Smashing Thru!
The Story of Captain America, Comic Books, and the Evolution of American Youth
(1938-1970)

John Richards

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in

History
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Purpose of the Study:
The purpose of this study is to analyze the content of comic books, specifically Captain America comic books from 1938-1970, in conjunction with the secondary research done by various youth and youth culture historians. Laying the primary content of comic books over top the secondary findings of the field's current youth scholarship, an important parallel is discovered, connecting the two scholarships and delivering a deeper understanding of the progression and evolution of youth thoughts, ideals and ambitions through the various generations under examination.

Procedure:
The primary research of this study was done with the historical comic books themselves, analyzing the themes, morals and ideological depth to establish the contemporary temperament of American youth. Additionally, within the history of comic books, a strong presence of both youth and adult feedback exists, generating empirical data displaying the foundation as well as the lengthening of the generation gap in America. As explained above, youth history was equally integral to this study. Without an acknowledgement of the current history of young America, this project would only be half complete. For this reason, I have examined a portion of the current historiography of young America, isolating both the inherent differences and shared opinions of each historian to make sense of my findings within comic books. Similarly, an understanding of various social, political and military histories were also included; this allowed me to understand the contemporary movements of society, and compare them directly to the comic book content.

Findings:
The content of comic books was found to be an important historical tool that uncovers a depth of youth voice that is currently missing from the historical landscape. Though each generation varied in their inclusion of reader thought and desires, a strong enough presence exists in each of the three generations of comic book content included in this study to acknowledge comic books as legitimate windows into the lives of young Americans.
Conclusions:

The conclusion of this paper acknowledges both comic books as well as youth culture as constantly mutating and evolving historical entities; through the study of one, we better understand the other. By focusing on comic books, as historians we are granted access to an otherwise unrecognized and unexplored factor in American history. Through the study of Captain America specifically, we are treated to an extremely specific social and political identification, that is not entirely present in a study of any other hero that existed in any of the three specific generations analyzed in this paper.

Chair: Dr. Steve Estes
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Comic Books are for Kids

Comic books are for kids. Few would dispute this remark. Sure, this is a broad generalization that does not account for the various generational inconsistencies, socio-economic definitions or subcultural identifications of American youth, but it is still a generally accepted fact within American social and popular culture. This has been true of comics since the first spandex-clad superhero descended upon the streets of Metropolis in 1938; but some contemporary historians have offered revisionist interpretations of early comic books. For instance, some have inflated the impact of Superman—the first true comic book superhero—canonizing him as an immigrant icon and even a Jewish messiah.\(^1\) Evidence for both theories exist within the content of early *Action Comics* (Superman’s monthly comic title), but it was not Depression era immigrants or pious American Jews who flocked to the newsstands each month to relinquish their hard earned nickels and dimes for a 6”x10” picture magazine, it was the kids: the young American adolescents who relished in the reflective qualities of their favorite heroes and bonded over an increasing awareness of themselves and their surrounding global landscape. Additionally, in this early era of comic book history, it was the kids who crafted the stories, it was the kids who drew the pictures, it was


the kids who filled the speech bubbles and it was the kids who applied the definitive four colored spectrums to each individual panel. The comic book industry was constructed in the early 1930s and served as America’s pioneering industry in youth specific orientation. As the generations progressed, youth subcultures matured and their relationship with comic books transformed, but the single inalterable fact remained intact from the first appearance of Superman onward: comic books are for kids.

This is a history of young Americans and youth culture, as translated through the content of comic books. When I began my research, I assumed that I would be able to take the content of a single hero, Captain America, and compare his content over the course of three distinct generations of American youth and comic book cultures (the Golden Age: 1938-1945, the Interregnum Era: 1946-1960, and the Marvel Age: 1961-1970), but as my research progressed, it became obvious that a comparison is impossible. Though the hero’s name and appearance remained consistent, the philosophy of his writers, the demands of his readers and the construction of his content were all wildly different. Therefore, I am not comparing youth cultures; instead, I am contrasting them. By isolating the various differences of comic book content and assessing the level in which young America was involved in the development of said content in each of these three generations, we, as historians, are able to isolate the depth of political and social awareness of American adolescents as well as gain a generalized sense of youth culture’s contemporary ideological allegiances.
To do this, a historical understanding of young America is required. Youth culture has traditionally been defined by its exclusion from the rest of American adult culture. Before the 20th century, youth role in society was primarily the product of American familial expectations. However, as historian Paula Fass explains, the traditional family structure was fractured in the late 19th century. “The family reflected and reinforced changes which began after the Civil War with the rapid acceleration of the process of urbanization, industrialization, and nationalization.” Fass argues, “Over time, the slow process of family adaptation had produced a radical alteration.” By the 1920s, the progressive mutation of the American family had laid a solid enough foundation for the pioneers of the youth class to begin construction on their own self-defined youth culture. “Youth did not, of course, spring up simply because the need for it existed. It developed because society gave it room to grow as institutions were reshaped to modern dimensions.”

This early American youth culture is the perfect microcosm for the youth cultures that developed in the coming decades. Though it was extremely small and exclusive (forged mostly in elite peer groups in private schools and universities) its impact is not measured by its size. Instead, the presence of this early youth culture is measured in terms of social and commercial recognition. Fass elaborates on youth

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4 Fass, 120.
5 Fass, 123.
culture’s social impact, but applies a heavy emphasis to the youth directed fads and trends of the 1920s.6

Most historians agree with Fass’s hypothesis, acknowledging youth culture’s roots in the 1920s; however a truly inclusive national youth culture did not exist until the 1940s.7 The youth culture Fass defines is the launching pad for the youth communities that grew throughout the next two decades. The growth of these cultures was dependent on the rise in population as well as the further development and creation of less exclusive peer groups (still mostly in schools).8 Additionally, industries began acknowledging and developing products exclusively for American youth. Comics were the forerunner in the development of the youth market; in the 1930s, despite the rest of the nation’s dismal economic condition, the comic book industry grew to a massively popular and profitable enterprise.9 And, as has been explained, young Americans were not just reading comic books, they were also creating them. Comic writers and artists in the Golden Age were generally of the same age or slightly older, but still ideologically aligned with their younger readers. This created a permeation point for the thoughts of young America to infuse the content of comic books. Unfortunately, the full youth exposure was limited in this era by the overarching adult financial interest in the industry; but still Golden Age comics were revolutionary in their identification and inclusion of youth thoughts and ideas.

6 Fass, 227.
9 Wright, xvi.
With the help of innovative advertisers and entrepreneurs, the comic industry had created a massive youth movement within American society by the 1940s that allowed the teenage market to flourish. Historian Thomas Hine defines the development of the teenager as a concept within American commercial society. “The term (‘teenager’) came into use during World War II...It seems to have leaked into the language from the world of advertising and marketing, where demographic information was becoming an increasingly important part of predicting what sales approaches are most effective with particular buyers.” The idea of single adolescent has existed since the 17th century, but, as Hine explains, the idea of a collective adolescent community could not exist until the 20th century. “With the rise of persuasion industries during the twentieth century, large groups of people were increasingly identified by single characteristics. People in their teens became ‘teens’ or ‘teeners’ or ‘teen-agers.’ They were largely in the same place—high school—sharing common experiences...They were, in short, easy to sell too.” While Hine is right to assert that the teen identity and terminology may have emerged from external sources like marketing and advertising, he goes a little too far in suggesting this identity and subculture was solely the product of adult design. American youth played an equal, if not greater role in the development their own subculture; I argue that comics are a perfect medium to investigate this joint venture of identity formation.

Between the 1930s and the 1950s, youth culture grew exponentially. As communications technologies matured, so did the reach of the commercial youth

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market. But with the growth of the youth market, came the backlash of adult concern. In the 1930s and during World War II, a faint, but observant voice acknowledged the development of the youth culture; citing its highly commercialized interests and behaviors as major follies in the face of American moral standards. After the war, this campaign gathered steam, carrying itself well into the 1950s. Charges of delinquency and Congressional investigations of moral corruption mar this generation of American youth; however, despite its substantial negativity, the adult fear of youth culture also represents the complete acknowledgement of its presence within American society. In this era, when young America was finally self aware, superhero comic books detrimentally removed the inherent reflective qualities that defined the medium in the previous generation. Instead, they pandered to the adult critics by watering down their content as a part of a greater national effort to re-assimilate young Americans back into the conventional womb of (adult) American expectations. While comic creators aged, a physical distance was also placed between them and readers that had never existed before; as a result, superheroes became obsolete. By the 1950s their dumbed-down, pro-authoritarian messages failed to maintain interest among this new generation of enlightened teenage readers. But the story of comic books in this era was not wholly a tale of woe and decline; a small off-shoot of comic companies separated themselves from the herd by developing stories and genres that presented the specific themes at the heart of the ongoing generational debates.

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11 Gilbert, 127.
12 Gilbert, 132.
13 Gilbert, 203.
14 Gilbert, 22.
These comics were defined by their unabashed violence, sexual suggestion and occasional streaks of anti-patriotism. Contemporary critics condemned these comics while young Americans celebrated them; this exchange and the content of these comics created tangible and empirical evidence illustrative of society’s growing generation gap.

From the 1950s to the 1970s, youth culture continued to grow in terms of population, acceptance and impact on the rest of American society. The foundation for youth culture was laid by the changes within the American familial structure during the late 19th century. It was introduced to a consumer market in the 1920s and developed into a major marketing demographic by the 1940s. By the 1960s, thanks in large part to the exaggeration of generational inconsistencies in the 1950s, youth culture finally became an accepted facet within American society. Psychologically, we can examine adolescence as a single, definable, stage of human development. Sociologically we can point to the trends and behaviors of subcultures to define contemporary age ranges. But historically, we need to look at the joint impacts, analyzing the various social, physical and commercial developments of each generation to contextualize American youth cultures that seem to exist in constant states of self-modification.

Identifying a single youth culture is a Sisyphean task. Even during the early generations of the youth subculture, adolescent identification was a stratum of

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15 Fass, 120.
16 Savage, 453.
18 Gilbert, 199.
individualized sub-subcultures. Additionally, when attempting to compare different generations of American teens, historians are faced with the realities of radically different intellectual, moral and political context. Youth culture—like all American cultures—is divided by individualized experiences and classifications; as youth culture expanded through the 20th century, the various youth identifications multiplied infinitely. Historians have traditionally attempted to define American youth culture by constructing classifications. Historians Joe Austin and Michal Nevin Willard propose an age range, 12-24, as an inalterable identification.19 Thomas Hine extends this range by explaining that, “youth could describe a person from twelve to thirty-five.”20 But simply identifying who participated in youth culture does not explain how, or to what capacity they were involved. I believe that to understand youth culture, and to identify how it evolved between generations, we need to analyze the commercial influences in accordance with the political, social and psychological metamorphoses. This is why I have opted to focus my study around comic books and comic book culture.

Between the 1940s and the 1970s comic book culture stood as a recognizable outlet for youth dreams and ambitions. By focusing on one medium, comic books, and examining the variations in each of the above listed generations, we can examine how a specific segment of youth recognized and understood their adult run society. In the 1940s, I will show how comic books provided an unprecedented level of political discussion among American teens. In the 1950s—the generation I refer to as the Interregnum era, as it literally exists in-between the two most popular eras

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19 Austin and Willard, 2.
20 Hine, 5.
of comic book history—I will explain how the industry’s deviation from youth
demand crippled the medium to a point of near collapse. Finally, in the 1960s and
into the 1970s—eras recognized for the politicized activism of American youth—I
will provide examples of how comic books reflected the less documented political
confusions and frustrations of American adolescents.21 My paper operates at the
intersection of two American subcultures: American youth and comic books.
Understanding how the youth segment of comic book culture understood American
society provides us with an understanding of how the more broadly defined 12-24
(or 12-35) year old Americans recognized the world around them.

Obviously, historical comic content is extremely diverse; differing books
offered differing attractions, tones and ideologies.22 While I intend to reference
other comics and characters throughout this project, a majority of my focus will be
paid to Captain America. Other works have sought to break down the comic
industry with more inclusive methods—focusing on genres, eras, or various
controversies—my project will specifically observe Captain America and how he
existed in and throughout these various sub-headings of comic book history.23 I
have selected Captain America as the focus of this case study for a number of
reasons. First, the Star Spangled Sentinel’s obvious political makeup provides great

21 James T. Patterson, Grand Expectations: the United States, 1945-1974 (New York: Oxford University
22 William W. Savage, Jr., Commiss, Cowboys, and Jungle Queens: Comic Books and America, 1945-1954
23 William W. Savage, Jr., Commiss, Cowboys, and Jungle Queens: Comic Books and America, 1945-1954
David Hajdu, The Ten Cent Plague: The Great Comic Book Scare and how it Changed America (New
Amy Kiste Nyberg, Seal of Approval: the History of the Comics Code (Jackson: University Press of
Mississippi 1998).
insight into the social and political behaviors of American youth; as the federally commissioned defender of liberty and democracy, the Cap personifies an unmistakable political construction. Second, Captain America is one of the few heroes to exist and maintain relevance throughout the 1940s, 50s and 60s. Where famous heroes like Iron Man, the Hulk, or Spider-Man have extremely fascinating and relevant roles in comic book history, each one of these heroes is confined to a specific era. Other heroes that share Captain America’s longevity, like Superman, Batman, or Captain Marvel, generally lack the political relevance that was present throughout the three and a half decades of Captain America books. The final reason I have selected Captain America is really a conglomeration of the previous two. Captain America represents an easily discerned political relationship between various generations of readers and writers. Over the course of thirty-five years the ideological constructions of the readers and the writers shifted dramatically. Thanks in large part to advances in other information technologies, adolescent readers in the 1960s had a greater understanding of local and global politics than their predecessors in the 1940s and 1950s. On a basic level, Captain America comic books are able to provide illustrative models of contemporary youth opinion for various generations of American youth that is essentially absent from most other titles.

The current condition of comic book historiography is best defined by historian Bradford Wright: “Much of the current scholarship on comic books—and there has not been a great deal—has been produced outside of the historical
discipline and without much attention to historical context.” Wright’s sentiments, though nearly a decade old, ring with an unfortunate air of truth; in the past ten years there have only been a handful of legitimate additions to comic book scholarship, and a majority of it has been produced through a discipline other than history. What has been produced however, (both pre and post Wright’s dismal observation) has still provided an in depth understanding of the comic field; whether the various books or articles have been manufactured for the scholar or for the layman, publications about comic books have rallied genuine interest, and produced deep discussions of the medium and its role in American cultural history.

Currently, the seminal text in the field is Bradford Wright’s afore cited Comic Book Nation. Of all of the authors who use comic books as a portal into American society, Wright is the only one who attempts to incorporate every essential element of comic book culture into his study. This includes the creators, the critics, the readership and (most predominately in Wright’s work) the content. According to both his introduction and his subtitle (the Transformation of American Youth Culture), Wright’s seeks to explain how the actions and trends of the comic book industry shaped youth culture throughout the 20th century. Wright expands upon this thesis by using well-formulated content analysis. Wright’s knowledge and presentation of comic book content in American culture is virtually unparalleled. William Savage’s Comic Books and America, 1945-1954, and Mike Madrid’s Supergirls, are two more of the sources that offer well-developed content discussion.

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24 Wright, ix.
By connecting the events inside of comics to the events of the real world, Savage’s book aims at legitimizing comic books as a genuine primary source. Madrid looks specifically at the women of American comics; using a two or three damsels and heroines from each era and comparing them to the women of contemporary teenage popular culture, Madrid attempts to argue that historical comics were in tune with young female sensibilities. Both works are important to the landscape of comic history; however, due to their overtly specified focuses, neither work is as complete as Wright’s.

Like Savage and Madrid, most comic book scholars tend to focus explicitly on one or two contributors of comic book culture. For instance, David Hajdu, author of *Ten Cent Plague: The Great Comic Book Scare and how it Changed America* directs his work around the various controversies spawned by the comic book industry within its first twenty years of relevance (1940-1960). As a result, Hajdu touches on the content, the readership and the critics, but his primary focus is almost exclusively on the creators and the inner-workings of the comic book industry. Amy Kiste Nyberg’s *History of the Comics Code* offers the most developed insight into the lives of comic culture’s second active member—the critics. Nyberg’s study specifically dissects the motivations behind comic critics leading up to and during the early era of the Comic Book’s Code Authority. Mathew Pustz’s *Comic Book Culture* provides

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the best insight into the lives of comic culture’s third, and arguably most pivotal constituent—the readers. Pustz’s work is a sociological study, and though he argues that comic culture is dominated by the readership, his analysis of the psychological motivations, and the documented trends of comic book readers throughout the twentieth century provides a more comprehensive discussion than any of the other books listed above. All of these texts work together to construct a complete history of comic book culture. What is absent in Pustz’s book may be present in Hajdu’s, and what is absent in Hajdu’s may be present in Nyberg’s or Wright’s. The current scholarship on comic book culture is extremely segmented, primarily because authors to this point have not grouped each of these individual parties into a singular comic book culture. One goal of my work is to bridge this scholarship and create a more functional (and inclusive) understanding of who participated in comic book culture and to what end.

The remaining scholarship on comic books is less concerned with the macro-cultural implications of comic books; instead they focus on singular elements like specific characters, creators, or genres. Frerenc Szasz’s *Atomic Heroes and Atomic Monsters*, for example, is a study of the horror genre during the nuclear age. Szasz’s work examines the contrasting reactions of American and Japanese comic books between 1945 and 1980. Szaz’s extremely specific focus makes it a less accessible

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The Comic Books Code Authority was the self-regulating organization; it was voluntarily constructed by the comic industry in 1954 as response to increasing calls for censorship and government regulations.


secondary source than any of the above listed works, however the information that is present contributes to an understanding of comic book culture in a microhistorical sense. Other works, like Adriane Quinlan’s *A Real-Life Comic Book Superhero* discusses the life and career of Lily Renee Phillips, one of the rare female comic artists of the 1940s and 50s.\textsuperscript{31} This type of work differs from Szaz’s because it less thematic and more biographical; Phillips was an interesting anomaly, but understanding her, or the career of any other comic book creator, only provides various insights into the industry and not a definitive understanding. But again, the extreme focuses of these biographical sources have an important role in the existing historiography; the life of Phillips may not be as essential to my research as the lives of Joe Simon or Jack Kirby (the heralded creators of Captain America), however the Quinlan article helps explain how women were received and treated in an industry dominated by ‘y’ chromosomes (a theme generally absent from other male focused histories).\textsuperscript{32}

Comic book history is a relatively young branch of the much more established field of popular culture history. As a result, the current scholarship is divided by focus and style, not clashing opinions. The first school attempts to present analysis of comic book culture with a definitive focus on one or two active members. The second school is a much more micro approach that generally forgoes any reference to elements outside of their narrow focus. Both schools inform my research; however my specific focus on Captain America suggests that my work...
belongs among the ranks of the second style. The products of the first school provide a sturdy research foundation for my project, allowing me to focus on Captain America; in doing so, I am able to integrate multiple dimensions of comic book, youth, and general American culture into my study.

My intention is to expose the political and social evolution of American youth through comic book content. The only other historian to pay equivalent attention to comic books and youth culture is Bradford Wright; however, Wright’s work analyzes the development of the American youth class as a commercial subculture, with specific attention paid to adult reactions and participation in young America’s mid-century construction. My work analyzes the political and social development of youth culture as outlined by the commercial demands of the American youth itself (as comic book readers). Historians who have focused on the other two contributors of comic culture (creators and critics), help to define how active adults were in defining the political affiliations of the youth. I ultimately argue that though adults were heavily involved and invested, the youth played a much larger role in their own politicization and socialization than historians have previously understood.

Comic book history represents only one half of the historiography I have used in order to construct this project. As I have mentioned, this paper deals with the overlap between two predominant American subcultures, comic book culture and youth culture. Like the history of comic book culture, the history of youth culture has been constructed with the aid of various non-historical disciplines. Anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists have all weighed in to develop a
loose and often contradictory definition of youth culture. Historians have traditionally borrowed from these debates to outline a historical understanding of the American subculture, concentrating on its progression, developments and relationship with rest of American society. The history is really split between two major styles of focus. Historians like James Gilbert, author of *A Cycle of Outrage*, apply a majority of their focus to the adult factions and institutions that vied to categorize and control the rising youth class. This type of scholarship helps us to understand how young America and youth culture were recognized and defined within American society. Additionally, these types of studies examine the adult contribution to the politicization and socialization of the American youth by analyzing whether youth political activity was conforming with or a clashing against the general adult consensus. Other historians, like Thomas Hine, author of *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*, focus mostly on the American teens themselves. This type of scholarship points to the intrinsic (social, political, and even financial) developments within the youth community over the course of the 20th century. Both styles of study are immensly important to the foundation of youth culture history; one defines how half of society recognized, utilized and to some degree, exploited youth culture, while the other defines how youth culture identified and coped with their own recognition and roles in society. A third style of youth culture history exists bringing these two schools together by recognizing the immediate relationships between adult and youth classes in America. A prime

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33 Gilbert, 5.  
example is Beth Bailey’s article, “From Panty Raids to Revolution.” In this piece, Bailey examines a unique circumstance on the Kansas University campus in the 1950s where the expressions and opinions of youth culture faced off—quite literally—with the contrasting expectations of the administrative adult culture. Though these overarching studies of youth culture are rare, they offer exceptionally effective arguments that display actual primary interaction between adults and the youth.

I intend to examine the unique overlap of youth culture and comic book culture throughout the mid-20th century. In order to do so, I have compiled a healthy historiographical base of two seemingly alien scholarships; when brought together however, comic book and youth culture history provide an obvious consistency.

My study will focus on three specific generations of Captain America Comics and youth culture. Recognizing and elaborating on these specific generational divisions is imperative to the foundation of this assignment. By outlining the progressions (and occasional regressions) of Captain America and general comic book content chronologically, we are presented with a nearly perfect outline of the generational developments and alterations of youth sensibilities and awareness. Illuminating the changes within young America becomes exceedingly more effective when attempted through the definitive scope of comic book chronology. For the purpose of cohesiveness, my paper will be divided into three chapters each aligned

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with one of the three listed comic book eras (The Golden Age, the Interregnum and the Marvel Age). With this strict chronological construction, I will be able to explore the specific political and social themes (i.e. American politics, foreign affairs, militarism, gender roles, civil rights, scientific progression, etc.), and study how they varied between each generation of comic book and youth culture.

The political commentary of Cap’s adventures across the world provided a place for American adolescents to study global affairs and consider the impacts of totalitarianism, imperialism and nationalism. The development of these themes were far less advanced in the forties and fifties than they were in the later comics of the sixties and early seventies; however their presence throughout the three generations shows an amplified respect for the young readership’s mental capacity. Creators often flirted with the boundary between propagandist impression and youth culture representation; this is evident through the overwhelmingly pro-democracy charge in most every Captain America title (the exception coming at the conclusion of this paper). 37 I will argue that these comics were, in a sense, a form of propaganda; however, their success can be equated to the youth readership’s acceptance of and contribution to the themes and character representations. My intention is to argue that comic books existed as a dialogue between creators and readers; if the dialogue began to resemble a lecture, the readership would check out, and the comics would fail. This formula is integral to the progression of this paper. The most successful eras of Captain America boasted thematic parallels with the movements of young America, while the era of least popularity represented the

37 Pustz, 29.
exact opposite. Other historians have discussed this style of formula; Paula Fass suggests, “Fads are democratic.”\textsuperscript{38} I will further this concept with references to direct teenage contributions in content creation and fan forums, however do to the limited access of this primary source, my paper will mainly focus on the capitalistic dialogue that existed between the two parties. Though not as direct, the importance of young comic book readers voting on and inspiring content through their own consumption is an integral piece of the equation that should not be ignored.

My first chapter begins in 1938 but deals primarily with the early 1940s, when Captain America content was one-dimensional: pro-establishment, pro-war and overwhelmingly pro-America. At the time, the nation was preoccupied by global struggle and very few political or social issues were capable of trumping the public’s international concerns. Similarly, dissent (in any form) was sparsely acknowledged and hardly tolerated.\textsuperscript{39} Young America in this era was still a burgeoning factor in the great American equation. The comic book industry was one of the first to recognize the adolescent community, and provide them a place to develop and discuss their political and social opinions.\textsuperscript{40} What is extremely unique about this era is the association of the creators themselves. Most of the writers and artists were still members of the young American class, and though they existed on the older end of the generational spectrum, it was their direction that ultimately helped shape the American youth identification. This is an important factor to consider, especially in future generations when creators were undeniably older than their readers.

\textsuperscript{38} Fass, 227.
\textsuperscript{39} David M. Oshinsky, \textit{A Conspiracy so Immense} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 94.
\textsuperscript{40} Wright, 4.
Though youth were integral in the development of their own societal identity, youth culture was heavily influenced by older, predominantly white, Americans. This did not completely corrupt the development of youth culture, but it gave it a more specific association, and a more recognizable foundation and origin.

After the World War, came the Cold War. Early in this era, Captain America struggled to maintain his relevance. As American youth began toiling with their own (nuclear, social, political and burgeoning pubescent) anxieties, Captain America creators refused to shed the unwavering pro-America commentary that defined their hero’s success during the war. The 1950s are often depicted as an era of cultural conformity; in comic books, the conformist demands of their adult critics and censors led to an overall decline of superhero popularity. In this Cold War era, when nationalism and patriotism drove mainstream American politics, Captain America surprisingly struggled to find an authentic voice and was incapable of speaking to young Americans and their concerns. It is these various failures and the eventual disappearance of Captain America in this period that help define the political and social trends of youth culture.

In the 1960s American identity was exponentially more convoluted than it was in the previous two decades. Civil rights, the Cold War, an awareness of domestic containment, and the exploitation of mass media technology created a segmented society. As young Americans grappled with the mores of their newly divided culture, there was a massive crisis of political identity. Just as Captain

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41 Wright, 57-58.
42 Hine, 250.
America was a bastion for the unwavering patriotism of young Americans in the 1940s, in the 1960s, he was rejuvenated as a lens for youth culture’s legitimate political confusion and apprehension. Whereas in previous eras, Captain America had confidently soldiered forward with an unswerving patriotic mission, in the 1960s, he lost his moral certainty, reflecting ambivalence about the mission that had driven him since World War II. These confusions were partially creator constructed, but primarily a response to reader feedback.43 Captain America’s renaissance was based on his transformation into a more complex character with conflicting motivations that spoke to an increasingly segmented youth culture and a troubled American identity.

