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*“With Great Power...”*:

Post-9/11 Politics in Superhero Comics, TV, and Film

By

Caroline Ristaino

\* \* \* \* \*

Submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for

Honors in the Departments of English and Political Science

UNION COLLEGE

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## ABSTRACT

RISTAINO CAROLINE “*With Great Power...*”: Post-9/11 Politics in Superhero Comics, TV, and Film. Departments of English and Political Science, June 2020.

ADVISORS: Judith Lewin, Bradley Hays, and Dan Venning

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 prompted the government to take drastic political action, such as the War on Terror, and inspired the American people to feel new cultural anxieties. Literature and popular culture also responded to 9/11 with attempts to make sense of such an unprecedented event. This thesis argues that superhero stories, both in comics and onscreen, are particularly well-suited to deconstruct and critique post-9/11 American society through their depictions of power and the question of how individuals with superpowers fit into society. Specifically, this thesis engages with Marvel Comics’ *Civil War* (2006-07), its film adaptation *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), Dynamite Comics’ *The Boys* (2006-12), and the first season of its television adaptation from Amazon (2019). Through examination of themes including accountability, corruption and dominance, this thesis reveals how, in recent years, the tropes of the superhero genre have been portrayed in nuanced ways that do not allow for a simple binary between good and evil. As such, these stories reflect the difficulty Americans have faced in adjusting to the realities of post-9/11 America, as actions that were meant to provide security have proven increasingly fallible in the years since the terrorist attacks.

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## Chapter 1

### Superhero Stories and their Political Content: An Overview

#### Introduction

In October of 2019, director Martin Scorsese gave an interview to *Empire Magazine* in which he was asked his opinion of Marvel movies. Scorsese responded, “I tried, you know? But that’s not cinema. Honestly, the closest I can think of them, as well-made as they are, with actors doing the best they can under the circumstances, is theme parks” (De Semlyen). The following month, Scorsese penned an opinion piece for *The New York Times* in order to clarify his position. In this follow-up, he explained that his central issue with Marvel films is the space they take up at movie theaters at the expense of smaller, independent, and, in Scorsese’s opinion, more artistic films. He also, however, affirmed his previous statement that Marvel blockbusters are not cinema because, unlike these superhero movies, “cinema was about revelation — aesthetic, emotional and spiritual revelation... It was about confronting the unexpected on the screen and in the life it dramatized and interpreted, and enlarging the sense of what was possible in the art form” (Scorsese).

Scorsese is far from the only person to criticize the predominance of Marvel and other superhero films in recent years. Numerous news outlets have published articles with headlines asking questions like, “How Much Marvel Is Too Much Marvel?” and “Is Marvel Killing the Movies?” (Katz, Heer, et al.). In addition to Scorsese’s reference to theme parks, these other articles have offered serialized television and video games as apt analogues for these superhero films. All of these comparisons suggest the same point: superhero movies are more focused on individual thrills and audience satisfaction than they are in reflecting the world around them or saying something about it. This thesis argues, instead, that superhero stories, both in comics and

onscreen, are particularly well-suited to deconstruct and critique American society through their depictions of power and the question of how individuals with superpowers fit into society. In recent years, the genre has been used to portray complex stories that go beyond a simple fight between good and evil and, in doing so, has reflected the complexities of post-9/11 society and the difficulties the American people have faced in adjusting to government actions. Not only have many critics failed to recognize these traits in the recent Marvel movies; superheroes and the stories in which they appear have been denounced by various critics for quite some time.

### **Literature Review**

Despite this academic scrutiny that comics have faced for many years, the medium has become more accepted over the past few decades. The publication of Art Spiegelman's seminal graphic novel, *Maus* from 1980 to 1991 helped to usher in a wider embrace of comics studies. In his retelling of his father's experiences during the Holocaust, Spiegelman utilizes the form of comics, with its unique combination of text and images, to its full extent, depicting Jews as mice and Germans as cats throughout the comic and allowing his images to do much of the symbolic work within the story. As the first graphic novel to win the Pulitzer Prize, *Maus* opened the door for the serious study of comic books and a conversation about what the medium can contribute to the pantheons of both art and literature. The success of *Maus*, however, did not mean that all comics were suddenly viewed as being worthy of scholarly discourse. Even as the field of comics studies grew, the focus remained for the most part on biographical, autobiographical, or historical stories told through the medium. Despite the fact that the superhero genre brought comics into popularity early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it has continued to be largely ignored, if not outright scorned, by comics scholars.

One of the most notable exceptions to this rule is Alan Moore's *Watchmen*, published in 1986 and 1987, which set a precedent for unconventional superhero stories that grappled with the social anxieties of their time. *Watchmen* was hailed by both people within the comic industry and a wider audience, and it was named one of TIME's top 100 books of all time in 2010 (Grossman). The superheroes in *Watchmen* are not the hopeful, brightly costumed ones that many associated with the genre at the time. Instead, they are superheroes pulled out of retirement by the murder of one of their own, The Comedian, who was employed by the U.S. government. Additionally, it is a former superhero who causes the destruction of New York at the end of the comics, something which the other heroes are unable to stop. The story is also intrinsically tied into the politics of its time because of its alternative history setting. In the world of *Watchmen*, superheroes helped the U.S. reach victory in the Vietnam War, and the removal of presidential term limits leads to Nixon's presence in the Oval Office extending through 1985. Additionally, the presence of the powerful superhero Dr. Manhattan in the United States escalates Cold War tensions with the Soviet Union, and the paranoia of the 1980s permeates the entirety of the graphic novel. As such, *Watchmen* set a standard for superhero comics that engage with the politics of the world around them and superheroes who are not as obviously heroic as characters like Superman. In a recent reflection on the significance of Moore's work, Adam Sternbergh wrote: "That comic not only awakened a generation of fans (and future creators) to the grander possibilities of the genre, it provided a template for how to use superhero tropes to tell thorny human stories" ("Watchmen' Is Coming"). This template would later be used by comics that reflected the tumultuous period in American society following 9/11. Moore's grittier take on superheroes helped lay the groundwork for scholarly arguments in favor of taking the genre seriously.

Despite the respect that works like *Maus* and *Watchmen* garnered, the majority of superhero comics continued to be scorned by scholars. In arguing against the academic significance of superhero comics, many critics point to their young target audience, and the resulting childish plotlines that they contain. This is, however, an oversimplified view of the genre, as it is in fact the stereotypes in superhero stories that facilitate social commentary, as has been pointed out by Alex S. Romagnoli and Gian S. Pagnucci in their book *Enter the Superheroes*. Superhero stories, especially those in early comic books, tend to portray a binary between good, as embodied by the superhero, and evil, as embodied by the supervillain. The clarity of this binary means that, “with few exceptions, the heroes and villains in superhero comics represent what mainstream American culture defines as good and evil” (Romagnoli and Pagnucci 9). As a result, the values that a superhero represents within a given time period reflect the cultural and political values of the society at that time. Tracing the shifts in how an American superhero is portrayed over time can consequently reveal how the country’s values have changed in relation to specific historical events. In addition, because superheroes are defined by their enhanced powers, this type of character “enables the reader to examine the nature of power” (11). By heightening a real-world concept like power, superhero stories create an allegorical lens through which to understand a theory which can often become muddled by the complexity of actual events. Finally, the idea that superhero stories are aimed solely at children or adult male readers stuck in a state of arrested development is inaccurate. Some of the most famous superhero comics, such as *Watchmen* and Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns*, contain nuanced and mature content. The very elements that have been frequently criticized by scholars are therefore the ones that make a scholarly and political reading of the superhero comics genre possible.

