

5-2018

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**A Patriot's Protest: Representations of Political Dissent in *Captain America Comics***

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A departmental senior thesis submitted to the Department of Computer Science at Trinity University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with departmental honors.

April 2018

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### Abstract

This study uses a textual analysis, as well as a secondary visual analysis, to trace representations of political dissent in *Captain America* comics between the 1960s-2000s. This study seeks to determine trends in the overall portrayal of dissenters during this time. It also attempts to address the circumstances in which Captain America acts as a dissenter, as well as circumstances in which he intervenes in dissent. It includes a comparative focus on representations between groups of dissenters and Captain America as a dissenter, particularly in relation to the use of violence in methods of protest. This study is situated within an ongoing debate on the role of superheroes in enforcing hegemonic structures and institutions. It analyzes various types of dissent portrayals in the comics in an effort to determine whether Captain America, a mainstream superhero, offers methods of radical resistance, or if he only serves to police political expression.

*Keywords:* Captain America, political dissent, protest, American identity.

## Introduction

Early superhero Captain America has endured as a popular figure in mainstream comics since the creation of the character in 1940. The World War II context in which the character was created established an opportunity for Captain America to provide commentary on United States policy. However, this has not always been radical in nature, and in some cases Captain America has further emphasized existing American structures. Regardless, Captain America's continued commentary on political engagement has only strengthened an association between the character and the construction of American values. Among the topics tackled in the comics, political dissent emerges as a continuing debate within the universe of *Captain America*. The portrayal of protest and dissent raises questions about whether it is necessary for a functional democracy, and if so, what forms of dissent are considered acceptable. The identification of Captain America with an American identity necessitates a closer look at how the comics represent political dissent, as well as an interrogation of Captain America's limitations on dissent as a form of political communication. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the portrayal of dissenters in *Captain America* comics between 1960-2010, as well as the representation of Captain America in relation to dissent.

## Literature Review

For many current fans of Captain America, their primary exposure to the hero has been through the films of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). There are currently three definitive phases of the MCU (Trumbore, 2018). The first of these three phases began a decade ago with the unexpected success of *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau, 2008). Captain America made his debut in the MCU with the film *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Joe Johnston, 2011) in the second phase, and the character has since become a crucial part of the overarching storyline that

structures the studio's timeline. Since the establishment of Marvel Studios, its films have grown exponentially in popularity among moviegoers, and its most recent release, *Black Panther* (Ryan Coogler, 2018), has become the highest grossing superhero movie of all time (Rubin, 2018). The popularity of these films has increased awareness of Captain America as a character, and the films themselves draw on elements of the comics to portray Captain America's relationship with the United States military and federal government. However, they fail to capture the full extent of the comic character's complicated history with American institutions, beginning with his inception in 1940. Since the creation of Captain America, the superhero has acted both as an enforcer of hegemony and a voice of political resistance; his stance on issues of free speech and civil disobedience has shifted over time and varies by circumstance. In certain storylines, Captain America elevates dissent as a patriotic duty, yet in others he offers critiques of the effectiveness of dissent to achieve change.

### **Responses to Dissent by Law Enforcement & Media**

Responses to political protest can be seen in both the description of the dissent by media and the interactions of dissenters with the state. In their examination of protest policing in the United States from 1960-1995, political scientist Donatella Porta and historian Herbert Reiter (1998) outline five notable characteristics of policing practices. These characteristics include the extent to which police show tolerance for community disruption in regards to protest. Porta and Reiter (1998) point to two styles of responding to protest: an escalated force style and a negotiated management style. They suggest that only "comfortable," and by extension peaceful, protests are accommodated by the police under escalated force policing. In contrast, more disruptive tactics employed by civil rights and antiwar protesters were rejected. Although they suggest that some disruption is acceptable under the negotiated management style, police still

endeavor to limit disruption to “acceptable levels.” Scholars such as political scientist Jules Boykoff (2006) have pointed to a cooperation between the state and media in the representation of political dissent within public discourse. Although he specifically examines this within the context of the Global Justice Movement, this has implications for the role of communication in policing dissent. Although media lack the ability to physically intervene in protest, news coverage of dissent may shape the extent to which it is perceived as acceptable.

Although the level of influence media have on audiences has long been debated in the field of communication studies, there is evidence to suggest that media can play a role in the legitimization— or lack thereof— of protest culture. In an examination of news coverage of political protests in Slovenia, researchers Trivundža and Brlek (2017) argue that news media can use violence as a framing device to influence audience’s perceptions of protesters. Media outlets function to fulfill the “normative work of articulating consensual moral values” (Trivundža & Brlek, 2017), constructing an understanding of acceptable political participation. In some cases, this can result in the depoliticization of otherwise legitimate social movements. Boykoff (2006) points to the use of “mass media deprecation” to emphasize protesters’ violence and assert the control of the state. His study on coverage of the Global Justice Movement reveals that news media outlets rely on specific framing devices in their coverage of protests. Although he identifies five devices overall, perhaps the two most notable emphasize the actions of protesters as violent and disruptive (Boykoff, 2006). By highlighting these specific elements of political dissent, news coverage establishes a link between dissenters and criminality.

Responses to political dissent are not restricted to the realm of news media, and other forms of media have been instrumental in supporting protest culture. For example, while news media has had a contentious relationship with protesters, satirical print media has often been

used to undermine institutions of authority. In the 1970s, authors such as Philip Roth used satire to lambast Richard Nixon and the entire presidential administration (Danky et al., 2015).

Television, in particular, underwent a cultural shift during the 1960s, as youth-oriented programs began to deviate from the scripted, hegemonic ideal of earlier sitcoms. Early television programs had been strictly standardized during their production process (Spigel & Curtin, p.2). As media historian Aniko Bodroghkozy (2001) argues, the rise of political resistance in television led to a “crisis of authority” within the industry. Shows featuring anti-establishment messages were viewed as a threat by established networks that relied on highly scripted, hegemonic programming. Specifically, Bodroghkozy (2001) points to programs such as *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, which attempted to inject political messages into their youth-oriented content. However, although messages of political dissent have been expressed through various art forms over the past several decades, they have often been characterized as operating outside of the mainstream (Danky et al., 2015).

### **Comics in Popular Culture**

The superhero genre of comics saw a rise in popularity following the 1930s as a response to the political and economic turmoil in the United States (Růžička, 2010). Even from their inception, scholar Darcy Sullivan (1991) suggests, early superheroes were distinctly American in their identities. This was reflected in both the visual style and writing of the characters; much of the imagery of heroes from the 1940’s revolved around American flags, a nationalistic response to rising wartime tensions. Superhero comic books have been described by author and comic scholar Mila Bongco (2014) as traditionally “...apparently hegemonic and sometimes overly authoritarian” (p.92), largely due to the portrayal of heroes as members of the establishment. Additionally, she notes that many plots of early comics involve a disruption in a closed society



that is later solved by the superhero in an effort to uphold the status quo. However, as the genre evolved, mainstream superhero comics began to stray from the traditional, black-and-white understandings of morality. Despite the limitations of genre conventions, increasing variety in superhero comics allowed for multiple social and political commentaries by debating a range of social and moral issues.

