

The American Ideal in the Age of Trump: An Analysis of Captain America

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“Whatever happens tomorrow you must promise me one thing. That you will stay who you are. Not a perfect soldier, but a good man” - Abraham Erskine (*Captain America: The First Avenger*)

Introduction

On December 7, 1941, the United States suffered an unprecedented attack on its own soil. The government’s response was swift and decisive, and the United States was soon propelled into one of the worst conflicts the world has ever seen. Three months later, Marvel Comics (then known as Timely Comics), published the first issue of a brand-new comic series: *Captain America Comics*. The cover was vibrant and impactful, boasting forty-five thrilling pages. It depicted a man dressed in red, white, and blue punching Adolf Hitler in the face. The issue told the tale of Steve Rogers, a young patriot who undergoes an experimental procedure that transforms him into a super soldier. Rogers then dons the mantle of Captain America and is sent overseas to battle Axis forces. The comic was an instant success, and soon enough, Timely was publishing Captain America comics all across the country on a monthly basis. Cap battled his way through World War II and even beyond, making him one of the only pieces of wartime propaganda to survive beyond wartime.

On September 11, 2001, the United States suffered an unprecedented attack on its own soil. The government’s response was swift and decisive, and the United States soon initiated one of the worst conflicts the world has ever seen. All the pieces were in place for Captain America to triumphantly return as a national symbol of patriotism, strength, and honor, as well as militarism and intervention. And yet, despite this eerily similar geopolitical landscape, Captain America appeared as something nearly unrecognizable

from how he began. Pop culture analyst and comic book critic Cord Scott notes that instead of charging fearlessly into battle to fight terrorists abroad, Captain America was “[fighting] off skinheads who were threatening the life of an Arab-American merchant in New York, then [making] a point of noting that there has to be a distinction between those who look different, and those who think differently and wish to do the U.S. harm” (337). Noticing this dramatic shift in ethos, many critics and commentators have sought to explain how Captain America has adapted as a character to fit in with an ever-changing political and cultural landscape. There exists a wide breadth of literature analyzing Captain America’s evolution from his inception during World War II to his reaction to 9/11. From this literature come two dominant interpretations of Captain America’s character: the “Perfect Soldier” or the “Good Man.”

Proponents of the “Perfect Soldier” interpretation argue that Captain America is simply a tool of propaganda; his primary function is to serve as an allegory for whatever the interests of the United States government are. Under this interpretation, any change that Captain America undergoes is simply him adapting to the new “orders” that have been issued to him by the government.

The “Good Man” interpretation views Captain America not as a representation of what America is during any given period of history, but what America should strive to be. Captain America is a moral agent who will always do what is right, regardless of what the government may believe. This version of Captain America also holds America to a higher standard, and will actively dissent against it if he believes that it is no longer doing what is right.

Although there have been many experts who have argued for both of these interpretations, there exists a significant gap within the literature concerning Captain America’s role in the political era of Trump. How should Captain America behave in an

age where Americans are more divided than perhaps ever before and issues of hate crimes and domestic terrorism are on the rise? This paper seeks to answer these questions by using the “Perfect Soldier” and “Good Man” theories as a guiding framework for analyzing the Captain America comics that have been published since Trump’s election. This analysis reveals that Captain America’s sustained cultural relevance can only be explained under the Good Man interpretation. Furthermore, this interpretation allows for a deeper understanding of Captain America’s role as a symbol of World War II-era American values in conflict with a political order that no longer prioritizes them, although further research is required on this subject. Before analyzing where Captain America stands currently, however, it is first important to understand these two interpretations and the historical context that supports them.

