

SENTINELS OF LIBERTY: CAPTAIN AMERICA, HIS DOUBLES, AND THE  
DILEMMA OF AMERICAN IDENTITY

by

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## ABSTRACT

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The Marvel character Captain America was created in 1941 as an unabashed, patriotic icon who was meant to inspire Americans in the face of war. At the end of World War II, however, American identity underwent a split between diplomatic “prophetic realism” and aggressive “zealous nationalism.” The inherent dilemma for Captain America quickly became which side of the American psyche he was to represent. Marvel has dealt with the problem of representation by allowing the original Captain America to be a prophetic realist, while introducing “doubles” of Captain America who act as zealous nationalists. In each era of Captain America’s publication, the conflict between the real Captain and his zealous doubles has provided a dialogue on the American spirit, while allowing for meaningful speculation on what the future holds for this country.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Illustrations .....	<i>vi</i>
Introduction .....	1
Chapter 1: Who is Captain America? .....	7
Chapter 2: The Forgotten Captain of the 1950s .....	23
Chapter 3: The 1980s and the Growth of Zealous Nationalism .....	40
Chapter 4: Regular versus Ultimate .....	58
Conclusion .....	74
Bibliography .....	77

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: Captain America squaring off against his fifties double .....	4
Figure 2: The cover to <i>Captain America</i> #18 (1942). Note the demonic representation of Japanese soldiers .....	9
Figure 3: Cap and the Black Panther team up – equally – to save freedom for all .....	13
Figure 4: Captain America officially teams up with the Falcon. Cautious Harlem residents look on .....	16
Figure 5: Cap’s double beating up Harlem residents .....	24
Figure 6: Fifties Cap’s violence, paranoia, and racism placed him squarely in the zealous nationalist camp .....	29
Figure 7: Captain America considers the fate of his double after their climactic battle .....	39
Figure 8: Captain America’s momentous decision to kill an enemy. The act resonates through the next few years’ worth of stories .....	48
Figure 9: John Walker, the replacement Captain America, taking down villains with extremely violent tactics .....	54
Figure 10: John Walker’s return as USAgent. The character still exists in modern continuity .....	55
Figure 11: Captain America speaks with another rescue worker at Ground Zero .....	61
Figure 12: Ultimate Cap slices his enemy in half during the final battle of <i>The Ultimates</i> .....	67
Figure 13: Ultimate Cap stands over the body of the unarmed, defenseless man he just stabbed in the chest .....	70
Figure 14: Captain America is gunned down on his way to face charges for his role in the Civil War .....	73

## Introduction

The Marvel superhero Captain America has a deceptively simple motif: his name, costume, and equipment all evoke feelings of patriotism in the reader, a feeling backed up by the Captain's oft-quoted duty to protect "those intangibles upon which our nation was founded...liberty, justice, dignity, (and) the pursuit of happiness."<sup>1</sup> It would be easy, given the expansion of America's armed forces following World War II, to characterize Captain America (or Cap, as he is colloquially known) as a symbol of American military might. This instinct to stereotype the character for his costume would be misguided, for his actions over the last forty years have consistently shown a true loyalty to those "intangibles" he mentioned as opposed to an aggressive foreign or suppressive domestic policy.

A problem has existed almost since Captain America's creation, however, and it lies in the very "intangibles" he so fervently defended. Whose conception of liberty, justice, dignity, and happiness was Captain America standing for? The costume would seem to indicate a unified, symbolic superhero who stood for everyone's idea of the intangibles, but America's sheer size and diversity make it impossible for the country to be encapsulated by anyone, even a character as popular and significant as Captain America. As one reader observed in the late 1970s:

Face it, there's no way Steve Rogers can be everyone. No matter how hard he tries, he can't be black, for instance. [He's] only one man, and putting him anywhere discriminates against most of the country. In the city, he's away from the country (the heartland). In the country, he's away from the city (the sprawling urban center). In the North, he's away from the South...<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Gruenwald, "The Choice," *Captain America*, vol.1, no. 332 (1987): 13.

<sup>2</sup> Kurt Busiek, as quoted in the letters page of *Captain America*, vol.1, no. 239 (1979): 17.

More than just geographical differences, though, the dilemma of Captain America's representative ability is best thought of in ideological terms. Since Cap's creation in World War II, America has factionalized into numerous, opposing groups with contradictory value systems that can be easily, though imperfectly, summarized as orthodox and progressive.<sup>3</sup>

There exists within each of these ideologies a clear conception of what the world is supposed to be. Cultural orthodoxy adheres to a supreme external authority, one that exists forever and which possesses unquestionable rightness in all of its actions.<sup>4</sup> In the past, the culturally orthodox have traditionally viewed the supreme authority in terms of God, but American cultural orthodoxy blends religion with faith in the American system. Culturally orthodox Americans may still believe in God, but their belief in the almost divine correctness of America can rival their commitment to religion. Culturally progressive Americans, on the other hand, view authority not in a Supreme Being or government, but in "the spirit of the modern age, a spirit of rationalism and subjectivism."<sup>5</sup> As such, the two ideologies bring with them different conceptions of what Cap describes as American intangibles.

The author Robert Jewett has further defined the split observed between the orthodox and the progressive in America. Jewett sees the American psyche as divided between what he calls zealous nationalism and prophetic realism.<sup>6</sup> Zealous nationalism seeks to redeem America through the destruction of the wicked. It is characterized by a

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<sup>3</sup> James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), 43.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Robert Jewett, *The Captain America Complex* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1973), 10.

black-and-white view of the world in which the enemies of America need to be rooted out and obliterated. Prophetic realism opposes this militant mindset with a call to diplomacy, impartial justice, and understanding.<sup>7</sup> The American identity has always been comprised of an uneasy wedding of these two ideologies, but since World War II, they have become fundamentally incompatible with each other, splitting into the cultural combatants described as orthodoxy and progressivism.

Jewett claims that the uneasy coexistence and frequent conflict between zealous nationalism and prophetic realism lies at the heart of what he has termed “the Captain America complex.”<sup>8</sup> It is his belief that Captain America represents the fundamental incompatibility of the two opposing groups in America. According to Jewett, Cap represents the jingoistic zealot who invades other countries and seeks out evildoers to destroy them. Since the 1960s, Jewett has used Captain America as the template for several books discussing the post-World War II disjunction between what he termed the “crusading and the realistic impulses”<sup>9</sup> of the American mind. The “Captain America complex” is certainly a fascinating method of describing such a disjunction. Nevertheless, a careful reading of the actual comics in question shows that Jewett’s estimation of Captain America as the locus of this split is unwarranted, at least to some degree.

Captain America’s hyper-militaristic 1941 origin surely fits the model of Jewett’s complex, and the mindset of disjunction between the two impulses was carried over into

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), xiii.

<sup>9</sup> Jewett, *The Captain America Complex*, 55.

the ill-fated 1950s run as well. But since 1963, with the introduction of Cap to a new generation of readers, Marvel has consistently portrayed Cap as the embodiment of progressive prophetic realism. While many fans feel that this portrayal is the true definition of the character, it leaves a large segment of the American population unrepresented. How can a man with the American flag on his chest, a man who embodies only half of the American psyche, truly stand for every American? Who represents the orthodox zealous nationalists of America?

Marvel has dealt with the dilemma of Captain America's inability to represent everyone by strategically using doubles, or analogues, of him. These doubles existed in three crucial eras of Captain

America's publication history: the 1970s revision of Captain America's controversial "commie-smasher" exploits; the 1980s use of a government-sanctioned replacement for the increasingly difficult-to-control Captain America; and the twenty-first century creation of an alternate, conservative Captain America in a

separate universe. While each storyline differed in thematic material and plot, one overriding trait existed in all three: a recognition that Captain America on his own could not, and never would be able to, represent all of America. Rather than being a unified



Figure 1: Captain America squaring off against his fifties double

symbol for the whole country, it is the contention of this thesis that Captain America, since 1963, has only ever embodied the progressive-prophetic-realist mindset, and that his doubles have always represented the orthodox-zealous-nationalist mindset.

All of the doubles are products of the times in which they were written. The 1970s storyline was an attempt to deal with the ugly history of McCarthyism and its effect on the character. Both the 1980s and 2000s stories were reactions to ages of renewed conservatism, as well as an attempt to reconcile a progressive Captain America with the increasingly orthodox world in which he found himself. Almost always, the doubles were antagonists for Cap, characters with irreconcilable differences from the way he operated and the person he was. It is telling that instead of assisting each other in fighting crime or making the country a better place, Captain America and his doubles inevitably clashed, a reminder that the two mindsets of American thought deal with the most fundamental ideas of who we are as Americans, and that those mindsets are in endless conflict.<sup>10</sup> The battles between Captain America and his patriotic counterparts, then, were more than just the colorful antics of two-dimensional super-people; they were, and are, a “struggle to define the meaning of America.”<sup>11</sup>

Jewett believed that on the pages of a comic book the battle was an innocuous sign of a larger conflict, but his dismissal is misguided. Though he decried the crudity of Captain America,<sup>12</sup> others recognized that the most “ephemeral and seemingly inconsequential literature – and in most quarters the comic book was certainly that – can

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<sup>10</sup> Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 43.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 51.

<sup>12</sup> Jewett and Lawrence, *Crusade Against Evil*, 6.

tell us a great deal about the society that produced and harbored it.”<sup>13</sup> The trend over the last forty years has been for Cap’s zealous nationalist doubles to go from troublesome, villainous antagonists to increasingly more important, even heroic characters. What this transformation tells us about the society that produced it is that a swing in the dominant mindset from prophetic realist to zealous nationalist has been taking place for some time. Far more than childish fights in the pages of a comic book, the struggle between the ideologies is a “contest to define reality,”<sup>14</sup> an effort to express who we are as a nation and where we might be going.

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<sup>13</sup> William J. Savage, Jr., *Comic Books and America: 1945-1954* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), x.

<sup>14</sup> Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 225.

## **Chapter 1: Who is Captain America?**

Some background is necessary to understand who Captain America is and what he has been at different stages of U.S. history. Though he would eventually become a stable character with fixed opinions and beliefs, Cap's 1940s origin placed him in the unique position of representing the incompatible amalgamation of prophetic realism and zealous nationalism, with a tendency for the latter to dominate. Later comics would establish President Roosevelt's connection in developing "Project: Rebirth," the experiment that created Captain America. As such, in his early years, Cap can be seen as an extension of Roosevelt's zealous nationalist policies in winning the war. Though Roosevelt championed progressive work projects to help get America out of the Depression, his foreign policy in winning the war could be described as a "crusade to rid the world of totalitarianism and to make it safe for the saints."<sup>15</sup> Historians cite the President's proposal of an unconditional surrender from Japan as well as his acceptance of the "Morgenthau Plan" (a plan for reducing Germany after the war to an agricultural province) as evidence of a desire for total warfare without the constraints of negotiations or diplomacy.<sup>16</sup>

Others at the time called for more realistic goals. Reinhold Niebuhr developed proposals about European reconstruction that were later adopted as part of the Marshall plan, standing in direct opposition to the Morgenthau Plan.<sup>17</sup> Others popularized the idea of a "One World" movement, united by peace agreements and the avoidance of

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<sup>15</sup> Robert Jewett, *The Captain America Complex* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1973), 52.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 53.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 54.

“dogmatism and a holier than thou attitude”<sup>18</sup> in the fight against the Axis powers. As it stood, the realist and zealous impulses held drastically different opinions about how to fight the war, and this disjunction worked its way into the comics of Captain America.

In the 1940s adventures, Captain America was the apex of patriotism, created by the U.S. army to be the first in a long line of super-soldiers meant to combat the Axis powers and, presumably, protect U.S. interests after the war. Shortly after administering the “super-soldier serum” to Steve Rogers, the creator of the serum, Dr. Abraham Erskine, was assassinated by a Nazi gunman. As Erskine was the only one to know the secret of the serum, Rogers was left as his country’s first and last super-soldier, forever cementing him as the only “true” Captain America.<sup>19</sup> The implication of Cap’s origin is that one man was meant to save the whole country, a pseudo-religious call to the zealous nationalists who saw World War II as a crusade against evil. The wartime Captain America comics, like Roosevelt’s aggressive war policies, denied “the ambivalence and complexity of real life, where the moral landscape offers choices in various shades of grey rather than in black and white.”<sup>20</sup>

Naturally, neither the writers nor the readers of the 1940s were interested in socially progressive issues; they wanted to see a man in an American flag costume punching Nazis in the face. An American public that had been “nurtured in the crusading

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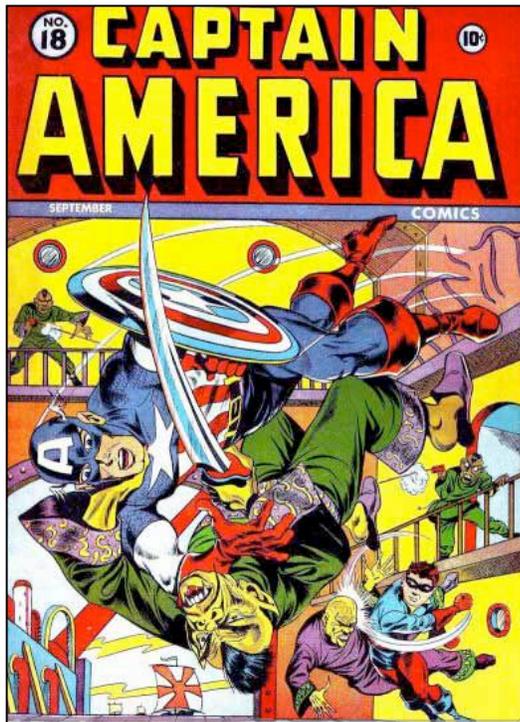
<sup>18</sup> James Bryant Conant, as quoted by Jewett, *The Captain America Complex*, 54.

<sup>19</sup> Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, “The Origin of Captain America,” *Tales of Suspense* vol.1, no. 63 (1965): 14.

<sup>20</sup> John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 48.

tradition”<sup>21</sup> welcomed Roosevelt’s call for total warfare. Newsreels showed the bombing of German cities, an act applauded for “saving a million American lives,”<sup>22</sup> despite the fact that many of the victims of bombing attacks were innocent civilians. Even with the loss of human life, a zealous American public scarcely had the time or willpower to make moral objections to a campaign seen as a modern crusade against evil. Captain America played to those zealous impulses when he was sent abroad to fight in both Europe and the Pacific theater.

