THE EVOLUTION OF A NATIONAL ICON

CAPTAIN AMERICA

J. RICHARD STEVENS

MASCULINITY, AND VIOLENCE

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To Peter, the little fan who continues to instruct me

J. Richard Stevens is an associate professor in the Department of Media Studies at the University of Colorado, Boulder. His research delves into the intersection of ideological formation and media message dissemination. This work comprises studies on how cultural messages are formed and passed through popular culture, how technology infrastructure affects the delivery of media messages, how communication technology policy is developed, and how media and technology platforms are changing American public discourse.

Preface

For some reason, whenever an author writes a book analyzing an aspect of popular culture, he or she inevitably precedes the work in question with an introduction that offers the reader a form of apology.

I'm not sure if this apology is for the benefit of the author or the reader. There exist certain stigmas around the consumption of popular culture that marginalize its study within the confines of academic inquiry. And yet how members of our culture play can be every bit as informative as how we work or what we create.[1]

Popular culture has long existed as a core component of Western societies. In his justification for the study of popular culture, John Storey links the emergence of European nationalisms to the emergence of popular culture.[2] Popular culture texts do not simply reflect the events of history; they typically create conformity while simultaneously depoliticizing a society's working class. At its heart, the struggle over popular culture is a struggle over meaning, a renegotiation of the significance of events or of the power of ideology in the public world. Because the superheroic version of the American monomyth (comprehensively discussed in chapter 2) emerged within a mass-media context, scholars have a tremendous opportunity to dissect its origins. By definition, mass culture reduces more complex ideology into simplistic themes and patterns for easier consumption by the working class.[3]

I came to this particular inquiry in a gradual way. As a young man, I had read Marvel comic books (as well as the occasional DC Comics title), and perhaps the largest proportion of what I read was *Captain America*. I cannot recall precisely what originally brought me to seek out the exploits of the star-spangled avenger, but I remember even as a youth struggling to

reconcile the Captain America of that contemporary age (the 1980s) with the Cap I found in back-issue copies I picked up from bargain bins and the long boxes in comic book stores. The Captain America of the 1980s experienced very different adventures from the Captain America of the 1960s and 1970s. "My" Cap dealt with much more individualized problems, whereas the back issues I read seemed to indicate a broader struggle against social problems, problems about which I was largely ignorant and less than enthused to read about between the covers of a comic book.

To my embarrassment, I remember looking at those past issues, published a few years before I was born, and thinking that because they engaged social issues such as race relations and sexism, they were somehow the antithesis of entertainment, within which my youthful mind considered education and advocacy inappropriate. But read them I did, and I confess those stories eventually did have some influence on my developing worldview. I did not, as a young man, think that racism was a contemporary problem. To my naïve mind, racism belonged in the history books under subtitles such as "American Slavery," "The American Civil War," and "The Emancipation Proclamation." I had a few African American friends, but I did not perceive any bias in myself or in my community against members of their race.

However, in the early 1970s Captain America had struggled rather explicitly with complex questions of race, with feminist critiques, and even with antiwar voices, so in the part of my mind that dreamed about other realities and possibilities, I acknowledged that, at least in the Marvel Universe, such problems existed.

It was not until I went to college and then on to graduate school to be trained in social science that I gained the intellectual tools necessary to think more critically about the world in which others live. Such is the plight of the white American male—or at least for some of us: it requires the ability to see beyond our own experiences, to consider the experiences of others, to understand how others see the world. Comic books and other forms of popular entertainment are vehicles for such considerations. Captain America did not open my eyes, but his struggles gave me a context in my fantasy world to consider alternative views of my world, a metaphor to

cling to as I began to see American culture as a series of overlapping social structures.

While in college, I stopped reading comic books to engage in more intellectual pursuits. I occasionally became roughly aware of the changes wrought on the comic book medium in the 1990s, though I wouldn't understand any of those events as significant until years later. My reintroduction to Captain America and comic books came during the Christmas season of 2003, when I was shopping for a gift for a young nephew. This endeavor led me into the local toy store, inside which I was struck by the amount and variety of Marvel Comics merchandise.

