Will The Real Captain America Please Stand-Up: Redefining the Patriotic Hero Post-9/11

Michelle Anne Lloyd
Clemson University, malloyd@clemson.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses

Recommended Citation
Lloyd, Michelle Anne, "Will The Real Captain America Please Stand-Up: Redefining the Patriotic Hero Post-9/11" (2016). All Theses. 2363.
https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses/2363

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses at TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Theses by an authorized administrator of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.
WILL THE REAL CAPTAIN AMERICA PLEASE STAND-UP: REDEFINING THE PATRIOTIC HERO POST-9/11

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
Michelle Anne Lloyd
May 2016

Accepted by:
Dr. Jan Holmevik, Committee Chair
Dr. Lindsay Thomas,
Keith Morris
ABSTRACT

Art, in all of its forms, has always reflected the moods and mores of the society that create it. This is true with the creating of comic books as well. Just as hardboiled novels reflected the bitterness and harshness of The Great Depression, a post-9/11 superhero had to become darker. Steve Rogers was plagued with PTSD following his revival in the 1960s and has abandoned the stars and stripes in the past, but he was not -- is not -- equipped to be Captain America in the 21st Century. The trend in comic books, and Science Fiction, following 9/11 favored the anti-hero and the hero who did not shy away from actions that would outrage the classical hero types, of which Steve Rogers’s Captain America is as near a perfect example as you are likely to find in modern literature.

My thesis explores the ways in which Barnes’s Soviet past, and the political climate of a post-9/11 America, makes him an unlikely candidate for the role of America’s most staunch patriot, and yet it would also seem to be, given the trend towards darker heroes who reflect the growing disillusionment of the American public, the most fitting choice for a post-9/11 Captain America. To accomplish this I explain the ways in which the character of Captain America has been influenced by the political leanings of the writing and editorial staff at Marvel over the last 70 years and show why, despite all of this, a change had to finally be made and Steve Rogers had to die.
DEDICATION

This thesis project is dedicated to the memory of my grandfather, James Weldon Lloyd, Col USA (Ret.) (June 8, 1940 – July 28, 2015). A true Clemson Tiger and American hero to the end.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would have never come to fruition without the support I received from my mom (Julie Mathis), Caroline Swanson, or my sweet Poe. Thank you for keeping me together when “it's always tea-time and we've no time to wash the things between whiles.”

Also, a huge thank you to the organizers of the Comic Arts Conference for letting me use San Diego Comic Con 2015 as a sounding board for my thesis. The feedback and connections I made at SDCC because of CAC have been invaluable.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TITLE PAGE</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION: Check under your bed for Commies and Muslims! They’re everywhere!</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. LITERATURE REVIEW: Give a man a comic and he’ll tell you about his world</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. A CAPTAIN FOR TODAY, YESTERDAY, AND TOMORROW: Using the good Captain as a mouthpiece</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. A STUDY IN SIDEKICKS &amp; THE THEORY OF GRAY HEROES: The lesser masculinity of sidekicks &amp; modern war heroes</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. BLURRED LINES: Fandom, Reboots, and America</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1

Introduction:

*Check under your bed for Commies and Muslims! They’re everywhere!*  

Obvious parallels between the War on Terror and the Cold War explain why there are more media being released now that depicts a communist threat than a Middle Eastern one and why action heroes face off against villains with Eastern European accents more often than they do against a member of al-Qaeda. Lack of general public support for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq could be to blame, as well as a general rewriting of Cold War history that casts the United States in the role of victim and attempts of redefining the Vietnam War along those same lines. There are a thousand possible reasons and explanations that might be offered up. One possible reason for the revived Soviet specter and that is the struggle to define America and patriotism during wartime when the enemy is ill-defined. To say that we are committed to fighting a global war on terror is all well and good, but it makes it difficult to identify the enemy; just as the War on Drugs or a war on communism did in the past. In the period between World War II and the Vietnam War, we began to define ourselves based on what we weren’t. Who are we, what do we stand for, when we don’t know who we are fighting?

In an attempt to answer this question I will analyze *The Death of Captain America* comic book arc and the film *Captain America: Winter Soldier*. The comic book arc, *The Death of Captain America*, released in 2007 has closer ties to 9/11 while *Captain America: Winter Soldier* was released in 2014 amongst a number of other summer
blockbusters in 2014 and 2015 that confronted – directly – a Soviet threat. In both instances, the Captain America of the end of the story had become a darker hero, one slightly more tarnished than the classical hero the Sentinel of Liberty has usually been depicted as. For him to remain relevant Captain America had to develop some rougher edges and to accomplish this end Marvel revived both a sidekick and the threat of a Soviet attack on American soil.

“Are you a communist too?” Baird Whitlock (George Clooney) asks from his spot in a chair in the center of a large living room, drinking a martini, when Hobie Doyle (Alden Ehrenreich) walks through the front door. Doyle, who has been sent to find the missing Whitlock, sighs, shakes his head, and whispers “so it’s Commies.” Clooney’s character has no more understanding of communism now than he did prior to his abduction; nevertheless, he has become a card-carrying member of the Communist Party. The Coen Brothers do not treat the communists in Hail, Caeser! with any sense of reverence or fear. The men who organized the kidnapping of Whitlock from the set of his film are frustrated studio creatives who are more interested in collecting ransom from the studio than they are in actually furthering the communist cause – and the man backing their efforts is an effeminate, gay, actor who, by the film’s end, departs for the USSR on a Soviet submarine with his small dog (and none of the ransom money).