As the decade progressed, the confusion dissipated and Marvel Comics began doctoring Captain America content to appease a predominantly left leaning audience. My paper will close in the late 1960s and into the 1970s. In this era Captain America adopted a strict anti-hero identity to questioning the very foundations of his origin. This massive ideological overhaul was a response to the vocal political shifts of a specific portion of the 46 million American baby boomers who entered their adolescence during the 1960s. But, as the purpose of this paper will explain, Captain America did not simply transform from World War icon to AWOL Avenger in between monthly releases.44 This metamorphosis occurred parallel to the ideological broadening and changes taking place within young American society. After all, comic books are, and always have been, for kids.

The Golden Age: 
1938-1945

CAPTAIN AMERICA COMICS #1

“U.S.A. (March) 1941. As the ruthless war-mongers of Europe focus their eyes on a peace-loving America...the youth call to arm for defense.” Among the cavalcade of patriotic enlisters is the young Steve Rodgers. But despite Rodgers's fervor, “he was refused because of his unfit condition! His chance to serve his country seemed gone!” Sulking in the gutters of 4F denial, Rodgers contemplates his own significance. His patriotism is unmatched, but his size and his age make him worthless in an era of increased political and military aggression. But nevertheless, even draft board rejection could not spell the end for this eager would-be G.I.

By executive order, two high-ranking military personnel are ushered into the hidden back room of a sinister looking curio shop, deep within New York's shabby tenement district. They stand incognito, garbed in average coats and hats, watching from behind a sheet of safety glass as the brilliant Dr. Reinstein leads his young recruit into his lavishly equipped government laboratory. The doctor's monologue echoes with a heavy tone of nationalist pride and excitement. Steve Rodgers, whose immature body was recently deemed unworthy by the U.S. Army, is now considered the ideal candidate for the secret American Super Soldier program. Dr. Reinstein attempts to comfort the frail young man, “Don't be afraid son...You are about to become one of America's Saviors!” the doctor then injects a large needle into Rodgers's boney arm and explains to his audience, “The formula coursing through his blood is rapidly building his body and brain tissues until his stature and intelligence increase to an amazing degree.” The agents in the nearby observation
room stare and gape in awe as Steve Rodgers is transformed from boy to man in front of their very eyes.

The doctor proudly puffs his chest by the side of his medical masterpiece. “Behold! The crowning achievement of all my years of hard work! The first of a corps of super-agents whose mental and physical ability will make them a terror to spies and saboteurs!” Dr. Reinstein then leans toward Rodgers directly; the hulking American courteously lowers his head toward the dwarfed doctor. “We shall call you Captain America son! Because like you—America shall gain the strength and the will to safeguard our shores!”

“But the hand of democracy’s enemy reaches deep into the ranks of America’s high officials...One of the Army men witnessing the demonstration is in the pay of Hitler’s Gestapo!” Reaching into his blue blazer, the saboteur reveals his Luger PO8; the double-agent quickly lays waste to the doctor, then everyone else in the observation room. But in his zealous rage, the traitor overlooks one important attendee of the day’s event. His eyes widen in horror as the glorious image of the patriotic avenger leaps toward him. Captain America issues an unreserved walloping, tossing the enemy agent from one panel to the next. In a brief moment of relent, the spy attempts to flee, but, overcome by his own fear and pain, he mistakenly stumbles headlong into a cove of dangerous laboratory equipment. The double crosser quickly becomes entangled in the machines’ powerful coils and wires which cause an endless stream of electricity to burrow beneath his skin and burn out his life. Under a heavy brow and unflinching frown, Captain America offers his observation to a now empty room, “Nothing left of him but charred ashes...A fate he...
well deserved!"

"Who is Captain America? A whole nation thrills to his daring exploits! His name becomes a symbol of courage to millions of Americans...And a by-word of terror in the shadow-world of spies! Although the wonder formula has been destroyed—its first creation...Captain America, becomes a powerful force in the battle against spies and saboteurs!"

Under an amassment of hero-toting headlines, Camp Lehigh's young mascot, Bucky Barnes, selects his favorite to share with Army Ranger recruit Steve Rodgers. “Oh...Steve...Steve! lookit, This Captain America’s done it again! Boy—How I’d like to meet that guy! I wish I could be like him!” The cavalier Rodgers glances down at the eager boy's newspaper, “Maybe you can Bucky...Maybe you can.”

**THE CAPTAIN, THE KIDS AND THE GOLDEN AGE OF COMICS**

Steve Rodgers was a teenage boy, and like many young people in 1941 American society he was largely overlooked and underestimated. The American *teenager* technically did not exist at this point in history, but as historian Thomas Hine explains, a lack of mainstream recognition did not equate to a complete non-existence. Steve Rodgers reflected this emerging class of American citizens; as a boy, his mind and body failed to meet American (military) standards, but as Captain America, Rodgers proved that American standards were outdated. Rodgers embodied a patriotic curiosity typical of American youth; his nationalistic fervor,

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and recognition of the Nazi threat exceeded general American expectations of young people’s mental capacity.\(^4\) Granted, the youth understanding of social and political issues were not as developed as older generations; but a recognition of the war, as well as the youth’s place within a mobilizing American landscape were important inclusions in *Captain America Comics* that represented the thoughts and opinions of the comic book industry’s young readers and creators.\(^5\)

By 1941, superhero comics had manufactured a tradition of subjecting adult issues to the scrutinizing justice of young readers. America’s first and arguably most recognizable super powered protagonist, Superman, was introduced in 1938’s *Action Comics #1*. In his 15-page inaugural crusade, the Man-of-Steel halted a public lynching, staved an unjust execution, upended a domestic dispute, handled a ring of organized gangsters and uncovered a massive senatorial scandal.\(^6\) Some historians argue that this explosion of Depression era issues was intended to be a literary assault on the various injustices plaguing American immigrants and the poverty-stricken lower class.\(^7\) Others believe that the hero was designed as a literary interpretation of the Judeo-Christian Messiah.\(^8\) But Superman did not appeal primarily to an audience of immigrants or religious zealots; his righteous might and idealized sense of justice rallied a predominantly youth readership.\(^9\) Governmental

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\(^5\) Mintz, 258.
\(^9\) Hajdu, 33.
inefficiency, corruption and organized crimes were adult issues, but, in the eyes of the youth, adults were failing to handle these problems. In a broken society, Superman was the champion of a budding youth culture; Big Blue accomplished more in 15 pages than any actual police force or government agency could do in a year. His justice was swift and unquestioning; he was the literal picture of American potential, idealized by a somewhat naive impression of good and evil.\textsuperscript{10}

The world Superman inhabited in 1938 was simplified to a severe degree of black and white. Superman rescued good guys while punishing bad guys; he operated outside of the law, but used American legal and moral guidelines as standards to differentiate between citizens and criminals.\textsuperscript{11} Despite all of their intellectual growth, in the 1930s and the 1940s the American adolescent’s world view was still not sophisticated enough to truly comprehend the varying severities of crime, and the ramifications or implications of how those crimes could be dealt with.\textsuperscript{12} This is why heroes like Superman could exist; their ultimate justice was believable, acceptable and desired. After the war, the effects of accepting and encouraging this abbreviated understanding were debated on a national stage, but before and during the war, this exaggerated good versus evil mentality was largely

\textsuperscript{10} In an interview with writer Jack Alexander, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover expounded on his appreciations of heroic characters (like his personal favorite) Dick Tracy, citing that he, “Consider(ed) them highly important influences in creating a public distaste for crime.” Quoted in Hajdu, 30. Additionally, after only a handful of issues, New York Mayor Fiorello La Guardia famously called the Timely Publishing (the publishing company behind Captain America) to personally congratulate Joe Simon on the success of Captain America.


\textsuperscript{12} Mintz, 255.
applauded.\textsuperscript{13}

The potent success of Superman's simplified American \textit{Metropolis} spawned an upsurge of costumed progenies. With the detached blessing of most adult onlookers, by 1941 thirty comic book publishers were churning out over 150 titles selling approximately 15-18 million magazines each month.\textsuperscript{14} By 1943, comic book consumption had boomed to an astounding 120 million readers.\textsuperscript{15} But the comic book industry did not simply materialize out of nothing; the conditions for comic book success were laid within the creation of youth culture itself.\textsuperscript{16} As Paula Fass explains, the first indication of a unified young America appeared in the 1920s.\textsuperscript{17} Throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s youth culture expanded rapidly. But it was not the physical population of Americans under the age of 21 that increased, it was their ability to unify and bond.\textsuperscript{18} Most historians point to the newly developed popularity of extended education (Junior and High School) as the foundation behind this phenomenon. Previous generations of American youth forwent education in lieu of work or familial obligations; the depressed economy and the larger urban populations of the 1930s led to a much higher enrollment in educational

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Hajdu62} Hajdu, 62.  
\bibitem{Hajdu30} A small faction of concerned Americans did speak out about the rise in comic book popularity in the early decade. Leading the charge was American author Sterling North, who asserted that comic books generated illiteracy and literally blinded young American readers. Hajdu, 30, 40.
\bibitem{Mintz236} Mintz, 236.
\end{thebibliography}
institutions.\textsuperscript{19} According to youth historian Steven Mintz, "The Depression marked a watershed in childhood experience in several (other) ways. The economic crisis of the 1930s not only ended child labor; it ultimately made high school attendance a modal experience for adolescents."\textsuperscript{20} The rise in high school attendance led directly to a rise in shared adolescent experiences, ideas and interests. The comic book industry was the first to identify and exploit this growing culture, both as consumers and, just as importantly, as contributors.\textsuperscript{21} Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster first conceived \textit{Superman} in 1931 at the tender age of 17, a 23-year-old Bob Kane first sketched \textit{Batman} in 1939, a year later, Kane's classmate, Will Eisner, first published \textit{the Spirit} (a pulp comic fueled by society's darker transgressions) at the age of 22, although he actually began his comic career three years earlier.\textsuperscript{22} In the 1930s, the American youth were evolving at a rapid pace and no one was better suited to explore and direct the trends of the burgeoning culture than the adolescents themselves.

The partnership between comic books and young America was successful during the Golden Age for two reasons. First, adolescents reading comic books understood that this medium was exclusively their own. David Hajdu explains, "Nearly all young people—boys and girls, loners, athletes, scholars, and debutantes—read comic books, and most of their parents did not. To read comics

\textsuperscript{19} Hine, 204.
\textsuperscript{20} Mintz, 236.
\textsuperscript{21} Hajdu, 5.
\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Secret Origin: the Story of DC Comics}, DVD, directed by Mac Carter (Burbank: Warner Home Video, 2010).
Hajdu, 50.
was to belong to a vast yet exclusive club, one whose membership was restricted primarily by age.” Ted White, who was a teenage comic fan in the 1940s, validates Hajdu's sentiments, “Everything else was ‘Ladies and Gentlemen’ and comic books were ‘hey boys and girls!”  

Jules Feiffer—who would eventually grow up to become one of the most influential satirical cartoonists of the 20th century—fondly remembers his own comic book laced childhood, “(Comic books) were less grown up than anything...there was practically nothing else that we thought of as our own in those days.”

In an era in which young Americans were still not collectively identified as a singular “youth culture,” comic books provided a communal recognition from which individual adolescents could derive great pleasure.

The second reason comic books were capable of succeeding came from the relatability of their creators. In short, comic creators were as much a part of youth culture as the comic readers. As explained earlier, the young age of the comic authors and artists provided a direct connection to the younigness of their readers; but beyond simple age ranges, the comic industry itself acted as a microcosm for the rising generational disparity. The comic creators represented the youth class while the comic publishers, editors and other comic industry authorities played the role of unwitting older American adults. Though both were integral to the construction of comic books, there was a fundamental difference between the two parties. Creators considered themselves the scribes of a generation. Authors and artists in the Golden Age made conscious efforts not to underestimate their readership’s mental ability, because they themselves knew first hand the actual mental potential of an American

23 Quoted in Hajdu, 37.
24 Quoted in Hajdu, 36.
adolescent. For Stanley Lieber (who later became the world renowned comic book creator, Stan Lee), the comic book was not some “cheap, low art form.”\(^{25}\) Instead, Lieber—who was first granted the opportunity to contribute to a *Captain America Comics* script at the age of 17—treated his work as if he were writing “the Great American Novel.”\(^{26}\) Publishers, on the other hand, were generally older and cared more for the profitability of their product than its cultural potential and importance. In his autobiography, Joe Simon reflects on the heavy adult undertow that slightly mucked the otherwise pure Golden Age comic book industry, “As comic books became a national fad, more publishers turned to the cheap little newsprint magazines for an easy buck...It was not unusual for a publisher unfamiliar with the comic book business to take a fling at the field, fail, and come out with a profit...All the while, mainstream publishing companies had been observing the field: checking sales figures, projecting the low overhead into profits under their superior distribution.”\(^{27}\)

The diverse interests of the two parties predictably led to constant infighting. Much like the rest of the younger American community, comic creators felt that their own interests, needs and desires were invalidated when they contradicted those of the publishers, who represented an American society dominated by adult authority. Will Eisner, who, as has been explained, entered the comic industry at 19-years-old, was actually forced to battle with closed-minded superiors on a number of occasions. “Hey,” the spirited adolescent would interject, “Don’t underestimate

\(^{25}\) Commonly used description for comic books as remembered by Will Eisner. Hajdu, 38.
\(^{26}\) Simon with Simon, 46.
\(^{27}\) Simon with Simon, 37.
me because of my age.” Eisner elaborates, “I got into a confrontation with the guys at Eisner and Iger over this...when I made the decision to do *The Spirit*, I thought that comic books could be an art form, a literary art form and the guys at the shop said that I was being uppity.”28 But even for older comic creators, like Joe Simon (who was 27 the year he and 22-year-old Jack Kirby released *Captain America*), the bond was tighter with younger readers than with older publishers. In his autobiography, Simon laments over “Uncle Robbie,” one of the more oblivious adult obstructions of the era, who enjoyed lording his age-entitled superiority over his subordinates.

“Uncle Robbie was all over the place. He fancied himself an art critic, a story critic, a circulation trouble-shooter, when in fact he was a first class obstacle.”29 By constantly interjecting his adult opinion, Uncle Robbie assumed he was protecting the interests of the publishing company, but was unaware that the true success of comic books did not come from his strict adult authority, but rather from the adolescent persuasion of the writers and artists he constantly dismissed and degraded.

**CAPTAIN AMERICA’S EDUCATED READERS (AND WRITERS)**

By 1940, 73% of American teens (aged fourteen to seventeen) were enrolled in high school. Even with the war adversely affecting attendance rates (most adolescents were required to either enlist or to re-enter the work force), over 50% of American teens still managed to graduate.30 This was a major stride forward from a decade earlier, when the graduation rate was approximately 30% (which in itself

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28 Quoted in Hajdu, 39.
29 Simon, 46.
30 Gilbert, 18-19
was a major improvement, up nearly 10% from the previous decade).\textsuperscript{31} Even if high schools were being utilized as free childcare or social hubs, American teens could not avoid the transitive effects of education. With furthered education came a heightened awareness of society and an increased ability for political and social assessment; a major part of the comic book industry’s success during this era was its acknowledgement of American teen’s newly sharpened cultural consciousness. Although it may be easy to look back on Captain America adventures and misinterpret them as purely propagandist and exploitative, in reality, Captain America books were among the most respectful of young America’s growing intelligence.\textsuperscript{32} There is no question that a certain level of propaganda did exist inside of Captain America’s patriotic pages; however, I argue that the Cap was still one of the era’s most reflective images of young America.

In the 1940s, American society was understandably preoccupied. The lingering economic depression and the looming threat of a global war dominated the political and social consciousness of most Americans. As a result, American youth culture was allowed to continue its growth organically.\textsuperscript{33} But freedom to grow also equated to a serious lack of recognition. Steve Rodgers, who desperately wanted to serve his country, was unfairly deemed too ill equipped to participate.\textsuperscript{34} This was not just a convenient plot point, but also a metaphor for America’s outdated

\textsuperscript{31} These numbers are national estimations based on a study of localized graduation rates in the Mid-Atlantic region from the late 1920s through the late 1930s. Claudia Goldin and Lawrence F. Katz, \textit{The Race Between Education and Technology} (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2008), 205.
\textsuperscript{32} Simon with Simon, 42.
\textsuperscript{33} Gilbert, 20-23.
\textsuperscript{34} Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, \textit{Captain America Comics #1}, in \textit{Marvel Masterworks: Golden Age Captain America, Vol.1} (New York: Marvel Publishing Group, 2005).
standard of reference. Like the young Siegel and Shuster who used Superman as a platform to rally against adult inefficiencies in Depression era America, the creators of Captain America, Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, sought to instill a stronger foundation of self worth in the largely undervalued members of young America.\textsuperscript{35} In his work on the historical construction of the teenage subculture Thomas Hine explains, “If properly directed, young people can use their imaginations, their emotional expressiveness, their self-control and their capacity for learning and understanding to navigate the psychic minefield.”\textsuperscript{36} Simon and Kirby employed Captain America to help their readers traverse the communal confusions of adolescence, which were being exaggerated by the traumatic global events of early 1940s American society. In the months before Pearl Harbor and throughout the war, Simon and Kirby argued—through Captain America—that despite their size and age, young Americans were not only conscious of American perils, but could also be important agents in the reconstruction and protection of American society.

Captain America’s patriotic adventures lent encouragement, or at the very least, a welcomed distraction to young Americans serving their country overseas. Along with letters from home and pictures of loved ones, comic books became a staple in troop care packages; it is estimated that one in every four magazines shipped overseas was a comic book, and at its peak, nearly 35,000 issues of Superman were being shipped each month.\textsuperscript{37} In a 1944 letter to the editor printed in the \textit{New York Times}, one eager patriot described comic books as, “An easily

\textsuperscript{35} Simon with Simon, 42.
\textsuperscript{36} Hine, 36.
\textsuperscript{37} Wright, 31.
digested and enjoyable escape (for the troops).”38. Before Pearl Harbor, Simon and Kirby crafted stories that enticed, excited, and sometimes enraged their readers, all while encouraging them to enlist. (Before Steve Rodgers was Captain America, his bravery, zeal for American justice, and his voluntary enlistment still made him a hero to his readers.) But after Pearl Harbor, an emphasis was placed on the importance of younger adolescents serving their country. At the end of select Captain America adventures, the Cap would glare through the fourth wall, and explain how his young readers could shed their prescribed insignificance and contribute to the American mobilization effort. Concluding 1942’s “The Tunnel of Terror,” a stern faced Captain America pointed out of page and directly at the collective noses of his entranced audience (picture a virtual Uncle Sam designed specifically for adolescent recruitment); the “Message from Captain America” read, “SENTINELS! AMERICANS ALL! Do you realize that you are being called upon to share the task of pulling our nation thru its great crisis? Do you realize that by buying Defense Savings Stamps you are doing as much in your way to win the war for America as our brave soldiers are doing in their valiant battle! Don’t fail the nation which has never failed you! BUY DEFENSE STAMPS FOR VICTORY!”39 In an earlier issue, a two-page splash boasted Captain America with his arms spanning the fold. “ATTENTION AMERICANS: WE WANT YOU TO BUY LESS COMIC MAGAZINES! Yes, even if it means that our own sales will suffer!...REMEMBER: YOUR DIME MAY

PAY FOR THE BULLET WHICH WILL FINISH OFF THE LAST JAP! FIGHT SIDE-BY-SIDE WITH CAPTAIN AMERICA FOR VICTORY! Signed—Martin Goodman, Publisher Timely Comics, Inc.” Underneath the publisher’s selfless proposal was a list of military necessities, a colorful image of each item and their associated costs (conveniently converted into the comic book equivalent), “485 dimes will buy 1 deadly M-1903 rifle! 35 dimes will buy 1 soldier’s haversack! 25 Dimes will buy 1 hand grenade! 70 dimes will buy 100 .30 caliber shells! 55 dimes will feed 10 soldiers for a day! 350 dimes will buy 10 avenging bayonets!” 40 In a 1944 issue instead of thwarting the usual breed of imperialist villains, Captain America and his young ally, Bucky Barnes (a stand-in for the young readers), trolled a local American neighborhood, collecting scrap metal in the bed of their little red wagon. 41 The message of this specific book was obvious: though scrap collection seemed menial and insignificant compared to the Cap’s standard docket of freedom preserving obligations, it was still a duty required of any true American hero. Furthermore, it was a duty that did not require bulging biceps or spectacular powers. Buying war bonds, donating their dimes, scrap collecting and the countless other Cap endorsed chores were realistic accomplishments for the patriotic younger generations. In the back pages of Captain America Comics #13, the Cap’s teenage sidekick Bucky Barnes is seen exuberantly exclaiming, “Hi Pals! ...I know that lots of you kids who are about my age are wondering what you can do to help our nation! Here’s what we can all do—and what we WILL do by golly!...(1.)We’re gonna buy all the United States

41 Gilbert, 34.
Defense Stamps we can! ...(2.) We’re gonna give the Red Cross all the money and support we can ... (3.) We’re gonna pitch in and CHEER and give our country and our leaders all the support they deserve! Remember, our most important task is to KEEP SMILING!”

Captain America was designed around a standard of youth empowerment. During the war, he and most of his comic compatriots advised young Americans how they could make measurable differences within society. This message eventually infused other facets of popular culture. Movies, music and radio serials all contributed to a national patriotic agenda. A booklet in 1943 titled *Your Children in Wartime* explained that the “Boys and girls of the United States of America are enlisted for the duration of the war as citizen soldiers. This is a total war, nobody is left out.” The Office of War Information (OWI) also reached out to entertainment producers, imploring them to follow the administration’s wartime guidelines, and by 1941, Hollywood and the various other entertainment enterprises were churning out pro-war propaganda in bulk.

Nationalist pamphlets and movie serials were effective in mobilizing the hearts and minds of the American people, but they suffered from some inherent limitations. Even when they included a focus on youth, most wartime productions

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42 Gilbert, 34.
43 Wright, 34.
44 Mintz, 258.
45 These were the same patriotic guidelines proudly presented in Comic Books since 1939. Wright, 34, 39.
Simon with Simon, 42.
were marketed specifically toward adults. The issues with this overt concentration were seen throughout the wartime media. In the above referenced *Your Children in Wartime*, Author Angelo Patri—a renowned professional in the field of child rearing and development—including youth in his text, but downplayed the depth of their awareness and potential for societal contribution. Patri designed *Your Children* to educate parents and teachers on how to shape and maintain youth morale during the war. Throughout his book, Patri preached the effectiveness of positivity and applied naivety, advising parents to keep their children distracted, delaying the war’s mental permeation as long as possible. “Busy children are happy children, and happy children have a hold on health that even a war fails to loosen.”46 To teachers, Patri offered, “School children are on the sidelines of this war. They look on, feel our unrest and our worry while they understand only in part. What we must try hard to do is to rear these children as nearly as possible in the usual healthy fashion. Let them be children with children’s interests, in a children’s world.”47 Though Patri did express a greater appreciation for youth mental maturity than most of his cohorts, his text was laced with conspicuous condescension; he suggested it was possible to deceive the younger generation into believing the war was less severe, or potentially a non-factor in their daily lives. But the real teenage degradation came in his specific address to “Older Boys and Girls,” where Patri promoted the importance of their muted temperament and behavior. “You boys and girls of the older groups can do a great deal to help in these troubled days. People are worried and nervous...Move quietly wherever you go...Go softly in a manner of speech and

46 Patri, 8.
47 Patri, 77.
action. Walk. Running excites other people...Talk softly. Shouts make people jumpy...Leave off being funny. Clowning is out for the duration...Cut out all funny business....”

The list of things not to do continued on, and though Patri offered some effective advice to the younger generation, it appears his chief concern was the limitation of their annoyance. This was the fundamental difference between the adult impression of youth culture and young America’s own impression of themselves. Patri instructed America’s youth to keep quiet, meanwhile Captain America’s creators wanted their kids to cheer and keep smiling. Patri thought that kids could be deceived into staying out of the way, but comic creators (a majority of whom were still young themselves) believed that America’s youth were not only aware of the war, but could actually aid their country.

American adolescents considered themselves vital contributors on the American home front. The Cap’s fleeting encouragements and advisements at the end of every issue were legitimate efforts to both recruit more youth aid as well as publicly applaud the current wartime contributors by bolstering their personal sense of pride and strengthening the public impression of their volunteering.

Historian Steven Mintz refers to the story of Joan Dooley—a young Girl Scout from Wichita, Kansas—to elaborate on the type of adolescent assistance endorsed by Captain America. In a letter to General Douglas MacArthur, Dooley outlined her community services. “She was doing her ‘bit by taking care of small children so that the parents may work in war factories.’ She and her friends ran ‘errands for people’

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48 Patri, 107-108.
and bought a war stamp every time they had a quarter.”

Mintz consolidates the joint efforts of young Americans: “By planting a Victory garden, raising chickens, cutting back on nonessential items, and finding substitutes for goods in short supply, children assisted their families (and communities) in making do during the war.”

**Bucky Barnes: the Successes and Failures of Young America in Comic Books**

Captain America was far less constrained by a desire to please the adult demographic. His appeal came in his directness and his inclusion of American youth. Advocacy of public service was a method of youth empowerment, but for creators to truly capture the hearts and minds of young Americans, they also needed to somehow include them in the texts. Captain America’s secret identity was the muscle bound Army Ranger *Steve Rodgers*, but readers familiar with Captain America’s origin story knew that the potato peeling G.I. was technically a second guise concealing the identity of the eager young patriot *Steve Rodgers*, introduced in *Captain America Comics #1*. This meant that all of the accomplishments and triumphs of Captain America were, in a way, the indirect successes of an American adolescent. But this metaphor was limited; the young Rodgers’s cerebral comprehension and commitment made him a romanticized champion of youth culture, but he was technically not a physical hero until his muscles and brain were matured to the rank of American adult.

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50 Mintz, 258.
51 Mintz, 258.
52 Wright, 27.
dilemmas in the past: how was it possible for American adolescents to feel completely engaged in their heroes’ escapades and messages if their heroes had more physically in common with their parents’ generation than their own?

In February of 1940, Fawcett Comics’ *Whiz Comics #2* provided a unique response to this question with the introduction of *the Earth’s Mightiest Mortal*: *Captain Marvel*. Originally conceived by comic creators C.C Beck and Bill Parker in the fall of 1939, Captain Marvel eventually became the Golden Era’s single most popular character. The format of the hero and the basic plot points were fairly cliché, so cliché in fact that Fawcett Comics spent a majority of the decade fending off infringement lawsuits from DC comics, who claimed the Captain Marvel creators had unlawfully violated a copyright they had on the Superman design. But despite all of their similarities, Captain Marvel had one definitive advantage over Superman: his alter ego. When Superman was done symbolically lamenting over the conditions of adult-run America, he re-concealed his tights beneath a sport coat and tie and returned to his mundane existence as adult newspaper journalist Clark Kent. When Captain Marvel concluded his heroic duties, he uttered the magic words “SHAZAM!” and returned to his life as the noble twelve-year-old news correspondent Billy Batson. In a way, Billy’s life was just as exciting as Captain Marvel’s. The comic adventures took Billy right to the brink of action; he traveled around the city,

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54 According to Captain Marvel enthusiasts, Chip Kidd and Geoff Spear, “The reason they chose to go after Fawcett, as opposed to any of the other comics publishers who were producing superheroes, seems clear: Captain Marvel was the only one who’d sold better than Superman. By a lot—fourteen million copies in a month.” Chip Kidd and Geoff Spear, *SHAZAM: the Golden Age of the World’s Mightiest Mortal*, (New York: Abrams, 2010)

interviewing interesting people and gathering important intel on would be villains and saboteurs. Mentally, Billy was advanced enough to comprehend the world around him, but when real trouble neared... SHAZAM! Just like Steve Rodgers to Captain America, Billy had to call upon his adult self to handle dangerous situations, but in doing so, he was forced to sever his physical bond with his audience.