The Perfect Soldier

It is difficult for Captain America, a character who represents American values, to remain consistent when those values have changed greatly since his inception. How does a character who was forged in the xenophobic, nationalist fires of World War II propaganda maintain cultural relevance? Writer and comic book analyst Charles Moss argues that Cap does so by adapting to the political climate. He writes that, “Captain America has always been a freedom fighter. But what kind of freedom he fights for depends on the era of modern American history” (Moss). Moss points specifically to the 1950s, when Captain America became the “commie smasher” and his comics prominently featured, “Asian communists, Soviets, and American commie spies.” History provides strong evidence for Moss’s argument, as the commie smashing adventures of Captain America were eventually retconned, “[reflecting] the changing political climate of post-McCarthy America, in which McCarthyite Americanism was deemed to be false

patriotism” (Dittmer 632). Moss’s ultimate conclusion is that Captain America operates as a sort of “Perfect Soldier” for the American government; battling whoever the American government deems is a threat, and advocating for whatever geopolitical order the government currently supports. Even his character’s origin is symbolic of this, as Captain America is a “super soldier” created by a government experiment. Advocates of the Perfect Soldier theory, such as Moss, believe that ultimately Captain America is nothing more than propaganda, and all he needs to remain relevant “[is] an enemy who'd placate the government” (Moss). When these real-world enemies change, so do the enemies that Captain America faces.

As the United States prepared to enter the conflict in Vietnam, Captain America approached an interesting crossroads. Captain America had historically been a symbol for American involvement in conflict, but this conflict was different. This time, there was no objectively evil force that was threatening America, no attack on American soil that interventionists could point to. This meant that Captain America’s involvement in the Vietnam War would be critical for the future of the character. Pop culture analyst Mike Milford argues that because Captain America is “an ‘anthropomorphic embodiment of the American nation,’ each of his adventures is transformed into an enactment of American values”; so, if Captain America decided to enter into the Vietnam conflict, it would mean that that conflict was absolutely in line with American ideals (Milford 625). Additionally, up until this point Captain America had been the perfect soldier that some scholars describe him as, battling America’s geopolitical enemies since World War II. Because of this, Captain America faced pressure from both sides of the ideological spectrum when it came to Vietnam, but “[a]s the war ground on, it became clear that the majority of the readership wanted Captain America to remain in the United States, and, for the most part, he did” (Dittmer 632). While some may argue that Captain America abstaining from

intervening in Vietnam serves as support for the Good Man theory, it is worth noting that Captain America did not take any sort of anti-war stance, which the Good Man theory dictates that he should have. While it may be true that Captain America did not involve himself in this conflict, he still did not dare to question the authority of the US government in any respect.

Supporters of the Perfect Soldier theory point to Captain America comics that followed 9/11 as further evidence that Captain America is merely a tool of American nationalism. Comic analyst Cord Scott believes 9/11 provided an opportunity for “the one character that was created for battle against America’s enemies, Captain America,” to “[return] for his ‘original purpose’” (337). Scott posits that while Captain America had changed in the 60’s and 70’s, it was not because of a shift in the attitudes of Americans, but rather due to a simple lack of enemies for Captain America to fight. Scott argues that after 9/11, Captain America is essentially the same as he was in 1941. Scott believes 9/11 gives Captain America his new “marching orders,” as he is presented a new enemy to fight in the form of “the terrorists that threatened the American way of life” (337). This dynamic directly mirrors the comics of the 1940s, in which “Captain America is seen exacting justice (in the form of beating fists) on Hitler, various storm troopers, or some other sort of military regime” (Scott 334). Captain America also underwent a visual change, as his costume was altered to make him look more like a soldier, which Scott believes “led the reader to assume that Captain America had a direct military connection to the unit around him” (337-338). Indeed, Captain America heavily reflected the ideals which the government sought to display: courage, strength, and most importantly, unwavering patriotism. Scott’s argument is similar to Moss’s, that being that Captain America serves the exclusive purpose of battling the enemies of America, whoever they may be. Both Scott and Moss argue that even though there have been several changes to

American culture since Captain America's creation, his role as an allegory for US interests is too deeply engrained within his character for him to truly change.