To look back on the comic book covers of those years reveals some decidedly



**Figure 2:** The cover to *Captain America* #18 (1942). Note the demonic representation of Japanese soldiers.

objectionable depictions of foreign soldiers. Specifically, Japanese fighters are illustrated as sallow-skinned, clawed, pointy-eared vampires, often dressed in cult-like cloaks and wielding scimitars rather than the modern artillery of a technologically advanced army.<sup>23</sup> Of course, propaganda of the time utilized equally racist caricatures of Japanese, German, and Italian fighters, so it only makes sense that a patriotic comic book would also employ such tactics. A large number of readers at this time were soldiers, a fact that testifies to the “utility of the medium in

<sup>21</sup> Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 76.

<sup>22</sup> Jewett, *The Captain America Complex*, 190.

<sup>23</sup> Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, *Captain America*, vol.1, no. 18 (1942), cover.

raising patriotic fervor, even if it should be achieved through appeals to racism.”<sup>24</sup>

Playing into the race hate felt by many Americans for their enemies was an example of projecting all evil outward onto others.<sup>25</sup> By making the comic book versions of Germans and Japanese soldiers appear as evil, demonic creatures, the Captain America writers were furthering the idea that the war was a crusade against dark forces, fueling the zealous nationalist mindset.

Captain America’s role in World War II provides an excellent example of the disjunction between zealous nationalism and prophetic realism for a number of reasons. The push for total war belied a crusading impulse, but the call to war was one of self-defense; few could say that America got into World War II for purely selfish reasons. The concept of only going to war to defend oneself is a central component of prophetic realism, and for this reason Cap was always seen carrying a shield instead of a gun. The idea was defense, not offense. Though Captain America could throw the shield to knock an opponent down, he never flat out killed anyone with it, opting instead to shield himself and allies from enemy bullets and relying on his fists to do the offense. All wars have to end eventually, though, and in 1945, Captain America was faced with the challenge of relevance after World War II. The dilemma of zealous nationalism has many facets, but one of the more insidious is the belief that with the eradication of an enemy, the threat to the world would be completely eliminated.<sup>26</sup>

Both America and Captain America soon discovered that this view simply did not hold up in reality. Nazis may have been handily crushed, but there was always a danger

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<sup>24</sup> William J. Savage, Jr., *Comic Books and America: 1945-1954* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 11.

<sup>25</sup> Lawrence and Jewett, *Myth of the American Hero*, 27.

<sup>26</sup> Jewett, *The Captain America Complex*, 55.

to threaten the zealous nationalists of America. After a few years of dwindling sales, Stan Lee revived Cap's series to have him fight a new menace to American freedom: communism. Though the new direction for Captain America was short lived, it was not without special significance for the character. Cap's previous arch-nemesis, the Nazi super-villain Red Skull, was revived and brought back to fight the hero once more. Only this time, in a perhaps deliberate verbal play on the villain's name, he was a communist agent seeking to overthrow America. All of this "commie-bashing," as the title of the comic so eloquently put it, came at a time when America was in the middle of a McCarthy-induced witch-hunt. That a celebrated war hero would fight specters and imaginary enemies in order to pander to a frenzy of xenophobia is simply a continuation of the zealous nationalist impulse. From the perspective of any zealous nationalists in Washington, the cause of America's danger was perfectly clear: "The threat came from Moscow, with its tentacles reaching out to intellectuals...fellow travelers and liberals."<sup>27</sup> Despite this apparently immediate threat to national security, sales of Captain America's comics continued to dip, and the character was allowed to quietly disappear from the popular consciousness after only a few issues of fighting the red menace.

He remained in creative limbo until Stan Lee once again revived him, this time successfully, in the 1960s to join the new super team, the Avengers. Within the fictional universe of the comics, Captain America was lost and presumed dead toward the end of World War II. It is revealed in *Avengers #4*, the issue of his modern-day discovery, that he was in fact frozen in an iceberg in the Atlantic Ocean, remaining in a state of

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 61.

suspended animation from about 1944 to the date of his discovery in 1963. Notably, no mention of his 1950s adventures was ever made.

An immediate hit with fans of the new “Marvel age of comics,” Cap spent a few years as a relatively status quo superhero, a man who fought super villains from mutants to space aliens. One popular type of story was the World War II flashback: untold tales of Cap and his sidekick, Bucky, fighting Nazis in Europe. Stan Lee knew that he was writing to a 1960s audience, however, and he changed the hyper-militaristic attitude of the 1940s to suit a country torn by the war in Vietnam. This is one of the first instances of a Marvel writer changing the political characterization of Captain America; no longer did he employ lethal force or racial taunts. The significance of Lee’s new characterization has affected the way writers portrayed Captain America for the last forty years. In many ways, Lee turned Captain America from a character torn by the disjunction of World War II between zealous and realist impulses into an individual representative of the prophetic realist mindset entirely. What’s more, Lee’s polarization of Cap into the prophetic realist mode created the need for a double to represent zealous nationalism all on its own. While Captain America spent most of the sixties embodying one ideology, zealous nationalism would have to wait until the 1970s to get a new character to represent it.

During the sixties, but in stories detailing World War II, Cap’s opponents were portrayed realistically, with a stronger awareness that German-American and Japanese-American youths would also be reading these comics. There was still a strong sense that America was morally justified in its WW2 behavior, but now Cap made long speeches about the worth and dignity of all humanity, not just Americans and especially not just

white Americans. For the first time in his history, Captain America was shown fighting a war without glorifying it. As he said at the end of one adventure, “In a war, Bucky, many people suffer. It isn’t necessary to be in the armed forces...to be a casualty.”<sup>28</sup> Such compassion for innocent civilians is laudable, but it is also anachronistic given the favor Americans gave the Air Plan during World War II, a plan that knowingly bombed areas filled with women and children.<sup>29</sup> The retroactive characterization of Captain America as having always been a prophetic realist is a strange phenomenon that has nonetheless stayed with him since the sixties.

Comics from this era would also play with the concept of the “man out of time,” a plot device that allowed the New Deal-era Captain to explore the world of the 1960s. Before long, Stan Lee and his fellow writers and artists were heavily utilizing Cap’s outsider status as a commentary on the world as they saw it. It is also at this time that Cap’s progressive characterization began to show through more and more. In a period when the Civil Rights movement was in full swing, Cap met and



**Figure 3:** Cap and the Black Panther team up – equally – to save freedom for all.

fought alongside the African superhero Black Panther (a character who predated the creation of the political movement of the same name). In their first meeting, Cap heaped praise on Black Panther: “He’s said to be one of the world’s most benevolent monarchs,

<sup>28</sup> Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, “When You Lie Down with Dogs,” *Tales of Suspense* vol.1, no.71 (1965), 7.

<sup>29</sup> Jewett, *The Captain America Complex*, 190.

as well as the most wealthy... and mysterious! When such a man speaks, other men listen!”<sup>30</sup> While this seems like a by the books meeting by today’s standards, it is worth noting that in 1968, the concept of a black superhero was still pretty new. Having the blond-haired, blue-eyed symbol of America team up with an African hero, specifically a hero named the Black Panther, was an incredibly progressive act in its “call for greater equity and thus the elimination of repressive relationships”<sup>31</sup> between social and ethnic groups.

Racial equality became a recurring theme for Captain America’s many mid-battle monologues. Notably, the revived Red Skull would harangue Cap during their numerous fights about the concepts he held so near and dear. As the Skull said at one point: “I am your superior in every way! I am a member of the master race! I am...” Captain America cut him off to say, “There is no master race, and you know it! We’re all human beings... all equal before our creator! Nothing you can ever say or do will change that!” Red Skull countered, “Equality! You fool... equality is just a myth!” Before delivering the final blow physically, Cap delivered a verbal strike to the Skull with “A myth, is it? Then America is a myth... as are liberty, and justice, and faith! Myths that free men everywhere are willing to die for!”<sup>32</sup> Cap’s valuation of equality was a strong position to take in the 1960s, but most striking about these tales is the way Stan Lee notably set the Red Skull up to represent those elements within America who were against the Civil Rights movement and other socially liberal acts.

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<sup>30</sup> Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, “And So It Begins,” *Tales of Suspense* vol.1, no.97 (1968), 8.

<sup>31</sup> James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), 115.

<sup>32</sup> Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, “The Weakest Link,” *Captain America* vol.1, no.103 (1968), 19.

The use of the Red Skull to stand in as a representative of the zealous nationalist parts of America served as a precursor to the actual doubles who would counter Captain America's progressive viewpoints. Notably, Red Skull believed that equality was a myth, and while it would be a stretch to claim no culturally orthodox Americans believe in equality, it is still true that the definition of equality is different in the orthodox and progressive views. Orthodox equality derives from civil and economic freedom as well as Judeo-Christian moral righteousness and justice.<sup>33</sup> Progressive equality comes from individual freedom as well as economic justice.<sup>34</sup> The differences play out drastically on the social field, but the end result is that the progressive ideology works harder for "women, blacks, Hispanics and other racial minorities, homosexuals and lesbians...and the poor and working classes."<sup>35</sup> Captain America, as Stan Lee wrote him, was a champion of all of these groups, furthering his connection to the progressive-prophetic-realist mindset.

The presence of a better zealous nationalist icon than the Red Skull was still a little less than a decade away, but the nascent concept for one could be found in the letters pages of each issue. After the successful appearance of the Black Panther, readers wrote in to congratulate Marvel. One reader commended the use of "the Negro hero, the Black Panther" because of the "obvious implication that Negroes and America make a good team." This same reader went on to say that the "equal time" concept should not apply to comics, for they could lead to "embarrassing circumstances, such as... the

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 111-112.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 114-115.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

Adventures of Captain Bigot!”<sup>36</sup> This fan’s joke, though awkward, was more portentous than he could have imagined. Although Captain America was supposed to represent the hopes, dreams, and ideals of the United States, his criteria for what defined “hopes, dreams, and ideals” differed from many others. The Civil Rights Movement impinged on the ideals of many people below the Mason-Dixon line, who saw it as a “direct assault... on their identity as white southerners” and because it challenged the “concept of white supremacy and a white South.”<sup>37</sup> Captain America, after his switch to prophetic realist, could not truly represent America with any degree of totality, and though the Nazi Red Skull may have been appropriate to represent some Americans, he was simply an unsuitable double for the Captain.

Fans who wanted better representation would have to wait, however, as Captain America closed out the 1960s and moved onward into the 1970s. In 1969, Cap was



**Figure 4:** Captain America officially teams up with the Falcon. Cautious Harlem residents look on.

teamed up with another black character, the Falcon, alias Sam Wilson. The Falcon differed from Marvel’s earlier notable black superhero, the Black Panther, in that he was an African-American born and raised on the streets of Harlem

rather than the king of a powerful African nation. Comic fans quickly accepted the

<sup>36</sup> Dan Taylor, as quoted in the letters page of *Captain America*, vol.1, no.103 (1968), 17.

<sup>37</sup> Cecil Kirk Hutson, “More Smoke than Fire,” in *America Under Construction*, eds. Kristi S. Long and Matthew Nadelhaft (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1997), 96.

Falcon as a realistic, non-stereotyped black character who could contrast with Cap's good-hearted though waspish intentions. Marvel saw the potential for a magic combination of personalities, and beginning with issue #134 in 1971, officially changed the title of the comic to *Captain America and the Falcon*. The issue ended on an optimistic note; after defeating a villain who was destroying tenements filled with poor black people, the Falcon said, "Cap, it's just beginning! My work here on behalf of my people has just begun!" Cap's response was momentous: "You mean our work! Captain America has finally found a partner!"

The tone of the series became even more about tackling social issues, both on a national level and within the boundaries of the Falcon's own Harlem. Cap was further distanced from his 1940s and 1950s zealous nationalism as he watched the world around him change and tried to figure out if it was for the better. As he brooded in one issue, "This is the day of the anti-hero, the age of the rebel, the dissenter! It isn't hip to defend the establishment, only to tear it down! And, in a world rife with injustice, greed, endless war...who's to say the rebels are wrong?"<sup>38</sup> No longer the unthinking patriot, Captain America had embraced the prophetic realist belief that good and evil can exist so inextricably in all people, and therefore in all countries.<sup>39</sup> The United States was, and is, made up of as much sin as it is made up of virtue. Acknowledging such a fact doesn't make someone a disloyal American: it just makes the job of cleaning up the bad parts that much more important. More to the point, in *Captain America*, it showed a realistic acceptance of the world as it was, not a moralistic battleground in which to fight a holy

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<sup>38</sup> Stan Lee and Gene Colan, "The Sting of the Scorpion," *Captain America* vol.1, no. 122 (1970), 3.

<sup>39</sup> Jewett, *The Captain America Complex*, 140.

crusade. Despite his unsteadiness in this age of cynicism and doubt, Cap still faced each new crisis with the same resolve and determination of one of his '40s battles. With the Falcon by his side, he tackled issues such as student protests, racial discrimination, poverty and gangs.

In spite of the public perception of him as a jingoistic soldier, Cap often took the side of the “rebels and dissenters” who so confused him. In an issue on student protest, he gave a memorable speech about the power of rebellion: “This nation was founded by dissidents. There’s nothing sacred about the status quo, and there never will be!” He went on to say, “I don’t believe in using force or violence, because they can be the weapons of those who would enslave us!”<sup>40</sup> He distanced himself from the establishment that created him in order to side with protesters because he saw in them the very principles upon which the nation was founded. Captain America was becoming less about a particular governmental system and more about the people who made up the country itself, or rather, specific groups in America that shared his ideals of prophetic realism.