Hail, Caeser!, is the latest comedy written and directed by the Coen Brothers. It is one of the many films to directly evoke the specter of the Cold War since 9/11, including remakes of Point Break and The Man from UNCLE that have some out in the last year.
FX’s television series, *The Americans* (2013 – still airing as this is being written), which tells the tale of two Soviet sleeper agents raising a family and spying for the USSR in 1980s Washington DC, finally won both a Critics Choice Award and an Emmy in 2015. It isn’t surprising (or shouldn’t be) that the ghost-like specter of the former USSR should revive itself post 9/11. The events that lead to 9/11 can – after all – be traced to Soviet involvement in Afghanistan and the American response to it. That this Soviet ghost still haunts our popular fiction today nearly 15 years after 9/11, however, forces us to take a closer look at the media of the last decade and a half to see if we might determine why. Why is an America consumed with fighting a global War on Terror and facing continued economic decline and civil unrest still casting Soviets as the villain in so many forms of popular media so often? We see this trend come to life in the first pages of Ed Brubaker’s *Captain America, Volume One: Winter Soldier Ultimate Collection* which take place in Russia and introduce the ex-KGB villains of the piece. Even the name “Winter Soldier” recalls the Cold War era in the midst of war in the Middle East.

As dozens of other former sidekicks have done before him, Bucky Barnes took over the role of Captain America following the death of his mentor, Steve Rogers, at the end of Marvel’s *Civil War*. Though he was at first reluctant to accept the shield (and burden) that Rogers left behind, Ed Brubaker carefully transitioned the former Soviet assassin into a place where he was able to accept his role as Captain America.

The transition from Rogers’s Captain America to Barnes’s is not as sudden and earth shattering as it might at first seem. While Steve Rogers’s Captain America might seem, on the surface, to be pure idealistic American propaganda he was not always the
stalwart defender of Washington he is assumed to be. He, more often than not, reflected current cultural norms and attitudes towards government and Americana. By running around fighting the forces of evil with the flag on his chest it is hard not to see Captain America as representative of everything we think America stands for -- where that idea becomes problematic is in determining which America Captain America is meant to represent. When The Star-Spangled Man with a Plan graced the pages of his first comic book he represented America’s fighting spirit and willingness to stand up to the global version of playground bullies. As time passed Captain America came to reflect the views and attitudes of the American people, including their disillusion with the war and politics that plagued the 1960s and ‘70s.

Art, in all of its forms, has always reflected the moods and mores of the society that create it. This is true with the creating of comic books as well. Just as hardboiled novels reflected the bitterness and harshness of The Great Depression, a post-9/11 superhero had to become darker. Steve Rogers was plagued with PTSD following his revival in the 1960s and has abandoned the stars and stripes in the past, but he was not equipped to be Captain America in the 21st Century. The trend in comic books, and Science Fiction, following 9/11 favored the anti-hero and the hero who did not shy away from actions that would outrage the classical hero types, of which Steve Rogers’s Captain America is as near a perfect example as you are likely to find in modern literature.

Barnes’s Soviet past, and the political climate of a post-9/11 America, makes him an unlikely candidate for the role of America’s most staunch patriot, and yet it would also seem to be, given the trend towards darker heroes who reflect the growing
disillusionment of the American public, the most fitting choice for a post-9/11 Captain America. For the past 70 years the character of Captain America has been influenced by the political leanings of the writing and editorial staff at Marvel. Despite all of this, a change had to finally be made and Steve Rogers had to die.
Chapter 2

Literature Review:

Give a man a comic and he’ll tell you about his world

After 9/11 military comic books – comic books starring members of the military – began to reimagine and rewrite the histories of classic characters from WWII. These characters were suddenly given darker pasts to fit in with the jaded view of the military and government that audiences had adopted. It is because of this disillusionment that when Steve Rogers died it could have only been Bucky Barnes that took his place. Released by Marvel as a one-volume trade paperback towards the beginning of the Iraq War, Combat Zone, written by historian and field reporter Karl Zinsmeister, depicts the Iraqi invasion as an honorable quest and re-enforces the idea of American exceptionalism. As the war in Iraq continued and public support waned and the Abu Gharib photographs were released to the public, a more critical comic book, Kyle Baker’s Special Forces was published. Baker also wrote an alternate storyline for Captain America featuring an African American Captain America and dealt with the Tuskegee experiments entitled Truth: Red, White, and Black. The 2003 six issue mini-series Fury: Peacemaker written by Garth Ennis and set during World War II shows Fury, within the first few pages of the book, pointing a gun at his superior officer’s head, threatening to kill him if he did not start acting as a leader should. In the next panel, Fury reveals that the superior officer is dead. From the very beginning, a clearly cynical tone is established, very different from the usual World War II fictions published prior to 9/11.
The Fury of *Peacemaker* is the very antithesis of the classical hero and a perfect illustration of the rebirth of pre-existing superheroes as gray heroes. Ennis continues this theme in his Punisher titles, though Frank Castle as never been the kind of classical hero that Captain America was. *Punisher: Born* depicts the adrenaline rush of combat during Castle’s third tour of duty in Vietnam where he seems to be fighting his own private war against the communists. Castle believes in the idea of American exceptionalism and is willing to engage in subversive methods and operating out of “proper” military channels to ensure that others do as well. The man who, upon his return to America, will become Punisher, agrees with the popular conservative assertion that the military was not allowed to win the war in Vietnam.