Two months after the introduction of Captain Marvel, famed Batman creative team Bob Kane and Bill Finger tried their hand at youth inclusion with the introduction of Robin, the Boy Wonder. In his first 10 issues, Batman’s blend of gritty pulp detective work and depression era crime busting lent to an enticing, but slightly generic Golden Age hero motif. According to most historians, Batman secured a considerable presence in the market, but his obvious handicap was his physical distance from his readers; his adventures were exciting, but not immediately relatable. Robin was a radical deviation from the typical Batman formula. Ideologically, they were equivalent; both Batman and his young ward shared a thirst for justice (the same simplified sense of justice defined in Action Comics #1), but physically, Batman and Robin were polar opposites. Batman was dark and brooding, Robin was young and vibrant. The introduction of Robin provided an entre for youth readers; through Robin, they could vicariously experience all of the Dark Knight’s adventures, making his stories more exciting and

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56 Kidd and Spear.
his brand more personal.⁶¹

Robin represented the first wave of the Golden Age’s sidekick tsunami. Over the next two years, the Human Torch adopted Toro, the Black Terror enlisted Kid Terror, and Captain Marvel introduced his readers to both Captain Marvel Jr. and his kid sister Mary Marvel. The teenage sidekick was the perfect comic book archetype.

In this era, comic creators were searching desperately for a way to communicate and relate with their young readers; the sidekick not only created a physical youth presence in comic books, it gave the heroes someone to talk to. Golden Age comic content was a conversation between comic creators and comic readers; starting with the birth of Robin, the dialogue between heroes and their sidekicks became a meta-transcript of the creator-reader exchange. Current Executive Publisher of DC Comics, Dan DiDio, expands on how this operated within the early Batman-Robin dynamic. “You had other characters for Batman to get exposition out through, whether it was a relationship with Alfred (the Butler) later on, or Commissioner Gordon, but those are different types of relationships and can only go so far. If the two people are sharing an adventure together, there can be a lot more discussion about how events are unfolding or what the thought processes are.”⁶² The hero provided a depth of awareness and observation to the conversations while the sidekick brought important ideas and inquiries. Both characters were reflective of youth culture, but this relationship was, more often than not, the subject of critical misinterpretation. Understandably, most non-comic readers immediately viewed

the hero-sidekick bond as strictly paternal, implanting the hero into the role of experienced father and the sidekick into the role of impressionable son; famed anti-comic book advocate Frederic Wertham went as far as to suggest that the relationship crossed a boundary of homosexual pedophilia. But according to Comic Historian Thomas Andre, neither of these assumptions were accurate. Quoting Bill Finger (the author and often un-credited co-creator of Batman), Andre explains, “He was writing a big brother relationship, rather than a father-son, but I think the father-son relationship crept in there as well. So there was a tension between Batman being a father figure and being a big brother figure.” Literary scholar Phil Cousineau describes the unique role Batman assumed in more recognizable familial terms. “The ‘fatherly big brother’, who will take care of him and show him how to become a man, and in this process of the mentorship, the kid is completely free. It’s the dream of all young teens.”

During World War II, over ten million fathers, uncles and older brothers served overseas in the U.S. armed forces. The impact of their absence was evident everywhere in society, but most predominantly within the workforce. During the war, women, minorities, and in some circumstances older adolescents, were forced to fill the recently emptied role of the American male working class. Additionally, many families (an estimated 15.3 million American citizens) voyaged away from

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63 Wright, 161.
Kennedy, 171.
Mintz, 258-259.
their homes to start new lives in industrializing military areas like Colorado and Southern California. Steven Mintz elaborates on the detrimental impact these massive societal shifts had on the American adolescents and their once familiar familial structure, “Children lived in a society shaken and disrupted by war. Many were growing up in homes without fathers and with working mothers. Frequent migration subjected children to extreme social and psychological dislocation... Although it is uncertain whether juvenile delinquency or parental neglect were greater problems in the United states in the 1940s... there is a mass of evidence indicating that social workers, psychologists, and public leaders were deeply troubled by the war’s impact on the young.” Comic books attempted to stave off these harsh realities by re-implementing a sense of familiarity in their readers’ lives. Comic heroes could never physically replace the absent fathers or brothers, but through the mentorship of their young sidekicks, superheroes partially filled the instructive void left by the removal of older males from society.

Introduced in the final two pages of Captain America’s first issue, Bucky Barnes became Cap’s proverbial kid brother. Captain America taught Bucky the difference between right and wrong through ideologically loaded skirmishes with overtly evil antagonists. Captain America, like most comic heroes of the era, acted as a moral compass, while Bucky, like most other sidekicks, was a surrogate for the young readers; when the Cap lectured Bucky on the virtues of justice and liberty, he was, in a sense, attempting to educate his readers. Likewise, when Bucky presented observations or inquiries, they represented the common input of the younger

67 Mintz, 257.
68 Mintz, 260.
generation, prepared by the creators, their families, or the countless fan letters written each month.\textsuperscript{69} This was the basic formula for most hero-sidekick relationships; the difference in Cap and Bucky’s relationship however came from Captain America’s specific nationalistic design. Rather than teaching Bucky how to identify crime and immorality in a normal American landscape, (ala the Batman-Robin relationship within the fictitious Gotham City), Captain America’s lessons took a more political and militaristic tone by identifying villainy and evil on a global stage. Nazis, and eventually the Japanese, were bad because they were the enemies of America and democracy, which were invariably good.

Bucky (and all teenage sidekicks of the era) were major factors in the progression of young America; they displayed adolescents thinking and acting well beyond society’s established expectations.\textsuperscript{70} But despite their revolutionary actions, sidekicks also represented a severe deficiency within America’s younger generation. According to Comic creator Jim Steranko, who grew up in the comic book culture of the Golden Age, “No kid wanted to be Bucky, if he could be Captain America instead.”\textsuperscript{71} Sidekicks were, by design, incapable of becoming heroes; and though they advanced the concept of a strengthening youth culture, they simultaneously hindered its progression by creating a restriction on the amount of adolescent accomplishment that was possible in comics.

No other sidekick represented this paradox more than Bucky Barnes.

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\textsuperscript{69} Simon with Simon, 42-43. \\
David Hajdu expands on the essential youth centricity of Golden Aged comic books Hajdu, 34-37. \\
\textsuperscript{70} Mintz, 255. \\
\textsuperscript{71} Matthew Pustz. \textit{Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers}. (Jackson, Mi: University of Mississippi Press, 1999), 28. 
\end{flushright}
Although he wore a mask and fought alongside the patriotically disguised Captain America, Bucky himself was unworthy of a heroic secret identity. His real name was known to every one of Captain America’s nemeses (making his little over-the-eye mask fairly redundant). In *Captain America Comics #2 “The Wax Statue of Death”* the sinister Wax Man instructs his henchmen to sneak onto the Army Camp Lehigh and abduct Captain America’s young colleague. The masters of villainy were unable to piece together the mystery behind Captain America’s hidden persona, but Bucky Barnes’s not-so-secret identity was too obvious to ignore. With little complication, the Nazi agents were able to sneak onto the army base, identify their 12-year-old mark (even without his signature sidekick duds) and escort him back to the Wax Man’s secret lair. In Bucky’s place, the kidnappers left a perfect wax replica of Bucky’s head, not the sidekick masked version of Bucky, but the normal, Camp Lehigh mascot, James Buchannan “Bucky” Barnes version. Later in the comic, Cap rescues Bucky who then helps the hero eradicate the Nazi thugs. Two panels later, Bucky is mysteriously back in his sidekick uniform with no explanation provided for his seemingly singular civilian and sidekick identities. It was not Bucky’s lack of secret identity that was damning to the character; it was his creators’ assumedly subconscious reluctance to even acknowledge that a need for a secret identity existed. Bucky’s presence in the book was important, but his degraded role reflected the limited expectations and self-identifications that continued to constrict

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72 Rather than an awesomely patriotic guise like his headline-grabbing mentor, Bucky was simply named after one of Joe Simon’s childhood friend. Simon with Simon, 43.

young America.

After Pearl Harbor, Bucky escorted Steve Rodgers's Ranger unit overseas, once there, he continued to fight along side Captain America in both the Pacific as well as the European theatres. While Captain America only needed his signature shield in battle (he was, after all, a character designed for defense, not aggression), Bucky was trusted to wield a slew of weapons ranging from pyrotechnic flamethrowers to the purely American Louisville Slugger. But again, his contributions were strained by his inability to accomplish a mission without being apprehended by the enemy. On fifteen of Captain America's first thirty covers (March 1941-August 1943), Bucky is being shackled, gagged, or somehow tortured by the book's title villain; in the stories, Captain America would have to divert from his original mission in order to (re)rescue his burdensome apprentice. Bucky Barnes filled the classic literary damsel-in-distress role, substituting the standard sexual tension with a brotherly comradery and devotion. Bucky was essentially a prop used by the creators to propel the story line; Captain America considered Bucky an important and trusted ally, but by constantly placing Bucky in danger, the creators proved that the young soldier was more of a liability than he was an asset in dangerous adult situations.

Finally, part of Bucky Barnes’s duty as Captain America’s sidekick was to construct his own team of young crime fighters. The team called themselves the Sentinels of Liberty, which was a direct reference to the official Captain America fan

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club of the same name (eventually, the publishers would give the Sentinels their own comic series and changed the name to *Young Allies*, an homage to a series of World War I dime novels enjoyed by co-creator Joe Simon as a young boy). The team itself was a testament to youth empowerment; at the age of 19, co-creator and author Stan Lee promoted the title, explaining in a brief caption, “When Patriotic American boys are on the march, let evil-doers beware!” In one of the team’s first adventures, a two page text-story tucked in the back of a Captain America comic, the team’s token street urchin, Knuckles, comes upon a group of mugs hassling United States Special Investigator Betty Ross (first introduced in *Captain America Comics* #2). Knuckles ponders to himself, “I can’t be any help against those four gangsters, but maybe the Sentinels of Liberty can,” and so Knuckles flees down the street, shouting “YAHOO!” and rallying the attention of his fellow Sentinels, including Bucky Barnes. Hot to act, the Sentinels encourage Bucky to devise a plan. With little hesitation, Bucky confronts his loyal herd, “Look, I wanta make a phone call for a minute. I’ll be right back.” He then retreats into the nearby corner store. Inside the store, Bucky rings his old(er) pal Captain America, and briefs him on the situation. After hanging up the phone, Bucky recollects the attention of the four anxious Sentinels waiting outside. Sharing one final exuberant YAHOO! the five teenage boys forge headlong into the gangsters’ hideout. To this point in the story, the crack investigatory skills, the dedicated teamwork and the collective bravery of the Sentinels of Liberty make them appear as heroes, but once inside the villains’ domain, reality sets back in, and the five boys are quickly overpowered by their

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75 Simon with Simon, 45.
much older and much larger foes. With doom impending and the story seemingly 
close to an unfortunate conclusion, Captain America bursts through the wall to save 
the day. Though he rescues the Sentinels from a doubtlessly bloody end, Captain 
America concurrently robs the teenage team of their chance to step out of his 
shadow and prove themselves worthy of their own heroic status.

Bucky Barnes, the Sentinels of Liberty, Billy Batson, Robin the Boy Wonder, 
and all other teenage comic characters and sidekicks represented a major 
progression inside of youth culture during the Golden Age. Including teens in comic 
adventures was revolutionary, but at the end of each issue, the teens were clearly 
the second-class attraction. Adolescents did not fantasize about being adolescents, 
because, as Bucky Barnes clearly displayed, the adolescent characters were still 
inferior to the adults in the stories. The teenage sidekicks succeeded in blurring 
the lines between what was expected of young America and what was actually 
possible; however, they failed in removing those boundaries completely.

**BETTY, WHITESWASH AND SERGEANT DUFFY:**
**THE VARIOUS EMPOWERED AND DISEMPowered CHARACTERS OF CAPTAIN AMERICA COMICS**

When it came to character representation, comic books were often simple 
reflections how their adolescent audiences already perceived the world around 
them. Comic books manufactured familiar landscapes and populated them with 
familiar characters. The sidekick is an example of how American teens perceived 
their own place in society, and how that perception actually contradicted American 
cultural expectation. But comic representations were hardly limited to American

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77 Pustz, 28.
teens; women, minorities and other adult figures were the constant subjects of the sometimes aggrandizing and the sometimes abasing youth creation.

Introduced in December of 1941, the undisputed queen of the Golden Age was Sensation Comics’ *Wonder Woman*. Created by Harvard-educated psychologist Dr. William Moulton Marston, Wonder Woman was a reaction to the comic book industry’s “blood curdling masculinity.”78 Her thirst for justice, incredible abilities and feminine prowess all made Wonder Woman the comic book industry’s first real superheroine; however, her risqué bustier, sado-masochistic undertones, and her creator’s openly perverse sexual lifestyle made her the single most controversial comic character of the 1940s.79 Actual American women underwent a massive vocational mobilization in the 1940s; mothers, sisters, aunts and even grandmothers filed into the American workforce as part of a much greater American war and defense effort.80 Despite all of her controversies, Wonder Woman’s strength and liberated disposition was a testimony to this newly defined feminine power in America; however her sole limitation came from her perspective.81 As mentioned, Wonder Woman was the creation of a 48 year old college educated sexual deviant (as branded by both his cohorts and critics), who used both his wife and his live-in courtesan as references for her design; Wonder Woman’s ideas and

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79 *Wonder Woman* first appeared on the Catholic National Organization of Decent Literature’s list of unsavory texts in 1942; she remained on the list longer than any other contemporary comic title. Hajdu, 77.
Hajdu, 75.
80 Evans, 220-221.
81 Esteemed comic author and editor, Louise Simonson describes the Golden Age Wonder Woman character as "Rosie the Riveter—only a Goddess."
actions, though intriguing and potentially influential in the lives of her adolescent audiences, lacked the immediate reflective qualities seen in other youth originated titles, like Captain America.\textsuperscript{82}

*Captain America Comics*—which were far more accepting of youth ideas and direction than Wonder Woman—displayed its own effort to raise the status of American women inside their pages. As teens witnessed their female family members climb the American social ladder, it became logical for the female representations inside of their comics to rise congruently. No woman in *Captain America Comics* ever reached the heroic stature of Wonder Woman, but their presence still bucked the contemporary mores. The most popular recurring female character in Captain America stories was the buxom blonde United States Special Investigator Betty Ross. As Captain America explains in a 1941 address to his readers in the back of *Captain America #7*, “Betty, as you know, is a swell gal who works for Uncle Sam and often helps me to get on the trail of spies and traitors. (She also forces me to get her out of trouble all the time, but I have to do it for Bucky too, so I’m used to it by now!) Most people don’t know that Betty’s father was a General in the United States Army who was killed by a spy! That’s what caused her to decide to become a ‘G-Girl’ and devote her life to catching spies just like Bucky and myself!”\textsuperscript{83} The creators of Captain America offered this woman a role generally occupied (by definition) by men. Betty was not a secretary, a schoolmarm, or any other typical female professional. During an era in which real life women were

\textsuperscript{82} Hajdu, 77-78.

increasingly defying traditional workplace protocols, Betty Ross was a triumphant representation of a (G)-girl performing successfully in a (G)-man’s profession. Of course, just like the comics’ representation of youth, there were some stringent limitations to Betty’s feminine liberation. As Captain America clarified, “...She also forces me to get her out of trouble all the time...” Of the fifteen comic covers with Bucky somehow being manacled or abused, there are at least four that include Betty being similarly restrained. Betty was no doubt a strong and powerful female figure in comics, but coming from a more youth-centric interpretation, she was clearly not Wonder Woman caliber.

Sheena the Jungle Queen was another powerful female character in comics who actually predated Superman. Sheena’s strong will and leadership qualities made her an early example of empowered female protagonists, however, her feminine liberty was woefully overshadowed by the racial degradation that really defined her comic. Comic historian, Mike Madrid, elaborates on the boorish foundation established in popular pre-Superman titles, like Sheena the Jungle Queen, “Sheena’s goal is to rule a peaceful kingdom where all jungle people can live in freedom. She is a protectress of the black natives of her land, usually represented as a simple, superstitious lot sporting bones through their noses, always on the verge of reverting back to their cannibalistic ways...Sheena embodied the colonial concept of the naturally intelligent and rational Caucasian, looking after her gullible black

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underlings.”\(^86\)

The war did little to help these derogatory characterizations. Many comics used dramatically altered images of Japanese to characterize the savagery and the malice of America’s enemy. In Captain America books, the villainous Japanese were illustrated with long sharpened talons and mouths full of razor-like fangs. In *Captain American Comics #14* (the first Captain America release after Pearl Harbor), a fiendish gang of ambiguous “Orientals” known as the League of the Unicorn, are portrayed with grotesque drill bits stitched to the crowns of their heads.\(^87\)

Tribal Africans were equally degraded in Golden Age comics. Much like the standard created in the Jungle Queen genre, Africans were generally violent, dimwitted and highly susceptible to Nazi propaganda and allegiance. Historian Bradford Wright explains, “(In comics) native uprisings played into the hands of Nazis, who incited and exploited them to suit their own hostile interests.” Wright continues, “Racism, imperialism and anti-Nazi sentiment combined in the tales of jungle queens like Sheena, who were forced to dethrone evil chiefs and Nazi tribal surrogates.”\(^88\)

Despite these major racially charged defects, some comic creators actually took a more liberal approach to racial inclusion during the Golden Age. One of the most popular newspaper serials of the era, *the Spirit* included the young African-American boy Ebony White. Ebony’s large pink lips and wide white eyes accompanied with his exaggerated use of broken English and slang made him a

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\(^{88}\) Wright, 37-39
harsh characterization of African-Americans. The racial qualities of the caricature were so amplified that in 1941, when comic creator Jack Cole sought to duplicate the *Spirit* design, one of the few tweaks he made was removing the Ebony character, replacing him instead with a talking monkey in a tiny hat. Still, despite the racist physical portrayal, Ebony’s presence in the story lines, the Spirit’s faith and trust in him, and the respect shown to him by a majority of the other white characters, suggest that Eisner and his readers were actually expressing a relative level of racial tolerance.

Captain America’s *Young Allies* displayed the same somewhat progressive message. The original Sentinels of Liberty were designed as a collection of unified recruits from various socio-economic and racial backgrounds. Jefferson Worthington Sandervilt was the well-read, high society member of the group, Knuckles (aka Percival Aloysius O’Toole) represented the Irish working class, Henry “Tubby” Tinkle was the well fed representative of the white middle class, and, as the sole African-American, Washington “Whitewash” Carver Jones provided the group a racial presence. As comic book scholar Michael Uslan explains, “Taken from a perspective of America today (2009), these characters repeat some of what we now perceive to be some of the worst stereotypes of the day as portrayed in minstrel shows, vaudeville, dime novels, pulps, and...well...in American society of that time.”

Though Irish readers may have taken some offense to Knuckles’s gruff exterior, Uslan is more than likely referring to the harsh characterization of

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89 Hajdu, 52.
Whitewash. Whitewash was portrayed with the same derogatory racial characteristics as *the Spirit*'s Ebony-White; additionally, his personality and behavior alluded to his racial inferiority. But much like Ebony, Whitewash’s participation in the group, and more importantly, his equality in the eyes of Captain America, provided further evidence of a racially enlightened outlook coming directly from the minds of young Americans.

While women and minorities were progressing (albeit slowly) in the eyes of American adolescents, American adults were quickly regressing. Between the economic Depression and eventually the war, American teens saw their society crumbling under the watch of their parent’s generation. This was a theme that began with Superman in *Action Comics #1* and the initial presentation of American youth’s simplified understanding of society and politics. *Captain America Comics* translated this image of American adults with less than flattering portrayals. Of course, not all adults of this era were viewed as totalitarian fascists, but there was still a recognizable effort by the comic creators to emphasize the growing generation gap that existed between American adolescents and the older adult culture. The creators took various precautions to ensure that Captain America’s adult appearance did not confuse his youthful disposition. As discussed, his origin

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91 Whitewash, defined in Stan Lee's 1941 "The Young Allies Deal a Blow for Justice:” “Put that mellon away and follow us, Whitewash,” ordered Jeff. Someone’s in trouble and we’ve got to assist her!” "Yeabo!” (a racially misinterpreted rendition of the team’s signature “Yahoo!” battle cry). Yelped the darky lad. "I’se just itchin’ to meet up with some trouble—providin’ it ain’t no bigger than me, ob course!” Stan Lee, “The Young Allies Deal a Blow for Justice” in *Marvel Masterworks: Golden Age Captain America, Vol.2* (New York: Marvel Publishing Group, 2008), 260-261.

92 Jon Savage uses Los Angeles’s notorious Zoot-Suit Riots in 1943 to define the clashing ethos of behind parental, societal and the American youth’s own understanding of adolescent culture and responsibility.
Savage, 397.
story explains that Captain America was actually still a teenage boy. Additionally, his actions, his simplified world view, and his adoption of the still young Bucky Barnes provided mediums through which the creators could communicate and relate with their readers. But the most obvious method of Captain America’s youth alignment came with the introduction of Sgt. Duffy.

Sgt. Duffy was a concept developed by the creators to properly juxtapose Captain America’s (and Steve Rodgers’s) cerebral alignments to those of an extremely exaggerated adult figure. Sgt. Duffy was the Sargent in charge of Army Base Camp Lehigh (where Steve Rodgers and Bucky Barnes were stationed). Duffy filled a metaphorical paternal role at the army base, and though he never expressed any of the severely negative stereotypes that Captain America’s enemies displayed (greed, power lust, or Nazism), Duffy still presented a radically negative characterization. Duffy was essentially the adult on a base populated by children; he looked down on the younger recruits and constantly berated them for their inferiority. Steve Rodgers and Bucky Barnes were among his most abused victims. But the irony came in Duffy’s proud support of Captain America. Much like adults in the real world, the Sergeant admired Captain America for the patriotic embodiments instilled in him by his young creators. But Duffy’s undeniably adult sensibilities slightly muddled Captain America’s true value. In a familiar scene at the end 1941’s The Hunchback of Hollywood and the Movie Murder, Duffy uses the recent successes of Captain America as ammunition to demoralize the physically and mentally less mature Steve Rodgers and Bucky Barnes, “If you mugs had half his (Captain

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America’s) brains you’d be getting somewhere in this man’s army!”⁹⁴ While heralding his favorite hero, Duffy unwittingly applauded his least favorite G.I. Steve Rodgers. Similarly, while otherwise detached parents and teachers approved of Captain America’s righteous moral code, they were completely ignorant to the depth of awareness and youth empowerment that lurked in the comic’s subtext. Sgt. Duffy and real life adults recognized Captain America as being bastion of patriotism and ideological fortitude in an era of elevated fear and confusion; what Duffy and his adult equivalents failed to recognize, were the same qualities that existed inside of Captain America’s oft-rebuked secret identity—Steve Rodgers—and Captain America Comics’s youth readership.

“You Started It! Now We’ll Finish It!”
CAPTAIN AMERICA GOES TO WAR

In Action Comics #1, Superman presented an impression of United States urban society that was simplified to two single degrees of human conscience: good and evil.⁹⁵ The comic book heroes that followed Superman borrowed from his radically romanticized rendition of American culture, creating a landscape within the adolescent imagination that saw both problems and solutions equally identifiable. In this polarized world view, Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Third Reich were extremely good for comics. In 1941, Hitler represented a character of previously un-conceived power and horror.⁹⁶ When that American concern was exaggerated through the lens of comic books, Adolf Hitler became the first real

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⁹⁵ Reynolds, 16.
comic book super villain. Hitler was a menace, and being generally unable to recognize or acknowledge any of the justifications behind their nation’s prolonged pacifism, the youth demanded American intervention. Captain America was molded in the crucible of this debate. When the Cap was introduced in 1941, he entered a war that had been waging inside of Comic Books since 1939. Captain America Comics #1 was not just an introduction to a hero, but a radical declaration by his creators; on its now iconic cover, the subtitle announces, “SMASHING THRU, Captain America came face to face with Hitler!” while the rest of the vibrant four colored image displays the masked American pummeling the Fuehrer with a right handed hay maker, remarkably unfazed by the hail of Nazi bullets ringing off of his star spangled shield. The comic publishers followed up their first issue’s wild success with a second equally charged issue. On the cover of Captain America Comics #2, the mighty patriot is exploding through a wall, descending directly upon a befuddled Adolf while again the Fuhrer’s Nazi guards fail to upend the hero’s righteous exertion. Hitler makes no actual appearance in either book, but his presence on both covers (and various future covers) was a proud affirmation of his creator’s political positions. Comic book author/historian and former editor of Marvel Comics Roy Thomas best explains the impact of Captain America’s first

97 Wright, 49.
98 The first issue of Will Eisner’s “Espionage” was published by Smash Comics in 1939 (when Eisner was only 22 years old). “Espionage” was the first comic to strongly allude to the possibility of the European conflict ballooning into a global conflict, putting American freedom and democracy in immediate peril. Wright, 39.
100 Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, Captain America Comics #2 in Marvel Masterworks: Golden Age Captain America, Vol.1 (New York: Marvel Publishing Group, 2005).
appearance on the comic racks. “That glorious sock to Adolf’s Aryan jaw is not just the cover of Captain America Comics #1. Rather, it’s the very essences of what Captain America himself—as a hero and a concept—was all about.”101

The war itself was represented in two distinct forms in Captain America Comics changing after Pearl Harbor. Before Pearl Harbor, the Nazi threat was blatant, not only overseas but also right in America’s back yard. On the inside cover of Captain America Comics #1, the authors warned, “But as great as the danger of foreign attack...is the threat of invasion from within...the dreaded fifth column...”102 Captain America was designed as a defensive precaution for the inevitable Nazi invasion—his shield was a metaphor for his role as a protector of American society, not an aggressor. But Captain America did not need to be overly aggressive in his pursuit of adventure; his comic world was populated with an overwhelming host of Nazi and imperialist belligerents. The most notorious villain in Captain America’s rogues’ gallery was the dreaded Red Skull. Captain America was a walking metaphor for American liberty and democracy, his adversary, the Red Skull, was the vainglorious comic book conglomeration of all Hitler’s and the Axis’s imperialist ambitions.103 What made the Red Skull even more of a threat was his origin and station inside America’s peace loving borders. Captain America and the Red Skull faced off in countless bouts; Captain America’s predictable victories always stood as

102 Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, Captain America Comics #1, in Marvel Masterworks: Golden Age Captain America, Vol.1 (New York: Marvel Publishing Group, 2005), 3.
103 According to the authors, the gravity of Skull’s internal malevolence was so deep it often frightened Hitler himself.
testaments to the superiority of Democracy and freedom, but the Red Skull’s continued tenacity and seemingly endless reserve of Nazi recruits demonstrated a prevailing fear that America’s prolonged abstinence would lead to almost certain devastation.

