the television series *The Avengers* (1961-69) [no connection to the comic book]. Still another example was the character of Agent-99 on the television sitcom *Get Smart* (1965-70), partner to the bumbling Maxwell Smart. Even among the internationally successful James Bond films, the “Bond Women” went from being not-so-innocent bystanders to professionals with brains and skills equal to that of the male lead.

⁴⁸ Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, “If a Hostage Should Die!,” *Tales of Suspense* #77 (May, 1966), (Marvel Comics – DVD ROM); Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women’s Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking Press, 2000), xv.

As the “Summer of Love” came to a close, Captain America made a decision: to retire from adventuring. When he confronted Agent-13, asking once more for her to give up her job with SHIELD, and she refuses once more, Cap still decided it was time for him to retire (a decision that would last exactly until the following issue). Even well into 1968, Cap’s opinion of female operatives had not changed. When Nick Fury suggests that Agent-13 accompany Cap on a mission to find and destroy the Red Skull’s fourth sleeper, Cap responds, “I can’t bring a GIRL on such a mission!” [Emphasis in the original]. Fury’s response is that Agent-13 is the best agent he has.⁴⁹

In *Captain America #110*, a new villainess is introduced: Madame Hydra. Sleek and sensual, Madame Hydra is as deadly as she is beautiful. Head of the international terrorist organization Hydra (named for the mythical creature that could re-grow multiple heads and limbs as one was cut off), Madame Hydra is dedicated to destroying America, SHIELD, and Captain America.



[Image 3-8: *Captain America #110* (February, 1969), Jim Steranko, Artist]

⁴⁹ Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, “The Sleeper Strikes!,” *Captain America #102* (June, 1968), (Marvel Comics – DVD-ROM).

The introduction of Madame Hydra is significant because it presents a woman at the head of an international terrorist organization, bent on global domination. She answers to no man, but, rather, has legions of men under her command. This represents a direct contrast to both America and the superhero community. In both of those areas, men are clearly dominant and “in charge.” The President of the United States was a man, as were virtually all other leading politicians. Superhero teams from the Fantastic Four, to the Avengers, to the X-Men, and even SHIELD were all overseen and commanded by men. The appearance of Madame Hydra answers that “question that has no name”: “Is this [dissatisfaction with the mundanity of relegation to a separate sphere] all?”⁵⁰ She has broken the societal bonds and commands with the same manner of deadly ruthlessness as any man.

Captain America – as all male comic book superheroes – represented both “hypermasculinity” and “heteromasculinity.” Hypermasculinity is defined as exaggerated masculinity, often with negative social consequences, indicating insecurity with sex role identities. Heteromasculinity, a relatively new term for an old concept, refers to “traditional” traits of masculinity: strength, power, dominance.⁵¹ The only “true” hero must have bulging muscles, act “manly,” protecting his territory (including his women). One quote, from Andrew Kimbrell’s *The Masculine Mystique*, is particularly relevant to Captain America during this period: “[Men] are locked into rigid stereotypes and financial responsibilities but are also being jolted by economic dislocations and rising demands for a change in gender roles. As a result men have been

⁵⁰ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1963), 5.

⁵¹ Joseph H. Pleck, *The Myth of Masculinity* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1981), 96; Bryce Traister, “Academic Viagra: The Rise of American Masculinity Studies,” *American Quarterly*, Volume 52, Number 2 (The American Studies Association, 2000), 275.

left confused, without a coherent or sustainable concept of their own masculinity.”⁵² This male “problem that has no name” is clear in most of the Captain America issues of the sixties. His confusion over his relationship with Agent-13 permeates every issue once the character is introduced. Cap repeatedly asks her to give up her adventurer ways and wait for him at home like a good woman should; and she consistently refuses his requests, proving herself in combat again and again. The question facing Captain America became: what is my role in a romantic relationship, and, for that matter, what is hers. With dramatically changing attitudes about gender roles in the country by the end of the 1960s, this was a question being asked by many American men.

One issue that connected both Captain America and Agent-13 was that of “identity.”⁵³ By the end of the decade, questions of identity abounded. Am I American first or black / white first? Am I American first or man / woman first? Am I American first or rich / poor first? Must there be a choice? Can anyone be both or all? From 1967 through the remainder of the decade, both Steve Rogers and Sharon Carter ponder the question of who they are, and what their respective identities are.

The artwork of the 1960s Captain America adventures clearly showed “hyper”-masculinized superheroes, as all comics did and do. All comic book superheroes – male and female – have Olympian perfect bodies. On the one hand, this promotes the idea of strong body-image. Unfortunately, the unrealistic nature of the portrayal of the superhero’s exaggerated muscles poses the problem of causing the reader – particularly younger readers – to have negative body-image issues. This was particularly a problem

⁵² Andrew Kimbrell, *The Masculine Mystique: The Politics of Masculinity* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), xii-xiii.

⁵³ Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis*, 78, 89.

during the Cold War, when villains were often portrayed as less physically perfect than the protagonists. It is feasible to conclude that younger readers, in particular, could deduce that those not physically perfect were more likely to go down the road of villainy. Advertisements throughout the decade consistently asked the question, “Tired of being thin?” At least 10% of ads promoted male work-outs and physical training, either through body building or martial arts. Nearly every issue of the sixties advertises muscle-building and weight-gain opportunities for men. Interestingly, especially in a society that glamorizes “thinness,” women in the 1960s were apparently dealing with the “problem” of being “too thin.” Numerous ads, in dozens of issues throughout the decade, ask women “Tired of Being Skinny?” This provides a window into how issues of body-image have changed from the 1960s to the present.⁵⁴

Bryce Traister has put forth the argument that studies of masculinity have been confined to hetero-masculinity. What makes a man a “man?” According to almost all of popular culture – and comic books particularly – the definition is clear: a “man” is someone who defends his country, his friends, and his woman; he is someone who is in peak physical condition for its own sake; and, most of all, he conforms to the norms of society. That is the message that is prevalent throughout the artwork in Captain America’s adventures in the 1960s (and beyond for some time).⁵⁵ It represents a relevant and powerful holdover from the conformism of the 1950s. In this regard, at least, the consensus of Cold War continuity remains up to the present: a tough man is a real man. Aside from this atavistic societal holdover, however, *Captain America* represented a much more egalitarian outlook on society than the vast majority of other comic books.

⁵⁴ These ads run in almost every issue of *Tales of Suspense* and *Captain America* in the 1960s.

⁵⁵ Traister, “Academic Viagra,” *American Quarterly* 52.2 (2000), 282.

Once again, Captain America's contemporaries fell somewhat short of addressing the issues. Since the Wertham crusade of the mid-1950s, the writers of Wonder Woman had focused on a more domestic role for their heroine, making her stories more about romance than heroics. In 1960, *Wonder Woman* was voted "worst comic" by readers of the fan magazine *Alter Ego*.⁵⁶ In 1968, new writer Denny O'Neil took Wonder Woman down a controversial course: he removed her super-powers, making her a "normal" woman of the sixties, independent and self-reliant, with no romantic entanglements. The reaction was unexpected: feminist leader Gloria Steinem reprimanded the writers, saying that they had taken away the powers of America's only female superhero.⁵⁷

The problematic nature of the treatment of female characters – particularly in a medium dominated by male writers and artists – is undeniable. In the article, "Girls and Subcultures," Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber argued that "[if] women are marginal to the male cultures of work, it is because they are central and pivotal to a subordinate sphere... [they] are marginal to work because they are central to family."⁵⁸ How does one write heroes who stand for traditional values, when some of those values are clearly wrong? In his study, *Superman on the Couch*, Danny Fingeroth states, "Our society's ideals of fair play demand there be superheroines. But our society's ingrained, conflicted, and unconscious feelings toward powerful women made the creation of truly crowd-pleasing superhero women take decades – generations – longer to develop than

⁵⁶ Valcour, *Manipulating the Messenger*, 215, 254.

⁵⁷ Valcour, *Manipulating the Messenger*, 271; *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked* (DVD); Denny O'Neil and Mike Sekowsky, *Diana Prince: Wonder Woman#178-183* (1968-69), DC Comics. These represent the original sources on Wonder Woman, as well as secondary analyses of this period.

⁵⁸ Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber, "Girls and Subcultures," *Feminism and Youth Culture: From 'Jackie' to 'Just Seventeen'*, Angela McRobbie, Ed. (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1991), 3.

their male counterparts.”⁵⁹ This is not to excuse the lack of powerful women in comic books, but merely an attempt to explain the difficulties faced at the time.

Christopher Knowles goes further in defining the “problematic nature” of female superheroes. According to his study, there are three major obstacles to successful female superheroes: female readers do not like superhero comics, preferring romance comics; younger male readers have no interest in “girl” heroes; and older male readers tend to objectify them as sex objects.⁶⁰ Comic book illustrator and historian Trina Robbins would disagree, stating that “Girls read comics when there are comics for girls to read.”⁶¹ In their introduction to *Comics and Ideology*, Matthew McAllister, Edward Sewell, and Ian Gordon provided additional reasons for a lack of female readership: superhero comics never deal with such female issues as rape, abortion, sexual harassment, or gender discrimination, deciding to focus instead on the “social ideal.”⁶² All of these provide legitimate arguments as to the problems faced by comic book writers in the 1960s who may have wished to change the genre.

Sharon Carter represented such an attempt. She was as tough, as well-trained, and as professional as Captain America, the Falcon, or Nick Fury. The large number of female SHIELD agents – who wear the same full-length, form-fitting uniforms as their male counterparts – in the 1960s is a testament to Marvel Comics’ attempts to provide examples of what the women’s movement was trying to express about female empowerment. Even in something as simple as footwear, Marvel’s female agents are

⁵⁹ Danny Fingerh, *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us About Ourselves and Our Society* (New York: Continuum Books, 2004), 82.

⁶⁰ Christopher Knowles, *Our Gods Wear Spandex: The Secret History of Comic Book Heroes* (San Francisco: Weiser Books, 2007), 159.

⁶¹ Trina Robbins, *From Girls to Grrrlz: A History of Female Comics and Teens to ‘Zines* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1999), 4; Richard Hall interview with Trina Robbins, January 27, 2011.

⁶² *Comics and Ideology*, Matthew P. McAllister, Edward H. Sewell, Jr., and Ian Gordon, Eds. (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 9.

more practical. Rather than the stiletto heels worn by superheroines like Batgirl or Wonder Woman, Agent-13's boots – though still heeled – are more combat-like and utilitarian. When confronted by her paramour to give up the spy game, which Cap says is not “for girls,” Carter, at first, resists, affirming her oath to her country. As the story progresses, however, the writers put the proverbial shoe on the other foot, when Sharon asks Cap to give up his lifestyle for a quieter home life with her. This storyline goes unresolved until well into the next decade. The only other significant example of the growing women's movement in the late-sixties in superhero comics was in the pages of *Detective Comics* and *Wonder Woman* at DC Comics.

In *Detective Comics* #359 (dated January, 1967), a new and important character is introduced into the Batman mythology in the story, “The Million-Dollar Debut of Batgirl.” Not associated with the cartoonish 1950s character of the same name, the “new” Batgirl was secretly Barbara Gordon, daughter of Gotham City Police Commissioner James Gordon, ally of Batman. A librarian and Ph.D., Barbara is on her way to a costume party, dressed in a feminized version of Batman's costume, when she stumbles across a crime being committed against millionaire Bruce Wayne. Her successful heroics inspire her to continue fighting crime as Batgirl.

Though fighting crime alongside Batman and Robin, her costume falls far from being utilitarian. Her boots are high-heels, her long hair is loose and flowing – an easy target for villains to pull – and instead of relying solely on a utility belt as does Batman, Batgirl accessorizes her utility belt with a matching purse, which hangs from her shoulder. In the early issues, she is frequently patronized by both Batman and the

teenage Robin. At one point, young pre-teen Robin cups Dr. Gordon / Batgirl's face in his hand and says, "there's a girl."⁶³ Like Captain America, the two World-War-II-era heroes see superheroics as the purview of men only.

Meanwhile World War II holdover Wonder Woman experienced a massive change late in the 1960s, due to the writing of newcomer Denny O'Neil. Beginning with *Wonder Woman #178* (cover dated October, 1968), the World War II heroine was stripped of her powers, gadgets and uniform. Now boasting the latest fashions and hairstyles, Diana Prince continued to fight crime with only her burgeoning martial arts prowess as her defense.⁶⁴ Believing that he was making great strides for the character and the women's movement, O'Neil's changes were soon attacked by none other than feminist icon Gloria Steinem, who argued that O'Neil and DC had taken the only woman superhero and stripped her of her powers. O'Neil later acknowledged that the change was wrong.⁶⁵

What seems clear by the end of the decade is that comic book writers and artists, though still confined by societal ideas, were attempting to change the demographic of heroes. Even the encyclopedia-style *The Superhero Book* jumps over the decade in its analysis of feminism in comics, lauding the 1940s, 1950s, 1970s, and 1990s as milestone periods, but the 1960s are mysteriously missing.⁶⁶ Though women had been heroes since the early years of comics, the idea of the "new woman" was just beginning to be defined and to become relevant and prevalent in comic books, and Captain America writers,

⁶³ Gardner Fox and Carmine Infantino, "The Million-Dollar Debut of Batgirl," *Detective Comics* #359 (January, 1967) New York: DC Comics.

⁶⁴ Denny O'Neil, "Forget the Old... The New Wonder Woman is Here!," *Wonder Woman #178*, (October, 1968), New York: DC Comics.

⁶⁵ *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked* (DVD).

⁶⁶ "Feminism," *The Superhero Book: The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Comic-Book Icons and Hollywood Heroes*, Gina Misiroglu and David A. Roach, Eds. (Detroit: Visible Ink Press, 2004), 212-15.

artists and editors appear to have been more in line with the women's movement's goal of equality than their counterparts at rival DC Comics.

Aside from patriotism, race, and gender, another social issue portrayed in the pages of *Captain America* in the 1960s was smoking tobacco. On television during the sixties, smoking was common. News anchors smoked as they read the news. On daytime soap operas, fictional doctors would smoke over the bedsides of their ailing patients. In the comic books, everyone smoked. Captain America's Steve Rogers, Batman's Bruce Wayne, and the Fantastic Four's Reed Richards all smoked pipes. Nick Fury smoked cigars. Various SHIELD agents smoked cigarettes. Even Cap villain the Red Skull smoked a cigarette in a long filter (a la FDR?).

Interestingly, the costumed heroes never smoked while in costume. Richards (an intellectual) and Fury (a blood-and-guts soldier) did not have secret identities, so they smoked as themselves, whether doing heroics or in their civilian life. Rogers and Wayne, however, never smoked while in costume as Captain America or Batman. Is it possible that some hidden meaning can be found here? Could it be that even though smoking was still considered socially acceptable at the time, the artists drawing these characters – most of whom were smokers themselves – did not see smoking as an activity appropriate for a role-model? Even at a time when smoking was a common social practice, these symbols of what was right for children did not smoke when in their roles as symbols.⁶⁷

Perhaps the best canvas to examine the broad overall appeal of comic books in the 1960s is through the advertisers who chose to run ads in the Marvel Comics. An

⁶⁷ Though not shown in every issue of *Captain America*, *Batman*, *Detective Comics*, *Fantastic Four*, or *Nick Fury: Agent of SHIELD*, characters smoking tobacco products was regular enough to be noticeable by the most casual of observers.

examination of the advertisements in both *Tales of Suspense* and *Captain America* reveals that advertisers as early as 1964 were aware that older readers were buying these comic books. Beginning with *Tales of Suspense* #59 and culminating with *Captain America* #122, many of the advertisers in Captain America comics – and Marvel Comics overall – remained much the same. Most of the products advertised throughout the 1960s were toy novelties of some kind or other, focusing on the youth demographic, which publishers still considered the primary market for comic books. However, as Marvel Editor-in-Chief Martin Goodman had mentioned to Stan Lee early on in Lee’s comic book career, another major demographic that bought comic books was that of “illiterate adults.”⁶⁸ Proof of the belief in this demographic can be seen in the myriad home-schooling opportunities presented in the ads of the decade. Though editors and writers could present fan letters as proof of the broadening appeal of comics, the advertisements of the period suggest that the publishers were not yet fully convinced, as they sought to appeal primarily to youth and high school dropouts.

As early as 1964, Mason Shoe Manufacturers began advertising in Marvel Comics looking for door-to-door shoe salesmen. Offers also existed offering lessons in radio/TV/electronics repair. “Train-at-Home” auto mechanics courses were also advertised, as were offers to “Start your own electronic appliance repair business.” The International Correspondence School began offering its own home-high-school-diploma courses. Throughout the decade, Marvel Comics printed ads for “drafting kits” to promote architectural careers. By the end of the decade, ads for Audel Skill-Building

⁶⁸ *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked* (DVD).

Practical Guides (primarily for auto repair or carpentry) began to run.⁶⁹ These advertisements would appeal to those readers who had, for one reason or another, never completed high school, but wanted to improve their lot in life.

Beginning in mid-1965, some advertisers began to market toward the growing teenage demographic. In *Tales of Suspense* #70 (dated October, 1965), “Hit Records,” offered sixty 45rpm vinyl records for \$2.98, including such hits as “The Name Game,” “This Diamond Ring,” and “My Girl.” The Wayne School, out of Chicago, offered courses to “finish high school at home”; and the American Basic Science Club offered a “Home Science Lab and Course.” In late-1967, ads for “skin-clearing cream” began to appear as well. By early 1966, it was clear that advertisers were aware that substantial numbers of adults were reading Marvel Comics, as the ad, “Is Your Hair Growing or Going?” indicates. In early 1968, ads for oil paintings appeared. The International Correspondence School began offering its own home-high-school-diploma courses.

As interest in the space program increased throughout the decade, ads were created to appeal to that interest, from ads to make you “astronaut tough,” to Cheerios cereal ads which told about the newest technology. In *Captain America* #104 (dated August, 1968), Cheerios took out a full page ad telling about the Intelsat III Satellite: “powered by solar energy cells, this satellite – launched in 1968 – can ‘bounce’ 1200 telephone calls and four television channels across the earth simultaneously.” Three months later, Cheerios would take out a similar ad telling about the XB-70A Valkyrie jet, which could go MACH 3 at 70,000 feet. The month immediately following, Cheerios did a similar ad reporting about the “World’s Fastest Train,” the New Tokaido, in Japan,

⁶⁹ Ads mentioned in these last two paragraphs run through numerous issues of both *Tales of Suspense* and *Captain America* from 1964 through 1969.

which could reach 101mph.⁷⁰ As man prepared to land on the moon, comic book readers of all ages were clearly already looking in that direction. These ads were likely meant to connect Cheerios cereal with space-age technological advancements in the minds of the younger comic book readers.

What appears to be obvious about Captain America adventures during the 1960s is that – just as the fascist-fighting hero of World War II, or the “Commie” smashing anti-communist of the 1950s – Captain America continued to be a mirror of his times in the turbulent, uncertain, and conflicted sixties. Throughout the decade, Cap could find himself either fighting or supporting social protesters, always unsure as to which side was “right.” While Superman, Wonder Woman, and even Batman still defended the status quo, Captain America was already asking the same questions as his readers. What did America stand for? Where was America going? In the new “Marvel Age” of relevancy, *Captain America* clearly led the way for readers.

In the turbulent 1960s, certain points can be ascertained from a close analysis of *Tales of Suspense* and *Captain America*. Fresh on the heels of the conservative, conformist fifties, Captain America’s return in 1964 coincided with the end of that more consensus-driven era. By the end of the decade, the pages of Captain America stories – like American society itself – began a gradual transition leftward. With the societal confusion over Vietnam and an increasing radicalization of the New Left, American society was caught in a whirlwind of socio-political questions. What kind of a people are we? For what does America stand? Who is our enemy?

⁷⁰ *Captain America* #'s 104, 107, 108, (August, November, and December, 1968), (Marvel Comics – DVD-ROM).

By the end of the decade, successes in the Civil Rights Movement and the reinvigorated women's movement were made manifest in the pages of *Captain America*. The Falcon became the world's first African-American superhero. Agent-13 became a strong equal to the Star-Spangled Avenger, much more in line with women in other genres of popular culture than even with her own comic book counterparts. Much of what comic book historians refer to as "relevance" in comics did not become clear in the texts of stories until the very end of the decade, and much more so after 1970, but the examples provided in this chapter give clear evidence that Captain America comic books in the 1960s continued to reflect the times in which they were published.

As far as the criticism by liberals that Captain America was too conservative – and the opposite argument made by conservatives – it appears clear that Captain America was right where the rest of the country was in 1969: the center. Richard Nixon won the Presidential election of 1968, causing many over the years to label this a win for conservatism. However, on closer examination, it was a victory for the center. With the Democratic Party by and large embracing the liberal agendas set in place by first the New Deal and now the Great Society, and the radical right embracing the radical segregationism of Governor George Wallace's Independent run for the Presidency, the center had nowhere to go but Richard Nixon. The "Silent Majority" was therefore assisted a great deal by centrists disgruntled with the radical ends of the political spectrum.⁷¹

This was where Captain America was by the end of the 1960s. Whereas the war in Vietnam was questionable, the dangers of Asian communism were clearly a reality.

⁷¹ Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (New York: Scribner Press, 2008), xii-xiii.

The days of white, male domination were clearly coming to an end, the only question remaining being when. The Counterculture, minority and women's activism, and the anti-war movements were markedly more volatile going into 1970. Unknown to mainstream Americans – and comic book writers and artists among them – at the time, the seventies would push American idealism to its limits, threatening the very fabric of the nation. As America faced the end of Vietnam, the downfall of a President, a Second Harlem Renaissance, and the critical issue of women's role in society, Captain America and his cadre of villains and fellow heroes would be there to reflect the times, pose questions to their readers, and continue to provide a window into the ever-changing American socio-political landscape.

CHAPTER 4

THE RELEVANCY REVOLUTION: CAPTAIN AMERICA IN THE 1970s

The 1970s was one of the most volatile decades in American history, in many ways as transformative as the 1960s. From college campus protests, to the end of Vietnam, to the constitutional crisis of Watergate, the seventies represented a hot-bed of political and social upheaval in the country. By the decade's end, America was held hostage, both proverbially by OPEC, and literally with 52 Americans held in Iran. Additionally, America was hit by one of the worst recessions since the Great Depression. "Stagflation" and "Misery Index" became new common phrases in the American vernacular.

The splintering of the Civil Rights Movement, exacerbated by the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968, had led to the emergence of a vocal "Black Power" movement. The economic advances Dr. King had fought for the last two years of his life were beginning to come to fruition. For the first time in American history, significant numbers of African-Americans found themselves with "discretionary income," making them an increasingly important demographic for the pop-culture industries. As a consequence, America experienced a "Second Harlem Renaissance."

Even more than in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, African-Americans in the 1970s dominated every aspect of American popular culture. The blaxploitation genre

of independent films actually saved Hollywood.¹ Nearly half of the top-ten network television programs, including *Good Times*, *Sanford and Son*, and *The Jeffersons*, centered on African-American characters and issues. Hank Aaron, Mohammad Ali, “Mean” Joe Greene, and Julius Irving brought the popularity of American sports to new heights. Alex Haley’s *Roots* dominated book sales and later television ratings as a made-for-tv mini-series. *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids* was one of the most popular Saturday morning cartoons of the day. Richard Pryor redefined stand-up comedy. Lastly – but by no means least – an entire generation of American children would be changed by their exposure to the interracial and gender-equal world of *Sesame Street*.

The women’s movement, likewise, experienced a dramatic upsurge. Unlike the political inequalities that African-American and other minority groups had fought against in the 1960s, the key issue facing women by 1970 was that of agency.² Women had possessed political rights for fifty years, and since then had not been denied those rights on the same kind of mass scale experienced by some minorities. However, their power to *act* on that political equality, and to exert equal *power* in the economy and society, was still being severely limited by the male power elite.³ Congressional passage of the ERA in 1972, and the landmark Supreme Court case *Roe v. Wade* in 1973 made it clear that American women were beginning to achieve a new status. This was reflected in popular culture. Increasing numbers of women began dominating music recording charts. Billie Jean King won the famous “Battle of the Sexes” on the tennis courts. Television gave

¹ *Baad Asssss Cinema: A Bold Look at 70s Blaxploitation Films*, Isaac Julian, Dir. (Hollywood: Minerva Pictures Production, IFC) (DVD), 2002.

² “Feminist Perspectives on the Self,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-self/> (August 5, 2009).

³ Ibid.

Americans *Charlie's Angels*, *The Bionic Woman*, *Police Woman*, *The Mary Tyler-Moore Show*, and *Maude*.

The key word in comic books as the decade dawned became “relevance.” The word has become synonymous with comic book studies of this period. Bradford Wright, for example, writes that “What the media actually noticed as ‘relevance’ was a proliferation of self-consciously leftist comic book explorations of political and social issues.”⁴ As had always been Stan Lee’s policy toward his comics, Marvel was giving their readers what they wanted; and their readers, by and large, were increasingly liberal high school and college students. By 1970, Captain America had gone from “New Dealer” to “New Lifter.” However, the stories in comic books – and *Captain America* in particular – were “relevant” in the same way that reports on the nightly news were relevant. Following the examples that Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko and the Marvel Age had presented in the 1960s, publishers began to recognize that their superhero comic books needed to reflect what was going on in the real world. At DC Comics, Denny O’Neil and Neal Adams addressed issues of race throughout the pages of *Green Lantern / Green Arrow*. By request of the Nixon administration, Stan Lee and Marvel Comics addressed the growing drug problem in the country in a three-issue story arc in *Amazing Spider-Man*.⁵

By the end of the decade, the increasing popularity of comic book superheroes became evident with two popular television series, *The Incredible Hulk* and *Wonder Woman*,⁶ and *Superman: The Movie*, which became one of the highest grossing films of

⁴ Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003 – Second Edition), 233.

⁵ *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked*, (DVD); Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 233-35.

⁶ *Marvel Chronicle*, 178.

the decade, earning over \$300 million.⁷ By the end of the decade, the industry was seriously hit by a broad economic downturn. While DC Comics weathered the hard times due to being owned by larger, more secure companies, Marvel was spared only by a prescient move by Stan Lee and Roy Thomas to negotiate a deal to make original comic books of the upcoming science fiction movie, *Star Wars*. When the film became a pop culture phenomenon, this deal would keep Marvel afloat well into the 1980s⁸

During this turbulent period, Captain America continued to change as did the country he represented. Stan Lee's biographers observe: "By the early 1970s, Lee's writing had become more competent than innovative. *Captain America* became the monthly most altered by explorations of realism, as the patriotic superhero gained a black partner... and delved into issues of racism and violence from a street-level perspective."⁹ In the wake of Vietnam and Watergate, Captain America – like the rest of the country – had to address the issue of what he believed in and stood for. For most of the decade, the title, *Captain America*, was changed to *Captain America and The Falcon*. Many of its stories revolved around African-American inner-city issues, while trying to avoid racial stereotyping, a problem in all genres of popular culture.¹⁰ *Captain America* may have shown a new sensitivity to issues of black/white relations during this period, but on gender issues the comic often seemed to regress to more traditional portrayals of women. This is particularly significant for the 1970s, as women on the whole began to question

⁷ *Look! Up in the Sky!*, (DVD); Daniels, *Superman, The Complete History*, 160.

⁸ *Marvel Chronicle*, 180.

⁹ Jordan Raphael and Tom Spurgeon, *Stan Lee and the Rise and Fall of the American Comic Book* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2003), 125.

¹⁰ Larry Gross, "Out of the Mainstream: Sexual Minorities and the Mass Media," *Gender, Race and Class in Media: A Text Reader*, Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez, Eds., (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1995), 62.

whether their traditional roles should, in fact, be abandoned, or whether being a wife and mother were, themselves, vital roles that only women could perform.

Beginning the decade with strong female characters like Leila, the vocal, politically active girlfriend of the Falcon, and an increasingly powerful Agent-13, who started the seventies as leader of the SHIELD special forces team, *Femme Force*, the comic took a dramatic turn by mid-decade. As romance comics fell out of favor with fans and disappeared altogether, their storylines re-emerged in the pages of comics like *Captain America*. To appease her man, Sharon Carter resigned from SHIELD, pining away for him while he continued actively to seek out danger and excitement; in essence, doing for him what he refused to allow her to do.

What these examples show above everything else is a reflection of the country's own feelings on issues of patriotism, race, and gender: confusion over what to do and believe; and uncertainty as to where the country should go. Until around 1970, *Captain America* comics had reflected American culture, as the best of popular culture always does. After 1970, partly in response to the influence of its liberal older readers, *Captain America* would begin to attempt to shape popular opinion, exposing a new generation of younger readers to the liberal ideas of the 1960s generation.

Patriotism became an even more controversial issue during the 1970s. Throughout the decade, Americans were faced with numerous issues that kept the topic in the limelight: Vietnam, Watergate, the Bicentennial, the energy crisis, American hostages in Iran. *Captain America* faced many of these same issues in the pages of the monthly comic. Steve Rogers questioned whether *Captain America* should stand for the

establishment or the rising rebelliousness found mainly among the young. In discussing Captain America in the 1970s, Cap writer Steve Englehart said, “The problem [in the ’70s] was that Cap was supposed to *stand* for America when people were *ashamed* of America... ultimately, Cap stands for American *ideals*, [which in the 1970s meant] ‘America can do better!’”¹¹

A related issue in the 1970s was the rise of the anti-hero. In Hollywood, characters like Hawkeye Pierce, George S. Patton, Vito and Michael Corleone, “Dirty” Harry, Popeye Doyle, and Han Solo dominated the silver screen. In the comic books, readers were introduced to The Punisher, a former New York City policeman who witnesses the murder of his family and becomes a one-man war on crime, punishing – and often killing – the guilty. Comics also introduced the character of Wolverine, a mutant with unbreakable metal claws who had no qualms about taking human life. The popularity of these heroes – as well as a resurgence of popularity of the Batman comics at DC – indicates the growing appeal of vengeance and violence in American society. Just as Captain America posed the question of what patriotism in the 1970s should mean, the writers and artists also addressed the question of whether the traditional American hero was still in keeping with “modern” American values. The “patriotism controversy” that had begun toward the end of the previous decade in the letters columns of *Captain America* was due primarily to the fact that it was never quite clear where Captain America’s loyalties lay: with the “establishment,” or with the people he was sworn to protect.¹² What the evidence – the storylines and letters columns – suggests is that

¹¹ Steve Englehart, interview with the author, January 23, 2008.

¹² David Walton, “‘*Captain America Must Die*’: The Many Afterlives of Steve Rogers,” *Captain America and the Struggle of the Superhero: Critical Essays*, Robert G. Weiner, Ed. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2008), 163.

“patriotism” was a complex concept that the writers of *Captain America* would have to walk a fine line to approach.

In *Captain America* #125 (cover-dated May 1970), Captain America returned to Vietnam to rescue a famous peace activist who had been taken, presumably by the NVA (North Vietnamese Army). The war, however was simply a back-drop. The Asian fascist and super villain, the Mandarin, was the mastermind behind the plot to kidnap Dr. Hoskins, the peace activist, with the goal of continuing the American war in Asia. As Captain America arrived in the region, both “camps” of the struggle in Vietnam hailed the work of Dr. Hoskins and claimed to have no part in his capture. The overall story, and the hero’s ultimate lack of interest in the war itself, implies to the reader that there are no “good guys” in this war, and that ultimately the war is being exacerbated by powers beyond either side’s control. The story concludes with Dr. Hoskins returning to his mission of peace. “Now that both sides realize they were duped by the Mandarin,” Captain America says in the closing panel, “They can face each other at the peace table again.”¹³ This issue, hitting newsstands in February, 1970, portrays Vietnam as the victim of more powerful forces intent on continuing the conflict for their own personal gain, particularly in war profiteering.

¹³ Stan Lee and Gene Colan, “Captured in Vietnam!” *Captain America* #125 (New York: Marvel Comics, May, 1970).



[Image 4-1: *Captain America* #125 (May, 1970), Gene Colan, Artist]

Captain America would not have seen Vietnam as the threat that the rest of American culture did as early as 1960. He would be well aware of Russian communism, but since he was frozen through the fall of China, the Korean Conflict, and the French-Indochinese war, this Captain America would likely have seen any non-Japanese Asian peoples as allies from the days of World War II.¹⁴ These dominos have not yet fallen for Cap. Stan Lee has stated in several interviews that his personal opinion at the time was that Vietnam was a very different war than World War II had been.¹⁵ The decline of McCarthyism and the success of various liberal social movements raised the question of whether or not communism was the threat it had originally been presented as being. It is possible that Marvel Comics, in order to appease its readers, whose ideas on the war may have been increasingly dovish, gave them an “American” hero who did not openly support the war. Conversely, it is possible that by showing younger readers that “America” did not support the war, the comic was actually creating more questioning regarding the war’s goals. Certainly since this episode was only the second time that Captain America went to Vietnam, the message to readers was that Vietnam was not a

¹⁴ Matthew J. Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis: Comic Books and the Unmasking of Cold War America* (New York: Continuum Books, 2009), 104.

¹⁵ *Stan Lee Conversations; Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked*.

place for “America,” but, rather, that the focus of America should be directed to the turmoil on the home front.¹⁶ This analysis is consistent with the more liberal leanings of the character since his return in the sixties.

By the time Vietnam would be mentioned again in the pages of Cap, the war was just ending. In a story called “Beware of Serpents!” (July, 1973) Captain America met a young Vietnam veteran – and former prisoner-of-war – named Dave Cox. The young soldier had lost an arm in the war, and was now a “conscientious objector,” a phrase that had become popular among American youth to describe citizens who both believed in their country and opposed the war. Pondering Dave’s stand against violence, and all he had sacrificed for his country, Cap laments, “I was created to put an END [emphasis in the original] to things like that... to keep Americans safe from aggressors... but what can I do if America herself...”¹⁷

When the Serpent Squad attacked Cap, Cox defended him, without giving in to violence, opening Cap’s eyes to the opposition movement. Cox defended his anti-violence position when he refused to use a rifle to defend the downed Captain America, “I swore to myself and my God, who said, ‘Thou shalt not kill!’ and ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you!’ Men talk of using a gun to keep the peace; of ‘fighting the war to end all wars!’ Don’t you see that it doesn’t work... that violence only breeds violence!”¹⁸ Cap ultimately defended Cox to Agent-13 by saying, “Dave Cox is

¹⁶ Jason Dittmer, “Fighting for Home: Masculinity and the Constitution of the Domestic in the Pages of *Tales of Suspense* and *Captain America*,” *Heroes of Film, Comics and American Culture: Essays on Real and Fictional Defenders of Home*, Lisa DeTora, ed (New York: McFarland, 2009).

¹⁷ Steve Englehart and Sal Buscema, “Beware of Serpents!” *Captain America and the Falcon #163* (New York: Marvel Comics, July, 1973).

¹⁸ Englehart and Buscema, “Beware of Serpents,” *Captain America and the Falcon #163*.

no coward! He was willing to die in order to protect us – without violating his beliefs.”¹⁹

Later, in the editorial column in issue number 169 (January, 1974), Englehart acknowledged being a conscientious objector himself.²⁰ As can be seen in the image below, when Captain America meets Dave, his shield is slung over his back. His defenses are down. He is open to alternative arguments.



[Image 4-2: *Captain America and the Falcon* #163 (July, 1973), Sal Buscema, Artist]

Thanks to the Silver Age and Marvel Comics, comic book sales by 1970 were very close to their World War II heights. Actual “readership” may have even been twice or three-times what sales records indicate. Among children – defining “children” as the target comic book audience of 8-12-year-old boys – comic books were often being

¹⁹ Englehart and Buscema, “Beware of Serpents,” *Captain America and the Falcon* #163.

²⁰ Steve Englehart, “Let’s Rap With Cap,” *Captain America and the Falcon* #169 (New York: Marvel Comics, January, 1974).

bought and “swapped.”²¹ While the directions of the stories were being guided by the suggestions sent in by the comics’ teenage and adult readers, the comics were simultaneously guiding the impressionable readers among America’s youth. Comic books – and particularly *Captain America* – were simultaneously reflecting and influencing American culture.

Letters to the pages of *Captain America* reflect the idealism of its readers, from all sides of the political spectrum. In *Captain America #126*, Guy Owen of Maryland stated, “if ever I forget what America has given me, then surely I’ll have lost my soul.” He went on to equate Captain America’s soul to “America, his love for her, her dream, and her people.” By contrast, in the same issue, Moose White of Michigan claimed that, “There is nothing sacred about the United States of America,” citing the slaughter of Native Americans as an example of the country’s legacy.²² This is an interesting analogy, since, by 1970, social history was just beginning to work its way into college classrooms; and still several years away from reaching public school children. To most young readers in 1970, “Indians” were still the bad guys, taken out by John Wayne in their fathers’ favorite movies, and portrayed by the less popular kids on the playground. Yet another reader questioned the “truth” of Vietnam.²³ This, too, was prescient, as the Pentagon Papers had yet to be published.

President Nixon, in his 1968 presidential campaign, had portrayed the radical left as un-American, while praising the patriotism of the “Silent Majority.” While counter-culture symbols such as the Weathermen or Charles Manson gave the radical fringe a bad

²¹ *Comic Book Confidential* (DVD).

²² “Let’s Rap With Cap,” *Captain America #126*, (New York: Marvel Comics, June 1970).

²³ Paul Rawlings, letter, “Let’s Rap With Cap,” *Captain America #127*, (New York: Marvel Comics, July 1970).

name, the truth was that patriotism could be found across the political spectrum. In a letter to Marvel in the spring of 1970, New Yorker Anthony Flood stated, “I happen to be a member of the radical left. Yet I feel as patriotic as any ‘right-winger’.”²⁴ This letter challenges the notion that the radical left did not love America as much as did the right. Many on the right, and most especially President Nixon, saw “hippies” as hating America because of their protest against its institutions.²⁵ This letter, though not unique, provides historical evidence to the contrary.

The ideologies of America’s youth took center-stage in the story “Up Against the Wall!” in which Captain America encountered a college riot. On approaching the riot, Cap expressed his uncertainty as to who needed help from whom, “Here’s where I oughtta step in and make like a swingin’ hero! But how do I know whose side to take? What the heck – the cops don’t need any help – but these kids do!” As he attempted to calm and disperse the protesters, he learned that the crowd had violent intentions toward the college dean; when he tried to talk to the students, he was attacked, his red-white-and-blue uniform seen as a representation of the establishment. In the wake of the incident, Captain America was asked to go on television and speak against the protesters. Cap, instead, defended them, stating:

I’ve been asked to speak to you today... to warn America about those who try to change our institutions... but in a pig’s eye I’ll warn you! This nation was founded by dissidents – by people who wanted something better! There’s nothing sacred about the status quo... and there never will be! I don’t believe in using force – or violence – because they can be the weapons of those who would enslave us... but nor do I believe in an establishment that remains aloof – so

²⁴ Anthony Flood, letter, “Let’s Rap With Cap,” *Captain America #128*, (New York: Marvel Comics, August, 1970).

²⁵ *Nixon: A Presidency Revealed*, A&E Home Video (DVD), 2007.

distant – that the people are driven to desperate measures... as in the case of a college dean who isolates himself from his student body!²⁶

Cap, therefore, defended neither the left nor the right, but instead called for openness on all sides. University of California medical student Fez Toi praised Cap for representing “individual freedom, individual responsibility, moral sensitivity, integrity, and a willingness to fight for right (vs. wrong, not left).”²⁷ These letters support the idea among scholars that Captain America has always represented the political center rather than either fringe.

However, another way to interpret this text and corresponding letters to the editor is that, by 1970 the tone of *Captain America* comics had clearly shifted. In the 1940s and ’50s, the character and his adventures clearly mirrored American culture at the time, first as a stalwart against fascism, and later against communism. With the character’s return in the mid-1960s, that reflection continued as *Captain America* more or less appeared to mirror the contemporary pop-culture phenomenon of superhero comic books with contemplative characters, questioning themselves and their society. By so clearly symbolizing America, Captain America would naturally be seen by young readers as a symbol of their country. Add to this Stan Lee’s (and later Roy Thomas’s) tendency to follow reader suggestions in directing story content and writing, and what emerges is a piece of essentially pro-left literature that is primarily directed at younger (8-12-year-old boys) readers, ultimately influencing a significant portion of the next generation of Americans.

²⁶ Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, “Up Against the Wall!,” *Captain America* #130, (New York: Marvel Comics, October, 1970); Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 244.

²⁷ Fez Toi, “Let’s Rap With Cap,” *Captain America* #131, (New York: Marvel Comics, November, 1970).

