

PATRIOTISM TO SKEPTICISM:
CAPTAIN AMERICA AND THE
CHANGING CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

by

BRANDI MONTANA HODO

LUKE NILER, COMMITTEE CHAIR
FREDERICK WHITING
STACY MORGAN

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ABSTRACT

Since the early 1930s, the genre of comic books have featured stories to amaze, to frighten, and to entertain readers. However, comic books are not just forms of entertainment, but cultural artifacts that mirror and, at times, analyze the attitudes of a particular period. In this thesis, I am using Captain America as a way to trace the changes in popular American culture, from the character's inception in March of 1941 until the 2009 creation of a new Captain America.

This study, using the framework of New Historicism, details the history of the character through the World War II, the Cold War, the Vietnam War, the Watergate Scandal, and the post-9/11 eras. The purpose of this study is to see how the Captain's attitudes and actions reflect those of his readers.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most unappreciated barometers of social change is the genre of comic books¹. When flipping through the pages of the latest installment of their favorite series, comic book readers are met with images of the latest fashions, music styles, and other fads. However, while comic books feature many of a particular time's superficial trends, they also show the reader some of the more deeply held truths of their society. For much of the time that comic books have been produced, they have been viewed with derision and marked as anti-educational by many scholars. In 1954, Dr. Frederick Wertham published his work *Seduction of the Innocent*, where he argues that comic books are a leading factor in the declining morals of America's youth. It is now held to be true that comic books are not just simple entertainment, but are important cultural artifacts. Comic books transcend time and provide readers with a snapshot of the cultural climate in which they are produced. As with any piece of literature, comic books must be analyzed in the context of the time that they were created.

While superhero comic books are found in nearly every country, they have long been viewed as a distinctly American phenomenon. As such, one can view the history of a particular comic book series and trace the changes in popular American society's cultural sentiments. Nowhere are the changes in American society more evident than in the pages of the *Captain*

¹ I have chosen to use the term comic book instead of graphic novel in this study. I made this choice because the material that I will be discussing was published in a single issue format. The term graphic novel is more appropriate when discussing longer works that are meant to stand alone or collections of single issue comics into a trade paperback format.

America comic book series. Since the series' inception in 1941, Captain America has reflected the ever changing, popular ideals of American society. In the 1940s, Captain America reflected some of the hyper-patriotism the country embodied during World War II. The Cold War Commie Smasher Captain personified the McCarthy era's fear of outsiders. The Nixon era Captain took on a new persona because of his disillusionment with the administration. Many Captain America fans have often been off put by their perceptions of Captain America's undying devotion to his country. To many he is seen as no more than a puppet who fails to question the motivations of the government that he serves. However, the modern Captain Americas have not shown the blind patriotism that the golden age Captain espoused. These Captain Americas have increasingly questioned the decisions of the government. Despite some critics' claims that the character only represents a smaller ruling class of America, I argue that throughout its history the *Captain America Comics* franchise has reflected the greater social and political concerns of America.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to trace the character from his inception in 1941 to the post 9/11 Captain that is featured in comic books today. I will use the character of Captain America as a critical lens to examine how popular American sentiments have evolved over the sixty year history of the character. To accomplish this study, I will employ a critical framework that relies on the theories of the Greenblatt school of New Historicists. Particularly relevant to this study are the notions that "every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices," "that literary and non-literary "texts" circulate inseparably" and "that no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths nor expresses inalterable human nature" (Veeser xi). This view allows for a study which involves texts, such as comic books, that fall outside of the traditional sense of literature and recognizes them as equally relevant to

cultural studies. New Historicism allows for the inclusion of non-canonical texts into the realms of academic criticism because it denies the notions of exclusivity of “high art” when considering what is defined as literature.

New Historicism also allows for the inclusion of historical settings in the analysis of literature. Thus, an analysis of a particular text is tied to the culture that produced it. In the words of Stephen Greenblatt, I seek to examine “what is the historical relation between art and society or between one institutionally demarcated discursive practice and another” (5). This study takes the “low-art” form of comic books and relates them to American society as a whole. What do the actions of Captain America represent? Who is the Captain functioning as an avatar for? Why is it the Captain that represents the popular values of America and not other characters?

In the first chapter, I will address the origins of the Captain America character. This will include a discussion of the motivations and backgrounds of the character’s creators, Jack Kirby and Joe Simon. The chapter will also discuss the Jewish roots of the Captain’s character. Chapter two will focus on the portrayals of African American characters within the Captain America mythos. I must note that this chapter breaks the chronological order of the other chapters as the story of the Black Captain America, Isaiah Bradley, was not published until 2002. However, the story is set in the same period as chapter one and I feel it is important to examine the two side by side. In chapter three, I will briefly examine the era between the 1950s Captain America and the modern post-9/11 Captain. Included in this chapter will be the Captain’s short run in the 1950s, the avoidance of the Vietnam War, and the break from the government in the Watergate Era. Chapter four will focus on the modern Captain Americas. I will focus on the mainstream Captain Americas, Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes, and I will also discuss the role of the Ultimate Captain America.

However, before entering into my analysis of the Captain America series, there is a piece of comic book lore that I need to address. Specifically, I want to explain the idea of worlds or universes that I will be discussing throughout the paper. While the knowledge of multiple universes is common to the average comic book reader, it can be disconcerting for those unfamiliar with the genre. When I refer to the “Marvel Universe,” I am referencing the mainstream universe that most comic book fans are aware. This Marvel Universe, in the comic world called Marvel 616, is where much of the stories discussed in this paper occur. I will also refer to the “Ultimate Universe.” This universe was launched in 2000 and hosts many familiar heroes. However, this universe tends to be more violent and sexualized as Marvel wanted to draw in younger readers. The final universe that I will refer to is the “real world,” which is our world, the world of the reader. I use this term because at times the events occurring in the pages of Captain America so closely mirror that of our own, there needs to be a delimiter to alert readers as to which world is being referred.

With my study of the changing attitudes of the Captain America characters, I hope to present a clear analysis of how the series, and its creators, have used the comic as a vehicle to discuss many social issues that have occurred during the character’s existence. I mention the creators because I want to address the fact that although the character has just reached its sixtieth anniversary, many men and women have influenced the character. They each bring their own experiences and ideals to the character. Thus, Captain America can truly be a reflection of any time period in which he is drawn. It is also important to note that a comic book is not created in an artistic vacuum. Each issue of Captain America can have up to a dozen people working on it from initial ideas to publication. Each book will have a writer, an artist (known as a penciller), an inker, a letter, and multiple editors. This shows that each issue is a well thought out and a

thought provoking experience for readers. Throughout this paper, I will discuss the motivations of the comic book's artistic team, as they frequently note that they intend for their works to represent something greater than just ink on the paper.

The goal of this study is to present the reader several "snap shots" of the Captain America character throughout his history. These snapshots will be examined in both the character's world and in relation to the real world. By analyzing these particular moments in time, the reader will have a greater perception of how the "art" of the comic book, both through plot and images, reflects the ideals and anxieties of the "society" in which it was produced. As previously mentioned, art is not created in a vacuum and to understand the symbols and ideals represented in each rendering, one must look to the history surrounding its creation. Using this lens of art and historical interaction, I seek to answer the question of what America is it that Captain America represents.

CHAPTER ONE

WORLD WAR II AND THE CREATION OF AMERICA'S "SUPER PATRIOT"

“A new powerful figure and his young ally, born of the courage of America, leads the U.S. Army out of a raging inferno of terror and sabotage!” exclaims the opening page of *Captain America Comics #1* (Kirby and Simon 2). The mentioned figures, emblazoned with the colors of the American flag, are Captain America and his loyal sidekick Bucky Barnes. Over the course of the next four years, these two characters, created by Jack Kirby and Joe Simon, would become an emblem of war time America's culture and values. Captain America would come to represent the determination, strength and integrity of the American spirit. The comic would prove to be a commercial success, as readers snatched up copies and millions were sold every month. Captain America was the embodiment of the perfect citizen and young readers followed his courageous adventures with awe. When modern readers peruse copies of Captain America's golden age they are transported to a time where patriotism and justice were esteemed above all. The Captain America of the 1940s was a figure that embodied the patriotic ideals of a nation and symbolized the dreams of the American Jewish community.

The first inklings of the character that would later become Captain America were written down in early 1940. At the time, Nazi Germany's forces had spread across most of Europe. The United States government was publicly espousing its policy of isolationism, all the while supplying the Allied troops with weapons and other forms of aid. However, it was becoming increasingly clear to many American citizens that it would only be a matter of time before the country would have to face the forces of the Third Reich. Kirby biographer Ronin Ro notes that

as Hitler's armies conquered increasing amounts of Europe, "Congress realized that America might soon be at war and encouraged various publishers to promote literary themes that inspired national patriotism" (13). Congress accomplished this objective by creating the Office of War Information. The organization prompted the "entertainment industry to raise American morale, encourage public cooperation and participation in the war effort, identify the menace of the Axis powers, and inform audiences about the progressive war aims pursued by the United States and its allies . . ." (Wright 35). Although the main focus of the OWI was the motion picture industry, their influence spread to many other entertainment genres. One of the first mediums to answer the call for war propaganda was the comic book industry. As most comic books are mass produced cheaply and on a monthly basis, the medium would prove to be a valuable asset to the American war propaganda movement. Soon after Congress' announcement, superheroes, like Superman, began to fight mostly unidentified, foreign enemies. The message these comics promoted was clear; the American people were ready to stand up against the forces of evil.

By early 1941, "as the U.S. mobilization was well underway, comic books had already gone to war" (Wright 31). However, most superheroes stayed their courses, by continuing to fight the same at-home foes that they had previously tangled with month after month. This refusal by many comic book publishers to recognize the greater war effort paved the way for a new hero that would face the Axis powers and show them the might of America. Captain America creator Joe Simon noted that the "patriotic frenzy" of the 1940s called for the creation of "a super patriot" (qtd in Albright and Hayton 15). Thus, the young team of Kirby and Simon would soon create a character that would fulfill those guidelines.