In the tradition of the comic book style, the Red Skull simplified the Nazi threat through exaggeration. There was not a remote indication of any reason or acceptability behind the Skull’s mad schemes; he was a mutated monster designed solely “to wreak a horrible vengeance on unsuspecting people!”

The Red Skull was an impression of the Nazi menace that American politicians continued to ignore. Despite the 1940 Congressional Selective Service Act (that registered approximately 50 million American males aged 18-45 between 1940 and 1945), and the 1.5 million American soldiers that were standing in preparation by summer of 1941, American military intervention was still forbidden.

In an early issue, Cap and Bucky pay close attention to American philanthropist Henry Baldwin. An American philanthropist voluntarily pledging his own finances and aid to the Allies, despite his nation’s declared neutrality. Baldwin explains to a packed stadium, “I’m a firm believer in Democracy. If my money will help beat our enemies, I’ll give all I can.” Steve Rodgers and Bucky Barnes are among the ecstatic applauders. With a large grin, Bucky leans toward the Army Private, “Now he’s what I call a real American.” “And more of his kind are needed Bucky!” the grinning G.I. replies. Steve Rodgers was limited by his affiliation with the U.S. army; as a private citizen, Henry

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Baldwin did not need American policy to dictate his actions. Baldwin was defined as a hero because he refused to wait for American approval; Bucky and Steve Rodgers's endorsements of Baldwin's private actions bolstered the criticisms of American political and military inaction.

Predictably, three panels after his introduction, Baldwin is abducted by a mob of sinister state-side Nazis and whisked away to Europe. Prohibited from intervening in European affairs, Steve Rodgers and Bucky must assume wild costumes to sneak their way out of America in pursuit of the American patriot. Their first stop is Nazi occupied France, but, as the narrator explains “Once gay Paris is not a pretty sight under the heel of the Nazi conqueror.” This caption is seen over a collage of depressing images. A family is escorted away at gunpoint, a one legged man hobbles in front of a Nazi Panther, behind him a troop of soldiers straighten their right arms to hail their Fuhrer. On the other side of page a brigade of armed Nazi soldiers goose step toward a burning Eiffel Tower as a grimacing Nazi commander looks on. Standing in the center of the mess, the costumed pair frowns in saddened disgust. Rodgers reminds Bucky of their mission, “We could stay and straighten France out—but we’ve got to go onto Germany!” The depressed representation of France was meant as an eye opener for the American readers. Although Cap’s typical adventures involved genuine Nazi threats, they were still loaded with animated color and lighthearted frivolity. Meanwhile, the real life Nazis continued their advance through Europe, leveling nations like Poland, Belgium and
While Captain America and Bucky mourn over Paris, behind the closed doors of Hitler’s Eagle’s Nest in far off Germany, the Nazi deception unfolds for the readers. As explained by Hitler himself, Henry Baldwin was kidnapped by his mugs, so that he can install an imposter Henry Baldwin back into society all in a maniacally complex effort to redirect the Baldwin fortune from Brittan and the Allies to Mussolini and the Fascists, “Dot Vill Swerve Europe to our side—leaving der democracies trapped!” Then, in a scene ending declaration to the rafters, Hitler exclaims, “Der Tag has arrived at last my mightiest Blitz is ready to be hurled at the world!” In this scene, the Nazi agents acknowledge that one of the greatest potential threats to their advance is the intervention of American ideological and capitalistic might. But Hitler illustrates his own belief that he has preemptively uprooted the democratic hazard by exploiting the easily deceived American masses.

Still, Hitler could not predict the intervention of America’s most famous hero. Captain America and Bucky quickly unravel the fraud in London, revealing the present Henry Baldwin as an imposter. The two then waste little time in their hunt for the real Henry Baldwin. As the American heroes venture away from Britain’s capital, they are trailed by the desperate pleas of an entire nation, “Don’t leave Captain America!” “England needs you!” This is the most blatant metaphor in the whole book. In France, Captain America shows his readers what he believes has
happened because of America’s lack of commitment to their allies; fearful of the same imminent fate, the creators offer an image of the British public calling out to the literal effigy of American militarism and democracy, begging for his (and, by way of theoretical transfer, his country’s) aid.

From London, Cap and Bucky track the real Baldwin to a concentration camp in the Black-Forest. Inside, Hitler and his portly Air Force commander Herman Göring prepare the real Henry Baldwin for “Der Cannon-Death” (a comic overkill in which Baldwin is tied to a steak only feet from the barrel of a massive aircraft cannon; “Der Cannon-Death” is an attempt to further illustrate the depravity of Hitler and his followers). But before the trigger can be pulled, Cap and Bucky confidently pop out of the gun’s roomy barrel confidently mocking the Nazi hoard. Hitler’s cap rears backward off of his head, “Der Yankee Shwein!” Then, as the narration explains, “Within split seconds the mourning wail of the attack signal is heard...The infantry marches up and...Swift mechanized units rumble forward to answer the call...Dreaded Stuka dive bombers plunge earthward to join in the Fuehrer’s personal blitzkrieg against Captain America.” Under a pile of soon-to-be Nazi corpses, Captain America declares, “Ye-Gods! The whole Nazi Army’s after us!” But even the entire might of the Third Reich is not enough to quell Cap and Bucky’s patriotic exuberance, and with quick thinking and a quicker repartee, the hero and his sidekick overcome the Fascists’ advance. After the traditional comic book carnage, the two Americans stumble upon Hitler cowering alongside Göring in a nearby shack. Cap jokes with Bucky, “Well, Well! Look who’s here!” Bucky replies derisive of the men’s shared cowardice, “And with a war going on outside!” Out of
options, the Nazi leaders fool heartily charge their attackers. “You get the big one Adolph, I'll get the little guy!” screams Göring. Hitler quickly retorts, “No, Herman, I'll get the little guy!” Bucky responds by rushing toward both of them, “Let’s not argue boys, you can both have me!” and with a flying double leg kick, the young teenage Bucky singlehandedly decommissions the Reich’s highest rank. A pleased Captain America hoists the K.O.ed Krouts by their jacket collars, unties the real Henry Baldwin, and alerts the Royal Air Force for evacuation aid. Stateside, a collection of newspaper headlines tell the story of Cap and Bucky’s overseas adventure, “Heroic Rescue by Captain America turns Reich Upside Down!” But back at Army Camp Lehigh, the characteristically aloof Sgt. Duffy confronts Private Rodgers and Bucky, “A.W.O.L. eh? I’ll show you monkeys you can’t loaf in this outfit. Into the Guard House with ya fir a week!” Rodgers and Bucky grin as they accept their punishment assuming that Sgt. Duffy’s faith and commitment to what they consider an obviously backward policy would prevent him from understanding the pride they had in their recent European accomplishments.107

The final battle in the Black Forest represented a severe swing in tone for the comic. In Paris, the book became uncharacteristically somber. In London, the mood was lightened slightly, but the message was still dire. The battle in Germany was a humorous slapstick satire. Many other comic books used images of Hitler and the Nazi army to instill fear; Captain America in particular had traditionally used radically dehumanized Nazi characters like the Red Skull to exaggerate the depravity of the Nazi ideology and the extent of the Nazi threat. But this battle

presented a much tamer, comical image of the Third Reich. There was no excessive bestialization, or exaggeration, there were no mechanically enhanced Nazi cyborgs or undead zombie Gestapo (themes typical in other World War II books), there was only Captain America, a pathetic, cowering Adolf Hitler, and an easily frustrated Nazi army. The creators provided images of the devastation wrought by the Nazi forces throughout Europe, they then presented an imaginative interpretation of a vulnerable Nazi army, then finally showed two Americans (one of whom was a teen) overwhelming the entire Nazi military complex (The cover of this issue promised a classic school yard scene, with Bucky on all fours, tripping Hitler backwards as Captain America shoved the Fuhrer into a swastika labeled trash can). It was a literary equation: The Nazi army was strong and relentless, but if American troops joined the Allies, and if young people aided in the effort (it was the young Bucky himself who concluded the battle portion of the comic with a pair of heroic karate kicks), the Allies could eradicate the threat swiftly and with relative ease. This was a typical simplified comic book solution to an extraordinarily complex real world problem. Once Steve Rodgers and Bucky Barnes returned to the U.S., they were accosted by the story’s token adult authority figure, Sgt. Duffy, who was assumed too daft and too preoccupied by his own over complicated adult awareness to comprehend the American triumph. Rodgers and Bucky proudly took their punishment as martyrs for the American teenage class; their mission was accomplished easily in the face of adult culture’s political disproval.

Pearl Harbor represented a clear turning point for all of society. Michael

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Uslan explains, “Everything in America changed overnight. Everything. Including comic books. Especially comic books.”109 Captain America Comics #13 was the first Captain America adventure released after Pearl Harbor. On the cover an enlarged Captain America stands in front of Bucky and an oversized American Flag. With the chaos of an ant sized war waging around him, the Cap clears the jaw of the equally enlarged Japanese Minister of War Hideki Tojo. Rather than lacing his punch with one of his typical jocular puns, Captain America sternly declares, “You started it! Now- We’ll Finish it!”110

With the movement of millions of U.S. troops overseas (including Joe Simon, Jack Kirby and a majority of the comic industry’s youngest and brightest creators), the once easily simplified war became exponentially more complex. Comic books had to become extremely sensitive with their treatment of the war so as not to undermine the truly heroic efforts of the actual American military. For some heroes, this was an easy task: Batman for instance would certainly be more equipped to handle the European battle fields than a standard G.I., but there was no implication in his design that would suggest that he would be able to singlehandedly end the war in both theaters. Superman, however, with his endless bag of magnificent abilities, should have been able to use his ice breath to freeze the Japanese Navy, his heat vision to burn Mussolini’s Roman stronghold, and his super strength to demolish the entire Third Reich in a matter of days (if not hours). Before American involvement, this would have been a simple and enjoyable feature, but with the

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110 Al Alvison (pencils), Captain America Comics #13, in Marvel Masterworks: Golden Age Captain America, Vol.4 (New York: Marvel Publishing Group, 2010).
sudden complexity of war now convoluting the youth understanding, it would have been neither reasonable nor suitable for Superman to employ his powers so recklessly. But still, according to Bradford Wright, “For the patriotic superhero not to enlist, when so many millions of young American men were doing so, would have been equally unacceptable.”\(^{111}\) At an impasse created by the collision of the war’s reality and the recently lifted naivety of the comic book impression, comic creators had to adapt quickly and creatively. Superman, for instance, was unable to go to war, because his alter-ego, Clark Kent, accidentally used his x-ray vision during his recruitment vision test; his legal blindness was used to declare him 4-F. As Wright explains, Superman and the various other heroes who remained stateside, still found plenty to do safeguarding the American shores from the constant threat of traitors, spies and saboteurs.\(^{112}\)

Captain America was not as hesitant to ferry (back) overseas as some other heroes, but the new complexity of war demanded that he could no longer simply venture into a Nazi stronghold and toss the Fuhrer around like a rag doll. Instead, while real American troops were battling real Japanese and Nazi armies in the Pacific and European theatres, Captain America found himself in the seedy shadows of combat, fighting supremely secret enemies in the hidden lairs, and haunted castles of Europe, Asia and America (Despite a declaration in *Captain America #15* that the Fifth Column had been officially “licked,” Captain America adventures still included a whopping proportion of home front defense from both Nazi and Japanese)

\(^{111}\) Wright, 43.  
\(^{112}\) Wright, 43.
The physical and mental characterizations of America’s enemies intensified after Pearl Harbor; the traditional comic book line between good and evil was held, making heroes and villains easily identified, not only through their appearances, but their actions.

The Red Skull made increasingly more cameos throughout the war; the signature emblem on his chest transitioned back and forth from a Nazi swastika to a Japanese Rising Sun. It became clear that he could not be defined simply as an ally of Hitler, but rather as a staunch enemy of America. In 1942’s “The Red Skull’s Deadly Revenge” the Skull (in a freshly tailored Rising Sun jumpsuit) symbolic ambushes Captain America; catching the Cap by surprise, the Skull is able to overpower and subdue the hero. When Captain America is brought back to consciousness, he tracks down the maniacal rogue and explains, “Just like my Country-I wont be caught napping twice!” He then enacts his (and all of America’s) revenge by tossing democracy’s greatest menace from the wing of his own getaway jet. The symbolism in this issue is palpable. The Red Skull was not just a comic book super villain, but the embodiment of America’s enemies. Before Pearl Harbor, he was a Nazi, but after Pearl Harbor he was everything that defined what America was not. This story was a microcosmic retelling of Pearl Harbor, released only months after the “date that would live in infamy,” the story showed exactly how America intended to react. The subtext was still glazed with the typical youth simplification, but a much more mature presentation was employed. Written by the

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then twenty-one year old Stan Lee, “The Red Skull’s Deadly Revenge” refrained from sailing Captain America to Japan and wiping the floor high ranking military officials (as he had done with Hitler and other Nazi troopers before the war). Instead, Captain America was used symbolically. He became an even stronger image of American principle. Michael Uslan explains, “Embodying the ideals of America and making its wartime slogans his own, Captain America became more than a character in a comic book. Month by month, he was being woven into the fabric of American folklore. He symbolized our strength and resolve. He became our male, action hero version of the Statue of Liberty. He inspired Servicemen, rallied the home front, and encouraged the children of ‘The Greatest Generation’ during our darkest hour.”

“WE DID IT BUCKY!”

The fundamental device behind the early century youth identification was the realization that adolescents were not part of the general American adult culture. By highlighting the advent of adolescent oriented activities and fashions, Paula Fass shows early indications of this mitosis in the 1920s. With joint experiences and the rise of comic books and other youth influenced products, the 1930s represented an era of continued youth development. By the 1940s, American teens had finally begun their break with the aid of youth endorsing popular culture mediums like comic books. In this era, young Americans not only recognized the divisions in their interests from the interests of adults, but also

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116 Hine, 226.
117 Fass, 227.
118 Hine, 204.
acknowledged the divisions in their own political comprehensions and social mores. When faced with major societal issues like the Great Depression and World War II, American teens could easily identify the issues, but could not understand why American leaders were not providing the seemingly obvious solutions. The superhero was manufactured as a simple youth response to overcomplicated adult problems. In 1938, Superman singlehandedly attacked the Depression by battling organized crime, a broken legal system, and federal corruption. In 1941 Captain America smuggled himself (and Bucky) overseas to battle what he and his youth audience considered the obvious Nazi menace, while the government remained officially neutral. On a social level, 1940s young Americans displayed a wonderfully progressive disposition. While American adults struggled with the advancement of American women and civil rights in society, the more youth oriented comic books, like Captain America included women and African Americans in important and progressive roles. The political and social reactions of teenagers in the 1940s were definitely sheltered by their own limited understanding of the world around them. Obviously, the Depression and World War II were exponentially more complex than they were displayed in comic books (neither crisis could have actually been ended with a well-timed knuckle-sandwich). Additionally, the social progressions of youth, women and minorities inside comic books were delayed by American adolescents’ own limited self-awareness. But the inclusion of these themes suggests that American youth culture was moving forward. Throughout the early 1940s, comic content matured with its audiences by displaying the increasing

facets of American youth’s political and social comprehensions. Where some adults, like *Your Children* Author Angelo Patri, sought to retard or control the progress of youth culture; heroes like Captain America nurtured the younger generation by providing a shared youth voice and a collective empowerment. Michael Uslan suggests, “Comic books were reflecting our times, and as we can clearly see from the hindsight of nearly seventy years, those times cried out for Captain America.”
Decline of the Supermen

Everything changed after World War II. Politically, the country's leaders were charged with the task of reconstructing American society in the confused aftermath of joyous victory and the new threat of atomic war. Socially, American G.I.s were welcomed home with open arms and a bounty of new mobilizing opportunities; meanwhile, the women and minorities who had kept the country's industrial gears moving during the previous five years found themselves resisting the resurrection of the prewar American caste structure. Scientifically, the advent of nuclear power represented an avenue of unbridled potential, but militarily, the atomic dream was tainted by the reality of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the dangerous potential of unchecked power. In the fifteen years following World War II, America found itself abraded by a legacy of political uncertainty, social unrest, scientific competition and unbridled paranoia. But for all of the negativity that claimed the national identity, the decades that followed World War II were also host to magnificent social and political liberations highlighted by the charge for civil

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Feminist Historian Sara Evans brilliantly uses the styles defined in Christian Dior's 1947 "New Look" Campaign to elaborate on society's (re)introduction of neo-Victorian gender roles and femininity after World War II.
Civil rights historian Mary Dudziak, similarly describes the global impression of America's outdated segregation laws after WWII.
3 Boyer, 35.
rights, gender equality, and the growth of the American middle class.⁴ In 1947, Executive advisor Bernard Baruch christened the postwar era the *Cold War*. The term was meant to define the new complexities of American military and foreign policies; however, historians have come to describe the *Cold War* as an era in which foreign policy, culture and society were tightly intertwined.⁵

Youth culture, and more specifically, the rise of the teenage society, is one of the most recognizable and controversial constructions of the Cold War. American youth emerged from the World War era with a newly minted self-recognition. The growth of their own subculture began in the 1920s, and matured over the next two and half decades. During the war, American adolescents experienced a new social empowerment, a phenomenon reflected in the increasingly adult themes and topics discussed in comic books. Comics allowed teens to survey and develop their own vicarious civilization outside of the adult public sphere and with limited, or sometimes no adult intervention at all. After the war, comic books were joined by other massive entertainment industries like magazine publishers, film studios, music producers and eventually television broadcasters; all of whom worked hard to further develop the teenage market as a profitable consumer demographic.⁶ The resulting products led to more sharply defined youth identifications and a growing divide between American youth and adult culture.⁷

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⁵ The Soviet fears that came to define the Cold War were first introduced in an article titled “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” written by the acting director of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff George Kennedy under the mysterious pseudonym, “Mr. X.” Patterson, 114.


⁷ Gilbert, 192.
But just as American marketers and the American youth finally became aware of the culture that had been proliferating over the previous twenty-five years, so did extraordinarily apprehensive American adults. Just like the millions of women and minorities who were being pushed back down the great American social ladder after World War II, the newly empowered American teenage class was subjected to a societal backlash. The adolescents who had spent the previous twenty-five years exploring and building their own generational identity were instantly branded “delinquent” and “lost.” The few voices who spoke out against the rise of youth culture during the late thirties and early forties were suddenly joined by a coalition of concerned parents, teachers and psychological experts. The public response to youth culture after World War II was immense, and the comic book industry, which had aided in the creation and development of the current adolescent identity, was caught in the crossfire. The years that followed World War II saw the rise of a new generational conflict, separating the ideas and demands of teenagers from those of adult America to previously un-reckoned distances.

The relationship between youth culture, adult culture and the comic book industry appeared so much simpler during the Golden Age. The evils of society were obvious: Superman battled greed, Batman battled corruption, and Captain America battled fascism. In most comics, the heroes and the villains were interchangeable because the stories, the themes and, most importantly, the morals

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8 Gilbert, 78.
were virtually identical. The parents concerned enough to examine their children’s literature choices were generally pacified by the appropriate representations of good and evil; the adolescent comic book purveyors were similarly appeased with the alignment of the their heroes’ abbreviated mentalities. But, as explained in the previous chapter, the realities of World War II sparked a new understanding of the world’s various complexities. As was seen within the transitions between prewar and wartime releases of Captain America, young Americans were no longer willing to accept the reductive world views made famous in previous superhero titles.\textsuperscript{12} Simultaneously, however, an increased pressure was being applied to the comic industry by a mobilized collective of irate parents, teachers and psychologists, who considered comic books responsible for the corruption of their children’s mental health.\textsuperscript{13} As pressure from critics increased, many comic companies reduced the literary weight of their magazines. The timing of this change could not have been worse; American adolescents continued to seek increasingly mature images of the world and how youth culture fit into the greater social landscape, but in this new era, comics failed to maintain pace with their readers’ demands.

Comic books came to embody the divisions between adult and adolescent societies within America after World War II. Adolescent readers sought greater substance and depth, while adult critics sought to reign in comic content. According to Bardford Wright, “In the broadest sense, the debate over comic books was really about cultural power in postwar America. As Americans looked to define their

\textsuperscript{12}This is the world view promoted in \textit{Action Comics #1}, and the foundation for the Golden Age’s success.

\textsuperscript{13}Wright, 162.
culture in an age of consumption and Cold War, influence over young people became hotly contested terrain.”\textsuperscript{14} The comic industry found itself at a serious impasse; some companies, like EC Comics and the Lev Gleason group, responded to their readers by quickly reattaching themselves to youth culture.\textsuperscript{15} These companies experienced immense success by churning out countless crime, romance and horror titles between 1945 and 1960.\textsuperscript{16} Other companies however, like DC and Fawcett Comics, fearful of criticism and the impending legal cloud that lurked over the industry for the duration of the era, pandered to the sensibilities of their adult critics. These companies amended the construction of their existing heroes and stories, but in doing so, detached the bond they shared with young America throughout the Golden Age.\textsuperscript{17} The comic companies that followed this suit suffered severe repercussions from their reading community; by 1950, the industry was in upheaval, and nearly every superhero title that reached news stands during the Golden Age was ushered into the mists of cultural obscurity.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{14} Wright, 87.
\textsuperscript{15} Companies is a word used here (and throughout) only out of necessity. In reality, companies diversified their catalogues providing various genres; however, most companies in this era were generally linked to a single title or a single genre. My use of the term companies has no negative bearing on the thesis of this paper, though it needs to be noted that the actual trends of the industry were hardly as neat and organized.
\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Comic Book Confidential}, DVD, Directed by Ron Mann (Chattsworth: Home Vision Entertainment, 2002).
\textsuperscript{18} Wright, 57-58.
DC’s holy trinity (Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman), were the only three heroes to maintain a semi-regular distribution throughout the 1950s; however, their stories were released within both the official and unofficial critical expectations of the era. Many contemporary historians consider the content of Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman in this era to be so degraded from the Golden Age comics, that they consider them almost separate heroes entirely.
Wright, 60.
Captain America was among the casualties of the new Cold War standard for comic book heroes. Although he was one of the most popular heroes only a few years earlier, the Cap quickly became a fundamental fossil in the postwar era. In 1941, Captain America was constructed on a foundation of simplified youth ideology, but beginning in 1945, the Cap’s jocular style and light-hearted adventures seemed almost inappropriate by the social standards constructed by the new order of American youth.\(^{19}\) Captain America and his patriotic makeup were emblematic of the old guard; as the generation gap extended in America, the pro-establishment mores and the unrelenting fundamentalism that defined the hero during the war made him unidentifiable for many among the new ranks of American youth. In February of 1951, magazine Editor Warren Kuhn elaborated on this new generation of American teen, “(Today’s) youth is a vast jump ahead of an earlier generation. They were weaned on jet-bombers and boo at a western movie that seems and unreal,” Bradford Write continues, “These young people tended to reject anything that seemed to condescend to them as juveniles.”\(^{20}\) But superhero publishers of the era were not willing to appease the changing tides of youth culture, and within months of the war’s ending, heroes like Captain America had become anachronisms. However, their failures during this era are just as explanatory of young American culture as their successes were in the previous Golden Age. By juxtaposing the content of the successful comic books during this era, to the unsuccessful use of superheroes in the same span, we are provided with an even more illustrative model of young America’s tastes and desires than we witnessed at the height of

\(^{19}\) Wright, 58-60.

\(^{20}\) Quoted in Wright, 58.
superhero success during the previous seven years. Additionally, we are able to analyze the data provided by the extremely vocal population of comic and youth culture critics to understand the adult fears and the generational foundation from which young America was breaking away. Finally, by continuing the focus on Captain America, we are again able to isolate his specific political and social constructions. By comparing the successes of the first era to the failures the second, we can witness the earliest stages of the actual ideological transformation of young Americans from World War II society into Cold War society.

“PERVERTED LITTLE MONSTERS:” TRYING TO CONTROL AMERICA’S YOUTH.\(^2\)

The apex of this era was the 1954 Congressional Hearing on Juvenile Delinquency, which focused almost exclusively on the plagues, they believed, the comic industry had imposed on the younger generation.\(^2\) The hearing lasted only one day and included the vehement testimony of various childhood psychologist, lawyers and publishing companies; but the most impressing witness to take the stand was Dr. Frederic Wertham.\(^2\) Dr. Wertham was the most recognized and revered voice in the popular anti-comic book campaign of the era. In his book, Seduction of the Innocent (1953), Wertham misrepresented the content and the morals of various comic book titles in an effort to amplify an existing public notion that comic books somehow fed into the rise of juvenile delinquency in America.

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\(^{2}\) In his defense against the the allegations of Dr. Wertham and the senate subcomitee, EC Publisher Max Gaines famously refered to his reading public as a collection of “Perverted little monsters.” Hajdu, 265.

\(^{2}\) Springhall, 121.

Among his work’s more popular accusations was the assertion that heroes like Superman promoted a fascist self-confidence and feeling of invulnerability to his readers while Batman and Robin specifically, provided subliminal encouragement for children to cavort in homosexual sin. To prove these, and his various other radicalized claims, Wertham carefully disassembled comic books, preserving and presenting only the singular panels and sequences that supported his thesis. During the congressional hearings, Dr. Wertham used his bastardized renditions of popular comic books to spearhead the attack against the industry. In his twenty-five minute opening address to the committee, Dr. Wertham explained:

I think that comic books primarily cause a great deal of ethical confusion...There is a school in a town in New York State where there has been a great deal of stealing. Sometime ago some boys attacked another boy and they twisted his arm so viciously that it broke in two places, just like in a comic book, the bone came through the skin...In the same school in one year, twenty-six girls became pregnant. The score this year, I think, is eight. Maybe it is nine by now. Now, Mr. Chairman, this is what I call ethical and moral confusion. I don’t think that any of these boys or girls individually vary very much. It cannot be explained individually, alone. Here is a general moral confusion and I think that these girls were seduced mentally long before they were seduced physically, and, of course, all those people are very, very

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great—not all of them, but most of them—are very great comic book readers, have been and are...The same kind of thing happens in many other places nowadays. Maybe not quite so much, maybe a little more. Many of these things happen and it is my belief that the comic book industry has a great deal to do with it.  