Issues of race were highly prominent in the 1970s adventures with the Falcon. For the same reason that Cap could not represent orthodox elements while he was espousing progressive doctrine, he also could not fully understand the struggles of black Americans. Teaming him up with the Falcon provided a different perspective on the problems facing African Americans in the 1970s. Captain America’s own attitude sometimes served as the conflict of an entire story, for though he tried to identify with the Falcon, race would often get in the way. In one comic, Cap snapped at the Falcon while

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<sup>40</sup> Stan Lee and Gene Colan, “Up Against the Wall,” *Captain America* vol.1, no.130 (1970), 16.

stressed out about a mission they were on. Falcon's response was a realistically tense reflection of race relations in the country at the time: "...I never signed on to be his whipping boy. Any time he wants a trade gripes, I'll match him two for one... I figure any black man can."<sup>41</sup> A few issues later, Cap tackled a villain without calling the Falcon for help, an act for which Falcon was justifiably upset: "We're supposed to be partners, or is that just for the headlines? I never thought even Captain America would have a token!"<sup>42</sup>

More so than such nebulous concepts as ideals and beliefs, race emphasized how difficult it was for one man to represent a country as diverse as America. In the early 1970s, Falcon was Captain America's double in the realm of race, as he could comment on the issues Cap could not. Even then, it was a limited form of doubling, as there were so many other groups left out of the representative equation: women, Native Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, immigrants. The solution to such a problem of representation goes back to Cap's all-around progressive attitude: by embracing all of these groups and supporting them in their right to demand more, Captain America bridged some of the chasms between the different aspects of America. He may never be black, but he fought time and again for the equality of all people. He may never be a woman, but he fought for the freedom of all humankind. This journey from that limited notion of America back in the 1940s to the all-encompassing, progressive concept of humanity is what allowed for Captain America to better represent more people. Without tarnishing that accomplishment, it must still be noted that there will always be people in

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<sup>41</sup> Stan Lee and Gene Colan, "To Stalk the Spider-man," *Captain America* vol.1, no.137 (1971), 13.

<sup>42</sup> Stan Lee and John Romita, "In the Grip of the Gargoyle," *Captain America* vol.1, no.140 (1971), 7.

America who do not see all of humanity as their brethren. Many white Southerners, whether in the 1870s or 1970s, would become livid when an outsider expressed the need for change.<sup>43</sup> Captain America, for all of his accomplishments in better representing minorities and other downtrodden groups, was distancing himself ideologically from an entire other spectrum of American citizens.

This conflict permeated the letters page of *Captain America* almost as far back as the character's 1960s revival. A letters page is a section of a comic book, usually in the back, where fans can write in to voice their opinions about the direction a book is going, ask questions, give praise or fling criticisms. Naturally, a hero as iconic as Captain America solicited more than his fair share of letters from young men and women interested in what, if any, significance Cap had in the complex world of tie-dye and love-ins. One of the most fascinating aspects to come out of Cap's letters page was the so-called "patriotism controversy." Starting in issue #110, a fan wrote in to complain that Captain America was far too conservative, and that he simply existed to defend the establishment. Cap was called a war hawk, a glory monger, and a reminder of America's "shameful ideals."<sup>44</sup>

For years following the publication of this letter, dozens of readers weighed in on whether or not Cap was too conservative or not. One reader thought that Cap was not conservative enough, and that he should be in Vietnam "fighting more communists," upset that Marvel would not go in this direction despite the fact that it would be a realistic

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<sup>43</sup> Hutson, "More Smoke Than Fire," 103.

<sup>44</sup> Albert Rodriguez, as quoted on the letters page of *Captain America* vol.1, no.110 (1969), 17.

use of a super-soldier.<sup>45</sup> Marvel responded in the same issue that the reason Cap never went to Vietnam for any prolonged storyline was due to the conflict over the war. They felt that by making Cap choose sides, they (and Cap) would be “deepening the chasm which already cuts across America.” Marvel’s awareness and fear of the potentially dangerous split Captain America might cause amongst fans from different ideological groups was interesting, considering the fact that he had already caused a split due to his ideological shift from a symbol of American disjunction to a flat-out progressive realist. Regardless of Marvel’s supposed wariness of making Captain America a polarizing figure, they had already done so by the beginning of the 1970s.

While Captain America had been created at a time when America was still a synthesized disjunction of two warring ideologies, he had developed over the 1960s and early 1970s into a model for only one of those ideologies. We have seen how in the 1940s and 1950s, Captain America represented the country for what it was: militaristic, conservative, and racially close-minded against ethnicities and political groups alien and frightening to it. In short, he represented the zealous nationalist mindset more so than the prophetic realist one. World War II “provided the circumstances under which the realistic and zealous elements in American nationalism would come increasingly into tension with each other.”<sup>46</sup> The 1960s exemplified the tension and eventual split of the ideologies, and Captain America’s movement to one side of the philosophical spectrum defined his character not only in that decade, but for the rest of his publication as well. Despite the stability this growth brought him as a character, it still closed him off from anyone whose opinions remained ideologically opposed to his actions in the earlier

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<sup>45</sup> Jeff Chown, as quoted on the letters page of *Captain America* vol.1, no.116 (1969), 17.

<sup>46</sup> Jewett and Lawrence, *The Crusade Against Evil*, 75.

decades. If, as in the 1940s and 1950s, he represented the orthodox-zealous-nationalist mindset more, he would be ignoring minority groups, civil rights, student protesters, and any number of important social clusters; but if he represented those groups, he left a large number of conservatively minded citizens outside of his sphere of portrayal. The letters pages alone go to show how multiple people could see the same actions from completely different viewpoints and demand that he act differently.

The best solution to this problem of representation is, as mentioned already, the use of a double or analogue. This conceptual character was yet to exist in the comics, but the budding idea was definitely present. At first found in the villainous Red Skull, then later in the heroic Falcon, an ideological foil for Steve Rogers was necessary to better represent America. The reason why both the Red Skull and the Falcon were imperfect characters for this task was due to the fact that they didn't carry the flag on their costumes the way Captain America did, or more specifically, they weren't Captain America. The best candidate to be Captain America's double was someone with red, white, and blue bedecking their costume in a near-mirror image of his to allow maximum symbolism: a zealous nationalist Captain America to stand for those Americans Steve Rogers could not or would not. Returning to the "uneasy fusion"<sup>47</sup> and near-schizophrenia of a single Captain America in order to try and represent both warring ideologies would be folly. However, a different Captain America for each group within the pluralistic conglomeration that is the United States would be a suitable solution for the dilemma of how to represent all of America. By 1972, Captain America would meet his first double, for better or for worse.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, xiii.

## Chapter 2: The Forgotten Captain of the 1950s

In 1972, Marvel writer Steve Englehart began a storyline that would have profound effects on Captain America. Specifically, the story dealt with how Captain America's 1950s portrayal was subsequently ignored by Stan Lee when he revived the character in the 1960s. The significance of this act lies in the fact that the 1950s were the years in which the uneasy wedding of zealous nationalism and prophetic realism was so deeply and finally broken. The split led to a "frustration so deep and pervasive, so bitter and repulsive, that its effects may yet be felt in American life."<sup>48</sup> Captain America had to choose a side, and his actions in the Fifties were clear indicators of a total adherence to zealous nationalism. In the era of McCarthy, the atom bomb, and the new threat of communism, Cap had gone the route of the orthodox. But Stan Lee's later decision to ignore this characterization and bring Cap to the side of prophetic realism forever separated the character from ever being identified with zealous nationalism again. Moreover, it left a large discrepancy in the chronology of Captain America's publication history. How could Cap have been fighting communists in the fifties when he was frozen in a block of ice between 1945 and 1963? Englehart ventured to answer why.

The cover to *Captain America* #153 showed a man dressed as Cap savagely beating a black man in order to get the Falcon's attention. Given the progressive attitude espoused by Captain America during his partnership with the Falcon, this behavior came from out of nowhere; in just the previous issue, Cap and the Falcon had fought to protect a tenement in Harlem from being destroyed. The identity of this double for Cap wouldn't

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<sup>48</sup>Robert Jewett, *The Captain America Complex* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1973) 67.

be revealed for a few issues, but he introduced himself in typically grandiose, comic book fashion. On the last page of his introductory issue, after knocking Falcon over the back of the head with the help of a boy dressed just like Cap's 1940s sidekick, Bucky, the double boldly announced, "Now there's nothing to stop the comeback of...the *real* Captain America and Bucky!"<sup>49</sup>. The mention of the "real" Captain America clued readers in that this man wasn't merely a clichéd robot or impostor, but someone far more sinister. As would later be revealed, the man attacking black people in Harlem was none other than the Captain America of the 1950s.



**Figure 5:** Cap's double beating up Harlem residents.

This double of the real Captain America would allow for some weighty commentary on a number of salient topics.<sup>50</sup> McCarthyism's role as a zealous nationalist tool was one of the most significant issues at stake, along with the degree to which the national

spirit had changed between the 1950s and the 1970s. The contrast between

the legitimate, progressive-prophetic-realist Cap and the renegade, orthodox-zealous-nationalist Cap emphasized the multiple Americas that existed within the boundaries of

<sup>49</sup> Steve Englehart and Sal Buscema, "Captain America – Hero or Hoax?" *Captain America* vol.1, no.153 (1972), 30.

<sup>50</sup> To avoid confusion, I refer to the Captain America who displayed prophetic realist tendencies as the real Captain America, since the comics maintain that this was the character who fought in World War II, and is thus the original. His double is referred to as the Captain America of the 1950s, Fifties Cap, or some variation.

one country. The battle between the two characters would ultimately serve as Marvel's interpretation of what the "real" American ideal should be.

The next issue continued the assault on Falcon, as the new Captain and Bucky discussed their tactic for luring him into the fray: "He's harder to take down than I figured, Bucky. When we decided to lure him to us by roughing up some coloreds, I should have taken that into account!"<sup>51</sup> Over the course of the fight, the new Cap and Bucky made multiple references to "coloreds" and "commies," driving home the point that these two were either from another time period, or they simply held the racist beliefs of a modern bigot. Either way, their conception of racial superiority played into the zealous nationalist belief that "while the good guy is clean, the bad guys are dirty,"<sup>52</sup> figuratively more than literally. In the zealous nationalist view, "Indians, blacks, Orientals, and swarthy Europeans tend to be stereotyped on sight,"<sup>53</sup> which helps explain why Fifties Cap was so quick to beat up innocent black men. He lacked the progressive compassion that the real Captain America possessed, and as a result, fought against the "corruption of the zealous ideal by (the) inclusion of Negroes and foreigners."<sup>54</sup> The amount of force that Fifties Cap and Bucky used to subdue the Falcon was also above and beyond anything the real Cap would have ever done, no matter whom he was fighting. When the Falcon was finally unconscious, the new Cap and Bucky took him to a warehouse to interrogate him using torture.

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<sup>51</sup> Steve Englehart and Sal Buscema, "The Falcon Fights Alone," *Captain America* vol.1, no.154 (1972), 2.

<sup>52</sup> Jewett, *The Captain America Complex*, 151.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 88.

Within a few pages, this new Captain America had already set himself up to be the exact opposite of the Captain with which readers were familiar. He was racist, overly violent, xenophobic, and an advocate of torture. While these characteristics seemed out of place for the real Captain America, they were fitting for Fifties Cap. The Korean War, following close on the conclusion of World War II, saw American soldiers changing gears in the wake of a crusade that had failed to eradicate the world of evil. In Korea, “emotion was a luxury in which Americans ought not to [have] indulge[d], because it could lead to psychological debility, if not death.”<sup>55</sup> Fifties Cap represented this mentality, a realization that caring in the middle of a war was a ridiculous waste of time.<sup>56</sup> Unfortunately, Fifties Cap was not in Korea and was not engaged in war.

Later, when Falcon was revived and beaten some more, the audience was clued into the mindset of this disturbing new character: “Falcon, I am Captain America! Your friend is some pinko who’s duped the American public ...who’s trying to sell out this great nation to the reds! I am the true force of our democracy, and you’ll admit it... or I’ll beat your brains out!”<sup>57</sup> The Captain from the 1950s honestly believed that he was the real one. What’s more, he saw the true Captain America’s behavior as the actions of a traitor to his country. Cooperation or coexistence did not exist under the zealous nationalist paradigm. Instead, conspiracy theories filled with radical stereotypes abounded in which purely good heroes were locked in battle with perfectly evil villains.<sup>58</sup> As such, Fifties Cap, seeing himself as a real, red-blooded American, could only deal

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<sup>55</sup> William J. Savage, Jr., *Comic Books and America: 1945-1954* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 54.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>57</sup> Englehart and Buscema, *Captain America* #154.

<sup>58</sup> Jewett, *The Captain America Complex*, 142.

with the real Captain America and his black partner through total warfare, the ever-present fallback of the zealot.

Fifties Cap's history read like a soap opera in the twists, turns, and confusing chronology employed by Steve Englehart to explain the discrepancy between Stan Lee's 1960s revival and the earlier commie-smasher period. A few aspects are crucial for understanding why Fifties Cap was awake in the world of 1972, and why he acted the way he did. Originally, the boy who would become Fifties Cap was a fan of Captain America during World War II, placing his formative years in the midst of America's disjunction between zealotry and realism. When Captain America was presumed dead toward the end of World War II, the boy was devastated. To add to his disillusionment, America had ended its war against evil in Europe, but "a mortal threat followed immediately upon the successful conclusion"<sup>59</sup> of that crusade. The boy (never given a name) grew up in an America torn by a grim reality invading the zealous dream. Communism was now the specter haunting the United States, not Nazism, and it was unclear whether America had the strength to fight another all-out battle against a new enemy, especially in light of the apparent failure of the first crusade to abolish evil once and for all.

With America in the grip of a frustrated international crisis, the boy went to college and graduated with a degree in American history. He traveled to Germany, where he found a version of the formula that created Captain America's super soldier serum. Returning to the U.S., he told the American government that he would let them have the formula if he could become America's new super soldier. The army agreed, and it was

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 57.

also during this time that the man had his name changed to Steve Rogers, had plastic surgery to look and sound like Rogers, and received an identical costume to the one worn by the original Captain America. Unfortunately, before he could be injected with the serum, the war ended in Korea and the army decided it had no use for him.<sup>60</sup>

Korea had provided a telling example of why American thought had to split between zealotry and realism.<sup>61</sup> The public opinion for the conflict was high when the public believed that total battle would be waged with the enemy. Criticism became apparent only when the government revealed that it would merely be containing the spread of communism, not waging total warfare with communists. Americans were indignant: “a crusade Americans could understand and support, but a police action?”<sup>62</sup> Anything less than total war was a betrayal to the crusading impulse of zealous nationalism. Fifties Cap had been bilked out of fighting for his country in an all-out war with the enemy, and as a result he felt the core components of zealous nationalism: jealousy, envy, rage, and striving.<sup>63</sup> But to what end? He was still just a man without powers living in the frustrated, zealous America of the 1950s.

