



Redemptive anti-Americanism and the death of Captain America

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ABSTRACT

The comic book character of Captain America was assassinated during a superhero “Civil War” occurring in the pages of Marvel comics. His death occurred because of his opposition to measures enacted by the U.S. government that denied due process to citizens and the government’s faulty justification for military aggression. This essay serves as an exploration of Captain America’s redemptive anti-Americanism and how the narrative of “the pure nation corrupted by an illegitimate government” serves as the basis for ostensibly pro-American anti-American rhetoric. A content analysis framework was employed to build an empirical model that demonstrates the presence of redemptive anti-Americanism in the specific texts analyzed (the *Civil War* and *Fallen Son* comic book series). Results of the analysis demonstrate correlation between the character, his role in the narrative, and the emergence of redemptive anti-American sentiment. Implications of the analysis are considered.

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O Captain my Captain! our fearful trip is done
The ship has weathered every rack, the prize we sought is won
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring
But O heart! heart! heart!
O the bleeding drops of red,
Where on the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.

–Walt Whitman

1. O Captain! My Captain!

How do you reward a soldier who has given America over 60 years of tireless service? How do you reward a champion of virtue who has both advised presidents and served as a role model to children? How do you offer commendation to a military hero who has balanced the requirements of both the need to be strong but to temper strength with compassion? Well, if you’re Marvel Comics, you shoot him dead.

In 2007, America’s Captain fell, in the words of Whitman, cold and dead. Captain America, the patriotic icon of Marvel’s comic book stories was killed by an assassin’s bullet for his opposition to the government’s prosecution of a war on terror. As part of its multi-volume “Civil War” storyline in which superheroes were split between those favoring government registration of superhumans and those who saw this as an intrusion on civil liberties (as Captain

America argued), the Captain was assassinated in the culminating event of the series. Cynical observers and anyone who’s read more than about three comic books are wont to speculate that the death was not real, as there are a plethora of ways in which comic writers have cheated the grim reaper (evil clones, identical robots, and the like). The death of Captain America, however, appears to be a more substantial and authentic attempt at a political statement by Marvel (Andrews, 2007). As noted, heroic deaths in comic books are hardly novel and the resurrection of fallen heroes is commonplace. However, the national mood of the period coupled with statements from Marvel Comics suggested that this death would have greater gravity than the expiration of other costumed crusaders. Responding to criticism that the death was merely an attempt to generate sales, Marvel Comics editor-in-chief Joe Quesada stated:

“If we’re going to kill off a character in the Marvel Universe, it has to be a significant death. It can’t just be for shock value. The same thing for resurrection. If they were solely created to be a huge publicity stunt, people would smell it a mile away and I think that would hurt our characters . . . it’s rife with allegories metaphors and that’s why (his death) has resonated with so many people” (Garcia, 2007).

What that death has meant to numerous media sources and comic book readers is a thinly veiled (and some might suggest hackneyed) attempt to create a metaphor for the concerns of a population increasingly uncomfortable with both the power and judgment of its government (Associated Press, 2007b; Aucoin & Kahn, 2007; Gustines, 2007; Robinson, 2011). Politically motivated opportunists preying on the fears of a nation? A conflict based in part on questionable intelligence, arguably lies? Captain America’s

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struggle appears to be a fairly transparent effort to parallel the debates over the Iraq War, the Patriot Act, the Bush domestic surveillance program and other controversial programs in the post-September 11 period in the United States. But a deeper analysis of the assassination story and the country's evolving politics may suggest something deeper – a belief that America's founding principles are real and moral and that those founding principles are being corrupted by the machinations of modern, heretical governance. This idea of return to American principles that have been corrupted is framed as redemptive anti-Americanism and this essay seeks to investigate how this perspective directly shaped Marvel's *Civil War* story series, the assassination of Captain America, and how it reflected an emerging sentiment in the United States that a return to mythical founding principles is central to redemption.

2. Method

The intent of this investigation is not the production of findings verifiable through traditional social scientific analysis. Rather, the focus is primarily on the development of an exploratory essay in which conceptual exploration, textual analysis, historical context, and cultural criticism are employed in the service of developing reasoned conclusions. The emerging conclusions are, as such, interpretive and are intended as invitations for reflection on the part of readers, critics, and investigators.

The intent of the essay, however, is neither to dismiss the importance of empirical data nor to justify undisciplined speculation about the observed phenomena. To that end, this essay will explore the history of the Captain America character and the intent of the *Civil War* story that led to his heroic demise. Additionally, anti-Americanism will be considered generally with particular attention paid to the unique subset of redemptive anti-Americanism.