As an art form, comic books have often been criticized as low-brow and uncultured by groups such as politicians and parents, largely due to early comics' appeal to American youth (Kidman, 2015). However, contemporary comic studies have argued for the legitimacy of the medium, emphasizing comics as a complex form of communication with the potential for social impact (Smith, 2011). Since their origin, comic books have been used to address pressing societal issues such as corruption and labor rights (Worden, 2015). As a result, they have often been used by their writers as a forum for social and political commentary. Early issues of *Action Comics* featured Superman railing against local-level concerns, including an issue in which he criticized worker exploitation and pushed for safety regulations. The growth of the early comic book industry was followed by a subsequent backlash from concerned parents and critics. Psychiatrist Frederic Wertham published *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954, which linked comics and juvenile delinquency. While Wertham also called for changes in how comics were sold to children. As a result, politicians and parents alike attributed the "moral corruption" of American children to the popularity of comics, linking the art form with criminality in the minds of the public (Ndalianis, 2011). Wertham's work has been criticized by many, including comics scholar Carol Tilly (2012), who asserts that Wertham falsified and manipulated the data to support his anti-comics stance. This unfounded portrayal of comic books as "dangerous" only further emphasized their inherent potential for subversive content (Danky et al., 2015).

Within comic scholarship, there is a distinct difference between mainstream comics and underground comics, which some artists distinguish as “comix” (Estren, 1974). While social and political satire has been largely unexplored terrain in mainstream comics, underground comics have historically had more freedom to tackle subversive content. Librarians Nargis and Joseph (2012) trace the origin of the comix movement to the counterculture of the 1960s, which promoted leftist politics through artistic expression. Since then, a rise in self-publishing has led to a growing awareness of comix in comic studies, which has primarily defined underground works by their messages of dissent (Spector, 2016). The discrepancy in content between mainstream comics and comix can be traced back to underground artists’ avoidance of the Comics Code Authority (CCA). The CCA was established in 1954 in response to Wertham’s work, although it was later abandoned over the course of the 2000’s (Hajdu, 2008). Its rules included mandates that required the triumph of good over evil and the condemnation of criminality, even going as far as restricting the portrayal of law enforcement and government officials to promote respect for the institutions (Senate Committee, 1955). English and film studies professor Nicole Devarenne (2008), who focuses on linguistic variety in literature, argues that this strict enforcement of comic standards was aimed at suppressing diversity in comics through the standardization of language and visuals. Subsequently, underground comics emerged as a reaction to this censorship, allowing much more freedom to question authority than mainstream comics. Comix can instead be characterized by their discussion of socially taboo subjects, including violence, sex, drugs and politics (Estren, 1974). Many have used these themes to promote specific political or social messages among their readers, leading some scholars to describe them as educational in nature and more overtly political than their mainstream

competitors. These topics were all banned from publishers operating under the CCA, so underground publishing became necessary for these comic writers.

**Political dissent in mainstream comic books.** Although themes of resistance have been traditionally explored in underground works, mainstream comics also offer a space for critiques of political establishments. Communication scholar James Black (2009) asserts that comics inherently have the potential to question and undermine authority. By using comics to inject political commentary, he suggests, artists are allowed "political cover" to directly target the establishment, even in times of crisis. This allows comic writers to tackle controversial subject matters from outside the world of underground publishing.

In the United States, comic scholars have examined the subversive role of superhero comics primarily from two perspectives: the hero is either viewed as an extension of the United States government and therefore incapable of genuine dissent, or they are seen as a natural protest symbol due to their ability to affect social change from outside the law (Dale & Foy, 2010). Comic scholar Peter Coogan (2006) suggests that mainstream comic heroes' use of their abilities to forcefully impose a particular way of life serves as a metaphor for American foreign policy. This would restrict superheroes to acting on behalf of government interests, effectively limiting their capacity for criticism. Additionally, a common argument against heroes as a symbol of dissent rests on the assumption that superheroes are presented as "agents of the law" above all else (Wolf-Meyer, 2003). In this sense, their duty is to maintain the status quo. Even while acting outside of the law, heroes are only viewed as threatening within the context of the comic; comic readers, however, are supposed to understand that the superheroes' actions are morally right regardless. However, it is important to note that the variety of characters portrayed within the superhero genre is paralleled by multiple perspectives on dissent — some heroes

operate outside of the law, whereas others act in accordance with the state. Devarenne (2008) concludes that the language of the superhero genre has the potential to be a tool for nationalism as well as a tool for the subversion of dominant narratives; the result largely depends on its use by writers.

One approach among scholars is to examine comics as cultural artifacts; this suggests that rather than promoting a specific political perspective, comics preserve the sentiments of the American public at specific points in time (Hodo, 2011). This is largely due to the unique form of comic books; the ongoing narrative structure spans decades and forces characters to confront specific issues unique to particular moments in American history. From this perspective, comics can be viewed as primary sources that offer snapshots of American life over time. Studies focused on comic book content in relation to social environment have found links between messages of authoritarianism in comics and levels of social threat. In times of high social threat, comics tend to have more aggressive imagery and follow highly conventional themes, especially within the superhero genre (Peterson & Gerstein, 2005). Comics have been used as political propaganda to vilify enemies of the United States in times of crisis such as World War II and post-9/11, comic scholar Cord Scott (2014) notes.

**Justice and vigilantism in comics.** Academic studies have also focused on the rise of vigilante heroes, or figures who operate outside of the law (Dubose, 2007). These heroes have gained increasing popularity within the superhero genre in recent decades, garnering attention from comic scholars. This increase in vigilante superheroes is linked to rising crime rates and a loss of faith in the legal system among Americans in the 1980s (Scully et al., 2014). Communication scholar Jason Bainbridge (2007) argues that the superhero genre already provides a foundation for vigilantism, as many of the comics offer a form of compensatory

justice in which heroes must take on the responsibility of ensuring citizens' safety. This seemingly implies that the government has limitations for which only super-powered men and women can compensate. According to Bainbridge (2007), these comics reflect "perceptions of failed or deficient law" (p.1), and their emphasis on individual heroes effectively portrays the legal system as secondary to the heroes' unique forms of justice. The devaluing of American institutions reflects, to a degree, similar themes of discontent in subversive underground works.

