Faded Glory: Captain America and the Wilted American Dream

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by

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I. Introduction

The United States of America is relatively young compared to countries like China, Italy and Israel. It has only been in existence for about 235 years. In this short time, the United States has evolved from an average life span of 35 to 78 and from a printing press and paperboys to a 24-hour news cycle and the Internet. While the United States may have found speedy success in terms of medicine, social issues and technology, it is young by global standards, and as a result, has fought fewer wars, experienced a smaller number of natural disasters and suffered less oppression than many other countries.

The past decade, however, has forced Americans to confront war, a devastating natural disaster and endure its place within a global economic crisis. The attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 marked the beginning of the “War on Terror,” Hurricane Katrina weakened faith in the abilities of the federal government and The Great Recession and federal bail out of the nation’s financial system in 2008 continues to wreak havoc on Americans’ sense of security. People are mentally, emotionally and economically exhausted. In times like these, people cling to notions of hope, anything that provides even a hint of relief that their lives may improve.

The American Dream and Horatio Alger Myth are two cultural tenets that people hold in hopes that something better is on the horizon. The pervasiveness of these ideas is used across mass communications, particularly in film and television. In this sense, we see entertainment and media outlets used to bolster national morale. Big Hollywood budgets offer familiar storylines in a new light. Movie production companies have begun to retell the stories of superheroes, the same superheroes that
have fought battles across the pages of comic books since the 1930s. The eight-to-fifteen-dollar movie ticket turns into the ultimate action-packed, horror-laced, drama-filled, comedy-crammed or tear-stuffed mind-bending experience a few bucks can buy.

The vulnerable state of mind of a grieving America, however, mixed with stimulating thrills can produce a dangerous equation. This fabricated recipe allows for entertainment channels to become the foundation and framework of hope, particularly when the newscasters, talking heads and one’s real-world relationships may provide much optimism. Movie producers, more and more, pull inspiration from classic books, real-world events and the rehashing of old storylines with new technologies. Hollywood production companies have provided an outlet for the audience’s wildest dreams to come to life. In a world where social networking, technology and the citizen journalist have the power to reach anyone at any time, it is important to reflect on how Hollywood’s messages affect the interpretation of larger concepts by those who may not have the ability to distinguish between reality and perceived reality.

The comic book industry has also provided an inexpensive medium for reflective entertainment. Researchers, authors and writers (Wright, 2001; Fingeroth, 2004; and Dittmer, 2008) have found interesting correlations between comic book superheroes, nostalgia, propaganda and popular culture. Comic books are a reflection of society’s issues and reframe complicated social concepts into an easy-to-follow format that is attractive to children and teenagers. The distinctive art form not only adds movement the feel of to a still medium, but also leaves room for individual imaginations to fill in the gaps.
Everyone knows what a comic book is today, but that was not always the case. Comic books did not become an industry until the 1930s. Before then, comic books were collections of reformulated newspaper funnies (Wright, 2001). People collected old funnies and reprinted them into books for resale. The comic strips had all been printed before in one newspaper or another, but no one had ever accumulated several hundred to create a book.

Later, two Jewish men, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, created Superman. The young cartoonists faced broad rejection until a lucky last chance landed Superman on newsstands. Superman changed comic forever becoming an instant hit during the late 1930s, when Americans suffered through depression-era problems. According to one scholar, “The distance between the American dream and reality seemed particularly large during the Great Depression...The self-made men of yesterday, the Herbert Hoovers and Horatio Algers, had become the greedy fat-cats and ‘economic royalists’ of the Depression” (Wright, 2001, p. 10). When the morale of an entire country is low, people look to those who promise hope and success, even if these turn out to be fictional characters. According to John Morton Blum (1976) and Koppes and Black (1987), the entertainment industry worked hand-in-hand with the Office of War Information (OWI) to produce messages of patriotism to American citizens. According to Wright:

[The Office of War Information] asked the entertainment industry to raise American morale, encourage public cooperation and participation in the war effort, identify the menace of the Axis powers, and inform audiences about the progressive war aims pursued by the United States and its allies, all in ways that
cloaked propaganda within the context of good entertainment as much as possible.” (2001, p. 34)

**Captain America’s Success**

Further evidence of the link between the entertainment industry and public morale can be found in the creation of Captain America, which may be the most closely linked to the American Dream because of his American flag-like costume. The symbolism behind his story, character and uniform create underlying messages of patriotism and nationalism.

Before he became Captain America, Steve Rogers was a young man whose only interest was to serve in the military but was physically unable. Selected for a top-secret government experiment, Rogers is transformed into a superhero with physical capabilities beyond any other human being in existence. The bullying he faces prior to the super serum, leadership abilities and passion all shape the hero he has become and are ultimately his weapons against the evil Red Skull, a Hitler-esque villain. Captain America is not pro war, bloodthirsty or disgruntled; he is a defender of innocence and freedom. He even carries a shield, which is also defensive. The soldiers in the Captain America comic books lose faith in their military leaders during WWII until Captain America, a single soldier, stood against the Red Skull’s armies to rescue a small team of soldiers. The popularity of the Captain America story demonstrates that America’s interest in the Horatio Alger Myth will never cease. The United States is founded on that very principle. Captain America personifies bravery to lead into the unknown, leave all safety behind and pursue something dangerous for the greater good.
It is no question that movies have extended the life cycle of the comic book superhero. The combination of comic book superheroes and film has been proven successful through the record-breaking box office numbers and increasing film budgets. According to BoxOfficeMojo, an online database dedicated to box office numbers, reported a $140 million budget for the making of Iron Man (2008) and a worldwide gross return of $585,174,222. The success from Iron Man is most likely to credit the reported $200 million budget for the making of Iron Man 2 (2010). Now the rest of the popular superheroes can be revamped and turned into huge Hollywood productions. Just this past summer (2011), Thor and Captain America joined Iron Man among other superheroes on the silver screen. The same three Marvel heroes will even come together in another blockbuster event, The Avengers (2012) with a reported $260 million production budget according to BoxOfficeMojo numbers.

These movies continue the authors’ reflection of American society in comic books through the eyes of a film director and screenwriter. The Iron Man storyline is blatantly anti-terrorism, and was released at the height of the coverage of the “War on Terror” in America. Iron Man, the one-man army, conquered his Middle-Eastern terrorist foes almost single-handedly, which avoided nuclear disaster (similar to the images and news framing of the “War on Terror”). Thor’s story arc may not have been as obvious as Iron Man’s when it comes to politics, but there is still an underlying political parallel. Thor is the epitome of perfection, both physically (America’s obsession with youth and beauty) and in righteousness. He left Asgard, a world of gods, to protect humans and Earth. His brother Loki is forced to live in Thor’s shadow and decides to betray the Asgardians by joining forces with the enemy. The Thor story arc
harkens back to America in the 1950s was full of paranoia due to McCarthyism. Back then, the fear that spies and communist traitors walked amongst hard-working Americans put people on edge and caused them to betray each other and hide in fear. Even today, more than 10 years after the terrorist attack on 9/11, some Americans seem to still fear that people of Middle-Eastern descent are affiliated with terrorists against the United States.

History tells us that this is nothing new. During the Golden Age of comics (the late 1930s to late 1940s), messages across all media suggested that in order to win the war, all citizens should sacrifice in any way they could. Comic book superheroes did the same thing. During the Silver Age (1950s-1970s), people rebelled against the government and opposed Vietnam, so did the superheroes in comics. In this chaotic era, they become nomads and vigilantes who fought against a corrupt system. Even Captain America went rogue to fight independently of the government for a stretch of time. The Modern Age of comics (1980s-1990s) suffered from loss of readership and began its battle against a continually evolving entertainment circuit with TV, movies and video games, but still reflected issues central to American society. Now, the comic industry must create ways to work with the addition of the Internet and social media. The public may not support the “War on Terror,” but they do support the soldiers who fight it. This is evident in the yellow “Support Our Troops” campaigns seen everywhere from the media to car bumpers; even the tagline says “Our Troops” instead of “The Troops,” which indicates a sense of togetherness. Local and national businesses call for care package items to send to the soldiers overseas and local and national media outlets report on soldier-related causes, families that wait proactively for the return of their
soldiers to return and on war information updates. It seems that Americans have pulled their talents together in order to help the soldiers who are defending American freedom. Captain America, Thor and Iron Man are all soldiers in one way or another, and all three also fight for American freedom.

Minimal research has been conducted on Hollywood's most recent superhero movies in regard to symbolism, American culture and patriotism. Few have attempted to reflect on the comic book super heroes as a window to examine social morale or the current state of the American Dream. Finally, no one has suggested that communication theory may explain the current state of the American Dream through an analysis of the evolution the Captain America story after 9/11.

This thesis explores how people interpret media frames and underlying messages through symbolic interaction theory, how people develop perceived relationships with Captain America though parasocial interaction theory and why these perceptions affect the strength of the American Dream by deconstructing Captain America comic books that were published after the declaration of the "War on Terror." Results may begin to unravel the state of the American Dream among American citizens through the continuing story of Captain America.

**Research Question**

1. Does Captain America affect how American audiences interpret the American Dream?

**Assumptions**

Comic books undoubtedly reflect American popular culture through parallels in current events. It is expected that the comic book characters will endure war, economic crisis and paranoia just as Americans have in the past few years. Captain America's role
in society will evolve into something else while his enemies continue to wreck havoc on the world. The art, dialogue and perspective on the comic book pages will reveal connections to problems that Americans have had to face since the attack on September 11. The relationships with his friends, enemies and citizens will unveil Captain America in a new light that proves his importance in today’s culture. The overall symbolism of Captain America, his struggles and successes will expose his affect on the concept of the American Dream.

II.

**Literature Review**

In order to understand how people create meaning and why that meaning affects broader concepts, it is important to first explore the processes in which people create meaning internally and socially. It is also important to apply cognitive aspects to social theory because they “conceptually distinguish between the environment and the social phenomenon. This is a central distinction to make for the wider purposes of the complexity cognition program, because otherwise there is no conceptual possibility to delineate a codependent relation between individual cognition and the social world as an autonomous order” (Mascareño, 2008, p. 202). Communication theory is important in explaining the processes by which people interpret, understand and share messages. “Communicative competence is not something people are born with, but can be developed through communicative activities. We use language to communicate across ideas, feelings and our plans in [the] business world; therefore, we must be competent in expressing ourselves when and where needed” (Kumral, 2009, p. 492). Shared
meanings and social values help shape collective identity, which in turn places understandable boundaries around the world wherein we operate.

Symbolism is one way to communicate non-verbal messages in a way that can go undetected, but it still embodies cognition because the process happens silently in one’s mind. Media framing is another way to push certain perspectives on audiences. Most media platforms deliver one-sided information, and it creates more difficulty for audiences to make accurate assumptions without full disclosure of all the facts. Propaganda is another way for skewed messages to reach audiences unnoticed. War propaganda in particular has a poor reputation throughout history, but has achieved the most scrutiny from World War II scholars. Propaganda messages are less obvious today than in the 1930s and 1940s, so it is important for scholars to continue misinformation research in times of war. Finally, Captain America is the epitome of the American ideal. His very existence stems from World War II support. In contemporary society, he has been resurrected to fight the “War on Terror.” The symbolism, media effects and war propaganda surrounding Captain America make him the perfect subject to explore as a possible explanation for America’s current war mindset.

Symbolism

Symbolism is a smaller part of the linear model of communication, in which a sender pushes a message to the receiver and indicates a directional route. The model becomes more complicated when the message is complex or when the message is overpowered by noise and other distractions (Gripsrud, 2006). The model represents verbal, auditory and visual messages. Communication becomes more complicated when the media transports messages through different media outlets like television,
newspaper and Internet websites. When interpreting the meaning of messages from different sources, it is important to distinguish between the denotation, or direct meaning, and the connotation, or indirect meaning. One scholar said:

“An important part of the reason why the distinction between denotation and connotation has been developed is the fact that the meanings or signifieds of signs tend to change with time and place. They are not absolutely and finally fixed in their meaning once and all. The same signifier can mean different things for different people at different times in different locations.” (Gripsrud, 2006, p. 16)

The signifiers, or meanings, stem from schemas that each person develops individually over time. A schema is best described as a category of codes that is stored in long-term memory until a familiar word, sound or image activates that schema into working memory. When an image activates similar schemas amongst a large group of people, that image becomes shared knowledge.