In his book *Tales to Astonish*, Ro gives the following account of Simon's first draft of the character:

He outlined a human figure and added bulging muscles, an armored jersey, tights, gloves and boots. "I drew a star on his chest and colored the costume red, white, and blue," he [Simon] explained. Then he gave him a shield and red-and-white stripes on his torso (under a blue chest). . . . He wrote the name "Super American" on the bottom of the first sketch but immediately changed his mind. "Captain America," he wrote over it. (14-15)

This rough sketch was fine-tuned and soon the character that would become an American icon was born. It is interesting to note that Simon's original title for the character was "Super American." This name follows in the vein of the popular Superman model of heroes. However, it also implies an otherness to the character. By naming the character Captain America, the character becomes more concrete and identifiable for readers. A regular person has the ability to become a soldier and serve his country. They do not, however, have the ability to become a super-human. In early 1941, Simon and Kirby's editor Martin Goldman saw the first sketch of the character and immediately commissioned the duo to write enough stories to fill an entire comic book.

In March of 1941, Captain America arrived on the scene with a bang. *Captain America Comics* first cover features the all-American hero delivering a punch in the face to Nazi Germany's chancellor Adolf Hitler. The inclusion of Hitler on the cover proved shocking to many within the comic book industry. Despite the fact that Hitler had risen to power in 1933, many people within the industry felt uncomfortable with the idea of naming the Fuhrer as the enemy or "heavy" that their superheroes were going to face. Even Simon's and Kirby's editor

Goodman was reluctant to have the duo put Hitler on the inaugural cover. However, Goodman's reluctance was not because of any political reason, but he feared that by the time the first issue of the comic was published that Hitler would have been assassinated (Moser 25). As other comic book writers refused to explicitly name Hitler and the Nazis as villains for their heroes to fight, Simon and Kirby felt the need to make the enemy of their patriotic superhero clear. Thus, Captain America began his tenure as America's hero by facing the country's biggest enemy head on. Danny Fingeroth asserts that Captain America's blow to the Fuhrer's face "was a literal and figurative punch in the face of fascism, and a powerful propaganda tool" (58). Although the country he represented was still in peace time the image of Captain America was saying "here is how you can use your gifts, America - to help those in need and distress!" (Fingeroth 18).

Captain America proved to be one of the most powerful propaganda tools that the American war effort could ask for. The Captain was a pure embodiment of patriotism. The United States had previously based their patriotism on a sense of isolationism. The new patriotism that the Captain embodies is that of an aggressive, engaging action. The Captain embodies the idea that it is no longer acceptable to remain passive in the face of injustice, but as Americans, the Captain and other like him must actively protect their country against outside forces.

Readers first see the Captain as Steve Rogers, a frail young man who wanted to serve his country. However, Rogers is rejected by the army because he does not meet the minimum physical standards for military service. So great was Rogers' dedication to his country that he volunteered to be part of Operation Rebirth, a secret program whose goal was to create a super soldier serum. In a secret laboratory, the serum proved successful as Rogers gained the ability

to quickly heal and also amazing levels of strength, speed, and agility. However, only moments after the successful transformation of Rogers, a Nazi sleeper agent kills the serum's creator Doctor Josef Reinstein. It is important to note that the creation of Captain America was made possible by the Jewish Doctor Reinstein. The character is created in both the real and imaginative universes by Jewish men. With the Nazi agent's bullet the secret of the serum's formula dies along with Reinstein and thus, Steve Rogers becomes America's protector, Captain America. The Captain and his sidekick Bucky bravely fought Nazi forces page after colorful page.

While the Captain was not the first patriotic superhero, he proved to be the most popular. Every month readers rushed to their local news stands to purchase the next copy of *Captain America Comics*. When reflecting on the early days of the comic, creator Simon recalls:

The U.S. hadn't yet entered the war when Jack and I did Captain America, so maybe he was our way of lashing out against the Nazi menace. Evidently, Captain America symbolized, if that's the correct word, the American people's sentiments. When we were producing Captain America, we were outselling Batman, Superman, and all the others (qtd. in Rhodes 33).

The comic was so popular that following the publication of the first issue there were nearly a million copies of the book sold every month (Ro 20). In the aftermath of the Captain's introduction "there came a platoon of red, white, and blue spangled superheroes: American Avenger, American Crusader, American Eagle, Commando Yank, Fighting Yank, Captain Flag, Captain Freedom, Captain Courageous, Captain Glory . . ." and so forth (Yanes 57). However, none could compete with the popularity of the Captain. *Captain America Comics*

were not only popular with readers on the home front, but also with many American soldiers who had been deployed in the aftermath of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Statistics show that every one in four magazines that were shipped to troops were comic books (Weinstein 53). The Captain allowed readers to feel as if they were supporting the American war effort. However, it soon proved that not everyone was a fan of the Captain or his ideals. Simon, Kirby, and their employers Timely Comics (later known as Marvel Comics) were flooded with hate mail filled with death threats. The situation became so serious that “New York mayor Fiorello La Guardia stationed police at the company’s 42nd Street Offices to protect it against the threats from homegrown Nazis angered by Captain America’s comics stories” (Fingerroth 57). While no acts of violence actually occurred, the situation alerted Americans that danger was lurking closer than originally thought. Although American propaganda pictures the country as strictly anti-Nazi, the actions of the Captain’s detractors proved that some American people espoused the ideology of the Nazis. Thus, Americans and the Captain had to combat prejudice and injustice both in the foreign war fields and at home.

However, it must be noted that while Captain America was created as a symbol of the American people as a whole; the character carries a greater significance to a specific ethnic group: the Jewish community. One must realize that the comic book industry in America was largely founded by Jewish authors and artists (Fingerroth 17). The genesis of what is now considered to be the comic book industry was based in New York City during the early to mid-1930s (Rhoades 12). A large portion of the immigrant community consisted of European Jews who had come to America to make their fortunes. What welcomed them were not golden streets, but crowded apartments and few job opportunities. Despite the disappointing first appearances, many young Jewish writers would create a world of their own. In the late 1930s

the magazine industry was a popular field to enter into and a subset of this industry was comic book publishing (Yanes 53). At the time, no serious artist would consider working in this new medium that was in the basic form the combining of Sunday comic strips into volumes. Comic books were considered the unrefined younger sibling of more widely syndicated and sophisticated magazines. In the aftermath of the Great Depression many American writers who considered themselves serious journalists found that the magazine industry did not have spaces for them. As a result, many young Jewish writers found themselves with little to no prospects for employment.

However, while the magazine industry was suffering, the comic book industry was growing in strength. As previously stated, many writers felt that comic books were below the standards of serious writing and were reluctant to take the jobs. The fact remained that the new comic book industry needed writers and artists to create their stories. Historian Arie Kaplan notes “the easiest way to fill the demand for new comic book features was for publishers to tap writers and artists who couldn’t get work anywhere else, either because they were too young, too inexperienced, or Jewish -- in most cases, all three” (qtd in Yanes 53). The comic book industry was soon dominated by young Jewish writers who would go on to create some of the most popular and enduring icons in popular culture.

Some of the most well know of these icons are Superman, Batman, and, of course, Captain America. One would be hard pressed to imagine what the comic book industry would be without its Jewish fathers. Many of the themes that permeate the early comic book stories resound with references to Jewish culture, especially the immigrant Jewish culture. Comic book historian Michael Chabon asserts “having a dual identity, changing your name and wearing a mask, of assimilating and reinventing yourself - it’s impossible not to see these things as

allegorical of the immigrant experience” (qtd in Weinstein 51). Many young Jewish writers found themselves changing their names to hide their ethnic background so that they could obtain jobs. The pages of comic books were the only outlet for many of these young Jewish writers to express their opinions on the state of current affairs. As the looming shadow of the Axis powers began to reach American soil “young Jewish American artists and writers (some barely out of their teens) began creating powerful characters who were dedicated to protecting the innocent and conquering evil” (Weinstein 16). One of these young writers was Captain America creator Jack Kirby, born Jacob Kurtzberg (Weinstein 48). While working at Timely Comics he found himself partnered with Joe Simon. In the months preceding the entrance of the United States into World War II, the two young writers put together a character that embodied the hopes of the Jewish and American people. It should be noted that while “Anti-Semitism had a powerful presence in the United States many Jews saw themselves as both Jewish and American: willing to fight for both heritage and nation” (Yanes 54). For many writers the threat of Nazi Germany outweighed the prejudice that they felt at home.

When Kirby and Simon designed the character of Captain America they made sure that he was identifiable to his readers. Unlike many other popular heroes of the time “Captain America was born not on make-believe planet Krypton or in fictional Gotham City but on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, where rundown tenement buildings faced noisy streets teeming with people, animals, and garbage” (Weinstein 48). Kirby and Simon placed their character in the real world, in a tangible place that readers could identify with, and in a place that the authors were familiar with as well. Kirby based pieces of Steve Roger’s origins on his own, as both were born and raised in New York’s Lower East Side. Both Kirby and Rogers had to change their names and wear masks so that they could speak out about the injustices they

perceived around them. Jacob Kurtzberg became the Irish sounding Jack Kirby, and scrawny Steve Rogers became Captain America. The fights that Captain America were involved in echoed back to the fights that Kirby remembered from his childhood (Fingerroth 31). When asked for the inspiration behind the character Kirby noted that “Captain America was me, and I was Captain America” (Weinstein 48). This statement would ring true when in 1943 Kirby was called to active duty and sent overseas, where he spent his time as an advance scout and even participated in the Normandy invasion (Fingerroth 31).