One reason inaccurate arguments against superhero stories continue to prevail is that superhero comics are regarded merely as a form of popular culture, rather than one of scholarly significance. Literary critic Frederic Jameson believes that most people see a contrast between what they regard as “high culture” and “mass culture,” which can be defined as the difference between works valued by scholars and those aimed solely at the public. Jameson, however, argues that “we must rethink the opposition high culture/mass culture” in order to change the view that if high culture is regarded as good, then mass culture must be bad (133). Rather, Jameson proposes a “genuinely historical and dialectical approach” so that “we read high and mass culture as objectively related and dialectically interdependent phenomena.” The claim being presented here is that, although high culture and mass culture may accomplish their ends in different ways, both cultural forms are products of history and development and can be understood as such. Thus, mass culture can and should be used to study the culture and politics of the time period in which a product was released. Jameson also shows his reader the ways in which ideologies of a certain time period can be seen in the works of mass culture. In arguing against the view that popular culture can only serve as escapist entertainment, Jameson writes that mass culture instead is “a transformational work on social and political anxieties and fantasies” that are repressed “by the narrative that construction of imaginary resolutions and by the projection of an optical illusion of social harmony” (141). In this sense, popular culture does serve a wish-fulfillment function, which could be viewed as escapist fantasy, but it can only do so by first exposing the societal anxieties that require such escapism in the first place. As a product of mass culture, a superhero comic book can be interpreted so as to reveal the social and political struggles of the time in which it was released through the conflicts presented, and the desires of the public through the way in which those conflicts are resolved. Thus, according to

Jameson, these works do not “express ideology,” but rather enact ideology through its “own virtual unmasking and self-criticism” (147). Jameson’s defense of mass culture is useful in justifying the study of superhero comics, despite the fact that many continue to denigrate them as mere blockbuster products aimed only at the anti-intellectual masses.

The association of the superhero with mass media has only grown stronger over the past two decades as the characters have become ubiquitous within popular culture. Movies based on comic book properties have come to dominate the box office, with seven such adaptations released in 2019 alone, including *Avengers: Endgame* which is currently the highest grossing movie of all time.<sup>1</sup> The Marvel Cinematic Universe, in particular, has become the most lucrative film franchise ever and created a new paradigm of cinematic universes in Hollywood. Superheroes are also prevalent on the small screen with cable channels and streaming services producing superhero television shows. The profit turned by the movies and the size of the audience that they reach at this point far exceeds those of the comics, and the extent to which movies and series reflect their sources varies. This is partially because, as Linda Hutcheon notes in her book *A Theory of Adaptation*, a film or television adaptation “can build upon a ‘preconstructed and preselected audience,’ but...must also expand that audience considerably” (128). More often than not, superhero stories on screen borrow characters and broad plot points from the comics rather than full story arcs, preferring to create new stories that better fit the characters in their screen iterations or tie into a larger onscreen universe. While the adaptations examined for this study, *Captain America: Civil War* and *The Boys*, do adhere to specific comic book storylines, it remains necessary to look beyond the notion of fidelity when examining comic book adaptations. These films and shows need rather be studied in the context of both the

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<sup>1</sup> *Avengers: Endgame* holds this title when box-office gross is not adjusted for inflation.

comics from which they originate, and the superhero culture that has been created around the adaptations themselves.

The beginnings of superhero mania at the box office traces back to the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, right around the same time as the terrorist attacks of 2001. While this tragic event was not the impetus for studios to begin making superhero movies, it did have effects on superhero characters. In the immediate aftermath of September 11, the terrorist attacks were widely perceived as a caesura, an interruption of normal culture, politics, and everyday life in the United States. The comics released during this time period treated the tragedy as such, with a notable example being Marvel's *The Amazing Spider-Man #36*. The issue begins with the words, "We interrupt our regularly scheduled program to bring you the following Special Bulletin" written in white on a black splash page (1). Right from the beginning, the reader is told to expect something other than a typical superhero story, something that may not fit into the canon of the Marvel Universe, but that needed to be addressed. The story of the issue opens with a two-page spread of Spider-Man seeing the flaming ruins of the Twin Towers from above, a visceral image accompanied by text boxes proclaiming, "Some things are beyond words. Beyond comprehension. Beyond forgiveness" (2-3).<sup>2</sup> In the following pages, Spider-Man and other Marvel heroes are shown assisting with the rescue efforts following the attacks, all the while coping with the fact that this was a tragedy they never saw coming and, as such, one that even they were powerless to stop. Even some of Marvel's most notorious villains, characters who have wreaked havoc upon the world countless times in previous comics, are moved to tears by the attacks. At the end of the issue's many reflections on how to process and move forward from

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<sup>2</sup> All quotations from comic books from this point forward are written in block capital letters in their source material. All capitalization is mine.

such an event is a page depicting firefighters, policemen, and others who served as first responders standing with the Marvel superheroes in front of an immense American flag.

The events of 9/11 had a profound effect on all Americans and, while the U.S. government and media began to put forth their own narrative, the events were incorporated into the narrative of comics as well. The creators of Marvel comics, in particular, addressed the attacks because their comics have always taken place in the real world, with many of their characters based, like the company itself, in New York City. While *The Amazing Spider-Man #36* was presented as an interruption of Marvel's typical content, it was far from the first time the comics tackled real-world events. Since the beginning of the Marvel era in 1961, superheroes have confronted the Cold War, the Vietnam War, and Watergate, among other contemporary political events. Even the more fictionalized universe of DC comics, where the heroes reside in Gotham and Metropolis rather than Manhattan, has elements of the real world, with Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton appearing in Batman and Superman stories respectively. Outside of the two major publishers, Marvel and DC, the universes are less clearly defined, which means that individual comic creators can decide whether or not to place their comics in the real world, as Garth Ennis did when setting *The Boys* in an alternate-history version of the United States in which the events of 9/11 played out quite differently. Superhero comics have always been a reflection of the world that their creators inhabit, and many of the films based on comics properties would turn out to be the same.

Scholars disagree about whether or not the seemingly sudden popularity of superheroes on screen can be directly related to 9/11. While the first of the modern era of superhero movies, Fox's adaptation of Marvel's *X-Men*, was released in 2000, before the 9/11 attacks, Sony's *Spider-Man*'s success in 2002 cemented the viability of superhero movies in Hollywood for the

first time. In *Comic Books Incorporated*, Shawna Kidman argues against any 9/11 causation and points out that *X-Men*, its sequel *X2*, and *Spider-Man* were all either completed or in production before September 11, 2001 (187-88). While technically true, this ignores the fact that the overwhelming financial success of *Spider-Man* and *X2*, both of which grossed more than *X-Men*, occurred post-9/11, meaning that audience desire for superhero movies may be tied to the terrorist attacks, even if the production of the films was not. In refuting the argument that 9/11 was partially responsible for the popularity of superhero movies, Kidman also calls 2008, rather than 2000 or 2002, the start of the superhero boom and claims that, by then, “the United States had arguably entered a new socio-cultural era” (188). Although the release of *Iron Man* in 2008 may have solidified the superhero genre at the box office, it is incorrect to assume that the effects of 9/11 had faded from American culture by that time. Rather, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq spurred by the 9/11 attacks were still ongoing and increasingly controversial. Furthermore, *Iron Man*’s origin story was updated from its Cold War setting for the 2008 film, as Tony Stark is kidnapped by a terrorist organization in Afghanistan. Had 9/11 truly been a caesura event, as it widely viewed in the immediate aftermath of the date, then Kidman’s argument would hold more weight. Instead, the effects of 9/11 continue to play a role in both foreign and domestic politics today, meaning that even the most recent superhero movies are influenced by the event.

Others have asserted a much clearer connection between the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the ability of superhero stories to provide escape and philosophical flexibility. Liam Burke explores this connection in *The Comic Book Film Adaptation*, writing: “Post-9/11, critics often credited comic book adaptations with serving three interrelated, ritual function: nostalgia, escapism, and wish fulfillment” (27). All of these strategies help Americans either avoid or cope with the reality of a post-9/11 world, and make any story that offered them more popular. More

specifically, Burke points to comic book movies as providing “a window into a world in which the tragedy could have been prevented” (31). Because superhero movies tend to focus on the heroes saving a population from an impending threat, it makes sense that Americans would take comfort in the idea of someone protecting them from future 9/11-type events. While these explanations for the popularity of superheroes make sense in the years immediately following 9/11, Burke does concede that they are less applicable to adaptations more distanced from the attacks, especially those that began to exhibit “skepticism, even outright antagonism, to clear-cut heroics” (35). This is especially true when looking at intentionally subversive adaptations, like *The Boys*, in comparison to the more mainstream superhero media that Marvel produces. The fact that these more subversive superhero stories enjoy the same positive reaction that more traditional and escapist stories do can be partially explained by what Jesse Walker calls “the superhero film’s philosophical flexibility,” or its “ability to invoke important issues without clearly coming down on one side or the other” (Walker). As post-9/11 politics have become increasingly polarized, it is difficult to see all political beliefs or positions reflected in onscreen narratives. By moving away from clear-cut heroics, superhero movies show flawed heroes and sympathetic villains, thus allowing for multiple perspectives to be represented without endorsing one. Superhero films therefore continue to respond to the needs of the American public in a post-9/11 society, albeit in an ever-shifting manner.