Semiotics refers to the theory of signs developed by Charles Sanders Peirce, an American mathematician and physicist. He claims that everything is a sign because everything has meaning. “Semiotics is above all an attempt to apply a single explanatory framework to a wide variety of phenomena, in particular to many aspects of culture from the arts to philosophy through semiosis, the process of making and using signs” (Kumral, 2009, p.483-84). Semiotics explores the relationship between a sign, the object and the interpretant. “The ‘sign’ is that which stands for something else, and the ‘object’ is that for which the sign stands. The interpretant is the signification or meaning that the sign has for someone” (Gripsrud, 2006, p. 29).
Symbolism is the application of shared meaning to a tangible thing, action or idea. It goes beyond direct definition and includes a representation of something more complicated and metaphorical. Symbolic interactionism is a sociological theory that explains the process in which human beings create meaning from symbols and interaction with others. “[Symbolic interactionism] assumes that people interpret the actions of others rather than simply reacting to them” (Soloman, 1983, p. 322). This interpretation explains humans’ ability to create individual perspective, while also creating shared meaning. “We do this by decomposing the continuum of our surroundings into a mass of individual mental symbols, which we then combine and recombine to produce the intellectual constructs to which we react. And given the same facts, it’s quite likely that each of us will produce a slightly – or even vastly – different construct” (Tattersall, 2008, p. 99).

On an interpersonal level, symbolic interactionism allows individuals to create and accept meaning from different symbols based on personal experiences. On a social level, collective meanings can be derived by shared experiences. Cultural symbols affect shared meaning amongst entire populations and cause separating factors to become obsolete. Age, race and social economic status among other demographic and psychographic features play less of a role when symbolic images create unity amongst an entire society.

Shared meaning unifies social values and thus creates a place in which shared norms and values exist. This unified existence thus generates a collective identity for Americans that is fed by emotion, politics and mass communication. As Reimon Bachika (2011) expressed in his study on symbolism and values in respect to
rationality, collective identities have a direct relationship with cultural identities in that these groups can only exist if a commonality is present. That common factor must hold a powerful meaning to the individuals and must be an identifying feature of the group.

“Identities are expressed through territorial and cultural claims, often by claiming certain symbols for certain groups without acknowledging the difficulties in clearly demarking cultural borders. When globally identifiable symbols are employed, the power of visual and cultural symbolism cuts across local differences in the densely semiotic and political landscape...” (Smala, 2003, p. 41). This process leads to a nationalistic-type of mindset for members of the group, especially when the group faces unforeseen negative effects, like a devastating natural disaster. The group’s individuals will come together to aid other members who have been directly affected by the phenomenon and display a collective identity.

Nationalism, which is the assumption that one’s country is superior to another, can be confused with patriotism, which is the commitment for one’s country. Both are forms of collective identity and both can be found in times of peace and war. The attacks on 9/11 led to an outburst of American patriotism. No other problems seemed to exist because people of all religions, races, ages and statuses put their differences aside to display their shock, anger and sadness in a combined patriotic manner. The use of American symbols could be found in every aspect of American life, whether it was through consumerism, mass communication or individual expression. As the years progressed after the initial attack, patriotism seemed to slowly disappear and be replaced with nationalism when it came to the Middle East. Two experimental studies (Kemmelmeier and David Winter 2008) demonstrated evidence that the use of the
American flag increased nationalism, not patriotism, after the attack on the Twin Towers. According to recent scholars (Griffith 2010; Webster 2011; and Bratta 2009), the emotional response to the attack mixed with an increase in patriotism following 9/11 caused Americans to feel insecure and more willing to support the invasion of Iraq. This is the point at which American patriotism faded and the angry nationalism began to swallow the nation.

The American flag is a central symbol within the American identity, representing liberty, freedom and bravery. However the meaning changed very quickly for those who felt the wrath of a vengeful American mindset following the declaration of war on Iraq. The symbol of the American flag caused fear, anger and sorrow for innocent people in Iraq who were affected by the war. Regardless of the perspective, though, the important thing to remember is that the American flag is a symbol of identity for America. Each nation’s flag carries meaning; it would be difficult to be a nation among nations without the distinguishing flags. The flag is a symbol of pride for each country and carries with it a national anthem, national patriotism and national recognition, which create a collective identity in that nation. This is demonstrated at the Olympic Games during the opening and closing ceremonies as well as on the athletes’ uniforms. The flag they wear masks the athletes’ individual identities, as they become the country they represent and carry the nation’s identity as their own.

**Persuasion**

Persuasion is central to the understanding of war communication. When audiences form strong attitudes, it is often too late to change that attitude with a counter argument. Debates, news stories and political and comparative advertisements
are targeted toward those who have yet to form strong attitude on a subject. This type of communication also serves as reinforcement for the strong attitudes that already exist. McGuire’s inoculation theory (1961) follows the strength of attitudes. If individuals are exposed to weak arguments against an attitude that is already present, they will be able to develop counterarguments intuitively and be more likely to resist persuasive messages by future counter-attitudinal messages. (Banas and Rains 2010; Ivanov, Pfau & Parker 2009; Pfau, Roskos-Ewoldsen, Wood, Yin, Cho, Lu, & Shen 2003)

A meta-analysis of 41 inoculation studies (Banas 2010) revealed that 95% of the cases showed evidence that inoculated participants are less likely to be persuaded by counter-attitudinal messages than participants who were not inoculated. This data suggests that messages may purposefully send a weak counter-attitudinal argument to audiences in order to reinforce the strong attitude that is already present. For example, political party A produced a candidacy ad that attacks its own party member to inoculate, or condition viewers to build resistance, against future counter attitudinal messages.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) focuses on the effects of persuasive messages on the strength of attitudes. It is defined by Cook, Moore and Steel (2004) as a process representing the degree to which individuals are motivated to cognitively consider the factors of an attitude object from either a central route or peripheral route. “If messages are strong, positive and stable attitudes result through central processing. If messages are weak, negative and stable attitudes result from central processing. In contrast, persuasion through the peripheral route is characterized by little cognitive scrutiny of a persuasive message. When message recipients are either unmotivated or
unable to process a message, their attitudes are based on responses to peripheral cues, such as the persuasive environment, the credibility of the source of the message, the attractiveness of the source of the message, or the mood of the target of persuasion” (Henningsen, 2003, p. 180). This means that some communication strategies rely on peripheral cues to persuade individuals who have yet to form strong attitudes toward a subject. A famous example includes the 1960 presidential election between Democratic candidate John F. Kennedy and Republican candidate Richard Nixon. In the early 1960s, a television set could be found in most American households. The televised presidential debate was the first in history and showed a young, collected Kennedy arguing with a sickly, yet knowledgeable, Nixon. Viewers noticed these peripheral cues and thus began the tug-of-war campaign lead between the two candidates. Ultimately, John F. Kennedy became president for several reasons, but arguably the most influential factor was the first televised debate.

Framing is a process in which messages are communicated from a biased standpoint. Instead of reporting in full disclosure, the material is conveyed to support only one side of an argument. Experiments on framing effects (Bizer, 2011) prove that negative framing is more likely to induce a more emotional response than positive framing, which in turn causes inoculation among viewers who have developed strong attitudes. News framing in particular has been the subject of scrutiny for many scholars. For the purpose of this paper it is important to study news framing as a way of persuasion. War communications and federal affairs can seem positive or negative depending on which news station is reporting.

Government officials and journalists titled the invasion of Iraq following the
attack on 9/11 the “War on Terror” because it dehumanized the situation. America stands for liberation and freedom, so it would not make sense to invade a tiny country to inflict punishment on innocent people for the acts of one terrorist group. By coining the phrase “War on Terror,” it was easier to mask the realities of the war and ultimately rallied support for the invasion following the devastating attack on the World Trade Center. This is important because “the study of news media effects on thinking about politics inherently links individual cognitive processes to the collective. More important, these individual cognitive processes are likely to have important implications for the well-being of the collective, including how informed it is and the basis of public opinion...” (Eveland, 2007, p. 309). In the early weeks of the Iraq invasion by the United States, news outlets used a variety of visual framing (Schwalbe 2008) to further the government’s efforts to build encouragement for the war. The use of video footage, photos, video interviews, sounds of explosions, images of Ground Zero and maps hastily settled the shock of the initial attack and thus began the call for defense against terrorism. Many TV stations even used a split-screen video effect to show the crumbled Twin Towers in the background while reporting on the families that were directly affected, public safety officials who were on the scene and academics who offered their expert opinions on the tragedy (Scheufele 2005). By providing a visual perspective, attitudes became stronger due to the overwhelming emotion caused by the visual cues. Instead of centrally processing the information (the United States had declared war), audiences focused on the sorrow surrounding those directly impacted by the attack, on the photos of Al-Qaida’s members who evoked such violence and on repetitive video footage of the attack on the Twin Towers. Although less obvious, this is
another form of news framing. A contextual analysis of news content from Fox News (Harmon 2009) during the month following the first anniversary of the attack on 9/11 revealed heavy news framing that supported the Bush administration in its decisions on war. Unsuspecting viewers may accept the content from Fox News at face value and thus form attitudes about the war based on that content.

Framing does not only come in the form of the content itself, but also from the source of the content. This is where peripheral cues affect the source likeability. Previous studies (Roskos-Ewoldsen, Bichsel & Hoffman 2002) have found that the more likable a source is, the more likely people are willing to listen and accept the message. A news anchor’s age, years of experience and even personality can be assets or hurdles. The more people who like the source, content topics and overall news station representation the higher the ratings will be and higher likeliness that the content will promote attitude formation. It is also important to note that viewers may be more susceptible to content that is delivered by someone who is thought to be credible (Brewer 2007).

For example, Anderson Cooper, a journalist and TV personality who hosts his own news segment on CNN, has a dedicated following. His personality traits and reputation add credibility to information he delivers, thus inoculating his followers against others who deliver counter arguments. When news personalities like Cooper become popular, it is possible for that single person to sway public opinion based on the size of his or her following. Many are concerned that news content is only focused on death, sorrow and disgust. One way to battle that negative stigma is to create news programs with hosts so viewers can identify with a person instead of focusing on the
content alone.

**Propaganda**

Propaganda holds a negative connotation because people seem to feel cheated or tricked into believing something they may not have believed if it were not for the propaganda tactic. In the Depression Era, government officials used mass communication through media and entertainment channels to persuade Americans into supporting World War I and II. The New International Webster’s Standard Dictionary (2006) defines propaganda as: “information designed to promote a cause or point of view,” while the online version of Merriam-Webster says:

- 2: the spreading of ideas, information, or rumor for the purpose of helping or injuring an institution, a cause, or a person
- 3: ideas, facts, or allegations spread deliberately to further one’s cause or to damage an opposing cause; also: a public action having such an effect

Propaganda is a communication strategy to used to sway public opinion in one direction or another for purposes of strategic function.

War propaganda is a complicated concept that scholars have studied to determine its numerous affect on public opinion. The slogan “War on Terror” is undoubtedly a contributor to war propaganda. A news content analysis (Plaisance 2005) of the weeks following the attack on September 11, 2001 revealed that U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell naming Charlotte Beers, a decorated advertising executive, as the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs called upon to rebrand American policy with a goal to sell the war as a product. Beers persuaded foreign-service corps that informing people about the devastation on 9/11 should be a
significant strategy in foreign-policy decisions and provided an informational pamphlet of the attack with excruciating detail, complete with grim photos, and an update to the website of the State Department that defended Muslim-Americans who were just as affected by the attack as everyone else (Plaisance 2005). The Beers-led public relations plan proved instrumental in shaping how foreigners would view the war. The media also provided a forum between U.S. government officials and the American people that offered insight into public opinion for those interested the news coverage of the war (Farmanfarmaian 2002). This dialogue provided a compelling story and encouraged foreign sympathy for America. A Time Magazine article describes the “War on Terror” as a propaganda war:

“"It is a war fought in news studios in Qatar and with editorials, sermons and press conferences. It is a war that the U.S. needs to fight not only to stanch the supply of extremists willing to die to murder Americans but also to shore up nervous moderate Arab allies, who fear their people may turn on them for supporting the bombing of Muslims." (Poniewozik, Cooper, Waller, Lofaro, Moaveni and Radwan, 2001)

Ideas like these offer proof that the invasion of Iraq, discussion of weapons of mass destruction and proximal guesses to the whereabouts of Osama Bin Laden were all part of the strategic communication plan to justify the 10-year war on terror.