*Marvel Historical Background, Patriot Act Allegories, and the Politics of Fear*

![Figure 1 - The making of Captain America - From Captain America: The First Avenger](image)

In March of 2007, Marvel killed Captain America as part of the summation of the *Civil War* storyline that had brought the entire Marvel Universe together. The comic book version of the *Civil War* story arc featured a battle over the fictional Superhuman
Registration Act (an allegory of the Patriot Act) with Iron Man supporting the government, Captain America leading a group of underground fighters who fought against such governmental oversight into the lives of citizens, and Spiderman caught in the middle – though originally siding with Iron Man and the government, believing it to be acting in the best interest of the people. Spiderman, in this instance, represents the scores of Americans who supported the actions of the government immediately following 9/11, but who came to be disillusioned and frustrated with the government and its actions.

By contrast, the trailers released for the cinematic version of *Civil War* seems less concerned with government intrusion into the lives of ordinary citizens but instead with the destruction of whole cities in the process of confronting evil. In the second trailer, Captain America tells Iron Man that if he sees someone in need of help he isn’t going to not help them. The implication being that if he has to destroy cities in order to rid the world of evil he will do so without a second thought. Here, more so than in any other representation of Captain America’s character, he represents the idealistic early World War II American government that had not yet bombed Japan into submission. While Iron Man represents the growing cultural concern for what sort of damage the United States has done by playing world police. This could be read as Marvel readying audiences for Bucky Barnes to take up the shield in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. The times are calling for a new Captain America, one that is more jaded than Steve Rogers but who believes that sometimes it is necessary to do “evil” in order to do good and has the maturity and self-awareness to call it evil without trying to cling to the belief that the
world is not painted with shades of gray. Brubaker’s Barnes learned this lesson, and that he was the best person to take on this role as a young man in World War II.

Reboots are a way of life for comics and are, generally speaking, generational and/or situational. Not just starting over in comic book form, but in movies, television, or cartoons, a reboot gives new audiences a chance to enter into the world of these characters by resetting the board. Most superheroes undergo some form of a reboot, and some undergo it more often than others (Batman for instance has had more reboots in the last thirty years than any other superhero, Marvel or DC). Yet somehow Steve Rogers has managed to keep almost exactly the same origin story since 1941 (almost because it is slightly tweaked in the 2011 and 2014 movies). Steve Rogers, 95 pounds and in poor health, wishes more than anything else in the world, that he could join the Army to fight the good fight with all the other men his age. He is, unsurprisingly, found to be unfit for service, but is ultimately given the chance to participate in “Operation Rebirth,” the government’s top secret Super-Soldier program. Little Steve Rogers is pumped full of Super-Soldier serum and vita-rays and instantly transformed into the ultimate soldier. He is fast and strong, and superior to normal soldiers in just about every way. The government never has a chance to recreate this experiment and build their army of Super Soldiers, however, because almost as soon as Steve Rogers undergoes his transformation Dr. Erskine is killed by a spy.
Private Rogers is then sent to Camp Lehigh for training where he meets the unofficial camp mascot, James Buchanan “Bucky” Barnes. Kid sidekicks being a new and seemingly popular invention of the 1940s comic book writers, young Bucky Barnes stumbles upon Steve Rogers changing into his Captain America uniform and begs his way into the role of sidekick to the good Captain. Thus began a happy, but rather short, partnership as the Captain and Bucky team up to take down Nazis and Hydra.
Chapter 3

A Captain for Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow:

Using the good Captain as a mouthpiece

In 1954 three issues of Captain America were published – the first Captain America comics to come out since the ‘40s – and Captain America and Bucky became “commie smashers” and took on all of the boogie men that the Cold War had conjured up. This, we would later learn, was not actually Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes, but rather imposters placed in their uniforms but the damage was done. Captain America had been used to further the political stances of those creatives in favor of the Red Scare scare tactics being used by those in Washington. Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes had actually died towards the end of World War II fighting the villainous Baron Zemo who had stolen an experimental plane from the Allies and loaded it down with bombs meant to be dropped on major US cities. The duo defeated Zemo but was unable to keep the plane from exploding. Bucky falls to what is believed to be his death while Steve Rogers is frozen alive and encased in ice until Stan Lee was able to bring him back to life in 1964. Cap leads his “Kooky Quartet” of former villains turned Avengers and running secret missions for S.H.I.E.L.D. throughout the rest of the ‘60s until teaming up with Sam Wilson, the Falcon\(^1\), in the ‘70s. During the ‘60s and ‘70s, the writers used Captain America and his sidekicks to discuss and dissect the reticent nature of politics and politician and the Civil Rights Movement. Marvel editors managed to keep Captain America

\(^{1}\) Created in 1969, Sam Wilson (aka Falcon) was the first African-American hero in a mainstream comic book.
America from outright supporting or speaking out against the Vietnam War, but in “The Secret Empire Saga” the writers of the title all but name President Nixon by name. The Secret Empire is out to destroy Captain America’s reputation and it is up to Cap to find “Number One” – the head of the organization – and stop him. “Number One” is the president, and as Captain America moves in to apprehend the villain he finds that the president has committed suicide. Steve Rogers hands in his shield and becomes Nomad, the Man without a Country, expressing the general state of dissatisfaction with America and its politics that most Americans found themselves to be facing.