These reflections of post-9/11 America within superhero stories are not always explicit, and thus may be interpreted by individual readers and viewers. In his theory of reception, cultural theorist Stuart Hall argues that we use interpretation almost constantly as a way to make sense of the world around us through our negotiation of “the relationships between concepts and signs” (21). The concepts we maintain in our heads allow us to recognize the physical or

symbolic representations of those concepts in the world. Importantly, however, these concepts are not fixed, but rather constructed. And, because the relationship between the signified and its signifier is not fixed, the interpretation of movies can change based on the time period or cultural context in which they were viewed. The passage of time since a comic or film was made or the background of the person reading or viewing the material can therefore affect the way in which they interpret that piece of media. Superhero comics are geared primarily toward an American audience, and while superhero films are influenced by considerations of the international box office, they are still largely set in America. In addition, 9/11 is still recent history and the shifts in politics and culture that occurred in its aftermath are still being felt. Accordingly, any superhero media that addresses these shifts has been released to an audience that is primed to consume the media in terms of its own political and cultural viewpoint. While the broad cultural context stays consistent for most recent superhero stories, adaptations must also contend with the way in which reception can change across time periods. Linda Hutcheon writes: “An adaptation, like the work it adapts, is always framed in a context—a time and a place, a society and a culture; it does not exist in a vacuum... Many adapters deal with this reality of reception by updating the time of their story in an attempt to find contemporary resonance for their audiences” (142). Even the elapse of ten years between the release of a comic and its adaptation can change which issues prevail in a culture and may shape what is included or emphasized in the adaptation. Thus, it is possible to read post-9/11 politics into all of the stories being studied, while also noting that the specifics of those politics may change between the release of the original material and its adaptation on screen.

A handful of political scholars have read the effects of 9/11 and other significant political events in comics, most notably Matthew J. Costello. As one of the few political scientists writing

about superhero comics from the perspective of his discipline, Costello's work provides an essential jumping off point for this study. In his book *Secret Identity Crisis: Comic Books & The Unmasking of Cold War America*, Costello traces the development of Marvel superheroes, most notably Iron Man and Captain America, throughout the Cold War and up to the War on Terror, arguing that the depictions of the heroes have varied over time in order to represent the American self, or the search for it, in a way that represents the loss of the liberal consensus. While his book is limited to Marvel heroes and this study is not, the characteristics that Costello examines and their relationship to American identity can be found in most superhero stories, including Ennis's *The Boys*. Specifically, Costello identifies "three elements of the superhero comic [that] render it a particularly revealing avenue for the exploration of national identity. These are the relevance of the heroic narrative to social values, the specific ideological content of the books as cultural artifacts, and the mechanism of the dual identity" (*Secret Identity Crisis* 15). The first two of these elements echo ideas touched upon Romagnoli and Pagnucci, and Jameson respectively, while the third element is one that Costello expands upon throughout his book. The focus of this paper is specifically on comics and adaptations released after 2001, but the societal reflections that Costello identifies in Cold War comics aid in situating more contemporary releases within the established political world of comics more broadly.

In chronicling Marvel heroes throughout the years, Costello returns to a few tropes that appear frequently in story arcs, are closely tied to American politics, and that are consequently used in this study as elements of political analysis. Three tropes identified by Costello that make superhero stories uniquely suited to the study of societal anxieties are the balance of public and private life, the relationship between superheroes and government, and the identity of those against whom the heroes are fighting. Because many superheroes have secret identities that allow

them to exist as normal citizens when not in costume, they can easily be used to symbolize the dichotomy between public and private life. Thus, Costello identifies periods during which the hero (i.e. Iron Man) was the focus of comics as periods of collectivity and public life in America, and periods when the alter ego (i.e. Tony Stark) was the focus as those when Americans retreated into individualism and domesticity. Even during the periods that focused more on private life, however, superheroes have always had some kind of connection to the government. When superheroes are cooperating with the government, Costello argues, it represents American consensus and moral clarity, as the morality of the heroes aligns with that of American leaders. As distrust of the government among Americans grew in the 1970s and 80s, that distrust was echoed by superheroes, who increasingly turned to acts of vigilantism, rather than using legitimate means and cooperating with the government. In addition, many superhero stories revolve around an act of betrayal, and that betrayal began to be more frequently committed by the government. This leads into the other major element identified by Costello as reflecting American society, namely the identity of those against whom the superheroes are fighting. During periods of consensus, superheroes fought Nazis or communists, groups that were almost universally seen as the enemy. As this consensus faded, however, superheroes began to fight against morally ambiguous villains, untrustworthy governments, and themselves. The presence of secret identities, government, and villains within the superhero stories under consideration therefore provides insight into the social and political anxieties of a post-9/11 era.

The three superhero story tropes identified by Costello appear in most stories of the genre, and are consequently useful tools in studying superhero adaptations. When the role of secret identities, the relationship between heroes and the government, and the identity of the villain change between a comic and its screen adaptation, it indicates a change in the political

subtext of the film as well. This is because theme and character, two story elements that are crucial parts of Costello's three tropes, are, according to *A Theory of Adaptation*, "perhaps the easiest story element to see as adaptable across media" (Hutcheon 10). Thus, when there are significant changes to theme or character from the source material to its adaptation, it typically indicates a change in the intention behind the story. While some literary theorists argue against the consideration of intentionality in literary analysis, Hutcheon takes an opposite view when it comes to adaptation: "Adapters' deeply personal as well as culturally and historically conditioned reasons for selecting a certain work to adapt and the particular way to do so should be considered seriously by adaptation theory" (95). In analyzing *Civil War* and *The Boys* as adaptations, then, it will be important to consider the elements of superhero stories that are tied to politics as identified by Costello in order to understand why the comics were adapted at a certain time and in a particular way.

The time period in question is associated with an American need for escapism, but in returning to Costello one may argue that superheroes, in fact, were more subversive than escapist after 9/11. Costello has written about superheroes in the age of the War on Terror, both in *Secret Identity Crisis*, and in his essay "Spandex Agonistes: Superhero Comics Confront the War on Terror." Costello argues that a defining characteristic of comics of the era is "the almost immediate questioning of the moral position of the United States in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001" (*Secret Identity Crisis* 200). Rather than provide a way for readers to forget about the terrorist attacks, these comics forced readers to confront a counter-narrative to the one of American exceptionalism put forward by the government and media. This dominant narrative focused both on the incredulity of such an attack happening on American soil, and the unique ability of the United States to spread the notions of democracy and liberty

around the world. Within the superhero stories being told at this time, however, “the American government is often implicated in the attacks” and the American response is portrayed “not as a morally righteous act, but as the product of nationalist hubris” (“Spandex Agonistes” 31). Once the tragedy of 9/11 had been addressed appropriately, the comics immediately pivoted to a more critical stance, revealing the anxieties the American public directed at its own government, rather than as an external threat. In reading into the moral ambiguities of post-9/11 superhero stories, Costello avoids the simplistic narrative that superheroes are only useful for wish-fulfillment and escapism, and points instead to their ability to unmask and criticize, the same functions that Jameson identifies as being central to mass culture. This paper therefore follows the lead of both Jameson and Costello in closely examining the anxieties exhibited in superhero stories, rather than simply their heroic resolutions.

One of the anxieties that is central to the works being studied is the influence 9/11 had on conceptions of American exceptionalism and, by extension, the way popular culture has represented America since the terrorist attacks. In his book *The New American Exceptionalism*, Donald E. Pease identifies a connection between the state of exception and fantasies of the state. Pease defines state fantasy not as “a mystification” but as “the dominant structure of desire out of which U.S. citizens imagined their national identity” (1). This state fantasy supports the state of exception, because when the state began to act outside of its jurisdiction, “U.S. citizens fantasized themselves as the sovereign power that had suspended the law in the name of securing the nation” (33). Americans initially accepted the decisions made by the U.S. government after 9/11 because they believed that they had contributed to those decisions. This fantasy, however, obscured for many the harmful reality of many of the actions taken in the name of security at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. John N. Duvall and Robert P. Marzec use Pease’s understanding of

fantasy and exception as the basis for their essay collection *Narrating 9/11: Fantasies of State, Security, and Terrorism*. In the introduction to this collection, Duvall and Marzec argue that fiction plays a crucial role in “the successful constitution of the nation” (3). The essays that they present support this point, as their focus is “on the ways in which post-9/11 narratives help make visible the fantasies that supposedly necessitate the ongoing state of exception and American exceptionalism” (2). If fantasy shaped the way in which Americans reacted to the 9/11 attacks, then fantastical stories can help to expose and make sense of the narratives that so many believed. This thesis therefore takes up Duvall and Marzec’s focus and applies it to superhero stories from both the page and the screen.