Propaganda comes in many forms and may not be as obvious as past propaganda tactics. Source likability and framing can also be used in a strategic manner for the purpose of propaganda with the use of fictional characters.

“"The conceptual framework that humans regard as their “real-world knowledge”
largely consists of information mediated through stories (e.g. Cinderella, Momotarou the Peach Boy, news items), featuring people they have never met (e.g., politicians) or who do not exist (e.g., faked identities in chat boxes), and broadcasting events they did not witness (e.g., World War II) or that never happened (e.g., a virus hoax). Whether such stories are fictional or not, people learn about the outside world from them and frequently build up affective relationships with the characters, sometimes undertaking action to seek or avoid interaction” (Hoorn and Konjin, 2003, p. 250).

With an exponential increase in media intake including but not limited to user-generated content, like YouTube, 200+ television channels and social media, it is not surprising that more and more people are developing parasocial interaction. This psycho-sociological phenomenon refers to the emotionally compelling experience of media figures and fictional characters by individuals (Greenwood 2011).

To build upon a previous example, a percentage of Anderson Cooper's followers have undoubtedly formed an emotional connection to him. That connection may be based on romance, respect or admiration. This observable relationship stems from hours upon hours of face-to-face contact with the media figure via a television, movie or computer screen. A certain level of involvement must be present in order for the equation to equal parasocial interaction with a media figure (Hoorn 2003). According to Greenwood (2011), “by conceptualizing imagined intimacy within the bounds of normative interpersonal interaction, we can fully appreciate both the mass appeal of the media culture and the specific social psychological uses and gratifications that motivate engagement with mass media figures. And, by examining interpersonal
engagement with media figures in the context of existing interpersonal tendencies and circumstances, we can clarify the powerful role that media figures stand to play in individuals’ social and emotional well-being” (p. 279).

Media figures and fictional characters, such as Anderson Cooper or Captain America, can be used to achieve framing strategies by playing against the need to belong and imagined intimacies thus creating a stronger, less obvious propaganda tactic. This helps us understand that Captain America can have a more intimate connection with fans than previously considered.

**America and Superheroes**

American history is riddled with underdog stories. These defining aspects of the American experience are most likely a reflection on the bravery of the European colonists to pursue independence, maintain their culture and practice their religions (which are also packed with underdogs who come out on top, but that topic is saved for a later study) in the New World; of the founding of the United States with the Declaration of Independence of 1776 and of the few who took action to make a difference for the greater good. The original 13 colonies have grown into 50 states, 5 major territories and 11 minor outlying islands that have become one of the most influential and powerful countries in the world. The U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights are what set the United States apart from other countries. Essentially, the people have power to speak freely against the government and to live freely as they choose.

This notion of freedom continues to be found in stories, entertainment and news of all kinds. Not a day goes by that Americans do not exercise their freedoms through one outlet or another. The importance of this freedom is reflected in everything people
hear, say and speak. If hardships and evil were nonexistent, it would be easy to take freedom for granted. The media, entertainment and political fields constantly remind us that a free nation is a threat to other nations, and those nations could be planning a way to take that freedom away. The only way to ensure freedom continues is to protect it through knowledge, preparation and sometimes battle.

American culture, entertainment and media celebrate the hero. The hero is almost always the protagonist in a story, defeats those who threaten freedom and maintains humility after the fact. Popular culture abounds with stories about heroes who took action to do something extraordinary under pressure when no one else would, someone who performed with ease in the face of adversity and who conquered fear and evil with undeniable bravery. America commemorates heroes of all races, sizes and ages, which makes heroes broadly relatable. Real-life heroes include police forces, firemen, doctors, athletes, artists, activists, religious leaders, soldiers and so on. These people save lives, stand for causes that are meant to benefit everyone and dedicate their time and resources to assist others in need. Heroes are held to a standard that few can reach.

So how do we define a superhero? Superheroes are extensions of the real-life heroes read about in newspapers, seen on television and heard about from others. They inhabit the characteristics of real-life heroes with the addition of something extraordinary. The easiest way to describe a superhero is to discuss his or her specialty power, advanced technology and/or strength of character and values. One scholar explains:

“Superheroes are by and large not upholders of the letter of the law; they are not
law enforcement agents employed by the state. The set of values they traditionally defend is summed up by the Superman tag of Truth, Justice and the American Way. Sometimes the last term has been interpreted in a narrowly nationalistic way... but far more often... has stood for the ideals enshrined in the US Constitution.” (Reynolds, 1992, p. 74)

Superheroes fight supervillains with super powers or super weapons for similar reasons real-life heroes protect people. They protect ideals and defend those who cannot defend themselves to maintain justice and balance. Breaking it down even further, one could say that the super part of a superhero is that his or her gains and losses are greater than those that we experience in our daily lives (Fingeroth, 2004).

When reading superhero comic books, the reader can see the superhero’s thoughts and struggles through the text and pictures on the page. The reader gets a sense of the character’s complexities, because he may be thinking one thing, but saying another in order to reassure another character while concealing his own feelings or because he is in denial. The reader begins to learn the character’s personality through body language, thoughts and reactions. After reading a couple of comic book issues, the reader will be confident in his or her assessment of the character’s personality.

Regardless of the reader’s like or dislike of the character, a connection has been made because he or she may feel as if they personally know the character. When meeting new people, humans are not always open, accepting or comfortable. It is only after learning others’ experiences, watching their interactions with others and building trust that newcomers are welcome. The same type of process is necessary for readers to accept a character in a story, but the difference is that the character does not learn
about the reader for a mutual connection. This is how parasocial interaction is formed. People spend dozens of hours reading comic books, then more hours discussing the storylines with other fans. In addition, superheroes are found on websites, in movies as well as other media outlets. The extended exposure of the superhero gives the reader a deeper connection with the character that results in a perceived relationship (friendship, romantic interest, role model, etc.). The perceived relationship almost creates vulnerability, an emotional response to messaging.

For example, Captain America is a literally a defender of American freedom. He is a walking, talking American flag with an admirable set of values. Spending time reading his comics, watching his movie and listening to others reflect on Captain America could eventually cause the fan to adopt a Captain America-like affinity. This goes for any fictional character or media figure. Enough time spent with someone admirable (fictional or not) will begin to reflect on one’s personal resemblance. Danny Fingeroth sums this idea up in the afterword of his book, *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us about Ourselves and Our Society* (2004) saying:

> Perhaps the flaw is thinking of media and entertainment as separate from our lives. Given the ubiquitous nature of media and fantasy images, there is no longer a clearly defined dividing line between the two. Perhaps what superheroes really tell us about ourselves and our society is that reality informs fantasy, fantasy informs reality, and we have to careful how we choose our heroes and our values. Sooner or later, realities will confront us that we, both personally and as a society, will have to deal with on our own, with no superhero there to swoop in to save the day. We each have to become our own superhero.
Captain America and the American Dream

Captain America’s story begins in 1940 in the minds of creators Joe Simon and Jack Kirby and continues today. The two Jewish Americans were repulsed by the actions of Nazi Germany. They retaliated by creating Captain America, who defeats the Red Skull, a villain directly linked to Adolf Hitler. “Cap” became an American icon embedded in popular culture and lived on through the media, literature and entertainment.

The Captain America tale begins during World War II in Brooklyn, New York where young Steve Rogers dreams of nothing more than protecting his country from the Axis Powers by joining the military, like his close friend, James Buchanan Barnes. Recruitment officers in several cities reject Rogers’ enlistment papers because of his small stature and poor health. Chester Phillips, the fictional U.S. attorney general, appreciates Rogers’ persistence and passion and offers him an opportunity to become the first of an army of Super Soldiers via “Operation: Rebirth,” a risky experiment meant to create physically superior soldiers. Rogers accepts and is chosen to be the first test subject. He is then injected with the “Super Serum” that is meant to create a larger, faster and stronger version of Steve Rogers through a controlled burst of “Vita-Rays” that initiate and stabilize the serum into his cellular makeup. During the experiment, a Nazi spy disrupts the injection sequence by assassinating Abraham Erskine, who would be the only person who could duplicate the serum from memory, and stealing the ready-made Super Serum. In a twist of fate, Rogers’ transformation is already complete, and he is free to test his new abilities while chasing down the gunman and serving
justice. He then begins his journey as Captain America, a counter-intelligence agent and a propaganda tool against the Red Skull, who is the head of Nazi terrorist operations.

The development of an arch-nemesis, in this case the Red Skull, is just as important as the creation of a hero because the two go hand in hand. Without a villain, the hero cannot achieve greatness or growth. The Red Skull’s thirst for power can be seen through his impeccable political, manipulative and scientific abilities. In the story, the Red Skull received training from Adolf Hitler himself. His success as a terrorist forced the United States to create Captain America in response. His partnership with Nazi geneticist Arnim Zola proved to be a worthy match. The duo created futuristic devices and strategies fueled by the Cosmic Cube, a reality-altering mechanism, to wreck havoc along their journey to world domination.

Despite the Red Skull’s technological advances and evil schemes, Captain America and his sidekick, Bucky (a.k.a. James Buchanan Barnes) defeated him again and again. The tension between Captain America and the Red Skull became irrelevant, however, as World War II ended. Both superhero and villain became frozen in time after their final battle of the 1940s. Captain America was blown off of Baron Zemo’s explosive plane, knocked unconscious and frozen in a glacier somewhere in the North Atlantic, while the Red Skull is also blown up and left under the remains of a bombed building only to be exposed to an experimental gas. Both remained ‘stuck’ until rescued in a modern setting when their rivalry was more relevant and reflective of society at the time.

The modern story arc between the Red Skull and Captain America is further proof that comic book authors interpret current affairs through their work. In the
comic books printed after the attack on 9/11, the Red Skull no longer fights "Cap" and his colleagues face to face. Instead, the Red Skull recruits other supervillains to carry out his evil bidding. In current years the Red Skull has resembled Osama Bin Laden in his ability to persuade others to die for his cause while he hides in his high-tech fortress that is so well hidden, that not even satellite imagery can locate his whereabouts. The Red Skull continues his war against Captain America, but instead of engaging in face-to-face battle, he strategically plans from afar. Comic book authors still use modern political unrest and real-life villains to continue their propaganda storylines.

It is only fitting that Captain America be frozen in time, because his victory signified an end to the war, and allowed preservation of his life until he was needed again. As the fighting ended, Americans focused on fulfilling the American Dream. As soldiers returned from war, mass production and pent up consumer demand encouraged people to spend and the Baby Boom began. A new independence among women and youth made them targets for consumer products; the end of the war marked the end of the Great Depression and the advertising business exploded. The timing of these three factors provided an achievable American Dream for most Caucasian Americans. But, what exactly is the American Dream? It is widely accepted that James Truslow Adams coined the term in his book *The Epic of America* in 1931. Adams explains:

“...That American dream of a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank, which is the greatest contribution we have made to the thought and welfare of the world. That dream or hope has been present from the start. Ever since we became an independent nation, each generation has seen an uprising of ordinary Americans to save that dream from the forces which appeared to be
The notion of the American Dream coupled with America’s love for the underdog is a recipe for hope that anyone in any situation can achieve happiness through hard work and perseverance. The goal is to rise above the current situation in hopes of a better life. American culture, media and entertainment are overflowing with idea of the American Dream.

III.

Methodology

The best way to analyze Captain America, his importance to the American Dream and the reflection of American society is to analyze the Captain America comic books. Over the years, several authors and artists have given, taken and added to the story of Captain America, thus making this process even more insightful. Captain America is the creation of one partnership between a writer and art director, but the product of many. Because Marvel owns the rights to the Captain America character, other Marvel writers and artists can create their own story arcs for the characters, thus providing more than one perspective on Captain America. Comic books provide dialogue and visual content, as well as perspective of the writers and the characters themselves. A deconstruction of the comic books provides an insightful examination of Captain America’s story and its importance to American society. A closer look at the relationships between the characters through a symbolic interaction theoretical lens provides a scholarly investigation of the overall Captain America story arc provided from more than one team of writers and artists.
Deconstruction

The term “deconstruction” carries a negative connotation. It does not refer to destruction or to taking something apart, but instead refers to a form of textual analysis and criticism developed by postmodern scholars to explain reality, culture, communication and media. It is an alternative method used to explore complicated philosophies. “Deconstruction arises in philosophy as reading of philosophical texts against the grain of the philosophical tradition, contesting its hierarchical binary oppositions (meaning/form, soul/body, inside/outside, speech/writing, and so on) by exploring how they are already deconstructed—shown to be constructions—by the texts that assert or depend on them” (Culler, 2007).