Though there was some credence to Dr. Wertham’s argument—in this era certain comic books had become irrevocably violent and amoral—historians have still declared his processes and theses too far removed from traditional scholastic practices to be held with the same reverence it was introduced with in the 1950s. As David Hajdu explains, “If, to many readers, the book appeared to be a serious treatment of a popular subject, it was elmentally a popular treatement of a serious subject,” after continued deridement of Wertham’s lack of a scientific basis, Hajdu finishes with a mockery of the Doctor’s obvious lack publication options, “Wertham chose to release his findings not in one of the peer-review publications in his fiield, such as The American Journal of Psychiatry, but, rather, in Ladies’ Home Journal, where the text of his book fit companionably among articles such as “Revolution in Mothballs” and “Can This Mariage Be Saved?” Clearly, Dr. Wertham sacrificed professional protocols and integrity to promote his anti-comic crusade amidst an already agitated core of American adults. Seduction of the Innocent was a transcribed sermon while the congressional hearings provided Wertham an appropriate pulpit.

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26 Hajdu, 232-233.
Though the hearings yielded no official actions, its publicity, and the publicity rallied by Dr. Wertham’s ferocious tirade, encouraged the comic industry to react internally.\textsuperscript{27} By the close of 1954, comic publishers collectively formed and imposed an establishment endorsed code of content modeled after the internal censorship program put in place by the American film industry in 1934.\textsuperscript{28} The Comic’s Code Authority (as it was so ominously christened) allowed powerful adult oversight that towered over the comic industry for the next half century. Though future comics would find ways of evading the Code’s restrictive powers, in this era, the Comics Code Authority essentially prevented any mainstream comic book from reaching the same level of youth involvement witnessed during the Golden Age.

**Crooks, Sobs and Alien Invaders: Finding Success in the Postwar Era**

One of the major differences between wartime and postwar comic books was the lack of involvement from the teenage readers. In the previous era, comic books carried a legitimate youth voice by translating the demands of the young readers through the stylings of their young authors. The war drained the industry of most of its younger creators, and after the war, a majority of the returning G.I.s were lured away from the comic industry by the sudden influx of other opportunities.\textsuperscript{29} It is essential to understand that the handful of titles that found success during the new era of comic books did so without the direct content input from the reading age generation. This does not mean that the successful comics were completely

\textsuperscript{27} Matthew J. Pustz, *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 41.
\textsuperscript{28} Hajdu, 128.
\textsuperscript{29} May, 77.

removed from young America; their commercial successes, and the controversial debates that raged between the two generations over the comic content are a joint testament to the alliance that existed between the comic creators and adolescents during this era.

Crime comics were the first genre to excite young audiences while simultaneously ruffling adult feathers. World War II comics were wildly successful because the violence they condoned (and often promoted) was aimed directly at a known and accepted enemy. When World War II ended, countless super-patriots found themselves struggling to re-adapt to the more ambiguous face of crime in peacetime society. This was one of the major handicaps of Captain America after 1945 as the hero stubbornly clung to his prototypical design, refusing to stop fighting Japs and Nazis for a full year after the war’s actual conclusion.

Meanwhile, a dangerous element flourished on the home front without any real comic book response. Crime comics were the first brand to step in and attempt to fill the antagonistic void left on American soil: Crime Does Not Pay was the unchallenged king of these postwar titles. Historian David Hajdu explains, “Crime Does Not Pay was the first comic magazine of its kind not in the fact that it portrayed criminality, but in the weight and shape of that portrayal.” There were plenty of similarities between Crime Does Not Pay and many of the successful Golden Age superhero titles. Heroes used a self-designed moral code to inflict an abbreviated vigilante justice on starkly drawn criminals and villains. In Crime Does Not Pay, the

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31 Hajdu, 63.
same condensed understanding of crime and punishment were utilized, however,
the major difference came from the inherent lack of a protagonist. Superhero
comics chronicled the adventures of good guys; crime comics followed the
escapades of the bad guys. The majority of an average crime comic was dedicated to
the amoral violence and pandemonium of the title’s primary antagonist; in the last
few pages, the criminals would finally meet a karmic fate at the hand of God, a
vengeance seeking individual, or, in various cases, actual law enforcement agents.
The comics’ conclusions were used to justify titles like *Crime Does Not Pay*, however,
many concerned adults considered these endings hollow and unable to correct the
blatant criminal glorification spread across the rest of the book.\(^{32}\) David Hajdu
elaborates on the fairly justified claims of the concerned adult critics, “The logo
represented the product well. The opening word, CRIME, appeared in heavy, three-
dimensional block letters two and a half inches tall, occupying nearly a third of the
cover, and the other three words ran at a height of five-sixteenths of an inch, set
inside a black banner that tricked the eye into reducing them further.” Hajdu
continues, “Gambling, alcohol, sex, shooting, brawling, knifing—Charles Biro
(creator and author of *Crime Does Not Pay*) packed in nearly everything that mid-
century America considered sinful...All that was missing from Biro’s first cover
onward through the comic’s first several years was restraint.”\(^{33}\) For this reason,
crime comics were an obvious target for Dr. Wertham who asserted in his testimony
to congress, “As long as the crime comic book industry exists in its present forms

\(^{32}\) Wright, 77.
\(^{33}\) Hajdu, 63-64.
there are no secure homes. You cannot resist infantile paralysis in your own home
alone."^{34}

Through hindsight, it easy to identify crime comics as the next step in the
progression from the simplified comic book world first introduced in *Action Comics
#1*. While comics grew increasingly more violent and less apologetic throughout the
war, their readers were developing a sharper understanding of the world around
them.^{35} By the late 1940s and into the 1950s many readers were no longer willing
accept the fictitious concept of a superhero; however, super villains (an idea first
conceived with the dramatic characterizations of Adolf Hitler in the early 1940s)
existed throughout the world and, more specifically, throughout America. Crime
comics were the culmination of the readers’ own seemingly contradictory desire for
increased barbarity and decreased fantasy. On the covers, comic publishers
displayed violent images and promised “True Crime Stories;” the wild success of
crime comics during this era was predicated on their reader’s assumption that the
violence and the asserted authenticity were gestures of respect for their growing
maturity.^{36} According to Hajdu, since its early forties inception, *Crime Does Not Pay*
was intended for an older audience, but still over two-thirds of the comic’s standard
readership were kids under the age of eighteen.^{37}

On the other end of the generational debate, adults degraded the content as
tasteless rather than mature. Dr. Wertham, always vigilant, spoke to the negative

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^{34} Congress, Senate, Committee on Judiciary United States Senate: *Subcommittee to Investigate
Juvenile Delinquency (Comic Books)*: 83rd Cong., 2nd sess., 4 June, 1954,
^{35} Wright, 58.
^{36} Wright, 77.
^{37} Hajdu, 70.
ramifications of continued crime comic circulation both on society and the fragile minds of America’s young, “As far as the individual child is concerned, constant perusal of pictures depicting vice, sadistic abuse and easy death is far more likely to lead to curiosity and imitation than to the release of aggressive impulses... (In regards to the first amendment rights of the publishers) We are not dealing with the rights and privileges of adults to read and write as they choose. We are dealing with the mental health of a generation—the care of which we have left too long in the hands of unscrupulous persons whose only interest is financial gain.” 38 But by refusing to adhere to critical decrees, crime comics deliberately aligned themselves with youth culture and, as Wertham predicted, reaped the bountiful financial rewards. *Crime Does Not Pay* experienced a 50% or greater annual growth every year from 1942 to 1946. By 1947, the comic title was selling approximately one million copies a month with an estimated “pass-along” value of six to ten readers an issue. 39 Wertham provided a voice for the era’s adult paranoia; however, the reactions of young American consumers illustrate an overall apathy toward his generation’s concerns. Unfortunately for crime comics, the critical demands eventually won out over youth desires, and, despite their strong sales, crime comics could not shoulder the costs of constant legal defense or massive boycotts; by the end of the 1940s, most crime specific comic companies had either folded or moved on to the next genre. 40

39 Hajdu, 87.
40 Hajdu, 154-155.
The crime comic genre was forged around the American teens’ decreased sensitivity and decreased capacity for fantasy; the content was gruesome and remorseless, but allowed the readers to assume their own maturity. This was a remarkably successful marketing strategy that fueled one of the fundamental arguments between the youth and adult generations. As the success of crime comics began to wane, comic creators sought out new methods and new genres that would express and exploit the emerging maturity of their audiences. Romance comic books were the most successful genre to surface during this search.\textsuperscript{41} Though romance comics were obvious deviations from the previous generation of highly violent and morally objectionable comic books, the romance genre gained wild success by focusing more on their readerships’ self-acclaimed sexual maturity.

Originally, the romance genre was conceived as a method for broadening the comic book’s gender appeal; romance comics were designed in the same format as many of the teenage girl magazines that had become popular after the war.\textsuperscript{42} But rather than just exciting teenage girls, romance comics rallied massive support from their young male counterparts.\textsuperscript{43} As David Hajdu explains, “While teenage girls were understood to be the primary audience of romance comics, boys surely relished them; in fact, many romance titles exploited the license that came with a presumption of being for girls’ eyes only.”\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{41} “In 1948, there were only three new love titles...By the end of 1949, there were 125 romance comics, and, a year later, 148 from twenty-six publishers.” Hajdu, 156.
\textsuperscript{42} Wright, 128.
\textsuperscript{43} Gilbert, 204.
\textsuperscript{44} Wright, 160-161.
\textsuperscript{44} Hajdu, 159.
Romance comics came about at a time of growing sexualization within American popular culture. In 1948, Dr. Alfred Kinsey published *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, a sensational exposé on the long considered taboo subjects of human sexuality. Five years later, Dr. Kinsey released his follow up report, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, which, like the first book, challenged the dated Victorian expectations of American society. Youth was an integral element of Kinsey's study; both *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* and *the Human Female* explored the sexual drive of American adolescents. Kinsey determined that the state of American youth sexuality was on par with cultural norms; however the increased puritanical inclinations of American society were at the root of the adult ignorance that fueled the (sexual) delinquency charges. Kinsey explained, “There is an increasing opinion that these youths should ignore their sexual responses and should abstain from sexual activities...But neither law nor the custom can change the age of onset of adolescence, nor the development of the sexual capacity of teen-age youths.” Through their consciousness of increasing sexual liberation and their deliberate alignment with youth culture, a large portion of the comic industry was able to maintain relevance with romance comics and generate excitement from both sides of the generational debate well into the 1950s.

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45 Beth Bailey explains the psychological fear that existed among older adults during the 1930s and forties, that the younger generation may be easily seduced by the perils of “heavy petting.” Beth Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America.* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 82-83.
Just as they did with crime comics a few years earlier, the successful romance comic companies linked themselves with their adolescent readership despite the critical objection. In a 1947 issue of *Collier’s*, Dr. Wertham collaborated with a handful of other psychiatrists and journalists to produce, “Horror in the Nursery,” a scathing exposé on the dangers of comic reading. “Horror in the Nursery,” much like *Seduction of the Innocent* (which was published six years later), pointed to all of the depravity and malfeasance they believed were being promoted in the paneled pages of comics. Specifically regarding romance books, the authors explained, “It isn’t accidental that all comic-book women are high-chested, full-hipped and given to appearing in any place at any time in abbreviated sarongs or French bathing suits. ‘there is a deliberate attempt,’ Dr. Wertham points out, ‘to emphasize sexual characteristics. Any normal kid is bound to be stimulated by the gorgeous gals. But the destructive thing is that such stimulation is abnormal and unhealthy because the sex desires are mixed with violence.’” One of Dr. Wertham’s colleagues continues, “For boys, the results are perverted ideals of feminine allure...For girls the results are frequently a feeling of inferiority and insufficiency, simply because the adolescent girl does not have the full bosom and rounded hips of the comic book...(Furthermore) Girls get the idea that normal sexual relations are a sadistic-masochistic mixture of pleasure and violence. Boys further get the impression that violence is a part of such relations.” 49 But these accusations, which chronologically coincided with the rise of romance themed books, did reflect a very real rise in sexual desire and expression by an entire generation. According to David

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49 Crist, 23.
Hajdu, “By the end of 1949, there were some 125 romance comics and a year later, 148 from twenty-six publishers.” Comic creators fed the young sexual curiosities; Joe Simon and Jack Kirby (renowned Captain America creators) pioneered the romance Genre with their Young Romance title. They were both openly aware of the risks of writing love stories for teens, but were not dissuaded by their objectors; as Simon explains, “We knew that a lot of comic-book readers were high-school age and, as a result, they wanted to read about people a few years older.” Simon and Kirby became the masters of baiting teenage curiosities. They famously planted a suggestive “for more adult readers” disclaimer on the covers of their romance titles, coupled with enticing images of entrancing young women. “The Savage Inside Me,” (1951) is a prime example. The comic’s cover page juxtaposes images of the same woman in two opposing yet equally suggestive situations with a caption that reads, “All my life, I had been two women! One—the daughter of missionary, firm in her convictions and dedicated to her father’s work...The other...A HELLCAT! FIERY! EMOTIONAL! WANTING TO LOVE AND BE LOVED!” Not only was this a tug at teenage curiosities, but it was an important image that displayed the actual fragmentation of two generational standards for proper adolescent thoughts and behavior. The first is outlined in Wertham’s article and illustrates the rigorous restrictions applied by American adults, while the second, which is outlined in Kinsey’s statement, illustrates American adolescents attempting to break free from the binds of outmoded principals of their parents’ America. Although Bradford

50 Hajdu, 156.
51 Quoted in Hajdu, 159.
52 Hajdu, 158.
Wright argues that a majority of romance comics tamely reaffirmed domestic policies and gender roles in this era, releases like “The Savage Inside Me,” were a common staple of young sexually liberating magazines.\textsuperscript{54} These titles were still devoid of the youth voice that existed in the superhero titles of World War II, but by following their capitalistic inclinations, romance comic creators, and the debate they generated, painted a relevant portrait of American generational disparity highlighted specifically by the liberation of young libidos.

Horror comics were the third genre to find some success in the postwar era. Unlike the crime comics that lacked the imaginative design of the superheroes of the Golden Age, the horror genre indulged their readers’ in fantastic stories dealing with wild monsters, invading aliens, and scientific premises. The horror genre itself was split into two styles. The first style is generally referred to as suspense comics.\textsuperscript{55} Suspense comics filled the hole left by the industry wide cancelation of crime in the early 1950s. Utilizing the familiar design, suspense comics generally focused around some sort of ne’er-do-well committing various atrocities. At the comic’s conclusion, the title character would meet exaggerated repercussions designed by his or her own unscrupulous actions.\textsuperscript{56} The difference between crime comics and suspense comics was their presentation. Crime comics were extremely violent and

\textsuperscript{54} Wright, 127.
\textsuperscript{55} One of the stipulations designed by the Comic’s Code Authority was a banning of any reference to the term “suspense.” EC publisher Bill Gaines claimed that this was a direct attack on his premier title, \textit{Shock SuspenStories}.

focused on the crimes themselves, applying very little attention to the actual punishment. Readers of suspense comics followed the antagonist’s crimes, but were more interested in how the specificity of the crimes would be manipulated in order to determine the appropriate punishment. Traditionally, the authors of suspense stories would reverse the crimes committed to manufacture an appropriate punishment. For example, in EC’s 1952 “The Neat Job” a verbally and physically abusive husband chastises his wife for her inability to maintain the organization of the individually jarred and labeled screws, nuts, and bolts in his workshop. When the wife mistakenly breaks one of the jars while cleaning, the husband becomes irate. But rather than simply cleaning up her mess (as she had done in the past), the wife opts to chop apart her husband and organize his pureed body parts in individual labeled jars on the shelves with the rest of his beloved collection. The ending is gruesome, but in some demented fashion, acceptable because of the evil and malice the husband displayed throughout the comic. Even the homicide detectives lack compassion for the dead husband after the wife confesses to the murder. 57 But despite the continued promotion of blurred good over obvious evil, critics understandably lambasted suspense comics for their continued hyperbolic abuse of the traditional American moral code. 58 In Seduction, Wertham explains, “the strong, the ruthless, the bluffer, the shrewd deceiver, the torturer and the thief. All the emphasis is on exploits where somebody takes advantage of somebody else,

58 In the 1954 Congressional hearing, Bill Gaines of EC Comics, one of the most prominent and notorious suspense publishers of the era, was admonished by the committee’s chairmen for his lack of taste and irresponsible use of gore and violence to sell magazines (at the expense of the well being of American youth).
Hajdu 270-272
violently, sexually, or threateningly... Hostility and hate set the pace for almost every comic story."^{59} Wertham continued this assault later in the year at the congressional hearing, “We have found that it makes no difference whether the locale is western, or Superman, or space ship, or horror, if a girl is raped, she is raped whether it is in a space ship or on the prairie."^{60} But comic readers provided their own fiery retort. Encouraged by the national anti-comic movement unofficially united under Wertham’s public charges a coalition of aggravated teens in Syracuse, New York banded together to craft a letter to the local Syracuse Herald-American. In their editorial, the “Disgusted High School Students” asserted, “How about the so-called best sellers that are so freely circulated among the parents? These adults, who were directly responsible for the enactment of this curb on the funnies, read this type of book constantly and don’t consider it good unless it is full of vile language and corrupt thoughts, which thoroughly disgust any decent person. The reading matter in comic books may not be of the highest caliber, but it is mild in comparison with that found in adult books. In our estimation these actions by our elders are of no constructive use and stimulate only disrespect in their children’s minds.”^{61} This final declaration of shared adolescent frustration is one of the very few actual manifestations of the generational debate during this era. At the root of these teenagers’ anger was the imposing judgment levied by self imposed adult

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Editorial aside: I have not come across a single instance of a woman being raped in a Superman, or any other superhero comic book of the era.
^{61} Hajdu, 147.
authorities—like Wertham—whose own misunderstanding of the modern American teen led to sweeping bids for cultural control.

The second style of horror comic book is best described as science fiction. Sci-fi books never claimed to be for mature audiences (like crime, romance, and suspense comics all did), and hardly rallied the same type of controversy; similarly, their scripts reintroduced overt fantasy back into the comic genres. But the sci-fi books still appealed to adolescents by arousing curiosities concerning the scientific and technological advancements of the new Cold War society. Between the arm’s race and the space race, science was extremely visible in American life in the postwar era. Educators and government officials began demanding more and better scientific pathways in schools. According to historian Paul Boyer, “By and large, academia readily succumbed to the flattering suggestion that its role would be significantly enhanced in the post-Hiroshima cultural disarray.” But increased scientific education alone did little to soothe the paranoia of the American people; especially once the Soviet Union’s nuclear program came online in 1949. On a broad scale, nuclear technology was responsible for the confused anxiety plaguing American society; it changed how Americans viewed and valued education, science and national security. But in a more localized sense, atomic power simply represented a new rung of magnitude and awe previously un-conceived by a majority of the American populace. Retailers began holding sales promotions so magnificent, they described them as “atomic.” A French swimsuit designer created a

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62 Savage, 16.
63 Patterson, 288.
64 Boyer, 154, 160.
trend so hot and risqué he named it after the famed nuclear testing facility, the Bikini Islands. In boxes of Kix cereal, children could unravel mysteries with their “secret atomic decoder rings.” But in comic books, the once unparalleled power of superheroes now seemed rather pedestrian compared to the power of the bomb; suddenly there was an actual community of real life scientists who seemed to poses all of the potential and power their fictitious superheroes once claimed. Like the crime and suspense genres, sci-fi comics crafted their stories around the villains, but where crime and suspense comics always concluded with some sort of unforeseen O. Henry twist, sci-fi comics generally presented well reasoned solutions by directing their readers toward the increased presence of the scientific community in America. Rather than testing their readers’ maturity the creators of the sci-fi comics sought to titillate their readers’ greater scientific curiosities. A majority of comics did so by utilizing science as a champion, supplanting the traditional superhero with a much more impressive and plausible hero of scientific might. Atlas Comics’ “I Challenged Groot...The Monster from Planet X” is a premier example of scientific heroism. In the story, a small town is ravaged by an arborous space alien (apparently all inhabitants of Planet X including are giant wooden monsters). When the barrel chested sheriff and his militia fail to rescue their town, the scrawny science minded Leslie Evans is left to save the day. Lesli (arguably the most feminine name you can give a male character) is constantly emasculated by his wife for his lack of traditional male muscle and bravery, but when Lesli’s scientific

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66 Boyer, 11
67 Boyer, 47.
prowess proves mightier than the conventional brute physicality displayed by the other male characters, Leslie’s wife melts back into his arms, begging for forgiveness. Groot was a traditional comic book villain; as a monster with no regard for human life, the alien invader sought to enslave and/or devour all of mankind. But Leslie represented a completely new breed of comic book hero; as wimpy scientist, he would have had no place on the front lines of a Golden Age battle, but, considering the new demands of the atomic age, Leslie’s mind was able to succeed where traditional might failed. Leslie and Groot embody the majority of sci-fi comics, but a small minority of the titles actually warned their readers of the unchecked dangers of science as a villain. These comics did so by painting surreal portraits of alternative futures wrought by an era of scientific (specifically nuclear) recklessness. The Atomic Knights, for example, was a short lived series produced by the generally establishment endorsing DC Comics in the late 1950s early 1960s. The stories revolved around a group of normal humans who had survived the Nuclear Holocaust, but were now forced to wear scientifically augmented suits of armor to protect them from both the Earth’s unstable radiation levels and the various villains and monsters spawned in the nexus of 1986’s planet destroying “Hydrogen War.”

The pessimistic overtone of The Atomic Knights spoke directly to the nuclear anxieties of the Cold War arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union. It was rare in this era for a comic company (especially DC comics) to make such a strident statement about the condition of contemporary politics, but the

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68 Jack Kirby, Tales to Astonish #13: I Challenged Groot...The Master from Planet X in Marvel 70th Anniversary Collection (New York: Marvel Comics, 2009) 41-47.
70 Patterson, 418-420.
presence of this style of comic is still significant. Though obviously in conflict, both
*Groot* and *The Atomic Knights* presented an appreciation of young America's
advanced comprehension of the scientific presence in society; the inherent
contradictions of the two types of stories display an empirical example of the
anxious uncertainty bred by science in American society during the early 1950s.
Additionally, the simple fact that this debate existed in the pages of comic books
illuminates just how deeply this anxiety manifested within the earliest generations
of Cold War adolescents.

**SOLDIERS WITHOUT A WAR**

The relationship between American adults and adolescents reached a major
diverging point after World War II; as the two cultures sheared in different
directions, comic companies were forced to choose between the radically different
demands of the two parties. The successful comic companies followed their
capitalistic instincts, providing provocative adult themes for young audiences in the
face of parental disapproval. The less successful comics, concerned more for their own
preservation, adhered to the demands of the older generation. Superhero comics
were caught in the latter group. Superheroes were now being created without the
once ubiquitous youth voices aiding their designs. Instead, their titles were
subjected to a drastically increased pressure from American adults; consequently
once famous heroes like Superman, Batman and Captain America surrendered their
appeal and subsequently ended their reign as youth culture's preferred champions.

The fall of comic book superheroes ran parallel to the rise of the crime,
romance and horror genres. In 1953, romance and horror comics (crime comics had
fallen out of public favor at this point) distributed a combined 70 million comic books per month. In same year, *Publishers Weekly* credited the industry with an annual value of $1 billion.\(^{71}\) Discounting the occasional non-consequential issue of Superman, Batman, or Wonder Woman, the industry was able to construct this massive empire without the aid of their super powered forefathers. Essentially, while these other genres advanced their content in accordance with the advancement of young America, superhero comic books either maintained their wartime tone or, in some cases, actually degraded their content, generating an unwelcomed air of arrogance and condescension that ultimately underwrote the superheroes’ fate. Bradford Wright explains, “Superheroes after World War II had far less to say about their world than ever before.” Referring specifically to DC Comics as a metaphor for the entire superhero industry, Wright continues, “Once the leader in producing comic books relevant to contemporary issues, DC Comics adopted a postwar editorial direction that increasingly de-emphasized social commentary in favor of lighthearted juvenile fantasy.”\(^{72}\)

Batman and Robin, who had been hailed as the ideal example of a sidekick partnership, lost their essential brotherly bond.\(^{73}\) Captain America and Bucky faced a similar strain; in April of 1948, Bucky was sent to the hospital, and in a half-hearted attempt to cash in on a rising female hero trend, Cap’s creators installed Golden Girl as Bucky’s replacement.\(^{74}\) Rather than advancing the condition of women, as Captain America creators had done with female characters in the past,

\(^{71}\) Wright, 155.
\(^{72}\) Wright, 59.
\(^{73}\) Wright, 59-60.
\(^{74}\) The brief female protagonist trend is described in Mike Benton’s *Comic Books in America*. Mike Benton, *Comic Books in America*, (Dallas: Taylor Publishing Company, 1989), 40.
Golden Girl, who was actually the recurring pseudo-romantic damsel Betty Ross, was used to reduce the role of the comic’s youth presence. Ross was an adult, but as Golden Girl she was treated as another child. She and Bucky squabbled for Captain America’s attention; they became siblings in a constant duel for the approval of their metaphorical father figure, Captain America.75

During the Golden Age, sidekicks were a youth interpretation of themselves and heroes were the men they eventually wanted to be when they grew older. Golden Girl represented an industry wide move away from youth representation; rather than presenting familiar and acceptable images of their readers, comic creators in the postwar era began using adult interpretations to define the actions and the limitations of younger characters in comics. Similarly, the heroes were reinterpreted as adult versions of adults; instead of being mentors or instructors as they had been in the Golden Age, heroes became the residing authority over their wards’ thoughts and actions. When Captain America finally returned home from the war (nearly a full year after its official conclusion), Steve Rodgers took a job as public school teacher, where he not only assumed the role as local authoritarian, but willingly disciplined his students when they failed to adhere to his adult-defined code of conduct.76 As a literal teacher, Captain America lost his readers’ attention, respect and admiration. Even though he continued to fight crime and promote

adventure, through the adolescent eyes, Captain America became yet another adult supremacist in a world dominated by generational inequality.