The way it was told in the actual issue from 1953, Captain America and Bucky were driving down the street when they heard a radio announcement proclaiming the Red Skull was back and that he had “joined our Red enemies to fight against America!”<sup>64</sup> As noted, Steve Englehart had revised the origin of Fifties Cap so that he was powerless up until that moment. By slipping into the narrative from the 1950s, Englehart interjected a

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<sup>60</sup> Steve Englehart and Sal Buscema, “The Incredible Origin of the Other Captain America,” *Captain America* vol.1, no.155 (1972), 18.

<sup>61</sup> Jewett, *The Captain America Complex*, 64.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 82.

<sup>64</sup> Stan Lee and John Romita, *Young Men Comics* vol.1, no.24 (1953), 19.

scene in which Cap and “Bucky,” a student of the ersatz Steve Rogers, slipped into an alleyway and injected themselves with the serum. With the establishment of how Fifties Cap got his powers, the continuity could slip back to the pages of the Fifties comics, showing Cap and Bucky fighting such communist villains as “the Russian killer Electro, and the Chinese assassin, the Man with no face!”<sup>65</sup>

Englehart went on to explain that the Fifties Cap and Bucky started to see communist agents where no one else did: “In fact, we found most people who weren’t



**Figure 6:** Fifties Cap’s violence, paranoia, and racism placed him squarely in the zealous nationalist camp.

pureblooded Americans were commies!”<sup>66</sup> The overt racism of Fifties Cap’s conception of what defined a true American made him a threat to everyone. Moreover, his close-minded attitude echoed former Secretary of State John Foster Dulles’ belief that there could be no “permanent coexistence with an adversary”<sup>67</sup> of any kind. America in the 1950s

was quick to see communists everywhere, in any radical group. Before long, the U.S. government decided Cap and Bucky were too much of a danger and took them in for

<sup>65</sup> Englehart and Buscema, *Captain America* #155.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Jewett, *The Captain America Complex*, 69.

psychiatric treatment. Unable to find a cure for their schizophrenic break, the army put the two former heroes in suspended animation until a treatment could be found.

By the time of the 1972 comic in which this was all disclosed, Fifties Cap and Bucky had been revived by elements within the U.S. government who believed that America was softening its vigilance against the “red menace.” Nixon’s trip to China regarding trade negotiation was shown to be the final straw in the decision to wake up a Captain America who could “turn the red tide before we’re all in communes,” as one American agent said.<sup>68</sup> The irony of Nixon, a one-time communist hunter, reaching out to communist China illustrated the shift that had occurred in America since the 1950s.<sup>69</sup> And according to Fifties Cap, that shift was a danger that would destroy the whole country.

Despite Englehart’s and Buscema’s capable job of explaining where Captain America’s 1950s exploits fit into his larger history, it is essential to understand that at the time of the publication of *Young Men Comics*, Fifties Cap was the true Captain America. If one ignores the revisions (known as retcons in comic book terminology), Fifties Cap really was Steve Rogers. The added facts about a man having plastic surgery and copying the super soldier serum from a Nazi journal were an after-the-fact stopgap to cover Stan Lee’s oversight in saying that Cap was frozen in the Atlantic during the fifties. More than a simple plot hole cover-up, though, the storyline allowed an ideological distance between what had become the “true” conception of Captain America and the regrettable behavior of his Fifties self. It was a way for Marvel to say that Captain

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<sup>68</sup> Englehart and Buscema, *Captain America* #155.

<sup>69</sup> Gary Daynes, “Paying Tribute to a Villain,” in *Making Villains, Making Heroes: Joseph R. McCarthy, Martin Luther King, Jr. and the American Politics of Memory*, ed. Jerome Nadelhaft (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1997), 99.

America was not just a committed prophetic realist, but that he had also never been a zealous nationalist. Marvel had established unequivocally that prophetic realism was the official viewpoint of Cap. In its most symbolic sense, the storyline acts as a revisionist expurgation of America's conduct in the 1950s. The "real" (read: progressive) America and all of its notions of the American intangibles – equality, justice, due process - would never act the way it did during McCarthy's witch-hunts; that was just something with America's face, voice, costume and name...but it wasn't really America.

More dissimilarity between the two Captains lay in the enemies Fifties Cap fought. The real Captain America cut his teeth on the battlefields of Europe and the Pacific Theater. Despite the zealous nationalist impulse to totally destroy the enemy, America during World War II was tempered by the prophetic realist impulse to fight only when provoked. After the war ended, America began a rebuilding effort in Europe and Japan that showed compassion for its enemies. In contrast, Fifties Cap stood as a symbol for the nationwide McCarthyistic paranoia that pursued ill-defined and often imaginary enemies not just in foreign countries, but also within American borders as well. The lack of a legitimate foe was given voice in Fifties Cap's violent treatment of those he considered impure – fighting communists in the 1950s was as much about spotting potential turncoats posing as one's neighbors as it was about fighting an actual war. As questionable as Fifties Cap's methods were to the readers of the 1970s, however, they fit in perfectly with the tenor of McCarthy-era America. In 1955, over two-thirds of American citizens said that a communist "should not be permitted to make a speech in their community," and that "any books he had written should be removed from the public

library, while nine out of ten called for firing a communist from a college teaching position.”<sup>70</sup>

This specific, directed intolerance of those different from “mainstream” America in the fifties was embodied perfectly in Fifties Cap’s erratic behavior. He saw communists everywhere, so long as “everywhere” was defined by the color of a person’s skin or the statement of beliefs antithetical to his own. The zealot’s world becomes divided into “the bitter camps of those few who are with [him] and those who are against him.”<sup>71</sup> This is important to note, as perceptions of the internal communist threat were also seen as leading directly to intolerance. This proclivity for intolerance “reflect[ed] the spirit of the times [...d]uring the McCarthy era, the overwhelming majority of Americans believed that an admitted communist had no right even to sell shoes, much less proclaim American citizenship”<sup>72</sup>

Fifties Cap’s behavior was simply a further elucidation of McCarthyism’s many layers of distrust. In addition to anti-intellectualism and anti-communism, “another important component of McCarthyism was racism. It was no accident that Albert Einstein and Groucho Marx, two notable targets of McCarthy’s sweeping paranoia, were both Jewish.”<sup>73</sup> McCarthy’s agents also targeted Martin Luther King, Jr., W.E.B. Dubois, and Paul Robeson unfairly. Not all of the worst atrocities took place under McCarthy’s watch; some, in fact, predate his rise to power: “In the bitter winter of 1947-

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<sup>70</sup> Mark Peffley and Lee Sigelman, “Intolerance of Communists During the McCarthy Era: A General Model,” *The Western Political Quarterly* 43, (1990): 93-111. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org).

<sup>71</sup> Jewett, *The Captain America Complex*, 108.

<sup>72</sup> Peffley and Sigelman, “Intolerance of Communists,” 101.

<sup>73</sup> John McCumber, *Time in the Ditch: American Philosophy and the McCarthy Era* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 22.

48, government relief was denied to the Navajo Nation, facing starvation, because their communal way of life was ‘un-American.’”<sup>74</sup> Fifties Cap’s method of attacking “coloreds” to flush out the Falcon was the mere logical extension of a Captain America who combined the most regrettable characteristics of racist America pre- and post-McCarthy.

Of course, there’s still debate over the full extent of the damage caused by McCarthy’s actions. As Peffley and Sigelman have noted:

On reflection, the McCarthy hearings may have had their greatest impact on public opinion by increasing the salience of domestic communists and by portraying them as proponents of an alien ideology antithetical to cherished American values, such as freedom of choice and religion and what may be called the American way of life.<sup>75</sup>

It has also been noted that the McCarthy hearings may not have been about anti-communism as much as they were “an exercise in semi-fascistic conformism with (like fascism itself) a core rhetoric of anti-communism.”<sup>76</sup> We know that people were victimized, often meaninglessly, and were left without jobs, friends, or hope. It has been argued that a majority of Americans agreed with McCarthyism as a whole, but a majority does not include everyone. Much like the real Captain America who, from 1963 on, represented a large majority but not the totality, Fifties Cap found himself ideologically counter to many Americans.

While the popular assumption in the years since McCarthy’s reign has been that most of America supported the senator wholeheartedly, there was always some form of dissent. The tenuous consensus that existed at the beginning of the Red Scare, as stated

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>75</sup> Peffley and Sigelman, “Intolerance of Communists,” 106.

<sup>76</sup> McCumber, *Time in the Ditch*, 20.

above, began with a perceived threat and progressed to a period of “focused intolerance.”<sup>77</sup> The alien threat of communism would surely have been a sufficient reason to generate intolerance on a mass scale, without having to be directed at anyone in particular. This paranoia can be expressed once again with the example of Fifties Cap lashing out at anyone he considered different than him. The 1950s began with a popular support of war, with two-thirds of Americans claiming it was more important to stop the spread of global communism than it was to prevent a war.<sup>78</sup> As the decade went on, popular support of militarism waned in the face of the war in Korea. Anti-communism still remained a prominent topic, but the fear of thermonuclear war tempered most Americans’ zealous readiness to really battle it out with the alien ideology.

Fifties Cap began and ended in an era of presumed black and white, where he could be said to represent the popular consensus to root out communism and, secondarily, to maintain white superiority. During his tenure, though, many Americans were not sufficiently represented by his ideals. The same problem would happen for the real Captain America in the 1960s and onward: as a proponent of one particular ideology, Captain America failed as a unified symbol of the country he was named for. In the fifties, minorities, intellectuals, and anyone else hunted by McCarthy were notable examples of this unrepresented, discontent segment of America, but eventually even conservative Americans who supported the battle with communism grew chary of hyper-militarism to fight it. The dominant ideology in the face of nuclear war was no longer

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<sup>77</sup> Peffley and Sigelman, “Intolerance of Communists,” 96.

<sup>78</sup> Eugene R. Wittkopf and James M. McCormick, “The Cold War Consensus: Did it Exist?” *Polity* 22 (1990): 627-653. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org).

one of aggression or of a condemnation of coexistence.<sup>79</sup> The unpopularity of Captain America's fifties adventures spoke to the unease American readers felt for a Captain America who would only settle for an apocalyptic battle with his enemies. Stan Lee, recognizing this shift in the mindset of his readers, put Captain America on the other ideological side when he revived the character once again in the sixties. Though this was a popular move in terms of gaining readership and fan loyalty to Captain America, it didn't fix the problem of representation. Now, instead of the minorities and other prophetic realists being ignored, it was the conservative war supporters and other zealous nationalists.

Whereas the Korean War had been the foreign crisis de jour in the 1950s, by the time of Steve Englehart's story, it was Vietnam. By 1972, the Vietnam War had sufficiently undone any sense of consensus the United States might have once held about the Cold War. "Growing antagonism to the war generally, especially apparent from late 1968 onward, reflect[ed] a growing bipartisan conviction that the war was a mistake" and evidence from a Gallup pole in 1971 indicated that the "overwhelming proportion of the American people became convinced that the Vietnam War was fundamentally misguided. That viewpoint has persisted ever since".<sup>80</sup> Progressive elements such as pluralism and peace movements contributed to the shift in the American political and cultural landscape, and it was this shift that writer Steve Englehart capitalized on when he wrote the "Captain America from the 1950s" storyline:

...the thing that I saw, and I don't mean to cast aspersions on anybody, but people were sort of embarrassed to be doing Captain America. I mean, here was a guy who was supposed to represent America, and at that time, obviously with

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<sup>79</sup> Jewett, *The Captain America Complex*, 69.

<sup>80</sup> Wittkopf and McCormick, "The Cold War Consensus," 636.

Watergate about to break, and the Vietnam War was still winding down. There were a lot of people against it, etcetera, etcetera. America was kind of a touchy subject for a lot of people in and of itself and people just, you know, they, in one sense or another, I think most of the people who came before, even Stan, you know, kind of said, 'Well, this guy's got stars and stripes on him. He must mean something, but I can't really get into what it is that he means.'<sup>81</sup>

The timing was right for a match up between prophetic realism and zealous nationalism, or more appropriately, for a match up between each ideology's Captain America. Using different Captain Americas as the representatives of different time periods, as well as different worldviews, was a creative means of allowing America to have a dialogue with itself at such an uncertain moment. The real Captain America had gone through some of the most painful events in then-recent American memory: the Civil Rights movement, student protests, and Vietnam. Through it all, he had become the realistic, open-minded, progressive representative of all Americans who believed equality and peace were worth fighting for. Fifties Cap had missed every single important cultural movement of the past two decades and was thus better suited to represent the orthodox, zealous forces in America who were still in favor of war, segregation, and strident nativism.

*Captain America* #156 was entitled "Two into One Won't Go," a strange refutation of America's call for ideological unity, *e pluribus unum*, or "out of many, one." It was an appropriate title, though, as this issue marked the final battle between the real Cap and his conservative, Fifties counterpart. As Cap walked toward the battle, he was cheered on by police officers who wondered why he looked so worried; after all, he had gone up against the Red Skull and come out on top before. Cap's response: "Sure Sarge,

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<sup>81</sup> Steve Englehart, interviewed by comics-art.com, <http://www.comic-art.com/interviews/englehar.htm> March 2nd, 1995.

but I've never fought the evil side of my own nature before. And that's what he is after all – a man who began with the same dreams I did, and ended as an insane, bigoted superpatriot!”<sup>82</sup> This line was as close as Marvel ever got to officially saying the zealous nationalist mindset was bad. The wording leaves little doubt as to the opinion of the writer and editors: if the zealous nationalist character was evil, then clearly the only good guy was the prophetic realist.

As the two clashed, the real Cap talked to Fifties Cap about the changes that had taken place over the last twenty years: “You think I'm a traitor? Grow up, fella...times have changed! America's in danger from within as well as without! There's organized crime, injustice, and fascism... or wouldn't you recognize that?”<sup>83</sup> The real Cap was speaking from the knowledge that comic books writers had gained since the 1950s: that sometimes, if America didn't have an external villain to shine the spotlight on, the real nastiness could be found within the heart of the United States itself.<sup>84</sup> Fifties Cap's unwillingness to accept that his country was not a bastion of perfection and did, in fact, have flaws was born from the fact that if he accepted America's faults, he would be compromising his beliefs. And, more than anything, the zealous nationalist could never compromise with anyone, least of all himself.<sup>85</sup>

Ironically, the real Cap fought for his opponent as much as he fought for himself, for if he was the victor, Fifties Cap would be treated humanely and sent to a hospital for treatment of his psychosis. Fifties Cap, on the other hand, was fighting to kill his enemy.