As I was checking out, I was confronted by a set of small, framed posters featuring Marvel characters. The posters presented the best-known heroes in classic poses, with an inspirational inscription below each. The Captain America version caught my eye. Beneath the classic depiction of Captain America appeared the word *Patriotism*, which was followed by a roughly reworked quote from President John F. Kennedy's 1961 inaugural address: "Wish our country well or ill, but know this . . . we will pay any price, bear any burden, and meet any hardship . . . to assure the survival of our freedom."

The poster drew a smirk. In the context of the still-young US war on terror, those words seemed to have an almost ironic meaning. I bought it, and over the next few days the juxtaposition of the original context of Kennedy's words and the poster continued to bother me. And then I became curious: How *had* Captain America responded to the events of September 11, 2001? Was he the calm and neutral hero I remembered from the 1980s, the one who often sought a relatively nonviolent solution to conflicts? Or had he returned to the jingoistic superpatriot I had occasionally come across from earlier eras of his publication history?

I visited a comic book store and encountered the cover of the trade hardback collecting the first six issues of the fourth volume of *Captain America*. The cover portrayed a dramatic nationalist image of Captain America reminiscent of World War II propaganda posters. Assuming that the jingoistic poster on the cover represented a shift toward blind support of the American war on terror, I purchased the trade and prepared to

watch my childhood hero betray the ideals I had come to associate with him. To my surprise, the storyline (written by John Ney Rieber) presented a sophisticated treatment of the relationship between overt nationalism, cultural imperialism, military might, and terrorism at a time when many such treatments were not available.

The Rieber storyline, one that involved Captain America confronting terrorism while simultaneously criticizing the US government for its role in fostering terrorism through its foreign policy, was eye-opening. I suddenly understood that this version of Captain America was radically different from the one that I had read about in my youth. And that, in turn, led me to wonder about other changes over time. More than ten years later this book is the result of that simple moment of curiosity.

Satisfying that curiosity would lead me down several different paths: thinking about patriotism and nationalism in American culture, looking at intersections of violence embedded in American mythology, conducting the kinds of counting and measurement activities consistent with social science, looking through the lenses of cultural theory, reading through fanzines of different eras, reading letter columns in the back of Captain America comic books, and finally bringing each of those instruments to bear on the questions of masculinity in American culture.

By learning more about Captain America and the writers and artists who created and continually re-created him as a cultural text, I began to see parallels with similar movements in other facets of American culture. Captain America, it turns out, has much to teach us about the ideals of American mythology—first and foremost, that such ideals are not nearly as static as seems to be generally presumed.

And so this book was intended to track the major moves in Captain America's evolution, to allow the text to make explicit what is too often implicit about American values (at least regarding how those values are expressed through a commercial commodity purposed with perpetually seeking consumer popularity).

This work has consumed a significant portion of my scholarly energy. I am forever indebted to so many people, probably most significantly the numerous friends who were subjected to late-night monologues as I sought to clarify my thinking by explaining why I was reading comic

books at work. In particular, I need to thank Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence. After coming across their series of books dealing with the American monomyth, which they convincingly argue is expressed in its purest forms through narratives involving superheroes, Western gunslingers, and 1980s action-movie figures, I contacted them with questions. Dr. Lawrence engaged with me in lengthy email discussions, nudging my thinking and even suggesting edits to my manuscript. Dr. Jewett met with me in a restaurant when he happened to be traveling through my area and critiqued an early draft of chapter 1. I disagree with each of them on certain points, which is what scholarship is all about, but their willingness to personally address my concerns proved invaluable.