The whole tone of superhero comics shifted in this direction during the postwar era. Despite a slight influx of superheroines after the war, by the early 1950s this trend had fizzled and comic book women became the victims of the national containment effort. In the Golden Age, female comic characters represented an enlightened interpretation of the progression of women in American society. Betty Ross, for example, proudly served Uncle Sam in a position generally reserved for men. After the war, however, she was demoted from government agent to superhero sidekick. With the sidekick role suffering its own practical regression during this era, the new comic creators were further degrading the female role in society. Another famous comic book female, Lois Lane lasted much longer than Betty Ross (though her longevity was not of her own accord, but rather a testament to the strength of her title hero, Superman). Lois began her career chasing Superman in 1938. Throughout the Golden Age, she bucked traditional gender policies by displaying substantial determination and bravery when tracking news worthy leads. But after the war, Lois began a steady decline, until eventually her character fit neatly in an archetypal mold of the modern feminine woman. In 1958, Lois was given her own comic series, Superman’s Girlfriend, Lois Lane. In the comics, Lois’s materialistic inclinations and petty jealousies were on full display. As

77 Wright, 128-130.
79 Described in William Savage’s Comic Books and America, “Lois Lane demonstrated that it was perfectly all right for a professional woman to behave like a moron while mooning over the man of her dreams...Women were out to marry, or else they were not virtuous.” Savage, 78.
the title character, most stories revolved around her selfish attempts to ruin Superman’s love life, or otherwise redirect the Man-of-Steel back into her own arms.\textsuperscript{80} Lois was neither the strong and liberated woman feminist historians have asserted lived in American society during the 1950s, nor was she the slightly sheltered but still independent female character originally designed by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster in 1938.\textsuperscript{81} Instead, Lois was a somewhat callous interpretation of a simple minded and romantically obsessed stereotype designed by white, adult men adhering to an unofficial expectation of domestic containment seen throughout popular culture in contemporary America.\textsuperscript{82}

Civil rights was another topic that fell by the wayside in the postwar era. During the Golden Age, some comic creators boldly introduced racially tolerant messages in their books. After the war however, many companies readopted the prewar jungle genre into their stable of titles, essentially re-saturating the market with racially charged and bigoted portrayals of tribal Africans and African Americans.\textsuperscript{83} Again, this was not a reflection of youth ideals or interests but instead an idea bred in the minds of the industry’s older creators. As an exception to this trend, Bill Gaines of EC comics, famously made efforts to undermine this comic

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{80} Madrid, 66-67.
\item \textsuperscript{82} Susan J. Douglas, \textit{Where the Girls Are} (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1995), 45.
\item Bradford Wright discusses the same dilema that existed within the more gender specific Romance genre. Wright, 130-131.
\item \textsuperscript{83} Savage, 76.
\end{itemize}
movement, lacing his content with very blatant pro-equality messages and morals.\textsuperscript{84} In one issue titled, “The Whipping,” Gaines showed a group of overt racists lynching a Mexican passer-by. Later in the story, as was typical in EC suspense tales, the fates turn for the torturous clan and they are subjected to a similar intolerance and hatred. But Gaines’s progressive efforts eventually backfired; during the congressional hearings, this specific issue was manipulated by Dr. Wertham to appear as inexcusably racist and destructive (even for contemporary standards). In his testimony, the Doctor used select samples from the first half of the comic, in which the cruel antagonists bandy about racial slurs, to support an overall claim that comic books provoke and promote racism.\textsuperscript{85} By the mid-1950s, the civil rights movement was extremely visible in society; socially there was an understanding that the type of intolerance displayed in jungle comics and the type of intolerance manufactured by Dr. Wertham was unacceptable. But privately, many Americans were still torn by their own contradictory sentiments.\textsuperscript{86} Eventually, the new generation of comic creators—either unaware or too far removed from the Golden Age tradition of discussing complex topics like race and equality—deemed the matter of civil rights far too complicated to broach in a medium as fundamentally simple comic books. As a result both the racially damaging and the racially liberating comic books vanished after 1954, leaving African Americans and any discussion of inclusion out of mainstream comics for nearly a decade.

\textsuperscript{84} Savage, 97-98.
\textsuperscript{85} Wright, 165-166.
\textsuperscript{86} Patterson, 380.
May, 8.
Each hero faced their own individual perils after World War II, but as a whole, it was the genre itself that veered irrevocably awry. The content of Captain America Comics illustrates the industry wide divergence away from youth culture.

In the previous era, Captain America Comics provided a special location where youth readers could revel in the elevated statuses of women, minorities and adolescents. After the war, Captain America Comics veered into the ranks of adult expectations, providing newly degraded interpretations of women and adolescents, and removing race from their content altogether. As society changed rapidly, Captain America became dislodged from a relevant timeline. Much like real American veterans, Captain America struggled to assimilate back into the new American society.87 The character spent an additional year overseas after the real war’s actual conclusion, clinging to an antiquated formula of Nazi villains and heroic American aggression.

In the year the Cap lost, the tastes and desires of the teenage readership had changed drastically. They were no longer interested in American militarism or his overt patriotism; instead, comic book readers craved explicit violence and realism, neither of which Captain America could provide. In the 1950s, the hero made only a handful of appearances, often lending his name to a title, but not even appearing in the book. Anti-communist messages and Korean War yarns were provided, but were largely ignored.88 In this era, the Cap and the rest of the superhero community failed, not just because their content became increasingly watered down, or their once famous cultural consciousness vanished from their pages, but because they

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87 May, 85.
88 Wright, 123.
removed the youth voice from their design. In the transition from the World War to the Cold War eras in America, Captain America and the greater superhero community mutated from the harbingers of youth liberation to a seemingly brainwashed army touting adult ideals and expectations. But their betrayal did not go unheeded; by the end of the 1940s, young America’s mutual distaste for the new superhero styles and brands, led to a massive unspoken boycott of their comics and their products.

**THE (LONG SOUGHT) END OF AN ERA**

In the Golden Age, the thoughts and opinions of American adolescents came through in the comic content; however in the post war era, the voice of young America came through primarily in their consumption. After World War II, American adolescents continued to purchase comic books that titillated their interests and played to their inherent desires, like crime, romance and horror; meanwhile, the outmoded comic genres, like superheroes, plummeted out of young America’s favor. Comic books found themselves at the heart of controversy in the postwar era. As the generational battle waged, comic books became scapegoated as the catalyst for the youth delinquency and violence. Neither the newly reformed superhero titles nor youth appeasing genres could escape the swell of negative criticism. Meanwhile, other massive entertainment enterprises, like film, television and music, began exploring the financial opportunities granted by recognizing young America’s differing needs and desires.

Both the rise of youth media and the onslaught of adult displeasure reflect the emergence of adult recognition. Even at the height of the Golden Age’s
popularity, youth culture was continually ignored and undervalued; but in this new era, the popularity of Elvis, James Dean and the universal sock hop in addition to the youth reform movements and the Congressional investigations and hearings on juvenile delinquency proved that all of America was now aware that a separate youth culture existed. Some feared it while others embraced it, but no one could ignore the commercial, social and political potential that this new breed of young Americans represented.
THE DAWN OF THE MARVEL AGE

The dawn of the "Marvel Age" is a story that has been told so many times, it is difficult to identify where the history ends and the myths begin. After nearly a decade of poor sales and a stark limitation of super powers throughout the entire comic industry, DC Comics attempted to revamp their own hero line in 1956 with the re-introduction of the freshly designed Golden Age staple, the Flash. The new Flash was a special police scientist who accidently soaked himself in a shower of lighting infused chemicals; the concoctions manipulated his chemical structure eventually giving him the power of super speed making him the undisputed "fastest man alive."1 DC followed up the Flash with a revived version of the Green Lantern; rather than the mystically empowered Green Lantern of the Golden Age, the new GL was a military test pilot who was identified by a highly technological alien power ring as the bravest and most deserving human on the planet.2 The two heroes reflected rising cultural trends in the second half of the 1950s; rather than ancient or amorphous powers of magic to dismiss their superheroes’ origin stories (as they had in the past), DC actually made attempts to integrate relevant backlogs and pseudo-scientific explanations to define their new characters. This won the company immense praise, and by 1960, DC Comics was once again the industry

leader in superheroes, churning out continuous issues of high flying, four-colored furry in an era many historians (and DC Comic fans) refer to as “the Silver Age.”

Fast forward now to a beautiful spring morning in 1961, on the 18th green of an upstate New York Golf Club (or so the legend traditionally continues). DC Comics’ editor Jack Liebowitz vaingloriously boasts the success of his newly revamped *Justice League* comic series to his struggling rival Martin Goodman, editor and chief of Atlas Comics (soon to be Marvel Comics). Intrigued by the prospect of popular comic books—a dream generally forgotten in the cramped office spaces of the few comic companies that had survived the previous fifteen-years—Goodman returned to the Atlas offices demanding a hot new superhero title of his own.

Meanwhile, behind the ostensibly obedient smile and nod of Goodman’s premier author, Stan Lee, lurked a fractured spirit. Lee had been beaten down by the monotony of the industry’s cliché expectations, the stringent restrictions of the Comic’s Code Authority, and his own publisher’s lack of imagination. Convinced this assignment would be his last, Lee’s wife urged her tired husband to write something that he could once again be proud of, even if it was limited to one final book. Lee, who had cut his teeth as a young writer and editor during the Golden Age, sought to reload his final comic book with the contemporary relevance and relatability that defined the industry twenty years prior. *The Fantastic Four #1* was released in November of 1961, and though it was initially meant to be his proverbial swan song, the story of America’s literal “nuclear family” introduced a new generation of American youth to the representative potential that had previously existed and was

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again present in this vogue medium, thus officially launching what most other comic historians (and Marvel fans) refer to as the “Marvel Age.”

Though it was not officially christened until much later, *The Fantastic Four* #1 was the first release in the recently rebranded Marvel Comics’ “New Wave of Comic Books.” Gone were the days of critical adherence and campy horror and romance titles; starting with the introduction of the Fantastic Four, Marvel authors and artists constructed a new line-up of relevant superheroes and topics. Bradford Wright explains the success of the new Marvel philosophy and the complex psychology of *The Fantastic Four*, “In a significant departure from superhero conventions,” Wright writes, “The heroes’ idiosyncrasies often impede their work as a team. They argue and even fight with each other...It was an often volatile mix of human emotions and personalities.”

*The Fantastic Four* displayed the problems of domestic containment that, according to historian Elaine Tyler May, typified the post-war era. Meanwhile, *The Incredible Hulk* challenged the Military-Industrial complex and continued nuclear aggressiveness, *The Amazing Spider-Man* spoke to anxious pubescents and the *Mighty Thor* illuminated the broadened gap between generations. Eventually, in 1964, the comic company would reintroduce Captain

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6 Wright, 205.

America as a convenient symbol of the nations, and more specifically young America’s political disunity and confusion. From Ant Man to the X-Men, Marvel infused each of their comic books with current affairs and pertinent moralized themes. They became the popular brand of choice for enlightened readers; Merry Marvel Marching Societies (the company’s personally endorsed national fan club) began springing up on college campuses across the nation.\(^8\) Though comic books would never match the ubiquitous exposure they experienced during the Golden Age, this new Marvel Age of comics regained a prominent place in within American youth culture.\(^9\)

According to Stan Lee, approximately 50% of Marvel comics were sold, traded and read on college campuses. A majority of the fan letters the company received were similarly spawned from the educated minds of American undergraduates.\(^10\) For the first time in comic book history, comic readers had a real inroad into the dictation comic content. In the Golden of Age, comic creators were generally of the same age range as their readers, making their content the indirect product of the readers’ thoughts and impressions. In the interim fifteen years between the Golden Age and the Marvel Age, many comic creators had removed the youth voice from their comics. The themes and morals in this era were almost unanimously rooted in adult impressions. The comparative success of the Marvel Age was the reintroduction of the Golden Age’s policy of using reader impression to


\(^{9}\) Wright, 218, 223.

shape comic content; but where the Golden Age was limited by its lack of accessibility, Marvel comic books in the 1960s provided both metaphorical and literal soap boxes for their readers to react to, discuss, and contribute to the construction of content. In a radio interview in 1970, Stan Lee explained to his hosts, “We do get an unexpected amount of letters...I use the letters to help me edit the magazine. It shows me what the readers want and don’t want. And for the most part, I try and follow their dictates because they’re the ones that buy the books.”

**THE KIDS ARE ALRIGHT**

According to Paula Fass, the first authentic American youth culture began with a relatively humble collection of college students bonding over various fashion and recreational trends in the 1920s. Four decades later, after the baby-boom of the late forties and fifties, youth culture had ballooned into a dominant hoard of teenagers spanning the country (and in some cases beyond); historian James Patterson elaborates, “The explosive leap in the number of college educated young people, one of the most salient demographic trends of the decade, promoted increasing amounts of talk by the mid-1960s about ‘youth culture,’ ‘youth rebellion,’ and ‘(the) generation gap.’” This new generation of teens collectively participated in specific musical, cinematic, and even literary activities that had been

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11 A fan forum existed in the final pages of Marvel Comics, allowing fans to write in and discuss anything from the Hulk’s waist line to America’s presence in Vietnam. Throughout the era (and actually up to the 1980s) the section was highlighted by Stan Lee’s personal message to his fans titled: “Stan’s Soap Box.”

An Example of Stan’s Soap Box.


manufactured primarily to feed their joint tastes and desires. No single catalyst can be isolated to explain the rapid development and eventual dominance of American teenagers in the 1960s, nor can it be considered that this overriding culture simply materialized out of the ether. Instead, it should be acknowledged that American youth culture was systematically constructed over the previous forty years. When viewed in the historical context outlined in the previous two chapters, it is clear that the participatory trends of American adolescence that so sharply defined youth culture in the 1960s were simply evolutions of similar or the same trends that began as early as the 1920s.

From 1920 to 1960, from one generation to the next, American teens continued to find themselves and bond with each other through increasingly accessible modes of communication. The comic book kick started the commercial acceptance of the teenage demographic during the depression era. In the following decade, magazine publishers and Hollywood films began mimicking the comic book industry’s success by embracing the same budding youth market. By the 1950s, the advent of television in addition to the heightened awareness and distribution networks of music, magazines and other media producers, contributed to a proverbial perfect storm of youth recognition. In this era, popular mediums were unanimously embracing the adolescent demographic; this phenomena simultaneously informed teens of their shared value and power within society,

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15 May, 207.
while also alerting America’s older generations that a unified teenage community existed and no longer emulated the country’s traditionally adult-centric interests, desires or values. The 1950s was a decade of vocal objection and debate in which the terms “youth culture” and “juvenile delinquency” seemed almost interchangeable within most adult circles. While entertainment industries continued to capitalize on teenage self-awareness, childhood psychologists, irate teachers, concerned parents and state funded congressional committees explored strategies for re-assimilating America’s younger community; but by vocalizing their concerns, anti-delinquency activists unintentionally acknowledged the existence of an American teenage collective, further empowering the already emboldened and aware class of adolescence. By the close of the decade, American teenagers could officially gather under the single “youth culture” banner. The media profited from it, American teens were empowered by it, and parents, teachers and elected representatives were all confounded by it. Consequently, youth culture criticism relented heavily in the 1960s; of course charges of delinquency and a general misunderstanding of young America’s antics and actions remained, but, by-and-large, American adults finally accepted the reality that teens now held an important position in the ranks of the once purely adult run American society.

Higher education played an equally fundamental role in the massive youth-favoring shift that occurred within American society in the early portion of the 1960s. Education has always been an integral motor in the development of youth

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18 Gilbert, 195.
19 Gilbert, 63.
20 Gilbert, 195.
culture. High schools and universities not only provide heightened societal awareness and understanding, but also create literal cells in which social relationships and peer bonding can occur.\textsuperscript{21} By breaking down the high school and university attendance rates generation by generation, we are able to isolate an important factor in both the rising self-awareness of American teenagers as well as the shift in the intellectual bell curve and the teenager’s ability to critically comprehend the events around them.\textsuperscript{22} In 1920, when the first unified youth culture began to develop, the American high school attendance rate was approximately 36.5\%.\textsuperscript{23} By 1960, the high school \textit{graduation} rate nearly doubled the twenties’ \textit{attendance} rate reaching upwards to 70\%, and continued to climb to 77\% by the end of the decade.\textsuperscript{24} In 1920, there were 1,041 institutes of higher education in the United States, by 1959, the amount of colleges and universities had reached just over 2,000.\textsuperscript{25} For previous generations of teens, the college experience was strictly reserved for students from more affluent families; but in the 1950s, thanks largely to government funded programs like the G.I. Bill, the long coveted college education

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{21}In a book written half a decade before Paula Fass claims the first sprouting of youth culture emerges, educator John Stout points to the proverbial planting of the seeds by outlining his own socializing vision for public schools. Fass, 13.
\textsuperscript{22}May, 77.
\textsuperscript{25}Snyder, 75.
\end{footnotes}
became attainable for America’s robust middle class.26 By 1959, nearly 3.7 million American men and women were enrolled in some sort of college or university, a monumental increase when compared to the just under 600,000 students enrolled forty years earlier.27 But in the new Cold War era, even the teens that did not move on to college were still treated to heightened academic standards within the American public school system. James Patterson argues that the massive influx of students in the 1950s contributed to an overall “dumbing down” of secondary and post-secondary academic standards; however, academic standards were actually heightened in response to the competitive demands of the Atomic Age.28 As early as the 1946, American scholars and educators began demanding an increase in scientifically oriented pathways inside of schools as well as an elevated awareness in liberal-studies class rooms. Quoting Charles Edison (son of the famed Thomas Edison), historian Paul Boyer explains, “Atomic energy ha(s) made ‘the unintelligent man obsolete...We have got to strive to make our heads more potent than uranium...Our public schools and our colleges must do a great deal more.”29 Additionally, the heightened exposure to furthered education generated a larger population of educated young adults; even if the rhetoric were dampened, as Patterson suggests, the sheer magnitude of high school and college graduates in the early Cold War period would have elevated the intellect of the average American adolescent in comparison to any of the preceding generations. The maturation of

26 May, 77.
27 Snyder, 75.
28 Patterson, 313.
adolescent awareness from the Golden Age to the 1950s era unfortunately resulted in a decline in superhero popularity; this is a direct correlation to the enlightened demands of young America and their generally decreased capacity for the anachronistic frivolity and simple mindedness portrayed in typical Golden Age style adventures. The resurgent success of comic books in the 1960s, (as well as the success of other major popular culture producers) came from the reconsideration and maturation of their content. Unlike the immediately previous generation of comic books, Marvel Age comics manufactured new methods of candid inclusion to compensate for the greater intellectual fortitude of the latest crop of American youth.

However, despite all other contributors, possibly the most integral factor in the dominance of youth culture in this decade came from the sheer size of its freshman class. Historian Suzanne Douglas explains, “The growth rate of the teenage population (in the 1960s) took off at four times the average of all other age groups: a staggering 46 million Americans entered their teens in this decade.” After World War II, Americans made conscious efforts to reconstruct the idealized American dream life. The search for idealism lead to the expansion of middle class suburban communities, the development of a disposable commercial culture and the perfectly contained familial structure; logically, a national conception craze followed.\textsuperscript{30} Between 1945 and 1960, the American birth rate reached one of its highest peaks of the entire 20\textsuperscript{th} century. By the late sixties, 26\% of the American

\textsuperscript{30} May, 16-17.
population was between the ages of 5 and 17.\textsuperscript{31} This baby-boom generation arrived in the new decade, proudly touting their unique combination of furthered education, elevated communication potential, and an affinity for consumable commercialism; all of these traits combined to define their own personal, uninhibited, non-adult youth, identification.\textsuperscript{32}

As the youth market grew into the 1960s, it became decreasingly less possible to make sweeping representative claims. Subcultures have always existed within youth culture; young Americans, like all Americans, have been subjected to contrasting socio, economic and racial identifications.\textsuperscript{33} In the Golden Age, when these differences were sharpened by the heightened self-awareness of American teens, creators Joe Simon and Jack Kirby made candid efforts to portray these divisions through the roster of their \textit{Young Allies} comic series. Although the races and creeds differed between each of the characters, Simon and Kirby ensured that their objectives were unwaveringly consistent.\textsuperscript{34} Ideological cohesiveness was possible in this era because of the nearly universal aversion to Nazism and a generally limited expectation of youth mental capacity. If reproduced in their overtly simplified Golden Age format, the \textit{Young Allies} would have never survived in the 1960s. The Golden Age had World War II, but in the Marvel Age there was not a

\textsuperscript{31} “120 Years of Literacy,” National Center for Educational Statistics.
can+subculture&hl=en&ei=aLWMTbeolPLAgQfyvMHFDQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=book-
thumbnail&resnum=1&ved=0CCoQ6wEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false (date accessed March 24, 2011).
\textsuperscript{34} Michael Uslan, introduction to \textit{Marvel Masterworks: Golden Age Young Allies, Vol.1} (New York: Marvel Publishing Group, 2009), iv.
single social, political, or military mandate demanding of unanimous American compliance anywhere in society. Furthermore, thanks in large part to better educations as well as increased communication technology, American adolescence had a heightened understanding for the complexities of society; with the growth of the youth population and the expansion of their communication potential, American teens were able to organize themselves into different ideological camps.

American memories of youth in the 1960s generally boast of liberal counter cultures and highly visible student coalitions like SDS (Students for a Democratic Society). Jackson Spielvogel’s text book on Western Civilization explains, “Protest was an integral part of the ever growing youth movement in the 1960s. Young people questioned authority and fostered rebellion in an attempt to change the social thinking of an older generation.” This antiauthoritarian radicalism may not have existed in the sweeping capacity that Spievogel suggests, but its presence in society was widespread and recognizable enough for Marvel to represent in their content. Yet Marvel also made conciliating efforts to include an equally radicalized, but considerably less acknowledged, conservative disposition in their pages. This contrast provided a balance in the content which was further emphasized by the company’s self-proclaimed commitment to moderateness. As Stan Lee explained in

35 James Patterson eludes to the variety of social and political topics protested specifically on college campuses across the United States in the 1960s. Patterson, 446.

James Patterson more willingly admits, “By no means (did) all campuses experience significant unrest in the 1960s...”
37 R. Christy, ’Voices from the Border: Conservative Students and a Decade of Protest’ (M.A. Thesis, Bowling Green State University, 2010), 5.
a radio interview with the left leaning Lawrence and Lindsey Van Gelder, “Even in our bullpen we have divergent opinions, which is something of course you think about, everybody belongs to a family and how often in a family is there ever complete concurrence on every issue? And when you try to think of making the whole world harmonious or getting people who are so totally different and have different interests throughout the nation to agree on any issue, why it’s just a staggering concept.”³⁸ Some historians, like filmmaker Ron Mann, misconstrue Marvel’s acclaimed “hipness” as an overall commitment to contemporary liberalism and antiauthoritarianism.³⁹ This is a credible statement when compared directly to the overwhelmingly pro-authoritarian messages delivered by rival DC Comics; however, when Marvel’s content is truly dissected, the liberal and the conservative radicalism is balanced by the general moderate inquisitiveness of the company’s themes and characters; stories were rarely overt dictations, but rather explorations into the popular social and political questions of the era.⁴⁰ For comic creators in the Marvel Age, the challenge came in their desire to respond to and please all of their readers’ interests; this was a much more attainable task in the Golden Age when readers, though slightly segmented, were still more willing to adhere to the homogeneous morality of comic book content (as is seen in the premise behind Simon and Kirby’s Young Allies series). In the 1960s, however, young America was

³⁹Comic Book Confidential, DVD, Directed by Ron Mann (Chattsworth: Home Vision Entertainment, 2002).
⁴⁰Matthew J. Pustz, Comic Book Culture (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 53.
far to intelligent, and far to connected with each other to simply accept a single answer or a single proposition.41

As suggested, Marvel reacted to the ideological misalignments in the early decade by attempting to pander toward the moderate majority while carefully sprinkling their comics with reader requested bites of conservatism and liberalism; this allowed the comic company to provide their readers a platform to explore and understand contemporary topics without overtly dictating or controlling their thoughts. According to Marvel Age mastermind, Stan Lee, “If I’ve learned anything from the kids on campus, the thing I’ve learned is that you got to make your comic magazines or your television shows or your movies or whatever relate to the real world because unless they do, you have meaningless cardboard characters, and that’s really not what people are into today...Years ago I used to lecture and the whole lecture was just about the comics. But now it seems every age group, whether they are radicals or whether they are conservatives, they want to know about today? What about what’s happening now?”42 This consideration of reader opinion—and inherent lack of condescension—had not occurred since the Golden Age, and even then, comic books did not provide the freedom of opinion that was welcomed by this new wave of Marvel magazines.

The Merry Marvel Marching Society

Marvel Comics in the 1960s certainly presented a more mature and intellectually inclusive world than their Golden Age predecessors, but despite the

41 Christy, 4.
resurgence in relevance and popularity, the Marvel style was still unwaveringly designed for young American readers. *The Fantastic Four*—the first major comic release of the Marvel Age—took the comic story right into their readers’ homes by shearing through the once hermetically contained nuclear-age family structure. Elaine Tyler May explains that in the early era of the Cold War, “The (domestic) ‘sphere of influence’ was the home. Within its walls, potentially dangerous social forces of the new age might be tamed, so they could contribute to the secure and fulfilling life to which postwar women and men aspired. Domestic containment was bolstered by a powerful political culture that rewarded its adherents and marginalized its detractors.”

But May also explains that behind the golden façade of American perfectionism lurked a true culture of fractured gender roles, generational incongruity and general disobedience; the impossibility of the “American dream” eventually overwhelmed and jaded younger Americans, shattering any hopes of generational sustainability into the 1960s. May continues, “Ultimately, containment proved to be an elusive goal...The baby-boom generation abandoned the idea, shrugging off the obsession with security and the vision of the family in which their parents had placed their highest hopes.”

Released in 1961, *The Fantastic Four* was among the first youth-centric productions to openly critique the reality of America’s perfectly contained family idealism.