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<sup>82</sup> Steve Englehart and Sal Buscema, “Two Into One Won't Go,” *Captain America* vol.1, no.156 (1972), 19.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Savage, *Comic Books and America*, 75.

<sup>85</sup> Jewett, *The Captain America Complex*, 71.

One of the strategies of prophetic realism is to “humanize the bad guy,”<sup>86</sup> a tactic the real Captain America was more than willing to employ. Coexistence with an enemy was more than just progressive rhetoric espoused by the modern Cap, it was a realistic strategy born from the Vietnam War, when America learned it couldn’t just pound all of its enemies into the ground as it had in World War II. To further this idea, prophetic realism recognizes that it would be folly to eradicate zeal from the American landscape entirely, for “it is not zeal but the absolutizing of zeal which is destructive.”<sup>87</sup> Prophetic realism can coexist with its zealous counterpart, but the inverse is not true. Zealous nationalism cannot under any circumstances try to live with its realist double. Hence Fifties Cap’s attempted destruction of the real Captain America.

In the end, the true Captain America won the fight when the Fifties version realized that his opponent was the original and not a copy. Since his awakening in modern America back in issue #153, Fifties Cap had assumed that a “pinko” agent was the new Captain America due to all of the compassion and compromise the supposed impostor was showing others. Unable to deal with the revelation that his hero was this liberal traitor to his country, Fifties Cap lunged at the real Cap, setting himself up for a final blow. The original Captain was left to ruminate over his foe’s end.

The use of a double in the context of this storyline served a number of purposes. From a pragmatic standpoint, it resolved the odd history of how Captain America could be fighting communists when he was supposed to have been frozen in a block of ice. Symbolically, however, the storyline served a much more important purpose. Comparing the dominant ideologies of the 1950s and the 1970s allowed for an important

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 170.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 111.

commentary on the state of the country: where it was, where it had been, and where it was going. Perhaps most important of all was the fact that other Americans who disagreed with the viewpoints that Captain America had espoused since 1963 were given some representation on the pages of his comic. Unfortunately, their representative was a psychotic who stood for the worst aspects of orthodox-zealous-nationalist ideology. Though it was an important step, it wasn't the final one in the journey to create a worthy representative of the other America. The United States had once been comprised of a blending of zealous nationalism and prophetic realism, which had since separated into its component parts. Claiming one whole ideology was "evil," or "wrong," as Marvel did with their "Captain America from the 1950s" storyline, was doing a disservice to culturally orthodox Americans who were nothing like Fifties Cap. The 1980s would partially solve the problem of representation with the creation of a character less villainous than Fifties Cap, but far more zealous than the real one.



Figure 7: Captain America considers the fate of his double after their climactic battle.

### **Chapter 3: The 1980s and the Growth of Zealous Nationalism**

Captain America began the eighties with the same mixture of trepidation and hope as the rest of the country. The overall mood of the seventies had been one of pensiveness for the comics as a torrent of difficult questions continuously weighed down upon Cap. The previous decade had seen the Captain grappling with serious social issues ranging from poverty and racism to the effects of Vietnam and Watergate. While never definitively solving any of these gargantuan dilemmas, Cap managed to remain relevant in the face of a changing political and ideological landscape, asking himself in almost every issue, “What is my role in this world?” The eighties continued the tradition of presenting Captain America as a human anachronism, a character who could effectively question the changes occurring around him. As such, more than any other period that had come before, the eighties would prove to be a landmark era in terms of Captain America’s relationship with his country, his government, and the American people. While the seventies had been a time when Cap’s prophetic realism was generally accepted, and even seen as representative of a greater majority than zealous nationalism, that belief began to change during the Reagan years. Zealous nationalism became increasingly more popular, forcing Marvel to create a double to better represent new proponents of the ideology.

In 1983, an issue of *Captain America* came out that effectively summed up the vast gulf separating Cap from the eighties. As he and another superhero named the Nomad patrolled the city after a recent adventure, they happened upon a domestic dispute involving a husband holding his family hostage at gunpoint. Cap disarmed the man and

knocked him out, preparing to bring him into the nearest police precinct to be processed. But when the man's wife told Captain America that her husband was down on his luck and prone to drunken episodes, Cap was persuaded not to turn him in. Instead, Cap told the woman to have her husband contact him in order to have a real talk and find better ways to deal with his problems. The prophetic realist and progressive impulses toward compassion were as strong for Captain America in the eighties as they were in the seventies.

Later in the issue, Steve Rogers overheard a news report saying that the same gunman he dealt with earlier was on the roof of a building shooting wildly at people. Mortified at the fact that he had had the opportunity to take this man off the streets but had failed to, Cap rushed off to do what he could to reverse his mistake. Along the way, he mused to himself about the actions he had taken: "Maybe in our line of work we have to view events in black and white...heroes and villains! No! I can't believe that! Beehan's no villain, he's a victim! I acted out of compassion this afternoon, and I'd do it again!"<sup>88</sup> Captain America's confusion over his actions was indicative of a character reckoning with the age he lived in, an age of renewed orthodoxy and zealotry. A decade earlier, the real Captain America had fought Fifties Cap because of the latter's strict adherence to black and white, now he was wondering if such an adherence was entirely misguided. Regardless, he remained committed to prophetic realism's tenets that a bad

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<sup>88</sup> J.M. Dematteis and Sal Buscema, "Diverging," *Captain America* vo.1, no.284 (1982): 17.

guy was redeemable and that violence in itself was not the sole answer to the world's problems.<sup>89</sup>

When Cap confronted Beehan, they exchanged opinions on the value of hope in America. Having grown up in the Depression, Cap knew the value of never giving up, and tried to express this to Beehan. The man remained unconvinced: "Bull! Ya can't make things better with a lot of stupid, empty words! Life ain't that simple, mister! And you know it!"<sup>90</sup> When words failed, Beehan turned the gun on himself, only to be foiled at the last minute by Cap. Beehan's last words in the issue were the bleak incantation of the hopeless: "I wanna die...I wanna die...I wanna die..."

This issue served as a perfect example of the conflict between the New Deal-era Captain and the Reagan-era America he lived in. As told in the many recaps of Captain America's origin, he was the recipient of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's blessing to be America's chosen hero. Multiple stories about Cap's life prior to his role as a superhero related the experiences young Steve Rogers had while waiting in bread lines, listening to rhetoric of the working man. The New Deal saw "monetary and fiscal policy, agricultural and labor policy, social security and other welfare programs, housing, power, and education" pitted against "big business, industry, and Wall Street."<sup>91</sup> It is only natural that a man who came out of that period of American history would be willing to listen to a wife about her husband who was "down on his luck." Understanding Steve Rogers as a product of the New Deal goes a long way toward explaining his progressive

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<sup>89</sup> Robert Jewett, *The Captain America Complex* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1973), 245.

<sup>90</sup> DeMatteis and Buscema, *Captain America* no. 284, 19.

<sup>91</sup> John G. Geer, "New Deal Issues and the American Electorate: 1952-1988," *Political Behavior* 14 (1992): 45-65. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org).

characterization in his post-1963 appearances in the Marvel universe. Indeed, “the Depression and the New Deal created a relatively clear political spectrum as well as a powerful political vocabulary that survived, albeit with significant modifications, for six decades.”<sup>92</sup> Of note, members of the Democratic Party, “following Franklin D. Roosevelt’s lead, increasingly called themselves liberal.”<sup>93</sup> Interestingly, Cap’s writers stressed the progressive elements of the 1930s and 1940s, without ever making mention of his connections to Roosevelt’s extremely zealous war policies.<sup>94</sup> Though there had been a tense union of ideologies in World War II, Captain America’s modern portrayal as a prophetic realist couldn’t be connected to any aspect of zealous nationalism, even his own origins. Regardless, by 1983, America had begun to swing away from New Deal-era progressive policies and toward a more zealous mindset.

Amongst the many policies on which President Reagan ran for office in 1980, some of the more prominent were an indictment of “Washington insiders for stifling individual achievement and subsidizing the undeserving poor,” as well as a chastisement of that same undeserving poor for seeking subsidies.<sup>95</sup> The popularity of Reagan’s economic models ultimately led to him serving two terms in the White House, and appropriately defined the eighties as a decade of conservative social and economic gains. In this climate, the New Deal declined in importance to voting Americans. “In 1952...nearly 80 percent of respondents (to a political survey) cited at least one New

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<sup>92</sup> Leo P. Ribuffo, “Why Is There So Much Conservatism in the United States and Why Do So Few Historians Know Anything About It?” *The American Historical Review* 99 (1994): 438-449. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org).

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 75.

<sup>95</sup> Ribuffo, “Why Is There So Much Conservatism?” 442.

Deal issue in their assessment of the parties.” In contrast, “by the early 1980s, the proportion of the electorate that viewed the New Deal as salient slipped to just slightly over 50 percent”.<sup>96</sup> The characterization of Mr. Beehan’s suicidal rampage in issue #284 reflected the apparent hopelessness of many “undeserving poor” to the increasingly desperate situation of a country that was turning its back on the welfare programs that had helped it through the Great Depression. As the product of the era that had generated the New Deal, Captain America once again faced the threat of relevance in a country that was increasingly shying away from the progressive-prophetic realist elements of that era and toward a more zealous nationalist ideal.

The voting habits of the electorate shed more light on Captain America’s dilemma in the eighties. Traditional party loyalties were abandoned in 1980, as historically Democratic voters flocked to Reagan: 79 percent of white Evangelicals, conventionally Democratic up until that time, voted Republican in the 1980s.<sup>97</sup> After the embarrassing conclusion of Vietnam and the perceived failure of prophetic realism’s coexistence with an enemy over the last ten to twelve years, Americans wanted a crusader to lead it.<sup>98</sup> Reagan fit the bill, bringing with him renewed strength to the orthodox views of the “American intangibles” Cap loved to defend. Unfortunately for Captain America, the orthodox conception of freedom lay in the economic free market, and justice came from an overriding religious moral vision.<sup>99</sup> In the course of one election, America’s majority

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<sup>96</sup> Geer, “New Deal Issues,” 51.

<sup>97</sup> James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), 280.

<sup>98</sup> John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 48.

<sup>99</sup> Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 112.

opinion of what defined freedom and justice changed to the orthodox, leaving Captain America and his progressive-prophetic-realist ideals in the lurch.

Furthermore, Captain America's treatment of Mr. Beehan betrayed a "bleeding-heart liberal" attitude toward the downtrodden. As Cap mused on his way to the sight of the conflict, "he isn't a villain, but a victim!"<sup>100</sup> Victimizing a criminal was just another sympathetic, progressive trait amongst many for a character who refused to kill, refused to work for his government in a military capacity, and consistently denounced the use of guns. In the 1980s, Cap's prophetic realist mentality began to go up against action heroes like Rambo, a character who often displayed the exact opposite of Cap's restraint and judgment, instead using excessive violence and a hefty body count to accomplish his goals. The prevalence of militaristic movies, toys, and media in the 1980s led to a "psychological numbing of the masses," which in turn led to "political passivity and obedience."<sup>101</sup> The Rambo mindset fueled a pop-cultural desire for more violent heroes or anti-heroes, a notion that found great popularity in Ronald Reagan's America. From 1982 to 1985, the Reagan administration instigated a sharp arms buildup; it was during this time that an increased prevalence of war toys and war movies found its way into the hearts and minds of young Americans.<sup>102</sup> Unlike the ostensibly militaristic Cap, however, these war toys and movies failed to impart a respect for life and other cultures. Instead, the Rambo mentality glorified a soldier who killed many people indiscriminately

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<sup>100</sup> Dematteis and Buscema, *Captain America* no. 284, 17.

<sup>101</sup> Patrick M. Regan, "War Toys, War Movies, and the Militarization of the United States, 1900-1985," *Journal of Peace Research* 31 (1994): 45-58. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org).

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

and without hesitation. The popularity of Rambo spilled into real life, where ordinary citizens in both the private and military sectors sought to emulate this new breed of hero.

The movie *Death Wish* and its four sequels spanned the years from 1974 to 1994, with the bulk of the franchise having come out in the 1980s. Other popular urban-vigilante movies of the time were the Dirty Harry films, as well as a smattering of Steven Seagal pictures. The common theme in these movies is that of urban cleansing/avenging through the use of lethal violence.<sup>103</sup> Though critics might have claimed that Captain America fit the mold of a lawless vigilante, the differences between *Captain America* comics and the violent films of the 1980s laid in Cap's reliance on police officers' assistance to legitimize his efforts, as well as a complete unwillingness to kill. In short, Captain America relied on law and order while the anti-heroes in *Death Wish* and *Dirty Harry* went around both concepts to perpetuate orthodox justice.<sup>104</sup>

In 1984, a man named Bernard Goetz applied *Death Wish*'s mode of justice when he opened fire on four street youths who harassed him on a subway car. The response from Americans over the event showed the nation's zealous nationalist mentality quite well: a legal defense fund was established for Goetz, and at his trial, signs reading "POWER TO THE VIGILANTE -N.Y. LOVES YA!" were prominently displayed outside the courthouse.<sup>105</sup> The "cult of righteous assault"<sup>106</sup> culminated in Goetz's acquittal of all but the relatively minor charge of carrying an unregistered weapon. Orthodox justice, defined by the righteousness so admired and lauded by Goetz's fans,<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Lawrence and Jewett, *Myth of the American Superhero*, 108.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 119.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 114.

was quickly replacing the real Captain America's conception of justice as equity and compassion.