Countless superhero comics and films have been released since September 11, 2001 that could potentially demonstrate the concepts outlined above, but stories in which the traditional superhero binary between good and evil is intentionally subverted are the most suited to this study. Comics and films in which superheroes fight against one another or in which superheroes are portrayed as the antagonists force the audience to question what qualifies as heroism, and which actions being carried out by the supposed heroes are truly justifiable or legitimate. These stories create allegories for government actions that are accepted because they come from the government, but that are carried out by questionable means. In addition, because this type of story does not tend to have a clear protagonist, the story’s creator is able to depict multiple points of view on the same subject and allow individual audience members to decide for themselves with which perspective they agree. *Civil War* and *The Boys* have been chosen for this study because of their ambiguity when it comes to the identity of a hero. In *Civil War* and its adaptation *Captain America: Civil War*, two teams of superheroes fight one another over a proposed government act that would force superheroes to register. One team is led by Iron Man

and the other by Captain America, both of whom are well known and loved heroes, which makes it unclear which side the audience should take. *The Boys*, on the contrary, explicitly positions superheroes as corrupt and debased villains. The titular Boys are the protagonists of both the comics and television series as they try to defeat the superheroes, but their questionable tactics mean that even they are not clear-cut heroes. The *Civil War* comics and film are both Marvel products, and therefore mainstream stories. *The Boys*, however, is a production of Dynamite Entertainment and Amazon Studios, and defines itself through its subversion of mainstream superheroes. These two completely distinct styles of story use a similar set up in order to make some of the same critiques of post-9/11 America, even if they do so in very different ways.

### **Outline of Thesis**

The remaining chapters of this thesis will use *Civil War* and *The Boys* as case studies for how political science can be used to analyze superhero comics and their adaptations. The analysis of the comics themselves will extend Matthew J. Costello's argument that superhero comics are inherently political artifacts, both in their overt ties to real-world political events, and in their political coding in the depiction of the various aspects of superhero identity. The film and television adaptations of these comics are less overtly tied to 9/11 and politics more generally, but will be analyzed in the same manner in order to explain how change in medium and distance from 9/11 affect the ways in which the same stories are told. While taking different approaches to the presentation of political content, superhero comics, movies, and television shows reveal the anxieties of their audiences. The expression of these anxieties, as well as the critiques of the political culture that creates them and the morality depicted within the stories all contribute to the popularity of superhero culture that we see today.

The second chapter focuses on the Marvel Comics event *Civil War* (2006-07), and the third chapter on its 2016 film adaptation *Captain America: Civil War*. While the *Civil War* storyline in the comics was incorporated into the individual comics of many characters, the focus of this paper is on the seven crossover volumes written by Mark Millar that make up the core of the story, and on Ed Brubaker's *The Death of Captain America*, which is regarded by many as the conclusion to the *Civil War* story arc. The chapter on the *Civil War* comics examines how an explicitly post-9/11 text confronts the question of superhero accountability, and the ways in which the morality displayed by each side of the conflict reframes their arguments. The analysis of the film adaptation in the third chapter also centers on accountability and morality, but considers how the themes of globalism and revenge, as well as the addition of a third-party villain beyond the heroes fighting one another, affect those concepts. The fourth chapter takes into account the entirety of *The Boys* comic series by Garth Ennis and the fifth chapter covers the first season of its television adaptation. The comics' critique of corporate America, its ties to the government, and its tendency to cause corruption are explored through the dynamics between corporations, superheroes, and the Boys. This critique is carried over in the adaptation, but the television show focuses more on concepts of dominance, exceptionalism, and community. Through examination of themes including accountability, corruption, and dominance, this thesis reveals how, in recent years, the tropes of the superhero genre have been portrayed in nuanced ways that do not allow for a simple binary between good and evil. As such, these stories reflect the difficulty Americans have faced in adjusting to the realities of post-9/11 America, as actions that were meant to provide security have proven increasingly fallible in the years since the terrorist attacks.

## Chapter 2

### “Please Let Us Be Doing the Right Thing Here”: Questioning Accountability and Morality in Marvel Comics’ *Civil War*

#### Introduction

Mark Millar’s *Civil War* comics open with a catastrophe. The New Warriors, a young team of superheroes, take on a group of supervillains in Stamford, Connecticut for the reality television show in which they star. One of the heroes, Namorita, chases the villain Nitro toward an elementary school where Nitro causes an explosion that results in the deaths of hundreds of civilians, including the children at the school. Three panels void of dialogue are devoted to the violence of the explosion, depicting a red mass of chaotic energy, the silhouettes of school children, and finally the mushroom cloud of the explosion shown from above. The next two pages, which serve as a title page for *Civil War*, show a scene that is clearly reminiscent of the rescue efforts that took place after 9/11, especially those depicted in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #36. Superheroes, most prominently Iron Man and Captain America, work alongside firefighters to shift debris, pull out bodies and survivors, and provide medical attention. Captain America’s boot is positioned directly above the tattered remains of an American flag, indicating to the reader that this is going to be viewed as a national tragedy. Because this title page is so clearly tied to 9/11 imagery, the reader is prepared to continue to see parallels between the comics and the real-life event.

In the wake of this tragedy in Stamford, the United States government proposes and passes the Superhuman Registration Act, which provides the main source of conflict for the warring heroes. This measure requires any individual with superpowers to register with the government, effectively making them civil servants beholden to the agency S.H.I.E.L.D. The

idea is that registration would force superhumans to be trained and held accountable to a larger governing body, thereby making them legitimate. The act is supported by a majority of the public, and by a number of superheroes. A pro-registration contingent of heroes is formed and led by Iron Man, otherwise known as Tony Stark. Stark feels personally responsible for the incident in Stamford because he funds superhero groups, and he therefore believes in the need for training and legitimacy. Not all superheroes support the act, however, and an underground resistance of unregistered heroes forms under the leadership of Captain America, who does not trust the government to effectively regulate superhumans. The majority of the comic event focuses on the battles between the two groups of superheroes as Iron Man's team works with S.H.I.E.L.D. to bring in the unregistered heroes. In the seventh and final crossover issue, Captain America brings the conflict to an uneasy end with his surrender. Immediately following this conclusion of Millar's event is Brubaker's *The Death of Captain America* series in which, as the title suggests, Captain America is assassinated on his way to be tried for failing to register. The death of one of Marvel's most famous and patriotic heroes reflected a turbulent time for the country that Cap represented.

The *Civil War* crossover comics are explicitly post-9/11 allegory, and many scholars have already engaged with the comics as such. In addition to the 9/11 imagery used to depict the tragedy at Stamford, the first issue contains other allegorical references to some of the most prominent American anxieties at the time. Sentinel robots are sent to monitor the X-Men as they aid in the Stamford rescue efforts and serve as a reminder of omnipresent domestic surveillance (Millar No. 1, 11). Tony Stark is verbally harassed by a mother who lost her son at Stamford because she blames him for funding the New Warriors, which reflects the role that Stark often plays in the Marvel comics as a representation of the military-industrial complex (14). And,

Johnny Storm, the Human Torch, is hospitalized after he is attacked by civilians who think all superheroes are responsible for the incident at Stamford, perpetuating an “us versus them” narrative that was popular after 9/11 (17). In addition to these incidents, scholars such as Mark D. White have read the Superhuman Registration Act as “a version of the Patriot Act” in the way it infringes upon the rights of citizens (Kilkenny). Beyond these specific gestures toward 9/11, the *Civil War* storyline pits beloved superheroes against one another, forcing readers to question the inherent heroism of these characters, just as the heroes themselves question their alliances and the forces against which they are fighting. While the comics present both perspectives taken by the superheroes as justifiable, the actions of Captain America occupy a clear moral high ground over those of Iron Man and therefore support Cap’s stance: superheroes should not be accountable to the government due to the lack of transparency and corruptibility that make both fictional and real government institutions fallible.