Evidence of discontent can be seen in a comparison between Batman and Superman comics, two popular mainstream superheroes with drastically different approaches to justice despite their shared avoidance of killing. Comic scholars Vollum and Adkinson (2003) note that while Superman upholds the legal system, Batman must occasionally act against it. Despite being viewed as an outsider among law enforcement, professor and media scholar Mike Dubose points out, Superman acts as a "tool of the government" (2017, p. 921). Batman's superhero activity, however, relies on a loss of faith in the establishment. Batman's city, Gotham, is defined by its extreme crime rates, and its institutions are presented as unreliable and corrupt (Vollum & Adkinson, 2003). Batman takes the form of a vigilante, sometimes acting in cooperation with the law but ultimately still operating outside of legal means. Unlike Superman, he refuses to let the government dictate his actions and instead punishes criminals according to his own definition of justice (Dubose, 2017). As Bainbridge (2007) noted, some vigilante superheroes depend on a belief that individual citizens must take action to compensate for the insufficiency of law enforcement. The superhero Daredevil is unique in his position both inside and outside of the law. He is often torn between his job as a lawyer and his role as a vigilante, but he recognizes the limits of the legal system and attempts to correct it through other means (Sharp, 2012). This dissatisfaction may provide a basis for messages in favor of dissent and civil disobedience.

### **Captain America**

Since his inception, the character of Captain America has largely been regarded as a symbolic representation of America itself; few comic characters are tied so strongly to a sense of national identity. The character's initial conception stemmed from the charged atmosphere of the Second World War. Two comic book creators, Jack Kirby and Joe Simon, saw potential in this growing nationalism and began to discuss a character driven by a patriotic sense of duty.

"Captain America came from a discussion between Joe Simon and myself," said co-creator Jack Kirby, "...[W]e discussed this idea about America. This was at a time where everybody was patriotic. There wasn't a day passed by that we didn't get news from Europe in the newspapers, that Hitler wasn't mentioned, that liberty wasn't mentioned and America wasn't mentioned. Everybody was patriotic" (Kirby, 1988). Both creators recognized the potential for comic book sales in the idea of a character symbolizing America, and their instincts proved correct. *Captain America* soon began to outsell other popular comics of the time, with the first issue reaching nearly a million copies sold (Rhoades, 2008). The creation of Steve Rogers as a physically enhanced soldier with origins in the U.S. military, as well as a costume designed to reflect an American flag, has led to a conflation by both readers and critics of the character with an American ideology. Geographer Jason Dittmer (2005) posits that Captain America occupies a symbolic role as an extension of U.S. foreign policy, promoting American exceptionalism and maintaining existing power structures. South African academic J.M. Coetzee (1992) even describes Captain America as "[a] hero of the nation-state," framing the character as a reinforcement of the American narrative (p. 109). The character's origins further complicate the possibility for political criticism in *Captain America* comics.

The first *Captain America* issue was released in December 1940, and its bold cover featured Captain America punching Hitler in the face, which was a clear political statement in a time when the U.S. had not yet involved itself directly in World War II. Kirby and Simon's Jewish heritage may have intensified their desire to take a public stance at a time when the American government had yet to intervene. In *Captain America #1*, a skinny, sickly Steve Rogers participates in a military experiment in which he is injected with a Super-Soldier Serum, turning him into a blonde, blue-eyed physical ideal. This, in a sense, turns the Nazi belief in eugenics and European superiority into an American weapon against the Germans. "We shall call you Captain America, son," the scientist Dr. Reinstein tells the newly-enhanced Rogers in the first issue, "Because, like you— America shall gain the strength and the will to safeguard our shores!" (Kirby & Simon, 1941, *Captain America #1*). It is made clear to the readers that, as Captain America, Steve has become an extension of America itself.

After the war, the Captain America writers struggled to make the character maintain relevance. Captain America was first revived in the 1950's to fight the perceived threat of Communism. In a series of issues characterized as "Captain America...Commie Smasher!", the character was used to echo McCarthy-era fears by fighting numerous Communist spies in disguise. This unpopular version of the character was short-lived, as English professor Brandi Hodo (2011) notes, and Captain America was briefly shelved in 1954 after only three issues as the Commie Smasher. He didn't return until almost a decade later, reemerging in *The Avengers #4* in March 1964. Hodo (2011) suggests that the character's unpopularity may have been due to the propaganda's lack of appeal for younger readers. After being uncovered in the ice, it was discovered by readers that Steve Rogers had been frozen in the ocean since World War II; the Commie Smasher era was explained away by the writers, who instead assured readers that Steve

Rogers had briefly been replaced by an imposter, the fanatic William Burnside. After being revived, Captain America later joined The Avengers as the group's leader. Notably, *Captain America* largely avoided the subject of the Vietnam War in the 1960s, and writers instead focused on domestic issues, including the rise of counterculture. Following his revival in the 1960s, the hero's original purpose as an unquestioningly loyal American soldier was contested. This is illustrated in his reactions to transformations in American culture following his reawakening, in which Steve Rogers is torn between his wartime origins and the growing relevance of counterculture. Additionally, the hero's battles against costumed Captain America imposters further express his disapproval of uncritical support of the U.S. government as these encounters often emphasize Rogers's prioritization of personal freedom over national duty (Curtis, 2015).

An interesting shift emerged in Captain America's character in the 1970s and 80s. At this time, he began to engage in direct conflicts with the American government. This presents a contrast with the original idea of the character as an extension of both the U.S. government and military. Amidst the aftermath of Watergate, the 1974 Secret Empire storyline saw Captain America facing off against a villain implied to be the President of the United States. For 4 issues in 1974 and 1975, Steve Rogers briefly gives up his Captain America identity to become the vigilante Nomad when his discontent with the actions of the American government causes him to question his role as a symbol of America. He resumed his role as Captain America several issues later, though, upon realizing he was still needed by his country. Dubose (2007) argues that Steve Rogers's divergence from the government demonstrates a postmodern sense of moral relativism, which ultimately promotes political criticism. This relativism creates a complex tension between his personal mission against evil and his relationship with authority. "In his public life Captain



America serves as Private Rogers in the uniformed armed service,” authors Robert Jewett and John Lawrence note, “but when the level of danger becomes unbearable, he takes on a masked identity and rids the world of evil” (Jewett & Lawrence, 2004). The use of non-democratic methods to in the achievement of democratic goals has been labelled by Jewett and Lawrence as the “Captain America complex,” and it is largely indicative of the superhero genre as a whole (p. 28).

The 1980s also offered a slew of new characters for Steve to come into conflict with regarding ideas of American identity and duty, including Super-Patriot, the Flag-Smasher, and Nuke. Overall, Captain America’s often calls for for reform over revolution. Issues where Captain America confronts other, more radical characters such as the Punisher illustrate this difference in approach (Scott, 2014). Scholar and librarian Woody Evans (2014) suggests that although superheroes like Captain America may advocate for progressive causes, they are ultimately conservative in their goal to preserve social rules and institutions; this is in contrast to progressive comic supervillains, who often advocate for sudden, violent societal change. “Although they are gods among men,” Evans points out, “they do not cause large-scale disruptions to human institutions, even when those institutions are widely considered to be unjust or evil” (para. 9). Rather than offering messages of radical transformation, Steve Rogers often advocates operating within the law to achieve gradual change, and his own form of patriotism is mapped out in relation to the villains he faces, including characters such as Flag Smasher (Scott, 2014).