It was in the face of this ever-changing America that the writers of Captain America strove to maintain the character's commitment to prophetic realism. In a landmark issue from 1986, Cap finally was forced to confront the attitude of the eighties, and he did so, strangely enough, with guns blazing. The cover to issue #321 featured an enraged-looking Captain firing a machine gun into the "camera" of the reader's point of view. The issue itself dealt with a hostage situation in which the odds continually escalated, forcing Captain America to compromise his values along the way. At the beginning of the hostage situation, Cap tried unsuccessfully to strong-arm some information out of a terrorist. The bad guy laughed off the attempt, causing Captain America to soliloquize: "This joker has me pegged, all right. I'm not willing to stoop to their level in order to win. My code of ethics won't permit me."<sup>108</sup> Despite this reluctance to shed his prophetic realism, Captain America was forced over the course of the issue to resort to more and more zealous means. Mark Gruenwald, the writer of the story, prominently emphasized Cap's discomfort with his increasingly desperate tactics against the terrorists. Sneaking up on various members of the terrorist group, Cap voiced his concern: "I'm not particularly proud of having to use these terrorists' guerrilla tactics, but 110 lives are at stake!"<sup>109</sup> By the end of the issue, Captain America found himself in the same room with the hostages and a gunman, but before he could move anyone to safety, the villain realized what was happening and opened fire on the crowd. Cap's

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<sup>108</sup> Mark Gruenwald and Paul Neary, "Ultimatum," *Captain America* vol.1, no.321 (1986): 15.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid*,18.

reaction was swift and direct: lacking his shield at the moment, he instead grabbed for a gun and shot the gunman to death.



**Figure 8:** Captain America’s momentous decision to kill an enemy. The act resonates through the next few years’ worth of stories.

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The next issue began with a lengthy monologue about Cap’s feelings regarding his lethal actions: “I believe that guns are for killing, and killing is the ultimate violation of individual rights, the ultimate denial of freedom. I never carry a gun. I have never taken another person’s life.”<sup>110</sup> This quote serves as a direct expression of the progressive definition of freedom as a recognition of individual rights<sup>111</sup> as well as a statement of regret over his failure to adhere to progressive realism’s desire for peaceful conflict resolution.<sup>112</sup> The fan reaction to the killing was fervent: some people were supportive and happy at this bold action while others were appalled. One reader wrote:

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<sup>110</sup> Mark Gruenwald and Paul Neary, “The Chasm,” *Captain America* vol.1, no.322 (1986), 2.

<sup>111</sup> Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 115.

<sup>112</sup> Jewett and Lawrence, *Crusade Against Evil*, 8.

“How dumb can you get? He kills his enemy and *regrets* it! How dumb!”<sup>113</sup> Another fan was less enthusiastic about the drastic action Cap was forced to take, saying: “I was glad to see that Cap was truly disturbed by the fact that he had to kill someone.”<sup>114</sup> More readers were confused as to how Captain America had never killed anyone before, even though he had fought in World War II. It is true that it was a bit of a stretch to claim that America’s super-soldier, created in the 1940s and deployed on numerous battlefields, had never killed before. Marvel was simply trying to keep Captain America true to his prophetic realist characterization, distancing him from both the increasingly accepted though certainly questionable trend of overly violent action heroes, as well as the zealous nationalist fervor in which he had been created. However, in distancing him, they were once again leaving a large segment of the country unrepresented, the segment that had supported Bernard Goetz or written in to the letters page in support of Cap’s lethal actions. It was time for another double of the Captain.

A character called Super-Patriot, also known as John Walker, appeared in Captain America’s comics beginning in 1985. When Steve Rogers saw him at a public rally, he was faced with “a hero with his finger on the pulse of the eighties.”<sup>115</sup> Unfortunately, this hero was more concerned with media popularity and ignored crimes he saw occurring in front of his face if he deemed them unimportant. Families like the one Cap helped in issue #284, the Beehans, were left to fend for themselves as the Super-Patriot looked for crimes worth stopping. His publicist told him to look for terrorists to fight on camera, to

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<sup>113</sup> Steve (no last name given), as quoted on the letters page of *Captain America* vol.1, no.327 (1987), 17.

<sup>114</sup> Lorne Teitelbaum, as quoted on the letters page, *Captain America* vol.1, no.327 (1987), 17.

<sup>115</sup> Mark Gruenwald and Paul Neary, “Super-Patriot is Here,” *Captain America* vol.1, no.323 (1986): 11.

which Super-Patriot agreed: “My gut feeling tells me that the public goes for the strongarm stuff...look at all the support that old fud Captain America got when he offed that terrorist!”<sup>116</sup> Super-Patriot, then, truly did have his finger on the pulse of the eighties: he was interested in using violence, more concerned with media glamour, and unconcerned with the downtrodden or working-class. Measured against Cap, who was shaped in his early years by “poverty, activism, and social reform,”<sup>117</sup> Super-Patriot was more in touch with society of the time. Marvel had set up a battle between the New Deal-era Cap and the Reagan-era Super-Patriot.

The ideological conflict escalated when, in issue 332, a committee of government bureaucrats called on Steve Rogers to appear before them. Arguing that the U.S. army had created the super soldier serum and that Cap’s costume, shield, and name were property of that group, the committee ordered Rogers to become the official agent of the United States or else they would strip him of his duties. Torn by the conflict, Rogers tried to find the right answer, marking one of the rare times that Marvel writers would directly acknowledge Captain America’s zealous nationalist history in World War II: as Cap said, “By going back to my wartime role as a glorified agent of America’s official policies, I’d be compromising my effectiveness as a symbol that transcends mere politics.”<sup>118</sup> By the end of the issue, Steve Rogers had decided to give up being Captain America in order not to damage his effectiveness as a symbol of prophetic realist ideals.

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<sup>116</sup> Mark Gruenwald and Paul Neary, “Clashing Symbols,” *Captain America* vol.1, no.327 (1987): 4.

<sup>117</sup> Carl W. Roberts and Kurt Lang, “Generations and Ideological Change: Some Observations,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 49 (1985): 460-473. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org).

<sup>118</sup> Mark Gruenwald and Tom Morgan, “The Choice,” *Captain America* vol.1, no.332 (1987): 13.

The commission chairman left him with a foreboding message: “Let me make one last thing clear, Rogers. America needs a popular high profile mascot and operative. If you will not be that man, have no doubt that we will find someone else to be Captain America!”<sup>119</sup>

There was little doubt as to who that man would be. Super-Patriot had been introduced just months earlier and was primed to take over the role of the “stale” Captain America. Fittingly, John Walker was a member of the very demographic that had recently revitalized zealous nationalist attitudes. In the 1970s, white males and white southerners were the groups that registered the “largest shifts in party identification,”<sup>120</sup> and Walker was revealed to be from a small town called Custer’s Grove, Georgia. His ideological leanings became apparent in one of his earliest missions, when he, as Captain America, went up against a vigilante group known as the Watchdogs, men bent on destroying anything they considered immoral. When Walker found out that the Watchdogs were against pornography, sex education, abortion, and teaching evolution in schools, he thought to himself, “Hmm...I’m against those things, too.”<sup>121</sup> While Steve Rogers had never explicitly been *for* any of the said “immoral” subjects, he had always maintained a progressive respect for individual rights to choose what was considered immoral.

For the first time, Captain America could accurately be called an orthodox zealous nationalist, for though Walker fought the Watchdogs at the behest of the

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>120</sup> Alan I. Abramowitz and Kyle L. Saunders, “Ideological Realignment in the U.S. Electorate,” *The Journal of Politics* 60 (1996): 634-652. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org).

<sup>121</sup> Mark Gruenwald and Tom Morgan, “Baptism of Fire,” *Captain America* vol.1, no.335 (1987): 9.

government, he could easily have been their ideological representative in a way Steve Rogers never could. In 1963, when Captain America was remade into a progressive superhero, he left a number of Americans without a proper symbol for their beliefs. After Brown V. Board, desegregation, and the Civil Rights Movement, many culturally orthodox Americans felt as though their ideology was impotent. By the time of the 1980s, however, many began to fight back against that tide of prophetic realism through “new symbols to glorify old myths.”<sup>122</sup> Walker was a new symbol, he was just clothed in the uniform of an old one. In fact, the motif and colors of the Captain America uniform, when worn by John Walker, could be seen as representative of the stars and bars of the Confederate flag, that “most holy of relics” to the zealous nationalist myth.<sup>123</sup>

As the months passed, John Walker began to display more extreme methods, becoming more and more like, as one reader summed up in the letters page, “Rambo and his many jingoistic clones.”<sup>124</sup> Whereas once Steve Rogers sought non-lethal solutions and despaired over killing an enemy, Walker beat a super-villain to death at the end of issue #338. Later, the commission who had used him to replace Rogers deemed the action suitable so long as the mission was accomplished. Moreover, Walker had no qualms following questionable orders, whereas Rogers had questioned authority every chance he got. As Walker took a mutant (Marvel’s ubiquitous, catch-all minority group)

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<sup>122</sup> Cecil Kirk Hutson, “More Smoke than Fire,” in *America Under Construction*, eds. Kristi S. Long and Matthew Nadelhaft (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1997), 108.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 96.

<sup>124</sup> Carmella Merlo, as quoted on the letters page of *Captain America* vol.1, no.329 (1987): 17.

in to custody for violating an unjust law, his reasoning was simple: “We don’t make the laws, we just enforce ‘em.”<sup>125</sup>

Readers were even more torn about the new status quo as they were when Rogers was the sole Captain America. Some supported Walker’s extreme strategies, happy that a superhero in the pages of a Marvel comic was accomplishing something concrete, more along the lines of Bernard Goetz than the traditional Captain America. Many defended him against being labeled a bad guy. More were simply mad about Rogers’ progressive characterization: “I knew you’d have to write a pro-liberal, conservative-bashing Captain America story eventually...from the stereotypical “conservative” terrorist to Steve Rogers’ subtle putdown of the current administration, the entire issue stunk!”<sup>126</sup> This reader would probably have been happy with the change to Walker as Captain America. It could be said that this new Cap was finally serving as a representative of the part of the country that Steve Rogers could never represent due to his moral code and ideological stance. Judging by the outpouring of support for Walker, Marvel had not been entirely misguided.

Whether or not they were off base in deciding to replace Rogers, the fact remains that Marvel never intended for the decision to be permanent. A Captain America who killed may have been popular with readers who were also fans of *Death Wish* and *Dirty Harry*, but the message in the John Walker storyline was that some lines should not be crossed, no matter how popular a decision may be. The wholesale killing of villains reached its peak in issue #345, when the same Watchdogs whom he had arrested in a

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<sup>125</sup> Mark Gruenwald and Dwyer, “Slippery People,” *Captain America* vol.1, no.343 (1988): 4.

<sup>126</sup> Larry King, as quoted on the letters page of *Captain America* vol.1, no.338 (1988): 17.

previous comic killed Walker's parents. The wordless illustrations following his parents' death show a maniacal Walker murdering every Watchdog in the room, racking up a body count of over a dozen. The next issue had him hunting down and attempting to murder the two men who leaked his identity and proximately caused his parents' deaths. Marvel showed that a character like Walker was ultimately unable to control the level of his violence, for zeal was an all-consuming mindset, an ideology that would never stop trying to redeem the world by destroying its enemies.<sup>127</sup>



**Figure 9:** John Walker, the replacement Captain America, taking down villains with extremely violent tactics.

Ultimately, John Walker was stripped of the Captain America identity due to his actions. Steve Rogers was returned to the role soon after, but unlike the Fifties Cap storyline from over a decade earlier, Marvel was not so quick to completely villainize Walker. While the creative team working on *Captain America* seemed dedicated to maintaining the notion that Steve Rogers was the true Captain America, it had to admit

<sup>127</sup> Jewett and Lawrence, *Crusade Against Evil*, 8.

that Walker's popularity was a referendum from fans about what they wanted out of their Captain America. Steve Rogers represented the progressive, non-lethal, prophetic realist segment of readers who thought America should seek some higher goal, like peace and equality. Walker was the orthodox, lethal, unquestioning American who believed that might makes right and that America had a duty to do whatever it took to maintain its power.

Was either one right? Certainly Marvel put their money on Rogers and his brand of progressive, New Deal-era compassion as the ideal for America. A character like

Walker was simply unable to focus on domestic problems like poverty and racism if he was too busy maintaining the ideals of zealous nationalism at home or abroad. But while Walker may not have been Marvel's ideal, the company still



**Figure 10:** John Walker's return as USAgent. The character still exists in modern continuity.

understood that his popularity meant something. Rogers, being unable to represent Walker's fans, failed as an icon for all of America, instead being a hero only to those who agreed with his prophetic realism. Walker's presence filled a gap of representation that

Rogers had, up until that point, left unnoticed. It was with this recognition that Marvel created a new character to serve as Captain America's permanent double: USAgent. Walker donned a variation of Cap's costume and became his government's answer to Rogers' progressive, non-lethal attitude. From that point in 1989 until today, Walker has played the part of USAgent, symbolically representing the other America.

Significantly, USAgent was not a villain. Though his methods were extremely violent, they established him as the icon of *an* American ideal, just not the one the real Captain America stood for. Rather than demonize the zealous nationalist mindset like they did with Fifties Cap, Marvel used Walker to show that some zeal could be beneficial, when used appropriately. For the first time, two patriotic heroes, dressed similarly and both carrying a shield, stood for America. Captain America's writers knew that to eliminate zeal entirely would be a mistake, it would "open the door to nihilism or worse...without zeal for some purpose the American moral sense could disintegrate. It could fall into apathy..."<sup>128</sup> Marvel didn't eliminate zeal from its conception of America, but included it to provide a better picture of the American mindset: grappling between two drastically different ideologies. Still, the concept of one character, Captain America, being the "true" representative of America while USAgent was more of a secondary character with a variation of Cap's costume made prophetic realism seem more important regardless. The progression to an equal representation of both ideologies was on track, yet incomplete. Not until 2001 would Marvel definitively create a double to represent zealous nationalism equally with prophetic realism. The double existed in a separate universe from the original Captain America, and though he was the embodiment of

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<sup>128</sup> Jewett, *The Captain America Complex*, 112.

zealous nationalism, his name and costume were identical to his prophetic realist counterpart's. The double's name was Steve Rogers, and he was Captain America.