As the Vietnam War continued into 1971, anti-war sentiment across the country grew. In a letter to the editor printed in the April, 1971-dated issue of *Cap*, US Army Corporal George Rackett defended those who were peacefully demonstrating against the war, while at the same time he derided the Nixon administration for vowing to ignore anti-war protestors.²⁸ Laura Frank of California later wrote of two different types of patriotism: (1) “blind patriotism” – which was necessary during earth-shattering events like World War II, but “when not needed... can become dangerously misguided”; and (2) “tempered patriotism” – which sees our country’s faults and seeks to solve them peacefully. She clearly saw Captain America representing this type of patriotism. Michigan college student Steve Hunsberger explained that he bought Marvel comics for the “philosophical ideas” they explored, portraying idealistic heroes who stand up for their beliefs and being the best of what people can be.²⁹ Though Lee later complained incessantly that he preferred letters to the editor to contain critiques and compliments of the actual stories and artwork in the comics, it is clear that at this point – mid-1971 – he was still impressed with the philosophical idealism of his readers.

Aside from the letters columns each month, the stories of the early-1970s began to take on increasingly political overtones, just as American society was heading toward its most serious political crisis since the Civil War. For the first time since World War II, the real world political landscape was being presented in the pages of *Captain America*. Beginning with #144 (dated December, 1971), President Richard Nixon began appearing

²⁸ CPL George Rackett, USA, “Let’s Rap With Cap,” *Captain America and the Falcon* #136, (New York: Marvel Comics, April, 1971)

²⁹ Laura Frank and Steve Hunsberger, “Let’s Rap With Cap,” *Captain America and the Falcon* #137 (New York: Marvel Comics, May, 1971).

in the pages of Cap. In that issue, SHIELD Director, Colonel Nick Fury appealed to the president for more funding, indicating for the first time under whose authority the spy agency fell. Appearing along someone who is clearly Vice President Spiro Agnew, President Nixon, in his role as the nation's chief executive, carefully explained to Fury the lengthy legislative process to procure defense funding. Just as Americans' perception of the President would change over the course of the next four years, so also would the portrayal of him in the comic book. President Nixon played a recurring role in the comic, leading up to his proverbial downfall in the comic, preceding his literal downfall by more than six months.

Meanwhile, other political stories would become prominent. In the summer of 1972, beginning in issue #153, writer Steve Englehart began the first of his two historic story-arcs in the pages of *Captain America and the Falcon*. Englehart finally answered pleas from fans curious as to how Captain America could have been frozen at the end of World War II and not found until late 1964, when they clearly remembered that there had been Captain America comic book adventures in the mid-1950s [the infamous "Commie Smasher" issues].

At the end of issue #153, just after wishing Captain America well on his much-deserved vacation, the Falcon found both Captain America and his World War II sidekick, Bucky Barnes, beating up a presumably innocent young black man. This "Captain America" and his teenage sidekick then turned their attentions on the black hero, claiming at the end of the fight to being "the REAL Captain America and Bucky!," a claim that was backed up when Falcon unmasked the star-spangled "imposter" only to

see the face of Steve Rogers.³⁰ Referring to African-Americans – including Falcon – as “coloreds,” this new Cap and Bucky concluded that the “uppity” nature of these “modern” blacks must be the result of the successful spread of communism. Such comments hearkened back to the McCarthy era, a period where the slightest liberal leaning could have one branded a communist. As Falcon continued to defend his friend as the “real” Captain America, the Cap in front of him stated, “I am Captain America! Your friend is some pinko who’s duped the American public... who’s trying to sell out this great nation to the Reds! I am the TRUE force of our democracy... and you’ll soon admit it... or I’ll beat your brains out!”³¹ The image below expresses the anger toward minorities that was reminiscent of the more conservative fifties. Clenched fists and teeth symbolize the tension between the races during that bygone era:



[Image 4-3: *Captain America and the Falcon #154* (October, 1972), Sal Buscema, Artist]

³⁰ Steve Englehart and Sal Buscema, “Captain America – Hero or Hoax?” *Captain America and the Falcon #153* (New York: Marvel Comics, September, 1972).

³¹ Steve Englehart and Sal Buscema, “The Falcon Fights Alone!” *Captain America and the Falcon #154* (New York: Marvel Comics, October, 1972).

In his analysis of Cold War culture, Matthew Costello pointed out that this portrayal of a McCarthy-esque Captain America undermined the patriotic Cold War culture of the 1950s, equalizing it with racial bigotry and chauvinism.³² What it also does, by contrast, is emphasize a more liberal Captain America – and America – in the 1970s. Once confronted with – and compared to – the “real” Captain America, therefore, the original would be even more associated with *détente* on all levels: politically (with the Russians); racially (with African-Americans); and gender-equally. Even though, in actuality, “Captain America” never changed and remained the same character since 1940, this story “ret-conned” – or rewrote – the history, making the post-World War II / pre-LBJ Cap a different person. This, according to Jason Dittmer, allowed the writers of Captain America to remake the character in a more liberal light, focused more on America’s inner problems than the outside threats of multiple “others.”³³

After two issues, the mystery regarding the two Caps was resolved. This “new” Captain America was, in fact, the Captain America of the 1950s (the “Commie Smasher”). After discovering that the “real” Captain America had disappeared in the last days of World War II, a college history grad student –and obsessed fan of Captain America – approached the government about becoming a new Captain. He and one of his students underwent plastic surgery to look like the real Cap and Bucky, and this new Cap took a new, experimental form of the Super Soldier Serum. As the excesses of anti-communism became clear by the late-1950s, this new, rabid anti-communist Cap was put

³² Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis*, 106-107.

³³ Jason Dittmer, “Retconning America: Captain America in the Wake of World War II and the McCarthy Hearings,” *The Amazing Transforming Superhero!: Essays on the Revision of Characters in Comic Books, Film and Television*, Terrence R. Wandtke, Ed. (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2007), 41.

into suspended animation with his young partner. He was then “thawed out” in 1972 by a government official who was afraid that the country had gone too far to the left.

Newly exposed to 1972-America, the '50s Cap saw the increased assertiveness of African-Americans and women as an obvious victory for communism. The “real” Cap was forced to return from vacation and put his doppelganger down.³⁴ What Englehart did masterfully with this script was to show the dramatic change in America over the last fifteen-to-twenty years. On defeating his doppelganger, Cap thought to himself, “I’ve never fought the evil side of my own nature, and that’s what he is after all... a man who began with the same dreams I did... and ended as an insane, bigoted superpatriot! He is what he is because he admired me... wanted to copy me... In a very real way, I’m responsible for all the evil he’s done!”³⁵

In their final showdown, the “real” Captain America exclaimed to his doppelganger, “You think I’m a traitor? Grow up, fella... times have changed! America’s in danger from within as well as without! There’s organized crime, injustice, and fascism...” To which, the '50s Cap retorted, “You’re scared to face up to the commies in a war like a real man! I’m a real man! And I’ll kill you to prove it!” Ultimately, the original Cap prevailed, a victory of modern liberalism over radical conservatism. In the end, however, rather than bask in his victory, Captain America pondered if, had he not been frozen and continued to be Captain America through the

³⁴ Steve Englehart, *Captain America and the Falcon*, #153-156 (New York: Marvel Comics, September through December, 1972).

³⁵ Steve Englehart and Sal Buscema, “Two Into One Won’t Go!” *Captain America and the Falcon* #156 (New York: Marvel Comics, December, 1972).

McCarthy era, he, too, would have gone over the line, so consumed with threats to the status quo that he would blind himself to the oppression of his fellow citizens.³⁶

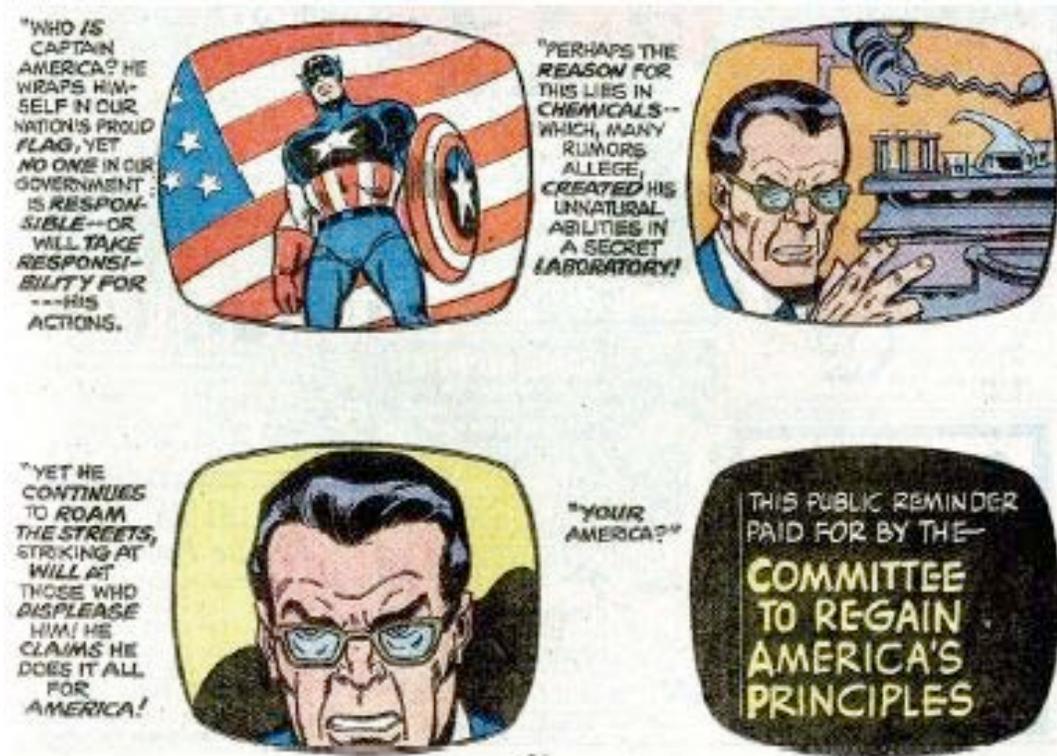
Not only had the political standing of women and African-Americans dramatically changed, but so had popular ideas about “patriotism” and the American ideal. In just over ten years since Vice President Nixon’s famous “Kitchen Debates” with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, the now-President Nixon had visited Communist China and begun *détente* with the Soviets. In that same time, Jim Crow had been replaced by Black Power. June Cleaver had been replaced by Maude. Jason Dittmer argues that by ret-conning the anti-communist Captain America of the 1950s as being a different Cap, it allowed for a clear continuity from the liberal New Deal / World War II era to the liberal 1960s / ’70s.³⁷ To Marvel writers of the 1970s, Captain America was never – and perhaps was never meant to be – the representation of all Americans or all American ideals, but, rather, a representation of America’s most liberal ideals.

Englehart’s next story-arc was written and published as the Watergate scandal was coming to a head. In issue number 169, hitting newsstands in October of 1973 – just weeks before the infamous “Saturday Night Massacre” in which President Nixon ordered the firing of Watergate Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox, Englehart introduced the “Committee to Regain America’s Principles” (with the ironic acronym, CRAP) and its leader Quentin Harderman. This was a not-so-subtle satirical poke at the real-life Committee to RE-Elect the President [CREEP] and White House Chief-of-Staff H.R. Haldeman.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Dittmer, “Retconning America,” 48-49.

Introducing itself to the world by means of a television commercial, CRAP posed the question, “Who is Captain America?” As the image below projects, the ad was presented to the reader in the same format in which it was being experienced by the fictional audience: in the shape of a television screen, a truly authoritative shape by the 1970s.



[Image 4-4: *Captain America and the Falcon* #169 (January, 1974), Mike Friedrich, Artist]

The ad expressed a great deal about the times in which the reader was living. Captain America was presented as an entity all to himself, responsible to no one, unchecked by the American people. By November 1973, when this issue hit newsstands, the Watergate scandal had succeeded in giving the American people the same image of their government. The ad in the comic created a “credibility gap,” a phrase made famous during the waning months of the Johnson administration but still relevant due to

President Nixon's illegal dealings. "Captain America" and the "government" were presented as synonymous to the fictional world of the comic book. The question that arises, however, is what impact would this have on the reader? The reader (at least older readers) could have interpreted this as a message from the writers that President Nixon may have been wronged in the same manner as Captain America. Interviews with Englehart verify that this was by no means the message; but the possibility of this interpretation remains.

This storyline introduced the "Secret Empire," a secret cabal attempting to take over the United States government and, from there, the world. As the story unfolded, Captain America was being repeatedly set-up in the mass media as being "un-American" – a plan put in motion by CRAP – and reinforced by the appearance of the so-called "America's Sanitation Unit" – an ultra nationalist organization – consistently coming to Cap's rescue, proclaiming, "[Leaders are] all [corrupt] now, nothing but ego and power hunger! There aren't any real leaders any more!"³⁸

After a discussion with Professor Charles Xavier, leader of the mutant-rights movement, Cap learned that the ultimate goal of this Secret Empire was to use advertising propaganda to control the country without the people realizing what was happening.³⁹ Reality and fiction collided in the following issue when the hooded "Number One" of the Secret Empire revealed that the Watergate scandal was part of the plan all along. Though his face remained hidden, "Number One" was revealed as the President of the United States (previously shown in the comics to be Nixon). When Cap

³⁸ Steve Englehart, "Believe It Or Not: The Banshee!", *Captain America and the Falcon #172* (New York: Marvel Comics, April, 1974).

³⁹ Steve Englehart, *Captain America and the Falcon #173* (New York: Marvel Comics, May, 1974).

chased the outlaw president into the Oval Office, the president reached into a desk drawer, pulled out a pistol, and committed suicide.⁴⁰ The image below expresses the shock as the truth about the President is made plain.



[Image *Captain America and the Falcon* #175 (July, 1974), Sal Buscema, Artist]

Readers of all ages would be able to relate to the story unfolding in the pages of *Captain America and the Falcon*. Happening as it did on the heels of the Vietnam War, Watergate hit the American people and American society like a punch in the stomach. What kind of a country were we? What kind of leaders had we chosen and why? Not

⁴⁰ Steve Englehart and Sal Buscema, "... Before the Dawn!", *Captain America and the Falcon* #175 (New York: Marvel Comics, July, 1974); Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 245.

since the Lincoln presidency had the U.S. Constitution been put so painfully to the test. By the time President Nixon resigned his office, Americans were asking what it meant to be a proud American. What was patriotism? Various writers would spend the next few years posing just those questions in the pages of *Captain America*.

Reader response – at least published reader response – was not especially critical of the recent presidential administration. Ralph Macchio of New Jersey – who would grow up and become Editor of Marvel Comics by the 1990s – wrote in thanking writers for placing some of the blame for America’s problems on the shoulders of Americans themselves.⁴¹ Warren Blum, also of New Jersey, wrote, “The real problem [in America] is not corrupt government but the apathy that led to the situation.”⁴² One point that had come through in the recent “Secret Empire” storyline was that if Americans were led like sheep to slaughter, it was because they allowed themselves to be. In response to Macchio’s letter, the editorial staff wrote, “Cap has always been a mouthpiece for his writers’ political views.”⁴³ The Marvel writing bullpen had become almost legendary for its “hipness” and liberal leanings, long hair and blue jeans having long replaced crew-cuts and suits as standard office-wear.⁴⁴ Mike Luckenbill, a college junior from Pennsylvania, called for *Captain America and the Falcon* #175 to be required reading in college classes, presumably for exposing the real-life political corruptions within our government.⁴⁵ Like

⁴¹ Ralph Macchio, “Let’s Rap With Cap,” *Captain America and the Falcon* #179 (New York: Marvel Comics, November, 1974).

⁴² Warren Blum, “Let’s Rap With Cap,” *Captain America and the Falcon* #180 (New York: Marvel Comics, December, 1974).

⁴³ Editor, “Let’s Rap With Cap,” *Captain America and the Falcon* #179.

⁴⁴ Robin Green, “Face Front: Clap Your Hands! You’re on the Winning Team!” *Rolling Stone*, Number 91 (September 16, 1971), 28-34; Author’s interview with *Captain America* writer Gary Friedrich (September 5, 2009).

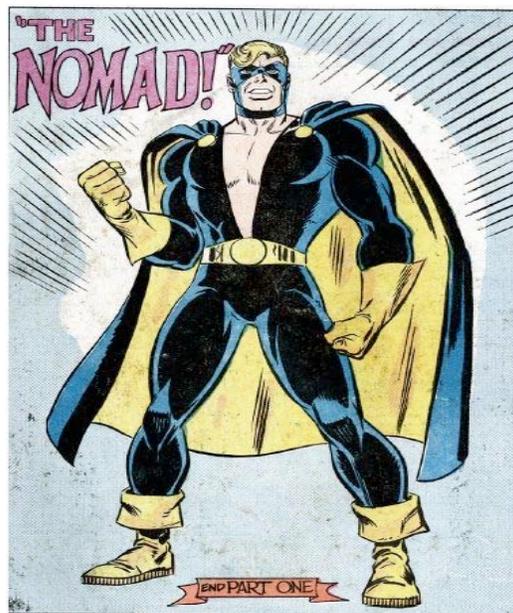
⁴⁵ Mike Luckenbill, “Let’s Rap With Cap,” *Captain America and the Falcon* #181 (New York: Marvel Comics, January, 1975).

Cap's new alias, the Nomad (shown below), heroics were no longer linked to the red-white-and-blue.

As the nation pondered the question of what it was to be a good American now, the same question was being played out in the pages of *Captain America*. In the wake of his experience with the Secret Empire, Cap contemplated what it meant to be Captain America, and if, in fact, there is such a thing as “America,”

There was a time, yes, when the country faced a clearly hideous aggressor, and her people stood united against it! But now, nothing's that simple. Americans have many goals... some of them quite contrary to others! In the land of the free, each of us is able to do what he wants to do... think what he wants to think. That's as it should be... but it makes for a great many different versions of what America is. So when people the world over look at me... which America am I supposed to symbolize?

In issue #180 – hitting newsstands in September of 1974 – Captain America officially hung up his star-spangled uniform and, with it, the identity of “Captain America.” Instead, he continued under a new hero persona: Nomad, the Man Without a Country.



[Image 4-6: *Captain America a/t Falcon* #180 (December, 1974), Sal Buscema, Artist]

For four issues, Captain America no longer existed. By the time Steve Rogers would return to being the red-white-and-blue Avenger, the new U.S. President, Gerald Ford, had controversially pardoned Richard Nixon for all crimes he might have committed while president. The issue of “what the president knew, and when did he know it” was moot. With both Vietnam and Watergate in the past, Americans were urged to look forward to the nation’s bicentennial birthday the next year. However, as the name “Nomad” suggests, the character – and every American citizen – was wandering in a political no-man’s-land, unsure of who we were or where we were going as a nation.

The transformation of Captain America into Nomad raised several issues. First was the nature of Steve Rogers as hero. While the “superhero” by nature is usually a type of vigilante, taking the law into his-or-her own hands, it remains equally true that, since World War II, as individual hero, assistant to SHIELD, or leader of the Avengers, Captain America worked for, or at the very least was legitimized by, the American government. “Nomad,” as the name suggests, possessed no such ties. He was a true vigilante, and as Rogers saw in his new relations with New York City Police, they did not want his form of civilian help.

In his studies of superhero comic books, Peter Coogan writes, “[Nomad’s] stories drew into question whether or not a superhero could legitimately support constituted authority and whether the status quo was worth defending when it seemed to benefit oppressors and inequality.”⁴⁶ In an article published in 1976, Andrew and Virginia MacDonald discussed this transition from Captain America to Nomad, stating that

⁴⁶ Peter Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* (Austin: MonkeyBrain Books, 2006), 212.

“[Nomad] reflects the disillusioned Seventies when young people have seen the values this land has historically represented crushed by the corruption and hypocrisy of ‘high-placed officials’.” They go on to argue in favor of the influence of comic books, pointing out that “it is fair to say that many more Americans know about Cap than about Richard Hofstadter, and the rhetorical effects of comic books should not be dismissed too quickly.”⁴⁷ Richard Reynolds believes that the Nomad stories represented a break-down of consensus in comic books’ view of society, beginning a trend of superheroes examining the political underpinnings of their actions.⁴⁸ What these scholars conclude, and rightly so, is that as Captain America represented America and American ideals in the 1940s, and even as argued the 1950s, by becoming Nomad in the wake of the Watergate scandal, Steve Rogers reacted to the question of what it was to be American in the same manner as many millions of his fellow citizens: uncertainty and disillusionment.

Once Captain America reclaimed his identity – due to the realization that if he did not continue as Captain America, someone else would, and that person would be in danger from Cap’s traditional enemies – his outlook on patriotism would be forever skewed, much as was the case with many Americans. In his last full script for *Captain America*, Englehart wrote, “[Since 1974, Cap] regards his world with a healthy skepticism – and an overriding desire to learn its truth for himself!”⁴⁹ In response to Captain America’s return, Bob Rodi of Illinois wrote,

Let’s face it, we all do love America, even though we realize she’s not perfect...
We are all like Steve Rogers, in a way... disillusionment and frustration make us

⁴⁷ Andrew and Virginia MacDonald, “Sold American: The Metamorphosis of Captain America,” *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (1976), 249, 254.

⁴⁸ Richard Reynolds, *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1994), 100-101.

⁴⁹ Steve Englehart, “Scream the Scarlet Skull!”, *Captain America and the Falcon #185* (New York: Marvel Comics, May, 1975).

divorce ourselves from America, but after weighing the alternatives, they just don't stack up. Using Captain America, a SYMBOL [emphasis in the original] of our country, to illustrate this common feeling is masterful... especially when the symbol becomes a symbol again... Captain America is not outdated. Captain America is rather indestructible... and I like that, a lot.⁵⁰

With Englehart's departure as writer for *Captain America*, and fallout from readers who sought more escapism from their comics than recent years had produced, storylines for the remainder of 1975 became standard beat-up-the-bad-guy-of-the-month superhero adventures, with few political overtones. This may well have reflected a general desire among Americans after 1975 not to think about politics, needing the type of escapism that traditional superhero comic books provided. That would change as the bicentennial year began. With the much heralded return of Captain America creator Jack "King" Kirby to both the writing and art responsibilities of his creation, and with this return coinciding with the nation's 200th birthday, *Captain America and the Falcon* began to focus once more on the traditional star-spangled Avenger. Though the stories were shallow – the art even fell far short of what fans had come to know during Kirby's height – the pages of *Captain America* still examined patriotic themes, but instead of the patriotism of the 1970s, 1976 would see Captain America considering the patriotic sentiments of 1776.

The return of Jack Kirby in issue #193, and the story "The Madbomb Screamer in the Brain!" began a nearly-year-long story involving Captain America and a threat to the United States from within. Captain America and Falcon are called into service by none other than Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. The mastermind behind the "madbomb" –

⁵⁰ Bob Rodi, "Let's Rap With Cap," *Captain America and the Falcon* #187 (New York: Marvel Comics, July, 1975).

a device that sent out a supersonic wave that induced uncontrollable rage in everyone in its path – was obsessed with the American Revolution, seeking to destroy America and return it to the hands of the long-established socio-economic elite (a state that he believed was consistent with pre-revolutionary British America); planning to do so during the bicentennial. The villain’s name, Lord Taurey – an obvious reference to “Tory” – desperately sought the descendent of the American patriot who killed his British ancestor, Sir William Taurey. That patriot’s name was Captain Steve Rogers, the ancestor of Captain America. In the image that follows, Taurey explains his ultimate plan of personal revenge. His anger can be seen growing from panel to panel, until ultimately giving way to complete madness.

While seemingly silly compared to the previous storylines, the bicentennial issues were consistent with Kirby’s commitment to traditional superhero storytelling, keeping real-life situations in the comics to a minimum. They were also consistent with the patriot-mania that swept the country in 1976. Everything from car tire sales to *RC Cola* bottles celebrated the red-white-and-blue. Kirby’s story, while keeping the actual United Kingdom out, reminded young readers of the values for which the revolution had been fought: liberty, equality and opportunity. While many could argue other, more conservative motivations, those listed above were consistent with the liberal slant of the character and the writing staff of Marvel in the ’70s.



[Image 4-7: *Captain America and the Falcon*, #194 (February, 1976), Jack Kirby, Artist]

Taurey called his organization The Royalist Forces of America. He used a scientific device to turn non-elites into cavemen-like brutes who would forever be enslaved to serve the elite, while being rewarded with occasional sporting events to divert their attention from their true plight.⁵¹ After several issues with Captain America and Falcon infiltrating the Royalist headquarters and trying to free the enslaved brutes, Cap finally has his showdown with Taurey in issue #200 (hitting newsstands around May of

⁵¹ Jack Kirby, "The Trojan Horde" *Captain America and the Falcon* #194 (New York: Marvel Comics, February 1976).

'76). During a traditional duel, Captain America has Taurey clearly in his sights, and forces the royalist to give up.

Fans were not pleased with the storyline, and Kirby's last run on *Captain America* ended with issue number 214, which hit newsstands in July of 1977. Kirby's final run on *Captain America* was clearly a shadow of his earlier Marvel work. Due to a bad eye, his art was not what it once was; likewise, he appeared to no longer be "in touch" with current Marvel readers or story continuity, which had become very closely tied to real-world events during Englehart's run.⁵² This was, however, consistent with Kirby's own philosophy on the issue of relevancy in comics. Although the editorial staff thought that bringing back Jack Kirby to the pages of *Captain America* was a coup, they failed to take into account that, since 1970, Marvel had become synonymous with relevancy in comics. The popularity of Englehart's run, as the content of the letters columns indicated, reflected a readership that no longer sought simple "escapism" in comics.

After Kirby's run, Marvel editor Roy Thomas, along with Don Glut and Steve Gerber, began a long story-arc examining the question "Who is Steve Rogers?" This search for his pre-Captain America identity came at a time when Americans were also questioning their identity. During this storyline, a new criminal organization, The Corporation, set out to destroy Captain America, ultimately causing his Super Soldier Serum to "disappear" from his system.⁵³ By reverting the hero to his humble pre-serum beginnings, the question became, "Is Captain America more than just a mask and serum?" Though true that the Corporation represented ordinary (non-super-powered)

⁵² Mark Evanier, *Kirby: King of Comics* (New York: Abrams Publishing, 2008), 187.

⁵³ Steve Gerber and Sal Buscema, *Captain America and the Falcon #225* (New York: Marvel Comics, September, 1978).

criminals, the story allowed readers to see that bravery and honor were not the product of chemical enhancement, and were attainable by anyone.

As the decade came to a close, Captain America found himself up against a group calling itself the National Force. At the peak of the story, Cap was brainwashed, his red-white-and-blue shield repainted with the Nazi symbol. The National Force were even responsible for killing Sharon Carter, Agent-13, to distract Captain America. Ultimately, only seeing the Nazi emblem washed from his shield, and its original colors restored, brought Cap around, allowing him to defeat the enemy again. After a difficult decade, with deep questions facing all Americans, Steve Rogers once more considered retirement, deciding to move to Greenwich Village and becoming a “commercial artist.” In this story, entitled “From the Ashes...,” Captain America, confronts the question of whether he has “outlived” his usefulness. His response is uncertain, but just as he contented himself with a quieter life, Nick Fury calls him into action again.⁵⁴

In one of the last issues of *Captain America* to hit newsstands in the 1970s, Captain America faced off against the popular new anti-hero, The Punisher. Here the American ideal of law and order confronts the growing American ideal of vengeance. The visuals are powerful: the hero, the American ideal, dressed in red-white-and-blue, versus the anti-hero, the personification of vengeance, dressed in black and white, with a white skull across his torso. Also powerful are the opposing images of the shield and the rifle. While both could be used as defensive as well as offensive weapons, what they represent is clear. Cap’s America, one of defending liberty, was being replaced by that of the Punisher: force.

⁵⁴ Chris Claremont and Rob McKenzie / Sal Buscema and Ron Perlin (art), “From the Ashes...” *Captain America* #237 (New York: Marvel Comics, September, 1979).



[Image 4-8: *Captain America* #241 (January, 1980), Springer and Marcos, Artists]

Saving a Mafia courier from the Punisher, Captain America warns the vigilante off, claiming that this man and the crime bosses for whom he works have “rights.” To this, the Punisher responded, “Rights?! They gave up their rights when they chose the path of crime! Now it’s my job to punish them...”⁵⁵ So-called “anti-heroes” like the Punisher along with a new, conservative ideology would dominate comics beginning in the 1980s.

However, during the 1970s, just as a more complex view of patriotism emerged in the pages of *Captain America*, so too did the comic reflect new thinking about issues of race. The political successes of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s paved the way for a Second Harlem Renaissance in the 1970s. Issues of the inner-city were a key point of concern to African-Americans during the decade, and they would play a feature role in *Captain America* as its name changed to *Captain America and the Falcon*.

⁵⁵ Mike Barr, Frank Springer, and Pablo Marcos, “Fear Grows in Brooklyn” *Captain America* #241 (New York: Marvel Comics, January, 1980).

As *Shaft*, *Foxy Brown*, *Superfly*, and *Coffy* brought urban plight and racial unrest into movie theaters nationwide, *Sanford and Son*, *Good Times*, and *The Jeffersons* dominated the television screen, opening the minds of millions of non-African-Americans through laughter every week. The racial barriers in sports, broken by Jackie Robinson, were now being shattered completely by Hank Aaron, “Mean” Joe Greene, and Muhammad Ali. Whether they realized it or not, white Americans were culturally embracing their black brothers and sisters. When asked about this “Second Harlem Renaissance,” former *Captain America* writer and comic book historian Mark Waid said,

Marvel did reflect it with gusto; the Black Panther was the first modern African hero; [Spider-Man antagonist and editor of the fictional newspaper *The Daily Bugle*] J. Jonah Jameson’s second-in-command, Robbie Robertson, was a Black man with authority and his struggles with his own teenage son mirrored the plight of the black man in the era. And Captain America always treated his new partner, The Falcon, with total color blindness. Meanwhile, Luke Cage, Hero for Hire, was working the slums of [New York City] and very reflective of the blaxploitation movement.⁵⁶

Comic books had long been vilified as perpetuating racial stereotypes. In Frederic Wertham’s *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) and Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), comics were accused of exposing the minds of young people to popular images of prejudice, perpetuating the problem generation after generation. Marc Singer claimed this to still be the case in the 1970s. Heroes such as DC’s Black Lightning and Marvel’s Black Panther, Singer believed, were “marked purely for their race.”⁵⁷ While making important observations of black superheroes in the 1970s, Singer’s work fails to even mention the Falcon, the first African-American superhero, perhaps because mentioning the Falcon would have undermined his argument.

⁵⁶ Mark Waid, interview with the author, March 30, 2009.

⁵⁷ Marc Singer, “‘Black Skins’ and White Masks: Comic Books and the Secret of Race,” *African-American Review*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Spring 2002), 107-108.

What is important to note about the 1970s, however, is the strength of the Black Power and “Black is Beautiful” movements. Placed in their original contexts, Black Lightning and Black Panther can – and should – be seen as agents of racial pride and singularity rather than as stereotypes or symbols of subjugation. Such images and texts in comic books, contrary to the view of Martin Barker, were not merely standard conventions of the comic book genre.⁵⁸ Rather, it is imperative to place characters’ names, origins, manner of speech, etc., into the historical context of the period. As discussed in Chapter One, this could become quite controversial, when popular conceptions of a race are based entirely on historical – and usually negative – racial stereotypes [See World War II era portrayals of the Japanese]. However, by the 1970s, a more enlightened society was ready for the emergence of strong black heroes. One hundred years earlier, black soldiers were seen as unable to fight as well as white men on the battlefield. The performance of all-black regiments such as the 54th Massachusetts in the Civil War, the 369th Regiment (93rd Infantry Division) in World War I, and the Tuskegee Airmen in World War II had laid those ideas to rest. According to Steve Englehart, “People want to see themselves,” and the primary demographic of superhero comic books had to date been young, white boys and men.⁵⁹ With the advent of the seventies, African-Americans with discretionary income had made them an equally viable target of the market.

In the very first issue of *Captain America* to hit newsstands in 1970 – issue #124 – a young African-American woman from Louisiana, Linda Lee Johnson, wrote in

⁵⁸ Martin Barker, *Comics: Ideology, Power, and the Critics* (Manchester: Manchester United Press, 1989), 109.

⁵⁹ Mark Waid, interview with the author.

hailing the Falcon as a hero, calling him “hope for the future.”⁶⁰ Byron Preiss, a college student and teaching intern at the University of Pennsylvania, successfully used Falcon stories in *Captain America* to excite his students about reading.⁶¹ The previous decade’s social activism continued to be reflected in the letters appearing in the pages of Marvel comics. Gary Zweng of Michigan suggested in his letter that comics should be used as a platform for social commentary, while Michael Drozdek urged Marvel to “use Cap’s image positively,” for the betterment of all minorities.⁶² Letters such as these may have inspired Marvel Comics to rename its patriotic title beginning with the cover-dated February, 1971, issue.

In that issue, a story titled “They Call Him... Stone Face” focused on Jody Casper, the nephew of Sam Wilson, the Falcon. African-Americans in the seventies had begun to dispute the findings of the previous decade’s Moynihan Report. In that report, future New York Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan had concluded that African-Americans’ progress had been “slowed” because of deficiencies in their family structures.⁶³ Focusing Falcon’s first adventure of the decade around his own family implicitly brought into question the conclusions of the Moynihan Report. In this story, Sam Wilson has set himself up as a Harlem social worker, one viewed by the local community as an “Uncle Tom.” The image of Falcon among his fellow Harlemites was that of a race-traitor, spending too much time with Captain America. Sam discovered that young Jody was working for the local crime lord, Stone Face. When the boy was

⁶⁰ Linda Lee Johnson, “Let’s Rap With Cap,” *Captain America* #124 (New York: Marvel Comics, April, 1970).

⁶¹ Byron Preiss, “Let’s Rap With Cap,” *Captain America* #125 (New York: Marvel Comics, May, 1970).

⁶² Gary Zweng, “Let’s Rap With Cap,” *Captain America* #126; and Michael Drozdek, “Let’s Rap With Cap,” *Captain America* #127 (New York: Marvel Comics, June/July, 1970).

⁶³ *Black/Brown/White Relations: Race Relations in the 1970s*, Charles V. Willie, Ed. (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1977), 24.

arrested, Captain America appeared before the judge to vouch for him, getting the charges dropped. When this happened, Stone Face believed that Jody was a “stooge,” and ordered him killed. Jody’s mother got shot defending him.

Though the mother recovered, and young Jody saw the errors of his ways, and Stone Face agreed to leave the family alone, Cap and Falcon end the issue contemplating all the children who have become lost in a system that they (the children) no longer believe they can trust. Sam ponders about “Kids who’ve lost faith in the law... in the world around them... and themselves! Kids with no one to turn to... no one to trust... with nothing but bitterness and contempt... for the system! Where do they go, Cap? What do they do? What chance to they have?” Captain America responds, “That depends on us, Sam... on all men of good faith everywhere!... So long as there are men willing to fight for justice... for tolerance... and for understanding... then maybe, just maybe, those kids’ll make it!”⁶⁴

In the image below, Stone Face is shown as both the traditionally disfigured comic book villain and a proponent of the Black Pride movement through his traditional African garb. Widespread poverty in the African-American community had already lent credence to the stereotype of blacks as criminals. The blaxploitation films did not help in changing that misconception. The image of Stone Face projects the following message: Stone Face is proud both of being black and being a crime lord. To a young white reader, the images could easily become synonymous with each other. This stereotype is further underscored due to the nature of comic book superhero storytelling. Characters such as Captain America, Superman and Wonder Woman combine job and ideology through

⁶⁴ Stan Lee and Gene Colan (Story), Dick Ayers (Art), “They Call Him... Stone Face!” *Captain America and the Falcon* #134 (New York: Marvel Comics, February, 1971).

their wardrobe, both standing for “truth, justice, and the American way.” Even Batman, dressing up like a predator of the night, makes the connection between vigilante and vengeance. The image of black pride and crime lord thus adds to the stereotype that the two are interconnected.



[Image 4-8: *Captain America and the Falcon* #134 (February, 1971), Gene Colan, Artist]

What becomes most clear in the Harlem-based stories of the decade is the search for and question of “identity.” Blacks, for centuries oppressed politically, socially, and economically because of their skin color, were becoming “African-Americans”; Americans, to be sure, but still different from “mainstream” Americans, by being largely confined, no longer on plantations, but instead to the inner city, a place that white Americans had long-since left. Skin color still separated the African-American from his Euro-American brothers and sisters. Nowhere in literature could this fact be displayed better than in comic books. How do African-Americans seek out their identity? The label itself implies that their “African” attributes came first.

It is clear in the pages of *Captain America* that African-Americans – though having come far in the last twenty years – were still being held to minority, and therefore subordinate, status. Though the Falcon is repeatedly touted as Captain America’s

“partner,” the character rarely appears to be more than a traditional “sidekick.” This actually does more to denigrate the African-American people than empower them by giving them a hero they can claim as their own. As a “sidekick,” Falcon – though a grown man – reverts to the image of “boy” associated with the most famous of comic book sidekicks, Robin, the Boy Wonder, as well as Captain America’s own World War II sidekick, young Bucky Barnes. When Falcon is not working as Captain America’s partner, Cap turns him over to Nick Fury and SHIELD. Falcon makes no open request to join SHIELD, nor does Fury make any attempt to recruit him. It does not take a long stretch to interpret this as an image of the slave-owner tasking out his slave to a neighboring white man. Fanon mentions this in *Black Skin, White Masks*, where he describes how white Americans constantly reinforce the differences between the races, culminating in the story of a young white girl who identified the author by stating, “Look, a Negro!”⁶⁵

When the Falcon fights alone, however, -- as he does more and more frequently as the decade proceeds – he is clearly his own man. He even separates himself from Cap from time to time when he feels he has not done enough for “his people.” At these times, and when Sam focuses on the preference to education and peace to mob-mentality and violence, the Falcon emerges as a hero and symbol, not just for African-Americans, but for all Americans.

In the seventies, readers were also introduced to Leila, a young woman from Harlem in whom Sam Wilson became romantically interested. Leila is part of the local Black Power movement, and sees both Sam and the Falcon in the same manner as the rest

⁶⁵ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Publishing, 1967), 109.

of the neighborhood, as an “Uncle Tom” who jumps at the behest of his white masters. In issue number 139, in the story, “The Badge and the Betrayal!,” Sam defends his occupation to Leila, who responds, “Our people need heroes, man, not handouts!” These and other inner-city stories in *Captain America and the Falcon*, mirror what was going on at the time in the blaxploitation films. Ultimately, Leila chooses Sam over her militant cohorts as a romantic interest. Costello, in his analysis of Cold War culture, states that this represents a slap in the face of the Black Pride movement, the “Uncle Tom” winning out over the militant for the affections of the beautiful woman; while at the same time the relationship represents a re-connection between the earlier King-wing of the African-American movement and its more violent offspring.⁶⁶ In the overall portrait of the narrative, however, it appears to be much simpler: an example of opposites attracting. After the assassination of King in 1968, no clear “leader” of the African-American “community” emerged since by 1970, there was no longer a clear African-American “community,” the black population being much more socio-economically diverse and heterogeneous than at any point in its past.

With the political gains of the 1960s accomplished, African-Americans sought more socio-economic equality with whites. Throughout the country, African-Americans increasingly lived primarily in the inner-city, where poverty ran most rampant and opened the door for crime and violence. Unfortunately, the rest of the country saw the growing crime rate as a racial issue, not an economic one. As to the immediate issues facing Sam Wilson, Leila, and Harlem in 1971, Sam told his new lady friend, “I ain’t sayin’ we don’t need to make it hot for the one’s [*sic*] who been steppin’ on us for

⁶⁶ Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis*, 121.

years... but, maybe it's just as important for some of us to cool things down... so we can protect the rights we been fightin' for.”

In this same issue, Steve Rogers went undercover as a New York City policeman. Ultimately, he came across some African-American men who see him as the enemy and begin to beat him (Rogers allows this beating rather than risk exposing himself as Captain America). The beating was interrupted by local minister Reverend Garcia, who is working to mend relations between the minorities of the inner-city and the white political elite. When Steve questioned the reverend after the young men ran away, Garcia tells him, “They are wild... they are angry! I know them well... for once I was one of them... and this I know too... they can be reached! They can be saved! They must be!”⁶⁷ The image below portrays how the poverty of the inner city had led to such degrees of violence that not even the symbol of law and order, a policeman, was no deterrent to violence. In fact, the appearance of the white man's law and order only exacerbated such situations. As the comment by the yellow-jacketed young man below suggests, the people of the inner city immediately associated policemen with billy clubs.