### **Accountability: The Government and The People**

The question at the heart of the debate over the Superhuman Registration Act, and at the heart of the comics, is to whom the superheroes should be accountable. Until the introduction of the act, superheroes have operated without direct accountability to any external governing body. Because they voluntarily take on the responsibility of protecting the world from the threats of supervillains, there is an ethical imperative to the people they protect, but the accountability is backed up only by individual moral responsibility, rather than anything concrete. While neither side of the conflict is portrayed as being definitively correct, the government agencies have questionable motives and means, as well as a lack of transparency, issues that were present in the U.S. government post-9/11. This means that the government is not truly accountable to the

people, and that the anti-registration superheroes have a better understanding of the dangers the government poses.

The United States government is one of the groups that weighs in on the idea of accountability, with the belief that superheroes should report to the government, and specifically the agency S.H.I.E.L.D. As social theorist Max Weber argues, “a state is a human community that (successfully) claims the *monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force* within a given territory” (78, *emph. orig.*). Thus, for actors outside the government to use violence legitimately, they must be permitted to do so by the state. Marvel Comics take place in a version of the real world that has superheroes, and so the presence of those superheroes poses a destabilizing threat to the government’s monopoly. At multiple points in the first crossover issue of *Civil War*, policemen are mentioned as examples of why it is wrong that superheroes are allowed to exercise violence outside of government jurisdiction. Tony Stark is confronted by Miriam Sharpe, the mother of one of the children who died in the Stamford explosion, and she says to him: “Cops have to train and carry badges, but that’s too boring for Tony Stark” (No. 1, 15). Superheroes’ use of violence is a threat to the accepted order, which is why the idea of a superhero police state is referenced frequently as a more comfortable reality for the government and the public. The government is able to use a catastrophe like Stamford for its own ends to reclaim the monopoly over the legitimate use of violence that superheroes have usurped by turning those superheroes from vigilantes to civil servants.

In holding superheroes accountable to S.H.I.E.L.D., the government does not eliminate superheroes’ use of violence, but rather takes control of the violence. Indeed, the government plans to use the violence to bring superheroes in line with the idea of registration, and to use the registered heroes to administer that violence. When the commander of S.H.I.E.L.D., Maria Hill,

tries to convince Captain America to join her side and help bring in unregistered heroes, she says, “It’s time you went legitimate, just like the rest of us, soldier” (No. 1, 24). The panel in which Hill says this line of dialogue is drawn from above to show Hill facing down Captain America, and a ring of men all pointing their guns at the superhero, indicating that Hill’s words are not a suggestion, but an order. Calling Captain America “soldier” rather than Captain reminds him that he is part of a chain of command, not an independent actor. In addition, the term implies that, were Captain America to join Hill, he would be utilized as a soldier, and made to use violence on behalf of the state, regardless of whether he personally believed that was a legitimate use of force. Earlier in the same conversation, Hill says that what she is asking Captain America to obey is “the will of the American people” (23). This suggests that the public will condone any government use of violence, even if it is directed against superheroes who have often been celebrated by the public, because that government-sanctioned violence is legitimate. The government’s desire to have superheroes be accountable to their agency can consequently be viewed as an attempt to control those heroes, rather than an attempt to curtail their collateral damage.

The narrative that the government creates in the *Civil War* comics is that if superheroes are accountable to the government then their violence becomes legitimate, but in reality the government wants to redeploy that violence for its own ends, just as it did post-9/11. In his speech on September 20, 2001, President George W. Bush told the American people, “Our nation has been put on notice, we’re not immune from attack. We will take defensive measures against terrorism to protect Americans” (“President Bush Addresses the Nation”). It is unsurprising that, in the wake of a terrorist attack, the priority of the President would be to prevent a repetition of the same violence against the American people. Yet, the wars fought in

Afghanistan and Iraq that were intended to protect Americans from terrorism resulted in the deaths of thousands of U.S. combatants, and the deaths of hundreds of thousands of combatants and citizens of those countries. The government was therefore not simply shielding its citizens from violence, but rather taking control of that violence by shifting it overseas. This same attempt to control, rather than eliminate violence can be seen in the government in the Marvel Comics' universe. After Commander Hill tries and fails to forcefully contain Captain America she looks after his disappearing figure and says, "You idiot. We were trying to save lives" (No. 1, 31). This line follows pages of fighting between Cap and the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents, and Hill delivers it while wiping blood from her face, thus undermining her claim about the value of protection. It is clear that the government is willing to support acts of violence, even those which could lead to the harm of Americans, as long as those acts serve the government's own ends.

Despite the self-serving reasons that the government wants control over superheroes, the public is portrayed as supporting this arrangement throughout the comics, even as violence continues to break out when unregistered heroes are tracked down. Shortly after the tragedy at Stamford, crowds of people gather outside the White House carrying signs with slogans like "Register powers!" and "Guns are licensed. Why not powers?" (No. 1, 32). Not only do these signs show the public support for the Superhuman Registration Act, but the fact that the people are demonstrating outside the White House indicates that they believe that the government should monitor superhero accountability. Millar drives this point home later in the comics, once Captain America and his team have begun operating in secret. One doctor tells another, "No, I don't think it's cool Cap's still fighting super-crime. What'd be cool is if he stopped breaking the law," to which the other doctor replies, "Well, I bet the people they rescued from that hijacked plane are glad Cap's Secret Avengers are still around..." (No. 3, 9). If Cap's team had to rescue

a hijacked plane, that means that the government sanctioned, registered superheroes were either unable or unavailable to do so, raising the question of whether the registered heroes under S.H.I.E.L.D.'s control are really meant to protect the public. Even so, the first doctor echoes Miriam Sharpe's earlier rhetoric in dismissing vigilante superhero actions as an attempt to seem cool, and therefore as being in opposition to the government. It is clear that the public puts more faith in established institutions, like S.H.I.E.L.D., than it does in individual actors, and so trusts in institutions blindly in the wake of a tragedy. The public instinct to follow the government's lead is clearly demonstrated from the beginning, but the question of whether that trust is warranted is not as straightforward.

Consenting to have S.H.I.E.L.D. control the affairs of superheroes requires the sacrifice of public transparency and the ability to hold the agency directly accountable to the people. Because S.H.I.E.L.D. is a spy agency that operates at many levels of top-secret clearance, it is implied that the agency does not provide much transparency to the public. This means that the people who have placed their trust in the institution remain unaware of what is being done on their behalf, and can therefore remain blissfully ignorant to any abuses the agency might perform. As previously noted, S.H.I.E.L.D. attempts to violently capture Captain America before the Superhuman Registration Act has become law. The conversation between Cap and Maria Hill that begins the scene is drawn as a faceoff, with the two characters standing opposite one another, and many panels featuring only the face of one character or the other as they argue about the act. These close-ups mean that when the illustrations finally pull back to include Cap and Hill's surroundings, it is a surprise to see all of the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents training their guns on Captain America. Because the act is not law at this time, the use of violence against Captain America is not legal, but Hill relies on force anyway, a fact that will likely never become public

because of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s lack of transparency. Throughout the comics, the agency continues to support extreme measures in enforcing registration, including the use of supervillains as a police force to bring in unregistered heroes. As far as the comics show, the public does not learn of these actions and continues to put their trust in S.H.I.E.L.D. and the rest of the government, which it may be more hesitant to do if it knew the full extent of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s actions. This lack of knowledge allows the public to maintain the belief that they have made the correct choice in supporting superhero accountability to the government, a belief that parallels those held by the American public after 9/11.

One of the reasons that the U.S. government was able to fight the questionable War on Terror with the support of the American public was because the focus on security meant that much of that war was carried out without public transparency. Because the American people believe in the social contract upon which their government is founded, there is an implicit trust that even secret government agencies are working in the nation's best interest. In his essay "Zero Dark Democracy," Timothy Melley argues that Americans are able to create their own fantasies surrounding covert government action: "One of the most important consequences of state secrecy is that citizens have limited ways to observe their own foreign policy — and thus narrative fictions come to dominate our thinking about this policy" (19). Melley's idea about the role of state secrecy is demonstrated by the government's ability to wage a war based on the presence of WMDs in Iraq for which they had no proof, and by the CIA's use of "enhanced interrogation" that violated domestic and international law. The American public was not initially aware of either of these things, and so maintained the belief that the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan were being fought for valid security reasons and according to American laws and principles. Similarly, the people of the Marvel universe believe that the government is registering superheroes to

protect the public, rather than to gain a monopoly on legitimate violence, and that they are using approved of measures, rather than excessive force and corrupt allies. This lack of transparency means that, while the pro-registration forces think they are making themselves more accountable to the public, they have instead made themselves beholden to an agency that is able to abuse public trust.