The Good Man

Those who contend with analysts such as Scott and Moss believe that there was one event in American history that permanently altered the fabric of Captain America's character: Watergate. In July of 1972, the American people were forced to confront the fact that their president had committed several crimes. Americans everywhere were shocked and appalled, and Captain America was no exception. Captain America was placed in an almost unwinnable position, how could a character who is "visually anthropomorphized' American ideology" and the "ultimate national icon" possibly survive if the ideology he represented was corrupt (Milford 614)? Steve Englehart, the writer of Captain America comics at the time, recognized this dilemma and created a solution that reflected American's attitudes at the time. He created a story that involved Captain America tracking down an evil organization known as the "Secret Empire." He eventually follows the leader to the White House, and the secret identity of the leader is revealed. Englehart heavily implies that the leader is actually the president through Cap's reaction to the leader's identity. After realizing this, Captain America, who once "[t]rusted in [his country's] basic framework, its stated goals, its long-term virtue," is now "crushed inside. Like millions of other Americans, each in his own way, he has seen his trust mocked" (Englehart 18). This betrayal ultimately led to Captain America abandoning his mantle and taking up the role of Nomad, the man without a country. The Nomad stories were used as a means of conveying that the traditional American values that Captain America had once represented were no longer present in American society. Sociologist Mike Dubose contends that Captain America's transformation to Nomad also "[started] a

trend of questioning ‘the political underpinning for superhero actions,’” a trend that he believes continues into the modern age of comics (933). Captain America abandoning his role portrayed how many Americans felt, that the country America had become was no longer worth protecting.

Dubose argues that Captain America’s eventual return represents the solution to the identity crisis that many Americans felt after Watergate. Dubose believes that Captain America returned because he decided “that America needed protecting even from those within America who tried to destroy the American Dream, and that was a task for Captain America” (927). Similarly, sociologist and comic analyst Jason Dittmer argues that this series of stories transformed Captain America and explicitly affirmed something that had been “implicit since the Captain’s return in 1964: he was, despite his government origins, a rugged individualist” (633). He contends heavily with the Perfect Soldier theory, arguing that “[even] when [Captain America] pursued American foreign policy goals, he was not directly affiliated with the American government” (Dittmer 633). Unlike Moss, Dittmer and Dubose believe that the Watergate scandal forced a permanent transition in Captain America, and caused a “disconnection between what Captain America is meant to represent (the idealized American) and the source of the geopolitical narratives in which he has to operate” (Dittmer 642).

Dubose cites the more contemplative and postmodern nature of Captain America comics immediately following Watergate as further evidence that the character was no longer the same. These comics find Captain America reflecting that “the American Dream [he’s] sworn to defend—is often light years removed from the American Reality” and that “people aren’t so easily pigeonholed into good guys and bad guys” (Dubose 928). Proponents of the Good Man believe that ultimately, Watergate transformed Captain America into an ideal for what America could, and should, become instead of what it is

during any given era, and “[a]lthough Captain America started out as a government agent, he ended up transcending politics and authority . . . which is what truly made him a hero” (Dubose 931). The Good Man theory still interprets Captain America as a reflection of sorts, but instead of being a reflection of what the American government deems important, he is a reflection of the disconnect between what America should be and what it is in reality.

Mike Milford, siding with both Jason Dittmer and Mike Dubose, argues that while Captain America might be tasked with battling those who would seek to do America harm after 9/11, his focus is more on protecting innocent lives than it is on protecting Americans specifically. When describing what happened on September 11th, Captain America refers to it as the murder of “almost three thousand defenseless human beings” (Reiber 121). Captain America views the September 11th attacks as a tragedy not because of their relation to America, but because of the loss of human life that they caused. This is almost directly opposite to Captain America’s priorities at his inception, which were fighting “the vicious elements who seek to overthrow the US government,” as well as enemies who “threaten [Americans’] independence” (Simon and Kirby 8). Captain America’s severance from American politics is apparent here, as he is no longer just a hero for Americans, he is a hero for innocent people everywhere. Milford specifically articulates that Captain America also has a more dynamic view of the US government in the comics following September 11th. While the Captain America of the 1940s was an avid advocate of American involvement in conflict, the comics in 2001 “used Captain America to argue for a measured response to 9/11” (Milford 625). Proponents of the Good Man theory also point to the villains presented in post-9/11 comics as evidence of a permanent shift. Villains in the 1940s were often portrayed as exaggerated caricatures of America’s enemies that embodied “Nazi ideology in stark contrast to the American