However, the limitations Captain America places on expression do not mean that he discourages all forms of political dissent; in many key instances, he supports it. As media studies scholar J.R. Stevens (2001) suggests, Captain America’s status as a relic of WWII living in a

modern context places him in the role of the outsider, “[allowing] him to continue to represent conservative values while consistently offering a liberal critique of the culture through which he walks” (p. 609).

Although Captain America may have initially been created as an extension of the United States military, he has become increasingly critical of the government since his revival in the 1960s. Academic Brandi Hodo (2011) attributes these abrupt changes in Captain America’s moral code to shifts in American public opinion following major historical events. This suggests that the portrayal of comic book characters reflect American public sentiment and the influence of world events. Hodo (2011) posits that Captain America’s specific brand of patriotism stems from a shared American experience, particularly an emphasis on future justice and a love of country. Overall, the character of Captain America and his commentary on political issues has evolved over time, ranging from an agent of the military to an outspoken activist.

This study seeks to address two questions: 1) How are dissenters portrayed in relation to non-dissenters in *Captain America* comics between between 1960-2010? and 2) Under what circumstances does Captain America engage in political dissent? While underground comix have historically been sources for radical political commentary, the capacity of mainstream comics to provide similar messages is still under debate. In this continuing conversation on the potential of the medium, Captain America offers insight into the possible range of representation of political dissent. An analysis of these representations sheds light on the ability of mainstream comics to delineate acceptable forms of political engagement; however, it also highlights key limitations present within the portrayals that hinder the possibility for radical political expression.

## **Methods**

## Sample

The sample includes two narrative arcs from each decade from the 1960s until 2010, individual issues and longer runs. The analysis focuses on comics written after the revival of Captain America in the 1960s, excluding the issues from the two earlier decades. The character underwent significant changes since its inception, and there was more opportunity for messages of dissent following the 1964 revival. Although the role of Captain America has been assumed by multiple people over the course of the comics, this scope of this study is restricted to comics featuring Steve Rogers as Captain America to track character development over time. The first comics examined will include *Captain America* Vol. 1 #120, “Crack-Up on Campus” and Vol. 1 #122, “The Sting of the Scorpion”, both of which were represent Cap’s attitudes toward dissent in the 1960s. *Captain America* Vol. 1 #143, “Power to the People”, and the original Secret Empire run from issues #163-176 will also be examined. Two standalone issues, *Captain America* #332 (Captain America No More!) and *What If?* Vol. 1 #44 (“What If Captain America Were Revived?”) will be used to examine shifts in dissent in the 1980s. Two issues from the Heroes Reborn comics, *Captain America* Vol. 2 #3 and #7, will also be included. The *Civil War* storyline from the 2000s will be used to examine dissent in post-9/11 society. The *Civil War* storyline includes seven core issues (See Appendix for all sample texts); this difference is due primarily to the recent shift towards longer story arcs in comics.

## Analytical Approach

This study employs a textual analysis of Captain America comics, specifically examining the use of language and discourse in the representation of political dissent. Although comic books are a visual medium, much of the stories are expressed through the written word. In an effort to narrow the scope of the study, the primary analysis focuses on the text, whereas analysis

of visual elements will be secondary. Each issue or storyline included in the sample has a plot that directly addresses dissent, and the dissenter functions as the unit of analysis. For the purposes of this study, dissent is defined as “a political and articulated disagreement directed towards a specific feature in society” (Leppänen, 2016, p.17). All comics in the sample fit this criterion and include clearly articulated political disagreements by various characters. The study itself integrates both quantitative and qualitative analysis to yield an in-depth analysis of dissent.

### **The Role of the Author**

It is important to note the potential influence of individual writers on the representation of dissent within the comics. The personal political views of every Captain America writer are not publicly available, but some have been outspoken on the subject. For example, Stan Lee has been known for his liberal political views for decades, and occasionally used his “Stan’s Soapbox” column to call for tolerance and equality (Parker, 2017). Similarly, *Civil War* writer Mark Miller has described himself as a “conscious liberal,” citing his early exposure to radical political cartoonists as a child (Phipps, 2010), although his Scottish background distances him from some elements of American politics. Steve Englehart, author of the Secret Empire storyline in the *Captain America* comics, has spoken on numerous occasions about his fusion of politics and writing. Englehart, who had been honorably discharged from the war as a conscientious objector (Englehart, n.d., p. 153-167), deliberately references the political disillusionment that plagued the 1970s in his work. These writers’ political ideologies cannot be dismissed in a discussion regarding the political representation of Captain America, although it remains central to this study to identify trends in representation that transcend individual authors.

### **Discussion**

Throughout Captain America's career, several key themes emerge in the portrayal of dissent and civil disobedience. Despite the inclusion of multiple storylines in which Captain America acts as a dissenter, references to dissent throughout the issues are largely negative. The few exceptions to this occur when Captain America functions as the dissenter, providing readers further insight into the justifications of his actions. However, a consistent issue linking Captain America and his fellow dissenters is the incorporation of violence, including both violence perpetrated by dissenters and violence against dissenters. Regardless of the character, the appearance of dissent is consistently linked with the appearance of violence, although this violence is not always explicitly condemned. Whereas there are only 28 positive visuals relating to dissent, there are 113 negative visuals, the majority of which include images of violence. The negative visuals far outnumber the times in which characters speak negatively about dissent; however, the 56 negative verbal references also outnumber the 14 positive verbal references by non-dissenters. The dissenters themselves frame their own goals in a negative light, favoring insults (15 instances) and threats (14 instances) over the positive discussion (9 instances). With the exception of instances in which Captain America is considered a dissenter, they emphasize the use of force as a form of retaliation against the establishment. Over the course of the sample, focus is shifted away from individual protest groups to Captain America as his struggles against the federal government increasingly position him as the primary dissenter. However, his chosen form of dissent is portrayed as distinctly different from other characters'. While other dissenters are presented as secondary characters, readers are able to gain a nuanced understanding of Cap's actions through his dialogue and the dialogue of his superhero colleagues. Although they sometimes describe their motivations, the perspectives of other dissenters are represented to a lesser degree in their own voice or by others. In contrast, Captain America is more likely to

explain his actions in depth and reflect on his own motivations, most often situating his dissent within a context of democratic expression.

