Written in Red, White, and Blue:
A Comparison of Comic Book Propaganda
from World War II and September 11

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> The Shield, G-Man Extraordinary . . . is as much a symbol of loyalty and patriotism as the American Flag itself . . . What is the meaning of the Shield? How did he come to acquire his super human powers? Why does he devote his ideals to our American government? This story is the answer . . .. (Novick 67)

> It doesn't matter where you thought you were going today. You're part of the bomb now. And somewhere in the world a handful of men with famished eyes sit around a radio or a telephone. Twenty minutes, four thousand murders later, they praise God for the blood that stains their hands. Oh God, how could this happen here? We've got to be strong—stronger than we've ever been. If we lose hope here, bury our faith in this darkness, then nothing else matters. (Cassaday and Rieber 1–5)

> You've got to be taught to be afraid/of people whose eyes are oddly made/and people whose skin is a diff'rent shade/you've got to be carefully taught. You've got to be taught before it's too late/before you are six or seven or eight/to hate all the people your relatives hate/ you've got to be carefully taught. (Rodgers and Hammerstein, *South Pacific*)

THE ATTACK ON THE WORLD TRADE CENTER TOWERS ON SEPTEMBER 11, 2001 was instantly compared with another direct attack on U.S. soil: the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. While these two events brought immediate comparison, they also

had monumental differences. Television programming allowed for the constant stream of immediate images and speculation (directed at adults), while those media that relied on print were at a loss. Should anything be said? What can be done to help assuage the feelings of anger and fear? One such attempt to take an entertainment media and have it respond was when Marvel Comic Books halted its suggested story line for the *Amazing Spider-Man #36*, and rewrote it. Gone were the normal villains and superhero story lines. Instead was a story of how Spiderman could not deal with the event, and how he could not prevent it. The *Amazing Spider-Man #36* featured an all black cover, save for the title (Straczynski and Romita 1–10). It was the first of the medium of comic books that dealt with the emotions surrounding the 9/11 attacks. While that particular issue, and the subsequent issues that honored the firefighters of New York were put to publication, the basic fears, hopes, and characters associated with comic books remained. Characters that had been around for several decades were given new direction toward the war on terrorism.

While the issues of 9/11 became tangible to younger viewers, the use of comic books as a form of propaganda has been around much longer. Comic books in the twenty-first century were able to react within weeks to send out a message of support. The comics of World War II were slower but more effective in showing the enemies of the United States through stereotypes, story lines, and characters. The writers and artists of the World War II era comics actively called for a United States intervention in the war, and were ardent in their support once the United States did become involved. This article looks at the development of comics as a way for private citizens to show their support of the country, call for intervention, and either reinforce or remove stereotypes. While the definition of propaganda is associated with government groups, in the case of comic books, the form of propaganda was to simply promote a viewpoint. For the writers, this viewpoint was the support of the United States and the vilification of the enemies of the United States.

Active Calls for US Entry into the War

As the threat of war in Europe turned into reality in 1939, comics in the United States incorporated the real villains into story lines. The villains in the books had exotic names and came from strange yet

familiar locales, but adults recognized the true origins. For example in *Shield* #5 (June 1941), the enemies of the Shield were depicted as wearing monocles, neatly trimmed facial hair, and coming from places such as Mosconia. The visual references (as well as the speech balloons, which proclaimed nationality in such phrases as "Den ve haff lost notting except de lives of some vorthless Americans") are clearly identified as German references, while Mosconia is a thinly veiled reference to Moscow and the impending Communist threat (Novick 55).