principles” (Milford 621). After September 11th, Captain America is confronted with villains who cause him to confront those very ideals. The issues of Captain America after September 11th follow Captain America tracking down a terrorist with a burned face that attacked a small American town. The terrorist offers to turn himself in if Captain America can guess where he’s from, telling him;

[g]uerillas gunned my father down while he was working in the fields— with American bullets. American weapons. Where am I from? My father didn’t know that the Cold War was at its height—remember? When the Soviets were your great enemy? The evil empire? My mother didn’t know that our nation was in the throes of an undeclared civil war between your allies and the allies of evil when she ran to find her husband. My mother was interrogated and shot. Our home was burned. That fire gave me my face. But fire didn’t make me a monster. You know your history, Captain America. Tell your monster where he’s from. . . You can’t answer me. . . You played that game in too many places... The sun never set on your political chessboard—your empire of blood. (qtd. in Dittmer 641)

For the first time, Captain America is confronted with a human being who has suffered at the hands of the country he stands for. These comics find Captain America reconsidering the values he fights for, wondering if Americans are “hated because [they’re] free—free and prosperous and good? Or does the light [Americans] see cast shadows that [they] don’t” (Reiber 127). These issues present both the reader and Captain America with a villain who has understandable intentions, and a real reason to hate America. Dubose notes this change by arguing that what is evil about these villains is “not necessarily their morals but their desire to inflict their morals on others” (929). This clearly contrasts with the villains presented in earlier issues of Captain America comics, whose only reason for

hating America was that they were evil, and therefore must hate what is good. Even if Captain America is once again battling the enemies of the American government, these enemies are so distinct from the ones presented at the time of his origin that they cannot be so easily compared.

Although the American public's initial response to the attacks on September 11th was very similar to the response after Pearl Harbor, analysts like Milford and Dubose contend that Captain America's response could not have been any more different. They argue that by 2001, Captain America has come to represent what America must strive to be. After September 11th, this means warning against hatred and fear. Captain America does this by informing Americans that, "[t]error's not a four-dollar knife. Or an envelope of powdered death. It's the hate, the blind hate, burning in a stranger's eyes" (Reiber 42). Americans can't sink to a blind hatred of their enemies, or those who look like them, like they had once done in 1941. It's clear that this is not the same Captain America that readers were introduced to during World War II, and those who defend the Good Man theory believe it is reductive to explain this change as nothing more than a soldier receiving new orders.

Captain vs. America

While not much literature analyzing Captain America comics published after Trump's election currently exists, the Perfect Soldier and Good Man theories established in existing literature provide a solid framework through which these comics may be analyzed. In doing so, it becomes clear that even if Captain America was at one point the American government's perfect soldier, he no longer is. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the first 6-issue story arc published after Trump's election entitled, "Winter in America." This arc, written by Lenil Francis Yu and Ta-Nehisi Coates, finds Captain

America confused, betrayed, and isolated by the nation that he swore to protect, and ultimately has him questioning the very values he stands for, all of which does not sound like something the perfect soldier should be doing. These were the first Captain America comics to be published in the wake of Trump's election, and serve as an effective means for determining what Captain America's reactions to that event are. The arc follows Captain America trying to track down a group of former American soldiers turned terrorists while at the same time trying to regain the trust of the American people.