*Getting Gray-er, Captain America in the Gritty World of ‘80s Comic Books*

Mike S. Dubose’s “Holding Out for a Hero: Reaganism, Comic Book Vigilantes, and Captain America” questions the need for Steve Rogers during the 1980s. Batman and other vigilantes better fit the tone of the ‘80s, Dubose says, but Cap attempted to hold his own in this era of lawless heroes. Marvel stressed the Everyman aspect of Steve Rogers in the ‘80s. He moved out of Avengers Mansion, got a day job and a girlfriend. “However, Captain America’s editors and writers still struggled with ways of making the hero side relevant to the 1980s, a drastically more morally complex era than that of his origin” (Dubose 927). In short, he claims that Cap must become a postmodern hero if he is to maintain his relevance. Throughout the ‘80s runs Cap contemplates the nature of morals (admitting that things are not as black and white as they might have seemed once) and the American Dream. This Captain America is less of a patriotic mascot than the
original run in the 1940s made him out to be. Stan Lee noted in 1971 that Steve Rogers had outgrown the role of a soldier, a point which Dubose leaps on. Not being a soldier means, for Dubose, that despite his “lapses” into speech-making Steve Rogers in the 1980s is a “more thoughtful” character than he had been and was “more prone to contemplation over the nature of America.” This is why he claims that

“What is evil—and un-American—about Captain America’s
adversaries in the eighties is not necessarily their morals but their desire
to inflict their morals on others. Occasionally, however, the villain is
someone like Every Man (from Captain America 267), whose actual
message—that the American Dream is not attainable by all (or even
most) Americans—is not far removed from Roger’s own beliefs. Such
villains, however, inevitably use violent means to force their message,
which is why Captain America treats them as enemies” (929).

Captain America then became less concerned with a villain's politics or message but how they chose to go about spreading that idea. Violence would be met with violence, as Every Man and Flag-Smasher learned. During his fight with Flag-Smasher onlookers berate the villain with statements like “if you don’t like America, take a hike!” and “go back to Russia, ya commie” while Dubose notes that Captain America’s response to FlagSmasher is simply to say that “‘I cannot fault you for wanting to see the world a better place’ (essentially supporting him) before berating the villain for using violence” (929). Yet fans kept writing into Marvel asking if Steve Rogers had voted for Reagan. The majority seemed to believe he had as one put it “a militant streak down his back a
mile wide” (929) which proved his allegiance with the Republican Party despite his actions in the recent comics, or perhaps because of what Dubose labeled as “lapses” into his 1940s patriotism. Ultimately this new postmodern Steve Rogers is fired and a replacement Captain America\(^2\) is found and Rogers becomes simply The Captain – a hero that Dubose labels as much a vigilante as Batman.

> "Captain America is not just setting himself apart from the system here, he is setting himself above the system. Even though he is often at odds with the government, Rogers still follows his morals and sense of justice. This makes Captain America more than a vigilante, and sets him on the level of Bruce Wayne (at the end of The Dark Knight Returns) and Ozymandias, as an alternate force of power. Perhaps what makes a hero in the eighties was the ability to follow morals while not necessarily working either outside the system (thus becoming a vigilante) or within it (as a police vigilante), but to transcend the system. Heroes in the eighties must be moral, but the most important quality perhaps is their ability to truly be larger than life” (933).

In 1980 the Captain is given the chance to run for president, and while it would not have been unusual for a hero to involve himself in politics (Oliver Queen, the Green

---

\(^2\) In the ‘50s and ‘80s, someone other than Steve Rogers took on the role of Captain America meaning that Bucky Barnes was not the first to replace Rogers. The difference between those two occasions and Barnes’s taking on the role being that while they did not outright tell the public that Rogers had died Barnes did not pretend to be him.
Arrow, was mayor of his beloved Star City for a time in the ‘80s) Steve Rogers is, in the words of the writers of that time, as centrist as it was possible to be and not cut out for the world of politics. The ‘80s and ‘90s saw the good Captain taking part on the War on Drugs. Post 9/11 Captain America unmasked himself and joined in the War on Terror. This is also the time that finally saw the revival of Bucky Barnes – disproving the axiom that no-one in comic books truly dies unless they are Bucky Barnes. In the “Winter Soldier” storyline of 2005 – 2006 we learn that Bucky did not die in the fall from Zemo’s plane, though he did lose an arm, and fell under the control of the Red Room – Marvel’s version of the KGB. A brainwashed Soviet assassin, Bucky does not remember his old friend Captain America, but in an amazing display of comic book science, Cap uses the Cosmic Cube to give Bucky back his memories.