Deconstruction encourages readers to challenge the author to ultimately create a better definition through a give and take relationship. As a tool for analysis, it “requires that traditional concepts, theory, and understanding surrounding a text be unraveled, including the assumptions that an author’s intentions and meanings can be easily determined” (Denzin, 1994, p. 185). It is important to note that an absolute truth may not exist and that any proven truths may be only one of many or one level of another truth. A true definition does not exist because endless meanings exist, so the best definition is the one that has been explored by the most people with the most diverse philosophies. Faulconer (1998) suggests a practical perspective on what deconstruction means:

Deconstruction does not assume that once its work has been done everything will have been included. That would be impossible. It doesn’t even assume that its work will result in the inclusion of more than previously included; it doesn’t
assume that its work will make things better. That remains to be seen in each case. In sum, deconstruction doesn’t assume that there is, even if only in principle, an end to the work of deconstruction. The point of deconstruction is to show where something has been omitted, not because of the blindness of the author... but because that is the way things are. (p. 5)

Because few scholars have decided to observe the comic book universe, it is obvious that anything I propose will only be of philosophies not found in scholarly research. It does not make them right or wrong or anything else definite; instead it invites discussion of a world that has yet to be explored. The discussion portion of this thesis is meant to offer an analysis of Captain America comic books and propose an argument for his importance in American popular culture.

**Symbolic Interaction Theory**

The literature review has already presented background information on symbolic interaction theory; therefore this section will focus on why it is important to the method. Symbolic interaction can be used to help explain the relationship between psychological cues and social behavior. Comic book readers not only mentally process the storyline, illustrations and perspectives in the fictional tales, but they also react socially by joining groups, attending events and holding discussions related to comic books. Deconstructing important pages in the Captain America comic books will help build a case to support the proposed research question.

Symbolic interactionism originated from the early studies of American sociologists and psychologists who focused on the how individuals interpret reality (Solomon 1983). Many scholars focus on actual or “real” relationships between living
people instead of relationships between fictional characters. However, given the important role fiction-based popular culture plays, this aspect demands further attention. “Relationships between material cues and social behavior are approached by melding symbolic interactionism theory from sociology with the empirical work of consumer researchers. It is believed that such an approach will allow assets of each perspective to compensate for deficits in the other” (Solomon, 1983, p. 320).

Since comic books are written and illustrated by real people who use real-life events and popular culture to create fictional characters and stories, it is possible to analyze a unique perspective of real people from fictional literature. The relationships between the characters in comic books are just as important as any relationships between nonfictional people living today, especially when those fictional stories reflect how readers may interpret the world around them.

Captain America interacts with S.H.I.E.L.D. officials, the CIA or FBI of the Marvel universe, the president of the United States, Iron Man, the Einstein of technology and fellow superhero, Sharon Carter (Agent 13), a love interest and peer, Bucky Barnes, the new Captain America and old sidekick to Steve Rogers and so on. All of these relationships reveal different sides to Steve Rogers and Captain America that are important in analyzing this specific interpretation of the American Dream. It is also important to note that throughout the Captain America story, two people take on the role of superhero. Steve Rogers is first, but when he dies, Bucky continues the Captain America persona. The symbolism behind the death of Steve Rogers, the internal struggle to take on the role Captain America and the resurrection of Steve Rogers as Captain America provides insight into American culture. How could Captain America,
the epitome of the American Dream, die from gunshot wounds? What does it mean that Bucky tries to take his place and dies in the process? How does the resurrection of Steve Rogers reflect the American Dream today?

**Captain America Materials**

A deconstruction and symbolic interaction analysis of the text and illustrations in Captain America comic books printed after the attack on the Twin Towers is the most useful way to explore why Captain America is more important today than before. The relationships he forms with friends, colleagues and love interests can all provide insight into his true character. A detailed analysis of his costume enables insight into his personality because he wears his values not just like a uniform, but also like armor. The perspectives in the illustrations and dialogue as well as the storyline by the writers and artists, also present particularized meaning that can help explain Captain America’s importance in American culture.

In order to get the most important parts Captain America’s story, I will summarize several comic books by various writers and illustrators to provide a background and history. For the purpose of this paper, it is important to know the story of Captain America’s beginning, growth, end and rebirth. The summary will include a more detailed tale of Captain America’s involvement in Mark Millar’s *Civil War* series, in which Captain America stands against Iron Man’s endorsed Superhero Registration Act, Ed Brubaker’s *The Death of Captain America* series, in which Captain America dies and a new Captain America takes his place and Matt Fraction’s *Fear Itself* series, in which the new Captain America dies and a recovered Steve Rogers reclaims his Captain America title.
I have chosen several pages from these comic books to weave into the summary for an in-depth analysis of Captain America’s importance to the America Dream as well as in popular culture. I will discuss the point-of-view, juxtaposition, dialogue, symbolism, character interaction, movement and color presented by the authors and artists to provide a well-rounded argument.

IV.

Results

After reading and rereading the hundreds of pages in Captain America comic books to really gain an understanding of the storyline by different authors, I have chosen 15 pages, five from Mark Millar’s Civil War, five from Ed Brubaker’s The Death of Captain America and five from Matt Fraction’s Fear Itself, that can be used to reflect on the state of the American Dream after the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001. The first of the three groups of comic book pages focus on the state of Captain America after 9/11, the second focus on Captain America’s death and how that affects the Marvel universe and the last group focus on the resurrection of Steve Rogers as Captain America. Later I will discuss how all of this affects readers’ perception of the American Dream, why Rogers’ role in these series is more important now than it was during World War II and what this means for future generations.

V.

Discussion

This work deconstructs three Captain America series by three different authors to develop an in-depth analysis of the superhero’s personality, appearance, relationships and character, and how these concepts can affect the American Dream.
Each series will be its own section and will discuss in detail five pages from the comic books in that series. A summary of each series will be presented at the beginning of each section to provide a background for those unfamiliar with the series. Then a short overview of details will accompany each comic book page to put the deconstruction in context. Each page will also be accompanied by a detailed analysis of dialogue, artwork, character interpretation and symbolism. Finally, each section will end with an analysis of the storyline and an examination of how it could affect the readers’ perception of the American Dream.

**Captain America after 9/11: Millar’s Civil War**

Captain America becomes a leading character in a civil war with other Marvel superheroes led by Iron Man. After an accident caused by a renegade superhero team that left a small Connecticut town crippled with civilian death, a crumbling infrastructure and anger towards superhumans, the government along with Tony Stark (a.k.a. Iron Man and leading technological warfare developer) propose the Superhuman Registration Act that would force all superheroes to register with the Strategic Hazard Intervention Espionage Logistics Directorate (S.H.I.E.L.D), a government secret service agency that works with superhumans, report their true identities and submit to regular government training sessions to ensure public safety and accountability.

Initially, Captain America is opposed to the act and leads his own team of superheroes and supervillains, the Secret Avengers, against Iron Man and his followers. After several devastating battles with Iron Man’s group, the loss of a close teammate and the realization that the Civil War was destructive to the American people (citizens were forced to hide, scared and worried about the damage caused by the battles),
Captain America shamefully surrenders. He is arrested by S.H.I.E.L.D. as his civilian identity, Steve Rogers, and taken to a holding cell to wait for his court date. All superhumans will then be registered under the new act, but a few of Rogers’ followers remain opposed, forming an underground movement. Tony Stark is credited with the dawn of a “New America” where superhumans work with the government to solve the world’s problems beyond law and order.

_Civil War: Part 1, Page 25_

After the accident in Connecticut, Maria Hill, head of S.H.I.E.L.D., approaches Captain America at S.H.I.E.L.D headquarters. They are not friends. Commander Hill knows Captain America is unlikely to support the Superhuman Registration Act, but annoys him with questions about how it will affect any rebels. She then explains that S.H.I.E.L.D. is already planning to arrest rebellious heroes using The Avengers, a group of superheroes led by Tony Stark and Captain America. When Cap refuses to arrest superheroes who “risk their lives for this county every day of the week,” Hill questions his loyalty to the American people. As the conversation gets more heated, Commander Hill orders her hero hit squad to tranquilize Captain America, but they fail and he escapes.

The first frame in Figure 1 (Civil War: Part 1, Page 25) is a close-up of Captain America pushing his shield through the hit squad. Even with their full-body armor, the soldiers are not as thick as Cap with his skin-tight uniform. Pieces of their shattered face guards float through the air as Cap breaks through the man-made wall in front of the glass walls of the S.H.I.E.L.D. helicarrier. The soldiers’ reflexes are not fast enough to react to Cap’s escape. Cap’s anger and disgust for the government agency is evident
Figure 1. (Civil War: Part 1, Page 25)

MARIA HILL TO ALL UNITS: STOP CAPTAIN AMERICA! I REPEAT: STOP CAPTAIN AMERICA!
in his facial expression, his teeth are clenched, his lips are parted with struggle and his eyes are averted downward as he blasts through the soldiers. He wants to be free of not only the soldiers blocking his escape, but also of the government that is tightening its grip on his freedom.

In the second frame, their guns and bodies fly every which way as the reader’s perspective is moved to ground-level now behind Commander Hill as she witnesses the carnage and requests backup. The highly trained soldiers, prepared for this exact scenario, are no match for Captain America’s skills and experience. He has decades of battle with the most notorious supervillains under his belt, so unless these soldiers have been training just as long to stop him, they don’t stand a chance.

The final frame shows “Cap” diving through the glass wall to his freedom. The reader’s perspective puts Cap breaking though from above as if we had to look up to see him escape. All of the glass is pointed outward as if the momentum from Cap’s jump will propel the pieces away from us indicating that we will not be harmed by looking up at his escape. Now that Cap has officially taken a stand against the government-supported registration act by breaking through the glass wall, his uniform has lost its red and blue color. The shadows make it seem as if “Cap” has lost the red and blue in his uniform, thus losing the symbolism behind a red, white and blue suit, which may explain that he is not the same Captain America that always fought for American freedom. Instead he is confused, angry and lost. Although the red stripes and blue chest have turned black, the red gloves remain the same. The red gloves may indicate that he is leading his escape with rage and anger because red is symbolic to those emotions. The rest of his uniform is black during the escape, which may foreshadow Cap’s shame
in the end for not defending what is best for the American people, thus the disappearance of the red and blue in his uniform.

Civil War: Part 3, Page 17

Captain America and his three right-hand men, Goliath, Hercules and Daredevil discuss how the registration act has changed their lives in a café while using their civilian secret identities when they hear of an emergency. They call the rest of their group and rush to a burning chemical plant only to find that Iron Man and his followers have set a trap. Several members of Cap’s group are defeated and captured, after their teleport escape plan fails. Iron Man pleads with Cap to end the rebellion and rejoin S.H.I.E.L.D. because it’s the only way superheroes can coexist safely with the public’s interest in mind.

Captain America’s body language indicates that he does not trust Iron Man in the first frame Figure 2 (Civil War: Part 3, Page 17). His stance is wide and tense, his head is slightly tilted back as he looks down his nose at Iron Man and replies with, "You mean a surrender? Thanks, but I think I’d rather take my chances." Cap’s statement may indicate that he believes he is above the idea of surrender. Spider-Man pleads with Cap only to be scorned for his publicity stunt in revealing his true identity and endangering pleads with Cap to end his family by doing so.

Iron Man lifts his facial armor to appeal to Cap again in the fifth frame. The lifting of his mask may indicate his plea for friendship and to show that he is trustworthy by not protecting his face, knowingly providing a kill shot to Cap. He explains that the ways of the superhero must evolve with society, as citizens demand accountability from superheroes. He asks for Cap’s trust and a chance to explain his
Figure 2 (Civil War: Part 3, Page 17)

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YOUR PAYMasters GOING SOFT, TONY?

WE DON’T COME HERE TO ARREST YOU, CAP. I TALKED S.H.I.E.L.D. INTO OFFERING YOU ONE FINAL AMNESTY.