[Image 4-9: *Captain America and the Falcon* #139 (July, 1971), John Romita, Artist]

⁶⁷ Stan Lee and John Romita, “The Badge and the Betrayal!” *Captain America and the Falcon* #139 (New York: Marvel Comics, July, 1971).

What this issue did perhaps best of all was to show both sides of the race conflict of the inner city. The confusion and fear of white Americans existed hand-in-hand with the anger and frustration of black Americans. If *Captain America* was, in fact, a mirror of its times, was it also *influential* in affecting the views of its readers? Similar questions have been posed about blaxploitation films, African-American television series, and Alex Haley's ground-breaking novel, *Roots*. While this question is difficult to answer, it is important to keep in mind that the young people reading *Captain America* in the 1970s became the adults who made Oprah Winfrey a media mogul in the 1990s and Barack Obama the president of the United States in 2008. Stories such as "The Badge and the Betrayal!" exposed readers of all races to the ideas on both sides of the race issue in 1971. This is an example of what "the best of popular culture always does."⁶⁸ Response to this issue was strong, and Stan Lee responded, "it's rewarding for us to know that some of you feel we are showing America as it is."⁶⁹

The Harlem issues of *Captain America and the Falcon* responded to society's problems in a manner that has come to be embraced by both sides of the political spectrum. Rather than having anything "handed" to them, Sam Wilson repeatedly urges his African-American neighbors to stop the violent protesting and go on to get their education, that being the best way out of poverty.⁷⁰ While his words would be embraced by anyone at the time on the political right, they are also almost word for word out of the "Great Society."

⁶⁸ *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked*, (DVD).

⁶⁹ Stan Lee, "Let's Rap With Cap," *Captain America and the Falcon* #142 (New York: Marvel Comics, October, 1971).

⁷⁰ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 238.

Unlike the blaxploitation films, which critics often accused of downplaying the “political needs” of black audiences, while promoting their “hedonistic indulgences,”⁷¹ the stories in *Captain America and the Falcon* showed both the good and bad sides of black Harlem society. Even the story of the Falcon reflected true-to-life complications, with Wilson forced to choose between his friendship with Cap and his relationship with the black activist, Leila, who deeply believed in “racial exclusivism.”⁷² Also known as “black separatism,” this idea was prevalent in the 1970s, as African-Americans became increasingly convinced of “the man’s” conspiracy to keep them in poverty – a belief only exacerbated by the implementation of President Lyndon Johnson’s social welfare programs – and a recurrent theme in the Harlem stories in Cap. This is seen in numerous examples where Sam Wilson, as a social worker in Harlem, is made fun of as being someone responsible for passing out government checks to the people on behalf of “the man.”

The Harlem stories continued for several issues. Steve became more involved with the local Boys’ Club at the request of Reverend Garcia. Sam worked to win over the militant Leila. In a story called “Power to the People!,” Sam investigated a masked man who was planning a violent riot across Harlem, ultimately burning some of it to the ground. “Now is the time to hit the honkies where they live!... And now’s when we’re gonna put it to ‘em!,” screams the masked leader. The crowd – mostly men – responded, “Right On! This Is The Start Of The Black Revolution!” When Sam attempted to warn the crowd that they were in danger of “losing all they’ve gained,” he was beaten severely and left for Steve Rogers to find. Though Leila saved Sam, she ultimately has not

⁷¹ *Bad Asssss Cinema* (DVD).

⁷² J.M. Coetzee, “Captain America in American Mythology,” *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 113.

changed her mind about where his loyalties lie. Once she saw that he was safe, she told him, “I got to get back to the streets now ‘cause that’s where MY people are... while YOUR people are shakin’ in their boots, watchin’ us take what’s comin’ to us!” When she met up outside with the militant Rafe, he called Sam “Silent Majority Sam,” a clear reference to the white, upper-middle-class, conservative vote that brought Richard Nixon into office in both 1968 and 1972. As police and activists squared off, Sharon Carter – now retired from SHIELD – pondered, “It’s unreal... that fellow countrymen could be so far apart... simply because of the color of their skins! That’s what it’s really about... in spite of the other issues.”

As the violence threatens to explode out of control, Cap and Falcon seek out the masked leader of the movement, and expose him as the Red Skull. Though the Skull escapes, the riot is quelled, and the African-American militants agree to hold off until the white city leaders can meet the promises they have made. Cap openly worries that the black community will riot again; in response to which Sam tells him that they have good reason to do so.⁷³ In the following image, the once violent crowd disperses, becoming monochromatic, no longer “black.” They have acquiesced to return to their traditional roles in society; meanwhile, Falcon, angered at Captain America’s (and America’s?) failure to see the heart of the matter – that the black community has legitimate reason to be angry and feel the urge to react violently – flies away. Costello points out that this represents the idea that white society want reconciliation with the black community, but on its own terms.⁷⁴ However, another, equally important point is that it also means that

⁷³ “Power to the People!” “Burn, Whitey, Burn!” and “Red Skull in the Morning... Cap Take Warning!” (A three-part story with no creative team named) *Captain America and the Falcon #143* (New York: Marvel Comics, November, 1971).

⁷⁴ Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis*, 122.

the writers are admitting their own inadequacies in regard to suggesting answers to this social problem.



[Image 4-10: *Captain America and the Falcon* #143 (November, 1971), No Artist Named]

Additionally, an issue raised by the Harlem stories is that of “power.” From 1968, and throughout the seventies, the five *Planet of the Apes* movies examined the issue of power in society: “who gets it, how they get it, what they do with it, and what the ramifications are for those involved.”⁷⁵ The Harlem issues of *Captain America and the Falcon* add to this discussion. With the story’s conclusion, the militants talk to the white politicians about when and how the destroyed buildings would be rebuilt. Herein lies the basis of the issue that angered the militants to begin with. Those who live in Harlem have no real power over the neighborhood in which their families live. That power is reserved for the white property owners that live elsewhere. This underscores what was reported in the *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* in 1968: “What white Americans have never fully understood... is that white society is deeply

⁷⁵ Eric Greene, *Planet of the Apes as American Myth: Race, Politics, and Popular Culture* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), xiii.

implicated in the ghetto. White society created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.”⁷⁶

One notable point about the writing in this issue is the repeated use of the word “honkey.” This was a racial term referring to white people and white society, utilized often in the blaxploitation films of the period. While use of the word in the pages of *Captain America* always threatened to cross the line of stereotyping – as the blaxploitation films were accused of doing – it helped to underscore the division between the races at this time. However, lack of similar slang on the part of white Americans in the stories ultimately made the African-American militants appear to be “more” racist than their white counterparts. The question becomes, how do you expose young readers – primarily white – to the seriousness of the race issue on both sides without simultaneously exposing them to the very language that has, in the past, caused that very division? In the next issue of Cap, Sam Wilson makes a similar observation, “You [whites] think you’ve got all the answers... when you don’t even ask the right questions!”⁷⁷

A shocking turn of events takes place in issue #185, hitting newsstands in February, 1975. In that issue, during the heat of battle against the Red Skull, the villain revealed that Falcon had been the creation of the Red Skull all along. It had been the Skull’s plan to place a sleeper agent within Captain America’s circle of trust. He had chosen a Harlem street criminal named Samuel T. “Snap” Wilson. The Skull kidnapped Wilson, erased his mind, retraining him to be “an upright, cheerful Negro, with a love for

⁷⁶ *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, March 1 1968* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1968), 2.

⁷⁷ Stan Lee, “Hydra Over All!” / “The Falcon Fights Alone!” *Captain America and the Falcon #144* (New York: Marvel Comics, December, 1971).

the same brotherhood” cherished by Captain America.⁷⁸ After Captain America succeeds in defeating the Skull again, Sam leaves to contemplate the reality of his dilemma.

Thinking of his newly-recovered memories, Falcon “sees BOTH sides of the coin that is America flipped before him. The one side trying desperately in their hearts to understand what this man is going thru, and possibly even see their way towards forgiving him his past... the other side ready to dump a figure who has done so much for them, whether it be out of fear for any one claiming a power apart from their own lives... or whether it be that man’s color or his ideas... and perhaps it is the sum of that coin that is truly the end worth of the man called The Falcon.”⁷⁹

He eventually turns himself in to authorities, and he is found “guilty” of his various crimes. The judge, however, suspends the sentence, placing Sam in parole with Nick Fury as his parole officer.⁸⁰ After the strange turn of fate for the Falcon, race issues all but disappear from the pages of *Captain America and the Falcon*; so much so that by the summer of 1978, with issue number 223, the title reverts to *Captain America* and the Falcon is little seen again for many years to come.

Interestingly, by 1975, the blaxploitation genre of films in Hollywood – which the inner city stories in *Captain America and the Falcon* had so closely resembled – had all but died away. Television programs such as *Good Times* and *Sanford and Son* were gaining in popularity, and a year later the publishing phenomenon *Roots* would be released, but it appears that the national landscape and the Watergate scandal had placed issues of race on the cultural back-burner. Another explanation is that, with the return of Jack Kirby to the pages of *Captain America and the Falcon* in 1976, realism and social relevance were put on hold; and with Stan Lee taking less and less a role in the overall

⁷⁸ Steve Englehart and John Warner, “Mind Cage!” *Captain America and the Falcon* #186 (New York: Marvel Comics, June, 1975).

⁷⁹ Tony Isabella and Bill Mantlo, “The Trial of the Falcon!” *Captain America and the Falcon* #191 (New York: Marvel Comics, November, 1975).

⁸⁰ Ibid.

editorial work at Marvel – becoming instead the company’s public relations name and face – a new editorial direction appears to have returned the comics to run-of-the-mill monthly beat-up-the-bad-guys superhero comics, more in line with what DC Comics had been producing throughout the decade.

One final story concerning race relations in America did emerge in the spring of 1979. In a story entitled “Burn, Cap, Burn!,” a brainwashed and apparently racist Captain America gives a speech on television calling on all whites to join the National Force, a neo-Nazi organization that is actually a front for the villainous psychiatrist Dr. Faustus. Faustus had brainwashed Cap, painting his shield with flames and a Nazi symbol. Ultimately, seeing the Nazi paint washed from his shield, revealing the red-white-and-blue, awakens Cap from his brainwashing, allowing him to take out the enemy, but not before it costs the life of his long-time love, Sharon Carter. Readers such as Peter Sanderson, a student at Columbia University in New York, pointed out that it did not seem “realistic” that a group like the National Force – desiring to gain more public support – would resort to widespread public violence. The ultimate goal of the National Force was to, in essence, “divide and conquer” America. The race issue still seemed divisive enough to accomplish this.⁸¹ The defeat of the plan also symbolized the lessening of the racial divide in America. As the decade came to a close, the racial divisiveness of 1970 was no longer so explosive by 1979. Perhaps no image in comics better portrays the stark contrast between racism and the American ideal than the image (seen below) of the Star-Spangled Avenger brandishing a swastika-laden shield. Though the uniform and shield share some of the same colors, they are in direct contrast to the

⁸¹ Roger McKenzie, Sal Buscema and Don Perlin, “Burn, Cap, Burn!” *Captain America* #234 (New York: Marvel Comics, June, 1979).

eye (looking closely, the red of the shield even looks darker than the red on Cap's uniform).



[Image 4-11: *Captain America* #234 (June, 1979), Sal Buscema and Don Perlin, Artists]

The real relevance of the National Force storyline – especially keeping in mind the apparent liberal leanings of the Marvel writers – was that the country by 1979 was taking a markedly conservative shift. This was obvious in both the political climate and other areas of popular culture. Politically, President Jimmy Carter had proven increasingly unpopular, being attacked even by members of his own party for the 1980 elections. The ERA was struggling among the states. In popular culture, the blaxploitation films were gone. *Studio 54* in New York was closed. On television, socially relevant programming like *All in the Family*, *Good Times*, and *The Mary Tyler-Moore Show* had fallen to programs such as *Dallas*, which focused on the lifestyles and troubles of the rich and famous. In fact, television programs focusing on African-

Americans were all but gone by 1979, *The Jeffersons* and *What's Happenin'* being the last, and falling in the ratings. American viewers were becoming less entertained by social issues in entertainment.

What makes this point even clearer is the fact that the Grand Director of the National Force was ultimately exposed to be the 1950s Captain America. Infuriated by the massive liberal gains since 1960, "Doctor Steven Rogers, Ph.D" began pursuing a radical conservative agenda, even going so far as to adopt the symbol of "Captain America's" greatest enemy, the Nazis. As seen in the image below, the Grand Director wore all white – similar to the Ku Klux Klan – meant to portray the purity of his cause. On his arm, he wore the armband of the Nazi Party, representing his radical conservatism and bigoted hatred. Coming as this story did going into presidential campaign season, this represents that the "Silent Majority" of 1968/72 may not be as silent in 1980.



[Image 4-12: *Captain America* #231 (March, 1979), Sal Buscema, Artist]

One of the many guest writers for *Captain America and the Falcon* during the seventies was Marv Wolfman, known better in the comic book industry as the creator of the African-American character, Blade, the Vampire Hunter, which debuted in the cult-favorite comic book *Tomb of Dracula #10* (1973). In a discussion on the issue of race in comic books during this period, Wolfman said, “A partner and I had tried to sell a black character to another company and failed, so I had made a promise that my next creation would be black... As it turned out my next creation was Blade, so he became Black, which I guess was unheard of back then in the horror genre.” As to how to write the character, Wolfman claimed that he sought to avoid the stereotypes, instead just writing each character as “a person.”⁸²

Blade was quite a contrast to Falcon. Whereas Falcon possessed the appearance to his neighbors as an “Uncle Tom,” following Captain America like his man-servant, Blade was his own man, and race appears to play no factor in his storylines. He is not a “black” man, but simply a man, a hero. As a human-vampire hybrid, he is even more of a minority, belonging to both societies and neither at the same time (the very epitome of “African-American” identity issues). Nor does Blade face down mad scientists like Lex Luthor, or crazed Nazis like the Red Skull. Instead, Blade made his debut facing off against the internationally infamous Count Dracula. Blade thus blazed the trail that was established by the Falcon, even while the Falcon, himself, may not entirely have succeeded during the seventies in breaking away from racial stereotypes of blacks.

It appears clear, then, that *Captain America and the Falcon* did play a groundbreaking role throughout the 1970s. The comic’s continuing effort to make its readers think about racial problems is perhaps best exemplified in a quote from *Captain America*

⁸² Marv Wolfman, interview with the author, April 26, 2009.

#133, shown below. As the image portrays, the real threat to America is not from any of the racial groups, but the evil machinations of a disfigured, inhuman creature. Through the image of MODOK, the reader sees that, as different as whites and blacks may be on the surface, both groups are much more alike than either are to their true enemy.



[Image 4-13: *Captain America* #234 (June, 1979), Buscema and Perlin, Artists]

Captain America thus identified the true issue behind the racial unrest in the inner city: poverty. This was the key issue of the Civil Rights Movement after passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. What kept the African-American community down was not solely their race, but their socio-economic condition. Throughout the Harlem stories in *Captain America and the Falcon*, this issue is at the forefront. Economic inequality exacerbated all other divisions in society. Since poverty breeds crime, and so many African-Americans lived in poverty, the stereotype of African-Americans as criminals was given more credence. By bringing these issues to light in the pages of comic books, Marvel Comics became a part of the movement for change.

An interesting point in regard to portrayals of race in *Captain America and the Falcon* in the 1970s was the noticeable absence of *white* issues. From the Harlem stories to those of the National Force, white society is seen as the domineering enemy of black society. However, what about the plight of white Americans? Throughout the decade, white Americans were as much a victim of the Misery Index as their black neighbors. Poor white society, however, is never touched upon in the pages of *Captain America*. This gives the reader the idea that only African-Americans have problems, and that their primary problem is white America. Though this does bring the plight of African-Americans to light for younger white readers, it also builds walls separating the two groups further, though it is very doubtful that this effect was intentional in any way. Another point that gets lost in the black-oriented stories in *Captain America* is that the race issues in the country went well beyond black and white, particularly by the 1970s. One of the effects of the Black Pride movement of the late '60s was the advent of Hispanic and Native-American civil rights movements.⁸³ Neither of these groups were represented in the pages of *Captain America*.

From the earliest anti-slavery movements in the 1830s, the push for social change often incorporated the plight of women as well. The Third Wave of feminism launched in the 1960s with Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* had made strides equally significant as made by African-Americans, though in a comparatively shorter timeframe. In the comics, however, this was not the case. This may be explained by the fact that mainstream superhero comic books were written exclusively by men; and even when addressing racial problems, these writers had written stories of problems between *men* of

⁸³ Terry H. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 414.

different races. How could – or would – issues of gender be addressed during the decade that saw the most significant advances for women since the 1910s?

“In a male-dominated society, women do not develop the symbols and stereotypes with which they are described.”⁸⁴ Perhaps nowhere is this quote as applicable as in comic books. As much as *Captain America* appeared to be paving the way for the New Woman by the end of the sixties, the seventies seem to go in just the opposite direction. In 1971, readers discovered that Sharon Carter, Agent-13, possessed a Ph.D. in Metaphysical Psychology. Sharon Carter was still a major character as the decade opened. Comic book historian / writer / editor Mark Waid agreed that she was much more representative of the “new woman” than any of her contemporaries in comic books: “Sharon Carter was a no-nonsense, take-no-prisoners, I’m-not-a-hostage-superspy.”⁸⁵ As such, she was attached to SHIELD’s new “Secret Psyche Squad,” which SHIELD Director, Nick Fury referred to as “Hyped-Up Woman’s Intuition.”⁸⁶ This patronizing comment, by a particularly “macho” male character, paved the way for a decade of Agent-13-related stories that took much away from her previously empowered role. Throughout the seventies, the two primary female characters in *Captain America and the Falcon*, Sharon Carter and Leila, both exhibited “the inability to grasp subtle principles of conduct, large aspirations, and grand designs,” of their male companions, underscoring

⁸⁴ Sylvia H. Keady, “Richard Wright’s Women Characters and Inequality” *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol. 10 No. 4 (Winter, 1976), 124.

⁸⁵ Mark Waid, interview with the author, March 30, 2009.

⁸⁶ Stan Lee, “The Unholy Alliance!” *Captain America and the Falcon #141* (New York: Marvel Comics, September, 1971).

a renewed belief among anti-feminists in the seventies: that a woman's place was in the home.⁸⁷

Even with the character of Leila, a woman who was clearly empowered and fighting alongside men for racial equality, the male characters throughout the decade began an almost de-evolution of thought concerning sexual equality. Leila was representative of the period. Thanks in large part to the blaxploitation genre, the 1970s marked the first time African-American women were presented in non-servile roles, representing “empowerment and beauty that did not conform to the dominant ideology’s notions of African-American femininity.”⁸⁸ In the story, “Power to the People!,” Sam Wilson, alone with Leila, said, “I’ve got a feeling you’re not as tough as you seem... that there’s a *real woman* [emphasis added] lurking under that militant exterior... I’m a man, and you’re a chick.”⁸⁹ From these two comments, much can be ascertained. First, Sam Wilson (aka The Falcon), a person who, to date, had repeatedly shown himself to be aware of the racial tension in the country, and adamant to make a difference concerning it, clearly possessed no such enlightenment when it came to the woman he loved. “Real women,” apparently, cannot be “militant.” This is ironic, since only five years earlier, Agent-13 fought alongside – and saved – both Falcon and Cap in battle time and again. However, it is consistent with Frances Beale’s contention that during the Civil Rights Movement, African-American men had usurped a dominant role in ways never seen

⁸⁷ Keady, 124.

⁸⁸ Yvonne D. Simms, *Women of Blaxploitation: How the Black Action Film Heroine Changed American Popular Culture* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2006), 8, 191.

⁸⁹ Stan Lee, “Power to the People!” *Captain America and the Falcon #143* (New York: Marvel Comics, November, 1971).

before in the community.⁹⁰ Second, though society might have been moving toward a greater equality by the early 1970s, many colloquialisms in the vernacular persisted from the 1950s. A woman, apparently, can very much be her own woman, and yet still a man's "chick." The image below emphasizes this example of sexual dominance. Sam, previously perceived as a kind, gentle, and enlightened man, appears to be forcing himself on Leila as she struggles against his advances.



[Image 4-14: *Captain America and the Falcon* #143 (November, 1971), Gene Colan, Artist]

The following month, readers were introduced to Femme Force. In an attack on a HYDRA lair – an attack broadcast via satellite to President Nixon – Cap, Fury, and SHIELD are reinforced in battle by the newly-commissioned Femme Force. Leading her new team into battle, Agent-13 proclaims, “This is our big chance... to prove we can be as valuable to SHIELD as men... if only we don’t blow it! The men haven’t left us much to work on... but we have to make the most of what there is... or forget about gaining

⁹⁰ Frances Beale, “The Double Jeopardy of Black Women,” in “Documents from the Black Women’s Liberation Movement,” in *Documents from the Women’s Liberation Movement*, an online Archival Collection, Special Collections Library, Duke University.

equality as agents!”⁹¹ Again, readers can take much away from this one frame. First, Agent-13 obviously feels that the women of SHIELD need to prove themselves worthy to fight alongside men, though she has done so individually for years. Second, it shows that SHIELD – which appeared so enlightened and egalitarian in the sixties – now sent their men into battle first, allowing the women to come in as a unit once the bulk of the danger has passed. The women, however, perform admirably, taking on criminal agents in hand-to-hand combat, all the while having their pistols at the ready. These are not *Charlie’s Angels*, relying on their womanly wiles and attractiveness to catch unsuspecting men. These are fully empowered government agents, ready and able to handle themselves in combat, as the following image projects. Though form-fitting, their uniforms are not over-sexualized. These women are equals to the men in every way.



[Image 4-15: *Captain America and the Falcon* #144 (December, 1971), John Romita, Artist]

Commenting on his creating and writing *Femme Force*, Gary Friedrich stated, “There weren’t any guidelines [from Marvel Comics] for writing strong female

⁹¹ Gary Friedrich and John Romita, “Hydra Over All!” *Captain America and the Falcon* #144 (New York: Marvel Comics, December, 1971).

characters. I had many friends who were strong women, and I tried to base my characters on them. I had hoped Femme Force would become a hit with readers and become a group that would get its own book, but alas as SHIELD died from poor sales, the Femme Force went with it.”⁹² Years before *Charlie’s Angels* dominated television screens, *Captain America and the Falcon* was already examining the idea of women agents, working tangentially to men in international espionage.

As the story of Femme Force continued – before disappearing altogether – disagreements emerged between Agent-13 and her second-in-command, Agent-14, La Contessa Valentina Allegra de Fontaine. Agent-14 was also the love interest of Colonel Nick Fury. Though Fury and Cap had their differences in the past, the rivalry between the female agents took on the feel of a stereotypical “cat fight,” with the characters more interested in who was in charge than tactics, objectives, or loyalties. This was a phenomenon that would be touched upon only a year later by *New York Times Magazine* contributor Jean Curtis in her article “When Sisterhood Turns Sour.” In that article, Curtis would point out a major sticking-point within the women’s movement: the issue of competition between feminists, and the glee one feminist felt at the failures of another.⁹³ Before her apparent death in 1979, Cap demanded that Sharon quit SHIELD and wait for him at home like a dutiful girlfriend. For most of the rest of the decade, she complied. While waiting at home for her man to return, Sharon began an intimate relationship with Vietnam War objector Dave Cox. As Cap and Sharon grew more distant, Dave and Sharon grew closer.⁹⁴

⁹² Richard Hall, Interview with *Captain America and the Falcon* writer Gary Friedrich, September 5, 2009.

⁹³ Jean Curtis, “When Sisterhood Turns Sour,” *New York Times Magazine*, (May 30, 1976), 15-16.

⁹⁴ *Captain America and the Falcon* #182-186 (1975); *Captain America* #229-235 (1979)

Whereas in the 1960s, Sharon Carter represented the New Woman, empowered and equal to her man in every way, her 1970s incarnation was more reflective of Phyllis Schlafly's ideas on the roles of women. Schlafly fought against the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s, arguing that it required women to fight in combat and would have negative influences on families, home life, and children.⁹⁵ Though often derided as "anti-feminist," Schlafly and her followers did promote a certain version of "feminism." They utilized their agency to promote a more conservative lifestyle, which, while seeming inconsistent with more liberal feminism, definitely falls within the overall feminist goal of "inclusiveness," using "choice" to live a lifestyle that is more conservative and traditional in nature, but important nonetheless.⁹⁶ While traditionally understood to mean including women in men's traditional spheres, the term "inclusiveness" could also be interpreted to mean "polyandrogynism," leaving traditional roles open to whomever in the relationship chooses to fill them.⁹⁷ In the Cap/Sharon relationship, Sharon was willing to make such career sacrifices for the perceived betterment of her relationship; Cap was not.

Sharon Carter was not forced to withdraw from her career and wait at home for her man. The argument went back and forth between Sharon and Cap throughout the late-60s / early-70s before Sharon finally chose to do what the man she loved was asking, making a sacrifice for her relationship. Ultimately, however, Sharon discovered that, not only would she see her lover more if she returned to action, but she could do her part to help him in his work. Just as Sharon practiced agency in deciding to leave SHIELD, she

⁹⁵ Donald T. Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 3-4.

⁹⁶ "Feminist Perspectives on the Self," <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-self/>

⁹⁷ Nina Rosenstand, *The Moral of the Story: An Introduction to Ethics, Sixth Edition* (Boston: McGraw Hill Higher Education, 2009), 604-605.

utilized the same agency when deciding to return. Though Sharon is presented through most of the decade as the pining girlfriend, dutifully waiting at home for the return of her soldier man, it is important to note that she is still there, seen in most every issue. This underscores Larry Gross's argument that in popular media, "representation in any form is power."⁹⁸ In other words, Sharon may have chosen to give up the super-agent lifestyle, but she is still present in the pages of the comic book. She was still a visible part of Captain America's life. Her presence, therefore, continued to represent women in the pages of the comic book. They were not relegated to some never-seen, off-stage character. She was still *there*.

Years later, however, the tables turned, and Sharon requested that Cap retire and stay home. Cap's response was to insist that she must respect him and accept the full package of Captain America along with Steve Rogers.⁹⁹ Here the hypocrisy is obvious. Captain America – the very symbol of the nation – demands of his woman what he will not give her himself. The message is clear: the American dream is not yet gender inclusive. Cap's reluctance ultimately led to Sharon's return to SHIELD the following spring. This acquiescence to the will of her man, however, appears to be consistent with female characters in Marvel Comics in the 1970s. The Scarlet Witch, the Wasp, the Invisible Woman (who finally changed her alias from Invisible *Girl*) all took subservient positions to the men in their lives. Even the "Savage She-Hulk" was not as powerful as her male cousin. Even stronger female characters such as Storm and Jean Grey of the

⁹⁸ Larry Gross, "Out of the Mainstream: Sexual Minorities and the Mass Media," *Gender, Race and Class in Media: A Text Reader*, Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez, Eds. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1995), 62.

⁹⁹ Jack Kirby, "The Unburied One!" *Captain America and the Falcon #204* (New York: Marvel Comics, December, 1976).

Uncanny X-Men never fought alone, but only alongside their male companions – who outnumber them two-to-one.

During the 1970s, Sharon Carter and her Marvel Comics cohorts actually went the opposite direction from their counterparts at DC Comics. Whereas the character stood out in the 1960s as being more empowered and dominant in her world than Wonder Woman or Batgirl, the opposite was true in the succeeding decade. In the comics, the newly-re-empowered Wonder Woman faced off against – before eventually allying herself with – Nubia, “the black Wonder Woman.”¹⁰⁰ Both in the comic and the popular television series developed around the character, the love life of Wonder Woman remained as difficult and constrained as that of Agent-13. By 1980, Wonder Woman had become “a symbol of ascending feminism,” with her television counterpart winning over male audiences with her “intelligence, spirit, personality, and good deeds.”¹⁰¹ Perhaps the best example of the strong feminist opposite to Sharon Carter was that of the Black Canary. In the pages of *Justice League of America*, the leather-and-fishnet-stockings-clad Canary stood as the ultimate symbol of independence. Rather than pining for a male superhero, this woman became the source of a male superhero pining for *her*.¹⁰²

What seems clear is that comic book writers of the decade were unsure of how to address romantic relationships where the women were as powerful or more powerful than their men. Perhaps the greatest contrast to the Agent-13 character in comics at the time was Batgirl, Barbara Gordon. In *Detective Comics #423* (1972), the character Barbara

¹⁰⁰ Francinne D. Valcour, *Manipulating the Messenger: Wonder Woman as an American Female Icon* (Arizona State University, Dissertation, 2006).

¹⁰¹ Mare Edward DiPaolo, “Wonder Woman as World War II Veteran, Camp Feminist Icon, and Male Sex Fantasy,” *The Amazing Transforming Superhero: Essays on the Revision of Characters in Comic Books, Film, and Television*, Terrence Wandtke, Ed., (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2007), 151, 163.

¹⁰² Mike Madrid, *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines* (New York: Exterminating Angel Press, 2009), 157-159.

Gordon ran for – and won – election to Congress.¹⁰³ Despite this, however, fellow-superhero Batman still referred to her in condescending language, calling the Congresswoman-elect “a cute, sunshiny little redhead.”¹⁰⁴ By the middle of the decade, Agent-13 and Batgirl represented the opposite ends of the feminist spectrum: Batgirl being more in line with the Betty Friedan / Gloria Steinem liberal branch of feminist ideals; and Agent-13 representing more the Phyllis Schlafly conservative ideal. By 1979, however, a strange reversal took place between these two unconnected characters: Sharon Carter returned to SHIELD, apparently dying in the line of duty; and Batgirl had her Congressional seat and Ph.D. taken from her. Her character reverted to ten years earlier, returned to college, and carrying on a secret love affair with the now-older Robin, the Teen Wonder (who, in the 1960s had clearly been ten years her junior).

As the decade closed, Captain America was stalked by the villainous “Corporation.” A Corporation agent, named Veda, works her way into Cap’s life, claiming to be the daughter of the only woman present at the “birth” of Captain America, the mysterious Agent-R (from way back in *Captain America #1*, 1941). Ultimately, Veda is killed by her own handlers for failing to complete her mission to destroy Captain America.¹⁰⁵ Though male villains, often working for the evil Red Skull – like Dr. Faustus, Arlim Zola, or MODOK – frequently failed against Captain America, Veda is killed on her first attempt. Men are given multiple “second chances,” while women are

¹⁰³ Frank Robbins and Don Heck, “Candidate for Danger” *Detective Comics #423* (New York: DC Comics, May, 1972).

¹⁰⁴ Elliot S! Maggin and Curt Swan, “Wild Week-End In Washington” *Superman #268* (New York: DC Comics, October, 1973).

¹⁰⁵ Don Glut and Sal Buscema, “One Day in Newfoundland!” *Captain America and the Falcon #218* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1978).

immediately punished for failure. This, too, says something about American society in the 1970s.

Any gender analysis of Captain America must also include an examination of the comics' treatment of masculinity. Since the end of slavery, there have been two divergent forms of hetero-masculinity in America. The traditional, dominant role often portrayed by white men, the power elite; and a different form, growing from the ashes of slavery. As freedpeople began to organize family units, the dehumanization and emasculation of black men during slavery created an equality between men and women that was not evident in white married couples.¹⁰⁶ This difference in masculinity between racial cultures remained relatively unchanged a century later. "In the domain of African-American cultural history, black masculinity emerges as less a reaction to perceived threats to its stability (for the very good reason that black men have never had a comparably legitimate individual terrain to defend) than as the occasionally gradual and often rebellious appropriation of prohibited masculine positionality."¹⁰⁷ This is evident in the Harlem related stories of the decade. Not only is Leila clearly on an equal footing socially with Sam Wilson (Falcon) and others in the radical movement, but even in the romantic relationship that develops, Leila clearly is not the stay-at-home-and-wait-for-her-man type that Sharon Carter portrays.

Falcon's ability to fly and speak to his pet bird pales in comparison to Captain America's heightened speed, strength and agility. As mentioned earlier, this puts Falcon alongside other sidekicks Bucky and Robin: boys, not men. This, too, was reflective of

¹⁰⁶ Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1985), 61.

¹⁰⁷ Bryce Traister, "Academic Viagra: The Rise of American Masculinity Studies" *American Quarterly* Vol. 52 No. 2 (2000), 289.

society in the decade. By 1975, black heroes such as Shaft had been replaced by other iconic African-American images such as the police-stooge / pimp / sidekick, Huggy Bear, on television's *Starsky and Hutch*. By the end of the decade, with the rise of the conservative revolution that would dominate the 1980s, the socio-political advances of the African-American and women's movements of the previous fifteen years were once again giving way to traditional paternalistic attitudes by the white power elite. Nowhere in American society would this be more emblematic than in popular culture throughout the eighties.

In the end, *Captain America and the Falcon* might lead the reader to believe that little had advanced for women in the 1970s. While women super-agents worked alongside men, the ideal portrayed in *Captain America* was that women would wait at home for their man, that home was the woman's "place." With the radical conservative resurgence in the years to come, it seemed doubtful that the 1980s would see much advance in the portrayal of social issues in the pages of *Captain America*.

By 1980, a very different America existed. The social idealism – and upheaval – in American society had given way to a rush of conservatism. Affirmative action, the Second Harlem Renaissance, and the New Woman were all on their way out. A new president was ushering in a new era; one that would be defined by him: a rugged cowboy, the ultimate macho man with his proverbial "little woman" at his side. The Reagan Revolution would come to signify radical conservative patriotism, fueling a resurgent Cold War. In its wake, race and gender issues would be given "back-burner" status. They would all but disappear from the popular culture as well. American society was becoming once more politically conservative.

After 1980, African-Americans and women would all but disappear from the different media of popular culture, never again achieving the heights of the 1970s. As the nation took a dramatically conservative turn, reinvigorating tensions with the Soviet Union, the pages of *Captain America* would continue to reflect the world of its readers. In the early months of the decade, there would be a push for Captain America to run for president of the United States. By the end of the Reagan Era, Steve Rogers would walk away from his role as Captain America, refusing to use the symbol of the hero as a justification of government policies with which Rogers himself did not agree. Though the “socially relevant” decades of the ’60s and ’70s were replaced by the “Me-Decade” of the 1980s, Captain America’s quest for self-definition and the national quest of self-discovery continued.

CHAPTER 5

CAPTAIN AMERICA IN THE AGE OF REAGAN: THE 1980s

By 1980, women and minorities in America had made major social and economic gains. The homosexual community was becoming more vocal and activist, adding to the perception of a liberal agenda at work in the country. The election of 1980 would dramatically slow that progress. Although Congress passed the Equal Rights Amendment, though it did not get ratified, and affirmative action programs in the 1970s, they met stiff resistance under the leadership of the conservative Republican administration of President Ronald Reagan.

At the dawn of the decade, fifty-two Americans were held hostage by Islamic fundamentalists in Iran. Gasoline was over a dollar a gallon and shortages led to long lines and rationing at gas pumps. President Carter's push for alternative energy sources was severely undercut by the meltdown at the Three Mile Island nuclear plant. The rise of the gay-rights movement and the seemingly overnight explosion of large numbers of women in the professions frightened an already disgruntled "Silent Majority." Humiliation of the United States on the world stage due to Watergate, Vietnam, and the aforementioned hostage crisis had America as a nation holding its proverbial head in shame. Into this socio-economic maelstrom came former California governor, Republican Ronald Reagan. Like a hero from one of his Golden Age movies, Reagan

epitomized the strength, determination, and flag-waving patriotism that many Americans believed was sorely needed.

Reagan's brand of conservatism, focusing on a strong national defense and free markets, represented a change in American society not seen since the early days of the Kennedy administration. In his inaugural speech, Reagan put forth his philosophy on government involvement in socio-economic issues: "Government is not the solution to our problems; government is the problem."¹ Though radically conservative in his views, Reagan's sincere patriotism and decisiveness attracted many political centrists of the "suburban middle and professional classes."²

Even though President Reagan's first appointment to the Supreme Court was a woman, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, the Court underwent a pro-conservative reaction to the liberal decisions of the sixties and seventies. As the eighties proceeded, the Court increasingly placed the burden of proof on the victim of racial discrimination. Affirmative-action programs were attacked as reverse discrimination, in cases such as *Wygant v. Jackson Board of Education* (1986) which began to limit dramatically the successes of affirmative action.³

By 1982, the ERA was dead, failing to achieve the three-fourths support from the states. Similarly, women's reproductive rights, secured under *Roe v. Wade* (1973), were being chipped away under the Reagan administration, which was strongly influenced by the "Christian Coalition." By 1989, the Supreme Court case of *William L. Webster v.*

¹ Ronald Reagan, "First Inaugural Address" January 20, 1981, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/reagan1.asp (December 10, 2009).

² John Ehrman, *The Eighties: America in the Age of Reagan* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2005), 2-7.

³ William C. Berman, *America's Right Turn: Nixon to Bush* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 133-35.

Reproductive Health Services made it clear that the conservative agenda was well on its way to limiting the liberal gains of previous decades. Though Title IX lawsuits in the '70s had succeeded in improving women's position in American society, women continued to earn considerably less than men for the same jobs. The promise of *The Feminine Mystique* and NOW would continue to be blocked by a glass ceiling for many women.⁴

Early in the decade, homosexuals were brought to the forefront in American society more than at any time before. The "gay cancer," that would ultimately become known as Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), hit America hard by 1980. At first apparent only in the gay community, it was proclaimed "nature's punishment" by the Christian Coalition for the alleged decadence of the gay lifestyle. President Reagan refused to provide government funding for AIDS research throughout most of his term. As a result, American homosexuals, already outcast by society, became "lepers," carrying a strange disease that no one understood and no heterosexuals appeared to care about curing. This anti-gay atmosphere would be exacerbated by the creation of the Moral Majority, under the leadership of television evangelist Jerry Falwell and with a membership in the hundreds of thousands and a budget in the millions of dollars.⁵

This conservatism was apparent in popular culture as well. Though the MTV cable television channel continued rock-n-roll's liberal traditions, promoting the careers of performers like the sexually-charged Madonna and British homosexual icon Boy George, most of television followed a more conservative course. Socially relevant sitcoms such as *Good Times* and *Maude* were replaced by outlandishly decadent opulence

⁴ Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking Press, 2000), 331-32.

⁵ Jerry Falwell, *Strength for the Journey* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 364.

on programs such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, which dominated television ratings throughout the decade. Average, “everyman” middle-and-lower-class African-American characters such as Fred Sanford, Rerun, J.J., and Huggy-Bear, were replaced by African-Americans who made upper-class white America more comfortable: cute black children like Arnold and Webster, raised by adopted, wealthy white parents; doctor and lawyer couple Cliff and Claire Huxtable and their ideal children; and the intelligent and sophisticated talk-show host, Oprah Winfrey. More “liberated” women like Mary Richards, Maude, and Wonder Woman were all but gone. Throughout the decade, the only popular television program to feature strong, realistic female roles was *The Golden Girls*, a sitcom dealing with four retired women, starring *Maude*’s Bea Arthur. Unfortunately, the vast majority of women on television were mere “eye candy,” providing some manner of physical pleasure for misogynistic male characters like J.R. Ewing, who would come to define the decade.⁶

The realism that had become standard in films in the sixties and seventies was all but gone as well, replaced by science fiction and teen angst films. The reinvigorated Cold War provided endless examples in popular culture, all of them promoting the idea of the greatness of America and the evil of the Soviet Union. Movie icons like Sylvester Stallone’s boxer champion Rocky Balboa – who defeated a Soviet super-boxer in 1987’s *Rocky IV* – and Rambo, who put duty to country above all else, were embraced by millions of Americans.⁷ Tom Clancy became a nationally best-selling author with his pro-US/ anti-USSR novel *The Hunt for Red October*. Though not as blatant as during the

⁶ Thompson, *American Culture in the 1980s*, 113-120.

⁷ Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 346; Graham, *American Culture in the 1980s*, 103.

1950s, the message in American culture was clear: conservatism was good, liberalism was, if not “bad,” at the very least suspicious.

The comic book industry experienced a revolution which reflected these trends in the 1980s. Throughout the '70s, Marvel and DC Comics had noticed a growing number of independent stores specializing in selling back-issues of comics, particularly superhero comics. In the '80s, publishers began distributing new, first-run issues directly to these outlets. By the end of the decade, most comic books were sold through these independent stores rather than through news racks or department stores.⁸ Aside from a revolution in sales and a maturing readership, the industry experienced real recognition by the rest of the publishing world with two ground-breaking comics, both distributed by DC Comics, and both published in 1986: *Watchmen*, by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, an apocalyptic alternate reality where retired superheroes investigate the killing of one of their own as the US, still under the leadership of Richard Nixon twelve years after Watergate, comes to the point of nuclear war with the Soviet Union; and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* by Frank Miller, still another apocalyptic near-future where a middle-aged Bruce Wayne comes out of retirement so that Batman can once more bring justice to a socially deteriorating Gotham City. These books gained the attention of the mainstream media, not only showing that comics were not just for children, but that they were not primarily for children. While both of these works attempted to deconstruct the idea of the superhero, they ultimately revitalized the superhero in the process.⁹

⁸ *Marvel Chronicle: A Year by Year History*, Catherine Saunders, Heather Scott, Julia March, and Alastair Dougall, Eds. (New York: DK Publishing, 2008), 195.