The FF was composed of four key members. Dr. Reed Richards (Mr. Fantastic) played the role of proud-papa. As a distinguished pipe puffing nuclear physicist, Richards represented everything the white middle-class American father

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43 May, 16.
44 May, 17.
should represent in 1961: he was brilliant, career oriented, scientifically motivated and the literal captain of his familial rocket ship. Sue Storm (the Invisible Girl) was the teams transplant mother; she was obedient, and un-opinionated. Storm’s primary function was the willful adherence to all of Richards’s orders, and the preservation of team morale.\textsuperscript{45} Ben Grimm (the Thing) was the older of the two children. A college football star and an ace pilot for the U.S. Marine Corps, Grimm’s fame preceded him in most social circles. Johnny Storm (the Human Torch) was the proverbial baby-brother. As an absolute wunderkin, Storm possessed incredible athletic and academic abilities that secured for him a future of seemingly endless personal opportunities. These four individuals appeared bonded together as the unembroidered image of American familial flawlessness: the literal ideal to which Cold War American families aspired to achieve. But beneath fictional family’s apparent American perfection lurked the ugly features of American reality. Reed Richards was an unabashed workaholic, constantly ignoring or endangering his family in the pursuit of professional achievement and notoriety. (It was his reckless insistence to fly a rocket ship into a space cloud of cosmic radiation that eventually infected his family with their respective transformative diseases).\textsuperscript{46} Sue Storm was woefully unhappy in her current domestic relationship, but was too weak to make any sort of ripple in her family’s already raucous affairs; instead, she both

\textsuperscript{45} Elaine Tyler May discusses the parental expectations of containment era Americans through the portrayal of mothers and fathers on film and popular television shows. May, 139.

figuratively and literally faded into the background of domestic quarrels.\textsuperscript{47} Ben Grimm possessed the traditional cocktail of Cold War machismo and social apathy; his perpetual pessimism was routinely overcome with a well-timed challenge to his masculinity and gender role.\textsuperscript{48} As the younger of the two brother figures, John Storm was the worst offender of American containment policy. Paraphrasing Elaine Tyler May, as the token baby-boomer, Storm was uninterested in the ideals of his parents’ (or his older brother’s) generation; instead, he refocused all of his potential on the pursuit of cheap thrills, juvenile frivolity and continuous pranking of his elder family members.\textsuperscript{49} The Fantastic Four represented the perfect American family; however, as readers quickly discovered, the exterior veil hid a more recognizable family, ripe with behavioral clashes and generational disagreements. The FF provided young readers a rare glimpse behind the curtain of American idealism; what they discovered was much more recognizable, and ironically reassuring image. Through the Fantastic Four, teenage readers took solace in the impracticality of their parent’s perfectionism and ambition; it was clear that even a super family could not escape to the type of domestic dysfunctionalism they experienced in their own daily lives.

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\textsuperscript{47} Beth Bailey explores the reality of her own Cold War childhood and the comparisons between her own parents (namely her mother) and the same popular television families discussed by May. Bailey, 43-44.
May points to the absence of fatherhood in most real containment era families. May, 139.
Wright, 205.
\textsuperscript{48} A discussion of expectations of Cold War masculinity enforced by the mass media.
Bailey, 17.
\textsuperscript{49} Thomas Hine, \textit{The Rise and Fall of the America Teenager} (New York: Harpers Collins Publishers, 1999), 260.
Wright, 205.
\end{flushleft}
As the sole youth in the story, Johnny Storm played very much the same role as Bucky Barnes and Robin were intended to play during the Golden Age. He was an adolescent inlet that helped translate the realities of the world to younger readers. Johnny Storm promised individual American teens that they were not alone; but his comic largely focused on his family, constricting Storm’s ability to fully purvey the range of individualized adolescent anxieties. In August of 1962, Marvel concocted a remedy for this void with the introduction of their latest “long underwear character”—and mainstream comic book’s first official (non-side kick) superhero—Spider-Man. In the opening twelve pages of the fledging monthly series *Amazing Fantasy*, fans were introduced to the bespectled outcaste adolescent, Peter Parker. Most superheroes titles of the era began with vibrant action sequences and colorfully illustrated words and speech bubbles, but *Amazing Fantasy #15* was introduced a little differently. On the first page, a hoard of high school students gather outside the school building; one student motions toward a hunched mass in the corner of the page, “Say Gang,” the student proposes, “We need one more guy for the Dance! How about Peter Parker over there?” At the center of the heard, Flash Thompson (resident BMOC) offers a dismissive wave toward Parker, “Are you kiddin’? That bookworm wouldn’t know a cha-cha from a waltz!” The trophy blonde at Thompson’s side neglects to even offer a glance as she callously adds, “Peter Parker? He’s Midtown High’s only professional wall flower!” The sheep surrounding Flash chime in with their dismissive cackles as the ostracized Parker dips his head and grips his schoolbooks tightly by his side.50 In the following pages, Peter Parker

50 Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, *Amazing Fantasy #15: introducing Spider-Man* in Marvel Masterworks: The
is bitten by a radio active spider, gains unique set of super powers, loses his dear Uncle Ben to New York City mugger, hunts down said mugger, captures said mugger, and finally, makes the heroic decision not to enact his own deadly revenge and releases the mugger into police custody. The bottom caption on the final page promises further adventures of “America’s most different teenage idol” in the next issue of *Amazing Fantasy*. Unfortunately, *Amazing Fantasy* never made it to issue #16, but “America’s most different teenage idol” most certainly did; roughly six months later, in March 1963, at the behest of countless demanding readers, *The Amazing Spider-Man #1* was released for fanboy consumption.

Spider-Man went on to become the single most popular hero in the Marvel line throughout the 1960s (even today, he is consider the company’s most recognizable character). Spider-Man’s success was forged in his design. Where John Storm empathized with his readers on the despair of family life, Spider-Man preached to the proverbial choir on all of the other complications of adolescents. Of course, as a superhero, Spider-Man spent a great deal of his time battling exceedingly mature super villains like Dr. Octopus and the Vulture (a literal geriatric who developed a method of sucking the youth from his victims to feed his own maniacal desire for eternal adolescence); but more times than not, those epic battles were painted as major inconveniences to Peter Parker, who still had to maintain his

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grades, finance his teenage lifestyle and adhere to a strict household curfew. In a 1965 article published in *Esquire Magazine*, a student at Stanford University elaborated on his own affinity for the web-slinger, “(Spider-Man) is a hero beset by woes, money problems, and the question of existence. In short, he is one of us.” The opening page of *Amazing Fantasy #15* did not look like a typical superhero comic, because Spider-Man was never intended to be a typical superhero. The stories told month after month in *The Amazing Spider-Man* followed average American teen, Peter Parker, as he struggled to cope with the traditional plagues of adolescence: money, girls and the occasional flare up of world threatening super villainy.

Marvel got the new decade rolling with a constant stream of blockbuster successes like *The Fantastic Four* and *The Amazing Spider-Man*. Stan Lee explained in an interview in 1968 that the only thing preventing the company from creating more titles and heroes was the massive demand that existed for all of their current titles and heroes. This was as much a testament to the unique character designs as it was the company’s inherent promise to maintain relevance without condescension. On the famous cover of 1961’s *Amazing Fantasy #7* (eight months and eight issues before Spider-Man made his heralded debut in the same comic series), the publishers ensured their readers that Marvel was, “The magazine that respects your intelligence.” The title image portrayed the backside of a massive

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55 Quoted in Wright, 233.
beast in the foreground. A mob of concerned adults stood in the background, staring pusillanimously back at the creature. Each of the onlookers was portrayed with a frightened gape and individually shaded in a singular tone of grey. In front of the crowd, a sole boy stood—fully colored—with his legs shoulder width apart and his arms flexed tensely at his side. Among the crowd of adults, the single boy was the only onlooker brave enough to stand up to the monster.\(^57\) This is how Marvel treated their readers, filling each book with an open-ended respect for the mental capacity and awareness of American teens, while simultaneously deriding the older generation for their own lack of awareness. Paraphrasing the great Stan Lee, Bradford Wright explains, “He (Lee) wanted readers to feel part of ‘an in thing that the outside world wasn’t even aware of...’”\(^58\) With Johnny Storm, teens could revel in their shared familial frustrations, with Spider-Man, or more accurately, Peter Parker, they could communicate the seemingly universal anxieties of adolescent awkwardness. These were expressions of teenage issues written for teenagers in a language they could accept as uniquely their own.

In the late fall of 1965, British Pop/Rock quartet the Who released My Generation, a debut track that very simply dug into the roots of generational disparities. As guitarist and writer Pete Townsend slammed down heavily distorted chords, lead singer Rodger Daltrey belted, “People try to put us down, just because we get around. Things they do look awful cold, I hope I die before I get old.”\(^59\) The tune itself was fundamentally simple, but it was a pure expression of the popular

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\(^{58}\) Quoted in Wright, 218.

culture and the youth culture of the era. The generation gap was an accepted reality in 1960s American society; popular artisans, like the Who, sought to exacerbate it by supplying young America with their own purely youth-centric fodder.\textsuperscript{60} In Marvel Comics, almost all of the stories fueled the raging generational fire in one capacity or another, but it was most specifically confronted in the tales of the Asgardian Prince, the Mighty Thor. Thor constantly butted heads with the heavenly All-Father, Odin. Odin’s dreams and ambitions for his son completely contradicted Thor’s own desires. Both were nobly fueled, Odin wanted his son to return to Asgard to fulfill his predestined destiny and serve as king, while Thor wished to remain on Midgard (the planet Earth) and serve as a protector for the human race; but the fundamental contradiction of their dueling desires resulted in massive verbal and occasionally physical brawls between the patriarchal pair.\textsuperscript{61} Though he appeared much older, Thor was essentially an unwieldy teenager in the eyes of his father, and an adolescent comrade in the battle for generational independence in the eyes of his readers. Odin was similarly portrayed as ignorantly stern and constantly pushing his own unfair agenda upon his son: a pure metaphor for the traditional parent/child dynamic in the post-containment era.\textsuperscript{62} The paternalistic relationship between Thor and Odin was meant to be a familiar relationship for the readers; Thor, much like the Fantastic Four’s Johnny Storm, was an expression of the differences between generations and a reminder to all adolescent readers that they were not alone. Through Thor’s adventures, and through the adventures of other

\textsuperscript{60} Douglas, 83-84.  
\textsuperscript{61} Wright, 213.  
\textsuperscript{62} Hine, 260.
characters like Johnny Storm and Spider-Man, Marvel Comics joined the ranks of rock and roll and various other pop-culture mediums by explicitly supporting and contributing to the broadening of young American minds in the 1960s (despite the disapproving finger wags of the bewildered older generations).

**BRAVE NEW WORLD: BRAVE NEW WAR**

Marvel did not limit themselves solely to adolescent representation. Of course, a major part of the 1960s generation of American teens was the heightened self-awareness; the Fantastic Four, Spider-Man and the Mighty Thor fulfilled these desires. But dating back to the Golden Age, comic books had a tradition of responding to the social and political happenings of “adult” America. In the Golden Age, these messages were generally limited due to the constricted self-awareness and educational restrictions of the youth class, but in the Marvel Age, there was virtually no constraint to the amount of worldly saturation the comic creators were capable of including in their texts. Likewise, there was no limit to the amount of political and social relevancy being demanded month after month by Marvel readers.63

By the time Captain America was thawed from his cryogenic preservation in 1964 (more on that later), Marvel Comics had introduced over a dozen new comic book superheroes, each with their own claim to American social and political relevancy. In the Golden Age, a single comic was all that was required to present the political and social commentaries of the era; Captain America alone discussed

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Nazism, civil rights and feminine liberation all in a single title. Though the content was limited, its presence was still revolutionary by contemporary standards. In the 1960s however, the multitude of topics was only equaled by the unreserved availability of information.\textsuperscript{64} A single comic in the Marvel Age was incapable of discussing every hot topic in the American media-sphere, so creators specialized individual titles, providing singular key topics to single characters.

The X-Men for instance, were a group of white teenagers with biological mutations making them different from the rest of society. Because of restrictions created inside of the Comic’s Code, and the industry’s history of generally poor minority relations, including minorities or discussing civil rights inside of comic books was a known taboo.\textsuperscript{65} But Marvel was unwilling to simply ignore one of the largest and most vital social topics of the era, especially considering the overwhelming segment of youth and student involvement in the movement.\textsuperscript{66} The X-Men were a creative evasion around 1960s industrial standards which allowed Stan Lee and his reading public to discuss civil rights and racial inclusion.\textsuperscript{67} In one book released in late 1964, two of the X-Men are traveling through New York City in their civilian guises. Hank McCoy, also known as the Beast, spots a small boy dangling from the edge of a skyscraper. Conscious of the consequences of revealing his mutations to the rest of crowd, McCoy still sheds his disguise and races to the young boy’s rescue. But despite the heroic effort, McCoy’s deed is met with discerning rumbles. One older gentleman loudly compares McCoy to a “Human

\textsuperscript{64} Edward J. Rielly, \textit{The 1960s} (Westport: Green Wood Press, 2003), 193.
\textsuperscript{65} Wright, 219.
\textsuperscript{66} Patterson, 446.
\textsuperscript{67} Wright, 219.
Gorilla!” Another prune faced old woman whispers: “I’ve heard there are many such mutants in hiding, waiting to take over the world!” The rest of the crowd joins in the discussion; one man asserts with a clinched fist, “He probably saved that kid just to throw us off guard...to make us think mutants aren’t dangerous!” Finally the hostility reaches percolation as a final man declares, “He can’t fool us! C’mon...Let’s get’im!” In the next panel, McCoy (who just selflessly raced to save a little boy from certain death) and his fellow mutant Bobby Drake are sprinting away from what the narrator has dubbed an “angry and unthinking mob.”68 This small sequence, released in only the X-Men’s eighth adventure, set the tone for the future of the franchise. Later X-Men comics would present extremely unsubtle stories about fervent anti-mutant senators with genocidal aspirations, anti-mutant militias comparable to the Ku Klux Klan, and eventually even a government sponsored “Sentinel Program,” which created an army of unthinking, unemotional robots with the sole design of locating and eradicating the mutant race, but in this early era, when racial inclusion and civil rights were unacceptable comic book topics, Stan Lee was able to utilize the X-Men to engage his readers in intelligent discussion of one of the nation’s leading political movements, all without introducing a single minority character or compromising the industry's stringent censorship policies.69

_The Incredible Hulk_ was another major political statement made by the Marvel creators in the early decade. As a scientific engineer for the U.S.

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Government, Dr. Bruce Banner helped develop the G-Bomb, "The most awesome weapon ever created by man!" Unfortunately, on the fateful test day, a clueless wanderer traveled right into the bomb's blast radius. Ignoring the menacing countdown warnings, Dr. Banner raced into harm's way to rescue the aloof intruder. Banner managed to usher the would-be victim to safety, but in doing so, he exposed himself to a shower of deadly gamma-radiation. The radiation transformed the mild mannered doctor into a massive green (originally grey) beast, eventually dubbed the Incredible Hulk. Throughout his adventures, the Hulk is hunted by the unrelenting fury of the U.S. Military, while the brilliant Dr. Banner is imprisoned in the shadows of the monster's dulled mind. The original tales of the Incredible Hulk ran congruently with the WSP (Women Strike for Peace) protests over America's unyielding nuclear testing practices, the rising resistance to America's presence in Vietnam, and an overarching American nuclear anxiety. Marvel never came out and made definitive objections to the Nuclear testing or American militarism, similarly, they never officially debated racism or heralded specific champions of civil rights, but by providing stories entrenched in modern American relevance, Marvel provided open-minded readers an opportunity to formulate and share their own opinions based around immensely moralized interpretations of reality. According to Stan Lee in a 1970 radio interview, “If something is going on today and it’s something we’re all real concerned with, it’s really almost impossible to keep it out

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71 May, 208-209
Patterson, 449-450
May, 13.
of a story...We’ve tried to do more than just involve the characters in contemporary problems. We try to also show how our characters themselves react to the problems...One thing I try and do in my own limited way is to show that nothing is really all black and white.”

But for all of their relevancy successes, many historians claim that Marvel fell woefully short in their attempts at female and feminist representation in the early decade (this all despite Stan Lee’s own verbose claims otherwise). The less than flattering assertions of historians are certainly well supported. Mike Madrid laments, “Heroines Invisible Girl, Wasp, and Marvel Girl formed a female trinity in the early days of Marvel Comics. All three have similar backgrounds and are around the same age...Each is a girl transformed into a heroine as a result of the work and machinations of the older men in their lives...The three young women of Marvel’s superhero world can be seen as accepting their fates, or at least biding their time until the men in their lives popped the questions...Their weaker powers usually force them to act only as a distraction or decoy within their team battles.” Madrid continues, further criticizing the chauvinist double-standard of Marvel Comics, “Despite the fact a teenager like Spider-Man was referred to as an adult, these heroines still go by the more adolescent appellation ‘girl.’” These claims, though undoubtedly accurate, do not take into account the contemporary standards set in popular film and television. Most Hollywood productions of the era portrayed

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73Wright, 220.
similar reductions of feminine power and perpetuated the domestic stereotypes. Additionally, these claims play little head to the amount of progress comics had actually made since the end of the Golden Age. Although his comics promoted (in a limited capacity) feminine empowerment in the 1940s, Captain America still had to adapt to the idea of Janet van Dyne, aka the Wasp, as an acceptable battle ready ally in the 1960s.

In March 1964, Earth’s mightiest heroes, the Avengers (a collective of popular Marvel heroes designed to emulate the success of rival DC Comics’ Justice League) discovered the Star Spangled Sentinel bobbing in an ice cube along the Antarctic rim. After thawing the World War hero and discovering the mystery behind his miraculous fifteen-year cryostasis (the blast of a hijacked Nazi missile propelled an unconscious Steve Rodgers into the frozen depths of the North Atlantic, instantly preserving his body and mind in an organic chamber of oceanic ice), the team elected to add Captain America to the full time varsity roster, but first they insisted on a display of his talents. Utilizing the combined might of Hank Pym’s biological mastery, Thor’s righteous hammer, and Iron Man’s state of the art armament technology, the Avengers chased Captain America from panel to panel, but ultimately could not overcome the super-soldier’s tactical perfection. But just as the Captain thought he had prevailed over his rescuers’ challenge, the Wasp reverted from her shrunken state and stood arms crossed in front of the old-time hero. Captain America halted in his tracks; the totalized forces of America’s mightiest heroes could not stall him but the presence of “a Woman!” in the combat

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75 Douglas, 44, 73.
zone proved to be an overwhelming concept for the dated hero, who instantly submitted to her feminine will. The Wasp may have been comparatively insignificant to the other heroes on the Avengers roster (her powers consisted of shrinking herself down to fly around the faces of villains stinging them with her obnoxiously underpowered ray-guns), but she was still a progressive figure when likened back to the inarguably less liberated female heroes, like Golden Girl, of the previous era. Many historians chastise the Wasp, who possessed all of the negative stereotypes available in the 1960s (love obsession, vanity and relative weakness); but through the eventual approval and endorsement of Captain America, who had come from an era of extremely limited female capacity and involvement, the Wasp, exaggerated flaws of femininity and all, represented a new, and acceptable place for women in society.

Captain America spent approximately fifteen years frozen in the cavernous reserves of comic book history. Since the last time he made a significant appearance in a comic book (1949) approximately forty-five to sixty-million American homes became equipped with televisions, the Supreme Court deemed segregation in public schools an unconstitutional denial of human rights, the Soviet Union had developed their first operational atomic bomb subsequently followed by a significant nuclear fortification program, and American youth culture had grown from the lowly reserve of forgotten adolescents, to a formidable population of educated and opinionated young consumers contributing to the progression of American

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77 Madrid, 109.
society.\textsuperscript{78} The face of America and the design of comic books had both undergone drastic evolutions during Steve Rodgers’s decade and half absence; befittingly, upon his return the ominous question echoed through the halls of comicdom: was there still room for a fighting symbol of liberty and democracy in a nation that could no longer unanimously agree on the virtues of Americanism? The publishers at Marvel Comics had two options when they chose to reintroduce Captain America: first, they could ignore the question and simply present a glorified reinterpretation of the World War might and power that the hero originally represented; or second, they could confront the question head on, and let all of the disquieted doubt and personal apprehension sear into the character’s own make-up, churning its own uneasiness and definitive questions of existence, right and relevance. Marvel opted for the ladder. Since his inception, Captain America has been more than comic book character, he has been a literary embodiment of American principal, but in an era of fractured national identity, the Cap had to adapt to his own anomalous presence in the modern American timeline. “What happens next?” the Cap ponders to himself within his very first moments back in New York City, “I don’t belong in this age—in this year—no place for me.”\textsuperscript{79}

In 1964, Marvel Comics did not need another hero to represent the civil rights movement, military policies, or scientific explorations, they already had titles considering those individual themes; what the company needed was a character

\textsuperscript{78} Rielly, 193
Patterson, 388-390
May, 99.
Gilbert, 195.

\textsuperscript{79} Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, \textit{The Avengers #4: Captain America Joins... The Avengers!}, in \textit{Marvel Masterworks: The Avengers, Vol. 1} (New York: Marvel Publishing Group, 2009), 84.
that could represent the enormous political and social uncertainties for a generation of curious teens without preaching specifically to one end of the ideological spectrum or the other. Captain America became that hero. As a champion weaned in the idealized era of the “good war” the hero had a very sheltered understanding of modern America. Just like many of his teenage readers as they progressed through their own adolescences, once the shroud of American perfection was lifted and all of the realities and intricacies of the world were exposed, Captain America retreated into his own confusion and fright.\textsuperscript{80} In a world dominated by the headlines of warring liberals and conservatives, Captain America came to represent the uneasy middle positioning. By design, Captain America was expected to blindly adhere to all American decree (as he had in the simplified Golden Age), but as an idealistic hero in the Marvel Age, being systematically exposed to the disjointedness of American policy and public discourse, Captain America’s character took on a coherent schizophrenia as he struggled to cope with his own internal dislocation.\textsuperscript{81}

Captain America’s personal struggles were the direct transcription of the struggling voices that made up the core of America’s younger generation. Concerned readers often wrote letters to Marvel’s staff, debating the Patriotic Avenger’s role in modern America. Bradford Wright explains, “As President Johnson


sent U.S. troops to Vietnam in 1965, readers wrote to Marvel suggesting that Captain America might go as well. While others asked that he stay out...the letters to the editor became a forum for pro-war and antiwar readers to debate political issues having little or nothing to do with the stories in the comic series."\(^{82}\) Stan Lee explains how this debate became a constant hindrance for him and his fellow creators, “I’ve been very frustrated with our Captain America magazine. I find as if I’ve been left alone on an ice floe somewhere and I got to shift for myself. I don’t know what the readers want because every letter we’ve gotten for the past three months of Captain America has merely dealt with political issues."\(^{83}\) In hindsight, it is easy to see that the Cap had always been the embodiment of the nation’s ideology; in the Golden Age the virtual consensus made the hero strong and his message potent, but in the 1960s, when the nation was notably divided, Captain America was sheered apart from the inside, struggling to locate a personal definition in an era in which his readers could not provide a concrete national identification. In one famous scene, Steve Rodgers peers over the high rise balcony of his Avengers supplied quarters, echoing the charges of displacement and anachronism made by a number of his readers.\(^{84}\) “The room I live in belongs to Tony Stark! And the time I live in belongs to others—who were born twenty years after me! The only thing that’s rightfully mine is my past—All the memories I can never escape.”\(^{85}\)

\(^{82}\) Wright, 244.


\(^{84}\) Wright, 244.

\(^{85}\) Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, Tales of Suspense #75: 30 Minutes to Live, in Marvel Masterworks: Captain America, Vol. 1 (New York: Marvel Publishing Group, 2010), 180.
Unlike the Golden Age in which multiple characters all forged headlong under an identical charge, one of the great achievements of Marvel Age comics were their ability to communicate these multiple dimensions and multiple perspectives of society. On a micro-level, this inter-character turmoil was presented within the home and within the generations with titles like the constantly bickering *Fantastic Four* or the reluctantly disobedient *Mighty Thor*; Captain America comics were used to translate this discourse on a macro-level, presenting the varying opinions of individuals spanning the political spectrum. In July 1965’s issue of *the Avengers*, subtitled: *When the Commissar Commands*, Captain America (interim team commander) intercepts an S.O.S. transmission from the tiny communist controlled country of Sin-Cong (a generic interpretation of Vietnam and other small Communist territories in the far east). Exuberant over what he considers a harkening plea for his traditional American prowess, Captain America rallies his team and prepares for the international mission. But the Avengers do not simply bend to their leader’s patriotic enthusiasm. Instead, new recruits Quicksilver and his sister, the Scarlet Witch, rebut his orders, echoing the same anti-imperialist sentiments read in the hordes Captain America fan mail, “Why need we concern ourselves with international affairs?” The impassioned Hawkeye interjects, “Let me spell it out for you! We’re supposed to avenge injustice, right? Well when Liberty’s threatened, justice goes right out the window!” And so, with only the support of one of his three subordinates, Captain America ushers both his ideological allies and objectors into the Avenger’s jet and they are whisked away to far off Sin-Cong. What the Avengers— namely Captain America—fail to realize at this point, is that they
were being lured into a trap. The malicious military dictator of Sin-Cong, Major Hoy, who is first portrayed crushing boulders in his hands and physically beating the Sin-Cong peasantry, used Captain America’s predictable idealism to bait him into his country where he would capture and defeat the great American icon, ultimately illustrating the inescapable dominance of socialism and his own personal superiority. As the story progresses, the Avengers are captured and forced into combat with the Commissar. To this point it had been Captain America’s failings as a leader and his own blinding principles that had brought the team into immediate danger. After a pain-staking struggle with the hulking communist, the Scarlet Witch stumbles upon the Commissar’s ultimate weakness; the invincible red is actually a robotic puppet being commanded by the real (and much slighter) Commander Hoy from behind a curtain in the corner of the palace. Hoy retreats and the peasants rejoice, “Behold! The communists deceived us!...The Avengers defeated him!...They have freed us from the Tyranny!” Captain America turns to the liberated party and explains, “By exposing their deception, we have caused them to lose face!...But, be always on your guard! Their goal is nothing less than total world conquest and world enslavement! Only constant vigilance and devotion to freedom can stop them!”86 This comic is a great example of the intentional inconsistencies the publishers implanted into the story lines. The verbal objection to Captain America’s role in foreign affairs as well Captain America’s own predictable and ignorant idealism were attacks on America’s self-appointed positioning as the agency of global protection. Meanwhile the insidious portrayal of a socialist despot and the

depressed state of his tyrannically abused citizens, presented an image similar to the one seen in Nazi occupied France in the Golden Age’s *Captain America Comics #2: Trapped in a Nazi Stronghold* (outlined thoroughly in chapter one). Additionally, and most importantly, the comic’s conclusion spoke to the depravity of socialism and the superiority of democracy and capitalism. The Cap’s final speech bubbles sounded more like public service announcements or the type of conclusion a reader could have expected at the end of a Golden Age title, not a publication from the self-acclaimed “enlightened” Marvel Age. Even the ever-poignant Hawkeye points to the Cap’s ill-placed lecture, “Cap, did you take lessons on how to be a cornball or does it come natural?” “Sorry Hawkeye,” the grinning hero replies, “Guess I got carried away by my own convictions.”

The conclusion rang unsettlingly conservative for a lot of the more liberal and even the moderate readers in 1965; but in the early portion of the Marvel Age, there was still a very heavy overtone of anti-communism in the comics. Throughout the early sixties, the comic company ran a slew of negatively painted communist antagonists, like the villainous Dr. Victor Von Doom. Doom was the repressive ruler of the tiny Eastern European kingdom of Latveria. In one famous Fantastic Four yarn, Doom brandishes a technically designed laser pistol at an imprisoned Latverian, explaining, “Have I not told you how dearly I love my subjects?...The WELFARE of my people is ever closest to my hear! What a pity I am so often forced to save you from your selves! That is why my invincible robot army stands guard both night and day! For NO ONE knows what is best for you except your
MIGHT...SOVEREIGN...DOCTOR DOOM!" Other Marvel villains possessed similar communist or totalitarian stereotypes like lusts for power, evil abuses of science and technology, and a general desire for global enslavement. The Merciless Mandarin—with his fanged teeth and elongated finger nails—was essentially an Asian reimagining of Dr. Doom, who abused the power of the mystical Ten Rings to quest for supremacy in the vulnerable Orient.\(^{88}\) The Red Ghost used science to bend the will of his brainless “Super-Apes” to fulfill his biddings, thus creating a microcosmic interpretation of the dictator/dictatee relationship many Americans feared existed in Soviet controlled territories.\(^{89}\) The Chameleon was a dangerous foe because of his skill of morphing into any identity in any situation; the idea that Communists may have the ability to infiltrate American society and poison the generously accessible democratic political pool was a common fear in Cold War society and a popular scare tactic used by many of the era’s politicians.\(^ {90}\) The Red Guardian (sometimes known as Red Dawn) was a Soviet Captain America, the Crimson Dynamo was a Soviet Iron Man, and Emil Blonski, aka the Abomination, was a Soviet bastardization of the Hulk. Each of these red soldiers were worthy foes, but ultimately lacked the free will or the freethinking ingenuity to upend their heroic American counterparts.\(^ {91}\) Communists were easy targets in the 1960s; in the light of the very public anti-communist crusades of politicians like Joe McCarthy and


Richard Nixon in the previous decade, and the continued politically endorsed Cold War competitiveness, even the more liberally minded comic book readers seemed to willingly accept the premise of over-vilified communist threats.\textsuperscript{92}

But there was a limit to the reader’s pro-democracy tolerance. Though it was ultimately inconsequential, Quicksilver’s defiance at the onset of *When the Commissar Commands* was an incredibly important moment for Captain America and for Marvel comics. The comic company had created a legacy of presenting the errors of American domestic policy by questioning their nuclear aggression, stances on civil rights and even military fundamentalism, but they remained true to the establishment line in their vilified branding of anything socialist, communist, or specifically Soviet. The conclusion of the Captain America story upheld the virtues of democracy and freedom, but those themes did not persevere in following issues; instead, the negative portrayals of Cap’s blind patriotism and his team’s objections ultimately accelerated the Captain America’s own inner questioning of his relevance in modern society.\textsuperscript{93} In his Golden Age, the enemies were obvious, the threat was immediate and the war was undoubtedly hot; in his newly thawed state, Captain America entered a world where the enemies were mysterious, the threat was ambiguous and the war was bone-chillingly cold. As a character, Captain America became a constant juxtaposition between the fundamental simplicity of the idealized World War era and the ever growing complexities of the modern age.


Readers had the opportunity to watch him as he attempted to adapt to the political misalignment of the nation. Contrasting ideology was woven throughout Captain America books just as chaotically as it was woven throughout the fan forums in the backs of his comics; though the victorious conclusion of *When the Commissar Commands* suggested that Marvel was wholly ready to use the Cap to promote the virtues of democracy and freedom in the face of the vilified communism, (as they did with the Nazi threat in the Golden Age), the ensuing descent and debate rallied in the letters to Marvel quickly realigned the publisher’s own thoughts on the subject.  

Stan Lee explained, “Most of us genuinely felt that the conflict was a simple matter of good versus evil…since that time we’ve realized that life isn’t quite so simple.” The ensuing lack of a singular political adherence in Captain America comics (which started with Quicksilver’s easily ignored objection) was an immediate reflection of the lack of a universal political conformity expressed by Marvel’s readers.  

To this point, the acceptance of the communist antagonist was seen throughout Marvel, but beginning in 1965, the comic company, and specifically Captain America, began displaying an ever growing concern that imperializing Americanism was not necessarily the correct answer. *When the Commissar Commands* was the second of only two Captain America adventures set in the Far East; the first, titled *The Strength of the Sumo* was released in the hero’s solo title approximately six months earlier, and suffices as the Cap’s only actual appearance in Viet Nam (the story itself was so trivial and fundamentally flat that at least one

94 Wright, 233.
95 Write, 222.
historian incorrectly claimed that Captain America never made an official visit overseas). In response to the fervent reader outcry other Marvel heroes continued to aid in the Vietnam effort (with their commitment to reader relevancy, they could not simply ignore the conflict altogether), but it was decided that Captain America was far too iconic and far too ideologically combustible to introduce to Vietnam again. *When the Commissar Commands* concluded with a heralding message of the virtues of unabashed Americanism, but it was the final time that the publishers allowed Captain America to deliver that type speech in that type of arena. After *When the Commissar Commands*, Captain America returned to his melodramatic self-loathing, and unending questions of personal relevance.

**WHO’S TO SAY THE REBELS ARE WRONG?**

If the evolution of comic book content had proven anything from the start of the Golden Age through the first decade of the Marvel Age, it was that young America existed (and continues to exist) in a constant state of redefinition and expansion. As the young population grew and their grip on popular trends and fashions tightened, a definitive and omnipresent youth culture emerged in early sixties American society. In this era, Marvel Comics mirrored the success of their World War ancestors by committing themselves to contemporary relevance and a heightened respect for the maturity of adolescent comprehension. However, one of

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96 In the story, Captain America is sent into the heart of communist controlled territory where he is forced to battle his way through the ranks of the increasingly bulky Vietcong military in order to rescue the African-American POW. The final battle pits the star and stripe clad champion against the General of the communist army, a crudely portrayed sumo-wrestler. Of course the hero upends the sumo’s charge with a host of truly American baseball and football references and ultimately proves that “Size and weight can be great assets,” but democracy will never yield to the might of tyranny. Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, *Tales of Suspense #61: the Strength of the Sumo* in *Marvel Masterworks: Captain America, Vol. 1* (New York: Marvel Publishing Group, 2010), 22-33.
the great struggles for the comic brand was the virtual impossibility of pleasing all of their ideological critics. Marvel confronted this hurdle by attempting a standard of impartiality: maintaining critical interpretations of American domestic policies while attempting to support the virtues of American international policies. But as the decade progressed, the voices of youth culture grew stronger and even more diversified. Marvel (then known as Timely Comics) had forged its commercial successes in both the Golden Age and the Marvel Age by implying their comics’ universal youth inclusion, but in the latter half of the 1960s, complete youth representation became too unattainable to even consider. In the mid to late decade, American youth culture had segmented itself into an absolute stratum of subcultural categorizations. Identifying with any one of the various social, political, economic, racial, geographic and consumeristic combinations, the demands of the eclectic Marvel readers differed dramatically. As Marvel Comics transitioned from their wild popularity in their first half decade, they were confronted with the challenge of maintaining success in the light of this radically diversified reading population in the second half of the decade. Marvel, trying to preserve their commitment to relevant America, sailed into the twilight of the 1960s on the same currents of social chaos that could have very well ravaged their ship. Their characters, who had traditionally provided their own unique interpretation of American society, became increasingly critical of the actions and the behaviors of the country’s leaders and politicians. Iron Man, who was historically the most conservative “Do-or-die for America and Mom’s Apple Pie” hero in the Marvel line-up, was exposed to the gritty realization that his capitalistic prowess and blind democratic allegiance may have
been abused of for the sake of political gains.\textsuperscript{97} New African and African-American characters the Black Panther and the Falcon joined the X-Men as they pointed to the grim social inequalities that continued to affect minorities living in the United States (and across the globe).\textsuperscript{98} Meanwhile, Peter Parker (who had recently enrolled as a college student at NYC’s fictitious Empire State University) began taking part in student demonstrations on campus; though he stringently opposed the use of violence as a means to an end in the debate, he still illustrated a sympathy for real life American students in the wake of the SDS demonstration on the Columbia University campus.\textsuperscript{99} In short, the company began a systematic move to the left, following in the footsteps of many young readers.

Of all the heroes in the Marvel stable, Captain America was most affected by the company’s cultural shift. As Marvel began servicing a more liberal and politically mobilized coalition of readers, the Cap was again reminded of his awkward paradoxical existence. The flag on his back represented the rise of late decade Nixonian conservatism and the power of the silent American majority, but his liberalized readers (the so-called vocal minority), demanded that he refute his political allegiances and defend a new American dream.\textsuperscript{100} Throughout the 1960s, Captain America comics were buried in ideological confusion and unconformity; as the decade closed the incongruity had finally beaten the hero down. In one of his final comics of the 1960s, the Captain is seen in full uniform marching aimlessly

\textsuperscript{97} Iron Man #78: Long Time Gone, in Wright, 242.
\textsuperscript{98} Wright, 238.
\textsuperscript{99} Spider-Man #68: Crisis on Campus, in Wright, 236.
Patterson, 687.
\textsuperscript{100} Christy, 7.
Wright, 244.
down a New York City street. He frowns as he passes an American woman carrying her groceries into her apartment. “I’m like a dinosaur—in the cro-magnon age!” the sentinel thinks to himself, “An anachronism who’s outlived his time! This is the day of the anti-hero—the age of the rebel—and the dissenter! It isn’t hip—to defend the establishment! Only to tear it down!” With his head lowered and his shield symbolically resting at his side, the defender of American freedom forces his way through a crowd of alarmed citizens, “And in a world ripe with injustice, greed, and endless war—Who’s to say the rebels are wrong?” Walking into the final shadow devoured panel of the page, the hero reconsiders his own country, his own history and, most damningly, himself, “I’ve spent a lifetime defending the flag—and the law! Perhaps—I should have battled less—and questioned more!” And with that final ill-omened statement, Captain America foreshadows his reluctant movement into the next decade and the next era of comic book history, characteristically longing for the simplicity of the past, but begrudgingly accepting the complexity of the present and the looming threats of the future.

“There are Many Risings and Advancings of the Spirit:”
*Captain America and Comic Books into the Future*

Historian Bruce Schulman suggests, “If one date delineated the end of the Sixties and the beginning of the Seventies, it was the year 1968.” For American society, 1968 was a year of assassinations, demonstrations and political polarizations; the murders of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy, in addition to the heavily publicized revolts on Columbia University’s campus all coincided with a national increase in student led movements against the war in Vietnam, civil rights injustices, and an overall disdain for the regulations and decrees of adult society. Shulman continues, “The campus revolt also convinced many Americans that revolution was at hand—that young radicals had moved from mere protest toward power.”¹ In 1968, the separation that existed between the generations began to resemble more of a canyon than a simple gap. For American adolescents, entering this new era, the disparity between their parents’ culture and their own was palpable; even though the teens themselves were segmented into a nearly infinite number of individualized ideological, social, economic and moral subcultures, there were very few youth cliques that permitted the presence of adults or adult influence. Young America entered the previous decade with a universally recognized and celebrated foundation of cultural significance; in 1968, amidst a

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chaotic society, young Americans took yet another stride away from the adult sphere by loudly asserting their own thoughts, opinions and declarations of independence. Schulman concludes, “The Sixties appeared as a historical divide, a decade of turmoil with the future hanging in the balance...The era, and its climactic twelve months, have been recalled as ‘the Year the Dream Died’—the year, to quote one journalist, "when for so many, the dream of a nobler optimistic America died, and the reality of a skeptical conservative America began to fill the void."”

Since 1938, comic books had found success by isolating the single unifying factor that bonded contemporary generations of young Americans. In the Golden Age, youth culture was constructed simply by acknowledging the shared youth experiences and sentiments; since very few other industries or people even recognized the presence of the collective teenage community, comic books became beacons of collective identity among young readers. In the next era, when the communal self-recognition of young America was being fostered, successful comic books maintained relevance by adhering to the demands for increased maturity and a deliberate contrast to traditional adult authority. In the 1960s, young Americans were stratified by various individual thoughts and desires; but Marvel Comics specifically, were still able to marry the individualized subcultures into a mutual readership by expressing the inherent disunity and ideological confusions that defined the generation. Moving into the 1970s, the subcultural identifications of American teens became even sharper, but comic books still managed to eke out the single factor that bonded the otherwise disunited society. In this era—more than

2 Quoted in Schulman, 2.
any era before it—it was a matter of recognition and appreciation for youth independence.

As Bruce Schulman explains, this era was the dawn of a new conservative America, and for young Americans, the best way to assert their independence from the rest of society, was to retaliate against their parents’ ideological foundations. In the seventies, Schulman observes, "Many young people grew disgusted with the nation and its basic values. This discontent filled both veterans of Sixties radicalism and millions of young Americans who had never demonstrated interest in political protest...Polls revealed widespread disenchantment among American youth...In this setting many young Americans no longer saw any reason to heed established conventions about sex, drugs, authority, clothing, living arrangements, food—the fundamental ways of living their lives." 3 Whether the dislocation from American culture was as severe as Schulman suggests remains in question; however the underlying discontent he portrays is absolutely accurate. For comic books, keying into the unifying factor of this generation of young Americans became a strict matter of antiauthoritarianism; comics vied to once again unify a youth readership by defiling the face of adult values. The resulting content was not overtly liberal, but rather ruthlessly anti-conservative. Of course, strains of liberalism naturally infused the content, but the objective for comic books in the new era was the presentation of the obliterated traditional American and, more specifically, adult moral structure.

As explained in the previous chapter, Marvel Comics spearheaded this industry wide shift away from the right, with strident redirections of traditionally

3 Schulman, 4, 16.
conservative characters like Iron Man. Other companies quickly followed suit. In 1969, DC Comics, who had maintained strong sales throughout the previous ten years with pro-authoritarian characters acting in comparatively irrelevant story lines, released the first of a thirteen issue series featuring the team up of two semi-popular characters Green Lantern and Green Arrow. Aside from the day-glow hue of their tunics, GL and GA had nothing in common. As described by the co-creator of the series, Denny O’Neil, “Green Lantern was, in effect, a cop. An incorruptible cop, to be sure with noble intentions, but still a cop, a crypto fascist; he took orders, he committed violence at the behest of commanders whose authority he did not question...then there was Green Arrow...He could be a lusty hot-tempered anarchist to contrast the cerebral, sedate model citizen who was Green Lantern. They would form the halves of a dialogue on the issues we chose to dramatize.”

The comic arc itself centered around the emerald idols as they toured the United States, exchanging ideological jabs and exaggerating their own fundamental incompatibility. Throughout their excursion, the two men ventured through dejected industrial mining towns, depressed Indian reservations and disheartening urban ghettos as Green Arrow (the hot-tempered anarchist) preached to Green Lantern (the crypto-fascist) on all of the civil and social abuses permitted by his unquestioning commitment to established authority. Meanwhile, behind Green Arrow’s self-righteous liberal back, his chauvinistic behavior chased his one true love into the arms of a dangerous counter-culture cult, and his unabashed vanity distracted him from his young ward, Speedy, who rebelled right into the grasp of

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heroin addiction. Issue after issue, the series offered blunt and invasive portrayals of American society, simultaneously illustrating the perils of blind conservatism and the pitfalls of the hypercritical egotism of older generations. Denny O'Neil continues, “My generation, and my father’s, had grown up ignorant; my son’s didn’t have to.”

This series provided an indirect assault against adult America by challenging their ideology, as well as a direct attack by mocking their fraudulent enlightenment. The importance of this series has been echoed in countless comic book histories, but it was not the integration or the weight of relevant American themes that made these stories so significant: their importance was strictly a product of their publisher.

Marvel Comics had been producing relevant comic titles since 1961, while rival DC Comics continued to promote a philosophy of limited real world exposure. The Green Lantern/Green Arrow series marked the industry-wide turn away from adult authority, and the full comic book embrace of young American cerebral independence.

For Captain America, the 1970s were again defined by his self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy. Captain America stories toiled with irrelevancy and the anachronistic nature of a single character who sought to encapsulate all of American—adult, teen, conservative and liberal—ideals.

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6 Bradford Wright, Comic Book Nation: the Transformation of Youth Culture in America (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 238-239.
8 Mathew Pustz, Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 170.
9 Wright, 203-205.
Starting in 1969, Captain America comic titles began integrating a heavy civil rights overtone. In a prelude to the next generation’s run of interracial “buddy” portrayals in film and television, The Falcon, mainstream comic books’ first African American superhero, was partnered with the patriotic avenger as his adventures transitioned from hyperbolic battles with space robots and super villains to more recognizable affronts against organized crime and gangsterism in real world Harlem. Part of adult America’s return to conservatism in this era included a severe regression in civil rights. The 1968 campaign support for Alabama Governor George Wallace, who famously stood toe to toe with Dr. Martin Luther King during the Selma marches three years prior, was proof of that. Bruce Schulman equates Wallace’s political celebrity to a late decade evaporation of, “The early Sixties vision of peaceful, nonviolent reform—of ending poverty and racism.” For Captain America, who helped pioneer the role of African American equality in comic books three decades prior, this was an easy inroad back into the graces of young readers. In the comics, Steve Rodgers moved from his Avengers supplied high rise to the shabby loft above Sam Wilson’s (the Falcon’s alter-ego) down town social worker office. This transition marked a new thread in the construction of future Captain America titles; traditional comic book villainy continued to plague the hero, but the joint annoyances of the Red Skull, Madame Hydra and Batroc the Leaper only forged a footnote in Captain America titles which were now more concerned with the presentation of the civil and social injustices caused by real world adult corruption and intolerance.

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8 Schulman, 3.
In 1972, author Steve Englehart took the reins of the comic series, but even with the new civil rights direction, Englehart was still burdened with the same paradox that had plagued the character since his revival in 1964. “The problem across the board at Marvel was that this was the 70s—prime anti-war years—and here was a guy with a flag on his chest who was supposed to represent what most people distrusted. No one knew what to do with him.”^{9} Within the next few years, Englehart completely revamped the construction of Captain America, taking the hero and his readers on an exploratory campaign that defined how Captain America could exist within the confines of this new generation of independent and politically motivated young Americans. In this new era of comic book construction, young America did not experience the same direct access to content dictation as they did in the previous decade, but they were still heavily involved in determining the direction of the content. Utilizing the same logic that propelled crime, romance and horror comics through the Interregnum era, Englehart elaborates, “We all took cues from the feedback and incorporated good ideas as they came to us...I had the ability to write anything I wanted if it sold and was turned in on time, my natural inclination was to write what I, as a fan, would like to read...I seemed to have enjoyed what Marvel had meant for readers and enjoyed so I thought I was a good test subject. Having said all that, I did look forward to fan feedback after every story to see if I was on the beam or not.”^{10}

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Doing well to isolate the said “beam” of his readers, the Englehart era began with a direct challenge to traditional America. In his first major yarn, the contemporary Captain America (the one thawed from cryogenic preservation in 1964) comes face to face with an imposter Captain America. The continuity of Marvel Age Captain America comics never really made much sense. According to *The Avengers* issues four and five, Steve Rodgers’ run as Captain America was put on ice toward the end of World War II. But in reality, Timely comics continued to produce Captain America titles until 1949, and occasionally reintroduced the character throughout the 1950s. For anyone who cared to notice, the story behind Captain America’s reincarnation in the 1960s was actually a major publication flub. Almost a decade later, Englehart was the first to reference this error, by introducing the man, he claimed deceitfully adopted the Captain America cowl during the real hero’s twenty-year hiatus. The ensuing issues literally pitted the modern Captain America against the historic one; two icons each reflecting contrasting generations of comic books and society. The first Captain America (the authentic one), possessed both the honor and virtue of a Golden Age veteran, as well as the malice and cynicism of contemporary post-Marvel Age adolescent. In the second Captain America, you had the blind authoritarian acceptance and anachronistic patriotic values of the Interregnum-era hero. On the cover of *Captain America #156*, the dueling doppelgangers exchange a hail of fists and retort: “Only one Captain America is going to win this fight! The REAL ONE!”

America would win out, but his victory was hollow. Rather than unearthing some semblance of an identification or relevance, his triumph only exaggerated his characters own dissonance with modern society.

The battle of the Captain Americas represented the beginning of the characters ideological drift into the darkness of near nihilism. Englehart created a series in which the readers were able to explore how Captain America, as an effigy of the established authority, actually coped with the corruption and the disunity of his own namesake. Rather than solitarily dwelling in his own self-pity, in this new era Captain America was faced with the public backlash of a disgruntled American society. Subtitles often hailed bulletins like: “Captain America: Hero or Hoax!” or “Wanted: Dead or Alive!” Meanwhile, in the actual stories, the American public quickly turned their back on the hero, calling him a masked criminal and a one-man vigilante committee.12 This downward spiral culminated in a story-line ripped from the Watergate headlines of the Washington Post.13 In 1974, in issues #169-176, Captain America is chased from public acceptance by an insidious cabal of hooded would-be world-dominators known as the “Secret Empire.” The ostracized hero hunts down the mysterious antagonists, eventually squaring off with the leader—identified simply as Number One—on the front lawn of the White House. A heroic chase scene ensues until Number One is cornered inside the oval office. Captain America dives at the villain and rips off his mask; Number One’s identity is instantly hidden from the reader by the far edge of the panel, but Captain America’s reaction

12 Steve Englehart, Captain America and the Falcon #169: When a Legend Dies!, in Captain America and the Falcon: Secret Empire (New York: Marvel Publishing Group, 2005), 11.
13 Schulman, 45.
affirms most astute observers’ speculative assumptions. “GOOD LORD! YOU!...But you--you’re--” Number One then responds, his face still hidden off the page, “EXACTLY! But high political office didn’t satisfy me! My power was still too constrained by legalities! I gambled on a coup to gain me the power I craved--and it appears that my gamble has finally failed.” Raising a pistol to his own head, “I’ll cash my chips then.” With the blurred portrait of a proud American forefather resting regally on the wall behind him, Captain America lunges forward, “No, WAIT--!” But his efforts are in vein. As the KRAK! of the sidearm splits the next panel, Marvel Comics effectively kills off the sitting President of the United States of America, asserting that his own suicide was the fruition of his uncontrolled corruption and greed. The final three panels offer only an ominous narration as Captain America slowly navigates through the crowd of unwitting heroes and reporters. “A man can change in a flicker of time. This man trusted the country of his birth...he saw its flaws...but trusted in its basic framework...its stated goals...its long-term virtues. Trusted. This man now is crushed inside. Like millions of other Americans, each in his own way, he has seen his trust mocked!”

Throughout Captain America’s history, creators have used the hero as political and patriotic litmus test for young Americans, always displaying him as a literal embodiment of his readers’ ideological temperaments. While the rest of real world America was rocked by the Watergate Scandal and the impending Presidential impeachment, as well as the continued protests against the Vietnam

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14 Steve Englehart, *Captain America and the Falcon #175: Showdown in the Shadow of the White House*, in *Captain America and the Falcon: Secret Empire* (New York: Marvel Publishing Group, 2005), 141.
War, Captain America comic books illustrated, in traditional comic book fashion, an exaggerated interpretation of how the fragile faiths of young America were irrevocably fractured by continued political betrayal.\(^{15}\) In the issues to come, Captain America sheds his patriotic guise, blaming America, as a whole, for his own inner turmoil. Eventually, he would separate the people from the politics, realizing that by turning his back on the American public, he had only repeated the offense of the politicians he had come to distrust and loath. In doing this, he returned to crime fighting, but not as Captain America: hero of a nation, but rather as Nomad: the man without a country. In his own words, the Nomad explains:

> Captain America is dead! He died the day his ideals did!...C.A. lived in a dream world! He was born in 1941, at a time when the American dream filled all our hearts! We willingly went to war against the Red Skull’s kind because they wanted to destroy that dream!...From the moment I returned to life in 1964, at the beginning of our Vietnam War, I felt out of my time—but it took Number One (The President of the United States of America) to make me see just how wrong things had gone while I’d been away! The people who had custody of the American dream had abused both it and us! There was no way I could keep calling myself “Captain America” because the others who acted in America’s name were every bit as bad...as...the...Red...Skull...!  
> <silence> ...and yet, I didn’t want to know about those people! The Skull was okay to oppose, and still is...but Number One (The President

of the United States of America) wasn’t, because he was supposed to
be on our side!16

The Nomad saga would be relatively short lived, but the principles asserted in the
character’s philosophy would define Captain America for the next forty years. As he
eventually removes the Nomad guise and redresses himself in the more familiar
Captain America uniform, the hero states to his compatriot Falcon, “The man Nomad
was won’t die, Falc! Everything he’s learned will live on—only now, once again, it’ll
be as CAPTAIN AMERICA!” Strapping his iconic shield to his wrist, the stern face
Captain America is born anew, ready to protect the ideals of his American dream in
the face of the great American nightmare. Filling the bottom quarter of the final
page of this issue, underneath an image of Captain America fully garbed and ready
for action, a single caption proudly reads: “34 years ago this month, Joe Simon and
Jack Kirby created Captain America! There are many risings and advancings of the
spirit.”17 And just like that, Captain America had come full circle. Ideologically the
Captain America of 1941 and the Captain America of 1975 were completely alien;
but symbolically, the two heroes were identical. By confronting directly the threats
of America, as defined by his readership, this new Captain America had maintained
the tradition of preserving the principals of democracy in the face tyranny. As
explained in the Nomad tirade, the face of tyranny had transformed, but the face of
democracy and freedom were just as recognizable as ever, and it was his

16 Steve Englehart, Captain America and the Falcon #183: Death of a Hero, in Captain America and the
Falcon: Nomad (New York: Marvel Publishing Group, 2006), 133.
17 Steve Englehart, Captain America and the Falcon #183: Death of a Hero, in Captain America and the
responsibility to continue to battle. "There has to be someone to fight for the dream against any foe...whatever the threat—wherever it originates...”\textsuperscript{18}

Though ideologically, comic books may have had to sacrifice some of their appeal to more conservative readers in this new era, overall, the transition of comic book content was an important effort that allowed comic books to reconnect themselves to the lives of young Americans. As comic books have transitioned from generation to generation over the previous forty years, their appeal has fluctuated as the parameters surrounding young American culture are constantly being redefined. But from 1938 to 2011, through the ebbs and flows of popularity and relevance, the transformations in style, tone, ideology and appearance, the one inalterable fact has remained constant: comic books are undoubtedly for kids, dictated in one way or another by their thoughts and demands. For Captain America, this relationship has been extremely specific; from Adolf Hitler and the villainous Red Skull, to the President of the United States of America, the Star-Spangled Sentinel has always been, and will always be, the hero of the American youth, fighting those who choose to oppose their ideological ambitions and jeopardize the purity of their national dreams.

Primary Sources:


**Secondary Sources:**