The manner in which these "Mosconians" were drawn relied upon the stereotypes of the Germans from the age of the Kaiser during World War I: arrogant, aristocratic (represented by the monocle), and malicious toward anyone not of their background. For other comic books, the Japanese and Africans were presented in far baser stereotypes. The Africans appeared with oversized lips and a general inclination toward simple spoken phrases (this "simpleton's" way of thinking was a direct result of the concept of "white man's burden" which served as the basis of imperialism, as well as the fictionalized life in the African jungle) (Eisner and Cuidera 23–28; Hoganson 54, 202). For Asians, the combined lack of cultural knowledge by American writers and preconceived stereotypes gave an evil appearance to all Asians, particularly the Japanese. Part of this demonization of the Japanese came from political issues of the day: the invasion of Manchuria in 1931, the invasion of China in 1937, the reports of the fighting in Shanghai, the rape of Nanjing, the sinking of the *USS Panay* in late 1937, and the Japanese rejection of the League of Nations (Dower 48). The Japanese looked like this: buck teeth, thick glasses, rat-like facial features, and a general tone of underlying treachery. For instance in *Captain America* #5 (August 1941) the reader is introduced to "Captain Okada, the Oriental Master of Evil." He is seen as refined in his manners (perhaps educated in the West, like Admiral Yamamoto?), but at the same time is more than willing to incorporate any form of torture, including that of innocent women (in this particular case, the daughter of a captured U.S. Navy Commander). The story line was complete with references to evil, noting "sinister looking Orientals" as well as comments such as "This (torture) is mild compared to the other tortures in store for her" (Simon and Kirby, Vol. 2, 5–10).

Little distinction was made between the 1930s and 1940s to separate any kind of Asiatic peoples. In another *Captain America* issue (#6, September 1941), a sinister enemy known as "Fang: Arch-fiend of the

Orient" was introduced. Although the artwork in the issue is done to show these particular Asians as Chinese (pigtails, short skull caps, and long flowing red robes), the underlying tone once again was that all Asian groups were in some sort of collusion to dominate the East, if not the entire world (Simon and Kirby, Vol. 2, 1–3). Although at first these stereotyped villains were rare (Asians only appeared three times—out of thirty-five—in the first ten issues of *Captain America*), they continued. As World War II progressed and the fighting in the Pacific became deadlier, the stereotypes increased.

These examples served as a way of portraying villains to relay complex political issues to all social and educational groups from young children to adults. Youth, especially younger people who are formulating ideas (and are the basis for marketing of comic books), needed to be given these characterizations and the subtle stereotypes, so that when the time came children would help in the war effort (Simon and Kirby, Vol. 2, 172).

For comic book depictions of the enemy, the image of what Americans were fighting for was just as important. The women depicted in comic books were variations of the Betty Grable pin-up. They were thin, attractive, and were easily applied to the victim role in the manly cartoons of the day. The men were handsome, and featured the best qualities in Americans: strong, broad shoulders, chiseled features, and a superior knowledge of science and technology. More importantly, the American hero in the comic book was unwilling to use that technology for any sort of immoral or illegal act. This was in stark contrast to the depiction of the enemies of the United States, who were willing to use any means at their disposal for the conquest of the world. Anyone seen as inferior to either the white American male or to the stereotypical Germans (or in some cases, Japanese) who were attempting to dominate them was factored into the formula of those whom the United States needed to fight for and, by extension, protect. This attitude of the noble American was not unlike the British heroic figure, which often appeared in the literature of the Imperial Age in England (Hoganson 67).

On the whole, artists and writers were unlike most Americans, in that they were in favor of American intervention. Many of the comic book writers were of Jewish background, and during the 1930s often had superheroes such as Superman, Batman, and the Green Lantern take on unscrupulous corporate profiteers. The transition of these superheroes to fight for a higher moral standard was a natural progression (Feiffer 24–26; Wright 11). Most difficult for people to

comprehend is the pro-intervention stance taken by Theodore Geisel, better known as Dr. Seuss. While Geisel's real fame came in the 1950s, his first children's book *Horton Lays an Egg* was written in 1940. As with the comic books, Geisel portrayed the enemies of the United States in caricature form: the Nazis were bumbling and aristocratic, the Italians monetarily poor and manipulated, and the Japanese as buzzard-like and treacherous. Geisel later took the characters honed in *PM* magazine and *Horton* and put them to use in a new format, marketing animated shorts in conjunction with Disney and Warner Brothers Studios which became training films for the US army. These films featured a soldier named Private Snafu (SNAFU is US army parlance for *S*ituation *N*ormal *A*ll *F*ouled *U*p). The children's medium of cartoons was used in a light-hearted manner to teach soldiers what not to do in combat so that they might live (Minear and Geisel 1–4).