⁹ Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 267, 271.

Those who grew up with comic books were continuing to follow them, and passing on the hobby to their children. In 1987, a survey commissioned by Marvel Comics found that the average comic book reader was twenty years old.¹⁰ In an interview with Michael Usland, producer of the '80s comic book-based movies *Swamp Thing* and *Batman* said, “Baby boomers have finally reached a point in life where they can have nostalgia and also share that experience with their kids.”¹¹ This is consistent with the observations of industry expert and comic book writer Mark Waid who said that the average age of comic book readers has consistently risen with each generation; whereas the average reader in the 1940s and '50s was an older child (8-12 years old), by the '60s and '70s the age of the average reader had risen to the late teens; and by the twenty-first century the average reader was in his or her thirties.¹² As in the previous two decades, the letters to the editors of *Captain America* in the 1980s continued to show a mature audience. Cap would continue to stand for the “American Dream,” a concept that was frequently used, but rarely explained. Acclaimed '80s Cap writer J.M. DeMatteis defined it best: “[Cap] believed, to the core of his being, in what America *could be* [emphasis in the original].”¹³

The 1980s represented what some pop-culture historians referred to as a *Kulturkampf*, or “cultural struggle.” This perceived culture war – perpetuated by right-wing pundits such as Patrick Buchanan – represented the growing conflict over American

¹⁰ Kurt Eichenwald, “Grown-Ups Gather at the Comic Book Stand,” *The New York Times*, September 30, 1987 (Late City Final Edition), sec. A.

¹¹ Nancy Miller, “Comic Book Renaissance,” *The Associated Press*, January 21, 1987, Domestic News.

¹² Richard Hall interview with Mark Waid, November 17, 2007.

¹³ J.M. DeMatteis, “Afterword,” *Captain America and the Struggle of the Superhero*, Robert G. Weiner, Ed. (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2009), 242.

culture between the opposing ends of the political spectrum.¹⁴ Beginning in the Reagan era, this battle became a cultural tug-of-war. While the Cold War returned to pre-Cuban Missile Crisis heights of tension, the foundations of social equality built in the '60s and '70s, through both the African-American and women's rights movements, remained firmly rooted and strong. American culture, therefore, did not swing back to the repressive conformity of the '50s. In the '80s, President Reagan stood at the center of this culture war. Its arguments were played out in the pages of *Captain America*.

Christopher Knowles, in his 2007 analysis of comic book superheroes, *Our Gods Wear Spandex*, asserted, "In the 1980s, Captain America reverted back to a generic superhero, perhaps mirroring the uncertain relationship modern Americans – particularly the intellectual misfits attracted to comic books – have with patriotism."¹⁵ This statement contradicts the evidence in the pages of *Captain America* throughout the decade. While the hero continued to deal with the questions of "what is patriotism" and "where do the patriot's loyalties lie," the storylines throughout the decade dealt with these questions in complex, analytical stories matching and in many cases surpassing the magazine's 1970s storylines. Throughout eight of the ten years from 1980-89, *Captain America* stories focused on important social and political issues even more openly than they did during the Englehart run of the early '70s. Among the topics presented in the comic were: the continuing question of patriotism, particularly in the context of the "Reagan Revolution"; nationalism and American hegemony; vigilantism in the era of Bernie Goetz; the corrupt influence of corporate America on government; affirmative action; homosexual

¹⁴ Graham Thompson, *American Culture in the 1980s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 9; John Ehrman, *The Eighties: America in the Age of Reagan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 2-4.

¹⁵ Christopher Knowles, *Our Gods Wear Spandex: The Secret History of Comic Book Heroes* (San Francisco: Weiser Press, 2007), 133.

relationships; the continuing – and rising – popularity of the “antihero”; steroid use during the scandal of professional wrestling in the late ’80s, an issue especially prevalent in a comic book about a hero enhanced by a “super soldier serum”; and a topic that touched every American, the economy. As such, the storylines presented in the pages of *Captain America* in the 1980s continued to reflect the relevant issues in American society, while at the same time attempting through their stories to influence the reader with a slightly-left-of-center socio-political perspective on the “American Dream.”

As the comic book transitioned from the ’70s into the Age of Reagan, readers presented a multitude of ideas concerning the political leanings of the character. Their comments reflect the shifting ideologies of the readers between 1979 and 1981. One of the earliest letters printed in the ’80s was from Malcolm Garder from Essex, England. His analysis of both Captain America and the United States in general successfully set the stage for what was to come in both the comic and the country in the years following:

I must admit that I’m unsure as to whether Cap truly embodies the spirit of the American people [in 1980]. To me, America seems to be a fragmented nation, clinging on the one hand to its ethnic roots and on the other to a vague sense of national unity. In this respect, Captain America’s bid over the last million issues to discover himself and his roots seem to epitomize America. His encounters with – and shock over – crooked politicians in the classic stories by Steve Englehart are indicative of America’s ultimate delusion. Apparently, until the revelations of Watergate, America as a whole refused to believe that such political hobgoblins as corruption-in-high-places existed. And yet, America – in its own worldly ways – must have always known about such dirty tricks... in the opinion of this British subject, Cap is the honest American, ceaselessly searching for his concept of America amongst the hundreds of *other* [emphasis in the original] conceptual Americans.¹⁶

¹⁶ Malcolm Gardner, “Letters to the Living Legend,” *Captain America* #244 (New York: Marvel Comics, April, 1980).

This perfectly-timed letter from the perspective of an outsider provides an excellent window into this period in American history. Just as America was in a transitional state in 1980, so, too, was *Captain America*. While much of the rest of the comic book industry was going more and more in the direction of the anti-hero in comics, the writers and artists of *Captain America* maintained the traditional hero while keeping the stories relevant. Their success was perhaps due to the strength of the “traditional hero” image of Reagan himself. Ironically, while the more traditional hero image of Captain America was likely to attract more conservative readers, the political stances taken by Cap during the decade continued on a much more centrist-though-left-leaning track.

This analysis of Captain America at the dawn of the '80s continued a few months later in an editorial column entitled “The Great Captain America Controversy” printed in the letters page of *Captain America* #246 (cover-dated June, 1980). Cap fan Matt Kaufman bemoaned the Captain America of the previous decade, pointing out the hero’s decade-long “identity crisis,” shifting from one social extreme to the next in a search for his identity (a search that Kaufman pointed out went hand-in-hand with the ever-changing writing staff), following whatever social “fad” was popular at the time. He then credited Roger McKenzie – Cap writer beginning in 1978 – with returning the character to his more “conservative” “pre-1968” roots.¹⁷

Cap editor Roger Stern wrote a lengthy response calling Kaufman’s letter “at once encouraging and disheartening.”¹⁸ Stern disagreed with Kaufman’s analysis of the 1970s

¹⁷ Matt Kaufman, “Letters to the Living Legend,” *Captain America* #246 (NY: Marvel Comics, June, 1980).

¹⁸ Roger Stern, “Letters to the Living Legend,” *Captain America* #246 (NY: Marvel Comics, June, 1980).

Cap, referring to a discussion he had with Roger McKenzie concerning where the character was as of 1980:

Mac pointed out that Cap's stories had always mirrored what was going on in the nation at the time. The 1940s Cap was a patriotic Nazi fighter; the fifties Cap engaged in red-baiting, anti-communist activities; the sixties Cap was an exuberant, if slightly introspective hero who immersed himself adventure after adventure, barely stopping to take a breath. By the time the seventies rolled around, Cap – like so many others – had to step back and question just what in blazes he was doing... and what was going on around him. And I agreed with Mac that our biggest problem in bringing Cap's present adventures to full blossom would be to figure out just where America was headed in the eighties and to present a positive reflection... Cap is not quite the rock-ribbed conservative you imagine him to be. As a matter of fact, he's probably about as dead center in the political spectrum as one can get... If anything, Steve Rogers probably grew up as a New Deal liberal... Captain America stands for truth, justice, and the American *Dream* [emphasis in the original]. And anyone who thinks the American Way comes anywhere close to the American Dream is living in a fool's paradise... [Cap] can teach us a lot about where we've been and where we're going. And maybe, just maybe, he'll make us all *think* [emphasis in the original] a little along the way.¹⁹

When Stern took over as writer on *Captain America*, he spent three issues explaining his philosophy on Captain America to readers. He saw Cap/Steve Rogers as a child of the Depression, with all of the values of that generation. Rather than an “anachronism,” as Stan Lee and others have described him, Stern saw him instead as an “anomaly,” a man-out-of-time with sensibilities to societal change, since, at his heart, his ideals and beliefs continued to be those of his contemporaries.²⁰

For the 250th issue of *Captain America* (cover-dated October, 1980), Roger Stern and artist John Byrne presented an untitled story that presented the hero considering an offer from the New Populist Party to run as its nominee for president of the United States in 1980. In yet another editorial, Stern informed the readers that the original idea, put

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Roger Stern, “Introductory Thoughts on a Living Legend,” *Captain America* #247 (New York: Marvel Comics, July, 1980).

forth by previous writing/artist team McKenzie and Perlin was to have Cap run and win. Stern admitted to nixing that idea because it asked “the readers to suspend their disbelief beyond the usual bounds... of Marvel Comics.”²¹ When Stern decided to go ahead with the idea of Captain America at least considering running for president, he requested that readers send in their list of problems facing the nation that election year. The results, based on an undisclosed number of respondents were as follows:

Iran Hostage Crisis	20.8%
Impending War	11.7%
Energy Crisis	10.4%
Soviet Expansionism	9.0%
The Economy	9.0%
Socio-Political Cynicism	7.8%
Terrorism	3.9%
Other	27.4%

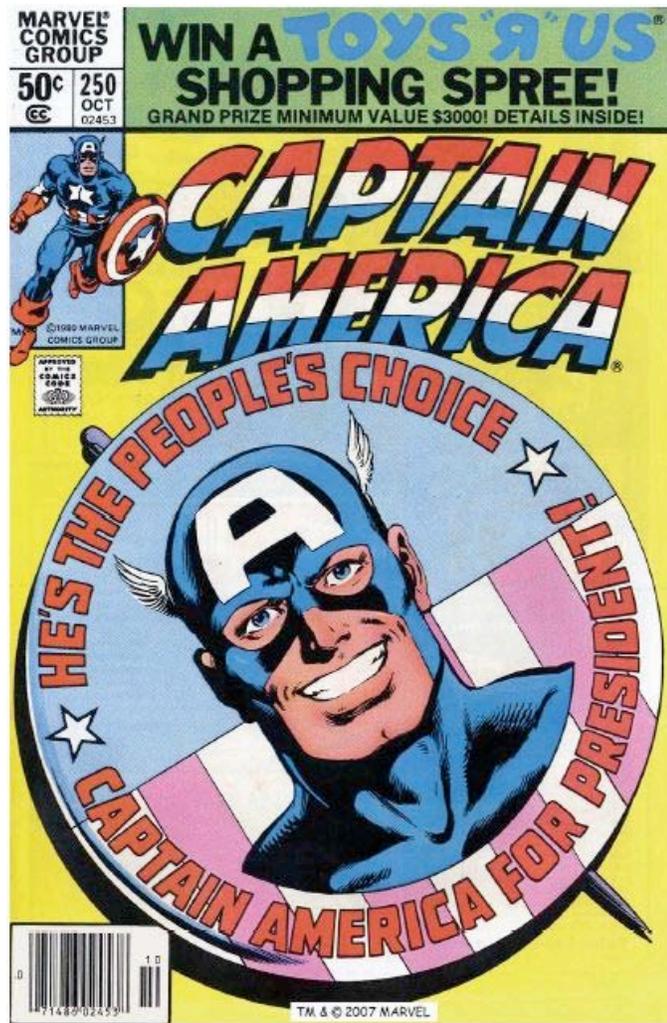
In the story, Captain America rescued a Congressman and his mistress from what appeared to be common street thugs. In the wake of the media attention regarding the rescue, the New Populist Party asked Cap to consider running for president. When Steve Rogers discussed the idea with neighbors – a diverse group including a young black man, an elderly Jewish woman, and a white middle-aged fireman – the consensus was that no one cared about politics anymore because “there’s never anyone worth voting for.” When Rogers asked his girlfriend, Bernie Rosenthal, her response was, “Wouldn’t it just be great to have a president you knew you could trust?” As Captain America, Steve asked his teammates from the Avengers. The opinions there were mixed. Tony Stark, the white, industrialist, conservative hero Iron Man and the robot, Vision were opposed to the idea; but young female hero, Wasp, and the mutant X-Man Beast were both in favor. Here, whether intended or not, the writers placed

²¹ Roger Stern, “Letters to the Living Legend,” *Captain America #250* (NY: Marvel Comics: October, 1980).

Captain America's political support on the left. The Beast, for example, was a mutant, and member of the hero team, The X-Men, representing a minority group in the Marvel Universe of humans – designated *homo-superior* – who have been blessed/cursed with genetically mutated abilities. They were hated for being different (an outcast and mistreated minority). The Wasp, Janet Pym, was a shrinking super-heroine but also a victim of spousal abuse. So, here, among this integrated group of heroes, only the women and oppressed minorities favored Captain America for president.²²

Ultimately, the hero decided to remain a civilian, leaving politics to the politicians. In his speech to the American people, turning down the party's nomination, Cap said, "My duty to the [American] Dream would severely limit any abilities I might have to preserve the [American] reality... it is the Dream... the Hope... that makes the Reality worth living... and as long as the dream remains even partially unfulfilled, I cannot abandon it." The cover of issue 250 is one of the most famous of the sixty-plus-year-run of the comic book. At first glance, it appears to represent a simple premise: a political campaign button featuring a patriotic hero for the highest office in the land. On closer inspection, however, other messages are apparent:

²² Roger Stern and John Byrne, *Captain America #250* (New York: Marvel Comics, October, 1980).



[Image 5-1: *Captain America* #250, John Byrne, artist]

The picture presented the image of the hero, Captain America, not Steve Rogers. The hero – the candidate – was masked. This was consistent with the malaise and apathy that many in post-Watergate America felt toward the political process. Even the most apparently trustworthy of candidates for political office were expected to be hiding something from the American people. The artist, then, presented both a patriotic alternative to the real candidates while also making a commentary on the status of American political culture in 1980.

Another ironic point from this cover was the ad that dominated the top of the page. The overwhelming majority of comic book covers never contained ads on the cover itself. In this political issue, Marvel printed an ad campaigning for Toys-R-Us stores, explaining that the details concerning the campaign were inside. So, as the fictional characters in the pages of *Captain America* were being approached to vote for Cap, the magazine's readers were being approached to shop at Toys-R-Us for a chance to win prizes. The connection between big business and politics was apparent on this cover.

Being a superhero, especially one who so consistently responded to threats in a strong, physical way, Captain America for president was consistent with the Republican Party's platform of aggressiveness and strength in foreign policy (both against the hostage-holding government in Iran and through ending "détente" with the communist U.S.S.R.). However, a large portion of Republican support in 1980 stemmed from the evangelical Christian right, most notably through the new Moral Majority.²³ Throughout the decade, the power of the Christian right was palpable. In 1985, a right-wing group, Fairness in Media – with support from U.S. Senator Jesse Helms – attempted to buy out CBS-TV. Minister Tim LaHaye fought against what he saw as "liberal media bias" in a mass mail campaign in 1988.²⁴ The conservative Christian right helped to define the decade. In forty years, the writers of *Captain America* never took a clear stance on Captain America's ideas concerning religion or Christianity. Like Lincoln, Cap is silent on the idea of Christianity. This silence reflects the distance between the character and the political right of the period.

²³ William C. Berman, *America's Right Turn: Nixon to Bush* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1994), 63, 75.

²⁴ James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Harper Collins / Basic Books, 1991), 227, 237-39.

Reader response to the “Cap for President” storyline was enthusiastic. Bruce Weintraub of New York wrote, “Considering my own rather nebulous feelings towards both Carter and Reagan, the enthusiasm generated by the idea of ‘Cap for President’ seemed quite genuine.” Will Hevelin of California added, “Isn’t it time we had a President we could trust; whose ideals are unquestionably admirable... who is clearly competent... who is assured of the support he’d need to enact his programs? Wouldn’t it be nice to have a candidate to vote FOR?” Eric Watts of South Carolina concluded, “Question: Why do I, a college sophomore, still read comic books? Answer: Captain America #250.”²⁵ In the next issue, Watts continued: “In the 1980s, every mortal battle won is one step closer to victory in the conceptual war; one less obstacle in reality is an easier path to the Dream. More than a man, more than a super hero, even more than a Living Legend... this is Captain America!”²⁶

Even long after the election, fans continued to write in with their opinions of Captain America’s representation of patriotism in uncertain times. In 1982, Indiana talk radio employee Thomas Cook, wrote:

In times of growing cynicism that we see today, the idea of patriotism of any kind seems to exist only in books and memories. But Captain America, the personification of our great country, brings back the meanings to liberty, freedom, and justice... Captain America assures us of the greatness in the United States. Upon reading your comics, I only hope half the pride I feel in America may be instilled in the rest of our people...²⁷

With the resurgence of Cold War tensions under President Reagan, rampant nationalism and American hegemony in the world became a recurring theme in the pages of *Captain*

²⁵ “Letters to the Living Legend,” *Captain America* #254 (New York: Marvel Comics, February, 1981).

²⁶ Eric Watts, “Letters to the Living Legend,” *Captain America* #255 (NY: Marvel Comics, March, 1981).

²⁷ Thomas Cook, “Letters to the Living Legend,” *Captain America* #270 (NY: Marvel Comics, June, 1982).

America. One point made by Cook – the idea that Captain America reassured the public of American greatness – was also the basis of much of Reagan’s appeal.

In one of the last letters of the decade to directly address issues of patriotism, David Gordon-MacDonald of Canada wrote of the importance of nationalism in relation to cultural identity:

[Nationalism] is our sense of group identity. Much of knowing who you are as an individual comes from knowing who your group is and how you fit in. Moreover, group identity is connected on a very basic level to everyone’s sense of personal ethics and societal morality. Cap represents these, even now when they seem to have become dirty words. If nothing else, Captain America... can show his readers that there are better reasons to be just and compassionate than because it’s in fashion. Cap is a concrete symbol of those values – freedoms, compassion and justice – which many now find laughable. This kind of thing is badly needed. Cap’s readers are being told, rightly, that these things *are not* [emphasis in the original] hokey, they are essential to human society and have been since the beginning of civilization.²⁸

What these letters show is the varying understandings of patriotism and nationalism on the part of *Captain America* readers in the early Reagan era. It is important to note that, contrary to popular fads of the day, the writers of *Captain America* did not turn him into a brooding, vigilante anti-hero. The character maintained the same beliefs and heroic nature that he had had since World War II. Though so much of America had changed in the succeeding decades, readers still responded to the traditional hero, and for the same reasons. Throughout the decade, and especially under the guidance of writer Mark Gruenwald, *Captain America* continued to stand for the American ideals of freedom and justice, even when the American system itself led to injustice.

²⁸ David Gordon-MacDonald, “Letters to the Living Legend,” *Captain America* #272 (New York: Marvel Comics, August, 1982).

One of the most controversial issues early on in the decade was the influence that the Christian Coalition had with the Reagan White House. Reagan explained his predilection for the Christian right in a speech called “The Need for Moral Reform” given to the 1983 convention of the National Association of Evangelicals. In that speech, Reagan said, “I want you to know that this administration is motivated by a political philosophy that sees the greatness of America in you, her people, and in your families, churches, neighborhoods, communities – the institutions that foster and nourish values like concern for others and respect for the rule of law under God.”²⁹ The overt references to church and God were a clear message to the evangelical right. Over time, this “concern for others,” came to exclude homosexuals and others that the religious right considered “deviants.” On the surface, however, this description of “American values” coincided with the views of Captain America. The Christian Coalition, however, represented a far more radical ideology than World War II-era American values.

In the pages of *Captain America*, this group was represented by the Coalition for an Upstanding America, a group of wealthy – and apparently all white – citizens who were protesting the “erosion” of so-called American values, especially in the mass media. This group sought out Captain America to act as its poster-boy, with the slogan, “America as it once was... America as it could be again.”³⁰ A villain going by the moniker of “Scarecrow” exposed the group as a fraud, backed by big business. In response to the revelations concerning the CUA, Cap said, “What happens to the

²⁹ “The Need for Moral Reform,” *Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Ronald Reagan, 1983, Vol. I* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1984), 360-363.

³⁰ J.M. DeMatteis and Mike Zeck, “Turning Point!,” *Captain America #276* (New York: Marvel Comics, December, 1982).

individual in a land where morality is wielded like a club? Where decency is dictated by those with the loudest voices – and the greatest wealth?”³¹

The opinion of the Sentinel of Liberty was clear: the imposition of morality by a self-appointed “majority” was inconsistent with the freedom of expression in America’s Bill of Rights. By emphasizing individual freedom, Captain America passed on another message to his readers as well. By 1983, the Reagan Administration had brought the Cold War back to its pre-Cuban Missile Crisis heights with added moralistic language. The president frequently referred to the Soviet Union as an “evil empire.” Just as during the socially-enforced conservatism of the 1950s, Americans were once more expected to conform to a conservative politically defined standard, foregoing individualism. As Americans had already discovered in the sixties, such conformity was more consistent with a “communist” than with a free society. Though this conformity may have been the preference of President Reagan and his Moral Majority supporters, the lessons learned from McCarthyism and the political need on the part of the president to appeal to the political center, prevented a repeat of the 1950s anti-communist witch hunts.

For most of Reagan’s first administration, the stories of *Captain America* were written by J.M. DeMatteis. DeMatteis, introduced to the character during the Lee/Kirby revival of the late-1960s, explained his perception of the character thusly in an interview with the author:

Captain America is the embodiment of the American Dream. He isn’t tied to any particular party or political philosophy. He’s above politics. He goes to the core of the American spirit, the core of what is best in all of us. In the Reagan era, when being American became more and more mixed in with the idea of being politically conservative. It was only natural that Cap – who had so vehemently questioned his government in the previous decade – should be asking questions

³¹ J.M. DeMatteis and Mike Zeck, “Sermon of Straw,” *Captain America* #280 (New York: Marvel Comics, April, 1983).

about the then-current American mindset. That said, I don't think my stories were anywhere near as political as Englehart's [in the early 1970s]. Looking back – I don't think I realized it at the time – I was coming at Cap from a more spiritual perspective... I never saw Cap as a liberal or a conservative. [Quoting Roger Stern], Steve Rogers was probably a dyed-in-the-wool New Deal Democrat. (Of course this brings up an interesting question: Is it possible that Steve Rogers was a liberal Democrat but, once the mask was on, he became something bigger, something better, than Steve? I think there's some truth in that.)³²

Despite his suggestion that his storylines were not as political as Englehart's a decade earlier, DeMatteis would take Captain America onto some fascinatingly new political ground in the early-'80s. He addressed issues of race, gender, and patriotism at a time when popular culture seemed increasingly racist and sexist.

Key to the limited but substantial success of the Christian Coalition was fear of the future. With the Cold War once more heated up, the fear of “mutually assured destruction” was higher than ever. In a near-future, apocalyptic storyline, Captain America was taken forward in time to the year 1991, to an America that he didn't recognize. Through a corporate conspiracy between the fictional Marvel Universe's major corporate villains, the Brand Corporation and Roxxon Oil, all of the super-heroes had been eradicated in the mid-1980s, allowing corrupt institutions to take over the country. In 1991, the country was run by a dictator named Hellinger, who, in the 1980s had been a Brand Corporation researcher responsible for creating the cyborg soldier, Deathlok.

A human clone of the original Deathlok went back in time to the early-'80s to find Captain America – as well as his former, cyborg self – to fight this future threat. After defeating Hellinger, Captain America told Deathlok, “you ARE America, 1991! You've been beaten down, used, abused... you've had your body pulled apart and put

³² Richard Hall, Interview with J.M. DeMatteis (August 18, 2008).

together in the form of a machine... and yet your spirit STILL refuses to be crushed.”

The Star-Spangled Avenger then returned to his present and prevented the Brand Corporation’s plan to destroy all the heroes, therefore, presumably, preventing the bleak future he had seen in 1991.³³ The message here, hot on the heels of the Coalition storyline, was that there were forces within America that held the potential of subverting American freedom, that those forces could and must be stopped, but that, should such forces temporarily succeed, the American spirit would still live on and fight back.

Still another example of the way the author uses Captain America as a vehicle for criticism of corporate greed and unethical behavior was the emergence in *Captain America* of the Guardian Life Insurance Company, which decided to insure known criminals, assuming no one would ever actually file a claim.³⁴ DeMatteis portrayed business in the 1980s as dishonest and working against the best interest of average Americans. Both of these DeMatteis stories bore similar warnings: that the true threat to America lay within, not without. This certainly represented the ideology of the political left in the early 1980s. Here, in the pages of a comic book superhero that Christopher Knowles, Robert Jewitt, and many others had already labeled conservative, liberal ideology would continue to dominate the storylines, though hidden in the trappings of renewed nationalism.

Nationalism became a recurring theme from 1984 on under the story writing of first J.M. DeMatteis and later Mark Gruenwald. One character whom DeMatteis brought back during his nearly four-year run on *Captain America* was Jack Monroe, the radically

³³ J.M. DeMatteis and Mike Zeck, “Mazes!” *Captain America* #288 (NY: Marvel Comics, December, 1983).

³⁴ Bill Mantlo and Herbe Trimpe, “To Tame a Tumbler!,” *Captain America* #291 (New York: Marvel Comics, March, 1984).

conservative, racist, ret-conned “Bucky of the 1950s” developed by Steve Englehart a decade before. Monroe – now presumably cured from his “insane” bigotry and rabid anti-communism – returned and assumed the role of Steve Rogers’s former alter-ego, Nomad. The message portrayed in this decision was that the rabid anti-communist, radically conservative hero of the 1950s was now the “man without a country,” searching for a place in the more socially liberal society of the post-Civil Rights era. From this, the reader could take away that American culture in the ’80s, and the radical swing toward conservatism, represented an amalgamation of the hardened Cold Warrior of the ’50s with the more socially tolerant ’60s and ’70s. As easily as Nomad may have fit in the Reagan era politically, he did not easily adapt to the liberal social values now represented by Captain America. When Nomad became too violent with some street criminals, Captain America rebuked him, “It’s not our job to flex our muscles...”³⁵ Here, the writers showed the reader the Captain America of the 1980s rebuking the Bucky of the 1950s, implying that the U.S. must not return to its early Cold War strong-arm tactics. Such tactics had only bred more violence in the past, and – in the more liberal opinions of *Captain America* writers – would do so again if allowed to continue.

One of the recurring themes in the ’80s stories was the argument concerning the line between patriotism (love and devotion to country) and imperialist nationalism (the imposition of a country’s ideals on other countries or societies). By far one of the most fascinating characters to be introduced in the pages of *Captain America* was Flag-Smasher. This villain first appeared destroying the flags outside of the United Nations, an institution he viewed as a “counterproductive charade.” He then burned down a

³⁵ J.M. DeMatteis and Paul Neery, “Field of Vision!” *Captain America* #293 (New York: Marvel Comics, May, 1984).

factory that produced American flags. His view of nationalism was that it promoted separation among the peoples of the world.³⁶ In the image below, Flag-Smasher explained his ideology to a crowd of curious young people and an obviously less-than-receptive Captain America:



[Image 5-2: *Captain America #312*, Paul Neary, Artist]

Flag-Smasher promoted the international relations philosophy of “idealism,” the antithesis of the standard “realist” or “realpolitik” school of thought, which defined the nation as the center of international studies, and national self-interest as the key factor in

³⁶ Mark Gruenwald and Paul Neary, “Deface the Nation” *Captain America #312* (New York: Marvel Comics, December, 1985).

international relations.³⁷ He argued that the concept of nationalism was a dangerous one, separating the peoples of the world into geo-political / geo-economic classes that continue to battle each other for control of the world's resources. Though technically a villain, Flag-Smasher showed that – as of the mid-1980s – the lessons of two world wars had not yet been learned. The promise of the idea of the United Nations was far from fruition, and continued nationalism increased the threat of international nuclear exchange.

The point of interest here – and elsewhere in the 1980s stories – is that the villain promoted more liberal values than the hero. While his actions were villainous – one could compare his attack on the flags at the U.N. and the destruction of the flag producing factory to that of eco-terrorists destroying machinery meant to destroy the land – his cause was noble: a world free of national competition and, as such, a sharing of the world's resources for the benefit of all. Placed, however, in the heated revival of Cold War tensions, such “tearing down of walls” would doubtless have been seen as “un-American,” and, therefore, bad.

This issue of *Captain America* came on the heels of the first summit between President Reagan and Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev in Geneva. For the first time in the Cold War, it appeared that a Soviet leader and American president could come to some peaceful terms and speak to each other on friendlier grounds. This appearance, however, was overshadowed by the reality of Reagan's hard line on space-based defenses and the rapidly deteriorating economic condition within the Soviet Union. As the Cold War began limping toward a quieter and more peaceful-than-expected end, American and Russian nationalism was becoming stronger. Even Captain America's stance in the

³⁷ Robert A. Heineman, *Political Science: An Introduction* (New York: MacGraw-Hill, 1996), 209-10.

previous image denoted America's general response to international idealism. The crossed arms – and note that only Captain America holds such a stance – traditionally denotes a refusal to accept what is being said or presented. Even Captain America's response to Flag-Smasher's speech shows an entrenched American nationalism:

I believe my opponent was wrong. There is nothing harmful about having a sense of national identity or ethnic heritage. America is made up of a multitude of different ethnic groups. Each of which has had its own part to contribute to American culture. Be proud of your heritage, but never let that pride make you forget that beneath it all, we are all human beings who have the same wants and needs and deserve the same respect and dignity.³⁸

Several letters over the course of the next few months – specifically those of Paul Weissberg of Illinois and Norman Breyfogle of California – defended Flag-Smasher.³⁹ Howard Kidd of Iowa said, “Wouldn't we be better off without the saber-rattling, chest thumping, hatred of the enemy?” and Michael Ketchek of New York suggested that Captain America's style of patriotism was exactly the kind of thinking that could lead to nuclear war.⁴⁰

Captain America would face off against Flag-Smasher one more time. In the Swiss Alps, Flag-Smasher and his new group, ULTIMATUM (Underground Liberated Totally Integrated Mobile Army to Unite Mankind) took several hostages, demanding that Captain America, as the living embodiment of the United States and international Americanism turn himself over for immediate – and internationally covered – execution. Cap ultimately rescued the hostages and captured Flag-Smasher, but not before being forced to shoot and kill one of the ULTIMATUM agents. This was the first life taken by

³⁸ Gruenwald and Neary, *Captain America* #312.

³⁹ “American Graffiti,” *Captain America* #318 (New York: Marvel Comics, June, 1986).

⁴⁰ Howard Kidd and Michael Ketchek, “American Graffiti,” *Captain America* #327 (New York: Marvel Comics, March, 1987).

Captain America (presumably not counting his military service in World War II).⁴¹ For the first time since his return in 1964, Captain America took the stance of the more popular “anti-heroes” like The Punisher or the X-Men’s Wolverine. Taking that life, even though it was to protect others, would be an issue that would be brought up again and again in the months to come, and a catalyst to one of the longest and most provocative storylines in the history of Captain America.

At one point during the “Flag-Smasher / ULTIMATUM” storyline, Captain America was alone with Flag-Smasher in a caved-in snowdrift. During their one-on-one conversation, Cap defended himself to Flag-Smasher, saying, “Some folks misunderstand me. They think I represent the American government, its political system, or its official policies. I DON’T. I represent the American Dream – the notion that human beings should have the opportunity to better their lives and attain their noblest aspirations.” Further, in response to the life he took, Captain America stated, “I believe that guns are for killing, and killing is the ultimate violation of individual rights – the ultimate denial of freedom.”⁴² These comments softened the earlier, more conservative stance taken against Flag-Smasher. Beyond simply a respect of ethnic diversity, Cap also promoted an idea of peace, and the notion that nationalism need not involve condoning the policies of one’s government. Here, then, is another example of a more centrist Captain America, both respecting American nationalism while at the same time admitting to flaws in the overall American system.

⁴¹ Mark Gruenwald and Paul Neary, “Ultimatum!,” *Captain America* #321 (New York: Marvel Comics, September, 1986).

⁴² Mark Gruenwald and Paul Neary, “The Chasm,” *Captain America* #322 (New York: Marvel Comics, October, 1986).

This second appearance of Flag-Smasher prompted another round of letters on the issues at hand. Roger Myers of England agreed that nationalism prevented a global community; but admitted that terrorism was not the way to go about fighting it. Lorne Teitlebaum of New York applauded the writer's decision to show Captain America remorseful for killing the terrorist; while Pierre Comtois of Massachusetts suggested several times where Captain America allegedly took a life, and that Cap had always been an agent of the US government (the flaw in the argument being that there is a perceived difference between "taking a life" and failing to save someone; or that taking lives of enemy combatants in war is not considered the same as murder).⁴³ The following month, Carmela Merlo of New York pointed out these flaws, arguing that Cap's killing of the terrorist in defense of others was "regrettable" but in no way "dishonorable," and that Cap's actions were "in no way an unlawful killing."⁴⁴ These letters were a fair representation of the growing trend in the eighties of the popularity of the anti-hero, protagonists who are "conspicuously lacking in [traditionally] heroic qualities."⁴⁵ By that time, for more than a decade, popular characters like Dirty Harry, Han Solo, Indiana Jones, Wolverine, and The Punisher had frequently taken the lives of criminals and those who posed a threat to others. It was becoming more socially acceptable to do so as the eighties progressed.

On his return to the United States, Captain America was confronted with the repercussions of his Alpine adventure. As an American citizen not officially sanctioned by the United States government, Captain America committing an act of murder on foreign soil gained the attention of the U.S. government for the first time since his

⁴³ "American Graffiti," *Captain America* #328 (New York: Marvel Comics, April, 1987).

⁴⁴ Carmela Merlo, "American Graffiti," *Captain America* #329 (NY: Marvel Comics, May, 1987).

⁴⁵ "anti-hero," *Mirriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 10th Edition* (2000)

resuscitation in the mid-'60s. In previous issues, Steve Rogers received a check for one million dollars from the U.S. government for "back-pay" (since, officially Steve Rogers had neither resigned from the U.S. Army nor had he been paid since 1945). Cap used that money to establish a 1-800 hotline so that people from all over the country could contact him if he was needed.

The terrorist killing and the million-dollar-windfall soon caught the attention of the new Presidential Commission on Superhuman Activities, which brought Captain America in for debriefing, reminding him that when he decided to take on the mantle of Captain America in 1941, he agreed to serve the U.S. in an official capacity until the president relieved him of duty. Steve Rogers, therefore, was given an ultimatum: to either serve the Commission in an official capacity, or cease being Captain America. This Commission consisted of a Mr. Yates and General Hayworth (both older white men), Henry Peter Gyrich (a previously established Marvel Universe government representative, a younger white man); a Ms. Cooper (a young, white, blonde woman); and Mr. Mathers (a middle-aged black man). After considerable deliberation, Rogers determined that if he accepted the government's terms and became a symbol of the "establishment," it would prevent his ability to act "as a symbol that transcends mere politics." His choice, then, was to resign as Captain America.⁴⁶

"To serve the country your way, I would have to give up my personal freedom."⁴⁷ This comment seemed particularly ironic coming from a veteran of World War II, and someone who had repeatedly called himself a "soldier." By 1987, however, the U.S. military had been an all-volunteer force for nearly a decade, but it was still the

⁴⁶ Mark Gruenwald and Tom Morgan, "The Choice," *Captain America* #332 (New York: Marvel Comics, August, 1987).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

understanding that to serve the country as a soldier meant giving up one's individual freedom. Orders were orders, regardless of personal opinions of them; but here, Captain America, the greatest American soldier of them all, refused to give up any personal freedom in service to his country. What this implies is that Captain America – who was willing to go to war for President Franklin Roosevelt – felt he would not be able to conscientiously follow similar orders from President Reagan. In forty years, the character had changed.

Readers responded with harsh criticism to Steve Rogers's decision to resign as Captain America. Some wrote of how "the people" (i.e. "the readers") had been let down by Rogers's decision, pointing out that any newly-appointed Captain America would, in fact, be nothing more than a stooge for the government.⁴⁸ This last criticism would – by the time the letter was printed – have already come to fruition when the character Super-Patriot was chosen to become the new Captain America. For the next eighteen months, *Captain America* would become the monthly adventures of two heroes, two different Captains.

The Super-Patriot was a former professional wrestler named John Walker. In this persona, Walker proposed to become a super-hero, but he only combated crimes that were newsworthy – at one point ignoring a woman being mugged because the crime wasn't "big enough." Super-Patriot worked alongside three other former wrestlers – all wearing Captain America masks – calling themselves the BUCKies (Bold Urban Commandos). After several months, and as Captain America faced his choice concerning his future, Super-Patriot took on a terrorist who threatened to blow up the Washington Monument. Due to his continued media attention, Walker was chosen by the

⁴⁸ "American Graffiti," *Captain America* #337 (New York: Marvel Comics, January, 1988).

Commission to become the new Captain America, with one of the BUCKies – an illiterate black man named Lemar Hoskins – as his new sidekick, Bucky.⁴⁹ At first, it appeared that the editors at Marvel and the writer of *Captain America*, Mark Gruenwald, had finally given in to pressure and made Captain America a more modern anti-hero.

John Walker, a native of Georgia, was much more conservative and eager to do the bidding of the US government than was Captain America, whatever that might be. One of his first missions as Captain America was against a group of ultra-conservatives, called the Watchdogs. They blew up an adult bookstore and killed the owner near Walker's hometown in Georgia. At first, Walker was concerned that he, too, shared the same beliefs as the Watchdogs, that of promoting decency in America. When the group threatened to burn down a library for refusing to take 152 chosen books from its shelves, Walker and Hoskins acted. First, they set up Hoskins as a big-city pornographic movie producer, looking for local ladies for his business. Walker then disrupted this faux-endeavor to gain the attention of the Watchdogs and infiltrate their ranks. While successful, the ruse also inspired the Watchdogs to capture Hoskins and hang him for his offenses. Ultimately, the new Captain America won the day, and the Watchdogs were taken into custody.⁵⁰ This storyline earned some strong response. Larry J. King of Vermont, a member of the National Federation for Decency and Moral Majority, was extremely displeased with the portrayal of conservatives in the pages of *Captain America* as radical and violent.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Mark Gruenwald and Paul Neary, "Super-Patriot Is Here;" Mark Gruenwald and Tom Morgan, "The Replacement," and "Basic Training," *Captain America #'s 323, 333, and 334* (New York: Marvel Comics, November, 1986; September and October, 1987).

⁵⁰ Mark Gruenwald and Tom Morgan, "Baptism of Fire," *Captain America #335* (New York: Marvel Comics, November, 1987).

⁵¹ Larry J. King, "American Graffiti," *Captain America #341* (NY: Marvel Comics, May, 1988).