Despite the similarities between the origins of Captain America and the origins of his creators, many comic readers are confused by the physical appearance of the character. Steve Rogers has blond hair, blue eyes and could readily be featured on recruiting posters as the perfect example of Hitler’s master race. Why would Jewish writers choose to have their character reflect the ideals of the greatest threat to their people? Weinstein argues that Simon and Kirby designed Rogers to represent the ideal American. He was tall, muscular, and had the all-American good looks. To Weinstein, Simon’s and Kirby’s Rogers represents the process of Jewish assimilation into the greater American culture. Even the Captain’s uniform speaks to this desire. Weinstein notes “The flag as costume notion reinforces the ideal of assimilation. By literally cloaking their character in patriotism, Kirby and Simon became true Americans” (50). Through their creation the writers were able to fulfill their own aspirations and speak when they would normally be silenced. The pages of *Captain America Comics* became a forum for the young creative team to express the ideals that they would have the American government echo. With Captain America’s entrance into World War II predating that of the United States’, Kirby and Simon were clearly expressing their opinion that action had to be taken to combat the Axis powers.

While Captain America's physical appearance may cause some confusion, many comic historians argue that the character has a deeper connection to Jewish traditions. Weinstein argues that Captain America functions a type of modern day golem (51). Weinstein's definition of golem is that of a being made of clay whose function was to protect. In the article "Pursing the Golem of Prague," Hillel Kieval explains that by the early twentieth century the mythical golem's story had evolved to a point where the creature became a being who was "created in order to defend the Jewish community against the anti-Semitism of the outside world" (15). The Captain fulfilled this role with his attacks on the Nazi regime. To further draw comparisons between the Captain and the golem, Weinstein notes "according to tradition, a golem is sustained by inscribing the Hebrew word emet (truth) upon its forehead" (51). He continues in the same vein by pointing out that the first letter of emet is called aleph, which corresponds with the letter A (Weinstein 51). Captain America's cowl features the very same letter prominently on his forehead. The Captain's A functions as a symbol to allies and enemies alike. However where the traditional golem was a creature made of clay, Captain America, Weinstein's modern day golem, is a super soldier who not only protects the Jews, but also Gentiles (Weiner 97). Simon's and Kirby's creation transcends the role of the superheroes and moves into the realm of somewhat supernatural protector of all American people.

When readers reflect on the Captain America of the 1940s they are reminded of images of great battles and victories over Hitler and his troops. The character was a bastion of American patriotism and integrity. He was a character that all Americans could look up to, regardless of race, creed, or economic background. Readers across the nation read his adventures and cheered for his victories. Troops were comforted and encouraged by the messages that they saw woven into the fabric of *Captain America Comics*. The character and

his comic book continued to thrive throughout World War II. Soon after the end of the war America's rabid patriotism began to fade and along with it the fervor for Captain America. As the country sought to move on from the horrors of the war, comic book readers no longer needed the Captain and in February of 1950 the character was removed from Timely Comics' main line up. However, one cannot overlook the contributions that the character made to America's war propaganda or to the greater American culture. The character represented the ideals of a war time and oppressed peoples. While the character and his patriotic ideals were shelved at the beginning of the 1950s, they would not remain there for long.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FORGOTTEN CAPTAIN: *CAPTAIN AMERICA COMICS* AND RACE

Comic books have long been the medium in which ideas that would otherwise be considered scandalous or improper have found a welcome audience. As comic books are viewed as low culture mediums and thus an open forum, issues, like desegregation or women's rights, that would be shocking in the pages of a national newspaper are not so in the hands of the average comic book reader. One such issue that would play itself out in the colorful pages of comic books is the issue of race and racism. In early comics, superheroes of African descent are noticeably absent. It was not until 1966 that the first African superhero would make his way to the printed page. Marvel may have felt the need to make their roster more diverse because of the civil rights movement that was occurring during this period. Only two years before, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed. The Act created the Equal Opportunity Employment Commission, banned the denial of service in public places based on race and instituted bussing to meet racial quotas at public schools. Also, the Black Power movement was founded in 1966 and Marvel capitalized on the need for diversity in their comics.

In 1966, Marvel Comics introduced the Black Panther, the first mainstream Black superhero (Rhoades 263). While Marvel's introduction of the character began the breakdown of racial barriers in the comic industry, one must note that the character is specifically of African origin. Like *Star Trek's* Lieutenant Uhura, the character's African roots gave a sense of exoticness, and presumably made him more acceptable to a mostly Caucasian readership.

However, only three years later in 1969, in the pages of *Captain America Comics*, Marvel introduced the Falcon, the first mainstream African American superhero (Molnar 118). Marvel Comics continued to be a front runner in the industry by creating a wealth of characters from diverse backgrounds. This ingenuity would continue into the modern era of comics when Marvel created a new character who would prove to be a controversial addition to the *Captain America* mythos. With the introduction of the Black Captain America and his ensuing legacy, Marvel Comics addresses an unsavory chapter of American history.

In 2002, Marvel published the mini-series² *Truth: Red, White, and Black*. The mini-series, written by Robert Morales and illustrated by Kyle Baker, forces its readers to reflect on a period in American history where racism was rampant and the rights of a large portion of the American people were ignored. Despite the controversial content of the graphic novel, Marvel quickly approved the proposal for the creation of a new character in the *Captain America* series. *Truth* writer Morales admits that when he was first approached with the proposal to create a Black Captain America he laughed at the idea. He then realized that by creating the character he would have a chance to bring to light social issues that are often over looked (Carpenter 54). In an interview *Truth*'s editor, Alex Alonso, commented "I thought it would be a really interesting way to use the character to tell a larger story, a chapter of American history. [We used] Captain America as a metaphor for America itself" (qtd in Carpenter 54).

The chapter of American history that Alonso refers to is the early 1940s. At the time America's social landscape was still defined by racial makeup. Racist attitudes were the norm and prejudice assisted in the development of the period's social codes. African Americans and other minority groups were classified as second class citizens and the racial tension of this era

² A mini-series is a comic book series that has a pre-set number of issues, unlike a regular comic book series that will continue until the title is cancelled.

provided a perfect backdrop for *Truth*'s creators. When Morales was researching ideas for the *Truth* series, he came across stories about the Tuskegee syphilis experiment. This experiment, conducted by the United States Public Health Service, offered free medical treatment for African American males who had contracted syphilis. It was later revealed that the experiment's purpose was not to treat the infected men, but to chart the progress of untreated syphilis. Between 1932 and 1971 "approximately four hundred African American men" were purposely withheld treatment from by the Public Health Service (Wanzo 340). As a result, nearly a third of the men in the study died because of syphilis or related complications (Walker 5).

Morales felt that the Tuskegee experiment would translate well into a story of experimentation on African American soldiers. He then proposed the plot where the serum that would later be administered to volunteer Steve Rogers was first tested on uninformed African American soldiers. In his interviews with the author, writer, and editor of *Truth*, Stanford Carpenter noted that all three opined "the military would never have performed the super soldier experiment on a blonde haired, blue eyed, White guy . . . at least not the more dangerous initial trials" (51). Thus, Morales and his team created the African American character Isaiah Bradley and detailed the story of how he became the first Captain America.

Truth tells the story of the creation of the Black Captain America, Isaiah Bradley. Readers follow the stories of three African American men, Bradley, Maurice Canfield, and Luke Evans, beginning a few months before their military enlistment following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The men are sent to the fictional Camp Cathcart, which, aside from the commanding officers, is entirely African American. A portion of the soldiers are then taken away to a secret location, while it is implied that the remaining soldiers are gunned down. The soldiers are then injected with a serum, the purpose of which is to turn them into super soldiers. Only six

of the original 300 men survive being injected with the serum. The unit is then sent to Germany to fight against the Nazi forces. One by one the soldiers are killed, either by the enemy or by each other. It is discovered that the serum causes the characters' worst traits to surface and many of the soldiers die because of their rage and paranoia. Finally only Bradley remains. He accepts a mission to infiltrate a concentration camp and takes along a Captain America uniform that he finds. While Bradley is successful in his destruction of the camp, he is taken prisoner. He escapes and is taken in by freedom fighters who eventually find him safe passage back to an American camp. Upon reporting for duty, Bradley is immediately arrested and court-martialed for the theft of the Captain America uniform.

Bradley's story is told alongside another narrative detailing Steve Rogers' discovering the truth about the mythical Black Captain America. Rogers seeks answers from his military and government contacts. He ultimately is given the name of Isaiah Bradley and recovers the uniform that Bradley was court-martialed for stealing. The conclusion of the *Truth* series features Rogers' visit with the family of Bradley. It is revealed by Bradley's wife Faith that his years in solitary confinement combined with the chemicals in the super soldier serum have left Bradley with the mentality of a young child. Upon meeting Bradley, Rogers tells him, "I wish I could undo all the suffering you've gone through. If I could've taken your place . . . But all I can do is my duty, Isaiah. To you and everyone else. That's why I'm here" (Morales). He then hands Bradley the tattered remains of the uniform. The final image of *Truth* features both Captain Americas standing side by side in their uniforms posing for Faith to take a picture.

Bradley is punished, not for disobeying orders, but for stealing the Captain America uniform. He is punished because he dared to use a uniform that was to serve as a symbol for white America. While it is true that the injuries that Bradley receives during his time as a super

soldier and then later in solitary confinement is devastating, the mental regression that he suffers symbolizes something much greater than simple wartime wounds. Bradley's childlike demeanor comes as a direct result of the poor conditions that he suffered while serving his sentence for the theft of the Captain America uniform. In his current state, Bradley has the mental capacity of a child, but the strength of a super-man. The serum also left Bradley sterile, thus leaving him in a state that is both infantilized and emasculated. Thus, there can be no further generations of Black supersoldiers. It is to be inferred that if the other soldiers, Canfield and Evans, had survived that they too would have deteriorated to the same state.