By the time the United States had become embroiled in full-scale fighting in 1942, the comics pushed for an Allied effort. The comic books endorsed the efforts of the British and the Poles, especially after the Battle of Britain. It was from this battle that the comic character Blackhawk emerged (Eisner and Cuidera 1–16). In fact, *Blackhawk* in part was created from the studio of Will Eisner, who is considered one of the Founding Fathers of the comic book industry. Eisner and many other artists including Joe Simon, Jack Kirby, and Reed Crandall endorsed the concept of bringing superheroes into the war effort when the United States finally entered. Many writers quickly joined the War Writers Board (WWB) which was established to promote government policy as well as discourage profiteering (Howell 795, 798). While the WWB was a private organization, it quickly joined forces with the Office of War Information (OWI). Headed by Elmer Davis, the OWI returned to its main purpose of coordinating all media for the war effort (Winkler 45).

The OWI wanted to give people details of the war, but at the same time prevented discouraging images or concepts that could demoralize the American people. While movies and cartoons for adults remained upbeat and patriotic, comic books did the same, but in a more obvious format. The comics were meant to give children hope in the outcome of the war, a bit of escape from the actual events, and a sense of contributing to the effort through calls in the comic books for scrap paper, metal, war bonds, or other related rallies, as well as to remain vigilant against enemy spy rings.

Characters and the Actions of Heroes

One of the most notable features of these wartime superheroes was that they had a tangible connection to the United States: namely some sort of red, white, and blue in their uniform. While the soldier took to the battlefield in greens and khakis and sought cover for concealment, the superhero went into battle fully emblazoned in color, so that his enemy might be shaken. (Surely only an invincible person would do something so brazen!) The writers and artists had to walk a fine line in how they portrayed these characters and how they showed them fighting the enemy. If a character was too successful at a time when the war was going against the United States, sales went down and people became demoralized. If the superhero did nothing but fight imaginary, non-threatening foes (such as domestic criminals), then the heroes were not doing their part for the war effort. This balancing act became even more pronounced when women entered the defense-related workforce and the comic book field as well.

The first truly patriotic character introduced to U.S. audiences appeared in January of 1940. It was not the character most associated with patriotism of the time (Captain America) but was in fact a character named Joe Higgins, who became the Shield. The Shield and Captain America were similar in that their costumes were of red, white, and blue. The Shield character was interesting in how he developed, as well as for whom he worked. In *Shield* #5 (May 1940) the readers were introduced to the origins of the superhero. The younger Higgins was forced to deal with the cruelties of life when saboteurs killed his father, who served in army intelligence during World War I. The villains made the elder's death look like dereliction of duty. Young Joe was taken aside and comforted by J. Edgar Hoover, who believed in the elder Higgins's innocence. Young Joe experimented with chemicals and, by happenstance, became empowered with superhuman capabilities. These powers first allow the Shield to find his father's killer, and afterward allow him to become a force controlled by the newly created FBI, by the only person who knows the Shield's true origin: Hoover himself (Novick 67–75).

The story allowed juveniles to associate real people from the papers (Hoover) with the fantasy that they wanted. For adults, the setup of the character reflected two important aspects of the day: the FBI in its counter-intelligence role (hence the references to the Mosconian

threat, which was related to the Communist threats of the day) and the aspect of science reflecting the creation of the superhuman. The concept of eugenics was known of and to an extent practiced in the United States as well as in Europe. Some scientific circles in the U.S. noted that through science, all could have a better life and that everyone would be a productive member. The eugenics program was also seen as a way to correct for genetic predispositions such as mental retardation, criminal deviancies, and other problems (Quinn 34–43).

For the Shield, the villains that he encountered were often hybrids of real threats: specifically German spies (by 1940 reflecting the conflict in Europe), the criminal element (especially those criminals that threatened war production, or resulted in profiteering), and the perceived threats from groups like the Mosconians who attempted to bring war to the shores of the United States. One of the more notable aspects of the Shield issues was that most villains were of European ancestry. One possible explanation for this might be that the United States simply did not consider the Japanese incursions abroad to be an immediate threat to the United States.