---

3 The War on Drugs influenced the Captain America mythology in that it resulted in the draining of the serum from Steve Rogers’s blood and it came to be equated with steroids instead of immunization.
Captain America has a long history of standing up against governments and speaking out against injustices on behalf of the average citizen – but that government is rarely located in Washington, DC. Yet, in the face of the Superhuman Registration Act and its policies, Captain America is willing to sacrifice his own safety and is willing to die for what he believes to be right, only ending the fight against Iron Man when the risk to civilian life becomes too great to ignore. It is at that moment of surrender, stripped of his cowl and being led away in handcuffs, that Steve Rogers is shot by a sniper and killed.

*The Good Captain’s Empire Post-9/11*

Jason Dittmer calls Steve Rogers’s post 9/11 identity and role into question in his “Captain America’s Empire: Reflections on Identity, Popular Culture, and Post-9/11 Geopolitics.” Children, Dittmer believes, look up to Captain America and want to become him as he is “an explicitly American superhero [whose characterization]
establishes him as both a representative of the idealized American nation and as a
defender of the American status quo” (Dittmer 627). Dittmer does not see a return of the
vigilante Captain America from the 1980s, but rather a call back to the uber patriot
Captain America was originally written to be. Comic book writers, Dittmer says, view the
chance to write Captain America (or any other comic) as a soapbox in which they can
make their voice heard. Throughout Captain America’s long history he has been called
“right-wing, left-wing, jingoist, communist, anti-American and flagwaving” (628). In
our post 9/11 world Dittmer notes that what he sees as essential to
Steve Rogers’s characterization has not changed much:

“Clearly identified as a territorial symbol of America by his red, white,
and blue star spangled uniform, Captain America is part of what Renan
(1990, 17) has called the ‘‘cult of the flag.’’ Villains often mock
Captain America for his uniform, which is in fact a vaguely ridiculous
display of stars and stripes completed by a pirate’s gloves and boots
and, inexplicably, small wings on his head that resemble those on the
ankles of the Roman god Mercury. Nevertheless, Captain America’s
friends never mock his outfit or think it odd because to them it is in the
background—what Billig (1995, 40) would call an ‘‘unwaved flag.’’
Only villains would dare to question his fashion sense. That Captain
America is intended to represent the American ideal cannot be seen as
simply recognition of ontological fact, but is instead a truth claim about
American-ness” (629).
Dittmer even goes so far as to pick at Steve Rogers’s name, calling it the blandest and obvious of Anglo-American names. Captain America, for Dittmer, both embodies and narrates America in a way that no other American symbol can. This makes the Captain a cultural product that connects the reader to the nation. Post 9/11 comics used Ground Zero and sweeping panoramic views of “privileged” landscapes as Steve Rogers rides past on his motorcycle contemplating what it would be like to be “one of us” heightening the emotional impact of that connection. When the good Captain takes up the War on Terror we are behind him. We root for Captain America to triumph over Faysal al-Tariq and save the All-American town of Centerville in a way that we have not since Captain America decked Hitler in the first comic book.

In his essay, “The Death of Captain America: An Open-ended Allegorical Reading of Marvel Comics’ Civil War Storyline,” Brian Swafford suggests that given the Captain’s origins as a product of WWII and his subsequent career, “he has represented the fighting spirit of America. But with his death, readers may read not only his death but the death of the type of American Captain America represents. […] Captain America was the symbol of America’s fighting spirit. But the ‘fighting man’ that serves on the front line is not held up as the ideal anymore” (Swafford 644). Lynnette Porter’s book Tarnished Heroes, Charming Villains and Modern Monsters looks at the trend during the first decade of the 21st century and the ways in which our usual ideas of what a hero was had been turned around and had resulted in the creation of a new gray hero⁴. Though

---

⁴ A video explanation of the gray hero as it can be applied to this thesis can be found here: https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B_bkGbSO_-AYb1pxeGcxaUZ0ejA
Porter, in her book, concentrates on trend in Science Fiction television. I believe that her study can be applied to comic book Science Fiction of the 2000s. Porter states, in a discussion about Dr. Horrible and Torchwood’s Captain Jack, that “The line between “bad good guys” and “good bad guys” is blurred by pragmatism and the sense that, in the 21st century, the old rules no longer apply when it comes to protecting one’s homeland” (Porter 33).

This is, I believe, applicable to the study of the death of Captain America and the recasting of Bucky Barnes from sidekick to the bad guy to hero. Barnes’s Captain America is not placed on the pedestal that Rogers was. Throughout his time as Captain America, Barnes worries about living up to Rogers’s legacy – about being good enough to carry the shield and wear the uniform – after the events of his past. But Barnes’s Captain America isn’t an attempt to be Steve Rogers in the way the “replacement” Captain Americas were in the 1960s and ‘80s. Barnes’s Captain embodies Porter’s gray hero with the weaponry he adds to the Captain America uniform and the motivation he has for carrying the shield. Bucky Barnes is on a quest for redemption when he becomes Captain America. And, most significantly, he is Captain America to honor Rogers – not, seemingly, out of a lingering sense of patriotism. Doomed to the role of a lesser masculine character from the first time he graced the pages of Captain America #1, Barnes was never going to fit the model of masculinity established at the end of WWII. In that way perhaps it is best that he went down in the North Atlantic in 1945. Barnes, the camp mascot, was the prototypical teenage boy obsessed with heroes when he discovers
that “clumsy” Steve Rogers is secretly the hero he has been reading about in the papers. Along with DC’s Dick Grayson, Barnes became one of the original teenage sidekicks.