### **Representation of Dissenters**

**Dissenters and violence.** The representation of dissenters in the *Captain America* comics seems to draw from existing framing devices utilized in protest news media coverage, as described by scholar Jules Boykoff (2006). The reliance on violence as a characterization of protests is notable in both verbal and visual portrayals of the dissenters. Throughout the comics, dissenters are overwhelmingly portrayed as a threat to non-dissenters. They use both intimidating language and visual acts of violence in their efforts to achieve their goals. Even in instances where dissenters are largely unthreatening, they tend to encounter violent responses, creating an association with violence regardless of the dissenters' intention. Across the issues, there are 14 separate instances in which dissenters threaten either direct physical harm or the destruction of property. There are another 14 instances in which they are shown physically harming others and 6 cases in which the dissenters are shown to be armed. The severity of the threat they represent, as well as their motivations behind their violence, vary depending on the issue. For example, in a 1971 storyline titled "Power to the People" (Friedrich & Romita, 1971, *Captain America* #143), the People's Militia, a black power movement, clashes violently with the police. However, the violence is framed by the protesters as a mere continuation of systemic violence imposed on them by institutional racism. The group not only threatens both law enforcement and Captain America, but they also turn on Sam Wilson, aka Falcon, after they label him a traitor for objecting to their methods. Falcon is portrayed a fellow superhero and friend to Captain America throughout the comics, and his response to the black power rhetoric of the People's Militia is inextricably linked to his status as the first African-American superhero in the Marvel comic

universe. When the rally members accuse Falcon of failing to support the “black side”, he responds: “But I am on the black side! You’re the one who’s off base! Don’t you see that revolution isn’t the answer...that going into the streets for some masked man is going to do more harm than good?” (Friedrich & Romita, 1971, *Captain America* #143). The group’s violence is presented by members of the movement as a form of justified self-defense following years of violent oppression; however, their decision to target Wilson demonstrates their willingness to turn against potential allies in their desire for revenge. Their indiscriminate violence against anyone who fails to support their cause is indicative of the group’s unwillingness to participate in democratic discussion. Notably, Wilson himself is conflicted by the events. He sympathizes with the People’s Militia’s cause but refuses to resort to their extreme methods, and he describes them several times as erratic and unreasonable. “You people aren’t thinking! You’re going to destroy everything you’ve gained,” he exclaims to the group of dissenters (Friedrich & Romita, 1971, *Captain America* #143), suggesting that their methods may undo prior civil rights advancements. Although their violence does not negate the justness of their cause, it delegitimizes their actions and prevents the possibility of true social change.



Figure 1: The *What If* representations of Nick Fury, Spider-Man and Sam Wilson are armed with weapons as they strategize for the resistance. Source: Gillis, P. (w), Buscema, S. (p), and Simons, D. (i). (1984, April). “What If Captain America Were Revived Today?” *What If?* #44. Marvel Comics.

Although the use of violence is prominent in the Captain America comics, its representation differs depending on the characters involved in the dissent. In the 1984 issue “What If Captain America Were Revived?” (Gillis & Buscema, *What If?* #183), an alternate version of Sam Wilson presents a very different perspective on the acceptance of violence for dissent. In the universe presented by the *What If* issue, an imposter posing as Captain America assists in establishing of an oppressive police state, forcing resistance groups to strategize underground. Wilson and Spider-Man are presented as key members of the resistance, and both are shown tolerating—and even encouraging—the murder of those who are sympathetic with the government. “Just give the word, General,” Spider-Man threatens an undercover Steve Rogers, “I’ll blow this guy’s head off!” This type of threat is a dramatic divergence from the usual methods of the superheroes, who are more likely to avoid violence. It is not representative of their usual stances on violence. However, it is important to note that the rightful Captain America seems unfazed by the implications of these threats, and he continues to work alongside



the resistance to overthrow his imposter. It is unclear if this can be seen as tacit acceptance of violence, but within the context of the comic their actions are presented as an understandable response to persecution by the political administration in power. Although the dissenters themselves actively threaten non-dissenters, the severity of their threat is minimized by their association with Captain America. Importantly, the *What If* issues are considered a divergence from the main universe of the *Captain America* storyline. Instead, the series imagines how the universe of the comics may have been shaped if specific moments in history were altered. Although it portrays events occurring in an alternate universe, this does not lessen the importance of Captain America's representation. The *What If* Captain America is shown to have all the same traits as his original counterpart. In fact, he is the only constant in an otherwise changed world. Although Falcon and Spider-Man's actions should be situated within their altered context, Captain America's reactions to their violence are framed as a continuation of his character rather than a divergence from it. This suggests that his actions in the *What If* universe are still indicative of his true moral character.

**Perceptions of criminality.** Similarly to representations of dissent in news media, disruption is used as a characteristic of the protesters in the *Captain America* comics as well. In addition to their use of violence, dissenters are also criticized for their disruptive impact on the community. This disruption is often linked to a perception of criminality. Overall, input from civilians within the comics is limited; they rarely voice their opinions in detail. Civilian perspectives, when presented, are most notable in their reference to the legality of political action, and they occasionally function to critique the existence of dissent. For example, student protesters turn violent on campus in Stan Lee's 1969 issue "Crack-Up on Campus" (Lee & Colan, *Captain America* #120), other students step in to intervene. "'No creepy goon with a loudspeaker

is gonna keep me from my diploma,” one unnamed student says in response to the presence of the protest leader. Although the dissenters turn to violence later in the issue, the language of the other students makes it clear that the mere existence of the protest is cause for concern. The protesters are criticized for the disruption of student life on campus, even before their aggressive tactics are implemented. In *Civil War*, pro-Registration hero Reed Richards blames the superhero resistance for the creation of “social dangers” (Millar & McNiven, 2007), and he cites his projections of these social dangers as justification for the harsh treatment of the resistance at the hands of S.H.I.E.L.D.

Much like Reed Richards’ point suggests, criticism of dissenters within the comics is located within a discourse of criminality and legitimacy. A sense of legitimacy within political discussion is derived from a compliance with the law, and forms of protest that use illegal methods are deemed illegitimate and therefore ineffective.

Due to their position outside the realm of both protesters and superheroes, civilians are often not privy to the more nuanced decision-making behind specific acts of dissent. In “Nomad: No More” (Englehart & Robbins, 1975, *Captain America* #183), one civilian describes Captain America as “the biggest crook of them all” after the hero’s split from Washington, unaware that he is speaking to the superhero himself. The man interprets Captain America’s decision to renounce his superhero identity as evidence of guilt and, by extension, criminality. In the *Civil War* issues, civilians are primarily shown as victims of the unintended destruction caused by dissenting superheroes. One nurse comments on the actions of Captain America: “...I don’t think it’s cool Cap’s still fighting super-crime. What’d be cool is if he stopped breaking the law” (Millar & McNiven, 2007). The possible justifications for the dissenters’ actions are lost when they are discussed in terms of legality. Instead, the dissenters are defined by their relationship

with the law and are therefore pitted against the interests of the overall community. Miriam Sharpe, a grieving mother and proponent of the government's Registration plan in the *Civil War* series, also offers a perspective that frames dissenters as criminals. When discussing the death of the superhero Goliath, she indicates no remorse or sympathy; instead, she suggests that his defiance of the law justifies his death. "This is no more your fault than a cop could be blamed for shooting a punk who pulls a gun on him," she suggests, equating Goliath's opposition to the registration with a threat of violence.

Interestingly, criminals also become potential allies for dissenters within the *Civil War* arc. Goldbug, an established supervillain, notes that the supervillain community is equally concerned with the government's actions. The potential unification of villains and heroes in the resistance only amplifies the dissenters' association with criminality, demonstrating the blurred lines between right and wrong in the portrayal of heroes in the *Civil War* storyline.