The infantilism and emasculation of the male African American characters represents the tension of the 1940s racially divided society. Yet, each of the three main characters challenges the stereotypes of the uneducated, thuggish black man. Canfield comes from an upper class family. Readers are introduced to the characters when he returns to his parents' home, where the door is answered by a butler. It is revealed to readers that Maurice is a social reformist and has recently been in a physical altercation with a group of white men who disagreed with his ideals.

Maurice comes from a well-to-do family, which is in itself problematic, but also espouses revolutionary ideas of racial equality. One must note that Canfield's anger which is usually expressed towards white society also extends to other African Americans who refuse to fight for racial equality. When his mother scolds him because of his actions and tells him to live up to the station in life that his father worked for, Canfield is offended by the notion. He tells her "I don't want a fortune based on Negroes that are compelled to lighten their skins and straighten their hair. Especially when they turn around and take their self-hatred out on me!" (Morales).

Another damaging aspect of Canfield's personality is his willingness to use violence to support his cause. Like the character Guitar from Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Canfield

believes passive protests will not help the movement towards equal civil rights. Thus, Canfield becomes a representation of the ideals of what would come to be known as the Black Nationalist Movement. It proves then that for the white society to restore order that Canfield, and others like him, must be removed and his voice silenced. In *Truth*, Canfield's removal comes when a white judge gives him the choice to either face time in prison or to enlist in the military.

Readers meet the character Evans and discover that he is a former army captain who has recently been demoted to sergeant after he is involved in a quarrel that turned violent with a white officer. Like Canfield, Evans is also a man of action and a violation of white societal codes. Before the start of the series Evans, has been demoted because he struck a white officer. The altercation stems from an event where an African American officer under Evans' command is unjustly killed in a fight with another military policeman. When Evans protests the treatment of his men, the commanding officer refers to the incident as a trifle. Evans recounts that his demotion comes as a result of "shoving him when he told me not to bother him with trifles -- Like a man's life is a trifle!" (Morales). Evans' demotion is to be a message to other Black officers that although they may serve in the United States Army and attain rank, they are still not equal to their white counterparts. Thus, Evans has his authority stripped so that he may be kept in check and also has the illusion that he has any real power removed. As he is in the billiards hall lining up his shot with the cue ball, Evans notes "This is the only place I get to shove ol' whitey around" (Morales). The message that Evans' white superiors wanted him to receive has been acknowledged. He has been reprimanded and reminded of his place in society. Through their actions and rhetoric both Canfield and Evans prove to be challengers to the expectations of white society. Canfield's high station proves threatening to some and provokes envy or disgust in some white characters. Evans represents the white anxiety about the African American male obtaining

any sort of authority over white men. So, to pay for their so-called transgressions against the social order, both men are forced to become test subjects, expendable soldiers, for the army's super soldier program.

Isaiah Bradley, however, is a markedly different character than Canfield or Evans. Readers first see Bradley with his wife Faith looking at the exhibits during the New York World Fair's Negro Week. Bradley nearly comes to blows with a white entertainer when he and Faith are denied entrance to an attraction because of their race. However, he is quickly soothed by Faith. Pages later readers see Bradley and a very pregnant Faith say farewell as he prepares to enter into the military in the aftermath of the attack at Pearl Harbor. Bradley represents a different type of violation to white expectations. Unlike Canfield and Evans, Bradley's loyalties lie with his family and his country. *Truth* writer Morales asserts that one of his main goals for the series "was to have a strong Black marriage at its core" (qtd in Carpenter 55). Bradley and Faith become representations of the strength of the Black family.

In a scene where the soldiers are in training camp, the men are arguing over their reasons to serve in the army. While one of the other soldiers insists that he joined the military so that he can kill white men, Bradley shows the others his picture of Faith and their new born daughter Sarah. A fellow soldier comments "I guess they what we fighting for, huh?" (Morales). While the others squabble about the desire to kill white men, Bradley remains mesmerized with the picture of his family. It has long been the stereotype that African American men abandon their families and Morales uses Bradley to show that the Black family unit is stronger than racism or social expectations. Readers of *Truth* continue to see the strength of the Bradley family as Faith confronts army officials about the death of her family and her subsequent conversation with Rogers shows her devotion to Bradley. As such, Bradley and his family defy stereotypes and

present readers the type of character who, while suffering under the weight of prejudice, still manages to hold true to his personal ideals.

While the *Truth* mini-series explores a piece of American history that many would rather forget. *Truth* also reveals that although the institutionalized racism of the 1940s has faded, it is still present in the mind sets of modern comic book readers. While *Truth* received many positive reviews for addressing such difficult subject matter, many readers were angry with the Marvel editor's decision to retroactively change the continuity of the Captain America mythos. *Truth* editor Alex Alonso commented "there are the fanboy continuity purists who don't like Marvel messing with sacred cows; those who worry the series will somehow besmirch Steve Rogers' legacy" and "outright racists who just don't like the idea of a black man in the Cap uniform" (qtd in Sinclair). Incredibly most of the criticism predated the publication of the first issue of the series. The pervasive fear throughout online message boards was that the introduction of the Black Captain America would stain the legacy of Steve Rogers. As Rogers' story features a young white man who volunteered for a secret military experiment that would make him the darling of the American government; Bradley's story is one of lies and death perpetrated by the same government. The sensational creation of Kirby's and Simon's Captain America would become less heroic as the untested serum which Rogers voluntarily submitted to becomes a death knell for the African American soldiers that secretly preceded him.

The series also drew criticism not only because of its plot but also because of its illustration style. As comics are a combination of art and words, the two must work together to form an effective whole. The cartoonish art style that artist Kyle Baker chose to employ when penciling the art for *Truth* does not prove an effective fit for Morales' story. While Baker notes that his art is supposed to reflect a pop art influence, the art of *Truth* appears more cartoonish

than the subject matter would allow. In many cases, the message of the piece is dampened by the style of the art.

The imbalance can be seen in a scene following the Black super soldiers' platoon's battle with Nazi forces. One of the super soldiers, Maurice, notices that they had prevented the Nazi soldiers from shipping medical supplies instead of the munitions that the platoon was original told. In the panel, the grief stricken Maurice bows his head and says "All our guys are dead - because we didn't want the enemy to get their bandages! What kind of soldiering keeps the wounded from being human beings?" (Morales). While this is a very emotionally charged scene, one must question Baker's choice to have the background of the panel be baby blue, with yellow flower outlines, and what appears to be blotches of pink spray paint.

Much of the criticism for the series comes as a result of Baker's chosen pop art style. The sober image of the mourning Maurice and the bright background colors cause a disconnect between the emotions of the panel and readers. Baker's pop art style drew the ire from many of the series' readers. In an online discussion of the *Truth* mini-series, one poster commented, "My biggest complaint was the art. . . .Having American soldiers slaughter African-American soldiers in a pit while having the characters looking like they crawled out of a Ren & Stimpy cartoon was a little too much" (Moose). As comic books are a combination of art and words, if one aspect is not accepted by readers then the book usually fails as a whole. As the reviewer noted, the art was so cartoonish that it made reading such an emotionally driven story awkward.

Despite the somewhat negative reaction to *Truth*, Marvel editors did not want the legacy of the Black Captain America to fade from their reader's minds. Even in the modern age of superheroes the number of African American superheroes is still negligible and Marvel editors saw a chance to create a new legacy for minority characters. In April 2005, writers Allan

Heinberg and Jim Cheung introduced a new team of superheroes to the Marvel Universe. The team of teenagers made their debut in true comic book fashion by attempting to defuse a hostage situation. The young heroes quickly find themselves held hostage and have to be assisted by a member of a bridal party. Following their impromptu introduction to the superhero world, the teenagers found themselves branded with the title Young Avengers (Heinberg). Each member of the team resembled, either through their powers or costumes, members of the Avengers team. Among them was a character, called the Patriot, who wore an updated costume of Captain America's teenaged side kick, Bucky Barnes. Upon seeing the headlines about the young vigilantes, the older heroes set out to force the team to disband. Rogers, haunted by his guilt over the death of Bucky, was especially interested in preventing the teenagers from pursuing their current paths. In a tense confrontation between the adult Avengers and the Young Avengers, Rogers questions the Patriot's choice in costume. In a dramatic bit of dialogue directed toward Captain America, Patriot, removing his mask, explains that he wears his costume not in the memory of Bucky, but "Out of respect for the first Captain America. The real Captain America. My grandfather. The Black Captain America" (Heinburg 55). It is revealed that Patriot is Elijah Bradley, the grandson of Isaiah.

The relationship between Captain America and Patriot is strained as the younger feels a sense of betrayal at the marginalization of his grandfather's place in history. Where the character of Isaiah Bradley was a wholesome family man, the younger Bradley is filled with resentment and it is revealed that his powers are not inherited from his grandfather but from an illegal drug that allows him to gain super strength for short periods of time. This faking of superpowers comes to an end when during a confrontation Patriot takes a shot intended for Captain America.

Patriot is rushed to the hospital where he receives a blood transfusion from his grandfather and thus gains the powers of a super soldier.

It is interesting to examine the relationship between Patriot and Rogers. Where Isaiah and Rogers have a type of mutual respect, Patriot's and Rogers' initial relationship is one of antagonism and distrust. The younger Bradley comes to represent distrust in a supposedly post segregation world. Although many in the media argue that the present generation is a post racial one, it is truer that racist attitudes have become harder to identify. Patriot represents the anger towards a system that fails to recognize the needs of its citizens because of the color of their skin. Thus, the character chooses to fight for his grandfather's legacy, so that he may receive the recognition that he deserves. Rogers is well known as a character that believes in equality but Patriot cannot accept the slight that history has given his grandfather. The story that is played out in the pages of *Young Avengers* becomes a narrative of self-acceptance and a move towards releasing the anger of years of denial. When Patriot and Rogers were ultimately able to put their differences aside and work together, they were finally able to break down the racial barriers that had come to represent the new *Captain America* mythos.