Figure 5 - Bucky Barnes's Captain America - From The Death of Captain America Complete Collection
When Bucky Barnes and Dick Grayson were created in the 1940s they set the standard for what the typical superhero sidekick should do and be. Based on the classical model of heroes and sidekicks, they set the stage for the legions that came after. Typically, they are seen as the hero’s inseparable companions and assistants. They are usually the same gender as the heroes they work with. They can be buddies, best friends, mentees, or apprentices but they can never be equals. They act as a support system for the hero but they are usually more than happy to let the hero take most if not all, of the credit for the daring rescues and random good deeds. Even when Robin (Dick Grayson), Kid Flash (Wally West), and Aqualad (Garth) founded the Teen Titans in 1964 they were a superhero team made up of Justice League sidekicks – they worked together as a team and performed heroic deeds but remained inferior to the Justice League and their individual heroes. Seldom do these sidekicks strike out on their own prior to 9/11. While they may leave behind their former codenames and affiliations they often trade them in for memberships to another group of heroes. Interest in sidekicks began to rise in 2007 according to a number of internet polls, as such sidekicks began to be given their own well-developed back stories as well as plot lines designed to reinforce the importance of their influence on their heroes. It is in 2007 that Bucky Barnes was brought back to life, 

5 According to Porter
given a retconned background that cast him as a one-man special forces team during World War II (already doing the things that Captain America couldn’t, or wouldn’t do himself).

Arthur Redding, author of the book *Turncoats, Traitors, and Fellow Travelers* writes that “popular culture of the period aimed, rather delicately, to domesticate a presumably ‘unruly’ or ‘uncouth’ working-class masculinity into consensual middleclass hetero-normativity” (Redding 84). Men, patriots, did not allow themselves to be manipulated by agents of the Soviet Union. To do so would be to become less than a man: immature, weak, and irresponsible. Barnes was and continues to be, as “unruly” and
“uncouth” as Rogers was wholesome. Rogers adapted to the new century and new norms, his fantasy of settling down that can be seen in the comics immediately following 9/11 looking like the picture-perfect 1950s family. Meanwhile, Barnes uses slang, was brainwashed by Soviet agents, and carries on a sexual relationship with a fellow former Soviet, the Black Widow.

The Black Widows and the Winter Soldier were created by the Red Room, a comic book universe offshoot of the KGB. Both were created via brainwashing with a side of genetic alterations for the Widows and cybernetic enhancement for the Winter Soldier, divorcing them from their personhood. In comparison, Captain America was created by the US Army with the creation of a serum that was akin to an immunization and wonder drug that cured him of the ailments that had plagued him prior to becoming Captain America. Once he undergoes this transformation, instead of becoming less of a person, Captain America becomes superhuman - a Super-Soldier. In becoming the Winter Soldier, Barnes also, like Captain America, becomes more than human. Unlike Captain America, however, instead of becoming an example of perfect masculinity he becomes a cyborg: something other than human and therefore incapable of being a true hero in the classical sense.
To this end, the sidekick presents an alternative masculinity that must be subservient to the hero. On a most basic, non-paranoid level, the sidekick gives the reader someone to identify with and someone to whom the hero can explain the plot to. This is a point that is usually called into question (after all, who wants to be Robin when they can be Batman) as the sidekick is typically having to be rescued by the hero more often than not, leading to a reading of the sidekick as being feminized and the hero as a representation of true masculinity. A standard trope in Cold War fiction was the feminization of the Soviet Other. We can see this trend continued in the Captain America titles featuring Barnes post-9/11 because he will be forever remembered as the good Captain’s sidekick as well as being Winter Soldier. The true role of the sidekick according to Shyminsky is not as Neil Gaiman would have it but to provide the hero with a constant wingman. Always the bridesmaid, never the bride, the sidekick traditionally never conducts his own romances but instead assists the hero in his. “Given the lack of options, the sidekick is made to seem either asexual or, by default, attracted to the same-sexed hero whose company and happiness the sidekick evidently privileges above that of all others—even his own. Whichever is the case, the young sidekick’s sexual desire becomes an ambiguous and elusive subject,” (Shyminsky 291). This has changed in the last thirty years as sidekicks have been given their own teams and become “part-time” aides to the hero on the road to becoming heroes in their own right (such as the case with the Teen Titans with DC and Young Avengers for Marvel) but in the case of most readings of sidekicks by fans and academics alike this is ignored in favor of the more paranoid “gay sidekick” trope.
The First Gulf War and the Soldier Hero Trope

In 1991 when President Bush officially announced the start of the Gulf War the “bleakest public symbol of the American victimhood” was ordered to be flown over all federal buildings in the country. Never before had such official national status been granted to any flag other than the American flag. Intended to be a symbol of the country’s “concern and commitment to resolving as fully as possible the fates of Americans still prisoner, missing and unaccounted for in Southeast Asia” it is a clear attempt to continue the national retconning of the Vietnam War. By promoting the idea that some of America’s missing in action soldiers might still be alive as POWs the national narrative of victimhood is continued. The POW myth, naturally, gave rise to the vision of sadistic communist torturers. Both plot devices have existed hand in hand since Nixon said “It is time for Hanoi to end the barbaric use of our prisoners as negotiating pawns” in 1971. Nixon went all in using the idea of American POWs to rationalize the continued war in Vietnam, the idea lurked in the minds of Americans throughout the 1980s culminating in 1985 with the release of Rambo: First Blood Part II and in 1991 when the Bush congress passed an act requiring the flying of the POW/MIA flag over federal buildings.