## **Chapter 4: Regular versus Ultimate**

September 11, 2001 changed the landscape of New York, America, and the world itself. Not since Pearl Harbor had an attack so brutally devastated the U.S. and profoundly influenced the thoughts of Americans. It makes sense, then, that Captain America, a character in many ways defined by his actions after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, would be affected by the events of 9/11. But as the months passed and Marvel prepared a new volume of *Captain America* comics to address Cap's role in the world after the attacks, it remained to be seen what his reaction would be. Obviously, with his growth away from his jingoistic origins toward a more prophetic realist stance on war and violence, it would be out of character for Captain America to backslide into a hyper-militarist attitude at the first sign of major foreign violence against the U.S. homeland in more than sixty years. Instead, Steve Rogers maintained his cool-headed attitude and respect for foreign cultures in opposition to a nation that was growing increasingly hostile toward such a stance. With the country split by the prospect of a war on terror, Captain America was once more unable to represent a large segment of the population. Marvel's technique of creating doubles would again be exercised, but the twist with this new double was that he would never interact with Captain America. In fact, he did not even exist in the same universe. Steve Rogers' double in the 2000s was none other than an alternate Steve Rogers.

In 2000, Marvel created an imprint line of comics taking place in a different universe than its regular titles. The line, dubbed "Ultimate Marvel," was meant to revamp characters who had taken on confusing and convoluted histories over the course

of forty years of continuous publication. Initially, Spider-man and the X-men were the central focus of this revamp, but in 2001 the Avengers were added to the roster under the new name of the Ultimates. Most of the Ultimates were given more modern, cynical takes on their classic counterparts' personalities; Thor was a new-age hippie, Giant Man was a pill-popping wife-beater, and Iron Man's alcoholism bordered on suicidal. Captain America's change was one of the most striking, however, as the character displayed markedly different traits from his "regular universe"<sup>129</sup> counterpart. He was socially orthodox, more willing to use lethal force, hyper-militaristic, and always at the beck and call of the U.S. government. He did not question orders or disobey his superiors. There was never a direct conflict between him and regular Captain America, either, since Marvel vowed to never do a crossover between the two universes.

Instead of a double operating alongside of or in opposition to Captain America, Marvel had set up a system whereby two men, both named Steve Rogers, both dressed in practically identical uniforms (the Ultimate version lacked the wing-tips on the cowl), and both calling themselves Captain America could tackle the same worldly, post-9/11 issues from completely differing ideologies. The split between two universes mirrored the contradictory responses to 9/11 from the American government. Regular Captain America reflected the fact that America belonged to a global network of countries, many of which had lost citizens in the attack on the World Trade Center. In the weeks after 9/11, President Bush and his administration relied on "forms of international cooperation

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<sup>129</sup> Fans refer to the original Captain America with varying terminology. For this work, I use "regular" as the descriptor for the Captain America created in 1941 and published ever since. "Ultimate" (capitalized) is the adjective of choice for the alternate version due to the name of the imprint.

favored by prophetic realism,”<sup>130</sup> a strategy that was applauded by many. Religious leaders from Christian, Jewish, Sikh, Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim faiths met with President Bush on September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2001 to make the claim that “the vision of community, tolerance, compassion, justice, and the sacredness of human life,”<sup>131</sup> rather than war, could succeed in defeating terrorism.

In contrast, Ultimate Captain America was the hot zealot, using the full force of the American war machine to subdue enemy agents without a hint of concern for human life besides that of America and her allies. He represented “retaliatory rage, fed by a reborn feeling of national innocence and violation.”<sup>132</sup> The comparisons to Pearl Harbor fueled a renascent sense of zealous nationalism, quite similar to that felt by the original Captain America during World War II. Senator John McCain claimed it was time to “shed a tear, and then get on with the business of killing our enemies as quickly as we can, and ruthlessly as we must.”<sup>133</sup> Others were even less subtle about their feelings toward the enemy: “We should invade their countries, kill their leaders, and convert them to Christianity. We weren’t punctilious about locating and punishing only Hitler and his top officers. We carpet-bombed German cities; we killed civilians. That’s war. This is war.”<sup>134</sup> While Ann Coulter could be considered an extreme view, it was not long before Ultimate Captain America was doing what she called for, just short of converting them to Christianity.

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<sup>130</sup> Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 12.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

<sup>133</sup> John McCain, as quoted in Jewett and Lawrence, *Crusade Against Evil*, 10.

<sup>134</sup> Ann Coulter, as quoted in Jewett and Lawrence, *Crusade Against Evil*, 11.

Following 9/11, regular Captain America began a new volume of comics with content dealing specifically with America’s role in the world and Cap’s role in America. The first issue took place just days after the attacks and featured Steve Rogers at Ground Zero digging through debris and looking for survivors. The issue was fraught with heavy commentary on the senselessness of the disaster. As he dug, Rogers had an imaginary dialogue with the men who committed the act, asking, “Is this the face of your Great Satan? Is this your offering to God? Your worship? Your prayer? Butchers...”<sup>135</sup> It is important to note that despite his sensitivity to other cultures, Captain America was not



**Figure 11:** Captain America speaks with another rescue worker at Ground Zero.

shown to be out of touch with reality. He expressed hurt, pain, and rage like any other citizen of New York, but he didn’t allow those feelings to escalate to the level of zealous nationalism, making him a blind patriot in the face

of national tragedy. When approached in the middle of his task by Nick Fury, Marvel’s resident government agent, and ordered to travel to Kandahar to fight the group who may have been responsible for the attacks, Rogers’ answer was simple: “*They* need me. The ones who might have five minutes of breath or blood left before they die. You go be a

<sup>135</sup> John Ney Neiber and John Cassaday, “Dust,” *Captain America* vol.4, no.1 (2002): 9.

hero, Fury. I've got work to do."<sup>136</sup> The denial to travel abroad and attack possible enemies was highly indicative of prophetic realism: "not to eliminate the crisis but advance gradually through it toward a goal."<sup>137</sup> Saving lives in the rubble of Ground Zero was a more realistic goal than chasing ghosts.

Later in the same issue, Steve Rogers, out of costume, was walking down the street when he spotted a young man closing up a Jordanian market. Aware of the violence against people of Middle Eastern descent following the attacks, Rogers told the man that he should probably not be walking around by himself at night. The young man's anger bubbled over as he told the Captain, "I live here. My name is Samir, not Osama. And my father was born on this street."<sup>138</sup> While this character's frustration was justified, so was Captain America's caution. Race and ethnicity are typically the product of overlearned stereotypes, difficult to change or ignore in most people. "The added component of a horrific domestic attack carried out by people of Middle Eastern descent introduce[d] a pervasive sense of threat that buttress[ed] this ethnocultural tendency even more."<sup>139</sup> The violence following 9/11 against anyone fitting the stereotyped image of "Middle Eastern" echoed the violence against people of Japanese descent after Pearl Harbor. And though Captain America took part in his share of racist propaganda in the 1940s, he was no longer that character in 2001.

When the Jordanian-American man named Samir was attacked on the following page, Captain America was present to stop the attack and defuse both parties' tension.

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>137</sup> Jewett and Lawrence, *Crusade Against Evil*, 314.

<sup>138</sup> Neiber and Cassaday, *Captain America* vol.4, no.1, 13.

<sup>139</sup> Deborah J. Schildkraut, "The More Things Change...American Identity and Mass and Elite Responses to 9/11," *Political Psychology* 23 (2002):511-535. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org).

Amidst a backdrop of almost ethereal light, Captain America stood between Samir and his attacker, a devastated parent of a 9/11 victim. Realizing that the man had lost someone, Cap implores the man to a higher standard: “I understand. You want justice. This isn’t justice. We’re better than this. Save your anger for the enemy.”<sup>140</sup> In one issue, Captain America had exemplified his twenty-first century reaction to the terror of 9/11. Not only had he refused to be deployed as a weapon in the Middle East, but he had also effectively expressed his pledge to incorporationism, the belief that we cannot stereotype people into categories of enemy and ally, but rather that we have to celebrate our differences under one American flag.<sup>141</sup> With the clash between Samir and his assailant over, Cap left the two men talking about their respective losses from the events of a few days before. Perhaps the most important message of the first issue of this new Captain America volume was that Cap could still stand as a symbol for aspiring to better instincts in the name of prophetic realism. As he watched the two men settle their conflict, Cap soliloquized, “We’re going to make it through this. We, the people. United by a power that no enemy of freedom could begin to understand. We share – we are – the American Dream.”<sup>142</sup>

Race certainly played a role in the animosity many zealous nationalists felt toward the perceived enemy. Deborah Schildkraut argued that after 9/11, “ascriptivist norms appear[ed] to be shaping the views of ordinary Americans more than they are shaping the rhetoric of political leaders.”<sup>143</sup> What this says is that a tendency to view Americanness in terms of concrete, racially divided lines was on the rise after 9/11 in a similar fashion

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<sup>140</sup> Neiber and Cassaday, *Captain America* vol.4, no.1, 16.

<sup>141</sup> Schildkraut, “The More Things Change,” 515.

<sup>142</sup> Neiber and Cassaday, *Captain America* vol.4, no.1, 17.

<sup>143</sup> Schildkraut, “The More Things Change,” 523.

to events following Pearl Harbor. The American public was more likely to display prejudicial or hyper-militaristic behavior, but regular Captain America, as usual, did not represent members of that group. Ultimate Captain America did, however, as his actions in the Ultimate universe showed from 2001 on.

Regular Captain America's adherence to what Schildkraut called incorporationism, a multicultural inclusiveness that had roots in prophetic realism, was countered after 9/11 by its ideological opposite: ethnoculturalism, a tendency to see racial and ethnic divides as the criteria for true "Americanness."<sup>144</sup> While incorporationism has been on the rise since 1945, "after 9/11, this tradition [has been] challenged by new concerns about immigration and a possible 'enemy within...the inherent tensions between incorporationism and ethnoculturalism are now surfacing in a clash of traditions that was largely absent in responses to the attack on Pearl Harbor."<sup>145</sup> In 1941, anti-Japanese sentiment on the part of the American public was matched by its political leaders' willingness to employ dubious legislation to protect American interests. The most famous of this legislation was Executive Order 9066, which authorized the removal of anyone from sensitive areas along the west coast, focusing entirely on Japanese Americans in the removal and eventual internment. In his State of the Union speech on January 6, 1942, FDR "made only one plea to avoid discrimination [against Japanese Americans], and he framed his vague request in strategic and instrumental terms."<sup>146</sup> Such racially insensitive behavior showed that Roosevelt was "becoming more and more

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid, 517.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid, 521.

dominated by the crusade as the war progressed,<sup>147</sup> and Captain America in the 1940s reflected that. However, after World War II, it was no longer widely possible for anyone to hold the disjointed view of Roosevelt's combined zealotry and realism, and when 9/11 brought the same feelings of racial hostility to the fore, two Captain Americas were necessary to elucidate both ideologies.

While ethnoculturalism dominated the American mind during World War II, it was less prominent, but still entirely extant, in 2001. Violence against Muslim Americans serves as testament to the existing hostility to the "enemy within," following 9/11. But incorporationist sentiments affected the country as well, as exemplified by the shock and outrage expressed by Americans when Rep. John Cooksey (R. LA) said that a person "wearing a diaper on his head" should be subject to more scrutiny when traveling on airlines.<sup>148</sup> Such shock was nonexistent in the 1940s, when politicians freely used pejorative epithets like "jap" and "nip."<sup>149</sup> It was in the face of this split between incorporationism and ethnoculturalism that regular Captain America and Ultimate Captain America made their appeals to separate groups. In many ways, the clash of these two philosophies played out, indirectly, on the pages of both *Captain America* and *The Ultimates*.

As noted already, following 9/11 Captain America made his plea for prophetic realist, progressive action as well as faith in the American Dream of unity out of diversity. While this mindset had its supporters, there were still a great many Americans who wanted to make it harder for potentially dangerous foreigners to enter the United

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<sup>147</sup> Robert Jewett, *The Captain America Complex* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1973), 54.

<sup>148</sup> Schildkraut, "The More Things Change," 521.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

States. Polls taken after 9/11 showed that 58% of respondents wanted to decrease immigration, up from 38% just a year before.<sup>150</sup> While the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq both had their detractors, there was also a base of support amongst some Americans who felt that offensive military actions were necessary to combat the terror that had caused 9/11. Ultimate Captain America spoke for those individuals who did not want to waste time with the regular Captain's plea for sensitivity.

As he first appeared in *The Ultimates*, Ultimate Cap was a man out of time, much like his regular predecessor. Regular Cap had had time to adjust to the world after his awakening from the block of ice, and though it amounts to over forty years of publications, Marvel typically condenses Cap's history in the "modern world" to somewhere around ten years. This was the time in which Cap was socially liberalized, a period where his history was distanced from aspects of 1940s culture like racist propaganda and FDR's internment of the Japanese, and directed towards FDR's more progressive economic and social policies. Ultimate Cap did not have that grace period, being thrust directly into the world of 2001 after having been frozen in 1945. Mark Millar, the writer of *The Ultimates*, cast his Captain America as a man unsettled by the world in which he woke up, describing club goers in one issue as "two hundred fellas with long hair who haven't seen a bath in months," and calling Thor "Goldilocks," derogatorily.<sup>151</sup> However, this seemingly harmless characterization of Captain America as an old man in a super soldier's body becomes more threatening when his orthodox and zealous nationalist tendencies were channeled into more violent arenas.

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid, 525.

<sup>151</sup> Mark Millar and Bryan Hitch, "Dead Man Walking," *The Ultimates 2*, no.2 (2005): 15.

The most telling example of Ultimate Captain America's cultural close-mindedness came in the conclusion of *The Ultimates'* first volume. While fighting the arch villain of the series, Ultimate Cap was pinned down and almost beaten. When asked



**Figure 12:** Ultimate Cap slices his enemy in half during the final battle of *The Ultimates*.

to surrender, Rogers' zealous rage drove him to smash the villain in the face a few times before slicing him in half with his shield, all while screaming, "Surrender? Surrender!?! You think this letter on my head stands for France?"<sup>152</sup>

Such emotion at the thought of surrender spoke to the zealous nationalist belief that defeat is only possible "if America lacks the moral

stamina and courage to hold to its zealous values."<sup>153</sup> The line was arguably the most famous piece of writing to come out of the comic, and its sentiment echoed into the regular Marvel Universe. A little more than a year after the France line was delivered, regular Captain America reminisced about his time in France during World War II and the bravery he witnessed on behalf of the French citizens, claiming, "That's why it really galls me when I hear my own people dismissing the French as cowards. We're talking about a people who never gave up fighting...their country may have surrendered, but

<sup>152</sup> Mark Millar and Bryan Hitch, "Persons of Mass Destruction," *The Ultimates* no.12 (2003): 24.