When *Truth* was published in early 2002, it shook the foundations of the *Captain America* series. What was once a story about the wholesome young Steve Rogers who volunteered to be experimented on, quickly turned into a torturous experiment that took the lives of over 300 African American soldiers. With the mini-series, Morales and Baker challenged readers to accept that American history contains injustices that have been buried because of their unpleasantness. However, Morales' storytelling presents readers with the character of Isaiah Bradley, a man who rose above the expectations of the white government official who denied him personhood. *Truth* is a narrative that not only speaks about the dangers of racism but also

presents readers with an honest, patriotic man who gave all he had to support his county and his family. Marvels' introduction of Patriot continued the legacy of Isaiah Bradley and addressed modern issues of racism and acceptance. While Black characters are still in the minority in comic books, *Captain America Comics* have opened the door for these characters and opened a forum for readers to discuss the issues as well.

CHAPTER THREE

PARANOIA AND DISILLUSION:

THE COLD WAR, VIETNAM, AND WATERGATE ERAS

Comic books sales slumped in the aftermath of World War II. The heroes who once were the role models for millions of comic book readers no longer held the same importance that they previously had. Even Captain America could not escape the comic book sales slump. During the war the Captain's adventures had been read by millions of readers each month. However, the post-World War II Captain could not generate enough interest from his readers. It appeared that the youth of America no longer needed a larger than life soldier to idolize. Peace time had settled in America and many readers may have wanted to distance themselves from the violence and gore of war which was so present in superhero comics.

The function of comic books during World War II had been to spread the message of America's might and fighting spirit. However, once the victory that Captain America and other superheroes had fought for was achieved, there was no longer a need for them. Victory was clinched and the soldiers were no longer as entertaining when there was no foreign threat for them to combat. Thus, the rash of patriotic superheroes that had held readers captivated during the war years were quickly shelved and most were never utilized again. Instead, the romance, western, and horror genres of comic books drew increasingly bigger sales in the years directly following the war. Titles such as *Young Romance* and *Tales from the Crypt* constantly sold out. According to Wright "by 1949 romance comic books, according to a report in *Time* magazine,

outsold all other genres and cut deeply into the market for confessional magazines” (128). Comic book readers were tired of the war and all the propaganda that surrounded it. The lighter stories that dominated the romance genre drew in more female readers. Horror comics provided a scare that was purely supernatural in origin, instead of the horrors of war. The western genre took readers back to an idealized time in American history and featured a different more attractive, roughhewn hero. The comic book industry had evolved and the soldier hero was outdated. As a result, *Captain America Comics* were soon retired to Marvel’s shelves.

However, America was soon embroiled with a battle against the communists in the Cold War. The next major conflict for America was the Korean War. The comic book industry remained mostly ambivalent to the conflict. In World War II, nearly every major superhero engaged the Axis forces in some form or another. The Korean War failed to draw much attention from either comic book producers or readers. The few comic books that did address the war were actually war story comic books³. No superheroes filled their pages, only soldiers. Also, the enemies in these war story comics were more concrete for readers. Traditional comic books feature super-villains, who have colorful costumes and usually follow some sort of theme in their crimes. War story comics, however, featured realistic enemies that soldiers were actually facing during the war. Following on the heels of World War II, the Korean War did not inspire the same need for patriotic superheroes. Thus, any stories addressing the issue were relegated to a niche genre, while the superheroes battled more imaginary foes.

Although the Korean War failed to draw the attention of the comic book industry, the Cold War quickly became a major plot point in many comic book stories. As the entire comic

³ Traditional comic books are considered superhero stories. These war story comic books were focused on the adventures and experiences of regular soldiers, instead of superheroes. Thus, the stories were more connected to real world events.

book industry's sales had suffered in the aftermath of World War II, many executives hoped to revive the superhero genre with Cold War stories. The Cold War was more of a universal issue that, like World War II, could possibly impact most of the world. As such, it was appropriate to bring back several of the superheroes that had previously fought for the American ideals of freedom and truth. Marvel decided to bring back an old favorite to combat the "red menace" and, thus, Captain America was once again utilized on the pages of Marvel comics. In 1953, Marvel editors decided to revive the character in the *Young Men* adventure comic series. In *Young Men* #24, readers are introduced to Professor Steve Rogers as he lectures about the history of Captain America during his history course. Over the next four issues, the Captain and his sidekick Bucky find themselves embroiled in a communist plot that instigated by their old foe, the Red Skull. The Captain and his anti-communist actions then moved over to *Men's Adventure* comics.

In May of 1954, Marvel decided to return the Captain to his own series and rebooted *Captain America Comics* with issue 76. However, the Captain's series now held the subtitle "Captain America . . . Commie Smasher." In World War II, the Captain and Bucky were defending America from a foreign threat. The Commie Smasher duo "reprised that role against Communist agents, striking at "the betrayers" who hid behind the privileges of a free society in order to subvert American institutions" (Wright 123). Instead of outside forces, like the Axis powers, Captain America and Bucky had to combat domestic enemies. This time there were no uniforms that clearly defined the enemy, and as a result, everyone was under suspicion.

The revival of the *Captain America Comics* series only lasted three months. Comic book audiences were not receptive to the heavy-handed tactics and rhetoric employed by the Captain. The comics were more of a caricature of the Golden Aged Captain than an updated version of the hero. The Commie Smasher Captain was self-righteous about his stance against the Communists

that he battled, but did not provide any rationale for his actions. In the chapter “Reds, Romance & Renegades,” Wright notes that “the series offered no further discussion of Cold War issues beyond the message that Communists were evil, overweight, and poor dressers” (123). Any foe of the Captain’s was portrayed as buffoonish traitors to America who must be destroyed at all costs.

Although the Captain’s actions appear extreme to modern readers, one must look at the comic in its historical period. During the 1950s, the “Red Scare” was pervasive in America. In World War II, America’s enemies were clear and far away. However, America’s new enemies were not as easy to identify. The fear of Communists who could blend in with American society was prevalent. Anyone could be a Communist, including your neighbor or best friend. This attitude was displayed in issue seventy-seven of *Captain America Comics*. In the issue, the Captain and Bucky are in a Chinese neighborhood searching for a Communist spy known as the Man with No Face. They realize that the spy is actually the twin brother of an honest, hardworking man who had earlier assisted them. As the spy throws himself from the roof of a building to escape capture, the Captain exclaims “So Wing’s own brother was ready to kill him for the cause! Another example of the brutal twisted thinking of the reds . . . When brother can be turned against brother” (CAC 77). The message conveyed by the comic was, of course, an extreme, but real fear in 1950s America. With leaders like Senator Joseph McCarthy acting as fear-mongers, the American people were subjected to the lurking fear of traitors.

However, even though the fear of a Communist regime was all too real to Cold War Americans, comic book readers did not buy into the Captain’s Commie Smasher adventures. After only three issues the Captain and Bucky were once again retired to Marvel’s shelves. The disconnect between the comic’s stories and its readers could be explained by noting that many

comics are read by younger readers. The fear of “Commies” may not have been all that interesting to them, because there was no real combat to be seen in Cold War America. There were no epic battles taking place on the corner between America’s defenders and the Communists. Instead, it was more of a battle of ideology, which is a bit harder to convey in action-packed comic books. Also, the western, romance, horror, and crime genres of comic books had become increasingly popular during this time period. Hayton and Albright argue that the superhero as propaganda model of comic books was just not attractive to readers (17). Readers no longer felt the need for clean-cut, patriotic superheroes who could do no wrong. Instead, grittier characters, like cowboys and detectives, became more popular figures in comic books. And so, *Captain America Comics* were cancelled again.

Several years later the history of the Captain America series was retconned⁴ to explain the unpopular actions of the Commie Smasher Captain. Marvel executives noted that readers had disliked the Commie Smasher Captain and needed a way to explain why the character behaved the way he did. To accomplish this rewrite of Captain America’s history, Marvel writers created a story where a man named William Burnside became obsessed with the figure of Captain America (CAC 153). Burnside was so obsessed that he had plastic surgery to make himself look like Steve Rogers, changed his name to that of his predecessor’s, and subjected himself to chemicals that supposedly changed Rogers into Captain America. He also took on a sidekick who underwent the same treatments to be the new Bucky Barnes. However, the chemicals that the two injected themselves with proved to be faulty and they were driven to insanity. Thus, Marvel was able to explain away what they deemed the “fascist” and “racist” behaviors of the Commie Smasher (Weiner 233). This move by Marvel’s editors shows that even comic book

⁴ This term means that a retroactive change in continuity or rewriting of a character’s history has occurred.

writers are performing a type of conscious revision of their character's history. They understand that the work reflected an acceptable attitude for the time period, but also understood that many modern readers cannot or do not place a work with in a historical context. As a result, the comics are viewed as racist propaganda and must be corrected by editorial intervention.

The previously mentioned retcon of the Commie Smasher Captain America came about because of Marvel editors' decision to once again revive Captain America. In the 1960s, Marvel's superheroes were still battling the Communist threat. During this time new characters, such as Spiderman, the X-Men, and Iron Man were introduced. Many of these new heroes' back stories include some type of interaction with radiation, and they came to represent the Cold War threat of nuclear war. The traditional format for superheroes stories of the previous era featured superheroes fighting alone or with a sidekick. Marvel wanted to create a superhero team that would be able to fight the villains, both Communist and not, that threatened America's security. To accomplish this goal, in 1963 Marvel put together a group of superheroes known as the Avengers.