YOU MEAN A SURRENDER?

THANKS, BUT I THINK I’D RATHER TAKE MY CHANCES.

DON’T TALK TO ME ABOUT PRINCIPLES, SPIDER-MAN. I SAW THAT LITTLE STUNT YOU PULLED ON TV. IS MARY JANE HAPPY ABOUT THE SANDMAN HAVING HER ZIP CODE NOW?

AW, C’MON. THE ONLY PEOPLE WHO WIN WHEN WE'RE FIGHTING EACH OTHER ARE THE BAD GUYS, BIG MAN. THIS GOES AGAINST EVERY PRINCIPLE YOU EVER BELIEVED IN.

CAP, PLEASE. I KNOW YOU'RE ANGRY. I KNOW IT'S AN ENORMOUS CHANGE FROM THE WAY WE'VE ALWAYS WORKED, BUT WE AIN'T LIVING IN NINETEEN FORTY-FIVE ANYMORE.

THE WORLD DOESN'T WANT MASKS AND SECRET IDENTITIES. THEY WANT TO FEEL SAFE WHEN WE'RE AROUND, AND THERE'S NO OTHER WAY TO WIN BACK THEIR RESPECT.

YOU'VE KNOWN ME ALMOST MY ENTIRE ADULT LIFE, CAP. YOU KNOW I WOULDN'T DO THIS UNLESS I BELIEVED IN IT WITH ALL MY HEART.

WE DON'T WANT TO FIGHT YOU JUST GIVE ME THE CHANCE TO TELL YOU OUR PLANS FOR MY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY OVERHAUL.
plan in its entirety. The reader is positioned behind Cap looking forward at Iron Man while he talks. This placement indicates that the reader is a supporter of Cap, not Iron Man, otherwise the position would be more neutral so the reader watched from a distance, seeing equal body parts of both Iron Man and Captain America. The reader can also see the remnants of the chemical explosion behind both characters as they converse, but it looks much worse coming from behind Cap because the flames are right behind him, almost as if emanating from his body, while the flames behind Iron Man are on either side indicating that he is not the cause of the flame, just a bystander. This could be more foreshadowing of Cap’s fault in the chaos.

_Civil War: Part 3, Page 27_

After Iron Man pleads with Captain America to listen to his plan before making any dangerous decisions that will continue the feud between the heroes, Cap answers by using Nick Fury’s electron-scrambler device to shut down Iron Man’s armor. Cap does not trust Iron Man after setting the trap and taking down two of Cap’s men before his arrival. This marks the beginning of the civil war as heroes begin to fight each other. S.H.I.E.L.D. stands by to keep the war within the chemical plant’s perimeter as the heroes plead with each other to surrender. Iron Man reboots his armor while Cap is occupied in battle with Spider-Man. Iron Man attacks Cap from behind, then wears him down by using his high-tech suit, which is equipped with information designed to counter Cap’s fighting style.

Even though Hercules is in a headlock, he still desperately warns Cap of Iron Man’s blindside attack Figure 3 (_Civil War: Part 3, Page 27_). The red ring around his dialogue bubble indicates alarm and struggle to get the words out. Iron Man uses Cap’s
CAPTAIN! BEWARE!

YOU'RE WASTING YOUR TIME, STEVE...

THIS ARMOR HAS RECORDED EVERY PUNCH YOU'VE EVER THROWN.

IT KNOWS YOUR NEXT MOVE BEFORE YOU DO...
body as a shield as he rams through the concrete wall. Cap loses his uniform color again as he picks himself up from the ground. It seems that when he is losing a fight, rebelling against the people or forgetting any of his values, his uniform turns black and white. It is almost as if he is not worthy to wear his own uniform of red, white and blue, which would again foreshadow Cap’s guilt in the end for fighting against not only his superhero friends but also the will of the American citizens.

The final three frames on this page show Iron Man as he throws a powerful fist into Cap’s right hip, another to the left side of Cap’s face, and then another fist to the right side of Cap’s face. As this is happening, Iron Man explains to Cap that his armor has recorded every punch Cap has ever made and that he can now anticipate his own moves before they are thrown. The reader sees two angles, one from behind Iron Man as if supporting the first blow to Captain America’s face and another from a more defensive angle as Iron Man’s fist follows through the second punch. The reader sees Iron Man’s fist as if it were being thrown at the reader’s face. The first punch to Cap’s face shows Iron Man in a dominant position over Cap with a very good target hit. The second punch shows that Cap is knocked out as he is falling backwards. It also shows that Iron Man is very focused, and the red shadows under his lit eyes indicate pumping adrenaline. This fight is more than a battle between two friends, it may illustrate that modern technology is superior to dated strategies since Iron Man’s chest and eyes glow, indicating a machine far beyond the capabilities of mass-produced technologies. It is also proved superior because it has been programmed to defeat Captain America in hand-to-hand combat.
Iron Man’s ambush left the Secret Avengers so battered and broken that they accepted the help of the unpredictable Punisher, also known as ex-detective Frank Castle, to infiltrate the Baxter Building, a high security prison, and set a plan in motion to free the Secret Avengers who have been captured. Iron Man’s Avengers are growing in numbers as superheroes and supervillains register with S.H.I.E.L.D. while imprisoning anyone who does comply. After the Punisher’s return from a successful infiltration, the group begins discussing the next steps of the prison break. Two supervillains step from the shadows and reveal that they are willing to aid the Secret Avengers against Iron Man and his group. Before anyone can react, the Punisher breaks the silence with the blasting of his guns as he murders the supervillains in the Secret Avengers’ headquarters. Captain America immediately knocks the Punisher to the ground with an angry punch to the face. Cap delivers several more blows as the Punisher pleads that his actions were justified because the supervillains are “thieves and killers” and refuses to defend himself against Cap.

In Figure 4 (Civil War: Part 6, Page 17) Cap demands that the Punisher stop talking and continues to lay blow after blow into his face and head. In the first frame, Cap yells for the Punisher to “SHUT UP!” as he lands a hard boot to the Punisher’s jaw. Castle flies backward, mouth open and blood spattering. We can tell that Castle is not fighting back by the position of his arm. It is only moving from the momentum of Cap’s blow to his face. The second and third frames are infused together but cut in half to maintain symmetry across the entire page. Here Cap uses the edge of his shield to slam the back of Castle’s head so that it ricochets into Cap’s thrusting knee. Again, it is clear
that Castle is not on the defensive because his arms are back in a way that almost
indicates that he allows the beating. This is almost surreal because readers have never
seen Cap allow his anger to erase all judgment. This is also the first time in the story
that Rogers snaps, uncontrollably beating the life out of Castle, which illustrates anger
so intense that “Cap” loses of control.

The background shows two massive computer screens with white and grey
static screens. The “snow” on the screens may indicate the end of the partnership
between the Punisher and the Secret Avengers, because when watching a videotape on
a VCR, after the credits finish, the same snowy static envelopes the screen to indicate
that there is nothing more on the tape. The fourth frame on the page shows Cap
smashing the flat part of the shield into the slumping Punisher against a shattered
screen demanding that he fights back. The final photo is a close-up shot of Castle’s
bloody face as he replies, “Not against you.” Those final words from the Punisher and
his lack of defense indicate his undying respect for Captain America. Castle committed
a crime in Cap’s eyes and accepted the punishment without argument.

Civil War: Part 7, Page 25

Cap and the Secret Avengers reach their allies being held captive in the Riker’s Island
penitentiary. Having been betrayed by Tigra, the Secret Avengers walk into another
ambush by Iron Man and his group of registration act supporters at the prison, but this
time they reveal their own secret plan. Hulkling had used his shape shifting ability to
impersonate Dr. Hank Pym to work along side Iron Man on behalf of the Secret
Avengers. Now that both groups are strong in numbers and confident in abilities, an all-
out battle begins. The Secret Avengers take on Iron Man and the pro-registration forces,
OH MY GOSH.
WHAT'S WRONG?

THEY'RE RIGHT. WE'RE NOT FIGHTING FOR THE PEOPLE ANYMORE.
FALCON...

LOOK AT US.
WE'RE JUST FIGHTING.
but destroy New York’s infrastructure along the way. Every superpower and super weapon imaginable collides in destruction. Superheroes and supervillains fly and crash left and right. Battle cries can be heard for miles. The pro-registration forces are joined by the Thor cyborg and Captain Marvel, while Namor and his Atlantean army assist the Secret Avengers. As the battle continues to escalate Captain America and Iron Man, whose armor has been destroyed in battle, exchange powerful blows. As Cap is about to deliver a fatal punch, several American civilians rush to Iron Man’s aid. Police officers, fire fighters and other emergency personnel jump on Cap’s arms and back to prevent him from killing Iron Man. In a rush of emotion, Captain America realizes the damage caused by the battle and ultimately surrenders for the sake of America.

Almost half of the page in Figure 5 (Civil War: Part 7, Page 25) is dedicated to the destruction caused by the battle between the Secret Avengers and the pro-registration group. Thick, black smoke fills the sky from at least seven fires on one block in the city. As the reader looks down at the devastated city, buildings crumbled, cars and buses are damaged and debris fills the streets. An elevated point-of-view allows the reader to almost feel the damage.

This graphic destruction may take readers back to the horrific images of the World Trade Center as it crumbled to the ground immediately following the attack on 9/11. The next frame on the page reveals Cap’s realization as he is still held back by the group of civilians. Suddenly, the anger is gone from Cap’s face and replaced with shock. Falcon, Cap’s right-hand man, approaches to help him, but realizes something has changed. The streetlight in the background glows red, indicating that the fighting and chaos has stopped.
The following frame shows Cap’s shield crashing to the ground. The dust separates in puffs as the heavy defensive weapon indicates Captain America’s surrender. His shield is more than that; it is a symbol of his defense for American freedom, now it rattles against the dirt as it settles in a passive position as the dust settles around it. The settling dust may symbolize the climax of the destructive Civil War between the two groups as the realization hits home for Captain America. The final frame takes Cap’s realization a step further by illustrating his guilt with streams of tears collecting in his mask and running down his face. As if it were not clear enough, Cap’s enlightenment is verbalized as he explains to Falcon that he has forgotten the American people. Cap’s eyes are the brightest blue they have been throughout the entire Civil War series, which may indicate that he finally ‘sees’ the mistakes he has made.

Civil War and the American Dream

During most of the Civil War series, Captain America is angry. He continues to fight for American freedom, his own freedom as a protector without intervention from the government, but fails to fulfill his purpose also as a protector of the American people. He fights an old war against his friends believing he is protecting civil rights and freedom, when in fact, he is really fighting the personal growth necessary to continue his will in a modern America. It is not until the civilian emergency personnel attack him that he realizes the destruction he has caused. The guilt finally washes over him and he surrenders to authorities to await trial. He is so ashamed that he surrenders as Steve Rogers not as Captain America. He no longer believes he deserves the title. He does not blame anyone else but himself. The respect the other characters have for Cap is evident in the way they follow his lead. At first, Cap believed in what he
was defending, so the anti-registration heroes did not question his lead. In the end, though, they just stopped fighting when Cap did.

This series reflects on how the American Dream has wilted. The American people do not trust the government to dig the country out of debt, they do not trust each other and security is at its most excessive. Captain America does not trust the government to fairly regulate superheroes, he does not trust his friends and has resisted change to the strategies that worked for the booming America in the 1940s. It is easy to focus on the War on Terror, the Great Recession and the other depressing issues facing the United States when the media and government officials only highlight the negative parts of life. The lack of trust in the government, lack of hope through the media and lack of support from each other has caused the American Dream to seem beyond reach.

The war coverage from a 24-hour news cycle plus the additional media outlets created a constant flow of negative exposure, which eventually wears down even the most optimistic person. This not only affects mood and behavior, but it also affects attitude. The years of this phenomenon has caused Americans to suffer physically, mentally and emotionally. That constant suffering causes lethargy and a lack of motivation to create a better situation for oneself and one’s family. If people doubt their abilities in a place where dreams are supposed to come true, then they will stop trying to better their lives. If people stop trying, then the wars meant to protect American liberties are wasted. The lack of American pride, lack of rallying support for soldiers and lack of hope for a better future affects what the American Dream means.

Millar’s *Civil War* is a war between allies on American soil that caused innocent deaths,
domestic destruction and fear of each other. It caused Captain America, the heart and soul of the American Dream, to become engulfed in so much distrust and anger that snapped. The American Dream was broken.