Meanwhile, the fate of Steve Rogers remained uncertain. While discussing Rogers's recent resignation, Sam Wilson, the Falcon, compared Rogers's predicament to the injustices of the sixties, and suggested that he fight the establishment. Jack Monroe – the new Nomad and former '50s Bucky – compared the situation to McCarthyism, suggesting that Rogers expose the corruption of the Commission. Meanwhile, Steve Rogers disappeared into the northwest, where he confronted an eco-terrorist calling himself Brother Nature. After fighting, and talking, with Brother Nature, Rogers decided to become a new hero, "The Captain," and continue to fight injustice as before, but drawing the line at ever fighting the government. As a costume, Rogers chose a variation on a theme:

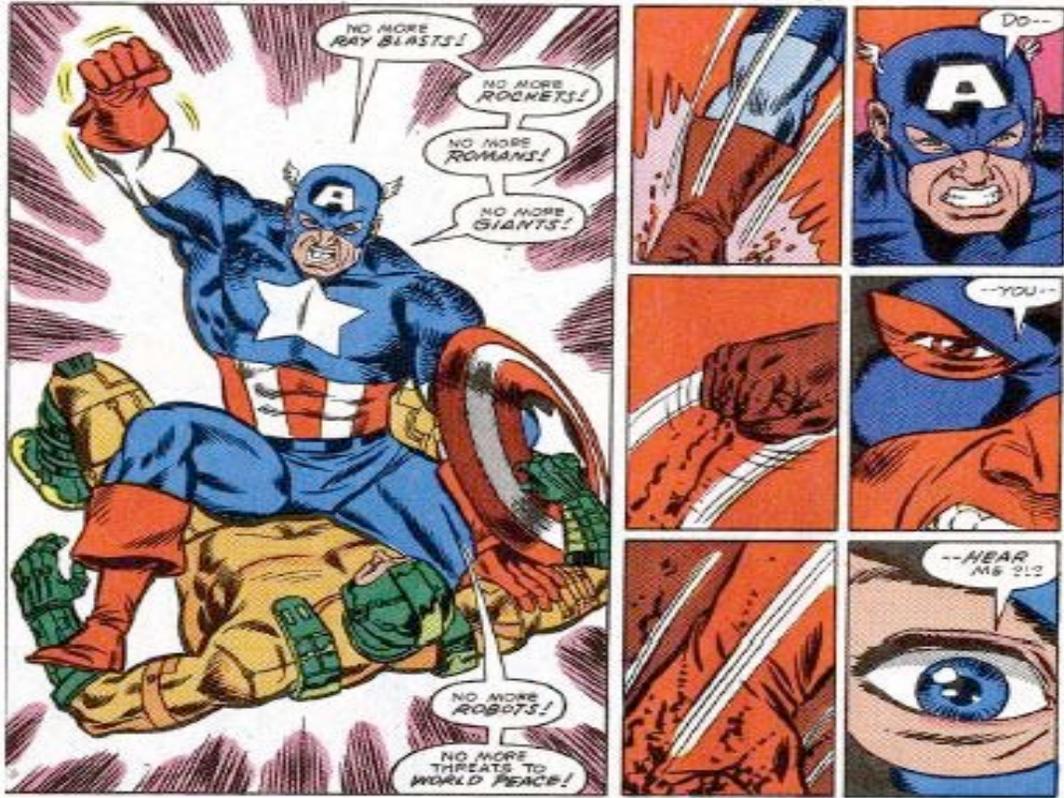


[Image 5-3: *Captain America* #337, Tom Morgan, Artist]

A star and stripes still evident, the design of the costume clearly identified this hero as being connected in some way to Captain America – even more so when he, too, began brandishing a shield. However, the black taking place of the blue suggested at least some separation from America, even suggesting on some level that this was some darker incarnation of the Sentinel of Liberty. Regardless of the similarities, few characters in the comic book who saw “The Captain” made the connection with Captain America, figuring him for some run-of-the-mill vigilante, and, as such, no longer having the support or sanction of local or federal law enforcement officials. The Captain gathered a team of old and new friends to assist him in his vigilante endeavors. The Falcon, Nomad, and Demolition Man (or D-Man, another former professional wrestler, physically enhanced, like John Walker, by a wrestling promoter called the Power Broker) spent most of the next year following The Captain on various adventures, eventually having their paths cross with the “official” Captain America.

In the meantime, the new Captain America and his partner were assigned by the Commission to find a man named Anthony Power, a multi-millionaire who, along with the former Secret Empire, recently attempted to start World War III. After facing numerous henchmen and robots, an enraged Captain America finally faced the newly enhanced and revived Power, beating him, literally, to death.⁵²

⁵² Mark Gruenwald and Kieron Dwyer, “Power Struggle,” *Captain America* #338 (New York: Marvel Comics, February, 1988).



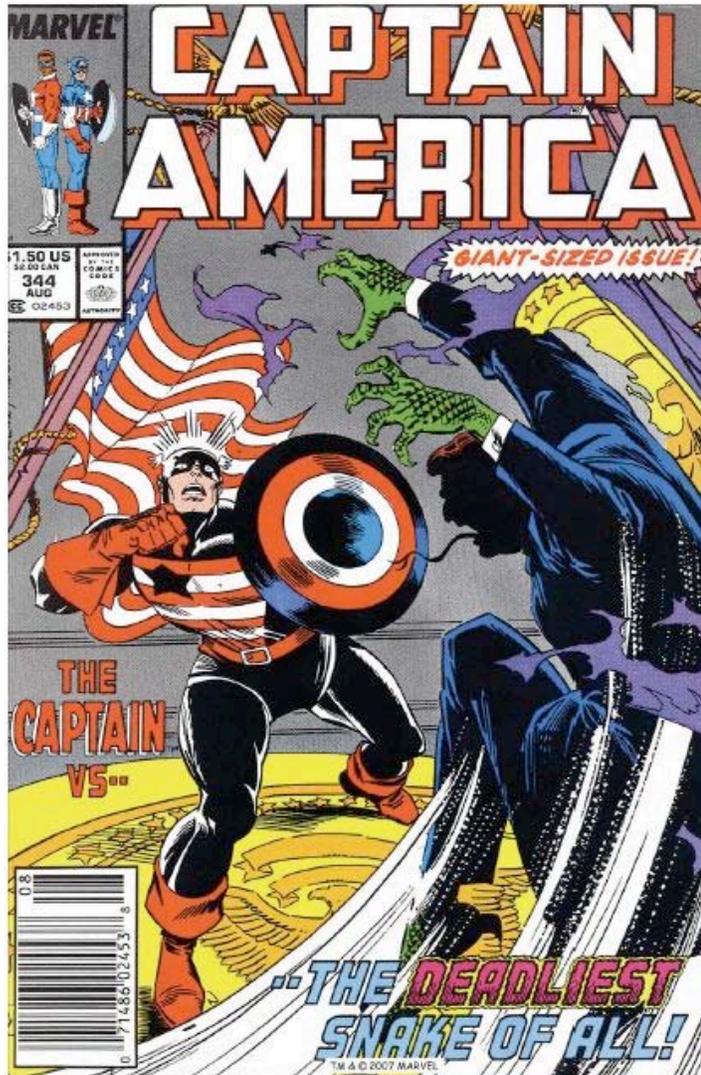
[Image 5-4: *Captain America* #338, Kieron Dwyer, Artist]

The image was powerful: Captain America, the Sentinel of Liberty, the Star-Spangled Avenger, literally beating a man to death, his face at one point red with rage. This was a clear sign to readers that this was no longer their parents' Captain America. Though the character later expressed remorse for the killing, he also crossed a line from which there was no return. This issue of *Captain America* hit stands only a few months after the acquittal of Bernard Goetz, the infamous "Subway Vigilante," who shot four men who were trying to mug him in December of 1984. Hailed as a hero in many circles, Goetz represented a people who felt themselves victimized by criminals, influenced by the anti-heroes of popular culture, and who took justice into their own hands. Though officially acting for the government, the new Captain America made the decision to be judge, jury, and executioner in the case of Anthony Power.

Perhaps the most blatantly politically themed storyline of the decade included President Reagan himself. The villainess Viper – a new moniker for the '70s' Madame Hydra – as new leader of the Serpent Society, a group of snake-themed minor villains working together, poisoned the Washington, D.C., water supply with a concoction that would turn the populace into snake-like creatures. While “Captain America” (John Walker) continued to work authorized missions for the government, the Viper’s plan was discovered and investigated by “The Captain” (Steve Rogers). In issue #343 (cover-dated July, 1988), the plot was uncovered and the closing panel focused on the White House, hinting that someone within had already been infected.⁵³

The cover of the next month’s issue showed a snake-like creature fighting The Captain. This creature, though his face was hidden, was surrounded by trappings suggesting the presidency and the creature itself had President Reagan’s trademark hairdo. The caption read: “The Captain vs... The Deadliest Snake of All!”

⁵³ Mark Gruenwald and Kieron Dwyer, “Slippery People,” *Captain America #343* (New York: Marvel Comics, July, 1988).



[Image 5-5: *Captain America* #344, Kieron Dwyer, Artist]

There are two interpretations on the message here to Marvel readers. On the one hand, despite Reagan's having been popularly elected by wide margins twice, there were those – especially, it seems at Marvel Comics – who viewed the president as dangerous. On the other hand, Reagan here has been corrupted by outside forces, as, many argued at the time and since, the president had been during the Iran-Contra Affair.⁵⁴ The imagery of

⁵⁴ The second argument was put forth by Jason Dittmer in a discussion with this author in December, 2010).

the snake immediately recalled the Serpent in the Garden of Eden, a liar and deceiver out to destroy mankind. By 1988, though still with very high approval numbers, President Reagan's administration had been tainted by his involvement in the Iran-Contra scandal. More significant, still, was the timing of the storyline. Hitting sales racks around May of 1988 during a presidential election year with a heated race for both parties' nominations, the anti-Reagan imagery was quite possibly targeted against the campaign of Reagan's Vice President, George H.W. Bush. One last point on this cover is that it supplied a second title, unlike the overwhelming majority of *Captain America* covers over the years. The actual title of the story was "Don't Tread On Me!" The "title" on the cover, therefore, was clearly meant as a commentary on the imagery from the cover alone, providing even further evidence of a politically motivated agenda.

Bradford Wright argues that, in the 1980s, superheroes, "[o]nce confident symbols of hope... now spoke to the paranoia and psychosis lurking behind the rosy veneer of Reagan's America."⁵⁵ While this statement was certainly true of Walker's Captain America, the original, traditional hero of World War II, Steve Rogers, actually represented a rejection of what Wright called "Reagan's America." The overall message of the "Two Captains" storyline appears to have been an overall rejection of such "anti-heroes" as had become popular in the preceding ten years, with Reagan apparently becoming the very symbol of what has come to be known as "cowboy diplomacy." Though tempered by the social tolerance and liberal idealism of the sixties and seventies, the heroic ideals of World War II were still relevant in the technologically advanced and

⁵⁵ Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 266.

internationally tense 1980s. This was most evident in the anti-Reaganesque snake-storyline.

The targeting of the president continued throughout the pages of the story. The opening panels showed President Reagan, already becoming a snake, but so thirsty that he consumed more and more of the tainted water. As the Viper shot up D.C., with most of its population now snake-creatures, she screamed, “America is weak and decadent – its people are materialistic automatons – its leaders shameless charlatans and capitalist tools – its institutions oppressive and obsolete – and here at the so-called White House, we find American degradation at its most venal!”⁵⁶ Here, as with more infamous villains like the Red Skull, the motivation of the villain was not personal gain, or even global domination, but rather the downfall of the American system. Indeed, Viper’s criticisms of America and Americans as being decadent and materialistic rang true in the late-1980s. The resurgent economy after 1983, along with technological breakthroughs in movies, music and television promoted the consumer economy as never before. The Viper preferred anarchy to a Reagan America.

Inside the White House, Viper found the snake-altered Nancy Reagan. At first raising her pistol to kill the First Lady, Viper pulled back, telling the creature, “You are not worth the bullets.” Nancy Reagan was never as popular as her husband among either the American people or within the Washington Beltway. This general disdain was captured in Viper’s comment. Viper eventually made her way to the presidential bedroom, where she found a transformed Reagan, calling for his “mommy.” Before she could kill the president, however, The Captain (Steve Rogers) showed up to defend him.

⁵⁶ Mark Gruenwald and Kieron Dwyer, “Don’t Tread on Me!,” *Captain America* #344 (New York: Marvel Comics, August, 1988).

As Viper escaped, Rogers was forced to battle the snake-President instead, appealing to his patriotism and sense of duty to “the people who’ve elected you twice,” to overcome the powerful drug, and ultimately succeeding.⁵⁷

In his study of American culture’s Cold War consensus, Matthew Costello observes: “Reagan attempted to rebuild an American consensus [like that of the more conservative 1950s] using the rhetoric of progress, freedom, and individualism.”⁵⁸ What Reagan – and many on the right – failed to understand was that after the social upheavals of the 1960s and ’70s, those terms had come to represent entirely different ideals, liberal ideals. Societal consensus had changed. Captain America, having changed over that same period, continued to reflect the new American consensus: that of equality and shared opportunities for achievement. Costello argues that the “liberal consensus was dead” by the mid-80s.⁵⁹ The pages of *Captain America*, however, would indicate just the opposite: American liberal idealism was even stronger in the pages of Cap in the 1980s than at any time before.

In the “Snake-Reagan” storyline, for example, by creating a snake-like society, the villain attempted to promote just the opposite of what had been accomplished since the 1960s: social regression, slavery, and mass-consciousness. Of course, as Costello pointed out, Reagan’s idea of progress actually represented regression to the status quo of 1950s America.⁶⁰ The snake storyline also represented the perceived nightmare of Reagan’s ultimate success, a smiling demon near the close of his planned agenda. The image that follows certainly added to that conclusion. True villainy, according to the

⁵⁷ Ibid.

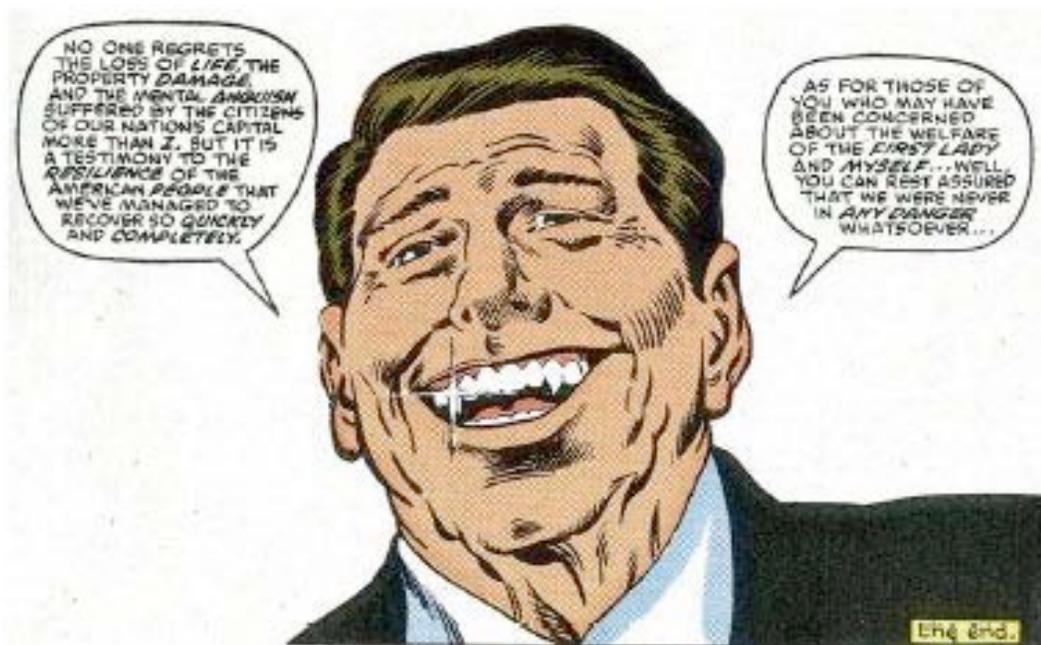
⁵⁸ Matthew Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis: Comic Books and the Unmasking of America* (New York: Continuum Books, 2009), 157.

⁵⁹ Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis*, 161.

⁶⁰ Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis*, 158.

writer and artist, were everywhere. No one could be trusted, neither cultural icons nor political institutions.

In an unexpected but telling twist, while reassuring the American people that all was well, in the final panel, a close-up of the President's smile showed fangs, suggesting to readers that Reagan had been a snake all along, and that it was perhaps this – and not his sense of patriotic duty – that saved him from the snake-inducing drug.



[Image 5-6: *Captain America* #344, Kieron Dwyer, Artist]

Again, whether representing a snake, vampire, or other creature, the imagery of the President possessed a strongly negative message to the reader: President Reagan could not and should not be trusted. Interestingly, there were no other overtly political messages in *Captain America* that, or any other election year. If not a message against any possible incoming president, it was without question a commentary on the outgoing one. However, no letters during this period showed any discontent with President

Reagan. On the contrary, letters were strongly patriotic with a much more conservative tint than during any previous period. Given that President Reagan left office with one of the highest approval ratings of any outgoing president in American history, it becomes clear that this storyline and imagery were meant to *influence* readers rather than simply *reflect* their ideology.

While most portrayals of Reagan in the pages of *Captain America* were not flattering, not all comic books in the '80s presented President Reagan in such a light. In *The Incredible Hulk* #279, Reagan pardons the man/beast The Hulk for any crimes he has committed after the Green Goliath protected the White House from an alien invasion. A letter from First Lady Nancy Reagan appeared in three 1983 issues of DC Comics's *New Teen Titans*. The shape-shifting hero Martian Manhunter assumed the appearance of Reagan to draw terrorist gunfire in the DC Comics 1986 *Legends* miniseries. Independent comic book artists Rich Buckler and Monroe Arnold produced a comedic miniseries called *Reagan's Raiders* in 1987, portraying the president as a cross between Captain America and the Sylvester Stalone movie character, Rambo.⁶¹ These examples, as well as those discussed from the pages of *Captain America* show that, even among younger readers, President Ronald Reagan was a powerful national – and nationalist – icon of the 1980s.

As the decade came to a close, the storyline of the “two” Captain Americas came to a conclusion... of sorts. When two disgruntled former BUCKies disclosed John Walker's identity to the general public, the Watchdogs saw an opportunity for revenge against the new Captain America. Kidnapping Walker's parents, the Watchdogs

⁶¹ “Ronald Reagan and Comic Superheroes in the 1980s,” http://superherouniverse.com/articles/Ronald_Reagan.htm (October 21, 2007).

demanded that Captain America (Walker) surrender to them. At the same time, the Commission required that The Captain (Rogers) surrender for his vigilante activities. Here the dichotomy between the two Captains became most apparent. While the “official” Captain America – Walker – repeatedly acted “above the law,” even killing when he felt it appropriate, the “renegade” Captain – Rogers – continued to respect law and order and law enforcement officials, refusing to violate any law (other than battling super villains in an unofficial capacity).

When both men surrendered to their respective enemies, Rogers was incarcerated, without trial, for an undisclosed period of time (decades before such incarcerations would become news in the so-called “War on Terror”). Walker, meanwhile, fought his captors, starting a gunfight in the process. When Walker’s parents were killed in the melee, Walker went on a killing frenzy, executing or severely injuring all of the Watchdogs. He then went on to hunt down the two former colleagues who disclosed his identity, thus causing his parents’ death. Though not killing the men, he did critically injure them, once more going beyond the line that the original Captain America saw as sacred.

Due to his increased tendency toward unwarranted executions, the Commission decided to fire Walker, and search for another Captain America. Soon after exposing that the Commission, in fact, had been working outside the confines of presidential oversight (a supposition also applied to the Iran-Contra affair), it was revealed that the true power behind the Commission was the Red Skull. The World War II villain died an old man in a 1984 storyline, but now returned, his consciousness having been “downloaded” into a younger body, cloned from the DNA of Steve Rogers. Admiring his new appearance, the Skull commented, “I have become an American dreamer. I now embrace the American

dream for what it is – the realization of one’s personal ambitions by whatever means necessary.”⁶² This was certainly the message that had been portrayed throughout popular culture during the 1980s. Characters like J.R. Ewing and Alexis Carrington-Colby-Dexter drew millions of television viewers every week with their endless machinations to achieve control, wealth, and power.

In the aftermath of the Skull’s revelations that he had been the mastermind behind all of the villains engaged by both Captain Americas since the early-’80s, culminating in a battle with Walker that left the Skull severely injured, Rogers was reinstated by the government as the official Captain America, allowed once more to work in whatever capacity he chose to. At the official ceremony giving the identity back to Rogers, Walker was shot and presumably killed by an unknown assassin.⁶³ Hitting the public just before the inauguration of President George H.W. Bush, this storyline appeared to insinuate hope for a new beginning for America. The dark and uncertain days of the Reagan era were gone, and the original Captain America was once more representing the American dream. Walker would return, however, as a covert operative called the US-Agent, with a new identity, Jack Daniel (another alcohol reference), and wearing Steve Rogers’s recent “Captain” costume.⁶⁴ For the remainder of the year, both Captain America and the US-Agent would have monthly adventures more consistent with traditional super-hero-versus-villain-of-the-month stories than the more politically-commentative stories of Cap, with both men still representing radically different ideas of “hero.”

⁶² Mark Gruenwald and Kieron Dwyer, “Seeing Red,” *Captain America* #350 (New York: Marvel Comics, February, 1989).

⁶³ Mark Gruenwald and Kieron Dwyer, “Changing of the Guard,” *Captain America* #351 (New York: Marvel Comics, March, 1989).

⁶⁴ Mark Gruenwald and Kieron Dwyer, “Reawakening,” *Captain America* #354 (New York: Marvel Comics, June, 1989).

In his study of super hero comic books in the 1980s, Mike Dubose argues that Steve Rogers's experience as "The Captain" taught him that "his status as a hero is reliant on his position on authority, and that authority plays a defining role in the life of the average citizen."⁶⁵ While this rang true of Steve Rogers, it does not apply to other super heroes. Other major – and frankly more popular – heroes such as Batman and Spider-Man, whose actions represent more the private vigilante, were just as widely recognized for their heroism within their respective "realities," and even among comic book fans themselves. What Rogers's conclusion regarding respect for authority truly showed was the character of Rogers himself. A product of the Depression and World War II America, Rogers – despite having experienced America during Vietnam, Watergate, and the various Iran-based crises – remained idealistic toward the American system. Fully aware that the system was from time to time corrupt and produced "wrong" choices, the "real" Captain America continued to believe in America, including her flawed political system. Throughout his decades-long run, Captain America continuously saw and forgave the flaws in individual Americans. His convictions while working outside the law as The Captain showed that he had the same forgiving nature toward the government, understanding that it was an institution made up of flawed individuals.

In one of the last issues of the decade, all images of the Smith Building, headquarters of the new Red Skull and his corporate empire, revealed the reflection of the Capitol Building along the Smith Building's glassy exterior.

⁶⁵ Mike S. Dubose, "Holding Out for a Hero: Reaganism, Comic Book Vigilantes, and Captain America," *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 40, No. 6 (2007), 933.



[Image 5-7: *Captain America* #367, Kieron Dwyer, Artist]

The message from this image requires little explanation. What Americans viewed as the seat of power in the country, the headquarters of the government, was nothing more than a façade, reflecting the interests, not of the American people, but of large corporations. The message is that that corporate influence was, at its core, evil. All of the hope and idealism suggested by the return of the “real” Captain America was, just a few months later, already gone.

Although Costello concludes that Reagan was ultimately unsuccessful in returning American culture to the consensus of the '50s, he also argues that the "liberal consensus [of the 1960s and early '70s] was long dead."⁶⁶ However, the pages of *Captain America* did not suggest this at all. Throughout the decade, *Captain America* continued to reflect the liberal consensus that he had helped to establish in comic books in the late-1960s. The work of Roger Stern, J.M. DeMatteis, and Mark Gruenwald throughout the Reagan era showed that a patriotic hero, loyal to his centrist-though-liberal-leaning beliefs, could continue to inspire American readers and comic book fans.

Jason Dittmer has posited that monthly comic books like *Captain America* were bound by the "tyranny of the serial," which never allowed for a real conclusion or happy ending as the comic book must continue selling from month to month.⁶⁷ While true of *Captain America*, which never had a definitive "end" like the story of the limited series *Watchmen*, this is due as much to the social relevance of the work as to the economic need for the continuing serial. As shown earlier in the writings of Roger Stern concerning *Captain America*, a certain degree of believability had to coexist with the wildly outrageous improbability of the idea of a real *Captain America*. Part of that believability, part of that comic book "reality," is that the life of the super-hero, like that of the reader, continues. While some "stories" in a person's real life may come to some manner of conclusion, life goes on. The hero's life goes on. Even *Captain America's* unusually extended life goes on.

Dittmer adds that, "*Captain America* comics... provide an anthropomorphic embodiment of the American nation through which readers can fantasize about

⁶⁶ Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis*, 161.

⁶⁷ Jason Dittmer, "The Tyranny of the Serial: Popular Geopolitics, the Nation, and Comic Book Discourse," *Antipode* (2007), 255.

embodying the American nation themselves.”⁶⁸ The letters to Cap support this theory. Many of the readers of *Captain America* – at the very least those whose letters were printed in the monthly columns – expressed a connection to the ideals of Captain America, whether they interpreted those ideals as conservative, liberal, or centrist. American patriots, from all points in the political spectrum, could find some form of role model in the pages of *Captain America* in the 1980s.

Throughout the decade, *Captain America* continued to spend an extraordinary amount of time dealing with real world issues. While the traditionally-defined period of comic book “relevance” was long over, the writers and artists of *Captain America* continued to pose questions about patriotism and nationalism. The issues touched upon by the writers and artists of the ’80s also went beyond such political questions. From the country’s inception, racial minorities, women, and homosexuals were collectively, traditionally given “other” status in American society and, for the most part, in American popular culture as well, uniting the “other” as a singular victimized group. Just as it had in the late-’60s and throughout most of the ’70s, *Captain America* continued to address issues regarding the pluralistic nature of America during one of the most conservative socio-political eras in American history.

The 1970s had seen the widespread assimilation of African-Americans into popular culture in television, movies, literature, sports, and, yes, comic books. The conservative “revolution” of 1980 brought that development to an almost immediate halt. With the exception of popular sports, African-Americans – and, for that matter, all people of color – were relegated once more to a background role in popular culture. In comic

⁶⁸ Dittmer, “The Tyranny of the Serial,” 257.

books, characters like Blade and Black Panther were also all but gone. The only significant presence of people of color in comic books was in the pages of Marvel's *The Uncanny X-Men* – which consistently dealt with issues regarding social “others” – and *Captain America*. Though the main African-American character, The Falcon – who shared the title throughout most of the '70s – was still present in the pages of *Cap*, it was in an increasingly limited role. However, issues of race relations and social pluralism remained. At the dawn of the decade, under the authorship of Roger McKenzie, Steve Rogers lived in an apartment building whose occupants lived like an extended family. Among his fellow tenants were an older Irish fireman, an elderly Jewish woman, and a young African-American man.

In an early storyline, the elderly Mrs. Applebaum – a survivor of the Nazi concentration camps in World War II – bumped into a former Nazi doctor under whom she had been tortured during the war. Though the now-elderly doctor was repentant of his past crimes, he was gunned down by the daughter of a Nazi hunter. In response, Captain America opined, “[Our quest for justice] will never be over. Not until we learn to temper justice with mercy.”⁶⁹ This was an extremely liberal stance regarding the former Nazi at a time when America was becoming increasingly vengeful. Not only was the Reagan campaign taking a strong stance on crime, but, at the same time, fifty-two Americans were being held hostage by a radical Islamic regime, and the American people were angry and demanding justice.

The following year, J.M. DeMatteis began his multi-year run on *Captain America*. In his first issue, Steve Rogers and Sam Wilson – not Captain America and the

⁶⁹ Roger McKenzie, Carmine Infantino and Joe Rubinstein, “... The Calypso Connection!” *Captain America* #245 (New York: Marvel Comics, May, 1980).

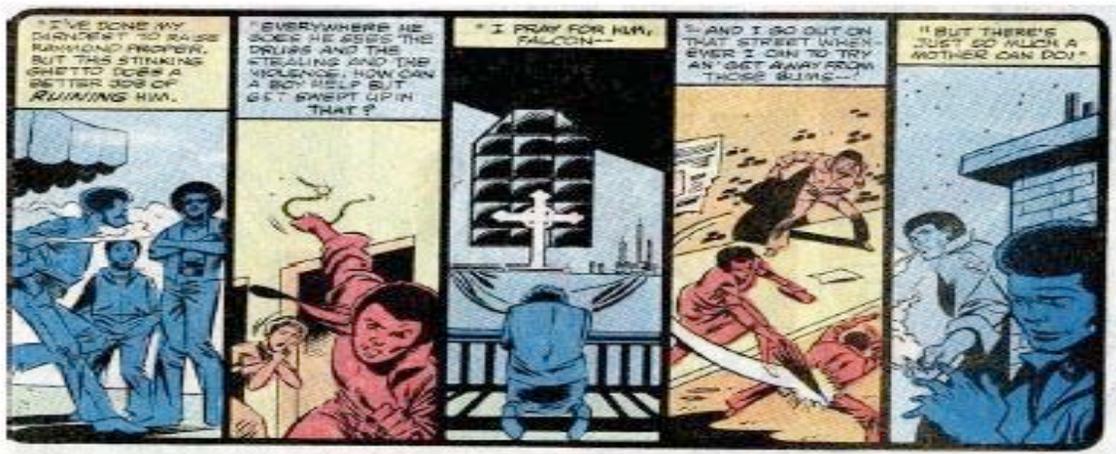
Falcon – attempted to break up a mugging in progress. During the ensuing melee, one of the muggers referred to Sam as “uppity.” This was – and to a large degree remains – a powerful word. Throughout the years of slavery and the Jim Crow South, the term was used – usually in conjunction with the even more infamous “n” word – to describe an African-American who dared to resist being kept in his or her “place.” DeMatteis’s use of the word here, in mid-1981, showed that, though society had come a long way since the 1950s, there were still whites in society who refused to acknowledge the equality of African-Americans, continuing instead to see them in a subservient role.

Another example of this continuing concern for the issue of race appears in the storyline “The Last Movie!” In yet another attempt to destroy America, the Red Skull bought and controlled a movie studio that was planning to do a movie on Captain America, to be shown on television. It was the Skull’s plan to use the film to hypnotize the American public into doing his will, taking away their most basic freedom, that of individual thought. His conviction that this would work was based on his belief that ’70s television mini-series like *Roots* (a story of an African-American family over generations of slavery) and *Holocaust* (a story of the Nazi death camps) had spread “lies” that the American people had been all too willing to accept.⁷⁰ Even with a popularly elected conservative administration, DeMatteis pointed out the dangers of radical conservatism that still existed in American society.

In 1982, a midterm election year, Sam Wilson made the decision to run for Congress. In the last significant Falcon story in the pages of *Captain America*, the Falcon rescued a young black teenager from older gang-members. Only after doing so

⁷⁰ J.M. DeMatteis and Mike Zeck, “The Last Movie!” *Captain America* #263 (New York: Marvel Comics, November, 1981).

did he learn that the boy was responsible for shooting Falcon's own brother-in-law. The Falcon was torn between anger and a thirst for vengeance for his relative and his understanding of the boy and where the boy was coming from. Despite the socio-political advances African-Americans had made since the 1950s, the poverty of the inner cities had not significantly changed, and street crime and illegal drug trafficking were increasing in the inner-city black community. In a conversation with the boy's mother, Falcon learned of the boy's situation:



[Image 5-8: *Captain America* #272, Mike Zeck, Artist]

In the mother's internalization/visualization of her conversation, images of her son socializing with street gangs and committing crimes merged with those of herself praying for her son and even physically trying to protect him from them, with the ultimate hope that he would walk away from that lifestyle. However, she concludes that, "there's just so much a mother can do!"⁷¹

This storyline was important in 1982, when conservatives were arguing that government had no role in raising children, that parents knew what was best. This story, however, showed that in the inner city, more was needed. Parents were little match for

⁷¹ J.M. DeMatteis and Mike Zeck, "Mean Streets," *Captain America* #272 (New York: Marvel Comics, August, 1982).

the allure of crime and easy money. This mother's plea was what convinced Falcon – as Sam Wilson – to run for Congress. If the conservative agenda was victorious, money for social programs would slowly evaporate to the point that more mothers like this one would see more of their sons – and daughters – fall to the draw and victimization of crime. President Reagan's philosophy of government was that it had no place in the socio-economic arena. He opposed busing in order to more fully integrate public schools, as well as affirmative-action and welfare programs.⁷²

By 1984, the U.S. population consisted of approximately 27 million African-Americans, making up approximately 14% of the overall population. Of that number, approximately 35% lived below the poverty line, compared to about 12% of white Americans living below the same line (with 15% of African-Americans unemployed compared to only around 6% of whites).⁷³ In 1988, only 12.7% of African-Americans were college graduates (half the number of whites).⁷⁴ These numbers are consistent with the plight suggested in the DeMatteis storyline, and in the portrayal of Harlem in *Captain America* since the 1970s. Far from stereotyping African-Americans, the story brought to the fore a painful reality. Poverty breeds crime, and abject poverty breeds the very worst of crime. In the 1960s, President Johnson's Great Society programs targeted poverty as the enemy. By 1980, the "blame" for the economic status of residents of the inner city, the "undeserving poor," had shifted from the economy to the poor themselves.⁷⁵ This

⁷² Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1992, (Revised Edition)* (New York: Noonday Press / Hill and Wang, 1993), 215.

⁷³ *Documentary History of the Modern Civil Rights Movement*, Peter B. Levy, ed. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 242-43, 249, 251.

⁷⁴ Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality*, 223.

⁷⁵ Christopher Jencks, *Rethinking Social Policy: Race, Poverty, and the Underclass* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992), 120.

popular perception of the inner city – particularly of inner-city blacks – was challenged in the storyline of the Falcon’s alter-ego, Sam Wilson.

In the pages of *Cap*, no sooner had Sam’s campaign begun than the press began to ask about his former life as the street criminal, “Snap” Wilson. The more the press pushed the issue, the more the submerged personality of Snap returned to the surface. By the end of 1982, Falcon fully reverted to Snap. Only the guidance of the local minister, Reverend Garcia, brought Sam back to his heroic self.⁷⁶ By that time, however, Wilson’s run for Congress was over. The story showed that the retrenchment in the 1980s of support for such programs as affirmative action made it all the more difficult for African-Americans to break the cycle of poverty and crime that was prevalent in American inner cities.

Socio-political regression on race issues affected more than simply the African-American community. Native-Americans were another persecuted racial minority group. In 1984 DeMatteis introduced a new character, Jesse Black Crow. A disabled Native-American by day, Jesse turned into the supernatural Black Crow by night. Black Crow decided that, for the centuries of crimes committed by Anglo-Americans against Native-Americans, Captain America – the very symbol of Anglo culture and nationalism – must die. Introducing himself to Captain America and Nomad, Black Crow said, “I am the transgressions of the past seeking redemption. I am your brother. I am your death.” Nomad – in typical 1950s semi-racist lingo – called Black Crow “Injun Joe.” Black Crow believed that the death of Captain America by his hand would usher in a new era of

⁷⁶ J.M. DeMatteis and Mike Zeck, “Turning Point!” and “In Thy Image,” *Captain America #’s 276 – 277* (New York: Marvel Comics, December, 1982, and January, 1983).

peace and justice for his people.⁷⁷ The image below showed the Native warrior preparing for battle:



[Image 5-9: *Captain America* #292, Paul Neary, Artist]

Here the warrior was shown in war paint, symbolizing his anger and readiness for battle. No longer lame, he was powerful, ceremoniously dancing and singing to call forth the strength of his ancestors, whose lives had been lost at the hand of the white man. Black Crow fought Cap to a stand-still, so that Captain America realized he could not win against such powerful and righteous anger. Rather than continue fighting – and possibly sacrifice his life in the process – Captain America fell to his knees in supplication to his enemy. On seeing this, Black Crow raised Captain America to his feet and embraced him, announcing, “The Earth Spirit is pleased.” Immediately afterward, Black Crow disappeared. A reflective Captain America said, “Perhaps the seeds of [America’s] future have been sown tonight.”⁷⁸

⁷⁷ J.M. DeMatteis and Paul Neary, “An American Christmas!” *Captain America* #292 (New York: Marvel Comics, April, 1984).

⁷⁸ Ibid.

Black Crow represented a continuing consistency in the villains portrayed in *Captain America*. Scarecrow, Flag-Smasher, the Watchdogs, Viper, and now Black Crow all portrayed liberal concerns about the ills of 1980s American society. Political / corporate corruption, American imperialism, threatened moral values, inequality, and continued racial oppression were all issues of concern to many in the 1980s. That these issues were addressed by villains suggests that taking such stands against the status quo was likewise often portrayed as being villainous. With the popularity of Reagan and the increasing influence of the radical right, many liberals – and the storylines in *Captain America* during the '80s suggest that the writers were liberals – likely saw their views as being vilified by those in power.

In a study of American national identity through an analysis of Captain America's villains, Steinmetz points out, concerning Black Crow, that "The secret identity of a Native-American superhero as a debilitated and emasculated man may also suggest that these peoples were considered incapacitated in their current state"; Steinmetz speculates that the reason that this character appeared only briefly in the overall run of the comic – unlike women and African-Americans – was that Native-American men could not be so easily assimilated into a white male-dominated society.⁷⁹ It is also important, however, to note that the industry is first and foremost a business. Black characters emerged when black readers became an economically viable portion of the reading demographic. Had there been evidence – primarily through letters to the editor – that larger numbers of Native-Americans were reading *Captain America* and enjoying the character, Black Crow likely would have returned, possibly even in his own book.

⁷⁹ Christian Steinmetz, "A Genealogy of Absence & Evil: Tracing The Nation's Borders with *Captain America*" (Master's Thesis, Georgia State University, 2008), 187.

The image of the invalid becoming a hero (or anti-hero, or villain depending on your perspective) was telling in regard to the status of Native-Americans in the 1980s. Most telling, perhaps, was the fact that this invalid only became powerful when fully embracing the traditions of his ancestors. The message was clear: if Native-Americans wanted to gain the attention of their fellow-Americans, they must not assimilate themselves into Anglo-American culture. Their beliefs and culture must be accepted and respected by the citizens of the U.S. Captain America provided this acceptance and respect by bowing in defeat before Black Crow.

Racism was still extant in American society despite the gains of the Civil Rights Movement. In a 1987 storyline by Mark Gruenwald, the aforementioned BUCKies (Bold Urban Commandos) launched an attack on a university in Wisconsin, protesting the large number of foreign students, apparently from the Middle East. Dressed in Captain America masks, the commandos attacked foreign students, calling them “camel jockies,” working for “Khaddafy” (a reference to Libyan leader Moammar Qaddafi, a known funder of international terrorism). Before leaving the campus, the black BUCKy ignited a fire on the campus lawn, spelling out “FORRENNERS GO HOME.” When his spelling was brought into question by a fellow commando, his response was, “I used the AMERICAN spelling.”⁸⁰ What this story implied was that racism – and its sister nativism – went hand-in-hand with ignorance. The fact that one of the attackers was black held a dual message of the dangers of nationalism.

This storyline reflected the views of many that there had been a regression in race relations since 1980 – a view reflected in pop culture during this period. Though the

⁸⁰ Mark Gruenwald and Paul Neary, “Clashing Symbols,” *Captain America* #327 (New York: Marvel Comics, March, 1987).

emergence of rap music throughout the '80s brought African-Americans further to the forefront of the music industry, most other genres of pop culture were devoid of a significant African-American presence. Aside from the few films of Spike Lee in theaters and even fewer productions of Bill Cosby on television, African-Americans were all but missing from American popular culture. Even though the cable network BET (Black Entertainment Television) began during this period, it did not hold a place in popular culture similar to that of other cable networks like HBO, CNN, or MTV.

In the summer of 1987, in *Captain America*, as the Commission debated a replacement for Steve Rogers as Captain America, one member suggested Sam Wilson, the Falcon. Mr. Mathers – the sole black member of the Commission – immediately rejected the suggestion, stating that America was not yet ready for a black Captain America.⁸¹ This came about regardless of the fact that by that time, on television, Bill Cosby had the number one show, *The Cosby Show*, and was embraced by millions of Americans – of all races – as a father figure (though due in large part to his portrayal as an educated, upper-middle-class professional). Oprah Winfrey was becoming a significant force in daytime television (though cancellation of similar shows by stalwarts such as Phil Donahue left little in the way of competition). Yet, a black character in the pages of *Captain America* believed that America was not yet ready for a black Captain America.

In another ironic twist, once John Walker assumed the identity of Captain America, the Commission hired the “black BUCKy,” Lemar Hoskins – the same commando who took part in the racist attack on the university – to assume the identity of

⁸¹ Mark Gruenwald and Tom Morgan, “The Replacement,” *Captain America* #333 (New York: Marvel Comics, September, 1987).

Cap's "sidekick," Bucky.⁸² The original Bucky was a child (and "Bucky" his actual name). Calling the new sidekick by the same name infantilized the character, providing another, though subconscious, suggestion of his inferiority to the white hero. This fact was discussed during the duo's first adventure, where Cap and Bucky faced off against the Watchdogs. In order to get John Walker noticed by the Watchdogs as a potential new member, Walker and Hoskins staged a fight in Walker's Georgia small town home. Hoskins (Bucky) came to town as a pornographer, looking for local girls to exploit. The subterfuge succeeded and Walker was invited to join. However, the Watchdogs continued to pursue Hoskins, eventually capturing him and sentencing him to justice.⁸³ The image below showed how close America still was to its nightmarish past:



[Image 5-10: *Captain America* #335, Tom Morgan, Artist]

⁸² Mark Gruenwald and Tom Morgan, "Basic Training," *Captain America* #334 (New York: Marvel Comics, October, 1987).