The second character introduced thematically into the war comics was Blackhawk, who appeared in *Military Comics #1* in August 1941. Blackhawk's origins were directly tied to the beginning of World War II. In the inaugural issue, Blackhawk was a Pole fighting the merciless Germans in September 1939. Once again the comic had all of the classic stereotypes: the sneering, aristocratic German officer, who not only shot down all of Blackhawk's friends, but then strafed and killed Blackhawk's family as well; the obligatory blonde nurse (of English origin, but with no name), who serves as the rationale for a final showdown with the Evil German (in this case, named Von Tepp); and a gallery of misfits and outcasts who join this all-star fighting force. Toward the end of the first issue, Blackhawk lands his plane to engage Von Tepp in single combat just as the Germans are to execute the English nurse and a member of the Blackhawk flyers. The hero wears a fitted black uniform (very different from the red, white, and blue, or for that matter, the standard US military uniform of the day) and shoots the gun from Von Tepp's hand *à la* a Saturday morning Tom Mix western (Eisner and Cuidera 2–11). Blackhawk's squadron even had a theme song of sorts: "Over land over sea, we fight to make men free, of danger we don't care, we're Blackhawks" (6). Later on, Blackhawk's origins were later changed to fit an immigrant to the United States, or

even US heritage, but at the time of its beginnings the comic book was written to be as inclusive as possible.

Blackhawk represented what Lary May referred to as a subversive character in World War II films. In this case, character development is the same between comics and film. What made Blackhawk a subversive character was that he and his comrades were ne'er-do-wells that worked outside of society's conventions. When society needed people to uphold its virtues, then characters such as Blackhawk rose to the occasion and fought on the side of good for the larger community. Other characters such as the Shield and Captain America were referred to as conversive characters, in that they always were on the side of good. Regardless of how these characters reached their decision to fight on the behalf of the patriots of the United States, their place in the realm of heroes was ordained (Eisner and Cuidera 83–85).

Over the course of the war, several different characters emerged, each with some sort of patriotic duty and/or appearance. Some of the lesser known superheroes from this timeframe included Uncle Sam (as the name implied, he looked like the poster, and fought characters associated with the home front); the Boy Commandos (similar to Boy Scouts with guns); the Fin (a naval officer who donned a black wetsuit with a large fin on top); Citizen V (for Victory, who looked like a bellhop with a large "V" on his chest); the Sub-Mariner, a prince from the undersea kingdom of Atlantis who fought off German submarines from attacking the U.S. East Coast; the Patriot (a descendant of the patriots of the Revolutionary War, who invoked his ancestors to fight); and the Human Torch, who is actually a kind of robot. All of these characters came and went, and few received their own titles. Some characters, such as the Human Torch and the Sub-Mariner, were given their own titles once their popularity was assured, but most eventually met their demise (Simon and Lee 23–34).

Even the major characters became involved in the war effort. But given the problem of doing too much in the make-believe war effort versus the real war effort, clever substitutions were introduced. The most notable "escape clause" centered on Superman. Clark Kent desperately wanted to enter service following the attack on Pearl Harbor. The writers were worried that children would place too much hope on Superman solving the conflict and so devised a careful premise. When Kent/Superman went for his army induction physical, he was so anxious to pass that he read the eye chart in the next room. The examining

doctor concluded that Kent was as blind as a bat and therefore was deemed 4F, physically unfit for military service. This allowed Kent to fight the war effort, but on the home front (Wright 43).

The fear of spies in America was a contributing factor for many of the comic book story lines. The spy in history has always been seen as underhanded, treacherous, and almost omnipresent. While the reality in the United States was not as bad as the popular press made it out to be, the threat was such that writers could work in story lines. Two characters that were written to appeal to girls, as well as the home front spy busters, were Miss Fury and Wonder Woman. Miss Fury was interesting to the war effort in two respects. First, Taupe Mills created her, in April 1941. Ms. Mills was a rarity in the comics field, as men dominated the market. Her comic character Miss Fury dealt with Nazi spies from around the globe. Her chief nemesis was the Baroness Elsa von Kampf, a German aristocrat who had a swastika branded upon her forehead. The symbology of the Baroness' appearance was interesting. She looked like a striking blonde, but the swastika showed her true allegiance. In addition, Mills took issue with the German concepts of titled nobility (the Baroness lacked nothing, due to her status, while Miss Fury came from the masses in typical American fashion), as well as the warlike nature of the Germans. This later concept was notably handled by the Baroness' name von Kampf which is German for struggle or, by loose extension, war (Robbins 58–60).