**An Icon Dies: Brubaker’s The Death of Captain America**

This series picks up where *Civil War* left off. Upon Steve Rogers’ arrival to the federal courthouse, Crossbones, a supervillain working for Red Skull, snipes Rogers on the courthouse steps. Rogers is then shot three more times at close range by his love interest, S.H.I.E.L.D. agent Sharon Carter, who had been brainwashed by another Red Skull accomplice, Austrian warfare psychologist Dr. Faustus. The Red Skull orchestrated the event using a secret identity by sharing the body of Aleksander Lukin, the wealthy owner of the oil king Kronas Corporation, and uses his wealth and power in an attempt to economically cripple the United States from the inside out by creating chaos for his political puppet, Gordon Wright to solve and gain popularity as a third party presidential candidate. Mad scientist Arnim Zola and Faustus use advanced technology and psychological torture to control key players within the political master plan while Sin, the Red Skull’s daughter, and her henchmen keep the superheroes busy with hand-to-hand combat, confusion and false leads. Iron Man finds a letter that Rogers wrote prior to his death stating that the world needs a Captain America. He wanted Bucky to continue his legacy. While Bucky (a.k.a. Winter Soldier) struggles with filling Rogers role, Sharon struggles with the control of her own mind after she remembers shooting Rogers on the courthouse steps with Zola’s time-travel gun and fights to protect her unborn child with the late Steve Rogers that is later killed in a brawl with Sin. Bucky is challenged playing the new Captain America and leads a small
team to destroy the Red Skull’s plans only for the Red Skull to be transported into one of Zola’s robot bodies instead of being killed.

*The Death of Captain America: Volume 1, Page 17*

As Captain America is being escorted to the courthouse to be sentenced for his crimes during the *Civil War* series, some citizens cheer for his freedom, while others taunt him. Sharon Carter, S.H.I.E.L.D. Agent 13 and Steve Rogers’ love interest, recalls her childhood watching Captain America protect the United States as she stands her post to carry out former head of S.H.I.E.L.D. Nick Fury’s rescue plan for Cap. She also remembers when she began working for S.H.I.E.L.D., met Captain America on a field assignment and fell in love with immediately. Bucky, also know as Winter Soldier and Rogers’ former sidekick, also stands by to execute Fury’s plan. Suddenly, Cap notices a red laser point on one of the escorting police marshal’s back, sees sniper in a distant window and dives in front of the shot before it hits the marshal. Meanwhile, the Red Skull, who is sharing a body with Aleksander Lukin, discusses with Dr. Faustus, a psychological warfare specialist that Rogers was supposed to notice the target and in a noble gesture sacrifice himself. The crowd of civilians panics and scatters as Sharon, Bucky and the two marshals fight through the chaos to reach Rogers slumping body. Almost immediately, three more shots are fired and it seems Rogers has taken those bullets as well.

More than two-thirds of the comic book page, see Figure 6 (*The Death of Captain America: Volume 1, Page 17*), has been dedicated to Steve Rogers’ dying body as Sharon has rushed to his side and as one of the policeman expresses his surprise and anger. Rogers lies on the courthouse steps, which is a place meant to serve justice and to
Figure 6 (The Death of Captain America: Volume 1, Page 17)
protect the American people. The reader looks down on Rogers’ bloodied body with his hands cuffed behind his back.

Three picket signs appear in the frame. Two of the signs read “FREE Captain America,” while the other larger sign reads “Cap Traitor” with the shield in a red circle-backslash symbol. The juxtaposition of the signage causes the reader to question whether or not Rogers’ is guilty. His death will leave the questioned unanswered. Marvel citizens must then decide for themselves. The bottom row of four frames reveals Cap’s final words. As Sharon cries for help, afraid to leave Rogers’ side, his final breath is used to ask Sharon to protect the citizens in the crowd. He struggles in his last request and dies. Sharon hugs him close, tears streaming down her face, sobbing as Rogers no longer moves or breathes.

**The Death of Captain America: Volume 1, Page 112**

Captain America is pronounced dead, Sharon struggles with the realization that she delivered the final three shots at the courthouse while under mind control and Bucky blames the death of his friend on Iron Man and seeks revenge. Dr. Faustus has broken Sharon down in order to control her mind, but she is aware of his presence in her thoughts and fights his orders. The Red Skull, Sin, Dr. Faustus, Aleksander Lukin and Arnim Zola continue their plans to destroy the United States from the inside out through political chaos, slight of hand and scientific experimentation. Bucky has successfully retrieved Cap’s shield by stealing it from the Black Widow, current super S.H.I.E.L.D. agent and love interest to Winter Soldier. While the Black Widow continues to search for Bucky on behalf of Tony Stark, Bucky is on the hunt for Crossbones, supervillain and Cap’s killer, hoping to find the Red Skull behind his death.
The dialogue in Figure 7 (The Death of Captain America: Volume 1, Page 112) consists of Bucky's thoughts. He recollects his past as the Winter Soldier, a time in which the Red Skull's stooges psychologically tortured him so they could control his mind turning him into a lethal pawn, and reflects on how his current goals mirror his assignments as an assassin. He also begins to make connections between the Red Skull and Aleksander Lukin as possible partners in this current situation.

The American flag incorporated in each sequential shot of Bucky's actions. First, he scales a tall building by using an American flag that hangs from the side, a close-up of the stripes are near his face in the second frame, and the reader is positioned above the scene as Bucky readjusts himself on the Kronas corporate building, then the reader is positioned below as Bucky grips the flag and leaps backwards from the building in the fourth shot, the flag follows the momentum of Bucky as he breaks through the glass, while knocking out a guard as he lands inside the building in the fifth shot and finally, the wind blows the flag inside the building as Bucky is determined to find the Red Skull. The use of the American flag is interesting because it represents the independence and freedom of the United States. Bucky, who used to be controlled by the Red Skull, is now free to pursue his own agenda in honor of his murdered friend. Since his plan to avenge Steve Rogers, who is also Captain America and also represents freedom and independence in the United States, the flag could represent the presence of something more than vengeance for Bucky. This could be foreshadowing how Bucky accepts Rogers' final request that Bucky resume the role of Captain America in his absence. Bucky's journey begins as a revenge mission but quickly turns into a mission to protect American freedom as Rogers did.
I GUESS I KNEW SOME DAY I'D HAVE TO MAKE UP FOR WHAT I'VE DONE.

AND TO COLLECT A DEBT BECAUSE OF IT, A DEBT IN BLOOD.

BUT WOULD HE REALLY COLLIDE WITH THE RED SKULL FOR THAT WITH SOMEONE HE HATED?

IT DIDN'T MAKE SENSE AT THE TIME, NOT UNTIL THE CIVIL WAR OVER HERE...

IT'S TIME I FOUND OUT...

THE SKULL'S GIANT DEATHBOT WAS BEING BUILT INSIDE THE TUNNELS OWNED BY LINCOLN'S COMPANY.

NOW IT SEEMS OBVIOUS LINCOLN WAS TRYING TO ADD FUEL TO THAT FIRE.

YET NOW I'M HERE HUNTING SOMETHING ELSE... NOW INITIATING...

STILL, I SAW IT IN LONDON, BUT IT DIDN'T MAKE SENSE...
In pursuit of the Red Skull, Bucky is captured by Crossbones and Sin and then delivered to Dr. Faustus for psychological torment. During his years as the Winter Soldier, Bucky was tortured regularly in similar fashion and had produced a thick mental wall too strong for Dr. Faustus to break through.

Agent 13 (also known as Sharon Carter) helped Bucky escape with the little control she had over her own mind at the time. She released Bucky into the hands of Falcon and Black Widow who turned him over to S.H.I.E.L.D. officials. Bucky was then held in prison until his robotic arm, which was removed for safety precautions, broke out of the lab to reattach to Bucky. He escaped his cell only to pursue Iron Man in search for someone to blame for Rogers’ death. His battle with Iron Man was short-lived when it was revealed that Steve Rogers sent a letter requesting that Iron Man locate Bucky to take over the role of Captain America in the case of his incarceration or death. Bucky accepts Rogers’ request on the condition that he would do so independently of Iron Man, S.H.I.E.L.D. or any other governing body. Iron Man agrees to let Bucky undertake the new role with the assistance of the Black Widow, who has history with the Winter Soldier. Iron Man and Bucky design a new Captain America uniform to accommodate Bucky’s firearms and robotic arm. The Black Widow and Bucky as the new Captain America follow a tip that will lead them to the Red Skull’s henchmen.
Figure 8 (The Death of Captain America: Volume 2, Page 79)
The world sees the new Captain America in action for the first time in Figure 8 (*The Death of Captain America: Volume 2, Page 79*). Bucky and the Black Widow surprise the A.I.M. (Advanced Idea Mechanics) agents working for the Red Skull with an attack. Captain America looks swift and confident as he sprints toward the A.I.M. agents, while he hurls Rogers’ shield. Captain America’s new uniform represents a new man behind the mask. It is a darker, shinier uniform with a new torso design. The metallic look may be to match Bucky’s robotic arm, to drive the newness of a new Captain America or to even look more modern. A modern look also comes with a modern set of values. In *Civil War*, Iron Man accused Steve Rogers of living in the past and continuing to use strategies and theory that worked in the 1940s. Bucky’s new role will allow him to reevaluate a position for Captain America that will work in a modern society. The need for Cap is there, but he may not be needed in the same way as he was in the past.

*The Death of Captain America: Volume 3, Page 71*

The Red Skull continues to set up false attacks on his political puppet, making him seem like a threat to the supervillains, while making him seem dedicated to the American people at the same time. The public and media are distracted by the election while the Red Skull and his team have sent a new menace to preoccupy the new Captain America. Dr. Faustus, Lukin and Zola have successfully awakened Jack Monroe from a 40-year slumber and tampered with his memory to make him believe he is Captain America.

When Steve Rogers first “died” after being blown up on Baron Zemo’s rocket and frozen underwater for a few decades, Jack Monroe took it upon himself to continue the role of Captain America in the 1950s. He had undergone intense plastic surgery to
adopt Rogers’ physique and facial structure. His voice was even reconstructed to sound like Rogers. The experimental super serum that he took caused him to believe everyone was an enemy, even his friends and supervisors. His downward spiral became its worst shortly before Rogers was recovered and revived. Rogers was able to stop Monroe who had successfully gone through treatment and later became Nomad.

Now, Dr. Faustus, Lukin and Zola revived Monroe to orchestrate an assassination attempt on Gordon Wright, who will be rescued by Monroe at the last minute, thus planting doubt in the public for the new Captain America. While training with Falcon, Bucky notices the news on television that reports Captain America saving Gordon Wright from an assassination attempt, concludes the Cap is an imposter and decides to pursue the phony hero. Monroe is expecting Bucky’s arrival with a surprise attack. Bucky is surprised how strong Monroe’s fighting abilities are and is puzzled as to who the imposter could be. As Monroe delivers more pounding blows, he calls Bucky an imposter and threatens his life.

The top frame in Figure 9 (The Death of Captain America: Volume 3, Page 71) shows Bucky in mid-fight hurled from the window with shattered glass all around him. The broken glass bleeds from the originating frame into two of the other pictures on the page indicating that this battle carries over into the following scenes. Bucky’s thoughts indicate that he is questioning his abilities to fill Rogers’ shoes as Captain America. He even doubts his abilities as a fighter. The second scene shows Bucky landing from the blow through the window in a very painful position. He was hit so hard that he could not brace himself for the landing. In the remaining three scenes, Bucky is baffled by his opponent’s strength and is bothered by the absence of the pretender’s identity. The
final scene shows an enraged Monroe pointing wide-eyed at Bucky and warning him to stay put.

The fact that an identically engineered Rogers with more strength is serving Bucky a beating and warning him not to run may be a personified internal struggle that Bucky is having with accepting his role as the new Captain America. Throughout the entire series, most of Bucky’s dialogue is not spoken. Instead the reader sees his thoughts as he fights and interacts with other characters. It is no secret that Bucky is terrified of failing as Captain America, thus tarnishing Rogers’ reputation and disappointing anyone who knew Rogers personally. Now as readers we see a Steve Rogers clone knocking some sense into Bucky at the beginning of his acceptance in becoming the new Captain America. The fear that Bucky had in disappointing Steve Rogers can now be seen in a real fight against an imposter Rogers. Bucky can physically fight his own doubts he has about himself.