And of course I must mention my research assistants' contributions over the years in editing my words and challenging my claims, most notably Christopher Bell and Shannon Sindorf. The staff at Syracuse University Press who handled and promoted my words deserve some special gratitude, in particular, Deborah Manion, Fred Wellner, Jennika Baines, and Mona Hamlin, along with freelance copyeditor Annie Barva. To that list, I should add the large number of friends and family who endured long discussions about this text over the years. In particular, Bryan Wade nudged me back into comics as a teenager. My youngest brother, Chuck, listened to me and contributed to long conversations that went through many a night. Carter Mullen often argued passionately with me about minutia in those ways brothers often do. Robert Foster pushed my intellectual boundaries around some of the related material in the first chapter. Friends such as Mark Huslig, Kelly and Christi Romeo, Jeff Stanglin, and Phillip Ratliff stoked the fires of my passions at various points. And Kimberly Donovan cheered me along over the final hurdles as I lurched toward completion. And of course my nephew Bradley Stevens, who helped inspire the original moment of curiosity.

But when it came time to dedicate the book, I had to dedicate it to my son. Peter, who is three years old as I write this preface, arrived at an interesting time. Comic books are often stereotypically considered the domain of children, but one of the surprises of my early parenting involved the stress associated with sorting through such texts and deciding which among them I felt comfortable bringing into my son's formative

experiences. To my delight and horror, Peter was strongly attracted to Captain America, along with other heroes such as Spider-Man. I found that few pressures like grandiose concerns about influencing the early life of a child can drive a scholar to critically examine the implicit messages of popular entertainment.

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Introduction

Sentinel of Liberty

On March 8, 2007, the *New York Times* ran as its featured book article a story on the assassination of Marvel Comics' Captain America.[1] The web version of the story appeared the evening before the printed edition and was briefly presented as the site's feature news story. Within minutes of the story's appearance, dozens of readers began to respond to it, including the following three examples:

> Capt. America dead? It is no wonder when Americans themselves think little of Americans.
>
> Capt. America might be dead, now, as also seems America—but, he should rise up, filled with hope, with pride, with the strength of the desire to live free as in 1776.
>
> Capt. America represents America in more ways than his ability to sell comic books. He fights with every man and woman in Iraq, against religious Islamic fascism. He fights with every New Yorker, looking to regain their lives in these last years since 9-11. He fights in the inner cities, in the farthest farm and in the most average suburb against those who would try to steal America's right to pray or not to pray, to say what they want to say—for the freedoms that make this country great.
>
> Get up, Capt. America. We need you now as much we needed you in 1941, when you fought for our fathers and grandfathers. Hitler is dead, but bin Laden lives on. Struggle to your feet, man. The fight is still worth fighting.

> I think this is the end. If you notice how it is becoming popular around the world to despise USA. this has been creeping into our own

population of passive Americans. I think that Marvel is throwing out this superhero because it is ashamed to be proud when everyone else is firing insults. We have forgotten the good which we stand up for. we are becmming wishy-washy europeanized country that can't stand up on it's own. we are afraid of saying we're great and ashamed of what we've done to help this world. THey killed Captain America in the Comic but our people of the USA are killing this great nation.

This is sick and unAmerican. What do the writers mean they new [sic] this was coming for a long time. In this world of conflict where America and democracy are fighting an existential battle against the forces of darkness, why would you have Captain America killed while trying to promote democratic ideals. Shame on these fools. Thousands of Americans were murdered on 9/11 and our soldiers die everyday fighting for liberty but these spoiled brats "kill Captain America." Disgusting. I would boycott Marvel Comics period.[2]

This type of rhetoric is hardly unusual for responses to the Captain America character. Nor was the commentary limited to fan dialogue. Original *Captain America Comics* writer Joe Simon told reporters he thought, "It's a hell of time for him to go. We really need him now."[3] Contemporary writer of *Captain America* Ed Brubaker commented, "What I found is that all the really hard-core Left-wing fans want Cap to be giving speeches on the street corner against the Bush Administration, and all the really Right-wing fans all want him to be over in the streets of Baghdad, punching out Saddam."[4]

Throughout the character's history, which contains messages varying from ultranationalist jingoism to a critique of the role of nationalism in the propagation of racism and terrorism, his narratives have provoked incredibly articulate responses. Since December 1940, Captain America has appeared in more than ten thousand stories in more than five thousand comic books, books, trade publications, and other media formats. To speak with a voice relevant to each era of American history, the character has undergone several transformations. Values, ideals, and even moral codes have adjusted at times to meet the needs of contemporary society.