Wonder Woman, created by William Marston and artist Harry G. Peter in December 1941, had the patriotic symbols incorporated into her costume, but her attempts to take on the Nazis or Japanese directly were limited. *Wonder Woman* dealt more with domestic criminals and spies inside the United States rather than engaging in combat directly with America's enemies. The possibility of women in combat, even comic book ones, was difficult for readers to grasp. There are some historians who feel that Wonder Woman was significant, the first major female character in a boy's realm. However, later moralists saw Wonder Woman as a variation of the dominatrix, as she tied up men with her magic lasso, and was often physically assaulted by Amazons. For the war effort, however, she encouraged both boys and girls to do their part (such as to collect scrap metal and be vigilant), as did all other comic heroes (Sabin 86–88).

The most famous of the patriotically clad superheroes, and the one that has lasted, is Captain America. Introduced to readers in 1941

(a year after the Shield), Captain America sought to fight the enemies of the United States directly, both at home and abroad. Several themes that were introduced in earlier comics once again were used by comic legends Joe Simon and Jack Kirby: a physically unfit man by the name of Steve Rogers is given an opportunity to serve as an experiment for Professor Reinstein (a German exile, and a play on Albert Einstein). Reinstein's formula worked and built Rogers into a superman who could do incredible physical things. Before an army of enhanced men could be created, Nazi spies kill Reinstein. When Reinstein dies, so too does the formula. Reinstein christens Rogers Captain America before he dies, so the name and the mission stuck (Simon and Kirby, Vol. 1, 1–10). This use of a super serum was similar to the eugenics issues brought up when the Shield was created, and also harkened back to the get-fit-quick ads touted by such 1930s ads as those from Charles Atlas.

What also made Captain America different than his previously mentioned predecessors was that he had a sidekick in the form of twelve-year-old Bucky Barnes. This gave readers (who were often around the same age) a chance to insert themselves into the action presented in the comic book. As with earlier issues, Captain America took on the stereotypical villains, as well as some of the more bizarre ones. Included in this latter category were Giant Asian zombies, Ivan the Terrible, and other foreign criminals. Most of the villains in these issues were related to the war. In many of the covers of the first ten issues, Captain America is seen exacting justice (in the form of beating fists) on Hitler, various storm troopers, or some other sort of military regime (Simon and Kirby, Vol. 1). What is striking about many of these issues is the violence. Many of the supporters of the good guys are found shot through the eyes, stabbed, or tortured, and it is up to the superheroes to either rescue the victims or avenge their deaths.

The most prominent enemy of Captain America also came from a super-serum experiment. Dubbed the Red Skull (perhaps underlining the inability of the American populace to distinguish between Nazis and Communists?), Baron von Skull exhibited the classic character-istics of any villain; he was cunning, psychopathic, and malicious. Whereas Captain America's formula only enhanced his abilities, the Skull's serum made him mentally unbalanced to a malevolent extent. At the end of the war, the Red Skull kept his Nazi origins, but became

a criminal mastermind that controlled a vast empire around the world. Once again, this reflected the fear of the day that the key Nazis had escaped, and that the Red threat of Communism had re-emerged.

While the comic books of the 1950s reflected these new fears, the characters themselves were retired. One of the reasons for the value of comic books from the 1940s was that following publication of Dr. Frederic Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* (1955), in which Wertham blamed many of society's ills on the widespread popularity of comic books, especially the Entertaining Comics line (run by *Max*, and later *MAD*, magazine publisher William Gaines). Many comic books were burnt in public displays, not unlike book burnings in Nazi Germany in the 1930s (Sabin 67–68).