_The Death of Captain America: Volume 3, Page 141_

Bucky, Falcon and Black Widow have teamed up to stop the Red Skull and his team of scientists from successfully placing Gordon Wright in the presidential race. Bucky has gone to the presidential candidate debate to watch for another assassination attempt on Gordon Wright. Falcon and Black Widow infiltrate the Red Skull’s secret headquarters to rescue Sharon and find that Dr. Faustus has quit his partnership with the Red Skull, allowing Sharon’s thoughts to become clearer. It is revealed that Sharon is the key to bring Steve Rogers’ mind and spirit back to the present in order to be controlled by the Red Skull for future plans, but she destroys Zola’s device that will allow Rogers’ return. Bucky successfully adverts Sin’s attempt to assassinate Gordon
Wright and wins some respect from the public in doing so. After Sharon's rescue, Falcon and Iron Man discuss her well-being and vow to care for her until she is healthy in honor of Steve Rogers. Bucky and Natasha, also known as Black Widow, watch the news together from the cozy couch as Gordon Wright withdraws his candidacy and as the media celebrates the new Captain America.

In the first three frames in Figure 10 (The Death of Captain America: Volume 3, Page 141), Natasha and Bucky are sitting together on a couch in civilian clothing. Natasha appreciates Bucky's struggle in becoming Captain America. She lovingly reassures him that it will get easier with time, that he is too hard on himself and that someday he will be ready to take on the responsibility without doubt. They share a kiss and hold each other as if they were a couple experiencing new love. The affection and chemistry between them is undeniable and their love for each other is obvious in their body language. They sit very closely together, Natasha wraps her arms around Bucky's neck during their conversation and he embraces her softly with his robotic arm for a sweet kiss.

The following frame is of Time Square in New York City complete with Broadway advertising, buzzing nightlife and tourists. Two of the big screens show Bucky as the new Captain America and one man stands out in the crowd. He is dressed in a suit, traditional slicker and a hat as he walks through Time Square. A thought box embellished with a white star and a faded blue indentation accompanies his thoughts, the same as it did earlier with Jack Monroe's thoughts. He thinks to himself that being Captain America will never be easy, especially in a changing society. He acknowledges that this America is not what it was in the 1940s and 1950s and that it is not his
Figure 10 ([The Death of Captain America: Volume 3, Page 141])

I like this... seeing you like this.

What's frustrated?

I don't think it's ever supposed to be easy, James.

No, Steve just made it look that way.

Struggling with it, this Captain America thing.

You will too.

It's not easy, you think, being Captain America.

It never was. But back in your day at least the world made sense.

Not like this... just so fast, so decadent, so wrong...

This isn't your America... but it will be someday...
America but that someday it would be. It is clear that Captain America must evolve with the changing society in order to remain relevant. Bucky has accepted the responsibility in becoming a Captain America that will serve America in its current needs, not just in the needs it used to have.

**The Death of Captain America and the American Dream**

The entire series follows Bucky in his struggle to become a new Captain America who ultimately updates the original one. He carries a pistol and a gun, wields a robotic arm that allows him to carry Rogers’ shield and struggles with what it means to be Captain America in a modern America. Bucky is still a defender of American freedom, as well as a standard of hope for citizens. He did not easily fill his role and still has doubt of whether or not he can succeed in the end, which is a very relatable feeling to have.

Captain America is no longer unreachable, he is no longer a perfect symbol, but instead he is a realistic version of the war hero who began this journey as a defender. His internal struggles make his successes that much more impressive. Before, Captain America had to overcome physical weakness that was cured by a government-issued serum and has not had much personal growth since then. Now, Captain America must overcome his own battle with self-esteem, an evolved version of his arch-nemesis, the Red Skull, through Sin as well as a new set of problems presented by the modern United States.

This series also reflects a broader concept that America may not stand for the same thing it did in the 1930s and 1940s. It is easy to reflect on American culture in the 1930s because so much time has passed, and so many people have already studied the
era. It is much harder to analyze current American culture because not many people reflect on the present. The United States has changed so much in the last eight decades that it is not possible to apply the definition of what America was to what it has become. War, government regulation and activism have all contributed to the growth and change the United States has experienced. If the country has evolved over all of this time, then it is safe to say that the goals of the people have evolved as well. If goals have changed, then it is time to reflect on and redefine what the American Dream has become.

**The Resurrection of Captain America: Fraction's Fear Itself**

*Captain American Reborn* written by Ed Brubaker, Bryan Hitch and Butch Guice reveals the truth behind Steve Rogers’ death and brings him back to life while Red Skull’s fury in his lost plans and allies in *The Death of Captain America* wreck havoc on the superheroes. The Red Skull works with Crossbones and Sin to take control of Steve Rogers’ body after it is revealed the gun Sharon used to shoot him was really a transport gun sponsored by Doctor Doom that pushed Rogers’ mind into a fixed point in time forcing him to relive the most painful moments of his life. The Red Skull and Steve Rogers fight subconsciously for the control of Rogers’ body while Bucky and the other heroes also try to reach Rogers and rescue the kidnapped Sharon Carter from the Red Skull. The superheroes defeat the Red Skull, kill Crossbones and capture Sin who, was too close to the final blow to her father and now has a red skull. The series ends with Steve Rogers’ glimpse into a fiery future, his reunion with Sharon and a celebration among friends.

*Fear Itself* picks up after Steve Rogers is granted full pardon of his actions during *Civil War* by the American president and appointed the head of national security. The
Superhuman Registration Act is repealed and Rogers reestablishes the Avengers, a
group of superheroes working together against the supervillains in a prior miniseries,
Steve Rogers: Super Soldier, written by Ed Brubaker and Dale Eaglesham.

In Fear Itself Steve Rogers aids the Avengers and Bucky, the current Captain
America, against the most evil of supervillains, the Serpent. It all begins when the Red
Skull performs a ritualistic ceremony during WWII that that causes the Hammer of
Skadi to fall to Earth. The Red Skull is unable to use the hammer’s powers and seals it
away until Sin, the Red Skull’s daughter, finds the Book of the Skull decades later that
allows her to lift the hammer to become Skadi, the Herald of the Serpent. She summons
the Serpent from his underwater prison causing seven extraterrestrial objects to fall to
Earth. The objects are soon revealed as hammers for the Worthy, the Serpent’s seven
essence generals who wreck havoc on Earth.

Meanwhile, Odin, king of the Asgardians (a.k.a. Thor’s father) calls his people
back to Asgard against Thor’s pleading in order to avoid the Serpent’s wrath, leaving
the humans to fend for themselves. As the Worthy create mass destruction, they also
create fear and uncertainty among the humans and superheroes. The more the Worthy
terrorize Earth, the stronger the Serpent becomes. During one battle, Bucky is mortally
wounded by Skadi and Steve Rogers reassumes his duties as Captain America. Odin
prepares to destroy Earth in order to recapture the Serpent before he regains all of his
power but Thor disagrees. As the Avengers split up to fight the Worthy in different
parts of the world, Iron Man requests the use of Odin’s workshop to create weapons
strong enough to fight the Worthy. Captain America leads the remaining Avengers
against Skadi and the Serpent only to be defeated. The fear and loss of hope is so great
that the Serpent is able to break Captain America’s shield in two. Thor decides to return to Earth to fight the Serpent in a final suicide mission with Odin’s personal armor and the Odinsword. Iron Man enlists the help of the dwarves of Svartalfheim to create eight new weapons made for a specific Avenger that are infused with uru, the same material used to make Thor’s legendary hammer. Using Thor’s hammer, Captain America leads a group of armed civilians against Skadi. Odin summons the Worthy’s hammers away, and they are all defeated, while Thor overpowers the Serpent at the cost of his life. The weapons forged in Asgard are returned and melted with the exception of Red She Hulk who retains hers. The superhero and civilian communities mourn Thor and Bucky, and Captain America is presented with his repaired shield that now wears a scar despite its uru infusion.

**Fear Itself: Book 2, Page 24**

The American people have become restless and hostile due to rising unemployment rates, increased cost of living and unfulfilled government promises. Protests turn into riots, families are losing their homes and people live in fear that they have not yet lived through the worst of the storm yet. Sin has summoned the powers of the magic hammer brought to Earth by her father decades ago to become Skadi and release The Serpent from his underwater prison. Iron Man recruits Steve Rogers, The Avengers, Thor and the Asgardians to support the rebuilding of Broxton, Oklahoma by building a new Asgardian city on Earth. Seven celestial objects have fallen to Earth revealing powerful hammers only to be used by certain hands. Thus far the Juggernaut turned into Kuurth, Breaker of Stone; the Hulk turned into Nul, Breaker of Worlds; Titania turned into Skirn, Breaker of Men; and Attuma turned into Nerkkod, Breaker of
Figure 11 (Fear Itself: Book 2, Page 24)

Panel 1:
-closer view of the Asgardian war machine sprouting from the earth

Panel 2:
-remind how far they were willing to go last time
-remember, that was only the beginning

Panel 3:
-show no mercy here
-show no patience for these vermin

Panel 4:
-see them driven before you, beat them and maul them and break them any way you know how.

Panel 5:
-do not stop

Panel 6:
-make them tremble, make them beg.

Panel 7:
-fill them with doubt and panic.

Panel 8:
-riot police on the scene as super-criminal escapees take reports of casualties

Panel 9:
-indicating a total of eight impacts around the world tonight

Panel 10:
-Chinese officials deny reports that

Panel 11:
-mobilized its navy as neighboring governments declared the act as

Panel 12:
-where is captain america? where are the avengers?
Oceans when they touched the magic hammers. The Serpent has called upon the
Worthy to wreck havoc on Earth while Skadi relays a similar message to her Nazi army.
Both call for a war on everyone and everything including children, property and morale
in order to completely destroy everyone and everything on Earth.

The Serpent recalls the previous war on Earth with the Asgardians in Figure 11
(Fear Itself: Book 2, Page 24), and how their defeat will be avoided this time by striking
fear on Earth. He demands that the Worthy show no mercy or patience in order to
make everyone on Earth tremble and beg. His goal is to fill people with doubt and panic.

The first frame shows the Asgardians preparing quickly for war. The second
frame shows supervillains and people running from one of the Worthy while cars fly
and crash around them. She-Hulk runs for her life carrying two small children with her
as she tries to escape Nul, Breaker of Worlds. The final scene is at S.H.I.E.L.D.
headquarters where Steve Rogers, Sharon Carter and Maria Hill helplessly watch the
monitors as numerous news reports describe the terror around the globe. These sit by
while the world begins to crumble as the seriousness of the situation sinks in. It is
unlike the superheroes to be unresponsive in the face of a catastrophe. They at least
throw some kind of plan together until they can come up with something better.

The fact that Steve Rogers is sitting down and Sharon has a dumbfounded look
on her face tells us that the Serpent is unlike any other supervillain we have ever seen.
The entire galaxy is affected by the destruction, fear and chaos caused by the Serpent
and his Worthy, and it is going to take more than Captain America or The Avengers to
solve this one.
Fear Itself: Book 4, Page 10

After learning of the Serpent’s escape and his calling of the Worthy, Odin, king of Asgard, summons his people back to Asgard to begin preparations to burn Earth in order to destroy the Serpent. Thor objects to Odin’s plans and as a result is imprisoned in Asgard. Bucky as Captain America leads Black Widow and Falcon against Skadi in Washington D.C. while Loki, Thor’s brother, breaks him out of prison to confront Odin on behalf of Earth. Steve Rogers leads S.H.I.E.L.D. to figure out who is behind the chaos. Three more Worthy have come into contact with their hammers; Absorbing Man turned into Greithoth, Breaker of Wills; The Grey Gargoyle turned into Mokk, Breaker of Faith; and The Thing turned into Angrir, Breaker of Souls.