⁸³ Mark Gruenwald and Tom Morgan, "Baptism of Fire," *Captain America* #335 (New York: Marvel Comics, November, 1987).

This image, of a bound black man, on his knees, face lowered in front of a group of white men holding a noose was a frightening reminder of America's recent history. This image, along with the child/sidekick identity given to Hoskins, and the Commission member's suggestion that America was not yet ready for a black Captain America, all provided the same message: that America remained a racist nation that kept racial minorities in a second-class status.

The storylines were controversial even at the time. Alan M. Dionne of Massachusetts criticized the writing team for creating another black sidekick; and Jeff Melton of North Carolina called John Walker – a Georgian – a typical southern stereotype (due to his strong patriotism and conservative beliefs).⁸⁴ Harold C. Holt, of Chicago, was an African-American reader who was offended by the emergence of a black Bucky, and that the character had portrayed a pornographer whose punishment was to be a lynching.⁸⁵ Gruenwald worked these complaints into the storyline itself. While Cap and Bucky assisted with a prison break, a black guard approached Bucky, giving the following opinion of Hoskins's dual identity:

[Bucky was] a young white kid who died forty years ago. You ask me, that's not a fitting name for a black man who's the same age as Cap, and has the same power as Cap [Hoskins had undergone the same physical augmentation as Walker while the two were professional wrestlers], and is bigger to boot! Not only that, in some parts of the country, "Buck" is an offensive term for a black man. You ask me, I think the government stuck you with that name to keep you in your place... Son, our people don't have that many super heroes we can call our own. That's why every one of you has to stand tall, be something we can all be proud of.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Alan M. Dionne and Jeff Melton, "American Graffiti," *Captain America* #339 (New York: Marvel Comics, March, 1988).

⁸⁵ Harold C. Holt, "American Graffiti," *Captain America* #341 (New York: Marvel Comics, May, 1988).

⁸⁶ Mark Gruenwald and Kieron Dwyer, "Break-In," *Captain America* #341 (Marvel Comics, May, 1988).

The authors of the comic then gave Hoskins a new, original identity. Keeping the same patriotic color motif, the Commission gave Hoskins the new identity of “Battle Star.” Bearing a copy of the original triangular shield that the original Cap carried in *Captain America #1* (1940), Hoskins’s new identity made him much more a “partner” to the new Cap rather than a sidekick, more in line with the role played by the Falcon in the 1970s. For the remainder of Walker’s term as Captain America, and for a few months afterward, Lemar Hoskins would fight alongside him as Battle Star as seen in the image below:



[Image 5-11: *Captain America #343*, Kieron Dwyer, Artist]

Here the heroes are in action, alongside each other, both equally protected by shields (though Battle Star’s shield was simply a metal shield, while Cap’s was indestructible). Both heroes were taking fire, and Battle Star was even given the “dominant” position in the picture. This team projected two equally powerful and relatively equally armed heroes doing battle against a common foe.

This issue of a male minority's manhood was a consistent one throughout the decade in the pages of *Captain America*. In the "man's world" of superhero comic books, men were men and even women, if too formidable, were "men" as well. Racial minorities certainly were present; and their issues given prominence in Captain America storylines. In the 1960s and '70s, women had also been portrayed in strong, independent roles. The 1980s saw a regression in that regard in many ways. Though still present, women were clearly no match for Captain America. Ironically, for the first time in popular comic books, a homosexual character was introduced in the pages of *Captain America*, playing a significant role for the better part of a year, right at the time that AIDS further stigmatized and demonized that part of the population. How would the ultimate symbol of the American Dream treat a homosexual character in the Age of Reagan?

According to John Ehrman's study of the 1980s, "Americans in general were less willing to judge one another than they had been a generation earlier – the emphasis on individual rights that had developed during the 1960s and 1970s and loosening of moral standards had given rise to greater individualism and a 'live and let live' ethos."⁸⁷ The portrayal of African-Americans and Native-Americans in the pages of *Captain America* seemed to exhibit this to a degree. However, one minority group in America did not enjoy such toleration, and, in fact, faced more of a "live and let die" policy: homosexuals. Due to the emergence of the AIDS virus in the late-'70s, homosexuals – homosexual men in particular – were quickly demonized in American society. Christian Coalition founder

⁸⁷ Ehrman, *The Eighties*, 175.

Jerry Falwell went as far as to call AIDS a punishment from God on the decadent sinful lifestyle of this group of Americans.

In *Captain America* #272 (cover-dated August, 1982), readers were introduced to the character Arnie Roth, a childhood friend of Steve Rogers who knew of his secret identity. Not having seen Steve since their service together in World War II, Arnie returned to Steve's life due to the machinations of one of Cap's arch-enemies, Baron Zemo. Zemo had kidnapped Arnie's "roommate," Michael, holding him hostage to force Arnie to lure Captain America into a trap. Captain America, however, won the day, and rescued Michael, taking him back to SHIELD headquarters for medical treatment. In the SHIELD hospital, Arnie was shown sitting on Michael's bed – very close to him – with a hand gently on his shoulder. When Cap came in to check on them, he said, "Hope I'm not interrupting anything."⁸⁸ Two issues later, when Zemo, Arnim Zola, and the mutated rat-like villain Vermin recaptured Michael – who died in the ensuing fight – Arnie screamed out, "My Michael's dead!"⁸⁹ These were the first suggestions that Arnie and Michael were romantically involved.

At no time did DeMatteis ever use the words "homosexual" or "gay" to describe these characters. This was due to a combination of the reservations of Cap Editor Jim Shooter and the guidelines of the Comics Code, which forbade any portrayal of homosexuality.⁹⁰ Throughout the Arnie Roth storylines, there was no evidence in the published letters to the editors that any of the readers had caught on to this subtle suggestion of Cap having a homosexual friend. What was clear was that Captain

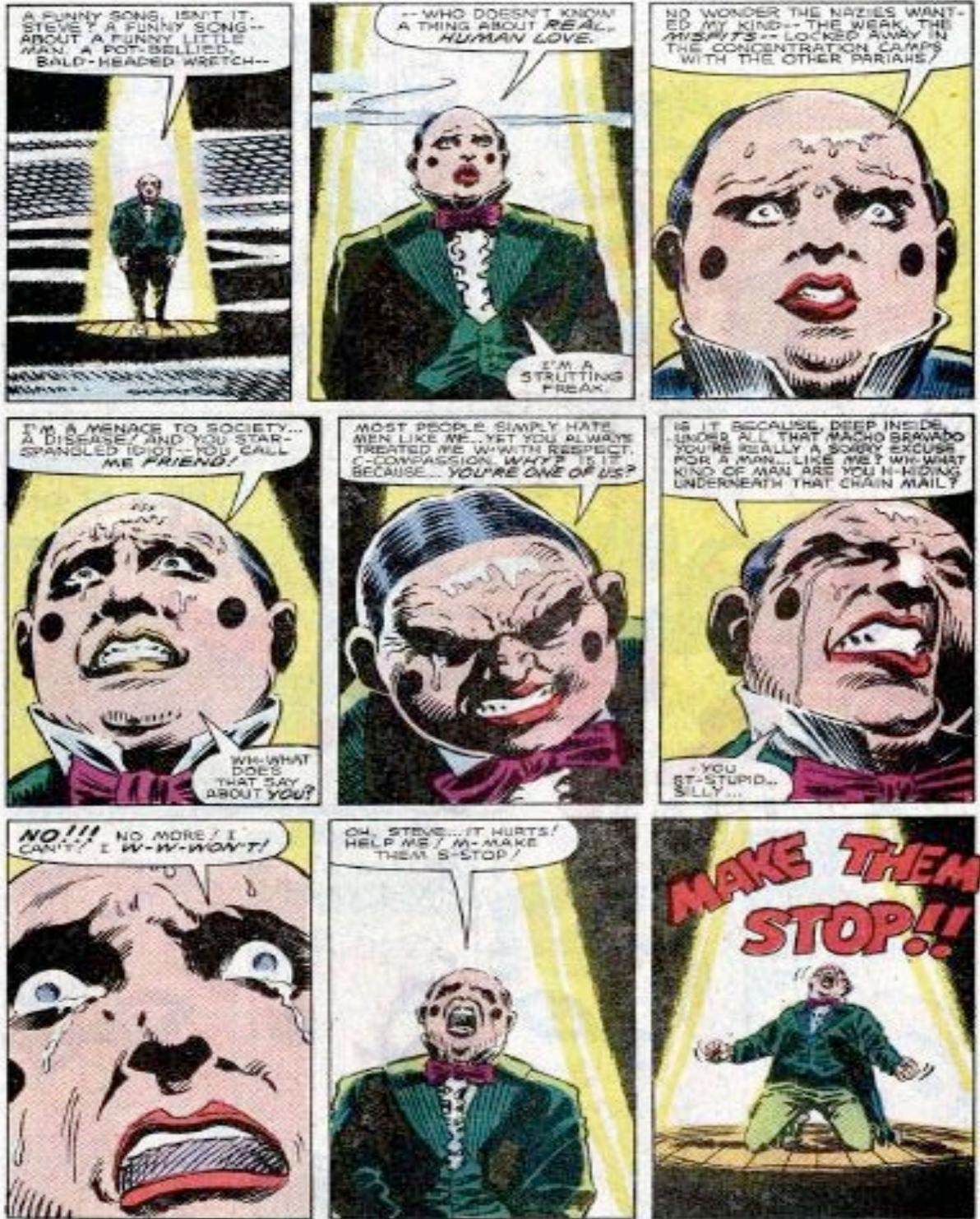
⁸⁸ J.M. DeMatteis and Mike Zeck, "Yesterday's Shadows!," *Captain America* #275 (New York: Marvel Comics, November, 1982).

⁸⁹ J.M. DeMatteis and Mike Zeck, "In Thy Image," *Captain America* #277 (New York: Marvel Comics, January, 1983).

⁹⁰ Richard Hall, Interview with J.M. DeMatteis, (August 18, 2008).

America did appear to understand the nature of this relationship and was completely comfortable with it and with Arnie.

More than a year later, in an elaborate plan to destroy Captain America, the Red Skull captured Cap's friends – Arnie, Falcon, and Cap's Jewish girlfriend, Bernie Rosenthol – all of whom would naturally be hated by the Nazi villain. Using mind-control devices, Red Skull forced Arnie to perform in a nightmare version of a 1930s German nightclub. Presented as “That Lovable Pansy,” Arnie was forced to sing a song that once and for all exposed him to the readers as a homosexual:



[Image 5-12: *Captain America* #296, Paul Neary, Artist]

He opened his song with the line, “My taste is not quite right...”⁹¹ After the Skull’s death, and the escape of Cap’s friends, Captain America confirmed to his friends – and the readers – that Arnie was a homosexual, though after the above performance, there would have been little doubt left in the minds of readers. Cap defended Arnie by stating, “[Those who hate homosexuals] can’t corrupt your love for Michael with their lies any more than they can corrupt my love for Bernie!... They’re the disease!”⁹² Well into 1985, however, there was still no sign among the printed letters that readers had thought anything about the Arnie storylines. DeMatteis’s timing could not have been more controversial. From 1982 to 1984, AIDS gained more and more of the spotlight in the mass media. Homosexuals and their “gay cancer” were vilified by a growing number of Americans.

Conservative pundits were unclear on how best to address the issue. Some called for social ostracizing of homosexuals due to their dangerous behavior. The HIV/AIDS virus created the perception that homosexuals were a threat to society. Others called for toleration of homosexuals, but on the condition that they cease their overt rallying for civil rights and keep their behavior quiet and to themselves (in essence, the civilian equivalent of “don’t ask, don’t tell”).⁹³ Steinmetz points out, “Homosexuals weren’t necessarily outside of the nation... [h]owever, their absence implies that neither were they tolerable enough to remain visible, missing from any inside/outside dialectic and kept invisible to the narrative.”⁹⁴ Steinmetz’s suggestion here was that homosexuals could not be made to conform to majority-ruling white/heterosexual/male society as

⁹¹ J.M. DeMatteis and Paul Neary, “Things Fall Apart!” *Captain America* #296 (New York: Marvel Comics, August, 1984).

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ehrman, *The Eighties*, 175.

⁹⁴ Christian Steinmetz, “A Genealogy of Absence and Evil,” 190.

easily as previously-ostracized “others,” blacks and women. This may explain why Arnie – or any other potential homosexual characters – soon disappeared from Captain America’s universe. However, what is important in the Arnie Roth storylines was not his eventual disappearance from *Captain America*, but rather the fact that he was included at all. Particularly at the height of the AIDS scare, DeMatteis’s inclusion of a gay character, openly though subtly expressing his love of his gay partner and finally confessing his sexual identity to the readers represented a powerful liberal holdover from the Englehart days of the 1970s. In these pages, the very symbol of America, the Star-Spangled Avenger, openly accepted his friend’s lifestyle, never so much as suggesting that Arnie’s way was in any way “deviant.” In fact, from the above quote comparing Arnie’s love to that of Cap’s own, Captain America expressed a complete acceptance of equality, with no suggestion that Arnie – or any homosexuals – should suffer from “other” status in society.

Aside from being openly homosexual, Arnie was also short, overweight, and balding. He was in every way the antithesis of the idea of manliness traditionally promoted by super hero comic books; and yet, he proved his strength against one of the Marvel Universe’s most ominous villains. Bryce Traister observes that so long as society continues to delineate concepts of “masculinity,” truly inclusive narratives – including history – will continue to be elusive.⁹⁵ The Arnie Roth storyline, under the pen of J.M. DeMatteis, took a large leap in that direction. Not only was a gay character introduced during one of the most intense “gay-bashing” periods of American history, but that character was shown to be a true “man” in regards to his bravery against an evil villain

⁹⁵ Bryce Traister, “Academic Viagra: The Rise of American Masculine Studies,” *American Quarterly*, Volume 52, Number 2 (2000), 282.

and his loyalty to his friend, Steve Rogers. As mentioned in Chapter Three, Andrew Kimbrell suggests that in the wake of the women's movement of the 1960s, men were left "confused" about gender roles.⁹⁶ With homosexuals coming more and more "out of the closet" during the 1970s and early '80s, this confusion was compounded. What is a man? Was he the "strong" member of a partnership? Was he a pillar of strength to his friends and family in difficult times? These have been traditional roles associated with masculinity, and they were roles played out by Arnie Roth throughout his presence in the pages of *Captain America*. Likewise, at no point did Captain America – or Steve Rogers – ever treat Arnie as being anything less than his own man, by any definition of the word.

David Leverenz argues that male authors "empower themselves as narrators... by transforming feelings of unmanly deviance into strategies of deviousness."⁹⁷ In essence, Leverenz believes that male authors – apparently to underscore their own masculinity – tend to vilify any male behavior traditionally viewed as "deviant," such as homosexuality. DeMatteis, however, did not do this. When first introduced, Arnie did lure Cap into a trap because his boyfriend, Michael, had been abducted (an act of "unmanly" cowardice); but at the last minute, he warned Cap of the impending trap.⁹⁸ In this instance, and all that followed, the "deviant" character was never devious or deceptive in any way, thus challenging Leverenz's theory. Traister raises a relevant question about American masculinity:

[W]hile a history of "men as men" demystifies the essentialization of masculinity as all things powerful, stabile [sic], and erect, it cannot change the fact that

⁹⁶ Andrew Kimbrell, *The Masculine Mystique: The Politics of Masculinity* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), xiii.

⁹⁷ David Leverenz, *Manhood and the American Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 172.

⁹⁸ J.M. DeMatteis and Mike Zeck, "Mean Streets," *Captain America* #272 (New York: Marvel Comics, August, 1982).

American enterprise was driven by the very men whose masculinity now appears as masquerade. If the history of the United States as imperialist, racist, sexist, and homophobic revises older historical models of American exceptionalism and possessive individualism, such interventions do presuppose an American masculinity notable for its ability to consolidate power and manage its others... With some impatience, I would ask: Are there actually no “real men” out there? What do we do say to the African-American men still being dragged around behind pick-up trucks driven by white men? To the gay college student mercilessly beaten unconscious and left to freeze to death over the course of a cold Wyoming prairie night?⁹⁹

From the examples given under DeMatteis’s run on *Captain America*, the answer would appear to be: homosexuals are just as much men, just as “manly,” just as “masculine,” as their heterosexual counterparts, even in the super hero community.

It would not be until the death of actor Rock Hudson in 1985 of complications from AIDS that society and popular culture would begin openly to discuss how to combat the illness. Seen as a heterosexual hero of 1960s films – and a longtime friend of the sitting president – Hudson, though “outed” as a homosexual when his disease became public, provided an acceptable face to the issue of AIDS. Due in large part to the mass media’s attention to Hudson, in 1987 the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) was founded.¹⁰⁰ Younger readers of Cap, then, would grow up with the issue of homosexuals in society very much a part of their daily lives. What was key to the entire homosexual / AIDS issue was fear of the unknown, the social “other.” Just as members of white society feared what they did not know or understand about blacks and men feared what they did not know or understand about women, heterosexuals feared what they did not know or understand about homosexuals.

That fear was exacerbated by the deadly force of AIDS. As young readers of *Captain America* no doubt heard adults – whether in their homes, schools, or on

⁹⁹ Traister, “Academic Viagra,” 292.

¹⁰⁰ Thompson, *American Culture in the 1980s*, 23-24.

television – expressing fear and even loathing of homosexuals, this super hero comic book did what super heroes did and do best: educate the reader to overcome fear.

Perhaps DeMatteis said it best:

One of the things I liked so much about Cap in [the early 1980s] was that he had an African-American best friend and a Jewish girlfriend... both representatives of oppressed minorities. I thought it suited him, as the symbol of America... I thought it would fit for Cap to have – and be totally accepting of – a close friend who was gay... I've seen a number of references to Arnie and his sexuality over the years, so I guess enough people "got" it.¹⁰¹

What Arnie Roth ultimately represented was a change in the socially accepted ideas of gender and gender roles. According to Jane Sherron De Hart, after World War II, “[Gender] was a given: a biologically, physically, spiritually defined thing; an unambiguous, clear, definite division of humanity into two.”¹⁰² The Arnie Roth stories suggested that this physical / sexual preference need not have any impact on ideas of manhood.

DeMatteis’s use of a homosexual character was consistent with what was going on in popular culture overall. In popular music, Elton John and the British group Culture Club’s lead singer “Boy George” were accepted by millions of Americans simply on the strength of their talent. Likewise, the lack of any mention in any of the printed letters in the pages of *Captain America* of the issue of Arnie’s sexuality, suggested – at least to a degree – similar acceptance. This lack of negative response seems to support Terry Anderson’s observation that even with Reagan’s popularity and conservative backing, “the majority of citizens did not honor his call for traditional social roles.”¹⁰³ Super

¹⁰¹ Richard Hall, Interview with J.M. DeMatteis, October 13, 2009.

¹⁰² Jane Sherron De Hart, “Containment at Home: Gender, Sexuality, and National Identity in Cold War America,” *Rethinking Cold War Culture*, Peter J. Kuznick and James Gilbert, Eds. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 138.

¹⁰³ Terry Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 413-14.

heroes overall, however, continued to represent traditionally “masculine” heterosexual roles, with their respective female love interests holding similarly traditional gendered roles. In this regard, *Captain America* was no exception.

Another area of gender relations that worked its way into the pages of *Captain America* in the '80s was sexuality. As the comic book industry began to appeal to more mature readers during the decade, sexual relations between characters became more of a topic of interest than in decades past. It was in these situations that Captain America's more conservative side was brought to light. Still a relic of World War II, Steve Rogers's idea of sexual relations was that they were a private matter between two consenting adults. In the '80s, he would occasionally be confronted with the issue of gender relations and physical intimacy.

During the storyline early in the decade concerning a possible Captain America movie, Cap contemplated visiting the Hollywood studio that was producing the film. On hearing this, his co-Avenger, Hank McCoy (aka The Beast) suggested, “Think of the pool-side beauties who'll be begging to wax your shield!”¹⁰⁴ Though Cap immediately dismissed the comment – apparently unaware of any innuendo – the remark bears some commentary. It is important to note the source of the comment: a furry, blue mutant known as The Beast. Though regarded as one of the geniuses in the Marvel Universe, the character had quite a history of overtly sexual comments toward women (who more often than not were put off by his animalistic appearance). The comment itself was one that many women would consider a “beastly” comment, one that objectified women as sexual playthings rather than as people. The comment showed that even a hero and academic

¹⁰⁴ J.M. DeMatteis and Mike Zeck, “Celluloid Heroes!,” *Captain America* #261 (New York: Marvel Comics, September, 1981).

like Hank McCoy (he was an accomplished scientist) still held outdated ideas concerning women. However, it was not only male characters who acted in an overtly sexual manner. In the wake of the socio-political advances women had made in the 1970s, their sexual openness was a point of recurring interest in 1980s popular culture.

In a storyline which found Captain America investigating missing children who were taken in and brainwashed by a criminal organization, Cap decided to physically alter himself to appear as a teenager. To do so, he turned to the sometime villain / sometime hero, the sorceress Sersi. The sorceress made it clear that she would want something in return for her services to Cap. After the successful completion of his mission, during a dinner date with Sersi, her wishes were made more clear:



[Image 5-13: *Captain America* #357, Al Milgrom, Artist]

From the beginning, the intentions of Sersi were plain. Her look was seductive, holding her martini glass close to her lips. The dinner was over candlelight, and under the table, she worked her bare foot (which she had just removed from the shoe shown under the table) up Captain America's leg. Cap's response in the final panel was panic.

Placed in the context of the overall stories of Cap's relationships with women it became clear that his feeling was that this suggestion was inappropriate, but that in order to clear his "outstanding debt," he would have to do something that he was not comfortable with. The large "END" notation at the bottom of the closing panel told the reader that they would never find out where this situation ultimately led. Because Cap had expressed his adamant belief in paying off his debts, the reader could assume that Sersi was ultimately satisfied; but Captain America was clearly not comfortable with such forward behavior from a woman.

A similar situation arose with the introduction of the villainess-turned-heroine Diamondback. Diamondback, an overtly sexual character, turned from evil to good as a direct result of her attraction to the Star Spangled Avenger. While their relationship would become more romantic in the early '90s, her initial attempts at gaining Cap's affection proved too overt for the conservative hero's tastes. In the following image, Diamondback had stumbled onto a plan by the evil Baron Zemo to retrieve a handful of jewel fragments that, once reconstituted, would allow the villain to bring his dead father back to life. In a fight for one of the fragments, Cap failed, but Diamondback managed to save the day:



[Image 5-14: *Captain America* #360, Kieron Dwyer, Artist]

By this time in their relationship, Diamondback had already tried the more overtly sexual approach previously attempted by Sersi, and was met with the same conservative resistance. In the above panel, her approach was more reserved. She coyly held her head aside and asked for a simple kiss. Even that request was too forward for Cap, who – though his face was hidden from the reader – scolded “Diamond...!” Diamondback was wounded by this continued rejection. Though her face expressed expected frustration, showing her broken arm was a clear suggestion that she was wounded by Cap’s refusal. Likewise, her comment of not being able to make a joke around Cap further emphasized her perception that the hero was too reserved.

What these examples tell us about the 1980s is that sex was becoming a more open and commonly accepted topic in regard to women’s sexuality. However, in the conservative climate of the 1980s, non-traditional women were seen as “easy,” “Jezebels,” or “whores.” This phenomenon was what Susan Faludi refers to as

“backlash,” or the “price” women paid for the social advances that had come about due to the women’s movement of the 1960s and ’70s.¹⁰⁵ Captain America represented the conservative ’80s uncertainty as to how to deal with a female colleague. Beast’s openly sexual comments were seen as normal, the way that men were expected to act around each other. For women to act in an equally overtly sexual manner caused panic in the hero. It was not seen as “normal” for women to voice their sexual desires. Such women – even in the 1980s – were suspected of being morally questionable, and – to a traditional, stalwart hero like Captain America – unacceptable.

The character Mother Night represented a different form of “unacceptable” behavior. She oversaw a criminal organization called the Sisters of Sin. Originally founded by Sin, the daughter of the Red Skull – who appeared earlier in the decade under the pseudonym “Mother Superior” – this new Sisters of Sin was kidnapping young teens, brainwashing them to act as their criminal army. These teens were trained and brainwashed by Mother Night and her “sisters,” Dream, Pleasure, Agony, and Death. The children were kept at a place called Camp Rage, and were being molded as assassins to go out into the world and kill conservatives. It was during his investigation of this group that Cap reverted to the appearance of a young teen, courtesy of the magic of Sersi. Once he uncovered the plot, he returned to his adult form and defeated the Sisters.¹⁰⁶ The following image showed Captain America’s advice to the newly-freed children:

¹⁰⁵ Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (London: Vintage Press, 1991), 1.

¹⁰⁶ Mark Gruenwald and Al Milgrom, “Night of Sin,” *Captain America* #357 (New York: Marvel Comics, Early September, 1989) [Beginning in 1989 and continuing into 1991, *Captain America* published two – and occasionally three – issues a month].



[Image 5-15: *Captain America* #357, Al Milgrom, Artist]

In this image, the mother figure has been subdued, and the children forced to listen to the more rational advice of a paternal figure, Cap. The story was even more blatant: women hate conservatives. While the Reagan administration represented a pulling back from the social advances of the 1960s and '70s, this storyline – a group of women who taught children to go out and kill conservatives – was a radical departure from portrayals of women in *Captain America* in decades past.

The overall message to readers throughout the decade was that gender roles had permanently changed. Women were now no longer just stay-at-home / stand-by-your-man helpmates such as Bernie Rosenthal suggested. Women in the '80s were also overtly sexual, blurring the line of acceptable sexual behavior that until now had been defined by men. Further, liberal women sought to stamp out conservatism. If left to their own devices – Mother Night answered to no man – such women were dangerous and, taken to the extreme, murderous. In such a situation, the young needed to listen to their

father figures. In the '80s, father[ly] figures were dominant in popular culture. President Reagan and Bill Cosby were both very popular father figures in the eyes of Americans throughout the decade. Even on the television soap opera, *Dallas*, the family patriarch, Jock Ewing – written as a minor character – continued to dominate storylines and dialogue years after the character – and the actor who portrayed him – had died.

The popular culture of the Reagan years exuded masculinity, even far and above what traditional comic book superheroes like Cap, Superman and Batman had done in the past. Films and television throughout the decade provided macho, hyper masculine heroes such as Rambo, Rocky Balboa, *The A-Team*, *Knight Rider*, and the navy pilots of *Top Gun*. In 1987, as professional wrestling mogul Vincent McMahon and his World Wrestling Federation were being investigated by Congress for steroid abuse among their wrestlers, Mark Gruenwald introduced *Cap* readers to the Unlimited Class Wrestling Federation, whose wrestlers were being chemically augmented by a villain called Power Broker. Cap sidekick, Demolition Man, as well as the new Captain America and Bucky/Battle Star (as well as the other former BUCKies) were all chemically augmented by the Power Broker and were former wrestlers for the UCWF.¹⁰⁷ These characters were not-so-subtle caricatures of real-life wrestlers Hulk Hogan and Rick Flair (among others). The message to young people was simple: real men, powerful men, took various forms of augmentation to become the men they were. This was particularly relevant to Captain America, as he, too, had been augmented by the Super Soldier Serum in the 1940s. Ultimately, Gruenwald – through Captain America – explained that such augmentations,

¹⁰⁷ Mark Gruenwald, Paul Neary and Vince Colletta, “The Hard Way!,” *Captain America* #328 (New York: Marvel Comics, April, 1987).

though beneficial at times and under certain circumstances – needed to be accompanied by a proper sense of right and wrong.

Adding to this rampant machismo, or gender conservatism, was the introduction of the “new” Captain America, John Walker. Not only was he physically augmented to be even stronger than the original Cap, but his name, John Walker, was a clear reference to the Scotch whiskey “Johnnie Walker.” If this reference were not enough, once Walker’s identity was made public, and he stepped down as Captain America, the government chose to fake his assassination, erase his memory, and reinstate him as the US-Agent, giving him a new personal identity: Jack Daniels.¹⁰⁸ For decades, alcohol had been advertised as the preferred drink of “real” men. These names, attached to a muscularly augmented body, portrayed Walker / Daniels as the ultimate “man’s man.” Added to that was Walker/Daniels’s more anti-hero approach to the role of government agent, willing to maim or kill without deliberation. This was all very relevant to the Reagan era’s cowboy diplomacy, recalling the days of America’s wild west where men were judged by the degree of violence they meted out.

De Hart argues that, “Gender, like sexuality, ethnicity, and race, is always in the process of reformulation in the modern nation-state.”¹⁰⁹ Overall, the 1980s represented a period of uncertain gender roles. Were homosexual men truly “men”? Were sexually promiscuous women “whores,” or were they simply now free to express their sexuality in new ways? What constituted the idea of a “real man.” Did real men bear powerful muscles and down strong liquor, or were they respectful of life and women like Steve Rogers? These were the social issues with which the readers of *Captain America*

¹⁰⁸ Mark Gruenwald and Mark Bright, “The Night of the Scourge, Part 1,” *Captain America* #358 (New York: Late September, 1989).

¹⁰⁹ De Hart, “Containment at Home,” 143.

contended in the 1980s. The socio-economic advances of women in the 1970s had left an American society unsure of how to deal with these changes in perceptions of gender and gender roles. This confusion would be only exacerbated with the inclusion of homosexuals.

All Americans in the early years of the Reagan administration were affected by the economy. A decade of social unrest, OPEC strangulation on the world's oil supplies, and "stagflation" at home created a period of rampant unemployment or under-employment, long lines at gas pumps, and even rationing of gasoline once one reached the pump. The economy was a key factor in President Carter's failed attempt at a second term in 1980, and President Reagan's rise to power. The 1980s saw an increase in what was called "relative poverty, with a widening gap between the poverty class and the nation's medium income."¹¹⁰

Reagan's ultimate response was what became known as "Reaganomics," or traditional "trickle-down" supply-side economics: granting massive tax cuts to the very wealthy, in the name of making capital available for investment that would create jobs, increasing both the tax base and the discretionary income necessary to fuel a consumer-based economy. Critics considered Reagan's policies as "hostile" toward those who some defined as the "undeserving poor," or those who showed no signs of trying to improve their economic lot, instead relying mostly or entirely on government programs.¹¹¹ Reagan implemented his tax-cuts in 1981, but from 1980 until 1983, the

¹¹⁰ James T. Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty 1900-1994* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 211.

¹¹¹ Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty*, 213.

economy continued to be the most serious issue for Americans, including the readers – and the parents of younger readers – of *Captain America*.¹¹²

In *Captain America* #246 (cover-dated June, 1980), Peter Gillis told the story of Joe Smith, an out of work actor, who had been abandoned by his wife and left with a mentally disabled son. When his son died, Smith sought vengeance on the system that he felt was responsible. He terrorized a Board of Education bureaucrat who had cut special education funding, and on the local Social Security office for cutting his benefits.

Captain America was able to talk Smith down, but lamented a system in dire need of fixing.¹¹³ After nearly a decade of stagflation and energy crises, the American people were suffering such as they had not since the Great Depression. This, to a degree, explained characters like Joe Smith who saw no answers to their problems.

Economically disadvantaged America needed an avenger. Just such a character would be introduced nearly a year later in the form of Every-Man.

While talking to a group of high school students about the future, Captain America was confronted by one of the students – soon to be revealed as a disciple of Every-Man – who, just before brandishing a pistol declared:

Let's talk about the American REALITY... about unequal distribution of wealth... about poverty, frustration, and DEATH!... You're the shining example, who says 'You can be what I am if you only try!' It's the same American success sickness: strive to BE something... scramble to the top of the heap. But you know that only one in ten thousand is gonna make it! So what about the rest of us?¹¹⁴

¹¹² Berman, *America's Right Turn*, 75, 110, and 120.

¹¹³ Peter Gillis and Jerry Bingham, "The Sins of the Fathers!," *Captain America* #246 (New York: Marvel Comics, June, 1980).

¹¹⁴ J.M. DeMatteis and Mike Zeck, "The Man Who Made a Difference!," *Captain America* #267 (New York: Marvel Comics, March, 1982).

The desperation was clear. The feeling of confidence in the American Dream was all but dead in the early 1980s. Anti-heroes/criminals such as Every-Man appealed to people feeling such disillusionment. Every-Man, a young man who had seen his father die due to abject poverty, went insane, blaming American capitalist society for the evils of the world, and seeing Captain America as the very symbol of that society. He concluded that to show the death of the American Dream, he must kill Captain America. He captured hostages and utilized the press to call out Cap, killing a policeman in the process. When talking to one of his young female followers – a follower he would later threaten to kill if Captain America did not surrender – Every-Man told of his own experience with the frustration of the American system and the failed dream. He began his tale by exclaiming, “They’re killing us every day!” He then went on to tell a tale of his father, who, as an upstanding American, played by the rules and died penniless for his efforts.¹¹⁵ This expressed the desperation in which a growing number of Americans were living every day.

The theme would recur occasionally throughout the decade. In 1983, Cap was confronted with a drunk, unemployed husband and father who took out his frustrations on his family. Though he openly threatened to kill them, his family forgave him and understood the source of his anger.¹¹⁶ In 1985, Cap faced The Armadillo, a poor man whose wife had fallen deathly ill. In order to pay for her medical expenses, he agreed to be physically transformed into a human armadillo in order to capture the Avenger Goliath

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ J.M. DeMatteis, Sal Buscema and Kim DeMulder, “Diverging...,” *Captain America* #284 (New York: Marvel Comics, August, 1983).

for the villain, Dr. Karl Malus.¹¹⁷ In both of these cases, the readers were reminded of the desperation that was brought on by abject poverty. By 1985, the economy was turning around, and the rest of the decade experienced an economic resurgence (not withstanding the 1987 stock market crash). However, the writers of Cap believed it important to remind readers that no matter how much better things were, poverty was still an issue for millions of Americans.

In a more comedic approach to the issue of economic troubles, beginning in the same issue that introduced The Armadillo, the minor villain Sidewinder approached eleven other minor criminals – all with snake-based alter-egos – in order to form a criminal labor union called The Serpent Society. The purpose of the Society was to assist those minor villains by guaranteeing work – and a share of the profits of their crimes – as well as medical insurance and a pension plan.¹¹⁸ Though based on a comical premise, it portrayed a specific message: even in the criminal world there were those would-be criminals who would never be able to compete with the likes of Red Skull, Dr. Doom, or Magneto. Such criminals needed to organize, to work together, and unionize. Though the Society would play a major role in the comic throughout the rest of the decade and on into the '90s, it would ultimately be taken over by Viper and betrayed by Cap's future love interest, Diamondback.

Costello views the Serpent Society – and the earlier villain Flag Smasher – as “anarchists.”¹¹⁹ While this was certainly the case in those stories in which the Society was under the leadership of Viper, the original intent of the Society was that of any other

¹¹⁷ Mark Gruenwald and Paul Neary, “The Body in Question,” *Captain America* #308 (New York: Marvel Comics, August, 1985).

¹¹⁸ Mark Gruenwald and Paul Neary, “Serpents of the World Unite!,” *Captain America* #310 (New York: Marvel Comics, October, 1985).

¹¹⁹ Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis*, 176.

unionizing organization: to create benefits for its members in an economy that all-to-often favored the wealthy and powerful. Confusion over the status of the economy its future exacerbated the problem for people who had experienced similar circumstances to those of Joe Smith, Every-Man, and the Serpent Society. Though younger readers likely did not understand the intricacies of the political economy of the 1980s, the increasing number of older readers felt and understood the ramifications of the economy on their lives. A decade of conservative resurgence on the heels of twenty years of radical social change left Americans largely confused as to who they were and where they were going. These feelings were evident in the pages of *Captain America* throughout the Reagan Era.

The changes in American society were as evident in the pages of *Captain America* as they were in other genres of popular culture. Political conservatism, radical nationalism, and the idea of American hegemony were evident early on and throughout the long writing runs of J.M. DeMatteis and Mark Gruenwald. As usual, *Captain America* tended to come down on the left side of center on most issues. The rise of the “new” Cap, John Walker, showed readers the dangers of *Captain America* being anything other than a centrist. The concept of the “American Dream” – a staple of the *Captain America* character since World War II – was complicated. The continued popularity of the character throughout this period, however, also showed a stark contrast to the increasingly popular “anti-hero,” who often worked outside the law to achieve “justice” in some form or fashion. Americans could still rally around the traditional hero, and even during troubling economic times, continue to believe in the American system and the American Dream.

While Superman increasingly waved the American flag, representing American strength and power on the world stage, and Batman represented the growing urge to overthrow the system and seek out individual self-interest, Captain America represented a continuation of the ideals set forth by the Founding Fathers. America was an imperfect experiment, with many past sins – most notably against racial minorities, women, and the poor – for which to atone; but the American ideal, and the American system was strong enough to overcome these and many more deficiencies and continue to progress toward the ideals for which the country was founded. Cap showed readers that while “patriotism” did not necessarily mean going along with the government or its policies, respect for the overall system of republican government was imperative if the system was ever to work for everyone.

As the 1980s came to an end, the Berlin Wall – the very symbol of the Cold War – was brought down, not by the wealthy or powerful, but by average citizens who decided that they no longer supported the division between east and west. Two years later, the Soviet Union would collapse. For a decade, the US would ask itself what its role was in a post-Cold War world. Would America remain the only surviving superpower in the world and, if so, what would that title entail? For nearly a decade, Americans – and citizens of the world – would ponder these questions. As a result, the role of Captain America would become a continuing question throughout the 1990s.

CHAPTER 6

CAPTAIN AMERICA FROM COLD WAR TO 9/11: 1990-2001

By the end of 1991, the Cold War was over.¹ The question then arose as to what the world's remaining super-power would do or be without the struggle with its decades-long nemesis. In "The End of History," Francis Fukuyama stated that the "New World Order" that would result from the end of the Cold War would represent the end of history, with liberal capitalism triumphant over Marxism. The result would be a world of constant "economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands... there will be neither arts nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history."² Matthew Costello, in his analysis of Marvel Comics during the Cold War as expressions of national identity wrote of this post-Cold War dilemma, "The Cold War definition of the American self had proven a sham... Reconstructing a coherent American national identity in the post-Cold War period would prove difficult."³

¹ H.W. Brands, *American Dreams: The United States Since 1945* (New York: Penguin Press, 2010), 276.

² Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History," *National Interest* (Summer, 1989), file:///G:/Classes/End%20of%20History_files/content_files/Fukuyama_the_end_of_history.htm (1 of 18)6/20/2003 7:04:26 AM

³ Matthew J. Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis: Comic Books and the Unmasking of Cold War America* (New York: Continuum Books, 2009), 193.

On the world stage in the years following the Cold War, the U.S. would become engaged militarily in the Persian Gulf, the Balkans, and Somalia.⁴ Domestically, a terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in 1993 portended a decade of terrorist attacks against American interests in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Africa by the radical Islamic organization al Qaeda. Incidents at Ruby Ridge, Waco, and Oklahoma City exposed threats at home from domestic terrorists as well.⁵

The 1990s represented an increasingly divided political climate in America, one that would only worsen in the new millennium. This divisiveness was evident as early as the 1992 presidential election. The rise of a third party under Texas businessman H. Ross Perot, who ultimately gained 19% of the popular vote, signified the distaste of many Americans, faced with the first real economic recession in a decade, toward the two major political parties. That divisiveness cost President George H.W. Bush a second term, and allowed the Democrat Bill Clinton to win with only a plurality of the popular vote. As with any period of serious political polarization, this division reflected a strong competition between increasingly divergent social values. Two years into the presidency of Bill Clinton, an increasingly divided electorate gave the Republican Party control of the House of Representatives and a stronger stance in the Senate for the first time in decades. The radical partisanship that ensued – not unprecedented in the nation’s history, but extreme nonetheless – reflected a “culture war” that emphasized that the Cold War-era consensus, such as it was, was over.⁶ It also resulted in the first impeachment of a U.S. president since 1867.⁷

⁴ Brands, *American Dreams*, 290; 311-12.

⁵ Brands, *American Dreams*, 302-04.

⁶ Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis*, 195; William C. Berman, *From the Center to the Edge: The Politics & Policies of the Clinton Presidency* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 16; James T.