By the end of World War II, the comic book had achieved its goal of creating support for the troops overseas as well as the goal of support for the U.S. government. As the nation shifted from the shooting of World War II to the intrigue of the Cold War, so too did the comic books. Many of the characters were given new assignments related to either corralling maniacal dictators or fighting the secret scourge of the Communists around the world.

Over the course of the 1950s, the characters most associated with the war were either retired, or readapted. The Shield was finally retired from comics in 1954 (Novick 2). Captain America, who fought alone after his kid sidekick Bucky was killed off in 1945, teamed up with other superheroes, the Avengers, and fought for American ideals. The role of defending America had changed by the time Vietnam was in full swing. However, Captain America did return to his primary, patriotic role by the start of the twenty-first century.

The Role of Comics Following 9/11

As with other media over the last sixty years, the comic book became more of a socially conscious forum for youth to learn adult themes. As the war in Vietnam consumed more energies of students, the characters themselves were brought into the aftermath of postwar angst. For example, when the 1960s character Spider-Man (created in 1964) was introduced, he soon had to deal with campus radicals, as well as veterans who had succumbed to drug habits (Wright 238). The comics did not necessarily have to deal with the issues of the larger world

around them. Any comics that attempted to be political in nature, such as Joe Sacco's *Palestine* (dealing with the occupation of the West Bank in Israel) and *Safe Zone Gorazde* (dealing with the UN in Bosnia), were limited in overall sales compared to the bigger comic titles such as *Superman*, *Spider-Man*, and *X-Men*.

The political nature of comics changed on September 11, 2001, when terrorists hijacked and then crashed aircraft into the twin towers of the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and a field in Pennsylvania. These events transfixed the United States, as the constant immediacy of TV had brought the images home for most Americans. While most media dealt with the adult market, the comic book writers, artists, and producers felt that they had to reach out and help as well. This need to help was due in no small part to two factors: most artists lived in Manhattan, and their creations should have been able to stop any sort of act like this. The first comic book to deal with the events of 9/11 came out less than three weeks after the event itself. *The Amazing Spider-Man #36* (October 2001) featured an all black cover, and inside showed the frustration of Americans concerning the attack. It also addressed the fact that, as in the World War II era comics, the super-heroes could not protect everyone as was originally thought. The characters also expressed the frustration of most Americans. But unlike the comics of World War II that depicted the enemies of the United States in base stereotypes, the comics from this event tried to be more even-handed (Straczynski and Romita 2–15).

The comics that followed *Amazing Spider-Man #36* depicted those "real life" superheroes, the men and women of the New York Fire and Police Departments. Four of the immediate anthologies released to help raise funds for the Red Cross all featured firefighters. The titles were either connected with the people (*Heroes, a Moment of Silence*), or the event (*9/11 Emergency Relief; 9/11 vols. 1 and 2*), and all featured a depiction of a fireman or other heroic person on the cover. The anthologies often dealt with the emotions surrounding the attack, the coverage on TV, or the experiences of the writers themselves. The interesting aspect of these issues was that the response and physical production was fast (within weeks), when one realizes that these pub-lications are often created months in advance. The characters often called for tolerance of ethnic groups that lived in the United States, especially Arab-Americans. This treatment was in stark contrast to the treatment given to groups in World War II.

Several vignettes from each of the *9/11* anthologies tried to deal with the increased role of hatred and actually attempted to deal with these emotions with a rational response. For example, in Geoff Johns and David Goyer's vignette "A Burning Hate," published in *9/11 vol. 2*, children tried to deal with their outpouring of hatred for all Arabs following the attacks. One child verbally attacked an Arab child for reading Superman and stated, "Superman isn't one of yours. He's American." The Arab boy then pointed out that Superman was from another world, and really was fighting for an ideal that all families had immigrated to America to obtain (189–94). This distinction of hatred for terrorist groups from all Arabs was an aspect of the comics that was sorely lacking in World War II comics. An underlying frustration and even hatred of religious zealots of all stripes, and a greater need for tolerance by all was a key to the story lines. In fact, the one character that was created for battle against America's enemies, Captain America, returned for his "original purpose."