After Vietnam, the image of the masculine soldier hero had been forever changed. David O. Russell’s film Three Kings’s tagline “In a war without heroes they were kings.” Like Rambo before it, Russell’s film attempted to rewrite Vietnam but fails to do so. What it does do, however, is to provide a model for the stereotypical soldier hero for the Middle Eastern conflict. Because the First Gulf War did not allow for the creation of
traditional hero soldiers it became impossible to cast the veterans of modern wars anything other than gray heroes. The technological advances of warfare that occurred between Vietnam and the First Gulf War, along with the brevity of the war itself, meant that many soldiers, like the citizens back home, observed the war via television. In order to become men, to become heroes, then the modern soldier is forced to act outside the military command structure. This means that they cannot be the traditional heroes of the past; they force us to redefine our ideas of what it means to be a soldier-hero in modern American culture.
Chapter 5

Blurred Lines:

Fandom, Reboots, and America

When we first see Barnes after Rogers’s transformation into Captain America in the 2011 film Captain America: the First Avenger it is on the lab table of Dr. Zola, a Hydra scientist. Bound and clearly recovering from torture and experimentation, Barnes is one of many POWs rescued by Captain America. This status of Barnes as a POW perhaps explains why following the release of 2014’s Captain America: Winter Soldier many of those fans who did not see the Winter Soldier as the film’s villain, and began instead to identify Barnes as “America’s longest serving POW.” From what little information the audience is given on the Winter Soldier and his background at this point, the case can be made for the labeling of Barnes as a POW. The national imaginative tale of the POW can extend itself to Barnes because, while it is HYDRA that eventually takes possession of him it is the Soviets who find him at the bottom of the ravine he fell into in Captain America: the First Avenger, remove his damaged arm, replace it with a cybernetic arm, and brainwash him into becoming an assassin.
Lee Iacocca, Chrysler’s CEO, continued the victim mentality of post-Vietnam America when he shot a Jeep ad that aired before Oliver Stone’s *Platoon*. The ad features Iacocca happening upon a forgotten military jeep during a walk through the woods. Iacocca calls *Platoon*, like the jeep, a memorial, “not to war but to all the men and women who fought in a time and in a place that nobody really understood, who knew only one thing: they were called and they went.” Such an uncritical obedience to authority would have at the height of the Cold War – even during the “conservative” 1950s – raised eyebrows. American exceptionalism might have been at a high during the height of the Cold War but it did not reduce the country’s national identity to an uncritical support of American Wars. Children raised in since Reagan’s presidency grew up on sanitized versions of the Vietnam War and televised Middle Eastern conflict. With the removal of the draft, the realities of war became less and less real to millions of Americans. That changed, to an extent, after 9/11. It was a shock, none the less, to see Captain America in
direct conflict with both his commanding officer and the Secretary of Defense in Captain America: Winter Soldier. While such questioning attitudes would have been commonplace among soldiers during Vietnam and would have fit in with Marvel’s Watergate allegory, audiences raised on the mid to late 1980s and ‘90s version of Captain America would not have been as intimately familiar with this version of Captain America.

![Figure 9 - Bucky Barnes and Steve Rogers](image)

**The First Avenger and Barnes in the Marvel Cinematic Universe**

In Captain America: The First Avenger, Steve Rogers’s origin story is changed slightly. Instead of meeting a child Bucky Barnes after being transformed into Captain America, a grown up Bucky Barnes is Steve Rogers’s best friend. “Best friends since childhood, Steve Rogers, and Bucky Barnes were inseparable on playground and battlefield,” reflects the narrated Captain America exhibit in Captain America: The Winter Soldier. The first time we see Bucky Barnes in the Marvel Cinematic Universe he is in full Army uniform and rescuing a pre-serum Steve Rogers from a bully he had
picked a fight with. Bucky Barnes sends the bully packing and we are introduced to Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes of the 107th. Far from the boy wonder of the comics, this aged up (and now slightly older than Steve Rogers) Barnes is Steve Rogers’s equal in some ways and his superior in others. On a double date to the science fair in which Steve Rogers is finally given the chance to become a hero, it is Bucky Barnes who secured the girls for the evening and it is Barnes that maintains the girls’ attention and affections. 95 pound asthmatic Steve Rogers is invisible to these girls, furthering the emphasis on Bucky Barnes’s superior masculinity. Barnes, still in the uniform we saw him in when he rescued Steve Rogers, leaves him behind at the fair after a fight in which he tried to talk him into staying home and collecting tin cans (typically the job of women and children) rather than attempting to join the Army again and risking arrest to take both girls dancing. Scenes of Bucky Barnes at war were cut from Captain America: The First Avenger so the next we see of him is when Captain America launches a rescue mission to rescue Barnes from a Hydra camp. No longer the hero he was in Brooklyn, this Bucky Barnes has been tortured and experimented upon. He is a broken man when Captain America takes him from Zola’s lab. Now Bucky Barnes is the one being rescued for once and Steve Rogers is the example of superior masculinity. However, the tables are not completely turned and when Captain America attempts to do “the hero thing” and send Bucky Barnes off to safety during the fight with the Red Skull, Bucky refuses to leave without Steve Rogers.
Steve Rogers, from the moment he stepped out of the chamber that transformed him into Captain America, failed to stick with the superhero code that allowed for the pursuit of the bad guy even in the face of collateral damage. He allowed himself to be distracted by the death of Dr. Erskine and for Agent Carter to be the hero chasing down the Hydra agent who had shot Erskine and stolen the Super-Soldier Serum. She stands in the middle of street shooting calmly at the Hydra agent’s stolen car, even as it speeds towards her, only to be perturbed by Steve Rogers’s arrival and his rescue of her.