Despite the disagreement about government control comprising a great deal of the ideological battle in the *Civil War* storyline, all the superheroes broadly believe in accountability to the people, although their perspectives differ on what form that accountability takes. The pro-registration superheroes think that, in Iron Man's words, "Becoming public employees makes perfect sense if it helps people sleep a little easier" (No. 1, 19). Essentially, their argument is that being accountable to the people means obeying public will and making all of their actions publicly known. Those who oppose registration, on the other contrary, agree with Captain America when he says, "Super heroes need to stay above that stuff [politics] or Washington starts telling us who the super-villains are" (23). Cap's words immediately prove prescient, as the government spends the remainder of the comics vilifying Cap himself. In the second issue of *Civil War*, the Young Avengers are arrested by S.H.I.E.L.D., and the arresting agent asks them, "You see what happens when you try to be some big bad vigilante like your buddy, Captain America?" (No. 2, 12). It takes very little time for the government to go from wanting Cap to help them register heroes, to holding him up as an example of a villain. Fans of Marvel Comics are accustomed to viewing Captain America as "an example of the personal virtues that philosophers since ancient times have put forward as defining personal excellence, as well as the ideals and principles upon which the United States was founded" (White vii). If this symbol of virtue is the kind of person whom the government deems a villain, then Cap's skepticism about

government accountability is justifiable. From this perspective, making superheroes beholden to another institution does not inherently mean that they will act more responsibly, only that their actions will be dictated by others.

Another large part of the debate between the two sides is the matter of secret identities and the sacrifice of privacy. Registering means the surrender of their secret identities for many of the superheroes, and while some argue that being public is not a big deal, Spider-Man retorts, “Yeah, well...not until that day I come home and find my wife impaled on an octopus arm and the woman who raised me begging for her life” (No. 1, 20). If, as Matthew J. Costello argues, the duality of superhero and secret identities represents “the tension between public and private,” then the Superhuman Registration Act can be read as forcing superheroes to give up their privacy in the same way all Americans did after 9/11 (*Secret Identity Crisis* 20). As previously noted, many scholars see an obvious connection between the Superhuman Registration Act and the Patriot Act, and thereby between the liberties that the superheroes and the American people are forced to give up. The superheroes who have relied on their secret identities for privacy feel the same conflicted feelings that many Americans did in the wake of 9/11, as both the characters and readers feel the “contradictory desires for both freedom and security” (Langley 70). Readers are thus able to identify with the superheroes who question the notion of government accountability. Additionally, in order for superheroes to be held accountable by the public, they must relinquish their right to be part of that public through the use of their secret identities. Compromising their liberties is just one way in which the choice the superheroes must make about accountability relates to the American public’s situation post-9/11.

The ideological opposition represented by the pro- and anti-registration camps also mirrors the changing relationship between the American people and the government after 9/11.

Immediately following the terrorist attacks, there was widespread support for the U.S. government. President Bush's approval ratings reached a record high for a seated president in the years following 9/11, and a majority of the American public supported the decision to use force in Iraq and to give up liberties in order to protect against terrorism (Moore "Bush Job Approval," Newport, "Which Freedoms"). This real-world response to national tragedy can explain why in the *Civil War* comics, the public is quick to put their trust in the government and some superheroes are willing to serve as a soldier-like force and surrender some of their liberties. As time passed after the terrorist attacks, however, public support for Bush and the measures he passed in response to the attacks steadily declined. Not only was Bush blamed for a failing economy, but the public slowly became aware that the stated reason for going to Iraq, that the country possessed weapons of mass destruction, was false, and people began to feel that measures like the Patriot Act went too far in curtailing civil liberties (Jones). The superheroes who oppose registration have the foresight that the American people did not post-9/11, and suspect that the government cannot be trusted to do what is best, nor to be transparent with its citizens about exactly what they are doing. Team Iron Man, therefore, can be viewed as representing the hope for the American government that people had after 9/11, while team Captain America represents the stance people began to take once faith in the government had dissipated.

While this post-9/11 reading shows that Captain America's team has the perspective borne out by immediate political history, the comics refuse an easy resolution for either side, suggesting that there is no infallible answer for the issue of public accountability. During the final confrontation between Iron Man and Captain America, the latter gains the upper hand and seems poised to kill his one-time friend before he is tackled by a group of civilians. Immediately,

Cap realizes that his team may be winning the physical fight, but they have lost the ideological argument. In explaining his choice to surrender to the other heroes on his team, Cap says, “They’re right. We’re not fighting for the people anymore, Falcon...Look at us. We’re just fighting” (No. 7, 19). Because Captain America’s surrender is prompted by civilian intervention, the public desire for superhero accountability to the government appears to win out. When Captain America is assassinated on his way to face trial in *The Death of Captain America*, however, his death is reported as that of a hero and Tony Stark expresses regret that the civil war led to his friend’s death, saying, “You can’t think I wanted any of this” (Brubaker No. 2, 4). Cap is killed when in the custody of the Department of Justice, surrounded by police officers. Even though Tony never intended for people to die in his fight for registration, the circumstances of Cap’s death suggest that the government is incapable of protecting its people, even when superhero registration with the government has been agreed upon. The *Civil War* storyline therefore concludes that the public must rely on the government to impose accountability, but that the government is not accountable for its failure to protect its citizens.

The support that Iron Man and other heroes show for superhero accountability to the government is motivated by good intentions, as they want to obey the will of the people. The government, however, uses the registration act as a means to secure their monopoly on the legitimate use of violence, and abuses S.H.I.E.L.D.’s lack of transparency through its use of extreme measures to obtain its ends. Furthermore, Captain America and the anti-registration heroes’ perspective aligns with that of the American people once they began to question measures like the War on Terror and the Patriot Act. Thus, although Captain America surrenders to Iron Man, his skepticism of the government is presented as not only justifiable, but necessary.

## **Morality: Extreme Measures and Heroic Surrender**

Beyond the relations of the two superhero teams to the government and the public, the increasingly questionable actions undertaken by the heroes themselves confirm Captain America's claim to the moral high ground. As both Iron Man and Captain America use dirty tactics and escalate the violence used against one another, it becomes unclear whether they are really fighting for their stated causes, either for or against the Superhuman Registration Act, or merely fighting to assert their power and win. In showing how a war that begins as virtuous can devolve into endless violence, *Civil War* mirrors the progression of the wars fought in Afghanistan and Iraq in the wake of 9/11, the supposed causes of which changed multiple times and which went on for far longer than expected. The comics are therefore able to expose the reality behind the narrative that convinced many Americans that war was necessary, and to celebrate Captain America as the one to bring an end to the pointless violence.

Iron Man's team, which claims to be fighting for the benefit of the people and operates with government backing, uses increasingly extreme measures to bring in the unregistered heroes, raising the question of whether those measures are being taken in defense of their ideology or for more self-serving purposes. As previously stated, the use of excessive force begins with S.H.I.E.L.D.'s attempt to detain Captain America before the Superhuman Registration Act is passed, meaning that unlawful violence is first used against him. Once the act is passed and the use of force against unregistered heroes becomes legal, Iron Man and his allies push this legality to its limits. In one battle between the two sides, the pro-registration forces employ a clone of Thor, the god of thunder, who behaves erratically and kills Goliath, one of Cap's allies. Goliath's death is portrayed as morally ambiguous, as it causes heroes from both teams to switch sides. It is, however, the only major superhero death of the crossover issues, making it a significant

moment. The death is justified by some in its aftermath, as Miriam Sharpe says, “Goliath knew what he was doing. He was breaking a law designed to save people’s lives. If he’d only gone legitimate, he’d still be alive” (Millar No. 4, 18). On the other contrary, though, some of the pro-registration heroes begin to question Tony Stark’s motives, noting that “Tony had been holding onto that strand of Thor’s hair since the first meeting of the Avengers,” and questioning “What kind of man combs his furniture for hair follicles and skin cells?” (14). The subtext of this conversation is that Tony was too willing to push the limits of not only what is legal, but what is morally acceptable, in cloning a god without fully understanding the possible repercussions. Despite these doubts about Tony’s character, he never faces punishment and is, in fact, promoted to head of S.H.I.E.L.D. at the end of the comics. Thus, the violence utilized by the pro-registration forces, though technically legitimate, raises questions about the morality of different forms of violence and whether the ends justify the means.