To build an empirical model that demonstrates the presence of redemptive anti-Americanism in the specific texts analyzed (the *Civil War* and *Fallen Son* comic book series), a content analysis framework will be employed. Justification for content analysis in investigating texts is summed up nicely by Franzosi (1998) who argues that social scientific research capably deals with first-order correlation of data and models and easily remedies problems of heteroscedasticity, non-normality, and spurious influence but frequently faces problems when evaluating stories, which Fisher called the building block for human consciousness (Ibrahim, 2007). As Captain America's relationship to redemptive anti-Americanism is the primary focus of this essay, all the character's textual statements in the *Civil War* and *Fallen Son* comic book series will be contextually analyzed and coded by the emergent themes present in these statements. Subsequent sections of this research will detail relevant literature related to the redemptive anti-Americanism. From this survey of key research related to the topic of redemptive anti-Americanism, several themes were identified to give thematic clarity to the concept and allow for focused empirical evaluation of redemptive anti-Americanism's presence or absence in the *Civil War* and *Fallen Son* comic book series. This identification of themes and investigation of their presence in a communication text is consistent with Bormann's concept of fantasy theme analysis in which a researcher identifies shared narratives and investigates the presence and manifestation of these narratives in a text. From the survey of the literature, the following themes emerge and will be expanded upon further in subsequent sections:

- Perceived purity of mythical American founding principles;
- Construction of existential crisis where pure American values are under threat of corruption;
- Return to pure orthodoxy of American founding principles is the remedy to the existential crisis.

With these themes, identified attention will be given to observing their frequency, intensity, and urgency in the text. While this process is somewhat speculative and reliant upon the interpretation of the spectator, the inclusion of such quantifiable data strengthens the argument of the critic (Belk, 1987; Brabant & Mooney, 1999; Dittmer & Larsen, 2007; Ibrahim, 2007; LaRossa & Yasumoto, 2010). To increase the verifiability of these interpretations, the *Civil War* and *Fallen Son* texts will be given to five coders along with the themes being investigated. Consistency between the coding in this research with external review will add additional validity and triangulation to this analysis, though as previously noted, this research continues to recognize that there is a speculative dimension to this method.

As this essay will build an argument that Captain America's assassination embodies redemptive Anti-Americanism, the following research questions will be considered:

Research Question 1

Does textual analysis of statements made by Captain America in the *Civil War* and *Fallen Son* comic book series will validate a thematic link to the perceived purity of mythical American founding principles?

Research Question 2

Does the textual analysis of statements made by Captain America in the *Civil War* and *Fallen Son* comic book series will validate the creation of a thematic existential crisis where pure American values are under threat of corruption?

Research Question 3

Does analysis of statements made by Captain America in the *Civil War* and *Fallen Son* comic book series will thematically suggest that a return to pure American values is the only remedy to the existential threat?

A foundation for considering this investigation relies on exploration of the role Captain America has played rhetorically in American culture and consideration of the distinct types of anti-Americanisms.

3. The comic book conscience

Having served as a hero against the evil intentions of hostile aggressors for over 60 years, the character of Captain America had always been the most direct representation of the power and conscience of the United States. Superman may fight for truth, justice and the American way, but he is not American. The story of Steve Rogers, the sickly boy transformed by American medical ingenuity to become a peerless soldier in the person of Captain America was the embodiment of the dominant cultural narratives of personal growth, strength, the power of science, and the need to protect through sacrifice. Perhaps most telling is the fact that unlike other comic book heroes, Captain America had no superpowers and his weapon was not a weapon at all, but a *shield*.

While Captain America's popularity waned in the period after the Cold War, Captain America stories since 2001 served as stark commentary on immediate post 9/11 U.S. policy. The *Civil War* series culminating in the assassination of Captain America instantly produced a flurry of national conversation on the meaning of his death and the critique implicit in killing such an icon. Media outlets including every major television news agency, National Public Radio, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, and hundreds of other local media covered the story and reflected on its relevance to the American prosecution of the war on terror.

Unlike most "events" in the comic book world, this one received extensive coverage in the popular press, including write-ups in serious media outlets that reflected on the story in a way that was largely unprecedented for what is often discarded as a juvenile "flights and tights" medium. Captain America's death was ranked as one of Yahoo.com's ten most searched for news stories in 2007 in

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