Captain America was restarted by Marvel (its original publisher in the 1940s) and was given his "marching orders" in the first issue of the new line. The first writers of the new line, John Ney Rieber and John Cassaday, were bringing Captain America back before the attacks. But, following the events of 9/11, they wrote the first five issues (a prequel of sorts) to deal with the terrorists that threatened the American way of life (Cotton 50–54). Once again, Captain America also served to take on not the direct armies of the world but went after the "spy-like" combatants of the twenty-first century: terrorists, who fight with underhanded tactics, use innocent lives for their own purposes, and then blend into the background. Captain America, in the first issue of the new line, fought off skinheads who were threatening the life of an Arab-American merchant in New York, then made a point of noting that there has to be a distinction between those who look different, and those who think differently and wish to do the U.S. harm (Cassaday and Rieber 28–33).

Captain America even underwent a cosmetic change. In the winter of 2002, Captain America was brought into the *Ultimates* comic book. While this book dealt with the origins of Captain America, it presented him with a more traditional look: the red white, and blue were still there, but the mask covering his face was leather, and was further covered by a standard US military helmet with a large "A" printed upon it. His kit also contained military suspenders and belt, which led

the reader to assume that Captain America had a direct military connection to the unit around him (Millar and Hitch 17).

Other characters introduced in new comics were not as subtle. The first comics that came out following the attacks included *SPECWAR, Kill Box, Pete the P.O.ed Postal Worker—War Journal*, and, the most blatant of the lot, *Civilian Justice*. Each of these comics sought to deal with adolescent fantasies of hunting down and killing those responsible. In the first mentioned comic, *SPECWAR*, the characters are all members of the Navy SEALS (*S*ea, *A*ir, and *L*and warriors) who are all trained in specialized warfare (such as antiterrorist operations, etc.— hence the name of the comic). In the first issue, written before 9/11, the team dealt with a Middle Eastern terrorist who planned to detonate an atomic bomb in New York Harbor. The plot was thwarted, and the bad guys were killed. Once again, the violence is explicit and meets the need of the audience: to avenge New York (Lauria 2, 32).

The second comic to emerge following the attacks dealt with hunting down Osama bin Laden and took a nod from the patriotically dressed characters of World War II. The main character in *Civilian Justice* lost his girlfriend in the World Trade Center attack. The character exhibited the characteristics of classic comics as well as war films from the World War II era: a loner with a troubled past who rises up to avenge his family as well as the country that he appreciates only after an attack by cowardly fanatics. The character on the cover waves an American flag but inside runs the flagpole through a demonic-looking Osama bin Laden-esque figure. There was no subtlety here: it was simply what the audience asked for and was promised in the previews. Even the tone of the comic's audience is very direct. While the writer Craig Weich noted that the real terrorist attacks had defamed Islam, the opening lines of the comic book gave a different tone: "A new symbol of hope . . . A hero to help us vent our rage and frustration against terrorism of any kind. For he does not attack he defends . . . Be warned, as justice is coming" (1). This particular comic also tied in promotions involving the Internet, a resin mold company to sell the statues of the comics, and a small film studio to produce the live action version of the comic (34).

Other comic books dealt with events at home. Following a spate of anthrax attacks via the U.S. mail, one comic book sought to blame Osama bin Laden for the attacks. This comic, entitled *Pete the P.O.ed Postal Worker*, relied on stereotypes of the disgruntled postal worker of

the 1980s as well as the superhero who punishes the villain in a horrendous fashion. In this particular issue, Pete is given the task of delivering a letter from a small child to Osama bin Laden himself, asking why the terrorist leader attacked the United States, killing his uncle. Pete, in his usual, violent self, offers to deliver the letter. This comic is replete with many of the rumors about Osama that were generated by the Internet: Osama's pet goat (who was understood to be a sexual substitute for women), Osama's cross-dressing, the issue of Paradise and the virgins that await martyrs to bin Laden's cause, the issues of news channels that either tacitly or actively supported the Islamic cause, as well as the concept of defiling the Islamic faith by having bin Laden killed by wild pigs (a pig is considered unclean in Islamic culture, therefore death by being trampled and eaten by pigs would be a very disturbing event). As with the other titles mentioned, this particular issue would not be received well by the very young reader, as the jokes are of an adult nature. However, adolescents would get the humor, and no doubt would find this a fulfillment of some sort of revenge scenario. How such comics are effective as propaganda remains to be seen, as the three above examples are from smaller companies, with limited runs (usually no more than ten thousand, when popular titles from Marvel or DC can run at least a hundred thousand) (Meleton and Garcia 1, 3).