**Capability of the dissenters.** The capability of the dissenters is often called into question by non-dissenters and outsiders who undermine the groups' ability to effect positive social change. Their capacity for rational thought is consistently dismissed, with dissenters often presented as unreasonable and crazed. In multiple instances, the dissenters are shown to be manipulated by others rather than acting on their own. In "Crack-Up on Campus," Captain America uncovers that the villain MODOK is inciting violence by brainwashing the protesters, causing them to act irrationally. Similarly, the People's Militia rally is led by the mysterious figure The Man, who is revealed to be the Red Skull in disguise. The Red Skull is one of the most enduring supervillains of the *Captain America* comics and is associated with Nazi ideology. "Though the eruption of racial violence is to the benefit of our cause," the Red Skull says, "our greatest victory will be won when we bring Captain America to its knees..." (Friedrich &

Romita, 1971, *Captain America* #143). The cause of the dissenters is secondary to the motivations of their manipulative leader, and the reveal of the Red Skull's identity demonstrates the gullibility of the rally attendees. When Falcon pleads with an unnamed People's Militia member to listen to his side, the man shoots back, "There ain't no other side!" In the comics, the protesters are presented as easily-manipulated, ill-informed masses. Their eagerness for violence prevents them from discerning right from wrong and often results in them acting counterintuitively to their true goals. This allows villains to appropriate protest culture, influencing the minds of dissenters and causing mass disruption.

### **Captain America and Dissent**

**Captain America as a dissenter.** Captain America may have initially been conceived as a perfect soldier, but his capacity for dissenting political views changes in later storylines. The earliest comics following the character's revival reveal his initial hesitancy to disengage from his relationship with the American government. However, as time passes, Captain America reveals growing concerns about the ability of the federal government to protect the freedoms of its citizens. Instead, he takes on this role himself, demonstrating a newfound independence rooted in his moral beliefs regarding a right to freedom of expression. This self-declared role as a voice for the American people occasionally clashes with Captain America's previous role in supporting the decisions of the U.S. government. These clashes highlight his unique position as an intermediary between the American political system and its citizens.

The moments in which Steve Rogers distances himself from the role of Captain America reveal the extent to which he views his superhero identity as independent from his duty to the American government. He rejects orders from his superiors when he determines them incompatible with his personal moral code. In contrast to other dissenters in the comics, his

motivations are often unrelated to particular political or social causes and instead reflect broader moral concerns. Captain America's moments of dissent are ultimately portrayed as righteous acts aimed at the preservation of freedom. Whereas others fight back against the authority, Captain America himself is a figure of authority, lending credence to his cause. Through his rejection of federal authority, Rogers reiterates the recurring relationship between Captain America and the American people. Although he does not hold an elected office, he frames himself as the voice of average Americans. Captain America's function as a protector of what he defines as American values—specifically, those of justice, liberty, and freedom—liberate him from federal restrictions by holding him to a higher moral standard. In this sense, Captain America mimics the construction of “consensual moral values” (Trivundža & Brlek, 2017), although these values do not explicitly support or condemn political dissent.

In 1975, Steve Rogers splits from the federal government for the first time following the events of the Secret Empire series and his loss of faith in the presidential administration. Refusing to continue his role as Captain America, Rogers instead takes up the mantle of Nomad, a vigilante identity, to continue his work outside of U.S. government control (Englehart & Buscema, 1974, *Captain America* #180). However, he immediately recognizes the limitations of this new identity; by operating as an outsider rather than a public figure, he loses a sense of legitimacy and struggles to achieve positive change. Eventually, he concedes that although he doesn't regret his time as Nomad or his stance against the government's actions, he could do more good as Captain America than Nomad. Rogers leaves his Nomad identity behind and resumes his role as Captain America, illustrating his commitment to serving the American people despite his disagreements with those in government. Communication scholar Jason Bainbridge's (2007) link between the superhero genre and vigilantism seems to explain Rogers's decision to

become Nomad, although his return to the role of Captain America displays the limits of his vigilante identity. As Bainbridge suggests, a hero's turn to vigilantism can be viewed as a continuation of their "compensatory justice." Steve Rogers's act of dissent is his decision to change identities, and it is rooted in his belief in fulfilling justice regardless of his title. However, his attempts at achieving this justice are shown to be less effective than Captain America, and he suggests that vigilantism is less effective than government support.

Another divergence of Steve Rogers from the Captain America identity occurs later in the series. In "Patriotism" (Liefeld & Loeb, 1997, *Captain America* Vol. 2 #3), he is placed in a similarly uncomfortable position when he voices his disagreement with supporting President Harry Truman's decision to drop nuclear bombs. In his refusal to offer his support, he cites his right to freedom of speech. However, both Truman and S.H.I.E.L.D. conspire to eliminate his right and suppress his expression through medical experiments to keep him brainwashed and compliant. To readers, it is clear that the actions taken by the government to suppress dissent are morally wrong; however, the characters themselves make multiple attempts to justify it, citing national security concerns. After the hero learns of the truth, he compares the actions of the president and S.H.I.E.L.D. to those of the Nazis. "You were only following orders," he tells Nick Fury, "As I recall, that was the excuse a lot of our Second World War enemies gave us." He chooses to once again leave the service of the government, citing a desire to "rediscover" the nation he loves. This rhetoric appears more than once across the years. In his justification of his dissent, Captain America describes a literal return to the American people. This suggests that by aiding government officials in their political aims, he departed from his ultimate purpose, and his decision to "go rogue" is framed as a realignment rather than a revolt.



Figure 2: Captain America describes his devotion to his country, linking it to his costumed identity. Source: Gillis, P. (w), Buscema, S. (p), & Simons, D. (i). (1984, April). "What if Captain America Were Revived Today?" *What If?* #44. Marvel Comics.

Despite his dissent, a permanent departure from government is never in the cards for Captain America. The reason for his dissent is not the existence of the establishment itself, but rather the actions taken by individuals within it. He refuses to expand his critique further in any of these instances, instead placing blame on specific political leaders. "...Those men are not my country," he says in writer Mark Gruenwald's 1987 issue "Captain America No More!" (Gruenwald & Morgan, *Captain America* #332). "They are only paid bureaucrats of the country's current administration." In each instance where Captain America acts as a dissenter, he draws a careful distinction between the American people and their leaders. He also emphasizes the true role of Captain America, which he envisions as an arbiter in matters of justice, cooperating with the U.S. government but ultimately beholden to the will of the people. Captain America suggests that although he was created to be a perfect soldier, his role transcends political maneuvering and instead occupies a symbolic space in the American consciousness. It is this symbolic importance that justifies Captain America's dissent, differentiating his actions from

other, potentially less righteous groups. Captain America's identity as a superhero provides a sense of legitimacy that serves to justify his political actions. As Dale & Foy (2010) suggest, superheroes may offer natural possibilities for social change. Captain America's symbolic role highlights how superheroes are uniquely positioned to enact change as this particular form of legitimacy is denied to other dissenters. The moral standard associated with heroic identity provides an opportunity for legitimate dissent that is not accessible to everyone.