These same questions arose about some of the techniques used in the post-9/11 conflicts by the United States that seemed unwarranted and were controversial among those involved. The initial U.S. invasion of Iraq was promoted with the use of “shock and awe,” a technique through which the U.S. military would demonstrate such extreme power so as to dissuade the enemy from fighting back. This strategy became possible because of the technological innovation of precision guided weapons, but it was not universally supported. One news source reported that “one senior official called it a bunch of bull,” and media reporting, especially abroad, took a largely negative view toward the shock and awe campaign (Chan, Ullman). The United States thus alienated some of its allies and its own people through the controversial way in which it deployed its military capabilities, in much the same way that Tony Stark alienates certain allies through the violent use of Thor’s clone. Additionally, after the successful initial invasion, the

U.S.'s goal shifted from overthrowing Saddam Hussein's government to trying to convince "the Iraqi people to support the newly elected government and its policies" (Sepp 217). Despite this change in objective, it took "three irrecoverable years for the US military to move away from the doctrine of 'shock and awe', to begin seeking to convert 'hearts and minds' to their cause" (218). The U.S.'s moral objective went unmet for years because of a continued dependence on violent tactics, in a similar way to how S.H.I.E.L.D. initiated illegal violence against Captain America without allowing for the possibility of negotiation or ideological debate. The actions of the pro-registration forces in *Civil War* therefore highlight the way that contentious actions can damage the objective in a supposedly virtuous war.

The parallels between the dubious measures used during the superhero war and the War on Terror, and their consequences, can be seen even more clearly in the use of the Negative Zone prison as an allegory for Guantanamo Bay Prison in Cuba. The Negative Zone is a universe that exists parallel to the Marvel Comics universe, and during *Civil War*, Iron Man and his allies construct a prison within the Negative Zone to hold unregistered superheroes who refuse to comply. In J. Michael Straczynski's *The Amazing Spider-Man #535*, Peter Parker demands to see the Negative Zone prison, whereupon he learns that if the heroes being held captive never register, they will remain in that prison "for the rest of their natural lives" (10). Peter also protests that the heroes were not allowed their right to a fair trial, to which Tony Stark replies, "This place is not on American soil... Once non-registrants come here, they're legal nonentities" (11). The language used in the comic clearly parallels the language used to justify the indefinite detainment and use of torture of prisoners in Guantanamo Bay, which holds a U.S. naval base but is considered outside of U.S. legal jurisdiction. Shortly following Peter Parker's visit to the Negative Zone, Millar's crossover issues show Spider-Man defecting from the pro-registration

team and citing the Negative Zone prison as one of his reasons for doing so (No. 5, 4). Similarly, in the midst of the War on Terror, U.S. diplomats reported that “U.S. treatment of detainees at Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib and elsewhere is the single most important motivating factor for T/FFs [foreign jihadists] travelling to Iraq” (“06KUWAIT913”). In the case of both the real world and the comics, actions undertaken to promote one cause actually led people to support the opposing cause. The Negative Zone allegory demonstrates how technically legal actions can still undermine a war if they are perceived to be unjust or immoral.

While the pro-registration side of the conflict most clearly parallels the failings of the U.S. government during the War on Terror, the anti-registration heroes are not immune to error. While Captain America’s team never causes the death of another hero, Cap himself is shown sacrificing his principles in order to gain the upper hand in a fight. As a character, Captain America has always been committed to honor, and therefore “shown an extraordinary dedication to fair play, including observing rules of engagement, showing mercy to prisoners, and keeping his word” (White 92). Yet, in his fights with Iron Man throughout *Civil War*, Cap relies on lies, trickery, and attacking from behind in order to gain the advantage. The first time that the two warring heroes meet after Cap has gone underground, Iron Man tries to reason with his friend before extending his hand to shake. Four panels then show close-ups that cut from Captain America’s eyes, to Iron Man’s hand, back to Cap, then to the S.H.I.E.L.D. helicopters flying overhead. The focus on Captain America’s gaze on Iron Man’s hand appears to indicate that he is considering whether or not to accept the handshake, which he proceeds to do. A panel at the bottom of that same page, however, reveals that Captain America planted a device on Iron Man’s glove that disables the Iron Man suit. (No. 3, 14). Once Cap’s true motives are revealed in this scene, it becomes clear that the close-up panels showed the planning of Cap’s deception, and that

the S.H.I.E.L.D. helicopters were a symbol of what he is fighting against using these tactics. What Tony Stark intends as a genuine show of friendship and compromise, Captain America uses as an opportunity for foul play, something that is against his traditional values. While Cap's actions are nowhere near as extreme as Iron Man's, he does discard his principles, a factor that eventually contributes to his surrender.

Captain America and his allies lose sight of the cause for which they are fighting throughout the comics, in much the same way that the supposed cause for the Iraq War shifted as previous reasoning became invalid. Once Cap has overpowered Iron Man in their final battle, a panel depicts him holding his shield above his head, as though he is prepared to strike a death blow. To see Captain America so close to murdering a former friend is a shocking image, but before he can do so, a group of police officers, firefighters, and EMTs intervene, leading Cap to protest, "Let me go! Please, I don't want to hurt you..." One of the civilians restraining Cap retorts, "Don't want to hurt us? Are you trying to be funny?" (No. 7, 18). This prompts Cap to realize that, although he had intended to protect the public by opposing registration, the war with Iron Man has prevented him from doing so, and he surrenders. Cap's allies are not as quick to see his point of view, as one hero protests, "We were beating them, man. We were winning back there" (20). Despite having lost sight of what they were fighting for, the anti-registration heroes continued to justify their use of violence on the faith that, if they were to defeat the pro-registration heroes in a physical battle, the ideological battle would also somehow be won. A similar phenomenon occurred during the Iraq War, as "cause and effect dissolved comfortably into one another, such that the effect of the war — discovery of WMDs and proof that Saddam was supporting terrorists set to use them — would justify faith in its cause" (Nadel 128). By blindly trusting that violence will bring about justification of its use, both the anti-registration

heroes and the U.S. government perpetuated the endless cycle of violence. Thus, what began as a virtuous war based on opposing ideologies was corrupted by extreme measures and unclear causes on both sides, reflecting the distressing realities of a War on Terror that the American people initially supported.

Captain America's ability to stop the violence between the two sides means that, although Iron Man's team is technically victorious, Cap is portrayed as the most heroic character. Travis Langley's conception of *Civil War* as a struggle between freedom and security means that, "For either side to beat the other outright would require them to break the other heroes. It would require a villainous act... Quite possibly the only way for either side to end the story heroically was to give up while winning a melee, which is exactly what Captain America does" (73). Not only does Cap overcome his temptation to kill Iron Man, but his surrender means that no other superhero will be put in the position to commit a villainous act against a fellow hero. Cap's surrender therefore puts an end to the same kind of cycle of violence that perpetuated the War on Terror, and prevents the superheroes from continuing down the path of never-ending war that America took after 9/11. Additionally, while Cap is vilified by the government and the public for much of *Civil War*, his death confirms his identity as a selfless and admirable hero. While Cap is following a police officer into the court house where he will face trial, he spots the red dot of a sniper rifle on the policeman's back. Even though he is handcuffed and weakened from battle, he throws himself against the police officer, taking the sniper's bullet in the man's stead. The Red Skull, who planned the assassination, says that "this is exactly how we meant for it to play out," implying that he knew Cap would sacrifice his own life in order to save someone else (Brubaker No. 1, 14). Thus, despite Cap's use of questionable tactics during the superhuman conflict, his

heroism is confirmed in his surrender and death, as he sacrifices both his battle and his life in order to ensure that others will not have to do the same.