According to Matthew Costello, the culture wars resulted from the fact that, “[t]he anchoring values of progress and virtue had been lost during the Cold War.”⁸ The two major political parties appeared to suggest that progress and virtue were in some way in competition with each other. Liberals embraced the “progress” of rights and opportunities for millions of Americans still being denied one or both (i.e. homosexuals, the poor, wrongly-convicted criminals, migrant workers, the disabled, etc.). Conservatives insisted that American “virtue” was linked to “traditional family values” that, in many ways, precluded such extensions beyond individuals’ ability to achieve such rights and opportunities for themselves.⁹

At its heart, the “culture wars” in America revolved around the question: what kind of a people are we? Was America the traditional, white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, male-dominated society it had been since its inception, or had it become something more diverse? Had the successes in civil rights for women and racial and ethnic minorities made us a more multicultural and tolerant people? If so, what then did it mean to be “American”? In many ways, Captain America in the 1990s continued to represent the idea that these values were, in fact, interconnected when acknowledged and respected in the best traditions of the American Experiment.

Patterson, *Restless Giant: The United States from Watergate to Bush v. Gore* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 251-53; Michael Schaller and George Rising, *The Republican Ascendancy: American Politics, 1968-2001* (Wheeling: Harlan Davidson, 2003), 117-18.

⁷ Berman, *From the Center to the Edge*, 92.

⁸ Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis*, 196.

⁹ Patterson, *Restless Giant*, 254.

Despite this climate of division and uncertainty, the U.S. enjoyed one of the greatest economic expansions in American history.¹⁰ The new century dawned in the wake of a divisive and hotly contested presidential election, and nine months and eleven days into it, the United States became the victim of the most devastating foreign attack on its soil in the nation's history.¹¹ A decade of relatively minor military and political struggles came to an end with the rise of America's "War on Terror" and what would become known as a "Post-9/11 World."

The comic book industry experienced successes and failures that contrast sharply with the performance of the rest of the nation's economy. As the country experienced a growing recession in the early years of the 1990s, the comic book industry experienced a massive jump in sales that was eventually described as a "collector's bubble." After a stock market scare in 1987, several articles suggested that investment in comic books was more sound than in stocks. This, along with comic book-related success stories such as 1986's *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* and the theatrical release of the 1989 film *Batman*, brought attention to the industry that it had not experienced in decades. From 1989-1993, a wave of speculators began investing heavily in buying comic books. Golden Age comics like *Detective Comics* #27 (the 1939 debut of the hero Batman) were selling for tens of thousands of dollars.¹²

As industry leaders Marvel and DC began noticing the jump in sales, the two companies began a rapid succession of publishing gimmicks to attract as many buyers as possible. Companies began having writers kill off heroes that had been around for

¹⁰ Brands, *American Dreams*, 317, 333.

¹¹ Brands, *American Dreams*, 346-56.

¹² Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 283; Shirrel Rhoades, *A Complete History of American Comic Books* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 128-9.

decades. Superman was killed (for a little over a year). Batman had his back broken (spending more than a year recuperating). Spider-Man discovered that he might, in fact, be a clone of the original, actual Spider-Man (it turned out he was not). Captain America, The Avengers, and The Fantastic Four sacrificed their lives battling the powerful mutant hybrid Onslaught (only to emerge in a “pocket universe” without their memories, returning to their original lives/continuities a year later). Ultimately, potential investors discovered that the only reason Golden Age comics were so valuable was that they were extremely rare (due in no small part to the paper-drives of World War II and the parents’ crusades of the late 1940s / early 1950s); and that the new comics they were buying (often with misleading covers claiming they were the “#1” issue) were worthless due to the massive print runs.¹³

The issue of the growing popularity of the anti-hero was addressed in the mid-90s by writer Mark Waid and artist Alex Ross in their ground-breaking DC-published mini-series *Kingdom Come*. In that story, a world in which classic heroes Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman have, for years, lived in retirement, has come under the protection of a new, younger generation of heroes, much more akin to the anti-heroes made popular in the last few decades. Superman finally emerges from his self-imposed exile to return with his former cohorts to remind the world of what heroes are and ought to be.¹⁴ As a part of that original generation of heroes, Captain America at Marvel Comics represented much the same reference to a more heroic age.

Decades-long disputes between creative talents and management came to a boiling point in the '90s. Several A-list writers and artists broke away from the two

¹³ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 282-3; Rhoades, *A Complete History of American Comic Books*, 135-7.

¹⁴ *Secret Origin: The Story of DC Comics*, Warner Home Video (DVD/Documentary), 2010.

major companies to form Image Comics.¹⁵ By the time the American economy rebounded and began its massive expansion, the bubble for comic books had burst and comic book sales tanked. Marvel Comics, after years of over-investing in toy and trading card companies, filed for bankruptcy in 1998.¹⁶ Meanwhile, sales of super hero comic books, and *Captain America* particularly, sank to record lows. Due to the constant gimmicks employed during the speculator bubble, even devoted comic book readers and collectors turned away from the industry.¹⁷

For Captain America, the period 1990-2001 repeatedly expressed ideas along similar lines as Fukuyama's theories. "National identity" appeared to be lost.¹⁸ Like America, Captain America was constantly unsure of his place in a world where nationalism and patriotism were no longer so clearly defined. Throughout this decade, Captain America would die, again and again... and again. The first of these deaths came about as a result of Captain America's own Super Soldier Serum. As the serum that gave him his powers fifty years before slowly began to incapacitate him, he became – in the words of John Trushell – "an anachronism: a creation of the American nation-state who had become delineated by his relations with the American military-industrial complex."¹⁹ The only way that Cap was able to stave off death for a short time longer was to don a suit of armor that worked as an exoskeleton.

This became, in essence, a symbol that America was not what it once was; perhaps even a shadow of what it once was. The greatness of that World War II

¹⁵ Rhoades, *A Complete History of American Comic Books*, 132.

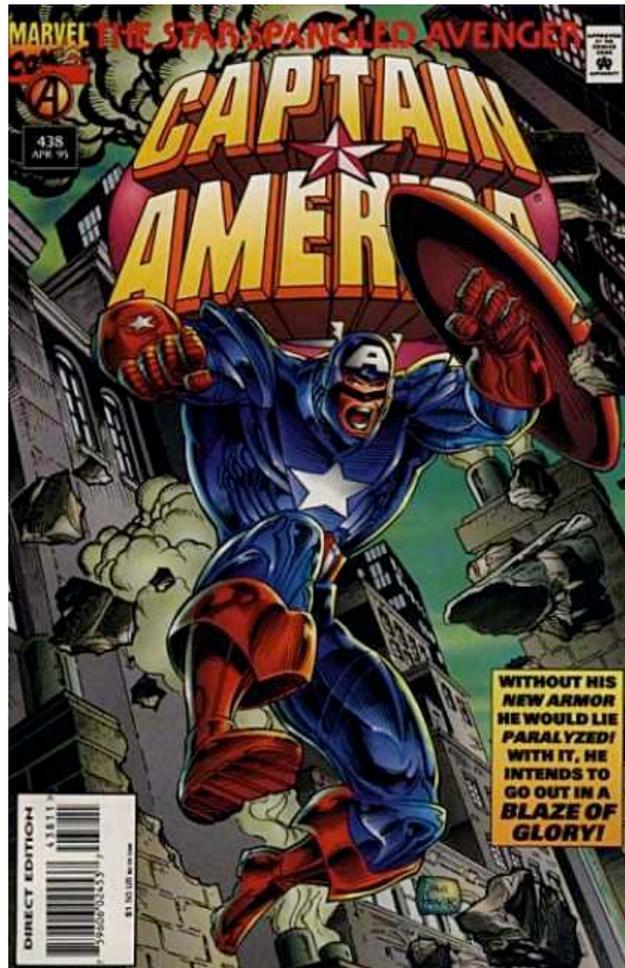
¹⁶ Bill E. Peterson and Emily D. Gerstein, "Fighting and Flying: Archival Analysis of Threat, Authoritarianism, and the North American Comic Book," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 26, No. 6 (2005), p. 893; Rhoades, *A Complete History of American Comic Books*, 163; Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 283.

¹⁷ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 283.

¹⁸ Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis*, 195.

¹⁹ John Trushell, "Captain America and His Compatriots: 'Our Country, Right or Wrong?'" *Borderlines: Studies in American Culture*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (1997), 227.

generation had grown feeble, no longer as relevant in a post-Cold War world. The armor would be short-lived as Cap would suffer one of his many deaths in the 1990s just a few months later. This was consistent with the idea that America was weakening from within. Without the unifying threat of Soviet communism, the weaknesses within American culture and society itself were made more manifest. On the world stage, America reigned supreme. Within, America was more and more at war with itself.



[Image 6-1: *Captain America* #438 (April, 1995), Dave Hoover, Artist]

As the nation became radically divided politically, these divisions were presented in the pages of *Captain America*. Stories revolving around the villain Hate-Monger emphasized an America still not at peace with its racially divided past. In the weeks

leading up to 9/11, a storyline featuring the Red Skull foretold of a plot to destroy America from within by turning its citizenry against itself. The empowered women of Cap's previous decades were pulled back to a degree, but still portrayed contemporary social issues. Cap's 1980s love interest, Diamondback, and the villainess Supertia were shown to be victims of domestic violence. Cap's first twenty-first century romantic storyline revolved around Connie Ferrari, a crusading defense attorney, staunchly defending personal liberties, even for known criminals. Also during the '90s, Cap's 1960s/'70s love interest, Sharon Carter, Agent-13, returned from the "dead" to become at first a rogue agent, and by decade's close, Director of SHIELD. Through it all, the creative teams behind Captain America continued to seek out answers to the question of what the role of Captain America in a post-Cold War world would be.

Since the 1970s, America had become increasingly enamored with the concept of the anti-hero. As discussed in earlier chapters, this relatively new breed of hero worked outside the law to a greater degree than more traditional heroes, like Captain America. Within comic books, anti-heroes like Wolverine, Ghost Rider, and The Punisher were joined in the nineties by Deadpool and Spawn. In the wake of the Bernard Goetz vigilante trial of the late-1980s, America had grown to embrace this type of vigilantism. Vigilantes represented the ultimate in citizen recourse. In a system where criminals appeared to be given more rights than victims, those more concerned with "justice" than due process saw these types of heroes as providing a more secure society than did the legal system. The issue of vigilantism was reflected in the pages of *Captain America*,

though the story lines demonstrated continuing concerns that action outside the law often created more problems than it solved.

In issue number 422 (cover-dated December, 1993), readers were introduced to Blistik (a play on the word “ballistic”), The Urban Avenger, an anti-hero who would ultimately be at odds with Captain America. A self-styled purveyor of vigilante justice, Blistik sees a group of inner city teens listening to their large radios – the so-called “ghetto blaster” – and finds them “guilty of an inner-city quality-of-life infraction,” beating them and warning that their next such “infraction” will cause them to “forfeit [their] citizenship.” Later, after two hired hitmen flee after trying to kill Captain America, Blistik stops them for running a red light and nearly hitting a pedestrian, therefore “detracting from the quality of life in [New York City].” When confronted with a young man who is considering suicide by jumping off the George Washington Bridge, Blistik argues that the man should jump because his indecision over doing so was causing crowds to form, disrupting, again, the “quality of life” in the city. Captain America intercedes, talking the jumper down, and, in the ensuing fight with Blistik, causes the vigilante to fall into the Hudson River (never to be seen again).²⁰

Blistik was portrayed as an almost comical vigilante who was taking vigilantism to the extreme, but the following year, a more serious form of this type of anti-hero emerged in the form of Americop. Hitting newsstands in the early spring of 1994 in the storyline “Policing the Nation,” Americop was a cross between the anti-hero Punisher and the more traditional hero of Cap:

²⁰ Mark Gruenwald and Rick Levins, “Going Ballistic,” *Captain America #422* (New York: Marvel Comics, December, 1993).



[Image 6-2: *The Amazing Spider-Man* #129 (February, 1974), Ross Andru, Artist; and Image 6-3: *Captain America* #446 (December, 1995, Ron Garney, Artist; Image 6-4: *Captain America* #428 (June, 1994), Dave Hoover, Artist]

As seen above, Punisher’s costume signifies his intent. The death’s head skull emblazoned across his all-black costume, rifle pointed at the vigilante Spider-Man, punishing any who break the law with extreme prejudice (even though doing so was, in itself, vigilantism). Captain America represents an opposite ideal, wearing the American flag, armed only with a defensive shield; he is the very embodiment of the traditional hero. Americop is portrayed as an amalgamation of the two: wearing the uniform of a policeman (a real-life representation of a “hero”); but his identity fully masked, and fully armed to enforce judgment and execution on any law-breakers (even Captain America, a very different type of vigilante). The message of Americop’s appearance is simple: law and order. “Justice” – as suggested by Captain America – has become less important to Americans than order. The rights of the accused are secondary to those of the victims. Whereas “vigilantes” like Captain America and Spider-Man capture suspected criminals, most of whom can only be captured by super-human means, delivering them to the

proper authorities for due process, Punisher and Americop dispense “justice” as they see fit, with total disregard for due process or the rule of law.

Like Punisher, Americop took it upon himself to judge and execute criminals rather than to trust their fate to due process. To a group of gun-runners, Americop says, “The nation’s prisons are already overburdened with criminal vermin. Therefore, in the best interests of the taxpayers, I sentence you all to death.” Ultimately, Americop’s actions are noticed by Captain America; and during their eventual confrontation, Americop calls Cap a “sad instrument of liberal dogma.” After Americop escapes, Captain America internalizes his convictions: “[A vigilante like Americop] makes it that much more important to remain steadfast to my ideals and keep doing the right thing, no matter how tough it becomes.”²¹

The perception that too many criminals were getting through the legal system and escaping justice only grew with the high profile murder trial of former football star O.J. Simpson. Though there was a considerable amount of circumstantial evidence connecting Simpson to the murders of his wife and her friend, because of procedural problems such as a racist witness for the prosecution and an ill-advised request on its part to have the defendant try on a glove believed to be connected to the murders, Simpson was found not-guilty. Many throughout the country were outraged and felt strongly that justice had not been served. In this climate, the ideology of anti-heroes such as Blistik and Americop, while representing the antithesis of what Captain America stood for, was more and more reflecting the feelings of a growing number of Americans.

²¹ Mark Gruenwald and Dave Hoover, “Policing the Nation,” *Captain America* #428 (New York: Marvel Comics, June, 1994).

The midterm elections of 1994 showed that the political polarization of the country was worsening. Republicans, under the leadership of future Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, promised a new “Contract with America,” fighting against the perceived socialism of the first two years of the Clinton Administration. The concept of “traditional family values,” repeatedly used by the right since the 1960s had become a mainstay of Republican politics.²² David Walton suggests that, while the temporary 1980s Captain America, John Walker, saw American ideals and values as a constantly evolving (or devolving) phenomenon, Steve Rogers stood for American ideals that transcended the history of the nation itself.²³ As has been seen in the issues of *Captain America* examined since the 1960s, the creative teams behind the character have portrayed increasingly left-of-center political affiliations. Mark Gruenwald, who, to date, has written more issues of *Captain America* than any other writer in its history (137 total), addressed the issue of “strong family values” beginning in a storyline called “Baron Ground” in the summer of 1994.

In that story, Captain America is investigating the kidnapping of several children. The trail leads him to a castle in Mexico occupied by his old nemesis Baron Zemo. Zemo and his wife, the Baroness Zemo, have kidnapped dozens of children, claiming to have rescued them from bad homes and brought them together to raise them with “strong family values” to “love and honor your parents and hate those who would take you from them.”²⁴ This was a clear and strong statement regarding the Clinton Administration’s

²² Michael Schaller and George Rising, *The Republican Ascendancy: American Politics, 1968-2001* (Wheeling: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2002), 119.

²³ David Walton, “‘*Captain America Must Die*’: The Many Afterlives of Steve Rogers,” *Captain America and the Struggle of the Superhero: Critical Essays*, Robert G. Weiner, ed (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2009), 169.

²⁴ Mark Gruenwald and Dario Carrasco, “Baron Ground,” *Captain America #432* (New York: Marvel Comics, October, 1994).

(and, more specifically, First Lady Hillary Clinton's) repeatedly stated belief that "it takes a village" to raise a child, a controversial communal approach to the issue of child-rearing that became a mainstay bone of contention between the right and left on into the twenty-first century.²⁵

The left-leaning Captain America promoted the ideas of due process and respecting the legal system, even if justice was occasionally denied and the "village" approach to raising children as part of a society rather than more traditional and strictly family-oriented loyalties. On the issue of justice, Captain America even supported the liberal opposition to the death penalty, believing that life must be preserved at all cost. "No one is totally beyond redemption," Cap said.²⁶

Fifty years after the end of World War II, the flag-waving patriot and "Commie Smasher" had made a gradually leftward progression since the 1960s, and by 1995 was perhaps more liberal than at any time before. Within the context of a post-Cold War world, even Cap's opinions of America within a more globalized context made their way into the pages of *Captain America*. When the Red Skull steals the Cosmic Cube – a device that bends reality to the will of whoever holds it – and alters reality to one where the Nazis rule America, the recently revived Sharon Carter suggests that Cap recapture the Cube and use it to create a better world than the one that originally existed. He responds that, "... making the world conform to your vision – changing reality to fit your image – that isn't for [us] to decide."²⁷ The days of American hegemony were over. This, perhaps, represented Captain America at his most liberal. American had proven its

²⁵ Hillary Rodham Clinton, *It Takes a Village* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), *ii*.

²⁶ Mark Gruenwald, Dave Hoover, and Danny Bulanadi, "Twilight's Last Gleaming," *Captain America* #443 (New York: Marvel Comics, September, 1995).

²⁷ Mark Waid and Ron Garney, "Triumph of the Will," *Captain America* #447 (New York: Marvel Comics, January, 1996).

point. More and more, the world was embracing American perspectives and institutions. History, as Fukuyama predicted in 1989, was over. Liberal capitalism had proven its case. With the conflict against global communism over, the United States should now truly join the family of nations and by its example, rather than by force, make a better world. This appears to be the message of Captain America during this period between the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the War on Terror.

While facing no direct external threat, several storylines of *Captain America* throughout the last half of the decade suggested that the only way for an enemy to overtake America was to destroy it from within, turning its people against themselves. In January, 1998, Marvel Comics introduced the “third volume” of *Captain America* (the “first” volume running from its origins in 1940 through the summer of 1996, when Captain America and other heroes appeared to have died in combat; and the “second” volume running from fall of 1996 throughout 1997 when the heroes were “reborn” in an alternate, “pocket” universe). *Captain America, Volume 3, Number 1* (cover-dated January, 1998) introduced a storyline where the newly resurrected Captain America experiences what is termed as “Capmania,” where Cap becomes an almost cult-like figure of worship.²⁸ Waking from his year-long hiatus in the heart of Tokyo, Japan, Captain America sees parades and merchandising revolving around his image and the flag-draped colors of the United States.

As the storyline progressed, the reader learns that the cult status of Captain America has been orchestrated by the alien Skrulls, a race of shape-shifting aliens intent on domination of humanity and the earth. Once Captain America was established as a

²⁸ Mark Waid and Ron Garney, “The Return of Steve Rogers,” *Captain America [Volume 3], #1* (New York: Marvel Comics, January, 1998).

figure of celebrity, the chief Skrull captures and replaces him, with the intent of turning Americans against each other. As the plan unfolds, and the people of America do begin to turn against one another, New York City is cited as being “Ground Zero” of the violence.



[Image 6-5: *Captain America [Volume 3] #7* (July, 1998), Ron Garney, Artist]

This image, of course, would ring frighteningly prescient when, in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the World Trade Center plaza in New York was given the same moniker (much like the images in the pages of *Captain America Comics of America*

winning World War II with an “American bomb” as early as 1943). Ultimately, Captain America exposes the Skrull threat, and addresses the weaknesses evident in American society:

Americans aren't sure what I represent, because, lately, I've had doubts myself. In the past, I've said I stand for the American Dream... the American Way. But those terms are becoming harder to define with each passing day. This country doesn't know what it is anymore. We're all wondering what our role will be in the dawning of a new millennium... so let me lay down my role once and for all... Years ago, in a simpler time, this suit and this shield were created as a symbol to help make America the land it's supposed to be... to help it realize its destiny... There's a difference between fighting against evil and fighting for the common good. I'm not always able to choose my battles... but effectively, I'm going to make an effort to choose the battles that matter. Battles against injustice... against cynicism... against intolerance... as of today, I am not a 'super hero.' Now and forevermore I am a man of the people. Together, you and I will identify and confront America's problems. Together, we will figure out what we are... and what we can be. Together we will define the American Dream... And make it an American Reality.²⁹

Just a few months later, a similar story appeared. In “American Nightmare,” Captain America is pitted against the villain Nightmare who has initiated a plan to lull those who embody the “American Dream” (business leaders, politicians, military leaders, and celebrities) into a deep sleep, using their unconscious bodies as ultra-violent puppets to subvert the country's faith in their most prominent citizens.

Trapped in the realm of nightmares, Cap attempts to move the others to rise up against their tormentor. “Pull yourself out of your selfish little shell! We have to work together!” Agent-13 adds, “All the riches, all the power – it's an illusion! You're being fooled!” As Cap successfully leads the other Americans to overcome their nightmare and fight back to reality, Cap tells Nightmare, “Dreams will always stir more souls than will

²⁹ Mark Waid, “Hoaxed,” *Captain America [Volume 3] #7* (New York: Marvel Comics, July, 1998).

nightmares.”³⁰ Throughout 1999, Cap writer Mark Waid utilizes on more than one occasion the famous quote by British Parliamentarian Edmund Burke, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil... is for good men to do nothing.”³¹ With no more Cold War – and the threats of international terrorists still continents away – Americans were becoming materialistic to a degree never before achieved. As the economy continued to boom throughout the late-nineties, Americans, rather than turning outward as part of a growing global community, were turning inward, closing their collective eyes to the problems outside their borders, obsessed with the accumulation of material consumer goods. Competition for political power and consumer goods was tearing the country apart.

Throughout Mark Waid’s run on *Captain America*, this recurring theme of division within America and the dangers that such divisions wrought were prevalent. During this time, the country became obsessed with the investigations into the sexual activities of President Bill Clinton, culminating in late-1998 with his impeachment hearing.³² No sooner had the country rebounded from this than the presidential election campaign of 2000 became a point of further division and contention. When that election resulted in questionable returns from Florida (where Republican candidate George W. Bush’s brother, Jeb, was governor), and the Supreme Court stepped in and, along partisan lines, ruled the vote recounts over and Bush the winner, and, therefore, the winner of the overall election, the American people once more split into their ideological camps, spurred on further by increasingly partisan coverage from cable news outlets.

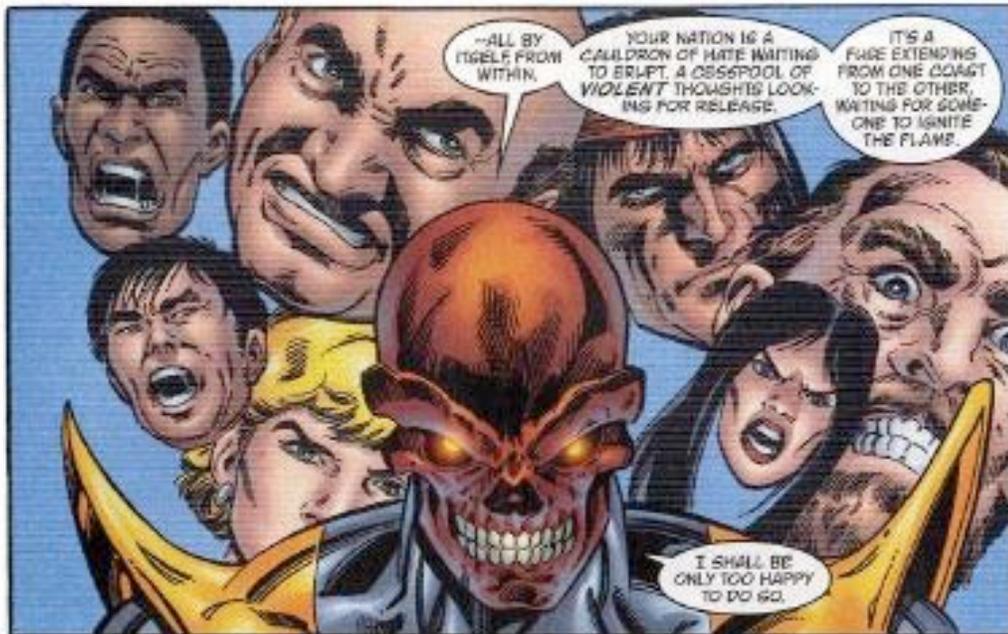
³⁰ Mark Waid, “Nuclear Dawn,” *Captain America [Volume 3] #12* (New York: Marvel Comics, December, 1998).

³¹ Mark Waid, “Man Out of Time,” *Captain America [Volume 3] #18* (New York: Marvel Comics, June, 1999).

³² Berman, *From the Center to the Edge*, 92; Patterson, *Restless Giant*, 399.

In the summer of 2001, literally leading up to the events of 9/11, Cap writer Dan Jurgens began his last story-arc in the series; and plans were already in motion to end the current “Volume 3” of *Captain America* by year’s end, replacing it the next year with “Volume 4” which would be part of Marvel’s growing “Marvel Knights” series (a series of titles featuring underperforming characters in grittier, edgier storylines). The terror attacks of September 11 would alter the plans for the Marvel Knights series, but the final Jurgens story played out eerily close to the history that was unfolding.

In the story-arc “America Lost,” the Red Skull puts into motion another plan to destroy America from within. Through mass hypnosis, Skull plays on the prejudices and fears evident across America: liberal versus conservative; American labor versus illegal immigrants; women versus men; black versus white; rich versus poor:



[Image 6-6: *Captain America [Volume 3] #46* (October, 2001), Dan Jurgens, Artist]

This image shows perhaps more than any other the divisions in American society. The frightening image of the evil Skull reigns supreme in front of an array of angry Americans of all races and genders.

With a cover date of October, this issue would have hit newsstands sometime in July or August, 2001. In the final issue of this storyline (cover dated December, hitting newsstands right around September 11), Captain America tells the hypnotized citizenry,

People, don't let small-mindedness become the downfall of us all... Every now and then I allow myself to think the war is over. But it never ends. There's always someone with a sick idea. Someone who wants to wallow in violence and destruction... Let us never forget that we have been blessed with the power and ability to help those in need. That we must give our all – no matter the price.³³

This speech from Captain America in the wake of his recent battle against the Red Skull was very similar to the inauguration speech of President George W. Bush at the beginning of that same year: “Where there is suffering, there is duty. Americans in need are not strangers, they are citizens, not problems, but priorities... I can pledge our nation to a goal: When we see that wounded traveler on the road to Jericho, we will not pass to the other side.”³⁴ This kind of unifying statement in a political speech was one that many would have expected from a new president who had won so narrowly. Though many could and would argue that President Bush did not live up to the more liberal ideals of his

³³ Dan Jurgens, “America Lost, Part 4,” *Captain America [Volume 3] #48* (New York: Marvel Comics, December, 2001).

³⁴ Inaugural Speech of President George W. Bush (January 20, 2001), <http://americanhistory.about.com/od/georgewbush/a/gwbushinaugural.htm>

inaugural speech, the words themselves ring consistent with the ideology expressed in *Captain America* throughout the 1990s and leading up to 2001.

The conclusion to the “America Lost” story was on newsstands at the time of the 9/11 attacks. As the fictional hero called for Americans to stand together, real-world events brought them together in a way that just a few days earlier could have not been imagined outside the neatly-bound covers of a superhero comic book. Even before the Twin Towers and Pentagon were hit, the editors at Marvel Comics had already decided to discontinue the regular adventures of the Star Spangled Avenger due to his consistently declining sales. The character would be re-launched the following year as part of Marvel’s “Marvel Knights” line of harder, grittier storylines revolving around characters whose sales numbers had for some time been falling.

America’s internal divisions were central to the *Captain America* storylines in the decade leading up to 9/11. In the 1991 story “Going to the Dogs,” Mark Gruenwald resurrected the 1980s villains The Watchdogs, a radical right-wing racist group. In that story, The Watchdogs attack a rap/hip-hop studio and its denizens. Captain America tracks down these domestic terrorists with the help of the former 1980s Cap, John Walker – now going by the alias U.S. Agent, wearing the 1980s black version of Cap’s costume.³⁵

Divisions in America, however, were as much about class and ethnicity as race, more so perhaps than any of the previous decades discussed. In 1998, as part of the “American Nightmare” storyline, Cap / Steve Rogers discovers that his apartment –

³⁵ Mark Gruenwald and Ron Lim, “Going to the Dogs,” and “For Righteousness’s Sake,” *Captain America* #’s 385-386 (New York: Marvel Comics, May and June, 1991).

abandoned by the hero for over a year at that point – had been occupied by a family of documented Hispanic immigrants who were homeless as a result of the father being unable to find work (with no explanation as to why this was the case during the booming economy of 1998). When the newly returned Sharon Carter balks at Rogers’s allowing the family to stay there, she asks, “What does Captain America owe [this family]?” His response was, “Same as he owes everyone else: opportunity.”³⁶ This was a strongly liberal perspective presented at a time of right-leaning moderation.

Since its inception, the United States prided itself on being the “Land of Opportunity,” and millions over the centuries came in search of the “American Dream.” In this small storyline, Captain America insists that America does not just provide opportunities, it owes opportunity to all who come in search of it. The fact that these were Hispanic immigrants (whereas, being set in New York City, the story could have easily involved immigrants from anywhere) brings to the fore the issue of Hispanic immigrants – both documented and not – that would become such a heated issue in the twenty-first century. The controversy over immigrants had prevailed since at least the late nineteenth century. In bad economic times, such immigrants were seen as stealing jobs from American citizens. Many argued that these immigrants primarily did jobs that most American citizens would not do, and for far less money than they were worth. The result has been a group of immigrant labor often exploited by mainstream America.

In the 1992 presidential elections, the sitting president, George H.W. Bush, was challenged from the right by radical nativist Patrick Buchanan, who took up the issue of illegal immigration along the Mexican border as a key issue. Though President Reagan

³⁶ Mark Waid and Adam Kubert, “American Nightmare, Chapter 2: The Growing Darkness,” *Captain America [Volume 3] #10* (New York: Marvel Comics, October, 1998).

addressed the issue in the 1980s with a sweeping amnesty law allowing paths to citizenship for many illegal immigrants, the issue did not go away; and the border continued to be flooded with more and more crossings. As border states felt the issue the most, in 1998 Californians amended their state constitution making English the official language of the state, making life more difficult for Mexican immigrants, many of whom spoke no English.³⁷ In 1996, Congress approved welfare reform – signed by President Clinton – that denied federal assistance to even legal immigrants for their first five years in the country.³⁸ In the above-mentioned side-story, Captain America in just a few short words defends the rights of immigrants – specifically documented immigrants – to the same opportunities as any American. Though a move toward a more culturally diverse society in the 1990s was, for the most part, successful, the issue concerning immigration – and especially Mexican illegal immigration – would become increasingly heated well into the twenty-first century.

Economic policies since 1995 had become increasingly right-of-center (*vis a vis* decreases in government spending and jobs, welfare reform, and continuing support for NAFTA).³⁹ The idea that America owed opportunity to those who came here – as opposed to those people seeking out and taking such opportunities on their own – represented much more the 1993-94 Clinton years. Traditional divisions along racial lines were becoming much more about “otherness” in any form.

The idea of a society driven by more strictly racial and ethnic divisions was more central to the “Twisted Tomorrows” storyline in 2000. An African-America general and military hero is kidnapped along with SHIELD Director Nick Fury. Captain America and

³⁷ Patterson, *Restless Giant*, 292.

³⁸ Patterson, *Restless Giant*, 298.

³⁹ Berman, *From the Center to the Edge*, 123-25.

the Falcon trace the missing heroes to a neo-Nazi group headed by Hate Monger, the living embodiment of human hatred and while in Idaho to investigate are captured by the group. Hate Monger's plan is to strap the general – and now the Falcon as well – to two missiles filled with anthrax (believing somehow that this will launch a race war). Captain America and his friends ultimately defeat Hate Monger's plans, but not before Hate Monger takes Captain America's shield and paints a Nazi swastika on it. Forcing the chained Captain America to watch, Hate Monger turns Cap's shield into a twisted vision of America itself: that America is now becoming the fascist state it once opposed.⁴⁰

Like the later plan by the Red Skull, Hate Monger's scheme was based on the belief that America could be torn apart from within; that the divisions and hatred throughout America would be the source of its ultimate fall to fascism. Though centering around race, the divisions in the country were actually much more political/economic. Race, however, was a more easily-expressed way of presenting these divisions in the heavily-visual medium of comic books. Writer and artist Dan Jurgens said, concerning the "Twisted Tomorrows" storyline, noted, "Even [in 2000], we were becoming a more polarized society. Both the Left and Right were getting more galvanized, with each side getting louder and more insulting. It was almost as though the Hate Monger really existed."⁴¹ This phenomenon appeared to only get worse the following year:

George [W.] Bush took office with a great deal of hate and anger directed his way, probably more than most any other president. America was tremendously divided at that point, which is a rough way to start... it would have been the same if [Democratic nominee Al] Gore had won the office. Remember, he didn't want to recount all of Florida, only certain counties. The polarization was going to be there regardless.⁴²

⁴⁰ Dan Jurgens and Adam Kubert, "Twisted Tomorrows, Parts 1-3," *Captain America [Volume 3] #'s 25-27* (New York: Marvel Comics, January-March, 2000).

⁴¹ Interview by author with Dan Jurgens, (November 16, 2010).

⁴² Ibid.



[Image 6-8: *Captain America [Volume 3] #26* (February, 2000), Adam Kubert, Artist]

The Hate Monger and his radical racism returned during the aforementioned “America Lost” storyline a year later. This, too, according to Jurgens, was a commentary on the “galvanized” state that America saw itself in during the months leading up to 9/11,

where “both sides seemed to hate each other.”⁴³ Though numerous divisions within America society were the target of the Red Skull’s plan, the story begins with a labor strike in Louisiana. White laborers are protesting a fifty-percent reduction in their pay; meanwhile, their company has allegedly hired Mexican migrant workers to take their place. The union representative gives the striking workers a list of the locations of these migrant workers. The “union representative,” Adam Hauser, has actually hypnotized the workers into believing that the Mexicans they see are these alleged scabs; the Mexicans in question are actually teachers from Mexico attending a conference to learn American classroom techniques.⁴⁴ Hauser – now exposed as Hate Monger – uses his powers on several other American groups thereafter, but ethnicity was the original dividing factor that was targeted.

Racial and ethnic issues, as a whole, however, rarely came up in the 1990s issues of *Captain America*. Even in the wake of race being brought up in the 1988 presidential election with Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis’s release of Willie Horton, a black inmate who, upon release, raped a white woman, and the Rodney King trial in 1992, the overall issues of black/white race relations were far less a part of the popular culture than any in any decade since the 1960s.⁴⁵ In contrast to the legal discrimination against blacks of earlier times, African-American celebrities O.J. Simpson and Michael Jackson seemed to escape justice in their respective legal trials.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Dan Jurgens (Story and Art), “America Lost, Parts 1-3,” *Captain America [Volume 3] #45-47* (New York: Marvel Comics, September – November, 2001).

⁴⁵ Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1992, Revised Edition* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 218-19.

It was clear to writers at the time that ethnic and racial divisions still existed, as an inevitable outcome of a truly pluralistic society. In the wake of 9/11, however, such division would once more become a serious issue; but rather than the traditional black/white racial divide, or the discontent with increasing numbers of Hispanic illegal immigrants, the divide would also become a religious one: between Christian and Muslim, with Arabs bearing the brunt of white (and black) hostility. As a key controversial aspect of Muslim culture, gender roles and relations in America, by contrast, are of distinct importance during this period.

During the 1990s, issues of gender were much more prevalent in the pages of *Captain America* than were racial or ethnic concerns. By 1990, the “New Woman” of the late-1960s and 1970s had truly arrived and thrived in American society. The 1990s, consequently, represented a very different world for the hero of World War II. A recurring theme in the early half of the 1990s was that of domestic violence.



[Image 6-9: *Captain America* #371 (June, 1990), Rom Lim, Artist]

In the above image, the villain Gamecock threatens “[his] woman.” Stories of domestic violence were becoming more prevalent going into the 1990s, particularly after the success of the made-for-TV movie “The Burning Bed,” starring Farrah Fawcett in 1984.⁴⁶ Concerns about masculine control over domestic partners / wives / girlfriends represented the uncertainty of masculinity at this time. Prior to the modern women’s movement, men were seen as the “king of the castle,” with women subservient in all ways. This was no longer the case by 1990, with more and more women in the workplace, and more and more in positions of authority and responsibility over men. The 1990s saw the first woman U.S. Attorney General and the first woman U.S. Secretary of State. Women representatives in both houses of Congress dramatically increased over the decade; and

⁴⁶ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0087010/>

by 2000, fifty-five percent of college undergraduates were women.⁴⁷ The “New Woman” of the 1960s had arrived.

The growth of female power in society was central to the storyline “The Superia Strategem.” The villainess Superia is striving to create an army of super-powered women to take over the world, with the assistance of MODAM (a female version of the 1970s mutated super-villain MODOK). Superia kidnaps Cap’s love interest, Diamondback, and pits her and other super-powered women against each other in what she calls “The Power Pageant” on the island of “Femizonia.” She captures Captain America and his compatriot Paladin, planning to turn them into women. Her plan is to sterilize all the women in the world except her army of super women, using them as breeding machines to create an all-powerful army only she can control. Cap and Paladin are rescued by the former villainesses Black Mamba and Asp. The naked men are forced to wear their rescuers costumes. Ultimately, Captain America challenges Superia to battle and wins. Superia escapes, and her island disappears.⁴⁸

The image of the costume change, though subtle, says much. On the one hand, Captain America, in order to cover his nakedness, must don the garb of a woman, a criminal woman at that. Vestiges of “masculinity” aside, he is now on the same level as his opponents, all of whom are women. This suggests the idea that women and men are in some way not equal. Superia’s goal was to change Captain America physically into a woman. Though unsuccessful, the rescued Captain must dress in women’s clothing, partially furthering Superia’s original aim. Whether wearing women’s clothes raises or lowers Captain America to the level of a woman depends greatly on the perspective of

⁴⁷ Patterson, *Restless Giant*, 272.

⁴⁸ Mark Gruenwald and Rick Levins, “The Superia Strategem,” *Captain America #’s 387-392* (New York: Marvel Comics, July-September, 1991).

the reader. The image also puts forth the notion that, regardless of wardrobe, a hero is a hero, male or female. Like much art, the interpretation rests on the shoulders of the observer, and what he or she brings to the image.



[Image 6-10: *Captain America* #391 (Early September, 1991), Rick Levins, Artist]

Captain America thinks to himself that he looks “ridiculous.” His rescuers mock his “underdeveloped” chest, and compare his physique to that of the villainess Anaconda (an extremely obese woman). The idea of body-image – a recurring theme in super hero comic books – once more comes to the fore.

After the Superia storyline, domestic violence became a major storyline point. Red Skull seduces the former Madame Hydra, Viper, while his acolyte, Mother Night, becomes jealous. Red Skull brutalizes Mother Night for daring to question him.