**Opposition to dissent.** Although Captain America himself acts as a dissenter on multiple occasions, his opinion on dissent seems to differ in the instances where he acts as an outside observer. Instead of taking a supportive stance in favor of dissent, he more frequently speaks out against the dissenters. His rare statements in favor of their actions are hesitant and fall short of outright support. "This is the day of the anti-hero— the age of the rebel— and the dissenter!," he exclaims in the 1970 issue "The Sting of the Scorpion", bemoaning his waning relevance in the age of 1960s counterculture, "It isn't hip— to defend the establishment! —Only to tear it down" (Lee & Colan, *Captain America* #122). He goes on to question his own role as an enforcer of the status quo, even suggesting that he join the protesters. However, only several panels later, he retracts his words and fully commits to supporting the establishment. He dismisses his earlier musings as unnecessarily dramatic and compares his words to "an audition for a soap opera" (Lee & Colan, *Captain America* #122), reframing his political concerns as an irrational response linked to his overall emotional instability. Although he briefly toys with the idea of protest culture, Captain America redirects his focus to the positive features of this undefined "establishment" rather than seriously entertaining the possibility. Scholar Woody Evans' (2014) argument for superheroes' preservation of social institutions is exemplified by Captain America's political positions in the earlier comics. His early rejection of dissent



demonstrates a belief that these institutions benefit society as a whole, and the revolutionary words of protesters threaten the stability they offer. Despite his ability to produce social change, he fails to act on this urge until much later in his superhero career.



Figure 3: Steve Rogers re-commits to his role as a protector of the establishment. Source: Lee, S. (w), Colan, G. (p), Sinnott, J.

(i). (1970, February). "The Sting of the Scorpion!" *Captain America* #122. Marvel Comics.

Captain America's only articulated objection to dissenters occurs in reference to their use of violence. Even as a dissenter himself, he draws a line between acceptable and unacceptable forms of dissent, which is based solely on his personal moral code. Even during the time as Nomad, he still locates himself outside of other forms of protest. In one instance as Nomad, he encounters a separate gathering of protesters who, enraged at the treatment of the villainous Serpent Squad, attempt to attack him. He notes that their loss of faith in superheroes is justified, asking himself, "You were the one who asked 'how can people trust 'heroes' anymore— and how can I blame them?" (Englehart & Robbins, 1975, *Captain America* #183). However, he fails to approve their aggressiveness after realizing that "all [they] want to do is fight" (Englehart

& Robbins, 1975, *Captain America* #183). This occurs once again in the 2006 *Civil War* series, in which he distances his resistance group from the Punisher after the antihero shoots two villains sympathetic to their cause. The resistance clearly upholds a moral standard despite breaking the law, and Frank Castle's (The Punisher) defiance of this code leads Captain America to describe him as an "animal" (Millar & McNiven, 2007). In the final issue of the core *Civil War* series, Captain America surrenders to authorities after recognizing the destructiveness of his own methods. "We're not fighting for the people anymore, Falcon," he points out to his fellow superhero, "We're just fighting" (Millar & McNiven, 2007).

The Captain America of the *Civil War* series is notably more aggressive in his methods than earlier issues, but he also demonstrates remorse after seeing the negative impact of the conflict on civilians. Although his critique of the U.S. government is a clear shift from the character's early stance as a member of the establishment, he ultimately renounces his own revolutionary tactics. Captain America's surrender implies a belief that although dissent itself is encouraged, it should not be prioritized over the safety and stability of the nation. This echoes familiar methods of policing dissent, in which only "comfortable" forms of dissent are acceptable and less comfortable methods necessitate intervention (Porta & Reiter, 1998).

As both an outsider and a dissenter, Captain America rarely takes the side of others who express dissent differently; instead, he supports a vague concept of dissent while distancing himself from the use of political violence to achieve change. Notably, Captain America himself utilizes violence as a tool of defense when acting in a crime-fighting capacity. Throughout his interactions with protesters, he is shown punching individual dissenters in four separate instances, demonstrating his willingness to use violence as a form of intervention. Although his use of a shield seems to suggest defensive action, he consistently deploys it as a weapon and throws it to

incapacitate his opposition, an offensive move. The morality of his use of violence against criminals and villains is unquestioned within the comics. In contrast, his use of violence as a form of political action is portrayed as ineffective and extreme, demonstrating that violence is only viewed as acceptable when Captain America acts in cooperation with authorities. This would seem to support the assertion that superheroes function primarily as agents of the law (Wolf-Meyer, 2003), and yet this assertion is further complicated when considering Captain America's violation of the law in his own acts of dissent. He shows the ability to go beyond his capacity as an agent of the law but continues to leverage his governmental role to police the actions of others.

**Chronology of Dissent.** Although the initial character of Captain America may have been conceived as an agent of the U.S. government, his role has expanded to encompass a broader purpose. It is clear that the concept of Captain America is linked closely with a belief in upholding American values, however unclear those values may be. In this sense, the hero Captain America is seen as a separate entity from Steve Rogers, the man. He is an eternal, static representation of intangible values, and when Steve steps away from his role as the hero, Captain America continues to function symbolically. Despite civilians having limited dialogue related to dissent in this sample, Captain America claims to understand the desires of average American citizens, and this shapes his interactions with federal officials. His conflicts with the United States government may stem from a moral opposition to discriminatory legislation, but they hinge on his belief that he alone represents the will of the people. Jewett and Lawrence (2004) identify the "Captain America complex" as the use of non-democratic means to achieve democratic goals; however, within the context of the comics, his dissent can be viewed as the ultimate expression of democratic action. His choices are framed as an exercise of his civil

liberties, and attempts by politicians to curtail those liberties are used to demonstrate the inherent danger of dissent to corrupt governments. The nation and its people continue to be idealized even in later issues, but representations of government officials grow darker over the course of Captain America's career. Whereas Captain America initially lends his support to the establishment in earlier issues, he later grows to speak against it. This is likely due to the political context in which the comic authors were operating in. His first notable divergence from this establishment takes place in "The Coming of the Nomad" (Englehart & Buscema, 1974, *Captain America #180*). As Hodo (2011) points out, the relationship between political context and the motivations of comic writers cannot be ignored. In this instance, writer Steve Englehart has spoken openly about his use of the Secret Empire and Nomad storylines as reflections of the events of the Watergate scandal (Shiach, 2017). In reference to Richard Nixon and how Watergate shaped the comics, he comments: "I was writing a man who believed in America's highest ideals at a time when America's President was a crook" (Englehart, n.d., p. 177-186). These events had a profound impact on political discourse in the United States, and similar themes are certainly echoed by Captain America's frustration with the political system, creating a snapshot of American sentiment at the time.