The first issue opens with Captain America battling a group of domestic terrorists on the National Mall, and it is immediately clear that this version of Captain America is entirely different from the one readers saw back in 1941. Firstly, Captain America is not seen here fighting some foreign body; he is fighting white, blonde haired, blue eyed American soldiers, people who look just like him. He then proceeds to describe himself as a "soldier at home or away. A man loyal to nothing...except the dream" (Coates and Yu 8-9). This language immediately invokes the Good Man theory. Captain America makes it clear that he is no longer a symbol for blind loyalty to any political order, rather he represents commitment to an ideal. He fights to maintain and uphold that ideal, regardless of whether or not that results in him fighting for the American government. While Captain America does refer to himself as a soldier, he does not do so with the burning nationalism he once had. Later, Captain America even admits that "[he is] a warrior who hates war" (Coates and Yu 10). If Captain America truly was a perfect soldier who only represents the interests of the government, what interests would these statements be reflective of? The values that the current American political order prioritizes are not subdued nationalism and pacifism. It is clear from these first issues alone that while Captain America is still inherently a national symbol, he is isolated from the nation's government or politics.

As the arc continues, Captain America's symbolic role in modern American society becomes increasingly clear. Because the terrorists that he is fighting are the products of "super soldier" formulas, Captain America reflects that "every time [he sees] another of them... [he sees] another part of [himself]" (Coates and Yu 27-28). In many ways, this arc forces Captain America to battle himself and the values that he stands for. These terrorists are symbolic of the values that Captain America once stood for being appropriated for a violent and hateful cause. That dynamic mirrors what many of Americans have experienced since Trump's election. Many people find it difficult to identify with America and the values that it represents since those values have been associated with such a divisive election and president. Captain America goes on to explain that he is "upset and tired" of "having to prove that no part of them is part of [him]" (Coates and Yu 30). This feeling is a direct reflection of the shame that many felt after Trump was elected. Movements such as "#notmypresident" reflect the desire that many Americans felt to prove that the election was not a reflection of who they were as Americans or as people. That despite the fact that those who support Trump and those who hate him appear the same on the surface, just as Captain America appears the same as the terrorists he is fighting, there are fundamental differences in their ideologies that distinguish them. Captain America experiencing this feeling lends further credence to the Good Man theory. If Captain America still was the Perfect Soldier that many argue he was at his origin, it seems unlikely that he would find himself reflecting on the divide between himself and others who claim to embody those values that he fights for. If Captain America was still a tool of propaganda meant only to represent the government's interests, he would return to battling America's foreign enemies and forwarding the American way of life abroad, instead of battling domestic terrorists while commenting on the political divide that is fracturing the American way of life.

The arc eventually ends on a cliffhanger, with Captain America's original Nazi Nemesis, the Red Skull, being resurrected. Even this ending is heavily draped in symbolism. One could easily draw a connection between the return of the Red Skull and the recent "resurrection" of neo-Nazi activity in the United States. And although the return of Captain America's original nemesis may make it seem like the character has not changed all that much since 1941, the juxtaposition of this "new" Captain America with a symbol of the "old" one, that being the Red Skull, brilliantly demonstrates all the ways that Captain America has changed since his inception. Sure, Captain America once again finds himself battling a cartoonish Nazi supervillain, but in 2019 he also finds himself battling his values, his history, and even his own government.

Conclusion

Captain America's value as a character extends beyond that of other superheroes. His origin and status as an inherently national icon gives him the unique ability to provide commentary on American politics and culture in a way that most other fictional characters cannot. On the other hand, this role has provided a challenge for the character and forced him to continuously adapt to a dynamic political landscape. It is clear that as a result of this, Captain America has been forced to diminish, and eventually sever, his connection to the American government. This severance is what has allowed Captain America to maintain cultural relevance well beyond any other piece of wartime propaganda. Although this paper has established two primary interpretations of the character as well as which interpretation the current iteration of Captain America more closely resembles, further research is required to determine whether or not these two interpretations are the best metric for evaluating the character. This paper accepts these two interpretations as a valid framework for evaluating modern Captain America comics,

but it does not compare them to other interpretations to determine whether or not they were best. And while that was never the goal of this paper, further research into that question could illuminate this topic further and implicate future evaluations of the character.

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