The last title of the military front is *Kill Box*, produced by Antarctic Press. This comic centers on a U.S. Abrams tank that is in the Iraqi desert. The reason for the tank being in Iraq focused on a war in the Middle East that was (presumably) to stop terrorist activities. The comic relies on base patriotic values ("If America does not go to war, war will go to America") and was somewhat prophetic, as the war with Iraq did, in fact, commence in March 2003, with the stated goal of removing a regime that supported terrorist activities (Denham 1). The main character was haunted by the ghost of his dead father (who died in the 1991 Gulf War), as well as the need to prove himself patriotically.

The comics of 9/11 that featured women were, unfortunately, very similar to those of the World War II era. Two of the notable entries into this set were *Shi: Through the Ashes*, and *United*. The former featured a character by the name of Shi, who was a cross between a kabuki theater actress and a martial arts champion. While there was some color on her outfit which might be associated with the American flag, on the

whole the character falls back on what readers expect to see of females drawn in comic books: skimpy outfits, augmented features (such as breast implants), and a usage of weapons to defeat enemies. The latter title *United* featured the characters Lady Death, Bad Kitty, and Chastity. The characters were able to handle themselves in fights, but unlike the male characters mentioned who took on terrorists directly, these female characters worked in a rescue capacity, helping those in need. The act of rescuing and taking care of the injured falls back to the stereotype of women as nurturing (Augustyn and Adrian 18, 20).

Many of the main comic book companies went with simpler, less overt samples of patriotism. Marvel introduced the Comic title *The Call* in the fall of 2002. Its purpose was to tie in the earlier 9/11 comic themes that centered on police (six issues), firefighters (six issues), and paramedics (four issues) from New York, and elevate them to a superhero status. While the original issues were realistic, the combined title, that linked all of the three separate themes, has gone into the realm of the mythic. On the whole, however, the desire for the comic book companies to relate their heroes to the greater conflict against terrorism has been effective. It allowed the comic industry to get its message out (whether its message is to support the United States, hate America's enemies, or find humor in serious situations).

Conclusion

The realm of children's propaganda has been a seldom discussed, but important, aspect of American life over the last sixty years. The comic book has served as a way to introduce the young reader to adult topics, and yet allow them to retain some sort of separation from reality. The comics have never been as direct, or effective, as advertising propaganda, but the ideology is still there. The impact of the comic has changed over the years. According to the New York Comic Book Museum, the average comic reader is twenty-four years old and has more than average disposable income (http://www.nyccomicbook museum.org). The audience aspect has had an impact on whom the comic is geared toward, and it is most likely not the perceived audience: children. However, as long as children take in the events around them, and animation in any form is perceived as a "children's" medium (and subsequently directed toward them), the comic book will serve as

an active way of teaching children to think. Whether or not it is for the betterment of humanity remains to be seen.

Postscript: In March 2003, just before the United States launched missile attacks against Iraq, Marvel sent its newest comic title to press. Titled *411*, the premise of the comic was to debunk stereotypes, and actually embrace the nonviolent traditions of Gandhi and Martin Luther King. What made this comic interesting in a propagandistic sense was that it did everything that the earlier comics did not: the theme was to show all characters (even enemies of the United States) as members of humanity. The key concept that the writers of *411* are trying to underscore is that people feel the same in all cultures, and that all should be willing to sacrifice anything that they have to for the concept of peaceful coexistence (Harris et al. 1–2). It was interesting that this concept should come from the same publishing line that produced the most patriotic of all propaganda comics, *Captain America*. The vignettes from the book contained radically different depictions of Israelis, Irish Catholics, and the Mujahadeen of Afghanistan, and how three different characters went against the cycle of violence for the betterment of their families and communities.

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