Although the number of instances Captain America criticizes the federal government increase following the 1970s, his stance on dissent as a concept remains fairly consistent despite his increased firsthand engagement. Even while actively dissenting, he polices the behavior of other protesters; in doing so, he establishes an understanding of acceptable dissent. This understanding is rooted in the character's opposition to violence. He consistently describes violent dissenters as unstable and unreasonable. A just cause is not enough, this suggests, and the acceptability of dissent is dependent on individual methods.

There is a shift away from individual protests towards conflicts between Captain America and the federal government in later storylines. The threat he represents by disagreeing with the government reveals the power of his dissent; however, this power is restricted to superheroes. Non-superhero dissenters are not shown to have the same level of political impact. Within the comics, dissent is magnified by an association with institutions. Captain America leverages his position as an American hero to effect political change, but he surrenders this ability upon abandoning his mantle as Captain America.

There is a notable lack of effective, peaceful demonstrations by dissenters outside of Captain America in the comics; instead, he either functions as the dissenter, or he is forced to intervene in others' dissent. The lack of effective action by protesters in the comics can be linked to their use of violence. The utilization of violence has been used to delegitimize and depoliticize protest movements. It allows the focus of media coverage to be shifted from the dissenters' cause to the acceptability their methods, undermining the movements themselves (Trivundža & Brlek, 2017). In the context of the comics, Captain America functions in a similar role to media by minimizing other dissenters' causes and diverting attention to the morality of their actions.

### **Conclusion**

The representation of Captain America as a dissenter has varied over time, demonstrating a range of interactions with both protesters and the U.S. federal government. The suggestion that superheroes may inherently provide opportunities for radical dissent (Dale & Foy, 2010) seems undermined by Captain America's goal to establish limitations on the expression of political action. However, claims that heroes such as Captain America operate as extensions of American policy (Coogan, 2006) fail to capture the complexity of his relationship with the American government. His actions against multiple political administrations in the comics reveal his ability

to critique the actions of the federal government rather than blindly following orders; in fact, his encounters with government officials in the comics often frame him as morally superior. While not all of his political beliefs are revolutionary in nature, he extends his support to the protection of individual civil liberties, allowing a space for certain forms of dissent. His own attempts at dissent reveal that he goes beyond merely tolerating its presence; however, he also acts as a gatekeeper of acceptable political expression through his interventions in other protests.

Dissenters unrelated to Captain America are portrayed in a much harsher light. They are largely characterized as violent and disruptive by other members of the community. Their dialogue highlights their unwillingness to compromise or reason with others. Their portrayal reveals a disconnect between their justifiable, legitimate grievances and their destructive, counterproductive methods. These groups are often explicitly condemned by Captain America and other superheroes for their approaches, and their use of intimidation prevents them from achieving their political goals by framing them as criminal agitators. The discrepancy between Captain America's dissent and the actions of these other groups is rooted in a discourse of legitimacy. Whereas Captain America's dissent is represented as morally correct and therefore a legitimate method of political participation, others' use of violence—as well as their lack of the symbolic status that the Captain America identity offers—ultimately robs them of their ability to enact social or political change.

Ultimately, the *Captain America* comics offer a complex glimpse into the political potential of mainstream comics, further complicated by the superhero's shifting political stances over time. In the 1960s, Captain America sought to reclaim his place as a member of the establishment during the height of counterculture. His appreciation of the status quo came at the expense of protest culture, which he dismissed as a viable option for political participation.

However, beginning in the 1980s, Captain America begins a series of departures from the United States government that emphasize dissent as both a necessity and a patriotic duty. Despite his increased attempts at resistance, the portrayal of other dissenters remains consistently negative over time in both visual and verbal representations. This points to an overarching disapproval of aggressive, grassroots activism, while simultaneously celebrating calls for institutional reform by figures of political authority. Rather than attempting to characterize the character as entirely conservative or progressive, it may instead be best to view the *Captain America* comics as a political middle ground— or, more specifically, as a template for dissent rooted in respectability over revolution.

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## Appendix

## Sample Texts

<b>Date Published</b>	<b>Issue Title</b>	<b>Volume, Issue</b>	<b>Writer(s)</b>	<b>Penciller(s)</b>	<b>Inker(s)</b>
1969	“Crack-Up on Campus”	<i>Captain America</i> Vol. 1, #120	Stan Lee	Gene Colan	Joe Sinnott
1970	“The Sting of the Scorpion”	<i>Captain America</i> Vol. 1, #122	Stan Lee	Gene Colan	Joe Sinnott
1971	“Power to the People”	<i>Captain America</i> Vol. #1, #143	Gary Friedrich	John Romita	John Romita, Tony Mortellaro
1975	“The Coming of the Nomad”	<i>Captain America</i> Vol. 1, #180	Steve Englehart	Sal Buscema	Vince Colletta
1975	“The Mark of Madness”	<i>Captain America</i> Vol. 1, #181	Steve Englehart	Sal Buscema	Vince Colletta
1975	“Inferno”	<i>Captain America</i> Vol. 1, #182	Steve Englehart	Frank Robbins	Joe Giella
1975	“Nomad: No More”	<i>Captain America</i> Vol. 1, #183	Steve Englehart	Frank Robbins	Frank Giacoia
1975	“Cap’s Back!”	<i>Captain America</i> Vol. 1, #184	Steve Englehart	Herb Trimpe	Frank Giacoia, Mike Esposito
1984	“What if Captain America Were Revived?”	<i>What If?</i> Vol. 1, #44	Peter Gillis		
1987	“Captain America	<i>Captain</i>	Mark	Tom	Bob

	No More!”	<i>America</i> #332	Gruenwald	Morgan	McLeod
1997	“Patriotism”	<i>Captain America</i> Vol. 2, #3	Rob Liefeld, Jeph Loeb	Sal Buscema	Dave Simons
1997	“Crossroads”	<i>Captain America</i> Vol. 2, #7	James Robinson	Joe Phillips, Travis Charest	Homage Studios
2006	“Civil War: Part One of Seven”	<i>Civil War</i> #1	Mark Millar	Steve McNiven	Dexter Vines
2006	“Civil War: Part Two”	<i>Civil War</i> #2	Mark Millar	Steve McNiven	Dexter Vines
2006	“Civil War: Part Three”	<i>Civil War</i> #3	Mark Millar	Steve McNiven	Dexter Vines, Mark Morales, Steven McNiven
2006	“Civil War: Part Four”	<i>Civil War</i> #4	Mark Millar	Steve McNiven	Dexter Vines
2006	“Civil War: Part Five”	<i>Civil War</i> #5	Mark Millar	Steve McNiven	Dexter Vines
2006	“Civil War: Part Six”	<i>Civil War</i> #6	Mark Millar	Steve McNiven	Dexter Vines
2006	“Civil War: Part Seven”	<i>Civil War</i> #7	Mark Millar	Steve McNiven	Dexter Vines, John Dell, Tim Townsend