As he picks up the chase, that would have been over quickly had he not gotten involved, a young boy is taken and used as a human shield before being thrown into the water. Steve Rogers pauses to check on the boy and is reassured that “[he] can swim! Go get him!” This level of care for bystanders is slightly atypical and chips away a bit at Captain
America’s new superior masculinity by casting him as a somewhat mothering figure to those weaker than himself. Pre-Civil War Avengers comics often cast Steve Rogers as the Avenger’s mother (with Tony Stark as the father figure), though we have not seen enough of his interaction with the other Avengers in the Marvel Cinematic Universe to see if this will remain true. The one time in the first film that Captain America took down the bad guy after seeing someone in need of rescuing, Bucky Barnes falls to his apparent death from Zola’s train. We later see Steve Rogers attempting to drown his sorrows in an empty bombed out bar, he is joined by Agent Carter and reminded that Bucky Barnes made his choice to follow Captain America knowing that he would likely die and not to take the dignity of that choice away from him. So the Bucky Barnes of the Marvel Cinematic Universe is not a sidekick, but rather an equal partner to Steve Rogers (if not to Captain America). Steve Rogers’s newly given superior masculinity does not negate or subvert Bucky Barnes’s, instead, they seem to trade off moments of manliness. Even with his new Super-Soldier body Steve Rogers is still hapless with women while Bucky Barnes finds himself as invisible as pre-serum Steve Rogers when he attempts to flirt with Agent Carter. Both Rogers and Barnes then, in the Marvel Cinematic Universe fail to conform to the traditional hero model. They fall into a gray space within the first film that they are never able to fully recover from.
The Influences of Fans

These films and the casting of both Rogers and Barnes in them as gray heroes beg the question of just who has written these roles. With the technological advancements made and increased popularity and usage of social media, fans of both the comic books and films are able to respond directly to the writers, artists, cast, crew, and studio responsible for creating the latest versions of Captain America. The trend among fans has become to create a Captain America who best represents them through either headcanons or fanworks.

These works, because they exist on the internet, are not the privileged fandom creations they had been up until the 21st Century. They are passed on to creatives responsible for the new Captain America works either in person or online via social media. Thus, it becomes impossible to judge exactly how much or how little fandom influences these
reboots. One thing that is clear, however, is that the old model of hero has been rejected completely by these fans.

With the advances in technology available to modern Americans it is little wonder that the archetype for American patriotism was forced to undergo a drastic change post-9/11. Wartime reporting had brought battles into American living rooms during Vietnam; this continues to this day, only now the internet has provided yet another way for people to connect with the outside world. This has created a smaller world and a more jaded American. Americans, in general, have not all now become pessimists because of technology and everyone was not always content with the world prior to the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Nevertheless, our national identity has undergone a drastic revamping. This means that we need gray heroes. We need a darker Captain America. One who would be willing to make hard choices. Bucky Barnes became Captain America at exactly the right moment, though his time as the Star-Spangled Man with a Plan did not last long. When asked about the origins of the name “Winter Soldier” Ed Brubaker made clear the influence of the Winter Soldier Trails during the Vietnam War in the naming. The Winter Soldier does what the Summer Soldier and the Sunshine Patriot cannot (or refuses) to do. He does the dirty work of war and patriotism. “I think that sparked something,” Brubaker stated. “[A] name that could imply Russia’s cold winters and the cold war, that was also tied to atrocities in another war, and that connected all the way back to the American Revolution.” We have reached a point, thanks largely in part

---

6 Kamala Kahn, the newest Ms. Marvel (a character that will be forever linked to American military service because of Carol Danvers), is a teenage Muslim.
7 http://www.themarysue.com/winter-soldier-history/#geekosystem
to television and the internet, where it is a universally acknowledged truth that war is not
the heroic man making the rite of passage it was made out to be by the war literature of
the past. Because of this, our war heroes have changed and our ideas of patriotism have
undergone cynic transformations. We need these new gray heroes and Bucky Barnes’s
Captain America acted as a model transformation for audiences familiar with the
character of Captain America who were looking for a more modern iteration that they
could identify with and opened the door for the casting of Sam Wilson as the next
Captain America in 2014.
REFERENCES


*Captain America the First Avenger*. Paramount, 2011.