While the Avengers featured many popular superheroes of the 1960s --Thor, Iron Man, Ant Man, Wasp, and the Hulk-- Marvel editors felt that the team was missing something. They concluded that the team needed a patriot, a character that outwardly represented the ideals of American society. In March of 1964, Marvel editors made the decision to revive the character of Captain America. This meant that Marvel had to explain away the Commie Smasher Captain and thus the imposter Captain story. The new history of Captain America stated that while attempting to disarm an explosive aboard an experimental plane Bucky is killed by the blast, while the Captain is thrown into the ice cold waters of the Atlantic Ocean. His body is frozen and because of the super soldier serum he is not killed. In 1964, the Captain's body is discovered by the

Avengers. After the ice melts, the Captain is revived and chooses to accept the invitation to become a member of the Avengers (*Avengers 4*).

During his tenure with the Avengers, the Captain finds himself functioning as a man out of time. He still holds his 1940s ideals with great pride, but finds it difficult to function in the new world that he is thrust into. The Captain is also suffering from what would now be called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as a result of the combat that he lived through in World War II and his guilt over the death of Bucky Barnes. In his article “Captain America, Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome, and the Vietnam Era,” Shawn Gillen posits that many of the Captain’s actions following his revival can be attributed to his continual grief over the death of Bucky. At times, the Captain finds it hard to function as a member of a team because of his guilt. On one occasion the Captain is haunted by hallucinations of his former partner. This causes him to seek professional help for his PTSD (*CAC 107*). Of course, in true comic book fashion the psychiatrist turns out to be a villain who wishes to destroy the Captain, but the fact remains that comic book readers were shown that the perfect patriot has weaknesses of his own.

This weakness is what some comic book scholars allude to as the Captain’s excuse for not participating in the Vietnam War. Unlike with the Korean War, many superheroes were featured in stories that dealt with the conflict. Iron Man frequently engaged in battle with Communist troops. Gillen notes that even Thor participates in a battle in Vietnam (105). It seemed odd that only Captain America would be absent from the fray. The super patriot should be the one defending the ideals of freedom against the oppression of the Communist regime. However, the Captain only appears in two stories that take place in Vietnam. The first was *Captain America #125* in May of 1970, where the Captain intervenes to protect a doctor who has pledged to treat people from both sides of the conflict. The second time that the Captain appears

in Vietnam is in *The 'Nam 41*, retroactive story that was not written until February 1990. In the issue, the Captain, alongside other heroes, appears in a soldier's fantasy sequence of what would have happened if superheroes had fought in the war (Gillen 113). Thus, during the United States' involvement in the nearly ten year duration of the Vietnam War, the Captain only appeared once.

The Captain's absence from the Vietnam War was noticed by many comic book fans. Gillen notes that many readers were disappointed that the Captain was not engaged in the war (112). In 1965, when President Johnson sent troops into Vietnam many "readers wrote to Marvel suggesting that Captain America ought to go as well. Other asked that he stay out" (Wright 244). As the war became more controversial with the American public "the letters to the editor became a forum for pro-war and anti-war readers to debate the political issues having little of nothing to do with the stories in the comic books" (Wright 244). The Captain's refusal to discuss or participate in the Vietnam War sparked a major furor amongst his readers. Many debated the role that the Captain played in the modern world and argued that his patriotic ideals were too outdated for 1960s ways of thinking.

In his article "'Let's Rap with Cap': Redefining American Patriotism through Popular Discourse and Letters," Richard Stevens discusses the political controversy that took place in the letters to the editors page in *Captain America Comics*. Using various excerpts from letters published in the comic book Stevens tracks how the political agenda of the Captain and his readers have shifted over time. Stevens argues that the letters controversy began in issue 110 of the series (615). In this issue a letter by a reader identified as Rodriquez questions what he perceives as the Captain's War Hawk perspective on politics. Rodriquez writes:

CA is the type of man who lives to fight for his personal brand of liberty. He believes just as the warmongers of the past wars and of today do. His roots belong

in the past, not now. Doesn't CA realize that today the so-called patriotic fighter is gone? . . . There are many promising people who are expounding the cause of peace and liberty. This magazine does not fit in with today's society. Cap ought to know that someday the world will be built on a pinnacle of peace and freedom. Cap believes the same way, but must he show it through violence and heroics? Of course, without this element there would be no Captain America. All I question is his reasoning, which is entirely out of date. This is a strong plea against war lovers and so-called patriots. . . . It would fit the standards of today, though, if he were more liberal. (CAC 110)

Rodriguez's letter asked both Marvel and other readers to question both their own politics and those of Captain America. Many readers were outraged by the letter and their responses were soon published. One writer responded to the Rodriguez letter stating

Where does Mr. R get off knocking patriotism?! It's the apathists, not the patriots, who have caused our country's problems. Mr. Rodriguez is not consistent. I quote from his letter: "this magazine does not fit in with today's society. Cap ought to know that some day the world will be built on a pinnacle of Peace and Freedom." I suggest Mr. Rodriguez look out his window. What does he call Vietnam? A flower garden? Perhaps someday Mr. Rodriguez's prediction will come true. But Cap's mag does fit in with today's society with all its evils and wars. No one but a dreamer can think the world is safe and peaceful. . . . (Burke, CAC 114)

Burke's letter was printed alongside several others that discussed readers' displeasure with Rodriguez's criticism of the Captain's politics and motivations. Over the next two years, the "Let's Rap with Cap" page became less about discussing the adventures that the Captain was

undergoing each issue and more of a forum expressing readers' discontent with the state of American politics during the Vietnam Era.

It should be noted that these types of political "letter wars" were not present in other Marvel titles during this time. Although there may be a stray letter in an Iron Man or X-Men issue, the political debate was most present in the pages of *Captain America Comics*. This presence may be justified by the fact that the Captain is a patriotic superhero who is supposed to represent the ideals of the American people. However, by looking at readers' letters allows one to see how the Vietnam War became a divisive issue amongst both Captain America readers and Marvel writers. Readers were angry that the Captain refused to take a side in Vietnam.

Although the Captain passes no judgment on the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War, his reticence speaks volumes. Marvel writers acknowledged that the Captain was a character that was functioning out of his time. Even well know Marvel writer Stan Lee wrote that Captain America "simply doesn't lend himself to the John Wayne-type character he once was" and went on to further question the need of super patriotic characters in 1960s society (qtd in Wright 243). The Captain who had only been revived for two short years was already having his ideals questioned. What does this Vietnam Era Captain represent? One can speculate that the Marvel writers' refusal to place the Captain in Vietnam related stories speaks to an anti-Vietnam stance on their part. One must not forget that the Captain can only act in the stories that he is placed. It appears that Marvel writers could not justify placing such a patriotic and blatantly American character in a situation that was so controversial. Unlike World War II, where there were fewer detractors, the Vietnam War was a divisive issue among the American people. As the Captain is supposed to act as a representation of the ideals of the American people it is questioned just who is he supposed to represent: War Hawks or Doves? I find that Marvel editors

avoided putting the Captain into the conflict to avoid taking sides in the conflict. It is acceptable for other heroes to enter into the conflict because of who they are. Iron Man is a billionaire business man who was in the weapons business. Many of his actions were actually protecting his own assets. Thor is a god who can intervene where he sees fit. Captain America, however, is an embodiment of the America spirit and his support represents the allegiance of the American people. Marvel writers recognized that the Vietnam issue was so inflammatory that if the Captain were to endorse either side, then a portion of the comic's reading audience would be alienated, and thus, the issue was avoided.

As the Captain had managed to avoid addressing the Vietnam War, he stayed his course in the battle against evil. He began to release some of his guilt over the death of Bucky and stopped showing signs of PTSD. The Captain was once again serving his government through his own individual adventures and with his adventure with the Avengers, until 1974, when the Captain must realize that the government that he serves is as corrupt as the other enemies that he faces. In the early 1970s, America was watching the Watergate Scandal unfold. President Nixon was implicated in a cover up of the scandal and the American people were forced to ask who they could trust. If the most powerful man in the country is corrupt, then who can they trust to lead them? Eventually President Nixon chose to resign his presidency in an attempt to avoid further scandal.

In the Marvel Universe, the Captain was discovering that the government that created him and that he fought for was just as corrupt as the Nixon administration. In an eight issue mini-series, the Captain uncovers that an organization called the Committee to Regain America's Principles (or CRAP) is secretly a fascist group that is striving to take over the United States government (Wright 245). As he digs deeper into the organization he finds that their leader is not

other than the President of the United States. The villain commits suicide after he is confronted by the Captain.

In the aftermath of the encounter Captain America becomes disillusioned with the government that he once served. As he tries to reconcile the knowledge that he had uncovered he doubts his own role as America's protector. In *Captain America* #176 he questions "So, when people take a look at me -- which America am I supposed to be symbolize?" The Captain cannot accept that he is supposed to protect a corrupt government and casts off his Captain America uniform and becomes "Nomad, the man without a country" (CAC 178). *Captain America* writer Steve Englehart explains his motivation for the story arc:

I was writing a man who believed in America's highest ideals at a time when America's President was a crook. I could not ignore that. And so, in the Marvel Universe, which so closely resembled our own, Cap followed a criminal conspiracy into the White House and saw the President commit suicide. And that was the end of Captain America... (n.p.)

The Captain's tenure as the Nomad is brief, but during his time he finds that his friends and partners do not approve of his choice to abandon his post as America's hero. He soon returns to the cowl and shield and vows to protect America from the corrupt both within and without.

It is interesting to note that the Captain appears to be more distressed by discovering that the President of the United States is secretly a terrorist than he was with the Vietnam War. While Marvel writers chose to keep the Captain out of the conflict, one must question why. In the Vietnam War, although one could say that the enemy was clearly the Communist forces, in actuality the enemy was more of an ideology. If he had entered into the conflict he would have been forced to endorse either an isolationist or

interventionist ideology. Neither the Captain nor Marvel's writers were willing to make this choice. However, the Nixon figure was a single, more concrete enemy for the Captain to face. It was easier to define injustice when the acts of an individual are so blatantly presented to the public. Thus, the Captain could look at the actions of the President and express betrayal, where as he could not identify who exactly the villain was in the Vietnam War.