When superheroes fight one another, it is inevitable that acts of violence will be perpetuated by and against beloved characters, and that heroic characters will be vilified, just as trusted government institutions started to be during the War on Terror. Iron Man's team may have the support of the people, but the use of measures like Thor's clone and the Negative Zone prison mirror American measures that went too far during the War on Terror, and thus undermine the pro-registration stance. Captain America's team also relies too heavily on violence in what should be an ideological battle, but Cap is able to see that and puts an end to it. The pro-registration team ends up victorious, with registration as law and Tony Stark as the head of S.H.I.E.L.D., but they are not portrayed as having the moral high ground. The comics show that, while the techniques used by pro-registration heroes and the U.S. government may be successful, that does not make them right. A storyline that revolves around violence between two teams of superheroes ends with a condemnation of violence, as it is only through its renunciation that Captain America is able to bring an end to the war, and its use leads to the death of the one truly heroic character in *Civil War*.

## **Conclusion**

The *Civil War* comics were released under the tagline, "Whose Side Are You On?" but they offer no simple answers to that question. The result is that the comics are able to depict and critique the reality behind the binary narrative that was created after 9/11, positioning Americans and those who believed in liberty as good, and terrorists and anyone who aided them as bad. Because the superhero civil war is divided along the lines of those we support the Superhuman

Registration Act and those who oppose it, it seems as though it should be a clear-cut argument, similar to the one that existed post-9/11. By having heroes fight against one another, however, the storyline upends the traditional superhero narrative where good and evil exist clearly in opposition to one another. Instead, the reader is forced to confront the fact that characters who are expected to do good are capable of carrying out immoral actions and pursuing ulterior motives, all while claiming to fight on behalf of the people. The comics depict the complex reality of a supposedly straightforward conflict that clearly mirrors the War on Terror, and in doing so disrupts the simple narratives that were created by the state post-9/11 in order to maintain the support of the public.

The issues of accountability and morality were especially prevalent in American society immediately following 9/11, but they have continued to be relevant for many years after, especially in the context of the continuing War on Terror. *Civil War* focuses on the domestic implications of these issues, as the American superheroes take on the allegorical role of the foreign terrorists. While elements like the Negative Zone gesture towards the international conflict that began after 9/11, the comics never address it directly. When *Captain America: Civil War* is viewed in conjunction with its comics source, then, it can provide the globalist perspective that is missing from the comics in the way it expands upon the themes of accountability and morality.

## Chapter 3

### “We’re Still Friends, Right?”: International Accountability and the Morality of Revenge in

#### *Captain America: Civil War*

#### Introduction

The *Civil War* comics were published from 2006 to 2007, still relatively close to the attacks of 9/11 and in the midst of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, meaning that they were very much of their time in addressing those events. In the year following the conclusion of the *Civil War* comic storyline, Marvel Studios launched the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) with the release of *Iron Man* (2008). It was eight years into this cinematic project, after the individual superheroes had already teamed up twice, that the heroes turned against one another in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), directed by Anthony and Joe Russo. Not only was the film much more distanced from 9/11 and its immediate aftermath, but it had to fit into the overarching plot and planned phases of the Marvel films, meaning that it could not be an exact adaptation of the event in the comics. As the head of Marvel Studios, Kevin Fiege, said before the release of the film: “This is the *Civil War* of the cinematic universe, which will be greatly inspired by the *Civil War* of the comic universe, but we have a very different continuity going on... It’s not about the secret identity thing, as much as it is about, overall, who reports to who[m]” (Sciretta). Of course, the civil war of the comics also concerns the question of “who reports to who[m],” and both the film and the comics therefore raise questions about accountability and morality.

Despite sharing broad thematic categories, *Captain America: Civil War* does follow a markedly different storyline than its comic source. The film begins in Lagos, Nigeria, where some of the Avengers are carrying out a mission. Wanda Maximoff, the Scarlet Witch, tries to contain an explosion to protect the people near it, but inadvertently destroys a building, causing

numerous civilian death. In response to this event, and others from previous Marvel movies, Secretary of State Thaddeus Ross presents the Avengers with the Sokovia Accords, named after the fictional city that was destroyed in the fight between the Avengers and Ultron in the film *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015). The Accords are approved by all members of the UN and require that the Avengers now operate under the international organization. Tony Stark (Iron Man) and a few of the others agree to sign the Accords, while Steve Rogers (Captain America) and a couple of allies refuse. At the ratification of the Accords, Helmut Zemo, a non-super-powered man whose family was killed in Sokovia, creates an explosion at the UN. Zemo frames Bucky Barnes, Steve's oldest friend (who once operated as the brainwashed assassin the Winter Soldier), for the explosion. Steve dedicates himself to protecting Bucky, while Tony works with the government to bring in the heroes who have not signed the Accords. When Steve and Bucky suspect that Zemo is creating an army of super soldiers, Tony abandons the government to help them bring Zemo down. Instead, Zemo attempts to tear the Avengers apart by showing Tony that Bucky, while brainwashed, murdered Tony's parents. Tony attacks Steve and Bucky, and the three heroes fight. Tony is defeated and Cap goes to rescue his allies who have been detained before going into hiding. The film ends with the Avengers divided, and an uneasy understanding but unrepaired friendship between Steve and Tony.

The focus on personal relationships within the bigger civil war is a byproduct of the shift from comic to screen, but it also changes the thematic content of the movie. Additionally, whereas the comics came out as the public's initial perceptions of the War on Terror were changing, the movie was released years after many Americans had reified their negative view towards the American government's response to 9/11. The movie did not therefore play the same role as the comics in deconstructing the post-9/11 state fantasies. Instead, the film takes a more

global perspective, exploring theories of exceptionalism that became prominent during the War on Terror. This global shift can be seen in the change from the superheroes being accountable to the U.S. government to being accountable to the UN, and in new perspectives in the arguments about accountability and morality. *Captain America: Civil War* demonstrates the destruction caused by U.S. globalization and the failures of the UN in fighting global terror, in addition to its condemnation of pointless violence that is presented through the theme of revenge.

### **Accountability: Global Superheroes**

In *Captain America: Civil War*, the main question is whether superheroes should be accountable to the government – specifically the UN – or to their own moral codes. Unlike the comics' storyline, the film does not show the opinions of civilians, and focuses instead on the perspectives of different government entities, and of the warring superheroes. Because of its distance from 9/11, and to a certain extent from the War on Terror, the movie exists in a world where the accountability of the government in global conflicts is openly questioned. Thus, the role of the film is not to expose the failings of government accountability, but to grapple with what to do when trust in the institutions that are responsible for accountability has already dissipated.

As noted, one significant difference between the comics and the movie is that the U.S. government is not trying to make the superheroes accountable to itself, but instead to the larger international governing body, the UN. This change can be partially explained by the continuity of the Marvel Cinematic Universe; S.H.I.E.L.D. was destroyed in a previous film and therefore cannot serve the same role that it did in the comics. The shift also works in a thematic sense, however, as the U.S. government cannot claim accountability for itself, yet cannot allow the

Avengers to continue to operate unsupervised. In Marvel movies up to this point, most superheroes on Earth are based in the United States, but they have exercised their powers around the world. While they ostensibly do this in order to protect as much of the planet as possible, the events in Sokovia and Lagos in particular demonstrate that their actions are not without consequences. From the perspective of these other countries, then, the Avengers are a group of “U.S.-based, enhanced individuals who routinely ignore sovereign borders and inflict their will wherever they choose and who, frankly, seem unconcerned about what they leave behind” (*Captain America: Civil War* 21:49). Aside from the part about enhanced individuals, this description applies to the CIA, or to other government institutions that have hurt America’s reputation abroad. The U.S. government therefore cannot afford to have the Avengers continue to operate without oversight for the sake of its position in a globalist world.

An international perspective on the Avengers forces audiences to confront the negative repercussions of the United States’ global presence created through a lack of accountability for actions abroad. At multiple points in the movie, superheroes are called nukes or weapons of mass destruction, equating super-powered individuals with dangerous lethal weapons. One of these instances comes when Secretary Ross says, “If I misplaced a couple of 30-megaton nukes, you can bet there’d be consequences,” implying not only that the Avengers are weapons, but that they are weapons that are not being properly controlled (23:51). When viewed in conjunction with Wanda’s inability to control her powers and the resulting casualties in Lagos, this analogy appears apt, but it also calls to mind fallible weapons employed by the United States abroad. As Alfred W. McCoy explores in his book *In the Shadows of the American Century*, Afghanistan “became a frontier for testing and perfecting biometric databases, as well as for drone warfare,” and therefore also a case study for the shortcomings of these weapons (170). Drones proved to be

particularly prone to err on the tactical and strategic level, as operators were unable to distinguish between innocent and malicious actions, and “the incessant drone overflights ‘terrorized’ and ