

AN ANALYSIS OF THE ENEMIES OF UNITED STATE SOCIETY THROUGH THE
SUPERHERO NARRATIVE FROM 1940-2015

By

DEXTER ANTON NELSON II

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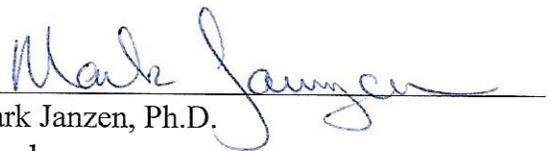
COMMITTEE APPROVALS:



Katrina Lacher, Ph.D.
Committee Chair
Assistant Professor of History



Lindsey Churchill, Ph.D.
Member
Assistant Professor of History



Mark Janzen, Ph.D.
Member
Assistant Professor of History

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Abstract

Comic books have been an aspect of culture in the United States since the late 1930s, since their inception, they have constantly reflected the attitudes, troubles and trends of the time. Because comic books follow historical trends so closely, they serve as a literary device that reflects the attitudes of the general population. This thesis explores the super hero narrative through comic books, in an effort to draw historical inclinations about perceived cultural enemies of United States societies from the 1940s to 2015. Since the super hero narrative gained momentum in 1938 with the debut issue of Superman, in *Action Comics* number one, superheroes have interpreted features of everyday life on a regular weekly schedule. Since comic books often mirror society, one can use comic books to create a vivid interpretation of past key events with the combination of literature and artistic illustrations that comic books and graphic novels offer.

Although the use of comic books being an avenue for historical interpretation is not new, what is new is the concept of using comic books to interpret and understand the cultural enemies of American society from the 1940s to 2015. In regards to this body of work, cultural enemies are defined as any group of people or negative traits of society that any large group of United States citizens believed had the potential to threaten the ability to pursue or maintain the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Such cultural threats include the Nazi Party, and Islamic State threat to the general population, the crime wave of the 1970s for populations living in cities and instances of racial injustice as seen in the 1990s that effected the African American population.

Since World War II, and the dropping of the atomic bombs, the United States has been a hegemon to countries around the world. In acting as a world leader, the United States has had its

share of cultural enemies both foreign and domestic. This thesis offers an in-depth perspective into the comic book industry and extracts examples of perceived cultural threats to various United States societies throughout the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s-1990s, and into the modern era of 2012-2016. The hope of this academic work is to shed light on the underutilization of comic books as historical resources. Comic books and graphic novels in conjunction with standard textbooks and knowledgeable instructors have the potential to create a more holistic and engaging learning environment for young students and adults. This thesis analyses various characters and series from a range of comic book publishers, in order to connect real world trends and events with specific comic book issues reflecting the attitudes of multiple populations regarding enemies threatening the United States cultural principles of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all.

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Introduction

This thesis explores American popular culture, specifically comic books, in an effort to identify historical trends through the reflections of particular issues, series or characters created during certain eras. Since the super hero narrative gained momentum in 1938 with the debut issue of Superman, in *Action Comics* number one, superheroes have interpreted the social norms, fears, hopes and key historic events throughout modern American society. This specific literary form of science fiction is unique in the frequency of its production. New issues of comic books arrive every week, making the genre adjustable to changing social commentary. It is the rate at which new issues arrive that allow the comic book industry to harness recent events as reflections within the superhero narrative. Since comic books often mirror current events, one can use them to recreate vivid interpretations of past key events utilizing the combination of literature and artistic illustrations. Although the use of comic books as a venue for historical interpretation is not new, what is new is the concept of using comic books to interpret and understand the cultural enemies different groups faced in the United States from the 1940s to 2015.

In this context, “cultural enemies” refers to any persons, acts or ideals that have or had the potential of stifling the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness granted to all Americans. Since World War II and the dropping of atomic bombs, the United States has been a hegemon to countries around the world. In acting as a world leader, the United States has had its share of cultural enemies both foreign and domestic. Illustrations of foreign enemies that carried a potential to threaten the American way of life would be the Nazi threat in World War II, the Soviets during the Cold War and the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. These and other foreign threats have the commonality of endangering the rights of United States

citizens by encroaching on the freedoms Americans hold dear, granted by the Constitution. Under all three adversaries, the United States would look and function much less democratic if any of the above groups had prevailed. Cases of domestic cultural enemies paralleled through comic books are crime and racial inequality. In this instance, crime is a threat to the stability of the nation in most major cities such as New York. During the 1970s when crime rose drastically in large cities, people grew to fear leaving their houses because of the dangerous environment they lived in. This endangered the United States citizen's constitutionally granted unalienable right to pursue happiness. In addition to crime, racial inequality was also a catalyst for division and endangered the constitutional rights of minorities. This thesis offers an in-depth perspective into the comic book industry and extracts examples of perceived cultural enemies of the country both externally and internally throughout the 1940s, 1960s, 1970s-80s, 1990s and into the contemporary era of 2012-2015. The work follows chronological order except for the chapter referring to the comics code of authority. The objective of this document is twofold. The first goal is to highlight cultural threats to the American dream to different groups of people, as reflected in the genre of super hero narratives in comic books. The second objective of this work is to shed light on the underutilization of comic books as public history. Comic books and graphic novels in conjunction with standard textbooks and knowledgeable instructors have the potential to create a more holistic learning environment for young students and adults.

The breakdown of the chapters follows this itinerary. The first chapter is a brief history of how the modern comic book came into being. Comic books were not always twenty pages bound in a single issue. The creation of the comic book is the result of two different literary devices woven together. In the first section of the thesis, readers will gain an understanding of the creation of the comic book and why they take their current form.

Chapter Two focuses on the events of World War II and the involvement of the super hero narrative during the war. The chapter highlights the creation of Captain America during this time and the way the comic book industry became involved in the war effort. Captain America served as a symbol of the patriotism and exceptionalism that stemmed from the United States involvement in the fight against the Nazis. The chapter ends with soldiers returning from war and the super heroes starting their new fight to stay relevant in the late 1940s.

Chapter Three shows readers the impact comic books had on society during the 1950s. Due to the work of Dr. Fredric Wertham, a psychologist, parents in the United States attributed comic books to negatively affecting the youth. A court case in 1954 resulted in a stringent code forced upon the comic book industry known as the comics code of authority. This new censorship of the genre would cause many comic producers to go out of business or adapt heavily censored, watered down story lines. The biased scrutiny Wertham used to form his arguments against the comic book industry are evidence of the popularity of comic books and their perceived threat against the youth. The code Wertham helped create would dominate the industry for many years to come. Even with the strict guidelines of the code, producers were still able to reflect meaningful themes in their titles.

Chapter Four deals with the golden age of Marvel Comics and the creation of The Fantastic Four, Spider-man, and the Hulk. Heavily influenced by events of the Cold War and the space race, advances in science and radiation/nuclear energy are in the debut issues of all three characters. In reading chapter four one gains an understanding of the connection reality has to the comic book industry. This chapter represents the first, clear link between the trends of the era and the superheroes and villains that embody those trends. Another highlight of the chapter is the first example of cultural domestic enemies with the ideas of McCarthyism and the Red Scare.

These two notions of covert spies infiltrating the United States can be seen in both issues of the *Fantastic Four* and *The Incredible Hulk*.

Chapter Five focuses on the Vietnam War and the growing wave of domestic crime. The character the Punisher, a violent vigilante, is able to summarize both aspects of the Vietnam War and the American crime rate of the 1970s. Marvel's Punisher offers a view of the conflict, weapons and events of the Vietnam War, in addition to a reflection of the degrading of society with the crime wave of the 1970s. Chapter five is unique in that it deals with a foreign conflict that challenged the domestic morals of America. While the United States fought a proxy war in Vietnam, citizens at home began to question the role America played in the affairs of the Vietnamese. After witnessing the brutality of both the South and North Vietnamese after the Tet Offensive, many American citizens believed that the United States had no business in the Vietnam conflict and demanded a withdrawal of troops. Marvel's Punisher character mirrors this fear of lacking good morals when dealing with the opposition, that stemmed from the Vietnam War in the bloodthirsty and brutal means the Punisher employs. A nation lacking said morals would be susceptible to extreme acts of violence as the Punisher character, who debuted in 1974 in Marvel's *Spider-Man* series. The Punisher personifies both the war mongering of the Vietnam War and the embodiment of the crime-ridden era of the 1970s.

Chapter Six brings us to the 1990s and offers a different perspective on the Persian-Gulf War and the Rodney King beatings. Both events have comic book equivalents in Marvel series. The Persian Gulf War and the actions of Saddam Hussein are mirrored in the 1991 *Infinity Gauntlet* series featuring the power hungry Titan, Thanos. Chapter six also revisits *The Punisher* series for a reflection on the events surrounding the Rodney King beating, the trial and the riots that followed.

In chapter Seven, we look at the rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State and the influence they have gathered around the world and the impression they are leaving on the comic book industry. Since the rise of the terror group, there has been an increase in the number of violent beheadings in comic book series. This trend seems to have developed alongside the plethora of beheading videos the group sends out in order to recruit and strike fear in their enemies. The final chapter looks at the Islamic State's origin and what the comic book industry will look like in a future dominated by their adopted form of terror.

Lastly, there is a summation of the chapters and the work as a whole. This section of the thesis offers a condensed version of both events, titles, series and the meanings behind them. A secondary focus is also to explore the concept of using comic books and other graphic novels in academic settings such as the classroom.

Chapter One: Origin of the Comic Book

Before there were comic books, there were pulp magazines and Sunday comic strips. Pulp magazines were roughly the size of an average magazine and contained a variety of different genres such as crime, detective drama, western, horror, action or a romantic story. They usually displayed scantily clad women in need of a rescue by a handsome hero or shadowy figure of some sort. The origin of the pulp magazine dates back to the 1890s; however, the pulp strips did not experience their golden age until the 1920s and 1930s. During this time, more than a hundred titles were on the newsstands. The distribution method of the pulps was important to the success of the genre. Pulp magazines sold at newsstands instead of specialty stores. The act of selling issues in newsstands was an advertising tactic that originated with the pulps but was later replicated to sell comic books. Another aspect from the Pulp Magazines that would later fuel the comic book industry was “Pulp Logic.”¹ “Pulp Logic” refers to the style of mixing and combining different aspects from pre-existing characters to form new characters. This “Pulp Logic” will be a crucial theme throughout comic book history. The early pulp comics contained, on average, 128 pages and usually had six short stories and at least two longer stories. Pulp magazines were aimed for an older audience whereas comic strips were more geared for the young and young at heart.

The other precursor to the comic book were the Sunday comic strips. Comic strips usually consisted of a humorous character, human or animal, that would get into little predicaments for comic relief. They were never very long and rarely continued the story to the next installment. The first modern comic book was composed of multiple comic strips; therefore,

¹ Paul Douglas Lopes, *Demanding Respect: The Evolution of the American Comic Book* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009).

comic strips were essential to the development of the modern comic book. In 1933, Procter and Gamble, a company that created consumer goods, released a promotional comic book that contained various pages of the *Funnies on Parade* comic strip. In the following year, another company called the Eastern Color Printing Company started selling comic books commercially as reprinted newspaper comic strips in a title called *Famous Funnies*. The series printed on a monthly basis.² Other publishers adopted this new development and not long after led to the creation of an all humor-based series called *New Fun*. *New Fun* paved the way for the first adventure comic book in 1937 called *Detective Comics*. *Detective Comics* would usher in a new format for storytelling by producing a story devoted to a single central character.³ The blend of gritty storytelling, newsstand distribution methods and “Pulp logic” in combination with the panel format of the comic strips would lead to the creation of the first true superhero and usher in the standard format for the comic books of the twenty first century.

The First Hero

The first modern hero originated in June 1938, his name was Superman. Two Jewish teenagers named Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel created Superman. Published by *Detective Comics*, under the title of *Action Comics*, the first appearance of Superman introduced the superhero narrative to consumers.⁴ The arrival of Superman marked the end of the pulp era. Once people saw pages with colorful superheroes battling against realistic enemies, the American public demanded more, this fact is apparent in the number of issues of *Action Comics* sold. Various

² Les Daniels, *Comix: A History of Comic Books in America* (New York: Outerbridge & Dienstfrey, 1971).

³ Maurice Horn, *The World Encyclopedia of Comics* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1976).

⁴ Roger Sabin, *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels* (London, UK: Phaidon Press, 1996).

distributors sold an estimated 200,000 copies of this first issue.⁵ Abiding by the pulp logic of the past, publishers would try to mimic anything that was selling. This business tactic would bring about the era of the superhero. Many new publishing companies started during the middle 1930s and into the early 1940s. They all had their own interpretation of what the classic superhero should look like. This era is referred to as the “golden age” of comics. Following the success of Superman in 1939, a man named Martin Goodman, a previous pulp magazine publisher, decided to try his hand at the superhero game. He started a publishing firm called Timely Publications and with the content provided by Funnies Inc. released the first issue of *Marvel Comics*. Timely later changed its name to Marvel Comics. In 1939, Timely Publications released their first issue titled *Marvel Comics*, the title later changed to *Marvel Mystery Comics*. The first issue contained seven individual stories ranging from various genres including jungle adventure and western. The highlight of the issue was the first appearance of the Human Torch written and drawn by Carl Burgos, as well as the second appearance of the anti-hero known as Namor: The Submariner, by Bill Everett. The first printing of the issue sold 80,000 copies and a month later sold 800,000 with a reprinted issue.⁶

Similar to the Superman series, the appeal of Marvel Comics was the parallel to what was happening during the time, which was organized crime. While Superman was fighting corrupt politicians and womanizers, the Human Torch was fighting the racketeering duo of Sardo and Red. Since the early days of the superhero narrative, comic books have relied on real world dilemmas to progress their characters. Comic books were able to highlight the complex problems of the era quicker and more accurately than other literary forms due to the frequency they were

⁵ John Jackson Miller, “Superman Sales Figures,” Comichron, <http://www.comichron.com/titlespotlights/superman.html>

⁶ Craig Delich, “Marvel Comics #1[1st Printing],” *Grand Comics Database*, Issue 556 (2013) <http://www.comics.org/issue/556/>

produced. In using the science fiction guise, comic books are able to reflect real world events without necessarily using the same people or places. This trend of artists and writers pulling antagonists from the real world would hit its climax with the ultimate enemies of the period, Adolf Hitler and communism.

The Heroes Go to War

In adhering to the original trend of mimicking real world events and adversaries, the comic book industry began paralleling Adolf Hitler prior to United States involvement in World War II. Hitler, a German dictator in the early 1900s, threatened the life and liberty of those he considered enemies of the Aryan race. People Hitler despised included Jews and African Americans. He would lead Germany in the first major war following World War I. The Second World War was a result of Germany rebelling against the world after being forced to pay reparations for World War I under the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler used persuasion and nationalism to entice the German people to blame the problematic after effects of the First World War on the Jewish people. Hitler formed the Nazi socialist party and started gaining territory in Europe. The war began with Germany invading Poland on September 1, 1939, but the United States involvement started in 1941 after the Japanese attacked American ships at Pearl Harbor.

While troops were abroad fighting the combined forces of Japan, Germany and Italy, also referred to as the Axis Powers, United States citizens at home needed a hero to match the uncertainty of wartime with blind nationalism and patriotism. That hero came a few months before Pearl Harbor with the first appearance of Captain America, created by writer Joe Simon and artist Jack Kirby. The two Jewish teenagers had a vested interest in what was going on overseas before United States involvement in the war. The first issue of Captain America featured four different short stories, all concerning the Nazi menace. The beginning of the comic

starts with the origin story of Steve Rodgers, a.k.a. Captain America, encountering a German spy who sabotages a government experiment sanctioned by Franklin D. Roosevelt. The test was to create a super soldier serum that would give an average person super human abilities.⁷ In his second story, Captain America and his young ward, Bucky Barnes, foil a Nazi plot by Von Krantz to "...destroy the morale of [our] your whole country!"⁸ Later in the comic book, Captain America battles a chess playing Nazi, who wants to get rid of all United States military generals, as well as his arch nemesis the Red Skull. Here we see the Nazis as a foreign threat to all aspects of American life, both minorities like African Americans and Jews in addition to the democratic majority. The first issue mirrors many themes of the time, specifically the Red Scare.

The Red Scare was an event in 1919 where multiple politicians received explosive devices in the mail for opposing immigration laws. The suspects of the bombings were believed to be communist; this was later found to be untrue. The Red Scare caused many to fear that Russian communist spies had infiltrated the United States and would overthrow its capitalist way of life.⁹ This fear made Captain America all the more important. Simon and Kirby used their sentinel of liberty to help cultivate nationalism and patriotism during a time when the public needed to remain calm against the fear of both the Nazis and their communist allies. Captain America's bias toward all things communist reflects the orthodox school of thought that would dominate the region for years to come. Not only did Captain America entertain people at home but also the troops risking their lives for the country. One out of every four items sent overseas to

⁷ Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, "Meet Captain America." *Captain America Comics #1*, (New York: Timely Publishing, 1941).

⁸ Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, "Case No. 2." *Captain America Comics #1*, (New York: Timely Publishing, 1941).

⁹ Michael Barson and Steven Heller, *Red Scared!: The Commie Menace in Propaganda and Pop Culture* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2001).

soldiers was a comic book during World War II.¹⁰ It was Captain America's propaganda that helped the United States win the morale war against the Nazis at home, the troops who helped America win the war against the Axis forces on the ground, and the atomic bomb that helped the United States establish America's newfound hegemony.

The Atomic Bomb

The dropping of the atomic bomb, without a doubt, would become one of the most influential moments in American history. The effect would cause massive change in all aspects of American culture. The influence of the atomic bomb is evident through the historical scholarship as well as the comic books of the era. It appears in the historical scholarship as the beginning of questioning the United States imperialistic intentions as revisionism, it also appears in comic books as the uncertainty of science.

In order to justify the ramifications of the bomb, it is imperative to understand how the bomb came into existence and how it was first used. The United States government, under the Manhattan Project, began creating the atomic bomb; Major General Leslie Groves directed the project. It ran from 1942 through 1946. The bomb put a definitive end to World War II when used against the Japanese forces and civilians. The Germans had already surrendered due to the Allied forces gaining ground with the liberation of Paris, France and the Allied advancement across the Rhine River in 1944. After the suicidal death of Adolf Hitler and the death of Benito Mussolini, the Italian Prime Minister, the only Axis power left was Japan. The nation of Japan

¹⁰ PBS: "*SuperHeroes: A Never-Ending Battle*, Netflix, Documentary, Dir. Kevin Burns (2013: Ghostlight Films, 2013).

remained fighting the combined might of the Allied Forces, suffering everything from blockades and loss of territory to firebombing from the American Air Force.¹¹

In July 1945, the Allied forces encouraged Japan's complete surrender with the Potsdam Declaration but Japan ignored the declaration. In response to Japan's disregard to the recommendation to surrender, President Harry Truman issued the first atomic bomb, deemed "Little Boy", deployed in the city of Hiroshima, Japan, on August 6, 1945. The American super weapon claimed eighty thousand lives; this included soldiers as well as civilians.¹² There are two main reasons Truman decided to deploy the bomb, the first was because he could. Truman would use the threat of a nuclear end to spread fear among lesser nations. Seeing the impact a nuclear weapon could do would deter other nations from challenging the United States. The second was in hopes of saving American lives from an attack on Japan. After the first bomb detonated, Japan still refused to surrender. Days after "Little Boy" detonated, and killed thousands, the United States arranged for another atomic demonstration with a second bomb deemed "Fat Man." The second atomic bomb dropped on the city Nagasaki, Japan. After the devastation of two atomic bombs and a declaration of war from Russia, Japan finally surrendered in August officially ending the war effort. American comic books and graphic novels are not the only literary source that represented aspects of World War II. A popular 1970s anime, or Japanese graphic novel, titled *Barefoot Gen* would feature a Japanese family's struggle to find peace after having their lives altered drastically by the detonation of the atomic bombs.

The introduction of the atomic bomb ushered in a new era of atomic power that seated the United States at the top of the world. This change in ideas are visible in comic books after the deployment of the atomic bomb as well as in the corresponding historical writings. Before World

¹¹ Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-2002*. Updated 9th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2004).

¹² Ibid

War II and the use of the A-bomb, the motivating factor for historical scholarship were the progressive ideas of social and political reform. Progressives such as W.E. Burghardt Du Bois and Charles Beard sought to view past events through the eyes of the minority, such as slaves and women.¹³ The progressive historians also received a reputation for criticizing the government in an attempt to pursue rights and freedoms for minorities. This idea received heavy criticism during the beginning of World War II for being in favor of a communist regime. Many historians like Charles Beard and his wife Mary were exiled from the historical community for having progressive views, such as linking the cause of the Civil War and the creation of the Constitution to economic factors favoring the rich. While the progressive era began to decline, due to the rise in nationalism after World War II, national consensus theory began to regain popularity during the early efforts of the war. Consensus history is the belief that the majority of people are thinking and feeling the same way, and in the midst of World War II, the nation felt riddled with nationalism and exceptionalism.¹⁴ An aspect of consensus history is the common thought that America acquired its new hegemonic state due to its democratic ideas and effective government. The rise of national consensus mirrors the booming popularity of the *Captain America* series in the 1940s and 1950s.

These ideas advanced in the American psyche by historians such as Daniel J. Boorstin and Richard Hofstadter, both men emphasized key consensus values such as a lack of class conflict and democracy. Boorstin showed a lack of class conflict with his book *The Genius of American Politics* focusing on the American Revolution, while Hofstadter highlighted how democracy defined America's greatness in his work titled *The American Political Tradition and*

¹³ Caroline Hoefflerle, *The Essential Historiography Reader*, (NJ: Prentice Hall, 2011).

¹⁴ Ibid

*the Men Who Made It*¹⁵. Many Americans were full of patriotism and love for the nation during the war, and anything adhering to those traits became widely popular. The comic books of the 1940s reflected Americans' national consensus attitude with Captain America, as well as reflecting both the Nazi and communist parties. These two foreign groups according to the majority had the potential to threaten America's unalienable rights.

The end of World War II

The comic books printed during World War II solidify the fact that when America was at war, so were its superheroes in the comic books. Marvel heroes like the Human Torch, Namor: The Submariner, Captain America and even his young friend Bucky Barnes had all battled against various spies, saboteurs, mad scientists and Nazi villains alike. The comic book heroes, even after the war, continued to fight the axis of evil. The reason comic books portrayed Nazis, Chinese and Russian villains so long after the end of the war was because the Marvel Universe is aligned with a sliding timescale, this means that events in the real world happen slower in the comics.¹⁶ As the war was coming to a close and veterans were coming back home and the need for caped crusaders lost its appeal. People were less concerned with superheroes when they had access to real American heroes in the form of veterans. Even the great *Captain America* title dropped out of publication. In order to bring him back years later, Marvel later revealed, that Captain America became frozen in the arctic after trying to stop the Nazi Baron Zemo from attacking a group of Allied forces.¹⁷ Since the popularity of the superhero had begun to fade, with the return of the soldiers who were fighting overseas, readers forced publishers to attempt

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Jeff Christiansen, and Mike Fichera, *The Official Handbook of the Marvel Universe A-Z*. Vol. 1. (New York: Marvel Pub. 2008).

¹⁷ Stan Lee, "Captain America joins...the Avengers", *The Avengers* (New York: Marvel Publishing, 1964).

new ways to keep the audience's attention. This search for new ideas would mark the beginning of the crime and horror genre of comic books. These genres of stories however would be short lived. The post-World War II era not only gained two new genres of comics but also a strict censorship code that would threaten the entire industry.

Dr. Wertham and the Comics Code of Authority (1950s-1970s)

One example of the level of relevance comic books carried in society can be illustrated in the aftermath of World War II with the scrutiny comic books were given. Comic books had grown exponentially in popularity during the Second Great War, this added attention also carried negative consideration. The consensus began to believe that the amount of violence and gore within comic books had the potential to taint America's youth. The false accusations and skewed statistics of Dr. Fredric Wertham fueled the lull of the comic book industry in the late 1950s. Dr. Fredric Wertham, a German psychiatrist believed comic books were ruining the virtue of the youth. The sudden popularity of horror and crime series help support Dr. Wertham's arguments that children were becoming more violent due to the comic books they were reading. In 1954, Wertham published his controversial book titled *Seduction of the Innocent*. He presented false statistics as well as misrepresented material to prove his point of comic books leading to delinquency in children. Some of his manipulated evidence consisted of surveying children with previously diagnosed psychiatric disorders and misrepresenting Batman and Robin's relationship as homosexual. Wertham blamed the imagery of scantily clad women, violent acts and

homosexuality as the primary culprits. His book became popular due to parental mass hysteria and the notion of family values being in jeopardy after the war.¹⁸

Another reason *Seduction of the Innocent* gained popularity was due to the increase of comic book sales in Germany. As West German teenagers started purchasing more comic books, the genre became associated with German culture. This went against the national consensus of a post-World War II United States that labeled anything German as evil and un-American.¹⁹

The many court hearings between Wertham and the lead comic book publishers at that time resulted in an agreement to establish a common code of conduct that all publishers would abide by for selling comic books. At this time, the leading publishers also organized to monitor and regulate the changes for the code in a group called the Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA). With the formation of the code and this new organization in 1954, it was deemed that any comic book without the seal of the comic's code of authority would not be sold in stores. The conservative restrictions and unrealistic expectations of the code not only caused several publishing companies to go out of business, but in addition, altered the medium to primarily consist of western and romance stories. Some of the rules of the comics code of authority included that "scenes of excessive violence shall be prohibited as well as scenes of brutal torture, excessive and unnecessary knife and gunplay, physical agony, gory and gruesome crime shall be eliminated." Other rules were that "in every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal punished for his misdeeds" and "crimes shall never be presented in such a way as to create sympathy for the criminal or to promote distrust of the forces of law and justice, or to

¹⁸ John A. Lent, *Pulp Demons: International Dimensions of the Postwar Anti-comics Campaign* (N.J.: Fairleigh Dickson University 1999).

¹⁹ John A. Lent, *Pulp Demons: International Dimensions of the Postwar Anti-comics Campaign* (N.J.: Fairleigh Dickson University, 1999).

inspire others with a desire to imitate criminals.”²⁰ The code essentially banned any depictions of violence, crime or anything that mimicked an indecent act.

The code would later be amended to encompass ideals that were more liberal in the early 1970s, and by the 2000s would be obsolete. Chapter four discusses more on the court proceedings and the lessening of the codes restrictions. The ramifications of the 1954 comics code of authority caused a massive decline in sales for the comic book industry. With the strictness of the comics code publishers were limited to the amount of violence and action allowed in the comic books, this limited their appeal to teenagers. Their massive loss in sales forced publishers to attract new readers or go bankrupt. The adoption of the comics code of authority reflects the comic book industry as a whole, conforming to society’s ideas of turning away from portrayals of violent or criminal activity in hopes of returning to normalcy after the events of World War II. Again, this strengthens the argument that whatever the consensus believed threatened the American values of life, liberty and happiness would parallel in American comic books. In this particular case, the reflection is seen both within the text of comic books, in the material allowed, and in the way comic books were viewed negatively as a whole during this time of returning to normalcy after World War II. The Cold War would bring about a wealth of new ideas and concepts that would later revitalize the comic book industry and destroy the comics code of authority.

²⁰ Les Daniels, *Comix: A History of Comic Books in America* (New York: Outerbridge & Dienstfrey, 1971).

Chapter Two: Marvel Comics enter the Cold War (1960s-1970s)

The 1960s brought about a proxy war between the United States and the Soviet Union battling over different ways to govern after World War II. This idea of containment theory led to a complicated and stimulating era in American history filled with fear and mass hysteria against anything Russian. Many achievements enjoyed today are remnants of that war, including Marvel Comics, which experienced its self-proclaimed “golden age” during the 1960s, and many of their groundbreaking characters remain popular to this day. Their heroes gained massive popularity because they embodied the mindset of the time, the culture and overall attitude of the nation. It is for this reason that comic books serve as mirrors for understanding major historical events and the cultures surrounding them. For the purpose of this text, comic books viewed as historical lenses reveal what the consensus of suburban middle to high-class societies believed to be cultural enemies of the United States during various eras in history.

Not only can comic books reveal past cultures, key events and main themes throughout history, but they can also show the changing schools of historical thought along with the perceived dangers and social norms of the time. Comic books combine the written word with detailed illustrations to produce a better medium for understanding the shift from the orthodox school of thought to revisionist and later to realist ideals. The changing schools of thought coincide with whom the nation perceived as a threat and to what extent. For example, during the start of the Cold War after World War II, America saw Russia in direct competition over leadership of the global stage. This animosity towards Russia resulted in the orthodox mentality of despising anything Russian or communist. As the Cold War progressed and the events of Vietnam began to unfold, Americans began sliding towards a more revisionist mindset believing that the feud with Russia likely began due to American imperialism, or America forcing its

democratic process on other countries to stop the spread of communism. The last trend of historical thought during the Cold War were the realist ideals. The realist school of thought was a byproduct of the United States believing it had surpassed Russia economically, technologically and socially. After perceiving Russia as a lesser threat, America started focusing its efforts on the Vietnam War and the rising crime rate. In this chapter, the shifting schools of historical thought highlight the cultural enemies of the United States during the Cold War. These cultural enemies threatened the American values of life, liberty and happiness. The link between comic books reflecting these enemies throughout modern history, are best illustrated by comparing the major debuts of Marvel's most popular characters in juxtaposition to critical events that took place during the 1960s Cold War.

The Cold War and Marvel Comics

The Cold War is the name given to the years roughly from 1945 to 1991 in which the United States and the Soviet Union were in conflict over different economic policies. This war differed from previous wars in the fact that no actual fighting took place between the main combatants. Both Russia and the United States had nuclear capabilities; a physical conflict between them would have resulted in mutually assured destruction. Instead of tanks and soldiers, the Cold War relied on economic ideologies to wage war. Russia practiced communism while the United States employed capitalism. Communism is an economic system in which the government controls the production of goods, while capitalism is a system where the individual controls the production of goods. During the Cold War, the general consensus of calmness became replaced with hysteria. People feared that the Russian communist would take over society and drastically alter the American way of life.

The term “Cold War” gained notoriety in 1947 when a journalist named Walter Lippmann used it as the title for his book, *The Cold War*, it was an early representation of revisionist theory.²¹ There were many different theories concerning who was at fault for starting the Cold War. The orthodox version credits America for attempting to stop the spread of communism; this version grew in popularity due to American dominance at the end of World War II. Winston Churchill and George W. Kennan fueled the orthodox movement with their literary works and speeches. The former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Churchill coined the term “iron curtain” during a speech in Fulton, Missouri in 1946 as a metaphor for the cultural barrier Russia erected around its borders after World War II. In his 1947 essay titled *The Sources of Soviet Conduct*, Kennan, an American historian, coined the term “containment” when referring to the policy adopted by the United States to stop the spread of communism.²²

The revisionists argue that the Cold War began due to the United States’ imperialistic intentions. This mentality originated with the dropping of atomic bombs but grew more with the United States’ involvement in the Korean and Vietnam War. William Appleman Williams first brought to light America’s imperial intentions in his 1959 book titled *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*.²³ Another historian and student of Williams, Walter LaFeber, contributed to the revisionist school of thought by focusing more on the problematic effects of America’s containment policy in his book titled *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-2000*.²⁴

Those who did not follow the orthodox or revisionist theories chose the realist path. The realist school of thought found neither Russia nor the United States responsible for the war, they

²¹ Walter Lippmann, *The Cold War: A Study in U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper. 1947).

²² George F. Kennan, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 65, no.

4, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/1987-03-01/containment-40-years-later-sources-soviet-conduct>.

²³ William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, First ed. (Cleveland: World Pub. Co. 1959).

²⁴ William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, First ed. (Cleveland: World Pub. Co. 1959).

believed conflict between the two nations was inevitable. Hans J. Morgenthau, one of the key proponents of the realist theory, credited the Cold War to a misunderstanding between nations in his 1948 book *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*.²⁵ The change to the realist school of thought paralleled in Marvel Comics during the 1970s when the focus changed from glamorous wars to more violent personal stories such as *NAM*, *Nick Fury* and *The Punisher*.

Comic books produced during the 1960s mirrored specific events that happened during the Cold War, for instance the start of the nuclear age, the orthodox way Americans viewed the Russians and the red scare of McCarthyism. The proceedings of the Cold War are a direct result of the United States usage of nuclear weapons at the end of World War II on the two Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. These nuclear attacks sparked a surge of exceptionalism among the American people, exceptionalism is the belief that one's nation is superior to all other nations because of certain exceptional factors. In relation to the United States, those factors were personal liberties, capitalism and democracy.²⁶ It was this notion of exceptionalism and nationalism that led Americans to view the early stages of the Cold War through an orthodox perspective. This meant that a large majority of people blamed the Russians for starting the conflict. Americans believed they would acquire more nuclear weapons than Russia, and with American superiority and democratic values, they could harness the destructive powers of nuclear energy and use it to better the commonwealth. The United States, shortly after World War II, envisioned using nuclear energy for a variety of common uses, everything from

²⁵ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations; the Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Knopf, 1948).

²⁶ Hoefflerle, *Historiography Reader*, (NJ: Prentice Hall, 2011).

preserving food to fuel for cars and space shuttles.²⁷ This nuclear optimism would soon end in 1949 when Russia gained nuclear capabilities.

Russia gained nuclear information by using spies to infiltrate the United States military structure. Covert operatives like Klaus Fuchs and Harry Gold often shared government secrets with the Soviet Union while being employed by the United States.²⁸ This view of Russians as sneaky, traitorous villains would appear often during the rise in popularity of Marvel comic books. With Russia now capable of a nuclear attack, the United States government started taking emergency protocols in the form of “duck and cover” safety drills as well as stockpiling more nuclear armaments in the event Russia should attack first. The hysteria over Russian spies grew to such extent due to the recent past. Previously, in the 1950s, a social movement started by Senator Joseph McCarthy led the nation in accusing various people of being communist sympathizers, this panic, of accusing people of Soviet spy ring connections is later referred to as McCarthyism. McCarthy’s false claims of communist activity started a nationwide witch-hunt. Thousands of people lost their jobs and reputations. People suspected of being spies were accused of receiving military orders from Stalin in Moscow, to overthrow the United States government. The crucial and most alarming accusation brought on by McCarthyism was the thought of all the communists in America forming a network of brainless puppets controlled by Russia’s elite to spread communism and take over the United States. The frightening thought was that they could be anywhere and anyone. This mass paranoia led to many innocent people being expedited to Russia, sentenced to jail or prison, ostracized from society or at the least fired

²⁷ Benjamin K. Sovacool, *Contesting the Future of Nuclear Power: A Critical Global Assessment of Atomic Energy*, (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co. 2011).

²⁸ Marian Smith Holmes, Spies Who Spilled Atomic Bomb Secrets, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/spies-who-spilled-atomic-bomb-secrets-127922660/?all>

from their current employers.²⁹ The feelings of fear and panic brought on by McCarthyism would later inspire a plethora of comic book villains seen in the 1960s.

The Golden Age

The 1960s marked a very successful decade for the Superhero genre in comic books. It had been over a decade since World War II and people were starting to buy superhero comics again. The lull in comic book sales became a byproduct of the ratification of the comics code of authority. During this time, the code was still in effect and publishers had to walk a fine line between allowable content and attention grabbing stories. The 1960s ushered in the golden age of Marvel Comics with the introduction of the Fantastic Four, the Incredible Hulk and Spider-man. The rise in the superhero genre was largely attributed to D.C.'s new featured title called *The Justice League of America*. Martin Goodman, publisher of Marvel comics,³⁰ attempted to establish his own group of superheroes equivalent to the Justice League. In 1961, Goodman assigned the task of creating such a team to Marvel editor Stanley Martin Lieber, also known as Stan Lee, Lee with advisement from his wife, decided to try something new in comics. He would later introduce the first nuclear family, the Fantastic Four. Lee sought the artistic vision of one of the most talented artists in comics; Jack Kirby, the co-creator of Captain America, illustrated this would be revolutionary comic book. The success of Marvel's Fantastic Four can be contributed to Stan Lee's initial vision of the series. Lee stated, "For just this once, I would do the type of story I myself would enjoy reading...the characters would be the kind of characters I could personally relate to; they'd be flesh and blood, they'd have their faults and foibles, they'd be fallible and feisty, and-most important of all-inside their colorful, costumed booties they'd still

²⁹ Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America*, (Boston: Little, Brown 1998).

³⁰ Originally titled Timely comics until the 50s, then relabeled Atlas comics until the 60s when it was changed to Marvel permanently.

have feet of clay.”³¹ Lee wanted a series people could relate to as well as identify with. In order to do that he would use a variety of different character personalities as well as culturally relevant themes in his comic books. The hard work and creativity of both Lee and Kirby would come together in November 1961 when the first issue of the Fantastic Four was released.

The Fantastic Four is composed of Dr. Reed Richards, a.k.a. Mr. Fantastic, Susan Storm also known as the “Invisible Girl,” her younger brother Johnny Storm, a.k.a. the Human Torch and lastly Reed’s college friend and roommate, Benjamin Grimm, a.k.a. the Thing. In their first issue, the reader witnesses the origin story of how the quartet received their powers. The group, persuaded by Reed Richards and Susan Storm, at the inclination of Ben Grimm, go on a mission to outer space in order to beat the Russian’s advancement to the stars. This premier issue of the Fantastic Four highlights the American need to beat the Russians into space for fear of Russia gaining a technological advantage over the United States.

Figure 1.
Fantastic Four Issue no. 1, page



Fig. 1-Source: Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, “Fantastic Four!” *Fantastic Four #1*. Nov. 1961 Marvel Publishing. Marvel Comics

³¹ Stan Lee, *Origins of Marvel Comics* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1974).

The mission goes terribly wrong when the four encounter cosmic rays that alter their bodily chemistry and give them super powers. The ability to stretch his limbs to ridiculous lengths is given to Reed Richards while Susan Storm gained the abilities to turn invisible as well as generate force fields on command. Her younger brother Johnny Storm, who went along on the mission for fun, received the power to ignite his whole body on fire. While Ben Grimm, the only one who did not want to go, was transformed into a hideous rock like creature. In the first issue, they use their newfound powers to battle against the dreaded Mole Man who is trying to destroy the atomic plants all over the United States in order for his “mighty mole creatures” to take over the Earth.³²

Stan Lee uses the themes of the time all throughout the first issues, specifically the ideas of the nuclear family, the space race, and the nuclear age as well as McCarthyism. The Fantastic Four represent the perfect nuclear family; this means a house-hold with two adults and two children. Reed serves as the paternal father figure while Susan serves as the maternal figure. Her brother serves as the adolescent member of the group while Ben Grimm is representative of the child or baby of the foursome. The space race against the Soviets is mirrored within the comic book pages as the initial reason they travel into space to begin with. Not only that, but the fast approaching threat of the Russians also prompted the rush into space before completing the necessary research. This threat of the Russians mimics the orthodoxical viewpoint of the 1960s. The United States’ reliance on nuclear power is apparent near the end of the issue when the Mole Man describes, through his master plan, that all that is required to invade the surface world is to rid it of nuclear capabilities first. Here Lee is mirroring the perspective that the atomic bomb and nuclear power are a major force in the United States and, without it, America would be

³² Stan Lee, “The Fantastic Four!” *Fantastic Four #1* (New York: Marvel Publishing, 1961).

susceptible to attack. Other facets of the Cold War are apparent in the following issues of *The Fantastic Four*.

The subsequent issue focuses on McCarthyism with the first appearance of the alien race called Skrulls. The story deemed the “Skrulls from Outer space” involves a race of mindless, shape shifting aliens who travel to Earth for their ruler to take over the planet. The Skrulls are representative of all the stereotypes associated with McCarthyism in the 1950s. The Skrulls come to Earth disguised as the Fantastic Four and begin to cause havoc, this leads the military to attempt to capture the super hero team with little success. After escaping from the military the Fantastic Four beat the Skrulls by tricking them into leaving Earth and a majority of the invaders flee. Mr. Fantastic uses his hypnosis ability, for the first and only other time, to convince the few remaining Skrulls to take the shape of cows and live forever on Earth.³³ The comic serves two goals. First, to play on the population’s mass fear of the unseen foreign enemy, and second the issue gives the perception that it is better to be a cow in the United States than a soldier fighting under a dictator somewhere else. This is exactly the orthodox mentality the United States was full of during the 1960s. The second issue of the series also shows revisionist ideas about questioning authority by using the United States military as a minor inconvenience to the heroes. After Lee and Kirby’s success with the Fantastic Four, Lee had the idea of creating a different sort of character, one focused more on the nuclear age and the duality of man. These ideas led to the creation of the Incredible Hulk.

In May 1962, Marvel comics released the first issue of the *Incredible Hulk*, it was written by Stan Lee and illustrated by Jack Kirby. Similar to other Marvel titles at this time, the issues

³³ Stan Lee, “The Fantastic Four Meet the Skrulls from Outer Space,” *The Fantastic Four #2* (New York: Marvel Publishing, 1962).

focused on current themes and fears of society and the Hulk was no different. The creation of the Hulk was a mixture of pulp logic and the theme of the nuclear era. The pulp logic of Hulk is that he is essentially the combination of Frankenstein and Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde. Taking ideas from others and altering them was a trademark of the pulp era.³⁴ The societal theme that links the Incredible Hulk to the Cold War is that he himself is a result of a nuclear bomb test that was sabotaged by a Soviet spy. The first issue of the Incredible Hulk is another comic book example of Marvel's usage of relevant themes as well as the traditional view Americans had of the Russians as the enemy.

Issue one of *The Incredible Hulk* begins with a test of a nuclear bomb, or Gamma bomb, created by protagonist Dr. Bruce Banner with the help of the antagonist Igor Drenkov. The Hulk is accidentally created when Dr. Banner sees a young man, Rick Jones, in the restricted testing site and rushes to save him before detonation. Banner saves the youth but not before the evil Russian scientist/spy, Igor activates the bomb prematurely, infusing Banner with Gamma powered radiation giving him the ability to transform into the Hulk. While as the Hulk, Banner is constantly being pursued by the United States military who believe Hulk is a dangerous monster. Later in the issue, Igor reveals himself as a spy attempting to gain information from the United States military and reporting his findings to his superior in Russia, Yuri Topolov a.k.a. the Gargoyle. With the last bit of information given to him by Igor, the Gargoyle sets off to capture the Hulk and Rick Jones with his mind controlling pellet gun. While in transport to Russian soil, the Hulk transforms back into Dr. Banner to the Gargoyle's surprise. After realizing the truth about the Hulk and Banner, the Gargoyle cannot believe anyone would prefer to be a monster and begins to weep at his own hideous figure. Dr. Banner takes pity on him and decides to offer

³⁴ Lee, *Origins of Marvel Comics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974).

him help. Bruce Banner and Rick Jones help Yuri fix his Gargoyle like appearance using radiation. Since the Americans fixed Yuri's appearance, something he himself could never have accomplished, he helps Dr. Banner and Jones escape the Russian police by sending them back home in a rocket while he sacrifices himself by destroying his laboratory.³⁵

The premiere issue of the *Incredible Hulk* displays the use of nuclear power in the atomic age, Russian spies, a confused United States military and the limitless capabilities of American science. Similar to Lee's *Fantastic Four* series, he uses both orthodox as well as revisionist themes for relevant plot material. The atomic energy theme is a constant in Marvel's golden age. It is no challenge to imagine an unfamiliar energy source that gives the power of super human strength, durability and the ability to transform into a monstrous creature. The usage of Gamma energy will be a constant staple of the Marvel Universe. Like in the *Fantastic Four*, Russian spies were viewed as the antagonist in the *Incredible Hulk*, either as spies or evil masterminds orchestrating grand, diabolical schemes against the United States. This idea of the evil Russian grew in popularity because it related to the fears people had of Russians threatening the American ideals of inalienable rights.

The theme of the Russian antagonist not only infiltrated comic books, but also cinema and literature. A 1962 television show called *Red Nightmare* depicted an American man who learns to appreciate his freedom after waking up in a communist controlled United States.³⁶ Similar to the *Red Nightmare*, George Orwell's book *1984* also reveals a world deprived of

³⁵ Stan Lee, "The Hulk." *The Incredible Hulk #1* (New York: Marvel Publishing, 1962).

³⁶ Lisa Marie Bowman, "Red Nightmare." *A Blast From the Past: Red Nightmare* (directed by George Waggner), unobtainium13.com. <http://unobtainium13.com/2015/09/07/a-blast-from-the-past-red-nightmare-directed-by-george-waggner/>

freedom, full of spies and secret police based on communistic ideals.³⁷ The *Incredible Hulk* uses the Russian spy as the main catalyst for the creation of the Hulk himself. The traditional theme of American superiority is depicted at the end of the comic book through a monologue from the villain. After being healed by Bruce Banner the villainous Gargoyle turns to a portrait of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev and proclaims that, "...it took an American to cure me! And now—now that I am no longer a Gargoyle, I can defy you, and all you stand for like a man!" The continual themes of America's scientific dominance as well as an inadequate military complex appear again in the second issue of the series when Dr. Banner uses a gamma powered machine, against the military's wishes, to defeat a group of toad men from taking over the planet. Stan Lee often recycles popular plot devices in many of his earlier comic books and creations. The first appearance of Spider-man would be no different.

One of Marvel's most popular characters is Peter Parker, better known as Spider-man. Spider-man was the third newest hero created during Marvel's golden age of comic books and his popularity among readers has never wilted. The first appearance of Spider-man appeared in the final issue of a title called *Amazing Fantasy*, previously titled *Amazing Adult Fantasy* in an attempt to reach an older audience. Pulp logic played a vital role in the creation of Spider-man. "The Spider: Master of men," was the pulp character Lee derived the name Spider-Man from. Lee took the idea of "the spider" and expanded on it by adding relevant technology and making the character generally more spider like. At first, publisher Martin Goodman rejected the idea of a Spider-man, but since the title was set for cancelation regardless, they decided to give Lee a chance.³⁸ Stan Lee wrote the first appearance of Spider-man with Steve Ditko creating the illustrations. One of the most renowned comic book artists next to Jack Kirby, Ditko had already

³⁷ George Orwell, *1984* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984).

³⁸ Daniels, *Comix: A History of Comic Books in America* (New York: Outerbridge & Dienstfrey, 1971).

gained a reputation while working with both Marvel and Detective Comics. Lee sought out the talent of Ditko because he wanted Spider-man/Peter Parker to have a more realistic, normal look instead of the robust, handsome appeal most superheroes had.³⁹ The final issue of *Amazing Fantasy* containing the first appearance of Spider-man was released in August 1962. Months later, when Marvel received the feedback from the issue, they realized they had two new star characters in Peter Parker and Spider-man.

The first issue begins with Peter Parker being ridiculed by a group of popular students who deem him not only as an outcast but as “Midtown High’s only professional wallflower.” Soon after his day at school, Parker goes to a science exhibit showcasing an experiment in radioactivity, while the experiment is taking place, a spider gets caught in the machine and accidentally absorbs “a fantastic amount of Radioactivity.”⁴⁰ The now irradiated spider bites Peter Parker before dying due to radiation. The spider bite gives Parker the ability to anticipate danger preemptively, walk on walls, and super human strength. In an attempt to earn extra income as well as test his newfound abilities, Parker decides to enter a wrestling match, which he wins. The promoter of the fight then invites Parker to be a guest on the Ed Sullivan show for additional income.

Now donned with a new spider like suit and with his newly created web shooters, Spider-man makes his big debut. While leaving the show, Spider-man witnesses a robbery-taking place and refuses to assist the police in stopping the thief. Moments later, Parker rushes home to find his Uncle Ben shot dead. The police tell him the presumed whereabouts of the assailant and Parker then becomes Spider-man and swings across the city to the old Acme warehouse where

³⁹ Lee, Stan, *Origins of Marvel Comics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974).

⁴⁰ Stan Lee, “Spider-man!,” *Amazing Fantasy #15* (New York: Marvel Publishing, 1962).

he encounters the killer who he recognizes from the robbery he failed to stop. After defeating the assailant and handing him to the police, Peter Parker walks away now knowing that “with Great power there must also come--Great Responsibility.”⁴¹ The last panel displaying this famous quote on responsibility echoes the orthodox perspective of the United States being the only nation capable of saving the world from communism. After Marvel became aware of the popularity of Spider-man in *Amazing Fantasy* issue 15, they decided to give the web slinger his own series in March 1963.

The first full issue of Spider-man appeared as *The Amazing Spider-man*, his second appearance was highly successful; the 1963 issue sold 145-150 million copies.⁴² It contained two different Spider-man stories in thirty-six pages. The first story takes up a majority of the book with three parts whereas the second story is only a few pages. The first independent storyline of Spider-man involves our hero looking for a way to make rent for himself and his Aunt May after Uncle Ben’s death. Parker decides to perform tricks as Spider-man to provide extra income. Problems first arise in the adventure when Spider-man finds out he cannot cash his check from his performance without the proper identification. Things only grew worse from then on when Parker finds out that the Daily Bugle, the fictional newspaper in the Marvel Universe, is claiming that Spider-man is a menace and danger to the community. The Bugle’s publisher, Mr. J. Jonah Jameson, would make a career out of defaming Spider-man; he would prove to be a constant well of problems for Spider-man. Jameson begrudges Spider-man and encourages the public to honor real heroes such as his son, John Jameson, who is about to test a new rocket for space travel. Again, evidence of Marvel mirroring the space race of the Cold War are apparent. The

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² John Jackson Miller, “Amazing Spider-Man Sales Figures,” Comichron, <http://www.comichron.com/titlespotlights/amazingspiderman.html>

shuttle after taking-off begins to experience system malfunctions and Spider-man is there to rescue his enemies' son from certain death.

The second story in the first issue titled "Spider-man vs. The Chameleon" features the appearance of a new Russian villain as well as a guest appearance of the Fantastic Four. As Parker is still in desperate need of money, he puts on his costume and attempts to join the Fantastic Four in an effort to earn a paycheck. After a battle caused by a misunderstanding, the FF thought Spider-man was attempting to burglarize them, the Fantastic Four inform Spider-man that they are a non-profit and could not pay him for his deeds.⁴³ Later in the issue, a villain called the Chameleon is introduced to the reader. The Chameleon, a Russian spy, equipped with a disguise vest that allows him to mimic the appearance of anyone. The Chameleon uses his skills to steal missile defense plans disguised as Spider-man. This plot plays on the then popular fear of Russians gaining a technological advantage over the United States in order to make America subservient. He almost achieved his goal had the real Spider-man not been on his tail. Parker reaches the Chameleon as he is approaching a Russian submarine. Then Spider-man webs the submarine door shut and the Soviets flee, leaving Spider-man to battle the Chameleon in his helicopter. Spider-man beats the Chameleon, and the issue ends with the Russian spy in police custody and Spider-man fleeing the scene upset that every time he tries to help things only get worse.⁴⁴ The issue follows Stan Lee's classic formula of portraying relevant social and cultural themes throughout the comic book, specifically the fear of Soviet spies and Russia becoming more technologically advanced than the United States.

⁴³ Stan Lee, "Spider-man!," *Amazing Spider-man #1* (New York: Marvel Publishing, 1963).

⁴⁴ Stan Lee, "Spider-man vs. The Chameleon," *Amazing Spider-man #1* (New York: Marvel Publishing, 1963)

Spider-man gained most of his popularity due to the fact that he was so relatable. It also helped that the problems Peter Parker faced were the same problems most people during the early sixties faced, such as poverty, the uncertainty of science and the then ever present fear of the Russian menace. Poverty rose to such distinction that during the 1960s President Lyndon B. Johnson went so far as to declare war on destitution.⁴⁵ Peter Parker also appealed to the revisionists with his economic inequality and his struggle against the press. Parker's constant financial dilemmas are apparent from the beginning of his first single issue. He and his aunt can barely get by without the added financial boost Uncle Ben had previously provided. After performing as Spider-man and going to pick up his check, the teller will not allow him to cash the check without proper identification. This highlights the realness of poverty seen throughout the series. Aunt May provides another example of poverty in the early issues when she goes to pawn away her jewelry in an effort to get money. The revisionist theme of science as an unknown and unpredictable element is clearly visible by the origin of how Parker became Spider-man with the radioactive spider. This shadows the motif of fear and uncertainty produced by the dropping of the atomic bomb and the massive loss of life.

There are other factors that make Spider-man/Peter Parker both popular and relatable. Many can relate to how the comics always "leave(s) Peter having narrowly avoided personal disaster and facing an uncertain future... [as well as] ...the incredible paranoia that filled Peter's life."⁴⁶ This era of uncertainty during the 1960s and 1970s perfectly captured the revisionist spirit surrounding the confusion of the Vietnam War and the rethinking of American foreign policy. The fear of the Russian spies created by McCarthyism manifested in the character known

⁴⁵ David Green, Renee Montagne and Robert Caro, "For LBJ, The War On Poverty Was Personal," Morning Edition, NPR, January. 08, 2014. <http://www.npr.org/2014/01/08/260572389/for-lbj-the-war-on-poverty-was-personal>

⁴⁶ Daniels, *Comix: A History of Comic Books in America* (New York: Outerbridge & Dienstfrey, 1971).

as the Chameleon. He is the embodiment of McCarthy's greatest fears, a Russian spy who could look like anyone at any time. The practice of the Soviets playing the antagonist is one that is used all the way until the beginning of the Vietnam War when the ideas of revisionism and realism start gaining momentum.

In 1964, Marvel would follow the curve of historical thought with their new female character Black Widow. Natasha Romanoff a.k.a. the Black Widow reflected the popularity of the realistic trend that no longer blamed Russia for starting the Cold War. One reason for the historical shift from revisionist to realistic was the conflict in Vietnam. The increasing tension of the proxy war moved people's attention from the threat of the Russians to the communist Vietcong. Due to this shift in foreign threats, consumers became more susceptible to the idea of a neutrally aligned Russian character as opposed to the standard portrayal of the Russian antagonist. The Black Widow, as a character, is an example of the public becoming less afraid of the Russians threatening American culture and a representation of women gaining more independence.⁴⁷ The 1960s ushered in a new era where women had the option of contraception, better pay and more room for advancement within in the workforce.⁴⁸ Her first appearance, in *Tales of Suspense #52*, written by Stan Lee and illustrated by Don Rico introduces the Black Widow as a spy hired to destroy the defected Russian villain known as the Crimson Dynamo. In the issue, Iron Man saves the day and the Black Widow escapes.

The usage of Russians as villains was a consistent orthodox theme until the revisionist ideas gained popularity in the 1960s and 1970s. With the orthodox theme in decline, Marvel experimented with a variety of new Russian themed characters such as Ursa Major, a man who

⁴⁷ The subject of women in comic books is an understudied topic that would require its own thesis to discuss at length. This document focuses on the female characters that highlight the perceived cultural enemies in certain eras.

⁴⁸ Kenneth T. Walsh, "The 1960s: A Decade of Change for Women," *U.S. News*, March 12, 2010, <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2010/03/12/the-1960s-a-decade-of-change-for-women>

can turn into a giant bear and the organic metallic, Soviet X-man Piotr Rasputin a.k.a. Colossus. Later, in 1998, Marvel would welcome a complete Russian superhero team called the Winter Guard. After her first appearance, Black Widow would go on to become one of the most popular female characters in the Marvel Universe.

Since before the United States entered World War II, comic books have stood as a source of reflection of culture. Comic books have aided the public in understanding and coping with the troubled times of the Cold War, and prior, by giving a face to perceived cultural enemies of the United States. Many readers throughout American history have enjoyed the stories of Marvel Comics. In the 1940s it was youths and soldiers reading about Captain America punching Hitler and battling the Nazi's Red Skull. In the early 1960s, American youth enjoyed reading comic books that mirrored the United States' urgency to go into space with the Fantastic Four trying desperately to beat the Russians.

Throughout Marvel's publication, they have consistently expressed the changing historical thoughts of the Cold War as well as acknowledged threats to the homeland within their comic books. The orthodox mentality of American superiority can be seen as early as the first issues of Captain America as well as throughout the first issues of the Fantastic Four, the Hulk, and Spider-man. The revisionist tendencies of questioning America's policy towards nuclear weapons parallel in the creation of the Hulk and the possible benefits and dangers associated with nuclear energy. The economic hardships of Peter Parker also highlight revisionist and realist concerns. The historical school of realism is evident with the creation of the Black Widow and other Russian themed characters. With the events of the Vietnam conflict unfolding, Russians no longer occupied the role of a primary threat to society and therefore became less of a threat in comic books. This allowed Marvel to begin using them as heroes.

Chapter Three: The personification of Vietnam and the growing crime rate in the 1970s (1970s-2000s)

Throughout their first publication, Timely/Marvel adopted the theme of mirroring significant historical events and trends within their comic books. Evidence of Marvel paralleling history can be seen as early as the first appearance of Captain America in 1941, where the Captain battles the Nazi menace and again in the 1960s, during the Cold War, with the adaptation of Russian antagonists in the premier issues of the Fantastic four and Spider-man. Marvel continued this trend of mirroring history with their 1974 debut of the Punisher. Gerry Conway, Ross Andru and John Romita Sr. created the fictional character Frank Castle commonly referred to as the Punisher as a reflection of both the Vietnam War and the crime wave of the era. The Vietnam War serves as a foreign cultural enemy that challenged the United States image of a just democracy on the global stage whereas the rising crime wave served as a domestic cultural threat that challenged the life and happiness of citizens living in heavily populated cities like New York. The origin of Frank Castle is a horrific story. Castle served as a decorated Marine during the Vietnam War, one day while on leave, Castle and his wife, daughter and son went to Central Park where mobsters gunned down the entire family. Frank Castle is the only one who survived.

This tragic act transformed Frank Castle, the family man, into the Punisher, a trained killer waging a one-man war against crime. Through the origin of the Punisher, the hazardous foes that plagued that era are apparent. Primarily, the Vietnam conflict that Frank Castle was on leave from and secondarily the high crime rate that created an environment where random shootings were frequent. The two cultural threats discussed in this chapter will be the Vietnam

War and the growing crime rate in the United States, both factors weighed heavily on American morals both foreign and domestic. The Vietnam War would call into question the foreign partners the United States associated with and the growing crime rate would reflect the 1970s crisis of personal values.

Gerry Conway stated, upon reflecting on the environment in which he created the Punisher that he felt "...afraid to take the Subway and knowing that at any moment, you know, a guy could walk down the street and shoot me."⁴⁹ It is apparent in the violent characteristics of the Punisher that he reflects a type of solution to the problem Conway and many other New Yorkers felt at that time. In another quote reflecting the Punisher's modus operandi, in relation to the growing crime wave, Conway remarked, "Here you have a social breakdown of all the rules and regulations that we had all thought we were living by. The Punisher comes along and he has a simple answer to that. His answer is, 'I'll take care of it.'"⁵⁰ Basing assumptions on the words of Gerry Conway, the purpose of the Punisher seems clear. Frank Castle a.k.a. "the Punisher" is the most violent character in comicdom. He serves as the personification of both the intense acts of violence and guerilla warfare used during the Vietnam War, as well as a reflection of the rising crime rate, vigilante trend and public disillusionment with the government in American society that originated in the late twentieth century. In serving as the personification of a senseless war and a crime epidemic, the Punisher serves as a muse of what America would look like voided of morals, thus left without hope of pursuing happiness.

The pre Punisher era

⁴⁹ PBS: "*Superheroes: A Never-Ending Battle*," Netflix, Directed by Kevin Burns (2013; Ghostlight Films).

⁵⁰ Ibid

Before a character such as the Punisher could gain popularity among the public, the entire comic book industry had to make drastic alteration from their misleading level of violence allowed in the 1950s. The year 1954 marked a major decline in overall comic book sales due to allegations from Dr. Fredric Wertham regarding the negative influence comic books had on the youth. The debate over the gruesome depictions in comic books spawned out of Wertham's book titled *Seduction of the Innocent*. In his book, he makes the argument that violence in comic books were causing young boys and girls to act more delinquently.⁵¹ One contributing factor to Wertham's success was that during this time the national consensus favored a return to normalcy after the atomic war ending events of World War II.

In the 1954 United States Senate case, referred to as the Kefauver hearings, Wertham along with a militia of angry mothers and supporters banded together to enforce creative restrictions on the comic book industry as a whole. The verdict of the case resulted in a group of publishers forming the comics code of authority. The comics code of authority regulated the content of comic books to make sure they were safe for children. This included the absence of the word "crime" and "horror" within the title page as well as restrictions on monsters, ghouls, criminals and overall violent acts or depictions. Any comic book sold without the seal of approval from the CMAA was deemed dangerous to the innocence of children. This strenuous, creativity-depleting code resulted in multiple companies, series and characters dying out. Decades later, the comics code of authority would become obsolete by a Spider-man comic depicting the negative aspects of marijuana in 1971.⁵² This particular issue, *The Amazing Spider-man #96*, was the first mainstream comic book produced without the comics code of authority seal and the first comic book to condemn drug abuse. Lee's antidrug plot came about after

⁵¹ Daniels, *Comix: A History of Comic Books in America* (New York: Outerbridge & Dienstfrey, 1971).

⁵² Stan Lee, "...And Now, The Goblin". *Amazing Spider-man #96* (New York: Marvel Publishing, 1971).

President Nixon's Department of Health, Education, and Welfare asked Marvel to create a comic book highlighting the negative aspects of drugs. Although, producing a comic without the appropriate seal was unheard of during this time, the popularity of Spider-man allowed Marvel to successfully market a comic book without the seal. After the success of *The Amazing Spider-man* #96, the code became less restrictive allowing more aspects of crime and horror, this cracking of the code would continue for decades until the code became obsolete in the early 2000s.⁵³ The comics code losing authority during the early 1970s allowed for more violent and dark characters to populate the comic book industry. It is this era of a less strict code that the vigilante character the Punisher is born. The Punisher would not have been possible had it not been for the removal of the comics code of authority and the Vietnam War.

The Vietnam War: A transformative, regrettable war

A decade after Adolf Hitler's defeat, and American atomic bombs put an end to World War II another war would be waged. During the Cold War era of the 1950s, the United States fell into the practice of following "containment theory," this theory consisted of despising anything that resembled communism while adhering to anything that favored capitalism. This mentality fueled the basic framework behind the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War had a massive effect on how Americans viewed violence in addition to how Americans viewed authoritarian institutions such as the government. Vietnam would also serve as the perfect background for the fictional anti-hero known as the Punisher, Marvel's most violent character. Before the Vietnam War and during the early years of the comics code of authority a character like the Punisher would have been unimaginable.

⁵³ Paul Douglas Lopes, *Demanding Respect: The Evolution of the American Comic Book* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009).

The Vietnam War originally started with France denying Indochina its independence. During the 1940s-1950s, the United States supported French forces against the Vietnamese until France left the region after the realization that they could not win a military victory over the Vietminh. As a result of French intervention, Vietnam became divided into two regions, North and South. The splitting of the country occurred as a result of the French and Vietminh peace talks during the Geneva Conference of 1954. The region divided in hopes of uniting in the future to form a peaceful, independent country. While Vietnam remained split, Ho Chi Minh controlled the Northern area while Ngo Dinh Diem ruled the South. It was during this time that the United States, against the wishes of both Congress and its allies, began supporting the South Vietnamese dictator Diem in hopes of stopping the perceived communist threat of Ho Chi Minh. The alliance between South Vietnam and the United States during the separation of Vietnam resulted in Ho Chi Minh gaining support from Russia and China. During the 1950s, Russia provided North Vietnam with grants and credits equaling \$159 million, while China gave a sum totaling \$100 million.⁵⁴

With the help of other communist nations, Ho Chi Minh brought economic stability to the North. At the same time the communist nations were aiding the North, the United States began supplying South Vietnam with money and weapons. The Southern ruler Diem acted as a repressive tyrant to his people. The American money given to him for his nation never trickled down to the lower classes. Instead, the dictator exhausted the funds on the elite and powerful. The poor rule of Diem caused rebellions within Southern Vietnam, these rebels gained support and supplies from the Communist North. “Vietcong” was the name given to those who rebelled

⁵⁴ George McTurnan Kahin and John Wilson Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam*, Revised ed. (New York: Dial Press, 1969).

against the South.⁵⁵ The confusion of the unidentified enemy in Vietnam is paralleled in the Punisher in the sense that his targets are all clearly criminals. This leaves little misunderstanding to the antagonists in his series. America feared the communist North overtaking the perceived democratic South would cause a domino effect and result in many other smaller nations becoming allies of communism.⁵⁶

Official United States involvement

The United States government had been supplying the South Vietnamese with advisors, money and pilots since the early 1950s. It was not until President Lyndon B. Johnson's administration that the American public became fully aware of the conflict and started committing large numbers of ground troops.⁵⁷ LBJ gained popular support for the war by disillusioning the American people; Johnson did this by falsifying the attack against the *USS Maddox*. In August 1964, President Johnson declared that the North Vietnamese in the Gulf of Tonkin had attacked a United States ship, the *USS Maddox*. Following the hype and patriotism the news brought, LBJ passed the Tonkin Resolution on August 7, 1964. This resolution would enable Johnson to use military force without the authority of Congress. Within days, bombs dropped on North Vietnam. Over the course of the war an estimated 1.1 million North Vietnamese and Vietcong fighters lost their lives.⁵⁸ This number is similar to the amount of criminals the Punisher has dispatched over the years since 1974. The hyper aggressive way the Punisher eliminates the criminal element is paralleled to the amount of people killed in the war that spawned the character. Evidence of fabrication later surfaced in 1965 with the revelation

⁵⁵ "Vietnam Chronology," *New York Times* (January 30, 1964)

⁵⁶ Kahin and Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam* (New York: Dial Press, 1969).

⁵⁷ Information regarding U.S. involvement was revealed during John F. Kennedy's term. Upon hearing about the potential for unrest, Kennedy sent multiple military advisors and Special Forces but failed to commit a large number of ground forces.

⁵⁸ Ronald H. Spector, *Vietnam War / 1954-1975* (Encyclopedia Britannica Online: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2014).

that Johnson misled the media on events of the Gulf of Tonkin in order to gain further support for the Vietnam War effort.⁵⁹

During the early years of official United States involvement, after the Tonkin Resolution, military advisors believed the war could be won in weeks. The Punisher's yearning to eliminate the criminal underworld in the comic books is equivalent to the United States strategy to "seek and destroy" the Vietcong during the initial phases of the Vietnam War.⁶⁰ According to the Punisher's origin, he served many tours in Vietnam as both a Marine and as a member of a recon unit.⁶¹ After his excursion in Vietnam, the Punisher was awarded the Vietnam combat infantry badge for his service in combat zones.⁶² The Vietnam War experience is the attributing factor to the Punisher's combat skills and weaponry knowledge. In the same way the United States army sought to annihilate its enemies in Vietnam, the Punisher uses both reconnaissance tactics and heavy firepower to wage his one man war against crime. Common tactics shared between the United States army in Vietnam and the Punisher consist of chemical warfare, like Agent Orange, search and destroy missions and aerial bombardments similar to operation Rolling Thunder.⁶³ He commonly uses the, AK-47, Bazooka,⁶⁴ M-16 and fragmentation grenades to dispatch criminals, all of which grew in popularity during the Vietnam conflict.⁶⁵ The previously listed weapons are either capable of firing multiple rounds in a short amount of time, or causing

⁵⁹ Galloway, John, *The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution*, (New Jersey: Associated University Press, 1970).

⁶⁰ "Search-and-Destroy Missions Gaining Flexibility," *New York Times*, (September 10, 1968).

⁶¹ "Frank Castle (Earth 616)," Marvel Database, Marvel Publishing, [http://marvel.wikia.com/wiki/Frank_Castle_\(Earth-616\)](http://marvel.wikia.com/wiki/Frank_Castle_(Earth-616)).

⁶² D.G., Chichester and Margaret Clark, "Establish the Blessings of Liberty," *Punisher & Captain America: Blood and Glory* (New York: Marvel Publishing, 1992).

⁶³ David L. Anderson, "The Military and Diplomatic Course of the Vietnam War," *Modern American Poetry*, The Oxford Companion to American Military History, <http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/vietnam/anderson.htm>.

⁶⁴ "Vietnam Toll: Many of U.S. Wounded Have Worse Injuries than in Earlier Wars" *Wall Street Journal* (July 24, 1969).

⁶⁵ "Who wants to be the last American killed in Vietnam?"

massive damage on impact. These weapons grew to popularity due to the amount of damage they were capable of creating.

Tet Offensive

Although military generals and advisors initially believed the Vietnam War would end in a swift United States victory, they quickly realized that would not be true. According to a February 8, 1965, *New York Times* article, during a Vietcong guerrilla attack eight American soldiers lost their lives, 108 were injured and 79 had been seriously wounded.⁶⁶ These numbers pale in comparison to the amount of lives, both American and Vietnamese, lost during the Tet Offensive in 1968. Events during the Tet Offensive would alter opinion of the war and test the morals of a nation. The Vietcong, supported by the North Vietnamese government, launched multiple attacks on several South Vietnamese cities with a force of over 70,000 men.⁶⁷ Catching United States soldiers and South Vietnamese troops off guard, the Vietcong initially slaughtered thousands during the first days of the seven day assault. After several days of fighting and reclaiming territory, United States forces drove out the communists with superior weaponry and aerial reinforcements.

Military ramifications of Tet Offensive

The Tet Offensive resulted in a pyrrhic United States victory with multiple consequences. One result of the Tet Offensive was the loss of morale among the soldiers. The troops stopped believing they were a force for democracy and began to think of their mission as pointless. This new mentality shared by soldiers and the majority of Americans believed the war a lost cause

⁶⁶ "Chronology of the Crisis." *New York Times* (February 8, 1965).

⁶⁷ History.com Staff, "Tet Offensive," A&E Television Networks, <<http://www.history.com/topics/vietnam-war/tet-offensive>>.

and a danger to American morals. The damage to American morals and values came from the United States, a world leader, aggressively choosing sides in the Vietnam conflict without provocation. Was it correct to prop up a ruler in a foreign land without fully understanding the opinion of the people who lived there? After Tet, the consensus changed from patriotism to abandonment. This point is made evident in a *New York Times* article released years after the offensive, “At the same time, most Americans on the scene admit to serious doubts about the viability of Vietnamization-President Nixon’s plan for the South Vietnamese assuming the major burden of the war-and the accuracy of the continually upbeat assessments of it that emanate from Washington.”⁶⁸ One new arrival to Vietnam blatantly remarked, “The war is a waste of time. There are more important things to do. Just getting out there and doing it for the Vietnamese isn’t helping them a bit.”⁶⁹ The Punisher, when referring to the difference between World War II and Vietnam, articulates the futility of the soldier’s role in Vietnam: “they came home from the Second World War to parades and open arms, I stepped down off the plane from ‘nam, a woman threw blood in my face and called me baby-killer. A call to duty turned to damnation.”⁷⁰ Although, the Punisher gives an exaggeration of the anti-war movement, United States soldiers realized after Tet that, “politically as well as militarily, stalemate appears as the unavoidable outcome of the Vietnam struggle.”⁷¹

After the Tet Offensive, the general consensus of the war being a wasted effort became realized by both the United States military and also the American people. LBJ’s approval rating

⁶⁸ Terence Smith, “Vietnam 2: Doubts Where They Count the Most,” *New York Times* (February 8, 1970).

⁶⁹ “As War Winds Down, Many GIs still Face Service in Vietnam,” *Wall Street Journal* (April 7, 1971).

⁷⁰ D.G. Chichester and Margret Clark, “We The People,” *Punisher & Captain America* (New York: Marvel Publishing, 1992).

⁷¹ “After the Tet Offensive.” *New York Times* (February 8, 1968).

for his handling of the Vietnam War fell to 32% after the events of the Tet Offensive.⁷² Not only does the Punisher embody the tactics and weapons used during the war but also the attitude of the soldiers, specifically after the Tet Offense when morale dropped drastically. The Punisher reflects the attitude of a soldier fighting a war with a lost cause yet feeling an obligation to serve for the public good.⁷³ This is made apparent in his first appearance when referring to why he is attempting to kill Spider-man, the Punisher states, “It’s not something I like doing...its simply something that has to be done...and I’ve got nothing to lose by risking what’s left of my life wiping out your kind of parasite.” This quote is easily applicable to service members battling the Vietcong after 1968. The Punisher also personifies the disillusionment soldiers felt after realizing that the government led them to fight an unjust war. This perspective is seen in the Punisher’s disbelief and mistrust in authoritarian figures. While attacking Spider-man again, in his second appearance, the Punisher claims, “I know how your kind can twist words...How you can make a man doubt the evidence of his senses—question the sanity of his own mind!”⁷⁴ This quote reflects the average viewpoint of how the government disillusioned the American public on United States involvement during the early stages of the war.⁷⁵

The methodology of the Punisher can also signify an extreme example of an American soldier devoid of morals due to the Vietnam War. This parallel of the senseless way the Punisher kills his targets and his violent nature suggest a disdain for human life similar to the United States soldiers in Vietnam on the global stage. He pays little attention to the ramifications of his actions using a tunnel vision of sorts when eliminating a target. Perhaps, this is what American

⁷² Joseph Carroll, “The Iraq-Vietnam Comparison,” Gallup (June 15, 2004)

<http://www.gallup.com/poll/11998/iraqvietnam-comparison.aspx>

⁷³ “Who wants to be the last American killed in Vietnam” *New York Times* (September 19, 1971).

⁷⁴ Gerry Conway, “Shoot-Out in Central Park!” *Amazing Spider-man #135* (New York: Marvel Publishing, 1974).

⁷⁵ PBS: “*Superheroes: A Never-Ending Battle*,” Netflix, Directed by Kevin Burns (2013; Ghostlight Films).

citizens thought of the United States soldiers fighting the Vietcong, that they were irrational killers with one single objective in mind. This would explain the negative reaction many soldiers faced once returning home. While troops fought against the communist forces abroad, citizens of the United States were watching the brutal carnage unfold on their television screens.

A devastating War, as seen on T.V.

The comics code of authority becoming obsolete is only one of the precursors that allowed the Punisher to gain popularity among the comic book reading public. The other would be the effect the Vietnam War had on public tolerance of violence and their faith in the government. At this time an estimated 50 million people watched the events of Vietnam nightly, an estimated 90% of news during this time focused on the Vietnam War effort.⁷⁶ This marked the first time Americans were able to view first-hand accounts of the war in real time. The media coverage of the fighting that occurred in Vietnam altered America's scope on violence in the fact that it served to desensitize the public towards death. This trend of brutality on the evening news would climax during the Tet Offensive when broadcasts showed many dying, by either bullets, bombs or napalm. These nightly televised accounts of the Vietnam War were so graphic they shocked even the film industry. "The Vietnam War was being shown every night in living color on television news. There was nothing left for the movies to do," said moviemaker Samuel Z. Arkoff.⁷⁷ Seeing brutal acts like Southern Vietnamese National Police Chief Loan executing a handcuffed Vietcong, named Lem, by shooting him in the head, would help to unintentionally raise the United States tolerance for violence.⁷⁸ In addition to the growing toleration of violence, the American people also lost faith in the decisions of the government. Seeing all of the death

⁷⁶ History.com, "Vietnam in HD," A&E Television Network, <http://www.history.com/shows/vietnam-in-hd>

⁷⁷ "After Long Study, Movie Makers Find A New War to Fight," *Wall Street journal* (November 1, 1977).

⁷⁸ Adams, Eddie, *Saigon Execution*, 1968, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX. Photograph.

and destruction made the public begin to favor a withdrawal of troops and question their moral position in the conflict. This cause was strengthened by viewers witnessing the execution of the Vietcong soldier Lem. His televised death would later be referred to as “an act of such naked brutality, so at odds with civilized notions of justice and decency, that it served graphically to confirm the charges that America’s allies in Vietnam were brutal men, morally indistinguishable from the brutal men on the other side.”⁷⁹ By 1971, a Gallup Poll featured in the *Wall Street Journal* estimated that 73% of Americans favored a complete withdrawal from Vietnam.⁸⁰ The high number of those in favor or withdrawing from the conflict supports the argument that a majority of the American population viewed the Vietnam War as an unjust occupation that threatened the moral standing America held as a hegemon on the world stage. In believing that the United States, a decisive world power, had entered the conflict unjustifiably, the consensus favored a withdrawal of troops. Acting without a sufficient moral compass to begin with tainted the ideals of the United States values of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. It is this reason that the Vietnam War qualifies as a foreign cultural enemy to the United States.

The comics code of authority and the Vietnam War helped to broaden America’s tolerance for violent actions paving the way for violent vigilante anti-heroes such as the Punisher. Following the 1968 attack, the destruction of LBJ’s presidency and the American public’s realization of the chaos in Vietnam, newly elected President Richard Nixon ordered a withdrawal of troops. Overall it is estimated more than 58,000 United States soldiers were killed

⁷⁹ David W. Levy, *The Debate over Vietnam*, The American Moment (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

⁸⁰ “Containing the Passions,” *Wall Street Journal* (April 2, 1971)

during the Vietnam War.⁸¹ If one quote could encapsulate the entirety of the United States involvement in Vietnam, it is this assessment from the *New Statesman* Paul Johnson:

America protects the freedom of the Vietnamese by helicopters armed with batteries of machine-guns, which spray entire villages with bullets and “flush out”-the clean, antiseptic military phrase- their inhibition’s; by cumbersome, big-bellied aircraft which, every week, pour hundreds of tons of herbicides on growing crops. They drop steel-blades...by the thousands and clusters of steel balls, the size of hand grenades, which break on impact and scatter lethal pellets through the thin partitions of the peasants’ huts. In Vietnam the treasures of the American way of death are spread out as in a shop-window.⁸²

Marvel’s character the Punisher embodies a violent, gun wielding Vietnam veteran who takes the law into his own hands and in doing this, he serves as brutal interpretation of the United States involvement in Vietnam.

Rising Crime Rate: A precursor to an unstoppable vigilante

The Vietnam War is one of two key ingredients that would frame the character known as the Punisher. The Punisher’s violent means to criminal ends seemed more appropriate to the public after witnessing the vicious actions the military undertook during the Tet Offensive on T.V. The next ingredient would be the growing crime rates of the 1970s-1980s. The Vietnam War had greatly altered the American consciousness. During the seven days of the Tet offensive, the American people had completely changed their attitudes towards United States involvement in Vietnam. This rapid change in society, according to French sociologist Emile Durkheim, had

⁸¹ “Who Really Lost the Vietnam War” *Wall Street Journal* (May 18, 1995).

⁸² Paul Johnson, “America’s Suez?” *New Statesman*, February 9, 1968, <http://www.newstatesman.com/society/2008/01/vietnam-war-america-resnick>

the potential to cause elevated crime.⁸³ This shift in popular opinion coupled with people no longer trusting the government and more individuals exposed to violent acts simply by watching the news led to crime rates skyrocketing nationwide. Common themes attributed to an increase in crime are social distress, lack of personal values, drugs and violence in the media.⁸⁴ The fallout of the Vietnam War would bring all of these themes to the forefront of society. It is estimated that the number of violent crimes within the United States from 1970-1975 totaled 52,805,600. New York City alone made up 974,720 of the nationwide total for that period.⁸⁵ Nearing the closing phases of the Vietnam War, New York City erupted in a massive crime wave.

The year 1974 offers the clearest evidence of the increased crime rates during that decade. According to official police records, 34% of the 1,554 murdered in New York City in 1974 did not know their attacker.⁸⁶ This statistic points to the randomness of crimes committed. Local newspapers commonly adopted headlines such as “two killed and two wounded in a holdup of a Queens bar,” and they featured stories about random acts of violence like the murders of March 26 and June 9.⁸⁷ In March 1974, a man named Richard Meyers walked into an antique shop wielding a .25 caliber automatic revolver. Meyer beat, tied-up and robbed the storeowner, Mr. Wallace Bishop, before shooting him in the head.⁸⁸ The incident left fellow shop owners as well as the community in disbelief. Although shocking it paled in comparison to the knife wielding seventeen year old in the Pomonok Queens housing project. In June of the same year, 17-year-old Robert Berry went across the hall to his neighbor’s apartment in 5B and

⁸³ Bruce J Cohen, *Crime in America: Perspectives on Criminal and Delinquent Behavior*. Second ed., (Itasca, Ill. : F. E. Peacock, 1977).

⁸⁴ Imogene Moyer, *Criminological Theories: Traditional and non-traditional themes* (New York: Sage Pub, 2001).

⁸⁵ Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Estimated crime in United States total: Uniform Crime Reporting Statistics* (Washington D.C.: National Archive of Criminal Justice, 2010).

⁸⁶ Cohen, *Crime in America: Perspectives on Criminal and Delinquent Behavior* (Itasca: Peacock, 1977).

⁸⁷ “2 killed and 2 wounded In Holdup of Queens Bar” *New York Times* (March 12, 1974).

⁸⁸ “Slaying of Antiques Dealer Shakes Up Neighbors in a Changing East 81st St.” *New York Times* (March 26, 1974).

proceeded to beat and stab Edith Horowitz to death. Police became suspicious of the teen when he called the murder in and could barely relate any relevant details. He told the officers that a masked man committed the deed. Edith's body was discovered in her bathtub but police determined her attack took place in the hallway outside.⁸⁹ The growing crime rate of the 1970s is undeniable. The Federal Bureau of Investigation issued a claim in October of 1974 that the crime rate had escalated to 16%; this follows a previous drop in crime during the early 1970s.⁹⁰ It is evident from local and federal graphs and statistics that the 1970s and 1980s were home to a crime epidemic that endangered the ideal goals of the average person pursuing life and happiness. One had trouble making a living or being happy while looking over their shoulder all of the time and being scared to leave their houses. This growth in criminal activity inspired the creation of Marvel Comics character, The Punisher.

As murder, theft, rape and arson increased in NYC so did the number of stranger-homicides. By 1974, the percentage of stranger-homicides grew from 20% to 34% within a decade.⁹¹ The increase in stranger-homicides left many grieving relatives with unanswered questions and a strong feeling of injustice. The adaptation of the Punisher in popular culture parallels the growing number of unsolved murders happening in New York. Marvel Comics and the creator of the Punisher, Gerry Conway, both resided in New York during this rise in the crime rate. The Punisher in waging his one man war against crime follows the anti-hero/vigilante theme. Both the anti-hero and the vigilante operate outside of the law, often by controversial means, for the betterment of justice and ordinary citizens. The vigilante can commonly be associated with vengeance and enforcing a self-defined social norm on individuals or small

⁸⁹ "Youth, 17, Accused in Neighbor's Death." *New York Times* (June 9, 1974).

⁹⁰ "'74 crime up 16%, Continuing Trend" *New York Times* (October 4, 1974).

⁹¹ "33% Slain in New York Don't Know Killer" *New York Times* (June 13, 1976).

groups.⁹² Continuing the trend of reflecting the overall consensus, Marvel adapted a vigilante character of their own. The character would embody the intense violence of the Vietnam War as well as personify the growing crime rate and public disillusionment with the government during the 1970s, he is Frank Castle, but his enemies would know him as the Punisher.

And then there was Punishment...

The Punisher made his first appearance in *Amazing Spider-man* volume one issue 129 in February 1974. The opening scene of the issue is a full-page picture, illustrated by Ross Andru, of the Punisher shooting apart a plaster statue of Spider-man in what looks like a 1960s computer room. The issue's plot builds on a previous issue where Spider-man was charged with the murder of the villainous Norman Osborn, alias the Green Goblin.⁹³ The Jackal, a mischievous and persuasive criminal, recruits the Punisher to track down and kill Spider-man for the alleged crime. As the cover depicts, the first encounter between Spider-man and the Punisher involves Spider-man falling out of the sky after the Punisher shoots him down. Upon landing on the rooftop, the Punisher and Spider-man fight. The Jackal attacks Spider-man from behind causing him to fall off the roof interrupting their fight. Believed to have killed Spider-man, the two flee. Unknown to them Spider-man survived the fall. He later goes back to the rooftop to look for clues and discovers that the Punisher dropped one of his guns. Spider-man tracks down the store the gun came from, there he finds the gun storeowner dead on the ground. The Punisher enters and they begin to fight. During their second battle, Spider-man reveals to the Punisher that the Jackal was behind the murder and has been manipulating him. After this realization, the two part ways.

⁹² William C. Culberson, *Vigilantism: Political History of Private Power in America*, Contributions in Criminology and Penology, No. 28 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990).

⁹³ Gerry Conway, "The Goblin's Last Stand!" *Amazing Spider-man #122* (New York: Marvel Publishing, 1973).

Throughout the issue the Punisher constantly states and restates his values and modus operandi as the personification of a lost war and a new violent era. Beginning from the first few pages while speaking with the Jackal, the Punisher states “I kill only those who deserve killing, Jackal.”⁹⁴ This marks a shift in the super hero genre as well as the country, no longer concerned with apprehending criminals and relying on the criminal justice system, the Punisher simply wants criminals dead. The criminal killing aspect is a crucial feature of the Punisher character. The rampant crime in New York becomes the catalyst that created the Punisher; when he watched his family being gunned down by mobsters. It is the Punisher’s lust for justice against criminals and murderers that drives him to attack Spider-man in the first place. He later states in his premier issue that his entire goal is “...the complete destruction of the crimeworld in New York.”⁹⁵ There are two crucial observations drawn from this quote concerning the Punisher’s goals. The first is that the crime wave grew to such ferocity during the 1970s heroes stopped fighting Nazi’s, monsters and evil scientists and began cleaning up the streets from murderers, thugs and mobsters. The second point are the similarities between the Punisher’s goals and the goals of the United States military in the early stages of the Vietnam War. Both the Punisher and the military wanted the complete and total destruction of their enemies and sought violent means to these ends.

The second full appearance of the Punisher, released in August 1974, would be no different from the first. In *Amazing Spider-man* issue 135, Spider-man finds himself on a cruise ship battling both the Punisher, who believes he is again a criminal, and Tarantula, a South American mercenary. While remaining on the cruise ship the Tarantula escapes the two heroes as they argue. Both the Punisher and Spider-man part ways and devise a plan to meet up and attack

⁹⁴ Gerry Conway, “The Punisher Strikes Twice!,” *Amazing Spider-man #129* (New York: Marvel Publishing, 1974).

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, *Amazing Spider-man #129*

the Tarantula. By the end of the comic book the Punisher and Spider-man have vanquished the villain and his henchmen and saved the day. The Punisher would make many similar appearances in various *Amazing Spider-man* issues. He would also appear or make cameos in the *Daredevil* and *Captain America* series. Having a character co-star in different comic book titles is a sign the character is gaining popularity. Not only was Frank Castle gaining popularity but the vigilante theme in general became widespread as well. The 1970s ushered in a plethora of other popular vigilante characters, including Harry Callahan in the 1971 film *Dirty Harry*, and Paul Kersey featured in the 1974 film *Death Wish*.⁹⁶ Vigilante films had become extremely popular with American audiences. This public fascination with the anti-hero/vigilante would result in the Punisher gaining his own personal comic book series in 1986 titled “Circle of Blood.”⁹⁷ This 1980s story arc would be the first of many for the Punisher.

Vietnam level violence and Veteran solidarity in the 2000s

Since his original creation in 1974, the Punisher has gone through multiple transformations in reference to the acknowledgment of his Vietnam experience and his escalation of violent tactics. His newer iterations express extreme violence produced from an era of high crime and an unstable soldier who suffers from the ramifications of a moral destroying war. In many ways the Punisher examines the life of an American who never stopped fighting a Vietnam style conflict, thus highlighting the threats of high crime in the homeland and the foreign threat to American values that the Vietnam War became. The best example of both concepts can be seen in the modern age appearing in the 2004-2009 run of the Punisher MAX series written by Garth Ennis, particularly the 2005 story arc of “The Slavers” and the 2008 story arch titled

⁹⁶ “*Dirty Harry*,” DVD, Directed by Don Siegel (1971; Burbank, CA: Malpasio Productions); “*Death Wish*,” DVD, Directed by Michael Winner (1974; Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures).

⁹⁷ Steve Grant & Jo Duffy, “Circle of Blood,” *Punisher vol. 1* TPB (New York: Marvel Publishing, 1988).

“Valley Forge, Valley Forge.” The Punisher MAX label features a more adult version of the character. The MAX imprint serves as an ironic inverted version of the comics code of authority seal of the 1950s.

The Punisher MAX story arc “The Slavers” mirrors the intense level of violence that originated out of the Vietnam War. The narrative begins with issue 25 and carries on thru issue 30. The entire arc centers on the Punisher dismantling a women’s sex slave ring controlled by two Serbian men, a father and son, and operated by the son’s girlfriend. Throughout the series, various depictions of the female motif are expressed.⁹⁸ A few include a female counselor character who aids the Punisher in locating various operations of the slave ring, a victimized female character who learns to cope with her traumatic experience of being a sex object and the female antagonist who is a villainous character who is responsible for breaking the will of the girls captured for the slave ring. The tale uses the old stereotype of the helpless, victimized woman to an extent but twist the idea by having her defend herself with a firearm while assisting the Punisher. This specific plot contains a dead baby, eye gouging, racial slurs, corrupt police officers and a recovering sex slave trying to adjust to a normal life. None of these previously mentioned aspects were acceptable in comic books in the 1950s, this shows an escalation in the amount of violence socially allowed since the Vietnam War.

The story arc also relies on the theme of institutional corruption, similar to the 1974 first appearance of the Punisher after Tet. The recovering woman is what leads the Punisher to pursue the Serbian men who killed her child in the first place. During the duration of “The Slavers” the Punisher utilizes the most brutal techniques in comic books to dispense his foreign foes. In issue 28, part four of the series, after shot gunning a room full of henchmen and rescuing

⁹⁸ Stereotypical female gender roles in addition to the sexually provocative costumes of female characters are other topics that need to be discussed at length in future papers.

a batch of would-be sex slaves the Punisher seeks out the son of the operation, Cristu Bulat. After having Cristu drugged, the Punisher begins cutting out his intestines and draping them along a tree branch while Cristu begins to wake up.⁹⁹ This is a form of intense physical and psychological violence that parallels the torture methods used in Vietnam. Cristu later bleeds out after a few hours of intense interrogation. In the next installment of the series, part five, the Punisher dispenses Vera, Cristu's girlfriend and trafficking operations manager by violently, repeatedly throwing her through a plate glass screen until she inevitably breaks the frame and plummets to her death.¹⁰⁰

In the final issue of the narrative, the Punisher viciously beats the sex trafficking ringleader Tiberiu Bulat to a bloody pulp after calling him a coward in his native language of Romanian. After beating the elderly man unconscious, he ties him to a chair with chains and lights him on fire.¹⁰¹ A connection parallels between the Punisher setting criminals on fire and United States troops dropping burning napalm on the Vietcong. These three issues highlight an intense threshold of violence rarely displayed in comic books. This brutality is a clear cause of the Vietnam War, particularly the violent amount of death depicted during the Tet Offensive. As the American public watched videos of the war narrated by anchors like Walter Cronkite, tolerance for viewing violent actions gradually increased. This overtly violent and graphic Punisher MAX series is evidence of the United States increased toleration and desensitization towards violence that grew out of the Vietnam conflict. As previously mentioned, Frank Castle's war experience and the violent methods he uses to disperse criminals is a constant staple of the

⁹⁹Garth Ennis, "The Slavers" *Punisher MAX* #28-30 (New York: Marvel Publishing, 2005).

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, #29

¹⁰¹ Ibid, #30

character. Garth Ennis relies on the Punisher's violent reputation in his MAX series titled "Valley Forge, Valley Forge."

The "Valley Forge, Valley Forge" story arc consists of issues 55-60 and marks the end of the Ennis run for the MAX brand. The storyline serves as an example of white collar crime and corruption within the United States military. The plot of this tale is very complicated because it builds off of the entire series. In summation, a few corrupt military generals hire Colonel George Howe and his Special Forces team to take down the Punisher. In staying true to his modus operandi, the Punisher only hurts criminals; he chooses to use non-lethal means to disperse and disable his captors with non-lethal means. The series plays towards his background as a Vietnam veteran and the scars he carries from the war beginning with the opening scene where the Punisher is having coffee with Nick Fury, a super spy and fellow veteran of Vietnam. Nick Fury begins the conversation with, "...you ever think we might have something coming to us for this shit?" referring to the violent acts both men carried out during the war. He follows up with a summation of the war itself, "Fuck...we invent a war and we invade. And how many of them are dead now, half a mil. or something like that?" The two veterans continue talking about the relevance of their service and the loss of faith both men now have. The duration of the story features multiple groups of Special Forces attempting to capture the Punisher. After many failed attempts, they finally overwhelm him and bring him in. It is apparent in issue 60, of the series, that the Punisher had previously rescued Colonel Howe while he served as a hostage in a Vietcong campsite. After receiving mistreatment by his corrupt superiors, Col. Howe tricks the generals into a room with the Punisher and a single pistol. The last pages on the series contains the Punisher stepping over several general corpses. The final pages offer another summation of the Vietnam War with text that reads, "In the end, the war in Vietnam was much like any other.

There were those who profited. Those it devoured. And then there were those for whom there are no words.”¹⁰²

Frank Castle a.k.a. “the Punisher” serves as the personification of both the intense acts of violence and guerilla warfare used during the Vietnam War, as well as a reflection of the rising crime rate, vigilante trend and public disillusionment with the government in American society that originated in the late twentieth century. Based on the violent actions of the Punisher and his intended targets of the criminal underworld, in combination with his creation date of 1974 a clear image of what the perceived threats during those decades are clear. People, specifically the suburban middle class, feared that the Vietnam War would cause a decline in overall morals of the nation fighting in a senseless war. In addition, shortly after the war, with the increase of violence, large city dwellers feared a crime riddled community. A vigilante anti-hero character like the Punisher would have never come to fruition had the comics code of authority never been lifted. It was the abolishment of the code coupled with America’s desensitization towards violence during the Vietnam War and the growing crime rate that followed that would combine to form the most violent character in comicdom. The Punisher personifies the Vietnam War by using weaponry and tactics of the war, such as the M-16 assault rifle and employing the military tactic of “seek and destroy” to obliterate his criminal enemies. He also reflects the growing crime rate of the 1970s by targeting street level issues such as criminals, drug dealers and prostitution rings. Lastly, the Punisher mirrors the general consensus of mistrust toward the government and authoritative figures by treating superheroes, like Spider-man, as criminals. This mistrust is due to the disillusionment of the United States government perceived by the people pertaining to the

¹⁰²Garth Ennis, “Valley Forge, Valley Forge” *Punisher MAX #55-60* (New York: Marvel Publishing, 2008).

involvement in the Vietnam War and the lack of faith in the criminal justice system that developed in the late 1960s-1970s.

Chapter Four: Comic Books in the 1990s: A War and a Beating

The 1990s were a decade of great change in the United States, during this time the Cold War had ended with the destruction of the Soviet Union, the internet was beginning to take shape and overall crime was down 41% compared to recent decades.¹⁰³ The previous notions of the Nazis, Russians and the Vietnamese War threatening the culture of America had been averted along with the perceived fear of the criminal element obstructing the endeavor for life, liberty and happiness. Although the 1990s had a variety of positive outcomes, it also had many negative events that to this day shape everyday life. This period is similar in the fact that comic books produced during this time mirror both domestic and foreign cultural enemies of the United States. The foreign enemy that plagued the United States was Saddam Hussein and his violent regime's invasion of Kuwait in the early 1990s. The domestic enemy that made an eventful return to the forefront of the media was racial injustice that effected American minorities, specifically the African American population. In particular, the Rodney King beating that triggered multiple riots across the country is evidence of this. In following chronological order, the Persian Gulf War marks the first major event of the decade.

An understanding of the Persian Gulf War during the 1990s is pivotal to understanding America's role in the world today and the framework for the current conflict in the Middle East against the self-proclaimed Islamic State. The Persian Gulf War began as a minor dispute among neighboring countries after the Iran- Iraq war in the 1980s. In the Iran-Iraq War, the United States aided Saddam Hussein in fighting Iran, who had threatened to seize oil fields that the industrial world, specifically the United States, heavily depended on. The United States relies on oil produced around the World to fuel everything from production to consumption. A majority of

¹⁰³ Kurt Anderson, "The Best Decade Ever? The 1990s Obviously," *New York Times*, February 6, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/08/opinion/sunday/the-best-decade-ever-the-1990s-obviously.html?_r=0

all consumer goods rely on the use of fossil fuels either in the creation of the product or distribution. A distortion in the flow of oil would have drastically changed the culture of the United States in the 1980s. After Saddam Hussein won the war with United States support, he quickly began stockpiling weapons, both chemical and biological.

Roughly, two years had passed since the Iran-Iraq War and tensions increased in the Middle East over both land and control of oil fields. Saddam Hussein had accused the neighboring country Kuwait of stealing oil from the Ar-Rumaylah oil fields that border Iraq and Kuwait.¹⁰⁴ The Iraqi leader also accused Kuwait of installing military bases on the Iraqi side of the border in addition to fixing oil prices to negatively affect the Iraqi economy. After many meetings of dignitaries, from both the United States, Kuwait and many other Arab countries, they could not settle the disputes peacefully. Shortly after the meetings for peace failed, Saddam Hussein advanced his tanks into Kuwait on August 2, 1990, starting the Persian Gulf War.¹⁰⁵

The Mad Iraqi

The Persian Gulf War would only last a year. A coalition of various nations all battling against Saddam Hussein determined its end. Similarly, to comic book heroes joining together to stop an overwhelming enemy, nations like Great Britain, the United States and many Middle Eastern countries joined forces to combat the Iraqi Dictator. The United States involvement during the Gulf War involved two main operations, Desert Shield and Desert Storm. Operation Desert Shield primarily consisted of protecting the nation of Saudi Arabia from Iraqi forces. Since Kuwait was so close in proximity to Saudi Arabia, the Arab League and the United Nations feared Saddam would invade the Saudis next. If Hussein had gained control of both

¹⁰⁴ Peter David, *Triumph in the Desert* (New York: Random House, 1991).

¹⁰⁵ Col. Walter J. Boyne, *Gulf War: A Comprehensive Guide to People, Places & Weapons* (New York: New American Library, 1991).

Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, he would gain control of the majority of the oil produced in the region during that time. The second operation conducted by the United States military during the Gulf War was operation Desert Storm. This mission was more of an offensive campaign as opposed to the defensive Desert Shield operation. Operation Desert Storm officially launched on January 15, 1991, but combat did not begin until the January 17. The operation Desert Storm had multiple goals, the first being an air campaign against Iraqi forces on the ground in both Kuwait and along the Saudi Arabian border, the other goal of Desert Storm entailed a ground offense. The air combat portion of Desert Storm destroyed a majority of large Iraqi artillery like surface to air missiles, in addition to supplying aerial support to the coalition ground forces. The ground offense of Desert Storm involved United States Special Forces reconnaissance missions and soldiers engaging in psychological warfare. The psychological warfare involved soldiers handing out leaflet and playing radiobroadcast encouraging Iraqi soldiers to desert or surrender.¹⁰⁶

After frequent successful aerial bombing campaigns and reconnaissance missions, the United States led coalition began making plans to end Saddam's reign in the Middle East. In February 1991, United States armed forces commanded by General Schwarzkopf concocted a plan to draw out Iraqi forces from hiding and reclaim territory previously held by Saddam Hussein. Schwarzkopf needed to draw the enemy forces out in the open in order to attack them via aerial strikes. One way in which United States forces drew them out was by attacking the key Iraqi city of Baghdad. Attacking the capital city forced the enemy to come out and defend it. This allowed multiple units to flank the enemy forces and surround them. Aside from occupying Baghdad, other objectives became closing the Iraqi route known as Highway 8 and controlling the road outside the town of Nasiriyah. By closing Highway 80 coalition forces stopped any

¹⁰⁶ Richard Schwartz, *Encyclopedia of Gulf War* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 1998).

supplies and reinforcements that could arrive for the Iraq forces. The purpose of controlling the road near Nasiriyah was to catch any fleeing soldiers of Hussein. Essentially, the Iraqi forces became surrounded and completely cut off from supplies and reinforcements. Overall, the Iraqi forces offered little resistance to the coalition forces. After numerous aerial bombings, the Iraqi battalions were low on both supplies and manpower, in addition to that they had inefficient tanks and targeting equipment. Due to a lack of targeting equipment, in most confrontations with the coalition forces, the Iraqi tank battalions often fought blind to coalition positions. This resulted in many casualties on the Iraqi side with little damage done to United States tanks.

Shortly after the battle Hussein made a public statement over a Baghdad broadcasting station announcing that he would withdraw from Kuwait citing that he and his Iraqi forces had successfully triumphed over the city. President George Bush Sr. did not accept Hussein's broadcast as a full-fledged surrender and ordered any battalions moving in formation to be attacked by United States forces. Both Iraqi and Palestinian troops and civilians used the highway to return to Iraq. This order from the Commander and Chief caused a massive amount of death along Highway 80, which connects Iraq to Kuwait City. During the bombing campaigns carried out by the United States and coalition forces, the highway acquired the nickname as the "Highway of Death." Days after the massacres on highway 80, President Bush announced a ceasefire and the liberation of Kuwait.¹⁰⁷ The events of the Gulf War had essentially been a power hungry ruler attempting to gain control of another area to exploit its resources and gain more control on a larger stage. The ideas and motivations of Saddam Hussein during the Gulf War would be emulated in the comic book world with Marvel's 1990s hit series, and first title stretching story arch, titled *The Infinity Gauntlet*.

¹⁰⁷ Norman Friedman, *Desert Victory: The War for Kuwait* (Annapolis, Md: Naval Institute Press, 1991).

Saddam & Marvel

Marvel's *The Infinity Gauntlet* is regarded as the comic book publication's first major story arc that effects multiple titles, called crossovers. The story, produced in 1991, tells the story of Thanos, an alien from the planet Titan, on his quest to prove his devotion to the personification of death by using a powerful assortment of gems referred to as the Infinity Gems. These six gems, time, space, mind, soul, reality and power, combined give the wearer god like powers. Once Thanos has all of the Infinity Gems he then creates the Infinity Gauntlet to hold them all together. In order to please death, Thanos's first act is to destroy half of all sentient life in the universe with the snap of his fingers.¹⁰⁸ As to be expected, the remaining super heroes band together to devise a plan to defeat the Mad Titan Thanos and his Infinity Gauntlet. A sorcerer named Adam Warlock, the cosmic Silver Surfer and the magician Doctor Strange lead the heroes. While the super heroes, along with various cosmic beings attempt to defeat Thanos he easily beats his foes with the combined might of the Infinity Gems.

After overpowering the celestial personification of Eternity, Thanos is elevated to a higher form. While in this higher form, his body remains unattended. This gives Nebula, his tortured daughter, the chance to seize the gauntlet for herself. In the hands of Nebula, she restores the world to how it looked twenty-four hours prior, restoring life across the universe.¹⁰⁹ The power of the Infinity Gauntlet overpowers her and the heroes then have to battle Nebula alongside Thanos, in order to retrieve the weapon. Adam Warlock is able to communicate with the gauntlet and separates it from Nebula, and after a free-for-all battle for the glove between the

¹⁰⁸ Jim Starlin, "God," *Infinity Gauntlet* #1 (New York: Marvel Publishing, 1991).

¹⁰⁹ Jim Starlin, "Astral Conflagration," *Infinity Gauntlet* #5 (New York: Marvel Publishing, 1991).

super heroes and Thanos, the heroes win and the gauntlet falls in the hands of Adam Warlock. Instead of admitting defeat, Thanos detonates an explosive device on his person and appears to have died in the blast.¹¹⁰

Throughout the *Infinity Gauntlet* story arc, Thanos battles the most powerful beings and heroes in the Marvel universe, and dispatches a majority of them with ease. The character Thanos faintly mirrors, with more success, the attitudes and ambitions of the former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein during the Persian Gulf War. Both leaders attempted to gain control of resources in order to claim attention on a larger stage. With Thanos, it was the Infinity Gems in order to court the mistress death, while Hussein attempted to control the oil fields of Kuwait in order to gain control of the industrialized global markets. Other similarities between the two can be seen in the rhetoric used during their conflicts. With his newfound abilities, Thanos sees the heroes attempting to attack him and remarks, “Fools taking up arms against omnipotence. They rush head-on into Armageddon. So I shall provide them with a most glorious doomsday! The heavens will run red with blood. But in the end, as always, Thanos will stand triumphant.”¹¹¹ This particular quote from Thanos mirrors the attitude and words Hussein assumed during the Gulf War in the beginning of the United States operation Desert Storm. In January 1991, during a radio broadcast in Baghdad, Hussein remarked, “The great duel, the mother of all battles has begun. The dawn of victory nears as this great showdown begins! ...The evil and Satanic intentions of the White House will be crushed and so will all the blasphemous and oppressive forces.”¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Jim Starlin, “The Final Confrontation,” *Infinity Gauntlet #6* (New York: Marvel Publishing, 1991).

¹¹¹ Jim Starlin, “Preparations for War” *Infinity Gauntlet #3* (New York: Marvel Publishing, 1991).

¹¹² Peter Furtado, *History's Daybook: A History of the World in 366 Quotations* (Berkeley, CA: Atlantic Books, 2011).

Whether purposeful or not, similarities between the Titan Thanos and the former Iraqi dictator are evident. Both wanted to gain power and control over those they believed were threats to them. Hussein wanted to control the oil reserves that flowed to the United States as well as reclaim the areas of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, which he believed were rightfully Iraq's, while the fictional character Thanos wanted to use the Infinity gauntlet to control the universe and reclaim the mistress death, which he believed was rightfully his. Another similarity between the *Infinity Gauntlet* series and the Persian Gulf War is that in order to depose the dictators, strong alliances had to be made. The coalition to defeat Hussein had been composed of numerous nations including the United States, France, Italy, The United Kingdom, Egypt and a majority of the Arab League. Each country set aside their differences in order to join together to defeat Hussein because they believed it was in their overall best interest. The way in which the United States led coalition banded together to overthrow Hussein is comparable to the unification of the Marvel super heroes attacking Thanos in a united front. Some threats, like Hussein and Thanos, became so grave that only a joint collective force could overwhelm them.

The month of February 1991, marked the end of the Persian Gulf War with the United States led coalition accepting a full surrender from Hussein controlled Iraqi forces. Roughly, a month later in March, an incident involving a black taxi driver sparked another type of conflict. Instead of a war for control over oil fields, the beating of Rodney Glenn King III ushered in a new theatre for the battle of equality. There are numerous examples of race relations shown within the comic book industry. For example, fringe groups in comic books such as the X-Men and the Inhumans in general parallel synonymously with the struggle of minorities, specifically African Americans. The example in juxtaposition to the Rodney King beating is used in this case because it accurately mirrors the specific situation. Multiple issues and series could illustrate the

1990s struggle of inequality but few make the blatant comparison as well as volume 2, issues 60 thru 62 of the Marvel *Punisher* series. These two particular issues accurately reenact the Rodney King beating a year after the actual event. Before an in-depth analysis of the comic book in comparison to the actual event is made, one must know the details of the Rodney King conflict.

Rodney King vs The Police

On Sunday, March 3, 1991, a taxi driver named Rodney Glenn King III sped down a Los Angeles, California, freeway attracting the attention of a California Highway patrol unit nearby. Once he realized he was being pursued, King accelerated averaging a speed between 80 to 100 miles an hour.¹¹³ King attempted to escape the police to avoid arrest due to his blood alcohol level being illegally high. Driving while intoxicated would have violated King's parole from a previous offense. After exiting the freeway and running a red light, multiple police officers in addition to a police helicopter following the chase from above surrounded King's vehicle. Once King's car stopped, the officers around his vehicle ordered King and his two passengers to step out of the car. The two passengers exited the vehicle while King remained inside. After King exited his vehicle, he encountered several LAPD officers confronting him with their weapons drawn. Reports claim that upon exiting the vehicle, King drunkenly danced and swayed causing officers to believe he had ingested a common street drug called PCP. After handcuffing King, the officers, including Los Angeles Police Department Sergeant Stacy Koon, exercised a police tactic referred to as a "swarm." This maneuver consist of four out of the fifteen officers surrounding King in an attempt to rush and overwhelm him.¹¹⁴ The officers did this by beating the handcuffed suspect with batons, open fists, and kicking him in the head. Overall Rodney

¹¹³ David Whitman, "The Untold Story of the LA Riot," *U.S. News*, May 23, 1993, <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/1993/05/23/the-untold-story-of-the-la-riot>

¹¹⁴"Incomplete Justice for Summary Injustice," *The New York Times* (March 8, 1991)

King had been tased, beaten with police batons, kicked in the head and verbally abused by several LAPD officers.¹¹⁵

An amateur videographer named George Holliday had recorded a majority of the incident after King had left his vehicle. The footage produced by Holliday sparked national debates over both the use of force and the treatment of African Americans by police officers. Holliday's roughly two-minute video would be the first film of its kind to go viral by today's standards.¹¹⁶ Days after the videotape of Rodney King's beating achieved national attention, the Mayor of Los Angeles, Tom Bradley, launched an investigation into the LAPD and the officers accused in the event. In addition to the state investigation, the Federal Bureau of Investigation also began examining the possibilities of whether or not King's civil rights had been violated. When LAPD Police Chief Daryl Gates was questioned about the case, he simply replied that the incident was an "aberration."¹¹⁷

In 1992, officers Stacey Koon, Laurence Powell, Timothy Wind and Theodore Briseno were acquitted in court for the beating of Rodney King. After the verdict, the city of L.A. erupted in violent riots. The notorious L.A. riots lasted several weeks and consisted of multiple deaths across the minority populated South Central Los Angeles area. The riots ended with the deployment of the National Guard. A month after the streets of Los Angeles burned, a federal grand jury proposed new charges against the four white officers for violating King's civil rights.¹¹⁸ In a 1993 trial, the combined testimony of Rodney King, George Holliday as well as

¹¹⁵ Ibid

¹¹⁶ Erik Ortiz, "George Holliday, Who taped Rodney King Beating, Urges Others to Share Videos," *NBC News*, June 9, 2015, <http://www.nbcnews.com/nightly-news/george-holliday-who-taped-rodney-king-beating-urges-others-share-n372551>

¹¹⁷"Videotape Appears to Show Police Beating," *New York Times*, March 6, 1991, <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/03/06/us/videotape-appears-to-show-police-beating.html>

¹¹⁸ CNN Wire Staff, "A timeline of events in Rodney King's life," Cable News Network, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/06/17/us/rodney-king-timeline/>

the nurse and doctor who treated King's injuries in 1991, led jurors to convict two of the four officers for violating King's civil rights. Stacey Koon and Laurence Powell both received guilty verdicts for violation of King's civil rights while Timothy Wind and Theodore Briseno received no punishments.¹¹⁹ In total, fifteen officers were present the night Rodney King was savagely beaten, only two suffered judicial repercussions. The next year the United States District Court in L.A. awarded King \$3.8 million in compensation fees for the ordeal. Originally, King sued the city of Los Angeles for \$56 million, which equates to 1 million dollars for every swing the officers took. The story of Rodney G. King III ended in June 2012 with a drug aided accidental drowning in his pool in Rialto, California. Coronary reports stated that King had trace amounts of alcohol, cocaine, marijuana and PCP in his system. This cause of death implies that King was most likely under the influence while driving that day in March of 1991, but that does not mean he deserved to be beaten.

As previously mentioned, multiple adaptations of police brutality are observable in a plethora of comic book story lines. The specific example that parallels the Rodney King beating most accurately is the version of the altercation in Marvel's volume two of *The Punisher*. The *Punisher* story arc referenced takes place during issues 60-62. In issue 60, the story begins with the Punisher recovering from breaking out of prison and facial reconstruction surgery. In order to save the Punisher's face after he was viciously attacked by his arch nemesis Jigsaw, a plastic surgeon/ex-drug user named Melinda Brewer gives Frank Castle a drug that fixes his face and also makes him temporarily African American. While disguised as a different race, Frank Castle, the Punisher, takes on the name "Frank Rook."

¹¹⁹ Rosalind X Moore, "Rodney King finally gets call to testify," *Los Angeles Sentinel* (March 11, 1993).

The main story begins after he realizes he is African American and is in the process of dropping off his surgeon. After leaving her behind, “Rook” then speeds down the highway through Chicago, still weak from surgery, the Punisher begins to fall asleep at the wheel and starts to swerve attracting the attention of several police cruisers. After noticing he is being pursued, the Punisher pulls over onto an off ramp. The officers order him to step out of the car and place both hands on top of the car and produce identification. When the Punisher does not respond, one of the officers’ remarks, “What’s a matter boy, cat got your tongue?” To which another police officer responds, “Maybe the coon’s got his tongue.” After being harassed for being black, the Punisher lashes out at the officers. The police employ a similar technique used in the Rodney King video, taken by Holliday, in which multiple officers surround their opponent and beat him repeatedly with batons. One difference the issue makes between the actual beating of Rodney King is that the issue has six police officers beating Castle instead of the fifteen that beat King. While police batons are overwhelming the Punisher, another car pulls up and the driver exits the vehicle. The character who steps out of the car is Luke Cage, one of the earliest African American heroes in Marvel’s roster. With the assistance of the bullet proof Luke Cage, the Punisher fends off the officers and speeds away with Cage after throwing one officer off an overpass ramp.¹²⁰

After saving the Punisher at the end of the previous issue, Luke Cage assists him in retrieving his weapons and armor. Once after reclaiming his arsenal, Castle agrees to help Cage rid his south side neighborhood of the crack dealing gang the “El Rukens.” By the end of issue 61 the Punisher and Luke Cage have successfully defeated the “El Ruken” gang and cleared a residential apartment of drug pushers.

¹²⁰ Mike Brown and Marc McLaurin, “Escape from New York,” *The Punisher #60* (New York: Marvel Publishing, 1992).

Another reflection of the Rodney King video comes from a confrontation in issue 62. After deciding to part ways with Luke Cage, the Punisher attempts to leave but is instead cornered and overtaken by armed soldiers. One of the soldiers captures the Punisher with a net, and then multiple armed assailants beat him unconscious. An old enemy and a white man in a business suit who has been filling the streets with drugs confront the Punisher once he wakes up. Moments after the villain's monologue, Luke Cage crashes through a window and unties the bound Punisher. By this time, the drugs Brewer gave Castle are wearing off and his melanin is returning to normal. Both heroes begin battling the crime lords, Luke Cage with his non-lethal striking and the Punisher with his deadly Uzi sub-machine gun and hunting knife.¹²¹

The entire series is a commentary on racial inequality and the rampant use of cocaine, both cultural threats plagued the African American community during this era. Starting with the beating of an unarmed African American and followed by an example of the ramifications of the crack cocaine epidemic, the multiple issued story arc plays on the racial inequalities that became a priority during the 1990s. This is evident in issue 60 when the Punisher and Luke Cage first enter the Chicago hotel the Punisher stashed his weapons cache years prior. When the reader first sees the inside of the hotel it is broken down and covered in graffiti, the Punisher questions how the hotel became so withered and damaged where it used to be so extravagant. Cage replies, "Poverty and crack will do that." This particular story line begins in February 1992, almost a year after the Rodney King beating and a month prior to the LA riots. Because of the flexibility comic books offer due to their weekly production, they can mirror real world events quicker than other literary devices. For this reason, the Rodney King beating appears not one year later in the

¹²¹ Mike Brown and Marc McLaurin, "Fade...to White," *The Punisher #62* (New York: Marvel Publishing, 1992).

comic book industry in illustrating the tension between African Americans and the police during this time.

The 1990s produced a decade filled with both war and prejudice; these two concepts are visible through two defining moments of the period, the Persian Gulf War and the Rodney King beating. The Persian Gulf War was crucial at the time because it represented the first foreign conflict after the fall of the Soviet Union and it created a moment for the United States to prove its hegemonic status to the world. Tension between Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and the United States President George Bush Sr. had been strained for years. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait became the instance where Bush realized the United States had to become involved in the Middle East and depose Hussein in order to maintain power on a global stage. Not dealing with the Iraqi President would have resulted in the oil reserves of the Middle East being under the control of a dictator. This would have negatively affected the price of oil and consumer products in the US stifling everyday comforts. People in the early 1990s understood this fact and rallied behind President Bush after he made the decision to go to war, this is seen in his approval which rose to 89% after the war.¹²² It is the threat Hussein posed on the US economy by invading Kuwait and threatening Saudi Arabia that labeled him a serious cultural enemy of the United States. Saddam Hussein's parallel is in the Marvel storyline *The Infinity Gauntlet* as a tyrannical alien attempting to rule the galaxy.

Another historic event that took place during the 1990s was the filmed beating of Rodney King. The videotaped beatings brought to light racial bias within the police and judicial system as well as riots that shocked the country. From an African American perspective, the incident

¹²² David W. Moore, Americans Believed U.S. Participation in Gulf War a Decade Ago Worthwhile, Gallup (February. 26, 2001). <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1963/americans-believe-us-participation-gulf-war-decade-ago-worthwhile.aspx>

produced a sense of discrimination and lack of trust in authoritarian figures that threatened both the lives and liberty of non-white citizens. Believing one will be treated unjustly by those employed to maintain justice results in the discriminated group(s) feeling that their existence and free will are in jeopardy of violation. This act of police aggression is reflected in Marvel's *The Punisher* issue 60; while African American, the Punisher is pulled over and beaten by multiple officers. What happened to Rodney King sent the message to minorities that they would be treated more harshly than their white counterparts.¹²³ This realization drastically changed the relationships between minorities and police authorities in a negative way. Today's interactions between law enforcement and African Americans reveal the ramifications of the Rodney King beating and how little has changed.¹²⁴

¹²³ Justin McCarthy, As a Major U.S. Problem, Race Relations Sharply Rises, Gallup (December. 19, 2014). <http://www.gallup.com/poll/180257/major-problem-race-relations-sharply-rises.aspx>

¹²⁴ The death of Trayvon Martin in 2012, the death of John Crawford III in 2014, the death of Freddie Gray in 2015

Chapter Five: The Radical Islamic effect on American comic books 2002-Present

Comic books have been a part of American culture since the 1930s. All ages from children just beginning to read, through middle-aged adults have enjoyed reading comic books from different companies and with diverse content. While children and adults were reading their comic books they became subjected to the popular culture of their era. The cultural activities or commercial products reflecting, suited to, or aimed at the taste of the general masses of people is referred to as popular culture. Often pop culture reveals problems faced by previous generations. For example, Marvel Comics in the sixties featured the suburban cultural threat of the Russian villain whereas comic books in the late 1990s dealt more with racial inequality, which at the time was considered a domestic threat to the inalienable rights of minorities. Based upon this definition, it is inferred that what specific people, ideas or themes occur in popular culture are relevant to a broader stage of importance. For instance, the debut issue of *Superman*, in 1938, did not contain pages of the hero battling aliens or sea monsters. Instead, it featured Superman fighting problems of the time, problems that the average citizen dealt with such as corrupt politicians, spousal abuse and economic worries.¹²⁵ Beginning with the early Superman comics in the 1930s, comic books have served to interpret popular culture and major historical trends better than other literary devices that rely solely on the written word. There is evidence of historical events and movements mirrored throughout the comic book industry starting from the golden age of comic books (1930-1956) all the way through the modern comic books of 2016.

One aspect that easily connects the problems of the real world to the comic book world are villains. In the first issue of *Captain America*, in 1941, he fights a Nazi villain named the Red

¹²⁵ PBS: “*Superheroes: A Never-Ending Battle*,” Netflix, Directed by Kevin Burns (2013; Ghostlight Films).

Skull. In the first issues of the *Fantastic Four*, *The Incredible Hulk* and *Spider-man* all three heroes battle Russian antagonist during the 1960s. Visibility of this inclination continue through the Vietnam War and into the growing crime wave of the 1970s and 1980s with the adaptation of the Punisher and his vow to destroy the criminal underworld. This trend of comic books mirroring cultural threats to the United States is still prevalent to this day. Instead of reflecting a specific identity or character, the comic book industry instead has chosen to mimic the violent brutality of the United States newest enemies: the self-proclaimed Islamic State, also known as ISIS or Daesh. The activities of this radical Islamic group are mimicked in the comic book industry because the threat of a terrorist attack effects all United States citizens.

Al Qaeda's JV

The Islamic State in its most simplistic form serves as a radical off branch of Al Qaeda, a terrorist group based in the Middle East. The origin of ISIS began after the September 11, 2001, attack on the Twin Towers, and various other locations, in the United States. After that attack, President George W. Bush commenced a war on terror that would tear the Middle East asunder. During the war on terror, the United States uprooted and usurped Saddam Hussein along with various other anti-American organizations. Beginning in the early 2000s, a radical Islamic group began to form under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Zarqawi and his violent radical Islamic group spread fear among both United States forces and Iraqi Shi'a Muslims alike inside and outside of Iraq. Zarqawi was one of the earliest users of the videotaped beheadings that ISIS would become famous for utilizing. While leading his radical Islamic group, Zarqawi earned the title of "Sheikh (or cleric) of the slaughterers" due to his bloodlust. During the United States occupation of Iraq, Zarqawi and Osama Bin Laden formed a truce and Bin Laden allowed Zarqawi to claim his group as Al Qaeda in Iraq. Much to Bin Laden's disapproval, Zarqawi

continued to attack Muslim civilians during his suicide bombing attacks. This caused a rift in the factions leading to Al Qaeda denouncing Zarqawi and his group. Zarqawi would later die by a United States air strike in a 2006 attack. With Zarqawi dead, a new leader named Abu Omar al Baghdadi rose to take control of Al Qaeda in Iraq. Omar changed the group's name to the Islamic State of Iraq, also referred to as ISI.¹²⁶

After the 2006 attack that killed Zarqawi the United States along with Iraqi forces began to rid the Middle East of terrorist groups, including ISI and Al Qaeda. It was also during this time that the Prime Minister of Iraq, Nouri al-Maliki, began to administer harsh treatment to the Sunni population of Iraq. These mistreated Sunnis would flock to ISI in order to dethrone what they believed was a corrupt Iraqi government, in-turn replenishing the soldiers ISI needed to maintain ranks. In 2010, ISI would gain a new leader due to Omar Baghdadi's death via United States air strike. After Omar's death, a man named Abu Bakr al Baghdadi would take the reins of ISI and transform the group into a full-fledged Islamic State.¹²⁷

Throughout the creation of the comic book industry real world evil has been portrayed in multiple ways, whether it be in the form of a psychopathic clown killer or a man dressed up as a goblin haunting the skies of New York City.¹²⁸ No matter the intensity of the evil there has always been a way to manifest it in human form. So far, in the modern age of comic books, no series villain has attempted to achieve the level of chaos al Baghdadi has introduced to the world.¹²⁹ Abu Bakr al Baghdadi graduated with a degree in Islamic Culture and Sharia Law from the University of Baghdad. Years later, he would become a prisoner of the United States

¹²⁶ Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Regan Arts, 2015).

¹²⁷ PBS: "*Superheroes: A Never-Ending Battle*," Netflix, Directed by Kevin Burns (2013; Ghostlight Films).

¹²⁸ This is in reference to the violent, homicidal nature of the Spider-man villain the Green Goblin and the Batman villain the Joker.

¹²⁹ Graeme Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants," *The Atlantic*, March 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>

held in Bucca Prison, in Iraq until his release in 2009. While in prison, Baghdadi would spread his radical views of Islam while converting and recruiting hundreds of soldiers to help him wage his jihad, or Holy War, against the West. There are three principals Baghdadi uses to exemplify his violent behavior, both while in prison and free. First Baghdadi, like his predecessors, adheres to a form of radicalized Islam known as Wahhabism. Wahhabism, best defined is a “fundamentalist, eighteenth-century version of Islam that imposes sharia law, relegates women to the status of second-class citizens, and regards Shia and Sufi Muslims as non-Muslims to be persecuted along with Christians and Jews.”¹³⁰ The second and third attributes Baghdadi uses to justify his extreme level of violence are Jihadi texts written in the 21st century. Baghdadi seeks justification in newly written Islamist text because the radical actions of ISIS stray from traditional teachings of Islam.¹³¹ *A Call to a Global Islamic Resistance* and *The Management/Administration of Savagery* are two documents Baghdadi heavily relies on for his extreme Islamic beliefs.

A Call to a Global Islamic Resistance, or the GIR, was written by Mustafa bin Abd al-Qadir Setmariam Nasar in 2004. The text highlights five key ideas that radical Muslims, referred to in the book as the “in-group,” appeal to. The purpose of the book is to recruit Muslims to commence jihad against all non-Muslims. The five traits are superiority, injustice, vulnerability, distrust and helplessness. Radical Muslims or those who practice jihad see themselves as superior to other religions, specifically the Shi’a, Christians and Jews. Jihadists who practice the teachings of the GIR feel that the in-group have treated them unjustly. It is because of this constantly perceived notion of being treated unjustly that jihadists burden a strong distrust

¹³⁰ Patrick Cockburn, *The Rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution* (New York: Verso, 2015).

¹³¹ Sudheendra Kulkarni, “Teaching True Islam to fight ISIS’s Anti-Islamic Terrorism,” *Huffington Post*, March 3, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.in/sudheendra-kulkarni/post_9685_b_7719398.html

towards their enemies. This distrust is so strong that it obliterates any chances of negotiating peace with anyone considered a member of the out-group. The final idea mentioned in the book is the idea of helplessness. Jihadist believe that the out-group is in control of the status quo and they are helpless to change it unless they join together with other jihadist and rebel together. This particular text is distributed among Sunni Muslims in order to promote the ISIS ideology.¹³²

While the GIR aims to recruit jihadists and promote lone wolf attacks, *The Management of Savagery* attempts to offer a guide to successfully wage jihad on a global scale against one's enemies. The *Management of Savagery* focuses on three key prospects of the jihadist struggle. The three principles are the disruption and exhaustion of one's enemies, empowering oneself and managing one's savagery. According to the text, disruption is a means by which terrorist use organized attacks to damage their enemies in order to demoralize them in the face of their population. Exhaustion, on the other hand, is a means of terrorist attacks focused on damaging a country economically. Evidence of terrorists using the disruption and exhaustion tactic can be seen in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. The overall tragedy of the September 11, 2001, attacks are mirrored in an *Amazing Spider-man* issue in which the heroes and villains join together to clean up the rubble, debris and rescue survivors of the Twin Towers.¹³³ Not only did the attacks prove a weakness in the United States homeland to the general public, it also caused a decline in America's market value equaling an estimated \$1.7 trillion.¹³⁴ This rough estimate is based on the amount of money lost during the lull period when trading on the stock market stopped due to the attacks. The second prospect the *Management of Savagery* emphasizes is empowerment. In this case, empowerment consists of re-creating the Muslim caliphate; a political-religious state

¹³² M.W. Zackie, review of *The Call to Global Islamic Resistance*, by Abu Mus'ab Al-Suri, *Journal of Strategic Security*, January 1, 2013.

¹³³ Michael J. Straczynski, "Stand Tall," *Amazing Spider-man #36* (New York: Marvel Publishing, 2001).

¹³⁴ Walter Enders and Todd Sandler, *The Political Economy of Terrorism* (Cambridge England; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

led by al Baghdadi. ISIS has been slowly empowering itself by taking territory in both Syria and Iraq since early 2014.¹³⁵ The last pillar of the book is by far the most controversial; it is the management of savagery itself. This can be defined as "...violent resistance with an emphasis on carrying out acts of highly visible violence, intended to send a message to both allies and enemies."¹³⁶ ISIS under al Baghdadi's leadership would take savagery to new heights by utilizing the internet and various social media outlets. The impact of ISIS's brutally violent media campaign would seep into popular culture through the outlet of comic books and graphic novels. Comic books were able to adapt this elevated level of violence ISIS produced due to the fact that issues are printed biweekly. As soon as news outlets broke information regarding a horrific video, a short time after a similar beheading would appear in newer comic books. Comic books can tap into the zeitgeist of society and reflect relevant events, such as the beheadings carried out by the self-proclaimed Islamic State, so rapidly due to the weekly production of new issues.

Beheadings have been a long tradition in many Middle Eastern countries for centuries.¹³⁷ It was not until 2004 that the world witnessed such cruel acts as the videotaped beheading of Jewish radio tower repairman Nick Berg by the Islamic radical known as the "Sheikh of the slaughterers" al Zarqawi.¹³⁸ The Islamic State, in learning from both *The Management of Savagery* and Zarqawi, regularly practices videotaped beheadings for multiple purposes. Whether to recruit, spread fear or relay important information, ISIS has employed the method of beheadings like no other terrorist group before them. In using internet media sites such as

¹³⁵ Jeremy Hobson, "ISIS Gains Ground in Iraq and Syria," Here & Now, NPR, <http://hereandnow.wbur.org/2015/05/22/isis-gains-ground-syria>

¹³⁶ Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (New York: Ecco Press, 2015).

¹³⁷ Benjamin Radford, "Why terrorist behead their victims," *Discovery News*, August 22, 2014, <http://news.discovery.com/history/religion/why-terrorists-behead-their-victims-140822.htm>

¹³⁸ Laura Mansnerus and James Dao. "From Strange Encounter with Iraqi Police to Fatal Capture by Islamic Terrorists." *New York Times* (May 12, 2004).

Twitter, Facebook, Liveleaks and Tumblr, ISIS has been able to promote their vicious beheading videos as propaganda for their radical Islamic caliphate.¹³⁹ This specific form of death seen in these beheading videos have been so influential on the American psyche that it has begun to be mirrored in American comic books.

ISIS invades popular culture

June 2014 would be the first instance of radical Islam appearing in mainstream comic books in the modern era. This example occurred a year after ISI became ISIS and months after Al Qaeda officially denounced all ties to Baghdadi and his group. June 2014 is coincidentally the same month Baghdadi announced his plans to re-establish the caliphate under the rule of the Islamic State.¹⁴⁰ The comic book in reference is issue 3 of the Marvel series titled *Original Sins*. In this issue, the character known as the Winter Soldier decapitates the well-known super spy Nick Fury after shooting him first in the chest and then in the arm as Fury attempts to defend himself. Winter Soldier proceeds to cut off his head with a knife after shooting Fury twice. The second to last panel of the comic book contains an image of a knife held with two hands performing a slashing motion with splatters of blood covering the arms, and a caption that reads “Shunnk.” The next page consists of a full illustration of Winter Soldier standing over the body holding the severed head.¹⁴¹ This 2014 comic book marks the beginning of radical Islamic brutality entering into American popular culture.

Following the *Original Sin* issue in June, ISIS began beheading a series of individuals with ties to the United States in order to deter the United States from continuing air strikes by unmanned drones. The first video of this sort titled “A Message to America” released on August

¹³⁹ Stern and Berger, *ISIS*. 2015.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid

¹⁴¹ Jason Aaron, “Trust no one, not even yourself,” *Original Sin # 3* (New York: Marvel Publishing, 2014).

19, 2014. It featured the beheading of journalist James Foley. Foley had gone to Syria to report on the civil war before ISIS captured him in 2012.¹⁴² The video released by ISIS first contains footage of President Barack Obama announcing his plan to attack ISIS strongholds via drone strikes, next the video cuts to a man wearing all black with his face covered standing over a bound James Foley in an orange prison uniform. After Foley is seen forcibly abandoning his American citizenship, his captor begins to saw at his neck with a medium sized blade. The next scene is the lifeless body of Foley with his head placed on his back. The end of the video features an ISIS soldier standing with another hostage and warning President Obama that, “the life of this American citizen, Obama, depends on your next decision.”¹⁴³ Obama would not negotiate with terrorists, nor would he cease United States airstrikes against the Islamic State.

Steve Sotloff was the hostage featured at the end of “Message to America.” He would be among the first in a long line of ISIS victims to come. The Islamic State began releasing these videos after they moved back to Iraq from Syria. The release of the videos was a plea from the group in order to deter the United States and other nations from bombing their locations. Sotloff, another journalist abducted by the Islamic State highlighted in a video again criticizing the Obama administration and its use of drone’s attacks, in a second video titled “A Second message to America.” Similar to the first video a man in black, who would later be known as Jihadi John, forced the American to read a statement denouncing the United States government. After that, the man dressed in black preceded to hack at Sotloff’s neck just before the camera cut away only

¹⁴² Arab American News. "Islamic State' Beheads American Photojournalist in Syria." *The Arab American News*, August 23, 2014,

<http://search.proquest.com/docview/1560171934?accountid=14516>.

¹⁴³ Stern and Berger, *ISIS*. 2015.

to return to an image of Sotloff's body with his head on his back just like Foley.¹⁴⁴ Similar to the first video, the second revealed yet another hostage held captive by the Islamic State.

Both videos drew massive attention to the monstrosities the radical Islamic group had been capable of enacting. They also sparked massive attention from news outlets globally. After the death of James Foley and Steven Sotloff, there came yet another decapitation in Marvel comics. In the *Avengers* issue 34.1, a villain known as The Mauler decapitates a police officer by melting his face with a plasma cannon while attempting to kidnap a child that resembled his son. The Mauler is thwarted by a caped hero known as Hyperion at the end of the issue.¹⁴⁵ Although most stories in the comic book universe end with a happy ending that would not be the case for those unfortunate enough to be captured by the Islamic State.

Ten days after *Avengers* # 34.1 depicted a brutal decapitation of a police officer, ISIS released yet another video showing an unarmed foreigner being beheaded. This time instead of being an American, the victim of jihadi violence was a British aid worker named David Haines and instead of showing President Obama, the video featured a speech by British Prime Minister David Cameron. This video, meant to scare Britain away from assisting the United States led coalition in airstrikes against ISIS was titled "A Message to the Allies of America." In continuing the trend taught to Baghdadi from *The Management of Savagery*, ISIS forced its viewers to watch David Haines recite a scripted paragraph citing the horrors of western civilization before a masked man began cutting his head off.¹⁴⁶ During the end of September and

144 Chelsea J. Carter, and Ashley Fantzt. "ISIS Video Shows Beheading of American Journalist Steven Sotloff," Cable News Network, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/09/02/world/meast/isis-american-journalist-sotloff/>

¹⁴⁵ Al Ewing, "The World in his Hands," *The Avengers* # 34.1 (New York: Marvel Publishing, 2014).

¹⁴⁶ Camila Domonoske, "ISIS Video Purports to Show Beheading of British Aid Worker," *NPR*, <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2014/09/13/348292090/isis-video-purports-to-show-beheading-of-british-aid-worker>

into the early days of October, ISIS graphically beheaded two British nationals. The first being Haines and the second being another humanitarian aid worker named Alan Henning.

2014: The ISIS code of authority

November 2014 ushered in a new aspect of the Islamic State's plan to manage their savagery. Instead of featuring one or two captives beheaded, they instead committed mass murder. On November 16, ISIS released a fifteen-minute propaganda video featuring the beheadings of a multitude of Syrian soldiers and pilots they had captured earlier in the year. This particular video also showed the remains of a captured United States veteran turned humanitarian worker Peter Kassig. Kassig, an Indiana native and former United States Army Ranger had been captured while on his way to Syria bearing supplies and medical aid for refugees.¹⁴⁷ His beheading took place of screen. This is evident due to his head being feature near the end of the video at the feet of ISIS video star "Jihadi John."¹⁴⁸ Kassig did not comply with the order by ISIS to read a forced statement criticizing the United States; this resulted in him dying off camera. After the release of the video presenting the beheading of Syrian prisoners and Peter Kassig death, President Barack Obama commented on the video. President Obama stated that "[ISIS] revels in the slaughter of innocents, including Muslims, and is bent only on sowing death and destruction" he also commented on the beheadings as "an act of pure evil by a terrorist group

¹⁴⁷ Diaa Hadid, "Islamic State group beheads American aid Worker," *Los Angeles Daily News*, 16 November, 2014, <http://www.dailynews.com/general-news/20141116/video-islamic-state-group-beheads-us-aid-worker-peter-kassig> <http://search.proquest.com.vortex3.uco.edu:2050/docview/1625667984/994B22EBE1EF4A9FPQ/2?accountid=14516>

¹⁴⁸ Leaksources, (GRAPHIC VIDEO) Islamic State Claims Beheading of Former U.S. Army Ranger/Aid Worker Peter Kassig, <http://leaksources.info/2014/11/16/graphic-video-islamic-state-claims-beheading-of-former-u-s-army-rangeraid-worker-peter-kassig/>

that the world rightly associated with inhumanity.”¹⁴⁹ This address from the Commander in Chief to denounce the actions of this radical extremist group illustrates the fear and concern the average citizens felt during the early years of ISIS. This level of fear is reminiscent of the fear surrounding the rise of Hitler, the growing strength of the Soviet Union and other cultural enemies mentioned previously.

These acts described by President Obama as “pure evil” and “inhumane” would later be reflected in the comic book industry as violent decapitations and deaths of multiple characters. The first comic book to mirror the slaughtered American citizens and Syrian fighters came about in issue number two of Marvel’s *All New Captain America* series. The series is titled “All New” because instead of Captain America being Steve Rogers, the white patriot from Boston, it is instead Sam Wilson, who was previously the character known as the Falcon. In the second issue, Captain America teams up with a character called Nomad, who is the son of Steve Rogers, to defeat a Nazi plot by the villain Armin Zola and the mercenary Crossbones. During the end of the comic book, Zola captures Nomad. The last two pages of the comic feature Zola revealing his evil scheme of purging the world of heroes to a defenseless Nomad suspended in chains. After Zola’s monologue, he proceeds to slash Nomad’s throat. The issue shows the gruesome act followed by an image of Nomad strung up with blood dripping down his head to his shackled arms. In following true ISIS fashion, the Nazi leader takes a picture of his freshly killed captive and sends it to Steve Rodgers, Nomad’s father, thus ending the issue.¹⁵⁰ The second comic book released after the mass slaughter by ISIS depicts a bloody, violent dismemberment of a character known as Deadpool, a mercenary who possesses a warped sense of humor and a self-healing

149 Kim Hjelmggaard and David Jackson, "U.S. Confirms Islamic State Beheading of American" *USA Today*, November 17, 2014. <<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2014/11/16/peter-kassig-islamic-state-claims-beheading-syria/19128067/>>.

¹⁵⁰ Rick Remender, *All-New Captain America #2* (New York: Marvel Publishing, 2014).

ability. In Marvel's *Avengers & X-Men: Axis*, the franchise's December 2014 major story arc, multiple villains and heroes switches sides, many evil doers became heroes while many super heroes, such as Iron Man, became evil doers. The specific comic book in reference is *Avengers & X-Men: Axis* number 7, in this issue the character Deadpool faces the mutant known as Apocalypse. In the Marvel Universe, Apocalypse serves as one of the X-Men's most formidable foes. While Deadpool attempts to argue the nature of love, kindness and humanity to Apocalypse, Apocalypse begins savagely attacking Deadpool in a bloody flurry of fisticuffs. The last page of the issue contains a full-page image of Apocalypse holding the severed head of Deadpool while standing next to his decapitated corpse and proclaiming, "I am better. Better than you. Better than all Humans. I am Apocalypse...and the end of man is nigh."¹⁵¹ Although comic books have been violent before, this level of increased gore and images of decapitation are a new facet of the industry. It was not until the rise of ISIS in early 2014 that more and more issues depicted violent decapitations and executions.

Although Marvel seems to be leading the comic book industry in mirroring ISIS level violence, Detective Comics, or DC comics, have also been showing gruesome beheadings in its titles. In December 2014, DC comics revamped an old Superman anti-hero known as Lobo, an alien bounty hunter who is renowned for his successful career. In the first issue, on the first page of the new *Lobo* series, Lobo is standing near a lifeless body holding, and talking to, the severed head of his victim, also named Lobo. After arguing with the severed head, he kicks it to the ground and shoots it, officially killing his adversary. This is not the only beheading in the book. After the two Lobo's battle, Lobo, the one left alive, accepts a bounty to hunt down eight deadly bounty hunters. His quest for the first bounty hunter leads him to Earth where he thwarts a

¹⁵¹ Rick Remender, "New World Disorder: Chapter 1-End the Line," *Avengers & X-Men: Axis* (New York: Marvel Publishing, 2014).

scheme to blow up the planet. After questioning his target for information, Lobo proceeds to decapitate his bounty and then set his location ablaze.¹⁵² Unlike most of the previously mentioned Marvel titles, this issue from DC contains multiple decapitations. A bloody cranial dismemberment is on the front cover, as well as the first page and the second to last page of the comic book. This mirrors the real life trend established by the self-proclaimed Islamic State of displaying gruesome decapitations for the sake of thrills and shock value. A rise in the number of graphic decapitations shown in the comic book industry spiked after ISIS had videotaped the decapitation of multiple American and British aid workers, journalists and Syrian soldiers. Another sharp increase in the number of beheadings portrayed in comic books would again follow the mass killings of Middle Eastern citizens by the Islamic State in 2015.

In 2014, the Islamic State publically beheaded five innocent foreigners in addition to an estimated 2,000 civilians or more from various regions and ethnicities.¹⁵³ After seizing territory, it is common for ISIS soldiers to behead, enslave and displace those who previously lived there. The number of foreign victims of ISIS would only increase as time went on. In January 2015, the Islamic State released a video directed at the Prime Minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe, seeking a ransom for two Japanese captives. The two captives were Kenji Goto, a journalist and Haruna Yukawa, a private military contractor. During this video, the same black clad Muslim from the previous videos told the Prime Minister that he had 72 hours to pay \$200 million or the captives would be killed. After the allotted, time ISIS released a second video featuring Goto holding a

¹⁵² Cullen Bunn, "Targets." *Lobo #1* (Burbank, California: Detective Comics, 2014).

¹⁵³ Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. "IS Executes 2618 since the Declaration of Its Alleged "caliphate" including 464 in One Month." *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights*, <http://www.syriahr.com/en/2015/05/is-executes-2618-since-the-declaration-of-its-alleged-caliphate-including-464-in-one-month/>: Karen Yourish. "The Fates of 23 ISIS Hostages in Syria." *New York Times*, February 10, 2015, <<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/10/24/world/middleeast/the-fate-of-23-hostages-in-syria.html>>.

picture of the beheaded Yukawa.¹⁵⁴ Days later the Islamic State contacted Japanese officials in an attempt to negotiate a prisoner trade for an alleged female suicide bomber for Goto's life. After realizing that Japan would not make the deal, they later killed Kenji Goto. The rise in public awareness of civilian casualties by ISIS has led multiple media outlets to focus on such depraved acts and the comic book industry is no different.

2015 Beheadings on paper & in real life

Three of the most graphic depiction of cranial dismemberment appeared on store shelves during the early months of 2015. The earliest issue featuring ISIS-style brutality appeared in Marvels *Angela: Asgard's Assassin # 4*. In this particular issue, Angela, a winged, angel like assassin from a mythological realm, teams up with the Guardians of the Galaxy to aid her on a quest to save Lord Odin's child. While traveling through space, Angela and team are attacked by a group of disgraced angel Valkyries called the Dísir. It is while fighting these Dísir, that Angela decapitates their leader with a broad sword, sending her attackers head lifelessly towards the ground. The act of the beheading itself is shown in a single image as both Angela and the Dísir leader are shown as silhouettes in front of an orange backdrop. The only text in the image signify the sound of the action as a simple "shunk."¹⁵⁵ The second issue featuring graphic beheadings appeared in a rare combination of genres in the Dark Horse series *Archie vs. Predator*. In this four issue mini-series the cast of Archie, including Jughead, Veronica and Betty, must fend off a young Predator as he attempts to hunt them all down. Throughout the series, multiple characters die in both gory and intensely brutal ways. Specifically, a restaurant chef is decapitated as well

¹⁵⁴ Reiji Yoshida and Masaaki Kameda. "Goto Beheaded by Islamic State Militants." *The Japan Times*, February 1, 2015, <<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/02/01/national/islamic-state-group-purportedly-releases-goto-execution-video/#.Ve-RCPmqkp01>>.

¹⁵⁵ Kieron Gillen and Marguerite Bennett, *Angela: Asgard's Assassin # 4* (New York: Marvel Publishing, 2015).

as Jughead first decapitated then having his head stuffed into a vending machine.¹⁵⁶ The first issue of the series depicts the Predator holding Jughead's head while laughing into the night, this image is a fair indication of the level of violence shown in the entire mini-series.¹⁵⁷

The last example of comic books mirroring the Islamic States 2014-2015 beheading campaign is yet another comic produced by Marvel. Marvel often makes the clearest examples of reflections of historical trends. This has been true from the early 1940s to modern day. The issue in reference to mimicking ISIS style beheadings comes from the 2015 major Marvel story arc titled *The (All-New) Secret Wars*. Similar to the original *Secret Wars* series in the early 1980s, the second installation takes place on a patchwork of remnant universes called Battleworld. The difference between the new and old *Secret Wars* series is that in the 2015 storyline the Fantastic Four Villain Victor Von Doom is the all-powerful ruler. Doom rules over the entire Battleworld but uses Barons to oversee different kingdoms. In the second issue of the series, Doom pits two characters against each other in order to establish guilt for the crime of treason. The two royals on trial are Baron Sinister, based off an X-men villain, and Lord Braddock, based off the hero Captain Britain. In order to settle the dispute, the two battle in an arena type stage. The comic book mirrors the Islamic State's preferred method of killing in the following panels where Lord Braddock decapitates Baron Sinister's head with a bo staff type weapon. Shortly after the decapitation, Lord Braddock gloats around victoriously until Baron Sinister reattaches his head and proceeds to defeat Lord Braddock.¹⁵⁸ Although in this particular instance the beheaded victim did not die, the lingering images of a head being forcibly detached from one's body is still ever present.

¹⁵⁶ Alex de Campi, *Archie vs. Predator #4* (Milwaukie, Oregon: Dark Horse Publishing, 2015).

¹⁵⁷ Alex de Campi, *Archie vs. Predator #1* (Milwaukie, Oregon: Dark Horse Publishing 2015).

¹⁵⁸ Jonathan Hickman, "Doom Messiah," *Secret Wars* (New York: Marvel Publishing, 2015).

The self-proclaimed Islamic State has grown in strength from its early inceptions, beginning in 2010. In 2014, the radical Islamic group started to release stylized videos featuring captured foreigners from the United States, Britain and Japan. These videos were produced in order to promote terror in the West, recruit individuals for jihad and to establish ISIS as a new, different threat to Western values. ISIS has for the most part succeeded. Today national security remains a top priority for the majority of American citizens. Attacks orchestrated by ISIS or lone wolf attacks inspired by the group are everyday fears.¹⁵⁹ This illustrates the level in which Americans fear ISIS could threaten their lives and disrupt the everyday flow of society. The videos showing graphic decapitations of numerous civilians has led nations such as the United States, Britain and Turkey to begin aerial bombings of ISIS-controlled areas in both Syria and Iraq. The graphic beheadings have also threatened to alter the culture in the United States. This fact is proven in the number of comic books by popular publications that have begun to feature violent beheadings of multiple characters.

ISIS has upped the level of tolerated violence in American society by focusing on this specific form of execution. The question remains how will the comic book industry react to this newly popularized form of death? How will American culture be affected by a long, hard fought battle against radical extremists who seek religious glory in beheading others? Based on the more recent issues released in 2015 the industry has become obsessed with beheadings. Currently, they are a preferred method of killing in many *Lobo* issues, A DC series, as well as the theme in the newly released series by Image titled *Head Lopper*. In addition to millions of displaced refugees, thousands of broken historical relics and monuments, and an untold number of dead civilians;

¹⁵⁹ William McCants, "Amid rising fears of ISIS, Obama must reassure," Brookings, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2016/01/12-state-of-the-union-rising-fears-on-isis-mccants>

another lasting ramification of the Islamic State may very well be a new and violent era in comic books.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

In summation, since their first inception, comic books and graphic novels have served as cultural lenses revealing the changing social zeitgeist through American history. This fact is not new. Many historians and comic book scholars alike have understood that comic books are often produced in sync with major historical events. What is new, however, is the perspective of looking at comic books to gain a better understanding of who or what Americans perceived as endangering their inalienable right since the 1940s through today. The United States Constitution grants all people these absolute rights in the second paragraph of the document, where it states that, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”¹⁶⁰ Having unquestionable rights to pursue life, liberty and happiness are unique in the sense that these three rights have shaped American culture to this point. All laws, legislation and actions done by governmental bodies’ center around protecting and insuring these three concepts. The cultural enemies mentioned in previous chapters, both foreign and domestic, have all at one time been associated with having the potential to alter American culture for groups of different people by threatening those three core ideas.

In chronological order, the first major threat people believed could threaten their day-to-day lives in the United States was the Nazi menace of the 1940s. This villainous group produced the Marvel Hero Captain America in 1941. While the Allied forces battled the Nazis abroad, Captain America kept the homeland safe from Nazi saboteurs. After the events of World War II the general population wanted a return to normalcy after witnessing the devastation caused by the atomic bomb. This push to return to pre-World War II society meant store shelves no longer

¹⁶⁰ Declaration of Independence, United States 1776, Thomas Jefferson

carried violent scenes depicted in comic books and graphic novels. The end of the 1940s and early 1950s would bring a harsh code of ethics that comic book producers had to follow or stop producing. During this time, comic books themselves were seen as threatening American culture by corrupting the youth. The next major enemy that was believed to have the ability to change the American dream for middle class suburbanites were the Russians. People believed the Soviets would invade the United States and force it to adhere to communism instead of capitalism. In order to defeat the Russian menace, Marvel created three characters to put them in their place. In the 1960s, the world is given the *Fantastic Four*, *The Incredible Hulk* and the *Amazing Spider-Man*. All three heroes fought Russians in their debut issues. This tells us that the threat of the Russians infiltrating the country was a widespread, relatable fear to most white Americans. The Russians became much less of a foreign cultural threat when the United States became involved in the Vietnam War.

During the 1970s, the United States began sending soldiers to bring democracy to Southeast Asia by aiding the South Vietnamese against the North. This bloody and drawn out war started under false pretenses and caused many American citizens, both brown minorities and white majorities, to reflect inward and challenge the information and tactics of the government. Vietnam is seen here as a foreign threat to American ideals because the entirety of the war threatened the morals of America on a world stage. The United States could not proclaim itself a just nation if it aided the South Vietnamese who acted just as violently as the North Vietnamese they fought against. While the United States had gone into Vietnam attempting to impose its own form of democracy, other nations such as France looked on at the task as a lost cause. The ramifications of the Vietnam War, and the image of what we looked like during that war can be seen in the personification of Marvel's the Punisher. This violent Vietnam War veteran thrives

off of war and is relentless in his pursuit of his idea of justice. The domestic threat to American culture in large cities is apparent within the same character. The Punisher also embodies the growing crime wave of the 1970s. He chooses to eliminate all crime in his environment instead of fighting Russians or monsters like other heroes. The change in the Punisher fighting crime instead of Nazi's or Soviets, like other popular Marvel heroes prior, illustrates the level of importance crime had risen at this time. The glooming threat to social order was no longer foreign but instead, domestic.

The next cultural enemies would appear in the Middle East in the form of Saddam Hussein and his quest for money and power by taking oil from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Were Saddam Hussein to have been victorious in the 1990s, he would have restricted the flow of oil to the United States, this would have drastically affected the way all Americans consumed and produced goods in a negative way. Had the United States not defeated Hussein in the Persian Gulf War, the lives, liberty and happiness of United States citizens would have been jeopardized. A reflection of the Mad Iraqi President is evident in the landmark Marvel series *The Infinity Gauntlet*, the series centers on an angry alien attempting to gain power and impress the mistress Death.

The 1990s ushered in new threats both foreign and domestic, not only was Hussein a threat, but so was racial injustice. The Rodney King beating and the following riots and court cases fueled by racial injustice and police brutality caused a man caught speeding down a highway to be brutally beaten and humiliated by several police officers. The case sparked months of tension and brought racial injustices by police officers to the forefront of the media revealing a threat to the everyday lives of minorities in the country. A 1992 comic book story arc titled *The Punisher* recreated the event, showing a defenseless black man savagely beaten by

authorities. During a complicated turn of events, the normally white character, the Punisher, transformed into an African American and immediately encounters racism by a group of police officers.

The final chapter offers the newest concepts to the field of comic book histories. Beginning in the early 2000s a group of radical Islamist extremist began forming groups of like-minded individuals to wage war against non-Muslims and establish a new religious order in the Middle East. This new extremist group would create a name for themselves by depicting shocking and violent beheadings on social media. These videos served to both terrorize and recruit new members. One potentially unintended consequence of the beheading videos has been an increase in the beheadings and violent actions in comic books. Since the rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State, multiple beheadings have been as constant staple of the comic book industry. Before the rise of ISIS, it was rare to see a graphic beheading in the pages of comic books but, since 2012, a new issue every week features a head being cut or shot off a lifeless body. Images of the Islamic States influence parallel in many Marvel issues and many issues of the DC series *Lobo*. Are comic books becoming more violent because of the elevated violence produced by the Islamic State? Yes, this form of showing brutal beheadings and mass executions has resulted in other genres advancing the theme of violence in order to shock audiences/viewers. This new form of extreme violence in the comic book world reflects the foreign threat of the Islamic State negatively altering the culture of America by attempting to convert the United States to a new, violent form of Wahhabis Islam.

The primary objective of this thesis is to show both foreign and domestic cultural enemies of United States societies through comic books, the secondary objective is to highlight the under emphasized historical relevance of comic books and graphic novels. Yes, often comic

books following the super hero narrative have very imaginative stories and fantastically unrealistic plot lines but within their comic book realm, they also offer clever insight into the cultural circumstances of the day. This idea of comic books accurately showing social trends and referencing major historical events can lead children and young adults to gain a better understanding of said trends and events by combining the written word with educational illustrations. For example, teaching about the Cold War and the perceived threat of the Soviet Union during the 1960s can be difficult concepts to understand, but using comic books, like the *Fantastic Four*, that deal with similar issues can educate the same way traditional text books do. Attempting to teach a classroom full of children with a comic book would be far-fetched, but using a comic book as an aid to teach these events, showing the vernacular and dress of the time, is not considered out of the realm of possibility. For example, in 2016s comic book climate, the social trends of political confusion, Middle Eastern politics and broadening LGBT acceptance are evident. Both themes of political uncertainty and pro homosexual lifestyles are common facets of Marvel's *Spider-Man 2099* series. The main character Miguel O'Hara, who comes from the future, openly addresses his concern about Donald Trump and the series features a prominent female character who is a lesbian.¹⁶¹ Aside from the previously mentioned issues where beheadings are common, comic books have begun featuring terrorist groups in addition to multiple terrorist actions such as decapitations. In a recent issue of *Green Lantern* number 48 and 49, the hero Hal Jordan, opposes a terrorist group led by the villain Sonar who is attempting to blow up the United Nations.¹⁶² Often the combination of text and illustrations convey a deeper understanding than manuscript alone. This is truly an area of scholastic endeavor that needs to be explored much more.

¹⁶¹ Peter, David, *Spider-man 2099 #1* (Marvel Publishing, 2015).

¹⁶² Robert Venditti, *Green Lantern #49 & #50* (Detective Comics Publishing, 2016).

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