The Captain America of the 1950s through the 1980s faced many different conflicts in his role as America's protector. His brief tenure during the 1950s reflected America's fear of Communists and domestic traitors. Although the Commie Smasher proved to be unpopular with readers, his stories are an interesting cultural artifact of the time period that expresses fear and paranoia. The Vietnam Era Captain was distanced from the conflicts that many of his readers felt he should directly engage, thus, showing that Marvel writers were apprehensive about declaring themselves either pro- or anti-war. The Watergate Era Captain found that he could not trust the government that he vowed to protect. He, like many Americans, found himself disillusioned with the establishment and sought to distance himself from it. Unfortunately for the Captain, the disillusionment that he felt during the 1970s was only a small representation of the challenges that he would soon face.

CHAPTER FOUR

SHIELDS AND GUNS: THE MODERN CAPTAIN AMERICAS

“Steve Rogers, that skinny blond-haired kid who grew up on the streets of New York showed us that the ideals of the American Dream . . . actually works!” are the words that Sam Wilson, the Falcon, uses to describe the effect that Rogers has had on the Marvel Universe’s America (Loeb). Wilson delivers this line while giving the eulogy at Rogers’ funeral. In 2007, the original Captain America was assassinated and both the Marvel Universe and the real world mourned the passing of the hero. Before his assassination Rogers had taken part in Marvel’s Civil War, a storyline that has echoes of real world politics. Following his death, a darker version of Bucky Barnes takes on the role of Captain America. Also, in the Ultimate Universe, a new Steve Rogers with a radically different personality picks up the shield of Captain America. The modern age of Marvel comics provides readers with three very different Captain Americas. These three Captain Americas produce a spectrum that represents different facets of modern American life.

As in the real world, Captain America soon became weary with the demands of the government. In July of 2006, Marvel comics began publication of series entitled Civil War. In the series, the superhero community is divided when the government attempts to pass legislation called the Superhuman Registration Act. The act would require all superheroes who wished to continue to fight crime to register their real names with the government and receive training. This would create a superhuman police force controlled by the government. While many,

including government officials, believed that Captain America would side with the government, it was surprising when he openly defied the Registration Act. Marvel writers created the Captain's dissent as a vehicle to set up a situation where their superheroes would be divided into two factions; one in support of the registration act and one in protest. The Pro-registration faction is led by Iron Man, while the Anti-registration side is led by Captain America.

Many readers of the Civil War series found the fictional United States government's actions and policies reminiscent of those in the real world. In the wake of the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks, the United States experienced a period of extreme patriotism. At that time a majority of the public agreed with the government's decision to declare war and dissenters were branded as cowards or unpatriotic. However, in the ensuing years public sentiment began to change and the actions of the government were increasingly called into question. The Civil War Captain America is a representation of the disillusioned patriot. This Captain America, unlike his previous incarnations, functions in a world that mirrors "political and social realities of the post-9/11 world, such as privacy issues, controversial wiretapping, and civil liberties compromises rising out of the Patriot Act" (Langley). During the Marvel *Civil War*, Captain America is fighting a battle not only against the Superhuman Registration Act, but also against the violations of civil liberties. This battle between national security and personal freedom is what inspired Marvel writers to use Captain America, the long argued embodiment of America's popular opinions, as the leader of the resistance. As he is such a fundamental and political figure of the Marvel Comic's world, the actions of Captain America carry more weight and influence than others, which places the burden of the battle for civil liberties on his shoulders giving the storyline more relevance.

The fundamental argument that is presented in the Civil War story arc is the battle between personal freedom and national security. In the Marvel Universe, this is represented by the battles between the Pro-Registration and Anti-Registration factions. In essence the Superhuman Registration Act would force heroes to give up their autonomy and become civil servants. This would take away their abilities to choose what battles to enter into, which heroes they associate with, and would also force them to give up portions of their identities. The heroes that for decades have volunteered to protect the innocent would now find themselves obligated to act. The heroes would also face the possibility that the official roster of their real names could fall into the hands of an enemy who could harm not only them but also their families.

These issues are echoed in the real world with the passage of the Bush Administration's USA PATRIOT Act. The act, which was signed into law on October 26, 2001, expands the reach of many law enforcement agencies (Dept. of Justice). Langley notes that this expanded authority includes "wire tapping, e-mail monitoring, lengthier airplane boarding procedures, broadened government ability to engage in search and seizure, expanded regulation of financial transactions, and easing of restrictions on foreign intelligence gathering on U.S. soil." Readers of Marvel's *Civil War*, can identify with the struggle between choosing extreme safety measures and fighting for the rights of the individual. Captain America and his fellow heroes defy the act and stand on the side of personal freedoms. The explosive battles between the heroes become the fight against a paternal government's ideologies. If any of the Captain's fellow freedom fighters are arrested they are imprisoned without any type of legal representation in the Negative Zone, a fictionalized Guantanamo Bay. However, despite the Anti-registration side's best effort, they soon surrender. After a lengthy battle with Iron Man, in which Captain America has the upper hand, the Captain pauses to look at the devastation that the heroes' battles have caused. In fact,

some of the crowd watching the battle attempts to save Iron Man from the Captain. As he looks at the damage and reactions to the battle, Captain America remarks to his fellow hero, the Falcon, that the crowds are right, “We’re not fighting for the people anymore, Falcon . . . Look at us. We’re just fighting” (Miller). As Langley notes the battle is “a fight that they were winning physically but losing philosophically.” This failure during philosophical battles is reminiscent of the Captain’s avoidance of the Vietnam War. Although the Captain can easily win battles against physical enemies, he fails to win battles that deal with ideology. Thus the defenders of personal liberty surrender to the forces of security and the Captain surrenders to the Pro-Registration side.

Only a short time after the end of the Civil War story line Captain America is assassinated. After being dressed in his uniform and paraded down the courthouse steps, the Captain is shot by an unknown assassin. His death is greeted with shock in the Marvel world and in the real world with headlines in the New York Times and many other publications. The decision by the Marvel editors to kill off the character of Steve Rogers proved to be a controversial one. Comic book message boards were flooded with posts by fans wondering about the intentions of the Marvel editors’ decision to kill off one of its most long lasting characters. One fan wrote “I’m definitely pissed off. . . . He’s supposed to represent all our ideals, everything we’re supposed to aspire to and they couldn’t leave him intact? And the way he died -- with two bullets to the chest by a sniper? Come on!” (qtd in Robinson).

As the above fan reaction reveals, the death of Captain America/Steve Rogers is much more problematic than simply killing off a fan favorite character. By killing the original Captain America, Marvel symbolically killed a portion of the American spirit or at least an idealized version of American values. The character was created as a propaganda piece for the war effort

and a protector for the oppressed in 1941 and continued in his role as the representation of popular public sentiment for decades. The death of Steve Rogers, the man who agreed to be experimented on because he wanted to fight for his country, signified the death of a portion of America's idealism and innocence. Matthew Costello notes "with the death of Captain America, the "death of a dream" as Marvel has called it, the myth of American virtue and progress must also die" (239). If idealism and justice are not the foundations on which the myth of American idealism is built, one must wonder what ideals the next generation of Americans will espouse. The death of the character exposes an anxiety about what the new American myth may be.

In the wake of Steve Rogers' death, the mantle of Captain America was left vacant for a short period. It was questioned by both fans and the fictional Marvel Universe as to who would be the next hero to take on the responsibility of being the living embodiment of American culture. In 2008, the role was filled by Bucky Barnes, the former teenage sidekick of Captain America. One can quickly see differences between the two characters. Steve Rogers was the perfect patriot. He was a physically weak young man who volunteered to have himself subjected to experimental chemicals. Whatever he had to do to protect his country he would do. Bucky, however, was severely injured during World War II. After his body was discovered by the Russians, he was brainwashed and fitted with a cybernetic arm to replace his lost one. Even the physicality of the characters represents the differences between the two characters. Although Steve Rogers underwent an experiment procedure, he was still all flesh and blood. Bucky's cybernetic arm points to the changes in the greater American culture from an older fashioned, grassroots atmosphere to a rapidly changing technological one. The new Captain fearlessly integrates technology into his arsenal and recognizes that many of the old fashioned ideals are

ineffective. As with the real world, Bucky makes sure that the Captain America mythos continues to grow and utilize the tools of the modern world.

However, where Steve Rogers had volunteered himself for the super soldier program, Bucky took the role of Captain America out of a sense of obligation. In the aftermath of Rogers' death, Bucky was given a letter that Rogers had written Iron Man asking him to save Bucky. At the end of the letter Rogers had written "America needs a Captain, maybe now more than ever. Don't let that dream die" (Bendis). Because of Rogers' letter, Bucky felt that he had to take on the role of the protector of the American people out of a sense of obligation instead of the patriotic ideal that Rogers embodied. Rogers became Captain America, despite being unqualified for the military, of his own volition because he wanted to protect his country. Bucky takes the role, in a role reversal, because of his guilt over Steve Rogers' death, not because of his desire to protect his country. The reluctance can be transferred to the real world where young Americans are inundated with rhetoric through commercials and advertisements that tell them that it is their responsibility, their obligation to enlist and serve their country.

A more striking difference between the philosophies of the two Captains is also evident when one looks at the weapons that the two characters employ. While one must note that Rogers was indeed a soldier and at times was pictured holding a gun, it was not his primary weapon. Rogers carries a shield, which is primarily a defensive weapon. Bucky, of course, continues to carry the iconic shield, but he also uses a gun. When questioned about the ethics of a superhero carrying a gun, the new Captain America replies, "The weapons don't make or unmake the man or the hero, they're simply tools" (Brubaker). Barnes acknowledges that this sets him apart from the traditional image of Captain America, but also notes that a new era calls for new methods.