<sup>153</sup> Jewett, *The Captain America Complex*, 230.

they didn't.”<sup>154</sup> Ultimate Cap was expressing the sentiment of a country in the grips of “freedom fries” and “freedom toast,” but regular Cap’s memory extended beyond the events of 9/11 to a time when the French were allies and friends of the American people.

Beyond this tendency to not accept people from a cultural milieu different than his own, Ultimate Cap also employed lethal violence and aggressive foreign policy, two actions regular Captain America would never commit. The most striking aspect of Ultimate Cap’s willingness to be deployed as a weapon is his regular counterpart’s absolute refusal to do so. The storyline from the 1980s involving John Walker is a useful example of one extreme, showing Captain America resign rather than be a tool of the government. *The Ultimates*, beginning with its second volume in 2004, showed the other extreme, a zealous willingness to be sent into hostile foreign territory as a weapon. Resolving conflicts in the Middle East was “merely a matter of allowing righteous, heroic zeal do its work.”<sup>155</sup> In the first issue of volume two, Ultimate Captain America was dropped into Northern Iraq to free a group of hostages held captive by “rebels,” and the tactics employed were extremely violent: in one panel, the Captain twisted a man’s head around, presumably snapping his neck, while kicking two men in their faces.<sup>156</sup> Blood flew, explosions caused by Cap’s grenades knocked people off their feet, and a level of extreme violence reminiscent, ironically, of *Rambo* or *Commando* tore the cityscape apart. One theme of *The Ultimates* was the level of discomfort displayed by other countries at the United States’ use of superhumans (or Persons of Mass Destruction) as

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<sup>154</sup> Ed Brubaker and Steve Epting, “Out of Time,” *Captain America* vol.5, no.3 (2005): 17.

<sup>155</sup> John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 341.

<sup>156</sup> Mark Millar and Bryan Hitch, “Gods and Monsters,” *Ultimates 2*, no.1 (2005): 4.

peacekeepers in hostile foreign nations. In the real world, the basic sentiment was echoed by the world as America's commitment to international law eroded in the wake of 9/11.<sup>157</sup> Ultimate Cap's violent actions in the Middle East represented zealous nationalism's "triumph over our commitment to coexist under law."<sup>158</sup>

The sanctity of life, a grandiose topic on its own, was related to another huge matter of concern for Americans following 9/11: due process and the rights of combatants captured by the United States. Regular Captain America addressed the topic directly in one storyline in which he was asked to serve on a military tribunal for a U.S. citizen of Iranian descent being held in Guantanamo Bay. The reason for his presence on the tribunal was because people trusted him. As one general said, "If you're on the tribunal, Rogers, people will know Hedayat's gotten a fair shake. It's that simple."<sup>159</sup> Later, when Captain America traveled to Guantanamo, he was paraded in front of prisoners while they were praying. Uncomfortable with being used in such a manner, he reminded the commanding officer of the base, "it's not in my orders to intimidate prisoners of war during their prayer services."<sup>160</sup> The writers of the regular Captain America were conveying his status as a symbol for justice, as evidenced by his reputation for fairness and tendency to view prisoners of war with respect and diplomacy. Captain America's respect for prisoners reflected Secretary of State Colin Powell's advocacy in the years following America's entry into the War on Terror that captured terrorists be

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<sup>157</sup> Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 319.

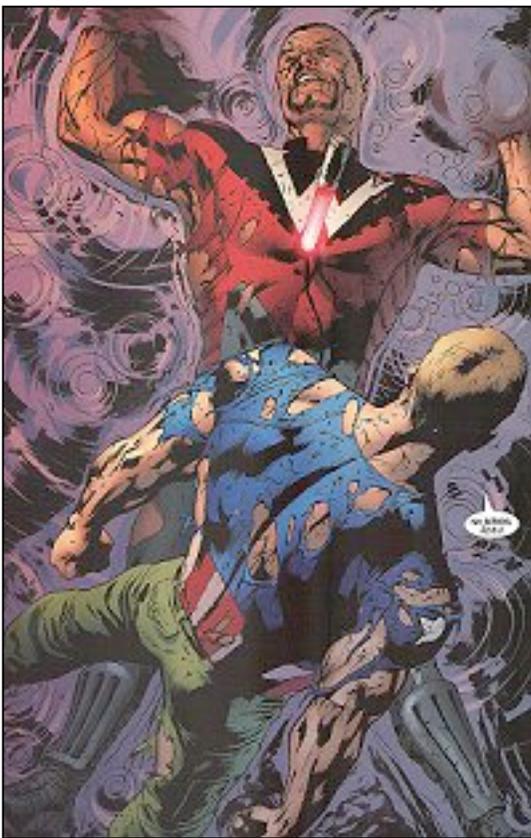
<sup>158</sup> Ibid, 320.

<sup>159</sup> Robert Morales and Chris Bachalo, "Homeland, pt.1," *Captain America* vol.4, no.21 (2004): 21.

<sup>160</sup> Morales and Bachalo, "Homeland, pt.2," *Captain America* vol.4, no.22 (2004): 12.

treated as POWs. Powell's position was more prophetically realistic than his superior's, as both President Bush and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld took the position that captured "unlawful combatants" are not POWs and therefore not subject to treatment as such.<sup>161</sup> Regular Captain America's progressive belief that justice came from individual rights was therefore in direct opposition to the leader of the United States. Over in the Ultimate universe, however, the same could not be said.

Ultimate Captain America's respect for enemies was practically nonexistent, and



**Figure 13:** Ultimate Cap stands over the body of the unarmed, defenseless man he just stabbed in the chest.

due process never seemed to occur to him during his confrontation with the villain at the conclusion of *Ultimates 2*. The bad guy in question was a notable political allegory for victims of real-life American foreign policy, a youth from the Middle East who was displaced when the Ultimates invaded his country and toppled his government. Volunteering for a procedure that would make him a sort of Middle Eastern Captain America, the boy renamed himself "the Colonel." He and a team of super soldiers from "Axis of Evil" countries invaded America in retribution for the Ultimates' aggressive takeover of any country that disagreed with them. As the two fought in the penultimate issue, Captain America told the Colonel to give up. The Colonel asked, "...why... so you can

<sup>161</sup> Jewett and Lawrence, *Crusade Against Evil*, 321.

humiliate me and execute me in front of your fellow officers?” “Don’t be ridiculous,” Cap responded, “That’s not the way we do things in this country.”<sup>162</sup> If he had stopped there, Ultimate Captain America would have been living up to regular Cap’s character, but instead the climactic fight between the Colonel and the Captain ended with the former’s hands being amputated by Captain America’s shield. Lying in a pool of water and his own blood, the Colonel asked, “Do you even appreciate why we did this thing?” Captain America’s response this time was to stab the literally unarmed man in the chest with his own weapon. Despite denying accusations that Americans unlawfully mistreat and execute their POWs, Ultimate Cap did those very things.

Amidst all of the turmoil wrought by the two different Captain Americas, Marvel began publishing a seven issue miniseries set in the regular universe that would have profound implications on that world’s Cap. The series was called *Civil War*, and Mark Millar, the same scripter of *The Ultimates*, wrote it. Bringing his trademark political allegory to the pages of this story, Millar’s *Civil War* dealt with a law called the Superhuman Registration Act, which required any superhero to reveal his or her identity to the government and register to be part of S.H.I.E.L.D. The law drove a wedge down the middle of the superhero community, leading to a pro-registration side led by Iron Man and an anti-registration side led by Captain America. Cap’s tendency to disobey the government’s orders when he found them unconscionable was a focal element of the story, and Millar framed the argument in terms of security versus civil rights.

At roughly the same time, Marvel was now publishing one Captain America who doggedly followed orders in *The Ultimates*, and one Captain America who refused to

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<sup>162</sup> Mark Millar and Bryan Hitch, “The Avengers,” *The Ultimates 2* no.12 (2006): 15.

submit to the same type of control as his Ultimate counterpart. However, before he could become as zealously anti-government as his doubles were zealously militaristic, regular Captain America surrendered when he saw the damage his war was causing. At the end of the final battle, when told by his fellow anti-registration fighters that they were winning, Cap responded, “Everything except the argument...stand down, troops. That’s an order.”<sup>163</sup> Unlike his Ultimate counterpart, who saw surrender as the definitive act of moral weakness, regular Cap understood that to become a zealot would only hurt more people. Surrender for regular Captain America was not an act of cowardice, it was an act of courage in the face of an increasingly grim reality.

Of course, the ending of *Civil War* was not the final nail in regular Captain America’s coffin. That fateful event happened in the *Captain America* issue directly following Cap’s surrender to pro-registration forces. While walking into the courthouse to be arraigned for his part in the conflict, Steve Rogers was gunned down. The symbolism was pretty heavy, as the embodiment of the prophetic realist ideal of equality, justice, and freedom was assassinated on the steps of a court of law and order. The message seemed to be that in an age of Guantanamo Bay, the Patriot Act, two simultaneous wars against nebulous foes, and the popularity of a zealous double who embodied all of the above, the prophetic ideal could not sustain itself anymore. It died in the view of an institution meant to uphold it, but which was now quietly approving of the renewed zealous nationalist reality.

Regular Cap was eventually replaced in his own universe, but his replacement carried a gun in addition to the shield. When explaining the decision to make the new

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<sup>163</sup> Mark Millar and Steve McNiven, *Civil War*, no.7 (2007): 20.

Cap closer in tone to his Ultimate counterpart, writer Ed Brubaker explained, “This isn’t the same Cap you’ve been reading about. This isn’t Steve Rogers.”<sup>164</sup> It really wasn’t Steve Rogers – that character existed now only in the Ultimate universe as a champion of the zealous nationalist ideology. When he was created in 1941, regular Steve Rogers’ status as the “real” Captain America was cemented by his being the only man to ever successfully receive the super soldier serum. He had been the “real” Captain America for more than sixty years, serving forty-four of those years as a prophetic realist. For the first time in Marvel’s history, there was no more “real” Captain America. He was dead, and the only men standing to fill his costume were doubles.



**Figure 14:** Captain America is gunned down on his way to face charges for his role in the Civil War.

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<sup>164</sup> Ed Brubaker, interviewed by David Betancourt, *The Seattle Times*, October 21<sup>st</sup>, 2007.

## Conclusion

Since his inception in 1941, Captain America has been a symbol for America, just not the *whole* America. His connection to World War II always tied Cap with a moment in American history when two warring ideologies were able to coexist in an uneasy, tenuous alliance. Regardless, there has never been a moment in which Captain America represented the entirety of the country. Even in the early years of ideological disjunction, as Jewett called it, Captain America left many Americans out of the conception of American identity. When the ideologies were split after World War II and Captain America was made to represent just one, the dilemma of representation became even greater. As noble a character as Captain America is, he has always been an imperfect symbol of American identity.

Marvel's doubles for Captain America have filled the gap of representation by allowing a second individual who, dressed similarly or identically to Captain America, stood for the other America that Steve Rogers did not stand for. The whole system of using doubles provides an interesting picture of America: a country so vast, so diverse, and often so torn, that no one person can be its sole icon. In a nation whose defining characteristic may well be pluralism, it is fitting that multiple Captains of America should be the representatives of thought, ideology, and demography.

From the appearance of Fifties Cap in the revisionist storyline from 1972, through to John Walker's tenure as Captain America and eventually as USAgent, into Ultimate Captain America's existence in his own separate universe, Marvel has consistently provided an alternate view to the real Steve Rogers' prophetic realist viewpoint. Zealous nationalism, though distasteful to many (including Robert Jewett, who wrote so

extensively on the subject), is as much a part of this nation's fabric as dissent and rebellion are. It is not inherently evil, as Fifties Cap was shown to be. The message of Captain America's doubles is that we must grapple with "the paradox of zeal, namely, that when it takes itself with ultimate seriousness or betrays its impulse with apathy, it sickens and becomes destructive."<sup>165</sup> The presence of both ideologies is of utmost importance in American civil thought, and it is their struggle with each other that provides the dialogue that is American identity.

Over the years, the national spirit has shifted, and Captain America and his doubles have consistently been there to explain what the shift has meant. The "contest to define reality"<sup>166</sup> has played out on the pages of Marvel comics for decades now, with a general trend towards zealous nationalism being the dominant result. The overall popularity of Ultimate Captain America and John Walker show that many readers want an orthodox Captain America. Moreover, the death of Captain America in 2007 served as a sign that America was ready for a new conception of what the "real" Cap was.

However, Captain America's death was not the cynical, nihilistic work that many readers saw it as being. Cap's death was the culmination of prophetic realism, it allowed Steve Rogers to achieve an ascendancy into the realm of mythic figures, following the way of a peaceful ideology as so many had before:

This is the way for the audacious and the large in spirit, who can live without idols and face an uncertain future unafraid. It is for those who dare coexist with all sorts and conditions of men. They who follow it will be thrust out into the no-man's-land between the rigid fronts of zealous conflicts, out where the wounded

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<sup>165</sup> Robert Jewett, *The Captain America Complex* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1973), 112.

<sup>166</sup> James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), 226.

are, the shell-shocked and the lost. Their impulses of creative love will draw them into the prisons and the ghettos, onto the streets and the way stations, even into the lands that have been ravaged by our crusades... they will seek and save victims as well as the violent ones, not by pious admonitions or zealous evangelism, but by the sort of unconditional acceptance they themselves have received. Many of them will perish in the times ahead, victims of hatred and suspicion. But their work will redeem, even as they forgive their executioners and pray for the lynching mobs. They stand in a great and noble company...<sup>167</sup>

Captain America's death was not the end of prophetic realism, simply its apotheosis.

Interestingly, though, without the original Captain America around, there is now a lack of representation for the prophetic realists. The tables have turned, and now America is once again without equal representation. Eventually, the pendulum may swing back in favor of prophetic realism, necessitating the presence of a prophetic realist double. And in the world of comic books, anything is possible - while Cap's sacrifice at the end of *Civil War* was indeed noble and laid the groundwork for a storyline questioning America's increased reliance on zealous nationalism, death is one of the most impermanent forces in the Marvel universe. Many fans wonder if the day will come when the "real" Steve Rogers might return to the world of the living to fight for prophetic realism once more. On that day, would he be the double of the "real" zealous nationalist Captain America? It is a matter for the next generation of Marvel writers to decide.

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<sup>167</sup> Jewett, 213-214.

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