[Image 6-11: *Captain America* #398 (March, 1992), Rick Levins, Artist]

Meanwhile, Diamondback is abducted by Crossbones, one of the henchmen of the Red Skull. Diamondback's past is presented through a series of flash-backs over several issues. The reader discovers that Diamondback knew Crossbones when she was younger, and was raped by him when she tried to join his gang. When her brothers attempt to avenge her, Crossbones murders them. Despite their past, Diamondback cannot bring herself to kill Crossbones when the opportunity presents itself; on the contrary,

Crossbones continues to torture her until she submits to his will and agrees to assist him in stealing a vial of Captain America's blood.⁴⁹



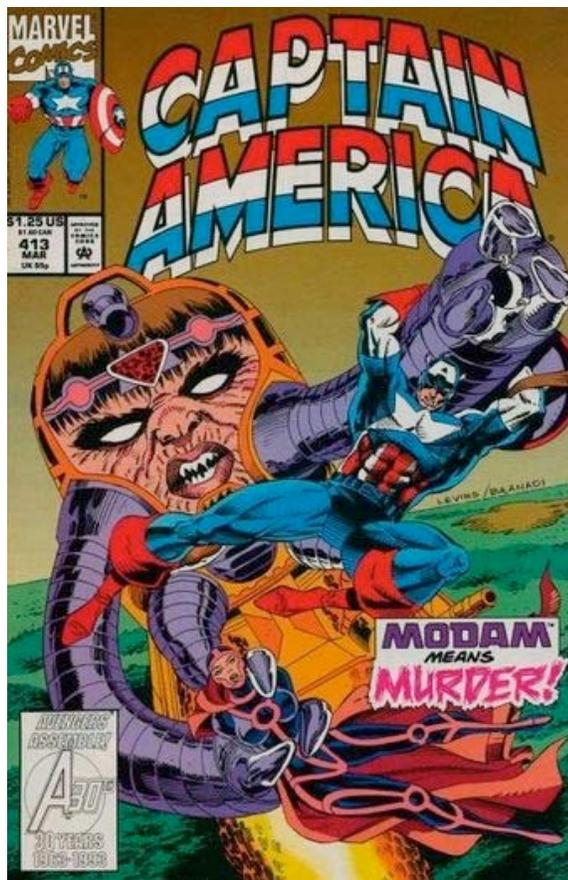
[Image 6-12: *Captain America* #400 (May, 1992), Rick Levins, Artist]

The images are brutal. The first shows a woman totally subdued by her tormentor, even to the point of accepting it as her own fault that the beating has taken place. The second shows a woman who, despite not only her own beatings but the murders of her brothers, does not give way to her desire for violent revenge. In both, the abusers are shown as the most vile and evil of men. Both stories represent the evil of

⁴⁹Mark Gruenwald and Rick Levins, "It Came from Outer Space," and "Murder by Decree!" *Captain America* #'s 398, 400 (New York: Marvel Comics, March and May, 1992).

violence, and the heroism that comes from the strength to overcome and resist responding in kind.

Superia and MODAM return in a plot to take over AIM (Advanced Idea Mechanics, the organization that created the technology responsible for MODAM). When MODAM turns on Superia, Superia calls her a traitor to her sex. MODAM responds, “I may have been born a woman but I have transcended such petty distinctions!”



[Image 6-13: *Captain America* #413 (March, 1993), Rick Levins, Artist]

In the above image, Captain America’s leg covers the portion of MODAM’s body that is her only recognizable feminine feature, her breast-plate. The rest of her image clearly

shows her to be neither male nor female, but a monstrosity. She has disregarded her gender identity to become something she considers to be beyond that.

Issues of gender identity are also suggested in the story “The Beaten Path.” Two young men are shown exiting a video store, eager to watch the film *The Crying Game*, about a man who becomes infatuated with someone he believes to be a woman, only to discover that the person is actually a man.⁵⁰ A very popular and controversial film, it reopened social discussions about homosexuality. In the story, the two men are accosted by a gang who call them “fancy men.” Before the gang can exact violence, however, they are stopped by Americop, who then shoots out their kneecaps.⁵¹ More than a decade after the introduction of Arnie Roth in the pages of *Captain America*, this story shows that homosexuals are still a terrorized and socially outcast community. At the time this story was released, the military’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy, allowing homosexuals to serve in the military only so long as their sexual preferences remained secret, had been in effect for a year.⁵² This policy, like the above-mentioned film, was extremely controversial. Homosexuals had become further ostracized with the advent of AIDS in the early 1980s. In this story, the radically conservative Americop comes to their defense, emphasizing that law and order were beyond any social prejudices.

Superia returns for one final time in the summer of 1994 under the guise of college professor / scientist Dr. Wentworth. She enlists mousy young college co-ed Cathy Webster to undergo experiments on physical augmentation. Webster is also unknowingly being hypnotized with the command “Hate Men! Hunt Men! Hurt Men!”

⁵⁰ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0104036/>

⁵¹ Mark Gruenwald and Dave Hoover, “The Beaten Path,” *Captain America* #429 (New York: Marvel Comics, July, 1994).

⁵² Patterson, *Restless Giant*, 328; Berman, *From the Center to the Edge*, 22.

After several physical confrontations, Webster realizes she has been manipulated and sets out to find Dr. Wentworth under the alias “Free Spirit.”⁵³ The following image shows a powerful contrast to the previous images of domestic violence. Here the woman is the aggressor.



[Image 6-14: *Captain America* #431 (September, 1994), Dave Hoover, Artist]

⁵³ Mark Gruenwald and Dave Hoover, “The Next Generation,” *Captain America* #431 (New York: Marvel Comics, September, 1994).

Free Spirit has been brainwashed to take power away from men and return their subjugation in kind. In the first panel, the men clearly attempt to overpower her, forcing her to reveal her identity. That attempted subjugation is reversed and Free Spirit takes the dominant position. By the bottom of the page, it is she who is standing over the presumably unconscious bodies of her would-be oppressors.

Free Spirit did not remain as a character for long. By the end of the following year, she was no longer in the pages of *Captain America*. She very soon became an over-sexualized caricature, as was increasingly common in comic books in the 1990s.⁵⁴ Men and women in comic books were always idealized, with hyper-masculine and hyper-feminine representations.⁵⁵ In the 1990s, however, as sexualized material in popular culture became more and more prevalent, comic books were at the forefront. As a large portion of their audience was now single, adult men, aged 25-35, women, in particular, were increasingly being portrayed as over-sexualized.⁵⁶ To a large degree, this over-sexualization of women was market-oriented. Though a bone of contention among comic book artists, “sex sells;” and comic books were and are, first and foremost, “male power fantasy.”⁵⁷

⁵⁴ *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked* (The History Channel, 2003, DVD); *Comic Book Confidential*, Ron Mann, Director (Sphinx Productions, 1988, DVD).

⁵⁵ Interview by author with Mark Waid (November 17, 2007).

⁵⁶ Cheryl Wetzstein, “Changing Market Reflected in Comic-Book Content, Cost,” *The Washington Times* (Tuesday, February 22, 2000, Final Edition), <https://www.lexisnexis.com/us/lnacademic/frame.do?tokenKey=rsh-20.990566.8644834028>; *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked* (The History Channel, 2003, DVD); *Comic Book Confidential*, Ron Mann, Director (Sphinx Productions, 1988, DVD); Richard Hall, Interview with Mark Waid (November 17, 2007).

⁵⁷ Richard Hall, Interview with Mark Waid (November 17, 2007).



[Image 6-15: *Captain America* #442 (August, 1995), Dave Hoover, Artist]

As the decade closed, however, the portrayal of women characters once more became less about their sexual attributes than about their abilities. In the fall of 1999, Steve Rogers began dating Connie Ferrari, a defense attorney who closely guarded civil liberties for all, even those obviously guilty of horrible crimes.⁵⁸ By the summer of 2000, Sharon Carter was named as Director of SHIELD during Nick Fury's absence.⁵⁹ In response to these women, the hero of World War II expressed his amazement:

There are times I feel out of place. Different... Watching Sharon Carter take control [of SHIELD] makes this one of those times. When I was a kid [in the early 1930s], women were never in charge. Back then they watched while men, competent or otherwise, had a lock on every position of authority. The role of

⁵⁸ Mark Waid, Jay Faerber, and Patrick Zircher, "Land of the Free," *Captain America [Volume 3] #23* (New York: Marvel Comics, November, 1999).

⁵⁹ Dan Jurgens and Adam Kubert, "Hidden Paths," *Captain America [Volume 3] #31* (New York: Marvel Comics, July, 2000).

women is just one of many changes in a world that's more free, but also more coarse – and in constant need of instant gratification.⁶⁰

As has been seen in the course of the previous chapters, the world of Captain America changed a great deal from December of 1941 through 2001. The separate spheres of the past were forever broken. Women could now be heads of spy agencies, or contemplate global domination. American society progressed to the fulfillment of its promises.

Women now shared in the American Dream that Captain America so long personified.

It is important to note, however, that Captain America's love interests in the 1990s – the villain/hero Diamondback, the defense attorney Connie Ferrari, and Agent-13, Sharon Carter – all represented what Stephanie Genz refers to as “the postfeminist singleton”: “the young, unattached, and mostly city-dwelling woman who is caught between the enjoyment of her independent urban life and her desperate yearning to find ‘Mr. Right’ with whom to settle down.”⁶¹ Despite the gains of women since the 1960s in breaking down the traditional spheres, certain attributes of “femininity” remained culturally dominant at the dawn of the twenty-first century. As Genz observes, the stories of these three characters “depict the struggles of contemporary womanhood to blend and integrate her contradictory aspirations.”⁶² What is additionally relevant in these particular storylines is that Captain America also shares this goal. Indeed, since the 1970s, Captain America has been repeatedly portrayed as someone who seeks out the comforts of home and hearth while at the same time keeping his independence to work as an agent of the American people. As depicted in the pages of *Captain America*, both men

⁶⁰ Dan Jurgens (Story and Art), “Brothers,” *Captain America [Volume 3] #37* (New York: Marvel Comics, January, 2001).

⁶¹ Stephanie Genz, “Singled Out: Postfeminism's ‘New Woman’ and the Dilemma of Having It All,” *The Journal of Popular Culture, Volume 43, Number 1* (Popular Culture Association, 2010), 99.

⁶² Genz, “Singled Out,” 102.

and women by the end of the twentieth century sought to integrate home and work which was, in essence, the very basis of Feminism.

Yet another issue relating to gender in the 1990s was that of female anger. Mary Magoulick states that female heroes of the 1990s represented a higher degree of anger than their male counterparts.⁶³ Sharon Carter perfectly represents this phenomenon. With her return from presumed death in the “Operation: Rebirth” storyline (cover-dated November, 1995), Sharon is angry at Steve Rogers for not coming to look for her when she disappeared. When she discovers that SHIELD had informed him that she was dead (and, in fact, he “saw” her die in 1979), her anger is directed toward all men.⁶⁴ She then spends the next few years working as a mercenary before slowly coming back into the fold of SHIELD, eventually becoming its Acting Director in 2000. Until that point, her storylines repeatedly show her brutally beating men in bars in unnamed Third World countries and on the occasions that she is forced to work with Captain America, she berates him with sarcasm and belittling comments. Sharon Carter is no longer the “stand-by-your-man” woman she was in the 1970s. This is a woman of power, fully independent of any need of men in any situation, and resentful of the life that men have robbed her of for the past decade.

Within the context of the Marvel Universe, there exists no institution on earth more powerful than SHIELD. This fact places Sharon Carter very much in charge of her environment, more so than any man during her tenure. On several occasions, she orders

⁶³ Mary Magoulick, “Frustrating Female Heroism: Mixed Messages in *Xena*, *Nikita*, and *Buffy*,” *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Volume 39, Number 5 (Popular Culture Association, 2006), 733.

⁶⁴ Mark Waid and Ron Garney, “Operation Rebirth, Chapter 1: Old Soldiers Never Die,” *Captain America #445* (New York: Marvel Comics, November, 1995).

Captain America away from his personal life and into action for the Agency; and he dutifully obeys. She clearly possesses power over Cap; and over all of the agents shown in the storylines (all of whom, coincidentally, are male). In the 1990s, more so than in any decade previous, the idea of Captain America taking orders from a woman appears as natural as his taking them from Nick Fury in the years before. At no time does Sharon's gender detract from her authority.

Aside from issues of patriotism, race and gender in American society, *Captain America* also provided a window into the comic book industry itself during this period. The speculator bubble that existed at the dawn of the '90s caused industry leaders Marvel and DC Comics to produce gimmicks to boost sales. Though the industry survived the bust that followed, the speculator boom represented a serious period of uncertainty for the market.⁶⁵ The speculators believed that comic books were prime investments, as was evidenced by such valuable collectables as *Action Comics #1* (1938) and *Detective Comics #27* (1939), each of which were going for tens of thousands of dollars at the beginning of the 1990s.⁶⁶ By 2010, *Action #1* (the debut of Superman) sold for \$1.3 million.

This real-world event was expressed in the pages of *Captain America #425* (cover-dated March, 1994). Steve Rogers – sans costume – stops a young boy who has just stolen several comic books from a comic book store. The boy admits he has no interest in reading them, just hoarding them to re-sell. When Steve returns the comics to

⁶⁵ Joseph Szadkowski, "Comics Industry is Serious Venture; '90s Have Been Boom or Bust for Superheroes," *The Washington Times* (Sunday, September 29, 1996, Final Edition, Part C, "Business," p. C-10), <http://www.lexisnexis.com/us/lnacademic/frame.do?tokenKey=rsh-20.731623.9243972269>.

⁶⁶ Rhoades, *A Complete History of American Comic Books*, 128-9, 135; Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 283; *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked* (DVD).

the owner, the store owner admits that he prefers comic book heroes like Punisher and Wolverine, not only because they take the law into their own hands, but because they sell better. This causes Steve to question whether his type of hero was still relevant in the world.⁶⁷

To answer demand, comic book writers were under tremendous pressure to create storylines that would ultimately drive up sales. DC Comics killed Superman and broke Batman's back in the early '90s.⁶⁸ Marvel Comics – already dominating sales with the various titles built around Spider-Man and the X-Men – came up with a similar gimmick to boost sales of under-performing characters like Iron Man, The Avengers, The Fantastic Four, and Captain America. This culminated in the “Heroes Reborn” series. These four titles were discontinued in a storyline against the mutant villain Onslaught. They sacrificed their lives and “died” in the normal continuity of the Marvel Universe in the summer of 1996. They were then re-launched in the fall under the banner “Heroes Reborn.” Four titles re-introduced the characters from the beginning (though altered “revamped” beginnings) to introduce new readers to these decades-old characters. It was also a sales gimmick, targeting those speculators who were constantly on the look-out for issues touting to be “#1.”

⁶⁷ Mark Gruenwald and Dave Hoover, *Captain America #425* (New York: Marvel Comics, March, 1994).

⁶⁸ Rhoades, *A Complete History of American Comic Books*, 128-9, 135; Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 283; *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked* (DVD).



[Image 6-16: *Captain America [Volume 2] #1* (November, 1997), Rob Liefeld, Artist]

Ultimately, whether due to the poor response by collectors or the desire for yet another sales gimmick, the “Heroes Reborn” series ended after thirteen issues, and the heroes from these four titles were returned to their traditional places within regular Marvel Universe continuity (with all new corresponding #1 titles) beginning around November, 1998. By that time, the speculator bubble had burst. Marvel Comics had filed for bankruptcy. The age of the superhero appeared to be over. Hollywood gave the heroes a boost with the 2000 film *X-Men*; but the event that truly brought the comic book superhero back into the mainstream was the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. For the next decade, as a mourning nation desperately sought heroes, comic book superheroes would once more dominate every form of media.

The final Cap story of Volume Three (cover dated February, 2002; but hitting newsstands around late-November, 2001) portrayed the death of Captain America (the fourth death since 1995). In that story, Captain America is sent by SHIELD Director Nick Fury to investigate a suspected bomb threat. The trail leads Cap to a community of former Nazis, brought to the U.S. during World War II and held ever since. This group had produced a cult around the image of the Red Skull, and had obtained somehow an atomic device that they planned to launch against the American people. To stop their plans, Cap causes it to explode on site, killing the Skull cult and himself as well. The remainder of the issue consisted of stories about the reaction to Captain America’s death, from other heroes, villains, and even children.⁶⁹ Likely written and drawn in the weeks

⁶⁹ Brian David-Marshall and Igor Kordey, “Relics,” *Captain America [Volume 3] #50* (New York: Marvel Comics, February, 2002).

before 9/11, the emotions prevalent throughout the issue were consistent with those of the nation in the wake of the attacks: confusion, heartbreak, and anger.



[Image 6-7: *Captain America [Volume 3] #50* (February, 2002), Igor Kordey, Artist]

This was the final image of Captain America in 2001. The hero of World War II was surrounded by an army of images of his decades-long nemesis, the very representation of evil. Once more saving America from an attack from within, trying to get rid of a nuclear explosive device before innocents could be hurt, Captain America gave his life, not unlike the passengers of United Airlines Flight 93, striving to prevent their plane from being used as a weapon against innocents on September 11. Dan Jurgens, the writer for *Captain America* at this time observed:

In terms of working on Cap at the time of 9/11, I must say that there was a tremendous hollow feeling at the time. America was felled by the very type of attack that Cap, more than any other hero, was supposed to prevent. That's why he became something of a symbol in its wake.⁷⁰

This Post-9/11 America was a time for heroes like no period in the country's history since such heroes had first been created prior to World War II. The divisions in America that were central to the "America Lost" story leading up to 9/11 were – temporarily – all but gone. America was united as it was after Pearl Harbor sixty years before.

Jason Dittmer points out, "The events of 9/11 provided an opportunity for *Captain America* to return to its origins, with a clear geopolitical script, free of the ambiguity and complexity introduced since the 1960s."⁷¹ Just as the superheroes represented a powerful response to the threats of Nazism and Japanese imperialism sixty years before, in the Post-9/11 world, they represented once more a strong, unified, American response to aggression and hate. As was seen in all media at the time – television, film, video-games, and comic books – superheroes in general and Captain America in particular were more popular than they had been in decades. Just as in the

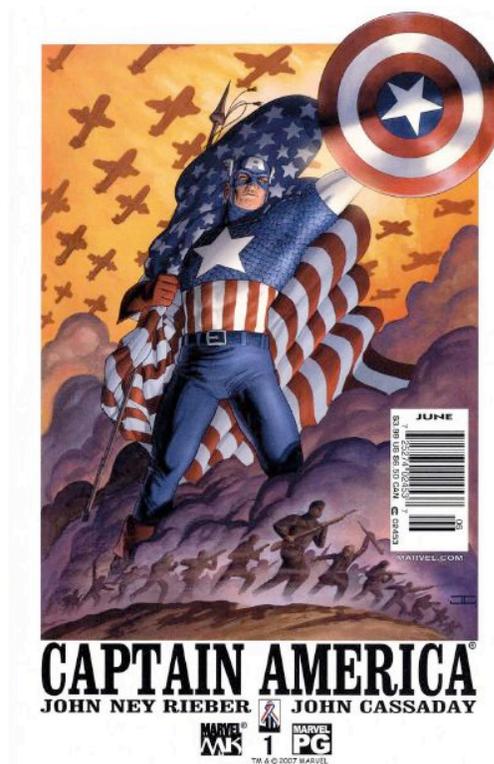
⁷⁰ Richard Hall, Interview with Dan Jurgens (November 16, 2010).

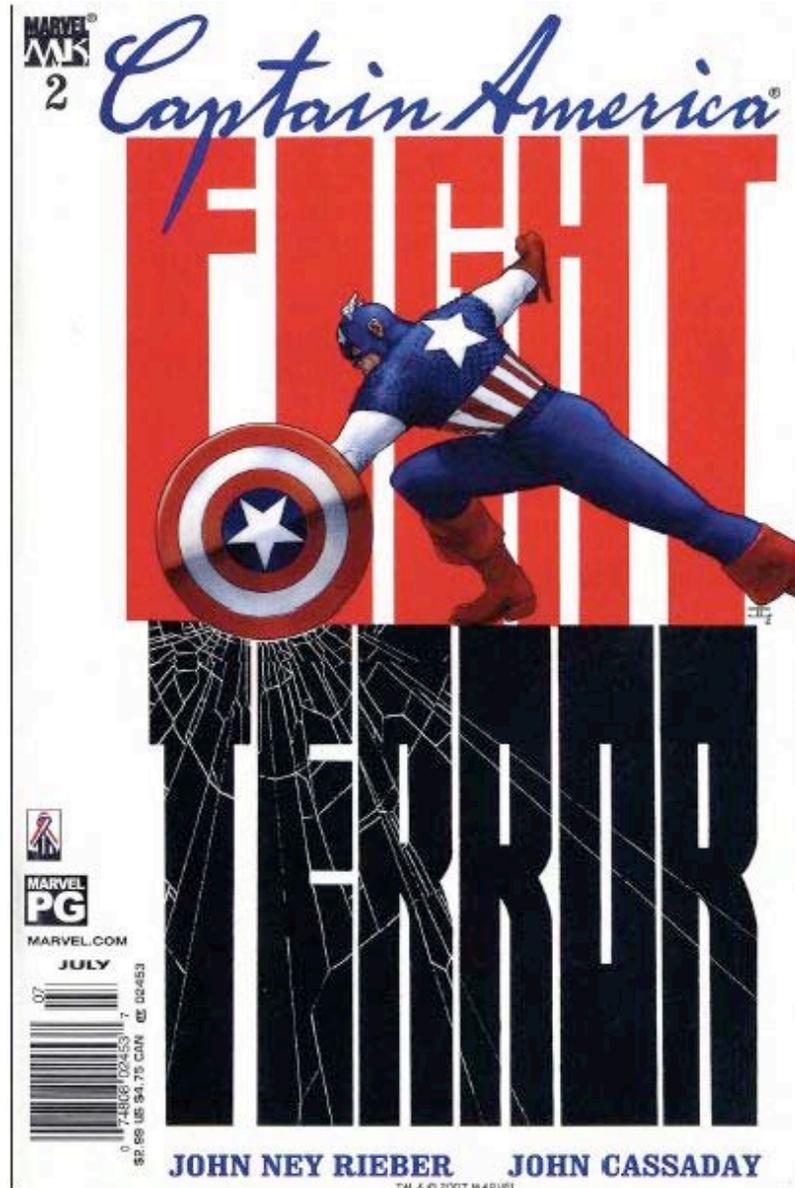
⁷¹ Jason Dittmer, "Captain America's Empire: Reflections on Identity, Popular Culture, and Post-9/11 Geopolitics," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Volume 95, No. 3 (2005), 637.

waning days of the Great Depression, or the challenges of World War II and the Cold War, America needed heroes. The idea of a powerful force taking care of the masses was once more appealing to Americans. The superhero had returned.

CONCLUSION:
THE POST-9/11 CAPTAIN AMERICA

After the events of 9/11, Captain America found his audience anew. In March, 2002, the title was re-launched with a new #1, beginning a fourth “run.” For the first time since the end of the Cold War, the issues of what it meant to be “American” and what this country does and should stand for suddenly again became important to readers. However, as America’s “War on Terror” lost support both at home and abroad, the questions took on still new meaning: for what does America stand; and how should it go about achieving its goals?





[Images C-01 and C-02: *Captain America (Volume IV)*, No's 1 and 2 (June and July, 2002), John Cassaday, Artist]

As the images above show, Captain America in the wake of 9/11 represented a strong American unity in the face of terrorist threat. By the time these issues were being produced, the United States had begun its invasion of Afghanistan and had overthrown the rule of the Taliban regime, supporters of Osama bin Ladin and his al Quaida

organization. This run of *Captain America* ran through 2004 and focused a great deal on the question of what America would stand for in a post-9/11 world.

Writer Ed Brubaker took the reins of *Captain America* beginning with Number 1 of Volume 5 in January, 2005. As the War on Terror – by this time having expanded to include an invasion and occupation of Iraq – and the administration of President George W. Bush began to lose popular support, Captain America, too, began to question the role of America and what America had become in the eyes of the world. In one storyline examining the relevance of the World War II hero – and his corresponding ideals – in a post-9/11 world, Captain America, Steve Rogers, was killed in an issue in early 2007. This sparked a great deal of analysis in the mainstream media concerning whether the United States in the twenty-first century was behaving in ways that were still consistent with the values of the so-called “Greatest Generation.”¹ Marvel’s opinion was that we no longer were. The values Captain America had represented since the waning days of the Great Depression were no longer the same as those represented by President Bush.

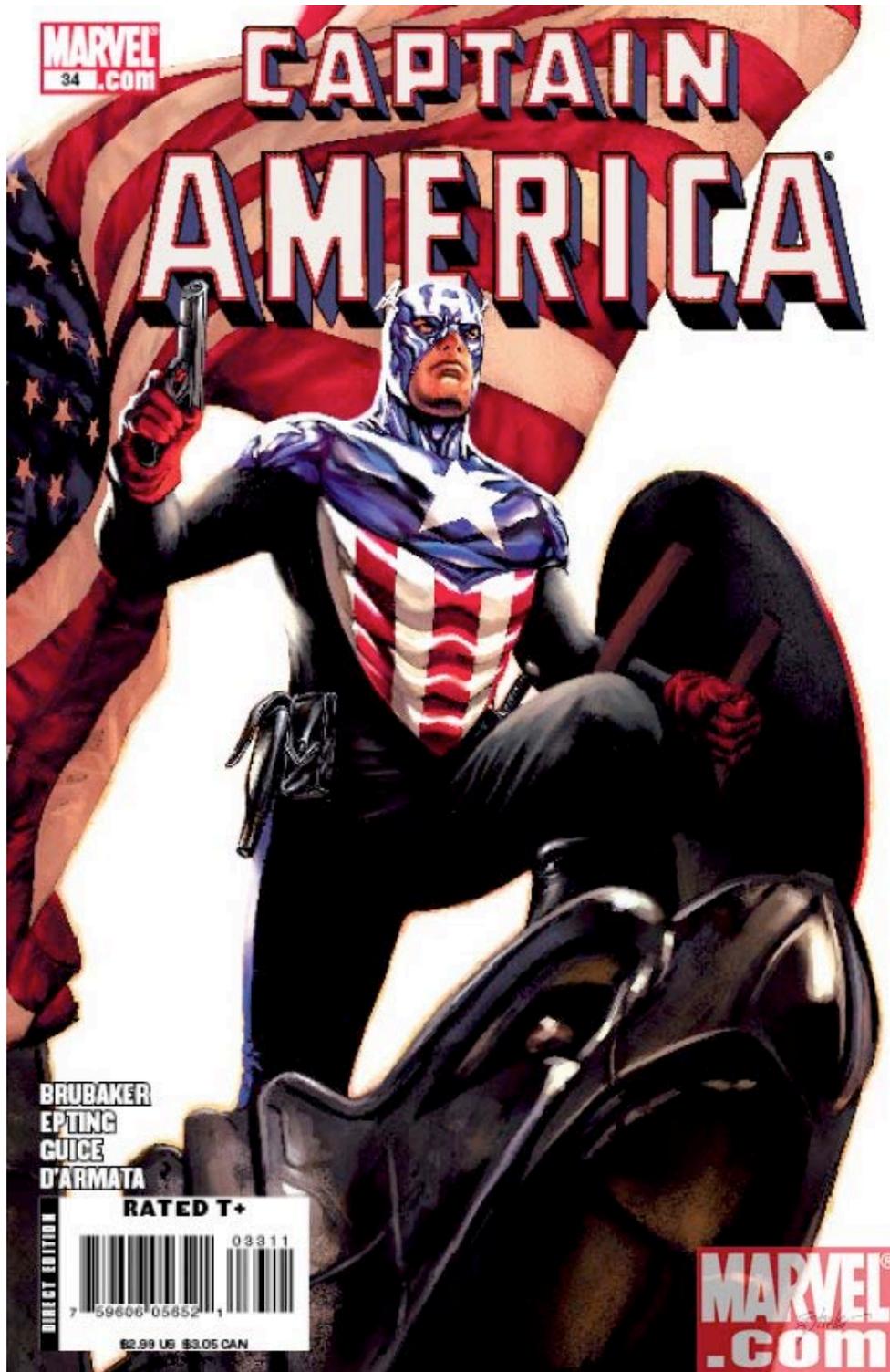
His replacement to don the shield was his old World War II partner, Bucky Barnes. Though for decades believed killed during the same mission that sent Captain America into the ice, the writers revealed that Bucky was also thrown free of the explosion and discovered later by the Soviet Union, where his missing arm was replaced with a “bionic” one, and he was brainwashed and trained him to be the perfect assassin, the Winter Soldier.

¹ News Articles Related to Death of Captain America:
<http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=2934283&page=1> ;
<http://today.msnbc.msn.com/id/17499797/ns/today-entertainment/>



[Image C-03: *Captain America (Volume V), No. 6* (June, 2005), Steve Epting, Artist]

Originally a deadly adversary of Captain America, the reformed Winter Soldier, now free of his communist brain-washing, agreed to take on the mantle of Captain America, as was the final written request of Steve Rogers. His Captain America would be different, however, carrying a gun and knife in addition to his symbolic shield. This more militant and more aggressive Captain appeared to be more in line with the popular perception of twenty-first century America (both at home and abroad).



[Image C-04: *Captain America (Volume V), No. 34* (November, 2007), Steve Epting, Artist]

Once more, Captain America became an issue to debate. Since December, 1940, Captain America had gone from stalwart defender of freedom and liberty, to a fully-armed

assassin, draped in the colors of America. The message was that America was a mere shadow of its former greatness, and in dire need of redemption.

To many – and, in particular to Brubaker and the editorial staff at Marvel Comics – the United States appeared to have begun the road to that redemption in 2009, when the election of President Barack Obama took office on a wave of hope for the future. By January, 2010, Steve Rogers returned. However, rather than re-taking the mantle of Captain America, Rogers, at the request of President Obama, returned to action in a higher position: as head of both the spy agency, SHIELD, and of the super-hero team The Avengers (of which the new Captain America became a member). As in decades past, then, Captain America continues to represent a point of contention by both ends of the political spectrum. To liberals, Captain America continues to be a representation for the status quo and American hegemony on the world stage. To conservatives, he continues to be a social idealist, the very representation of ethical relativism. A close study of the texts of the comics over the decades proves that Captain America has been and continues to simultaneously be both and neither.

As the previous chapters attest, comic books and comic book superheroes – and Captain America in particular – represent a fascinating window into the history of the United States. At the same time that the United States was becoming a super-power on the world stage, the comic book superhero – a distinctly American phenomenon – was introduced and embraced by the popular culture. Throughout the decades since, *Captain America* has mirrored its times, both reflecting the real world from which it was conceived and simultaneously attempting to influence that world by affecting the minds

of its readers. To many, however, particularly those who have never read the comic books themselves, the appearance of Captain America represents staunch American nationalism and hegemony.

In the forward to the second edition of Robert Jewett's *The Captain America Complex*, published in the wake of America's invasion of the small island nation of Grenada in 1983 to overthrow its communist regime, William Coffin proclaims: "[This book] is about American self-righteousness, about all things in our history and culture that keep prompting the thought in American minds that of all nations on earth, God smiles the most on ours."² Later Jewett, himself, explains:

Captain America's approach to peacemaking, so to speak, derives from a pervasive tradition and its power is manifest even in the ways that many who oppose current militarization visualize the problem. The American sense of mission influences both the supporters of militant rearmament and the advocates of a nuclear freeze. Yet to a substantial degree this influence is invisible. The public is largely unaware of the origins of its convictions about peace-making or how they are conveyed.³

In an updated study, *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil*, published in the wake of 9/11 and co-authored with John Shelton Lawrence, Jewett repeats his thesis:

The "Captain America Complex" that we describe in the following pages is the uneasy fusion of two kinds of roles. Should America be the 'city set upon a hill' that promotes the rule of law even when faced with difficult adversaries? Or should it crusade on the military plane of battle, allowing no law or institution to impede its efforts to destroy evil? As we completed the text of this manuscript in the winter of 2001-2002... our premonitions concerning zealotry's seductive call are being confirmed.⁴

While Jewett's argument may have validity with regard to certain aspects of popular thought and governmental actions and thinking in both periods, the connection he makes

² William Coffin, "Forward," *The Captain America Complex: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism* (Santa Fe: Bear & Company, 1984), vii.

³ Robert Jewett, *The Captain America Complex*, 9.

⁴ Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), xiii.

to the character of Captain America is not consistent with the texts to which they refer. Citing only three monthly issues of the comic book in the two separate studies (and taking much of their interpretations of those citations out of context), Coffin, Jewett, and Lawrence all add to the popular misconception that the Captain America character represents the U.S. government and its various international machinations during the Cold War and in the wake of 9/11.

The analysis presented in this study of the entirety of Captain America comic books from 1940 through 2001 dramatically refutes these claims. While the general image of Captain America does bring to mind staunch American nationalism, the texts of the stories over the decades – as well as the personal insights of several of the authors of those stories – consistently show the character to represent a more nuanced and, in many ways, liberal stand on the issue of patriotism, while simultaneously highlighting the value of the changes in American society regarding perceptions of race and gender relations in the decades since World War II.

Captain America and Patriotism

Introduced as he was in 1940 clad in stars and stripes, red, white, and blue, Captain America has always been a symbol of the United States and nationalism. Beginning as he did as a poster-child against Hitler, in the year leading up to Pearl Harbor, Captain America represented a growing anti-Nazi sentiment in America. Throughout the war, he represented American might and American right. In the immediate post-war period, Captain America became a standard superhero, a symbol of social justice; and, also like many other superheroes, disappeared at decade's end as the

genre became less commercially successful. During his brief 1954 run, he returned as the “Commie Smasher.”

Just as the early 1950s have become in memory a period of radical conservatism and anti-communist witch-hunts, the Commie-Smasher Captain America has also fallen into that stereotype. A closer look at the stories, however, shows the heart of the character’s anti-communist ideology as more in line with his stand against fascism: that it threatened individual liberty. Communism in the 1950s was viewed as totalitarian first and foremost, not different in nature from Nazism of a decade earlier. In this regard, Captain America in 1954 represented a worldview that was consistent with that adopted by his earlier incarnation. Though clearly a symbol of the anti-communist crusade, the character was more focused on protecting America from totalitarianism and communism than he was dedicated to progressive or more egalitarian concepts themselves. Once more, however, the lack of commercial interest in superheroes caused the book to be cancelled just three issues into its run.

After the birth of the “Age of Marvel” in the early 1960s, Marvel editor-in-chief Stan Lee, who had first started his writing career with Captain America, brought back the World War II hero. Reappearing just after the assassination of President John Kennedy, Captain America returned to popular culture just as that culture was fracturing. The period of “The Sixties” was just beginning. For the last five years of the decade, Captain America represented a cautious response to the growing liberalism of American youth culture. While respecting society’s right to protest, he represented a more traditional, respectful approach to such protest, questioning the extremes to which many protesters carried their resistance.

In the 1970s, Captain America confronted his own patriotism when he discovered that President Nixon was at the heart of a massive conspiracy to take over the American government. No longer able to justify his wearing of American colors, Captain America resigned and became the hero Nomad, the Man Without a Country. Once the Watergate scandal began to subside, he returned to his traditional role, believing that America needed a Captain America more than ever. Throughout the 1980s, Captain America would repeatedly pose the question of what it means to be American, in general, and Captain America, in particular, to the point of being removed from his role for a few years, replaced by the government with a more conservative Captain, John Walker.

As the Cold War drew to a close, writers were confronted with the issue of what Captain America would represent in the new world order of the post-Cold War era. This, along with renewed market fluctuations in the comic book industry, left the hero in a constant state of flux throughout the 1990s. Just as the title was scheduled to be cancelled once more, the events of September 11, 2001, made the character relevant once more, as America faced new threats in a new century. Even then, however, Captain America remained a stalwart of the center, relatively speaking. As mainstream media often focuses on political polarization within American society, Captain America consistently represented a slightly-left-of-center approach to America's role in the world.

Captain America and Race

One of the main issues facing America since the Great Depression has been race relations. During World War II, traditional racial stereotypes were present in the pages of *Captain America Comics*, with Asians and African-Americans portrayed as racial stereotypes. This, however, is a perfect example of how the comic books reflected society at the time, as these stereotypes were widely regarded as standard throughout popular culture.

Until the 1960s, comic book superheroes were universally white. Marvel Comics stood as the front-runner in racially integrating comic book superheroes with the creation of the Black Panther, whose alter-ego was T'Challa, King of the fictional African kingdom of Wakanda. The first African-American superhero was introduced in the pages of *Captain America* in 1969. Beginning in 1970, and continuing throughout most of the decade, The Falcon shared title credits with Captain America in the heroes' monthly adventures, with many stories focusing on the growing conflict in the African-American populated inner-cities.

In the 1980s, Captain America addressed the plight of Native-Americans, and in the 1990s that of Hispanic-Americans. As the twenty-first century dawned, a continuing theme in the pages of *Captain America* was how racial divisions in America were still extant, and threatened to allow our enemies to use those divisions against us to destroy America if Americans continued to allow them to fester. As America began its "War on Terror," the hero confronted the issue of Muslim and Arab-Americans and how race (and now ethnicity, culture, and religion) continued to be a divisive issue that threatens American unity and prosperity.

Captain America and Gender

The very image of Captain America brings to mind not only issues of patriotism and race, but also that of gender. In the 1940s, *Captain America Comics* presented women as strong, vital members of the pre-war effort. Whereas Superman's famous love interest, Lois Lane, was a reporter, Captain America's paramour, Betty [though, at first, Betsy] Ross, was at first an FBI agent and then, once the war began, an officer in the Women's Army Corps. In both these roles, Ross was usually an ally of Captain America in his efforts against America's enemies. After the war, Betty Ross joined Cap's alter-ego, Steve Rogers, as a teacher in a private school before ultimately becoming Captain America's partner in the form of Golden Girl. This was consistent with the war-time policies toward women, urging them into the workplace and military service in greater numbers than at any time before.

As women were urged back to the homefront by the end of the 1940s, when Captain America returned to publication in 1954, not only was Betty Ross no longer Captain America's partner – nor did she any longer know his secret identity – she was relegated to the role of reporter more consistent with the traditional Lois Lane-type role, in need of Captain America to save her from villains. Unlike the patriotic or racial aspects of the 1954 run, however, this represented more of a reversal of what came before. It was, however, consistent with how American society tended to present women and expect women to behave during the conservative 1950s, different, though, that perception was from the reality.

Beginning in the mid-1960s, a character was introduced that was both different from her comic book contemporaries and consistent with the growing “New Woman” of

the post-Friedan women's movement. First appearing in *Tales of Suspense* #75 (1965), Sharon Carter, Agent-13 of SHIELD, became Captain America's love interest and occasional partner. Unlike more popular contemporaries such as Wonder Woman and Batgirl, Agent-13 was not an oversexualized character. Her wardrobe was not revealing and she did not wear stiletto high-heeled boots. Instead, she wore utilitarian clothing (uniform with her fellow male agents) and boots more fitting for combat. In the 1970s, she became a member of Femme Force, a special assault team of SHIELD. In the 1990s, she was a rogue agent, working on her own and taking out villains on her own, with no assistance from the male hero; and prior to 9/11 she spent some time as Director of SHIELD. In fact, with the exception of a brief mid-1970s storyline that saw her as a stay-at-home love interest pining for her hero, Sharon Carter was consistently portrayed as a strong, independent, fully-realized character in her own right.

In the 1980s – while Carter was presumed dead – women in the pages of *Captain America* were once more portrayed in ways that were consistent with their portrayal in the broader popular culture. Often villainesses and even more often sexually aggressive, female characters were portrayed with all the independence and self-actualization consistent with the socio-economic gains women in American society had made during the 1970s. Just as the musical artist Madonna on MTV, local journalist Oprah Winfrey, and the fictional Alexis Carrington-Colby-Dexter on the nighttime soap opera *Dynasty*, the women of *Captain America* in the 1980s represented a stark contrast to the women of the hero's origins in the Great Depression. Women had arrived and were becoming forces to be reckoned with.

A proper study of gender, however, goes beyond that of women. As mentioned before, superheroes, by their nature, represent the masculine ideal: brave, strong, and, above all, heterosexual. The early 1980s saw the introduction of a heroic homosexual character in the form of Steve Rogers's childhood friend, Arnie Roth. Though never overtly referred to as homosexual – due primarily to the precarious perception of homosexuals at the height of the AIDS scare of the 1980s – hints were given by the writer J.M. DeMatteis to present him as such. When the Red Skull attempts to get at Captain America through his cohorts – his African-American partner, his Jewish-American girlfriend, and his homosexual friend – it is Roth who stands strong in the face of torture at the hands of the Skull. Through Roth, DeMatteis portrayed a character that was in every way heroic. Roth was brave, loyal, and unbending in the face of evil. As such, heroism was presented as not something that is necessarily hetero/hyper-masculine, but can exist in an individual regardless of that person's sexual preference.

Captain America's own perception of and reaction to women is also significant. Beginning in the 1960s, the World War II-era hero is resistant to women fighting alongside men (though he did so during the war and after). In the 1980s, he is consistently uncomfortable with the increasing sexual freedom that women were expressing. In post-war America, Captain America represented all men in his often-confused and occasionally-contradictory opinions about women. As seen in Chapter 6, even in the 1990s, Captain America confessed his confusion regarding the change in women since the war.

Captain America and American Society

As is the case with other periodicals, including satire, comic books are reflections of their times. They are produced by American writers and artists for American audiences. They are America. Through them, the changes in America since the Great Depression can be seen and analyzed. Since World War II, the United States has consistently and continuously faced the question of what is patriotism and what makes a patriot. Though political, racial, and gendered divisions have been a constant, the idea of America and what is best about America has remained relatively unchanged, as the character of Captain America perhaps best represents. As the gods of myth teach much about the ancient Greeks and Romans, so, too, may the spandex-clad heroes of modern myth teach much about America as a super-power.

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