Meanwhile in major cities around the globe, the superheroes try to fight the Worthy and protect civilians in any way they can. The Serpent’s strength is regaining faster and faster as Odin recounts the Serpent’s goal to cripple man in fear. It has been affirmed that Bucky has died from the wounds inflicted by Skadi. Nick Fury, Iron Man and Natasha stand over his corpse in sadness and anger. Thor appears to warn them about the Serpent, Worthy and Odin’s plans to destroy them by burning Earth. Nick Fury, former head of S.H.I.E.L.D. suggests that Iron Man, Thor and Steve Rogers join the fight against the Serpent and Worthy before Odin wipes out any chance at victory. Rogers sits in an adjacent room to the morgue and recalls a news report that said, “WE NEED CAPTAIN AMERICA AND THE AVENGERS…”

The red overcast in Figure 12 (Fear Itself: Book 4, Page 10) takes up the entire page. The red light from the room where Bucky’s corpse lies shines through the
Figure 12 (Fear Itself: Book 4, Page 10)
doorway to the adjacent room where Rogers sits in his original Captain America uniform. He sits with his elbows on his knees staring at his Captain America mask as if lost in thought. The light from the morgue muddies the colors of his red, white and blue uniform and shield. He knows that the people cannot handle another dead Captain America. In order to boost confidence and motivation he reaccepts his place as Captain America. He has risen from the dead, defeated the Red Skull and taken on new responsibility as Steve Rogers. He has finally evolved from the old Captain America into a fresh Captain America that will continue to fight for freedom. His clenched fists and frowning brow in the second photo indicate he is not only ready to take on the Serpent and the Worthy but that he is also ready to resume his role as Captain America in a modern sense.

_Fear Itself: Book 5, Page 19_

The Avengers, led by Steve Rogers as Captain America, have continued to rally against the Serpent and his Worthy on behalf of humanity. The Worthy have caused so much damage and fear that the Serpent has finally rejuvenated, raised his dark castle and began advancing on Asgard. Thor attempts to stop the Serpent learning that he is the true exiled king of Asgard only to be cast down to Earth in clutches of Hulk and Thing. Iron Man goes to the fallen Asgard in Broxton to plead with Odin. He convinces Odin to delay the burning of Earth to give man a chance to win the war. In order to even the playing field, he asks to use Odin’s workshop to create weaponry comparable to the Worthy’s hammers and is granted his request. Thor defeats Thing and moves on to continue his battle with Hulk. Meanwhile, Steve Rogers as Captain America leads a team of Avengers in battle against Skadi as the Serpent brings his dark castle upon them.
Figure 13 (Fear Itself: Book 5, Page 19)
claiming Earth as his new kingdom. The Avengers attack the Serpent but not quickly enough as he slams his hammer into the ground causing a mass explosion. Captain America gathers his strength in Figure 13 (Fear Itself: Book 5, Page 19) before throwing his shield to catch the Serpent off guard. Instead of delivering a blow to the villain, the Serpent catches the shield, mumbles some kind of sorcery in an ancient language and shatters the shield with his bare hands. The green overcast on the page indicates the Serpent's growing powers. The more fear and chaos caused, the stronger he becomes. Rogers mustered up the last bit of strength and confidence he had left to hurl his shield at the Serpent only for it to be caught and shattered. This moment in the series not only represents the loss of hope and broken spirits of the Avengers who have continued to fight, but it is also a reflection on how even Captain America's supposedly indestructible shield is not strong enough to defeat a war on terror.

*Fear Itself: Book 7, Page 16*

Thor has collapsed after slamming Hulk with his hammer to the outer stratosphere and is transported back to Asgard. The Avengers begin to fall apart as they each question their abilities, chances of surviving and whether or not time would be better spent with family and friends. Captain America's anger toward the Avengers' loss of faith only motivates him to push forward with a plan to delay the Serpent from settling his kingdom in Broxton by assigning the remaining Avengers to fight the Worthy, while he joins forces with the Broxton civilians until he is joined by backup. Iron Man continues to forge weaponry in Odin's workshop with the help of the dwarves of Svartalfheim that will match the strength of the Worthy's hammer.
Figure 14 (Fear Itself: Book 7, Page 16)

RICK, SIR, RICK, YOU OKAY?

YOU CAME BACK.

KNOW YOU WOULDN'T LET ME DOWN.

IT'S MY TOWN, SOMEBODY HAS TO STAND UP FOR THE PLACE.

BESIDES THE AVENGERS, I MEAN.

I KNEW IT.

I KNEW.

CAP...

I GOT NEWS FOR YOU, BUDDY. WE'RE ALL AVENGERS NOW.
Thor learns that in order to save Earth he must embark on a suicide mission against the Serpent. Thor’s mission reflects the “War on Terror” because the terrorist suicide bombers on the planes that crashed into World Trade Center also knew they would not survive their mission. The difference being that Thor wanted to protect all humans on Earth, while the terrorists wanted to make an example of the United States with their attack.

Odin presents Thor with the Odinsword Ragnarok and Odin’s own personal armor to defeat the Serpent on Earth. Iron Man joins Captain America with eight Avengers equipped with uru-infused weaponry to delay the Serpent and the Worthy from taking over the World Tree in Broxton. The Serpent turns into a giant green snake-dragon monster as Thor approaches with his sword and hammer. The Serpent sends the hammer away, coils its body around Thor and takes a devastating stab from the Odinsword causing a massive explosion.

Captain America awakens from the explosion in Figure 14 (Fear Itself: Book 7, Page 16) and is helped up by one of the Broxton civilians who planned to flee for safety. He is not a superhero, does not possess super strength or speed, does not have much to offer in the way of help, but returned to defend his town in the face of evil. The civilian man ignited a new hope in Captain America as he reaches down to pick up Thor’s hammer, which is not something that can be done under normal circumstances. Thor is the only one who can carry his hammer, but in this war, where everyone must band together to save Earth, it is possible for Captain America to use it in the absence of his shield. This newfound hope is just the beginning of humanity’s regaining confidence. The more confidence they can gather, the less power the Serpent will have.
Captain America leads The Avengers with a new hope while Thor continues to battle the Serpent. The Black Widow, Hawkeye, Mr. Fantastic and Daredevil wield their new uru-infused weaponry against the Worthy with a new confidence. The snowball effect continues as humanity slowly reclaims its faith. Thor delivers a final blow to the Serpent's head just as Odin appears with his warriors to destroy Earth in order to defeat the Serpent before he claimed the World Tree in Broxton. As the Serpent dies, the Worthy's powers returned to their hammers to be destroyed by Odin. In response to Thor's death, Odin casts the Asgardians to Earth and sealed Asgard behind him to guard his brother for the rest of eternity. Thor and Bucky are mourned as the Avengers and human race begin to rebuild their lives.

Figure 15 (*Fear Itself*: Book 7, Page 35) begins to show the daily steps taken to recover from the war against the Serpent and his Worthy. Superheroes, civilians and military personnel gather at Bucky's funeral on Sunday, the dwarves of Svartalfheim are busy destroying the uru-infused weaponry forged for the Avengers on Monday and Iron Man presents Captain America with his uru-infused shield that should be stronger than ever with the enhancements despite the scar left behind by the damage. When Iron Man offers to use his advanced technology to remove the scar, Captain America objects welcoming the scar as a hint of character. The repaired shield represents a new hope for America.

While the shield is the ultimate weapon of defense for a hero who is the defender of American freedom, it is also a representation of the importance of defending that freedom. The scar is a reminder that no matter how powerful a nation or group of
Figure 15 (Fear Itself: Book 7, Page 35)
superheroes becomes it can always be threatened when taken for granted. Cap also says that the scar gives the shield some “character,” which may be a reflection that his new role as the evolved Captain America also has “character” due to the war against the Serpent.

**Fear Itself and the American Dream**

The events in the *Fear Itself* series can be compared to the War on Terror. The Serpent gains power through the amount of fear and panic inflicted on the American citizens. People are so scared and nervous that they begin to turn on each other instead of focusing on the problem. Government officials are forced to protect citizens from themselves as well as maintain order while the media provides its own interpretation of events. These distractions lead to poor solutions and quick fixes that end up costing more and solving less in the long run. The success of humanity against the Serpent lies in the faith a few people had to push forward. The moral of the story is that when at rock bottom, the only way to go is up. Humanity had nothing else to lose, and the faith of a few spread just as easily as the fear inflicted by the Serpent and his Worthy. It is more productive to work together against enemies than it is to point blame. We all have some responsibility in protecting our rights and freedom and cannot expect others to fight our battles because then we do not appreciate that freedom as much.

**Conclusion**

Entertainment and media outlets are tremendous commodities that have the power to shift American morale. The exponential increase of reality television programming, celebrity gossip and user-generated content on the Internet should be enough proof that society’s priorities are changing. It is no longer important to live in a
1950s world where every aspect of life is seemingly perfect and unaffected by negativity.

Comic books provide a reflection of popular culture through a medium that is distinctive and credited for creating the world of the superhero. Increasingly, superheroes are being portrayed in a vulnerable light. The superheroes of yesterday are not the same struggling people we see today. Captain America not only fights evil, he also makes mistakes, and has grown as a “real” human being might. He admits his faults, accepts the consequences and strives to be better. He has lived, died and been reborn into something more than he was before. He has evolved from a 1940s government stooge to the modern day hero he is in today’s popular culture.

These three comic book series have provided a reflection on the American Dream. It was forgotten during the Great Recession, after the United States declared the War on Terror and after the increased media attention on the nation’s natural disasters. It was hard to believe anything positive would come about for a long time, and people began to look for someone to blame. Whether that blame was placed on President Obama, on the voters and nonvoters, on other government leaders or on each other, it was just another negative way to deal with the issues at hand. The Serpent served as a metaphor for the chaos caused by the attack on September 11 and reflected the way people reacted to the tragedy. In the end, citizens banded together to support the soldiers who fought overseas in Iraq because those soldiers represented hope that justice would be served.

Symbolic Interaction provides a clearer reflection of how Captain America developed over the three series. The relationships Cap had as Steve Rogers and as
Bucky Barnes helped readers define him as a person. His interactions with allies and enemies also allow readers to create meaning for his character as he transformed through his struggles. Even his thoughts were revealing in how his situation and surroundings affected his reactions and judgment. It was unclear whether or not Captain America could figuratively survive these series, but at the end of Fear Itself it was obvious that he had evolved into something better fitted for a modern America.

It is important to remember that this is not the first time people lost Captain America. He supposedly died the same day Bucky did in the 1940s and was frozen in an underwater tomb. Until he was discovered in the glacier, Jack Monroe had undergone extensive surgery to look the part of Captain America as well as play the role until the experimental super serum caused some major side effects. Rogers died when the war was over and America did not need him for the time being. This time he died because he was not what America needed him to be. Although Cap died from bullet wounds, he was really a victim of the times. The generation that grew up with Captain America is not reading comic books anymore and the battles Cap fights were no longer relevant to society. He used old strategies on a new menace and it just did not work anymore. Captain America’s death not only marked the end of an era, but it also allowed for a revision of Captain America to successfully live and fight in modern society for a new audience. The authors of these three series did not kill off the best parts of Cap; they only created an outlet for Cap to grow. Captain America says it best in Captain America Vol. 4 # 7, when he describes his role to Iron Man.

Captain America is not here to lead the country. I’m here to serve it. If I’m a captain, then I’m a soldier. Not of any military branch, but of the American
people. Years ago, in simpler times, this suit and this shield were created as a symbol to help make America the land it's supposed to be... to help it realize its destiny... But as of today, I am not a "super hero." Now and forevermore, I am a man of the people. Together, you and I will identify and confront America's problems. Together, we will figure out what we are and what we can be.

Together, we will define the American Dream and make it an American reality. (Reiber, 2003)

This journey was more about how the man behind the Captain America identity lived and thought than about his death and resurrection. The end product is a Captain America wise with experience, who has reflected on his past in order to push forward in the future and is ready to lead against America's modern enemies.

**Future Research**

As with any project, time is the enemy. A more extensive analysis of Captain America from his creation in the early 1940s through today would have given this paper a complete assessment of the twists and turns of the storyline as it reflected American history and pop culture. Also, this paper does not explore Captain America during the Golden, Silver or Modern ages of comic books, nor does it include his complete history and involvement with The Avengers. Several other comic books with appearances by Captain America could have provided a more in-depth analysis of his role in other superheroes' lives as well as his importance in the Marvel Universe. The exclusion of other media and entertainment outlets such as film, animation and media coverage only provided an analysis of the comic book authors' interpretations of Captain America and current events of the time. While the analyses and deconstruction
presented in this paper are theory-based and justified, an analysis of reader responses
to the three comic book series would be more reliable.
References


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