Cord Scott writes, “Perhaps the need for an icon that is willing to use overwhelming force is not far on the horizon after all” (133). Costello notes that Barnes is

more willing to take fatal action than was Steve Rogers. Such violence generates no major remorse from the new Captain America . . . Where Steve Rogers had slept through the deepest dark of the Cold War, Bucky is an agent of American’s enemy. Rogers brought World War II values to the late twentieth century: Bucky upholds the ideals, tempered by the reality of four decades of Cold War transformation. Where Steve Rogers stood as an example of the best America could be . . . Bucky is one of the people, an everyman trying to do his best. (240)

This then calls for readers to question which of the Captains actually embodies the spirit of the current American culture. Is it the traditional spirit of hyperpatriotism that calls upon citizens to uphold ideals that at time can seem naive? Or has the country reached a place where violence and technology is what is really needed? This struggle was also played out in the comic book series after the reintroduction of Steve Rogers to the traditional Marvel Universe. In an issued entitled “Who will wield the shield?” both Barnes and Rogers struggle with the decision of who should keep the mantle of Captain America. Both believe that the other embodies modern America’s cultural ideals. Barnes asserts that Rogers’ sense of justice and morality is what the country needs. While Rogers believe that Barnes strength and confidence is needed in the role. Ultimately Marvel chose to retain Barnes as the new Captain America, while Rogers takes on the role of a regular soldier within the S.H.I.E.L.D. organization.

However, the traditional Marvel Universe is not the only place where the changes in American culture are being represented. In the late 90s/early 2000s, Marvel executives noticed a startling change in their reader demographics. Longtime fans were remaining faithful to their

childhood heroes, but there were little to no younger readers coming into the fold to take their place. Marvel worried that the traditional, mainstream characters had become too inaccessible to younger readers, because they require the audience to know around fifty to sixty years of character backstory. This could prove to be a daunting task, especially for the new technology driven, instant gratification seeking generation. Marvels' answer to the youth crisis was simple: create a new universe. The newly dubbed Ultimate Universe gave Marvel writers a clean slate to work with. They were able to introduce many of the well know characters from the mainstream universe by giving them new backstories and, in many cases, new personalities. Young readers are no longer burdened with the task of knowing years of backstory. Thus with the new, edgy Ultimate Universe, Marvel hoped would open up the Marvel world to a whole new demographic.

Of course, if Marvel creates a new universe, they must also create a new Captain America. His backstory was much the same as his mainstream counterpart. Ultimate Steve Rogers is a soldier, who volunteered for the super soldier program and is subsequently dropped into the ocean and frozen. Years later his icy tomb is discovered and this is the point where the story strays from that of the mainstream universe Captain. The Ultimate Captain America is turned over to an elite group of government sponsored superheroes called the Ultimates. Despite having a lineup that resembles the mainstream Avengers, the team is undisciplined, attention-seeking and the epitome of dysfunction. This is the group of people that Ultimate Captain America finds himself in charge of.

The Ultimate Captain America hearkens readers back to a time when the Captain was the patriotic servant of the military. He blindly follows order and fails to question the motives of his superiors. Whereas the original Captain America serves as an inspiration or goal for readers to aspire to, the Ultimate Captain fails to connect emotionally with the people he was created to

protect. This disjunction can be seen through the character's inability to adjust to the modern world in which he is unfrozen. While on a mission in the Middle East, Ultimate Captain shows no compassion to the occupants of the city that the team is evacuating. He yells at a young boy and dismisses his sorrow about the destruction of his home. This encounter would come back to haunt the Captain when the young boy volunteers to become a super soldier for his country and eventually attacks and nearly takes control of the United States (Miller).

The Ultimate Captain's actions mirror that of many American citizens. The United States' long occupation in the Middle East has long been a subject of controversy. Many American citizens fail to comprehend the anger that arises from these occupied countries. In this case the United States embodies the role of a paternal government, who decides what the correct course of action for another is without giving credence to the ideas of the "child" nation. Also in many cases the paternalism stems from the parent nations desire to obtain goods from the subservient nation. In the case of the Middle East this product is oil. *Ultimates 2* writer Mark Miller notes that he was inspired because "in the name of oil, this [the Bush] administration is stirring up a hornet's nest" that will ultimately cause the downfall of the American economy (Estrella). He uses the actions of the Ultimate Captain and his team to represent the effects of greed on the world scene.

Not only does the Ultimate Captain fail to find an emotional connection with his fellow countrymen, he also responds to conflict in a different manner. Unlike the mainstream Captain America/Rogers, he is violent and manipulative. Jackson Sutcliff notes that, "Ultimate Captain America is less of an inspiration than an action hero; instead of John Wayne, he's Sylvester Stallone" (121). This Captain solves problems with his fist and not his mind. When faced with the possibility of retreat, he points to the A on his cowl and shouts, "Do you think this letter on

my head stands for France?” (Miller). To this modern re-imagined Captain, victory is all that matters. Loss of life and property damage is just a means to an end. Miller created his Ultimate Captain as an embodiment of the Bush Administration which was in power during the beginning of the Ultimate Universe.

It is easy for readers to see the parallels between Ultimate Captain America’s attitude and the real world. At times it seems as if the Ultimate Captain embodies, at least a part, of modern America’s foreign policy. Both are swift to retaliate, destructive, and convinced of their righteousness. While it may be argued that many of their actions have a basis in good intentions, their overwhelming condescension is alienating. Both the fictional Ultimate Captain and, at times, the real world government espouse ideals that are old and outdated, making the public question their worth. One can also see the similarities between the Ultimate Captain America and popular public opinion following the September 11th attacks. After the attacks much of the public felt a new found vulnerability of the United States. The reaction was very defensive and dismissive of others. France became a popular foe, as its people were described as cowards and Congress found the time to rename a popular side dish “Freedom Fries.” The Ultimate Captain America embodies the ill-founded characteristics of defensive anger and xenophobia. As the original Steve Rogers serves as a model citizen and soldier that readers wish to emulate, the Ultimate Steve Rogers serves a grotesque warning against zealous nationalism.

The three modern Captain Americas prove to be very different characters. The original Steve Rogers continues to embody the ideals of the World War II era. Bucky Barnes is a more dangerous Captain that recognizes his mentor’s virtues, but also in the realities of the violent new era. The Ultimate Captain America is a xenophobic sociopath who fails to see the error of his ways. Each of the Captain Americas represents a form of American popular opinion. Not every

ideal expressed by the characters is a positive one, but each is anchored in a real world situation. As America continues to progress into this new era, one must question which of these Captains represents the country.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Over the years, *Captain America Comics* have offered readers several different views of America. From the hyperpatriotism of the 1940s to the severe political disillusionment of the post-9/11 period, the Captain America character has been utilized as a vehicle for Marvel's writers to express their opinions of the world around them. Thus, readers can look at each issue of the comic books series and see "the historical relation between art and society" that Greenblatt discusses in his works (5). In his role as the embodiment of American ideals, the Captain faces in the Marvel universe many conflicts that are mirrored in our world. Kading asserts, "the superhero genre has always been focused on expanding the bounds of our imagination in ways that offered insights into our immediate reality, while adding a dimension (or twist) that took it just beyond our know experience" (209). Yes, Captain America functions in a world that is rife with superheroes and villains, but that does not detract from the fact that his stories reflect the concerns of real world Americans.

Although the genre of comic books is often overlooked as unimportant or anti-educational, it is apparent that just the opposite is true. Readers can pick up any issue of the *Captain America* series and see snap shots of American culture. The Captain, through his actions and speech, conveys to readers the popular attitudes of the times, be they pro- or anti-government. The character is not bound to the "feel good" stories that dominate in the Sunday comics, or as they are sometimes called "funny books." The Captain represents ideals and beliefs

across the American political continuum. At times he fights against his own government. As such, readers can clearly see a reflection of their own world or beliefs in the character.

From World War II to the post-9/11 America, the Captain and his fellow heroes have provoked readers to examine what it means to be an American. In the 1940s, many were supportive of the character, but there were also those who disagreed with the ideal of an American protector of all people regardless of race. Later during the Vietnam War, the letters to the editor page of the *Captain America* comic books became a forum for readers to discuss the merits of American intervention to the threat of Communist regimes abroad. Then in the years following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, comic book message boards were filled with readers arguing the merits of Marvel's *Civil War* storyline and the Captain's actions during the conflict. The defining theme for the decades of discussion comes down to one question – what does it mean to be an American? I argue that the Captain offers an insight into an answer for this question. For each decade, the Captain functioned as an ideal for popular American sentiment. Even his inaction during the Vietnam War reflects American sentiments, as he, along with readers, could not decide whether America should be involved in the conflict or not.

In March of 2011, Captain America celebrated his sixtieth anniversary. Since his first appearance in March of 1941, the character has become an icon for America. Throughout his tenure in the pages of Marvel Comics, the Captain has become one of the company's most recognizable characters. Whether the Captain was in solo stories or with his team the Avengers, he was a leader and a symbol for readers to idolize. The Captain's first incarnation reminds readers of a time where America was facing a foreign threat in the Axis powers. Simon's and Kirby's character gave a voice to the Jewish community of the 1940s. The 1950s Captain reflected the fear of a domestic attack from Communist spies. The Vietnam era Captain avoided

engaging in the conflict, as he was attempting to adapt to a world that was so unlike the one that he originally knew. The Watergate era Captain was forced to recognize that the government that he had spent decades fighting for was just as corrupt as any of the enemies that he had face. The post-9/11 Captains represent the modern schism that marks the politics of the time. When one looks at the sixty year history of the Captain it is apparent that *Captain America Comics* just a collection of brightly colored, action sequences, but are cultural artifacts that attempt to define several different political and social regimes. Although the Captain cannot fully embody the ideals of each and every American citizen, the character does embody the basic tenants of what defined patriotism in the 1940s and continues until today: a love of his country, the courage to fight for his beliefs, and the hope that tomorrow will be another day to correct the injustices in the world.

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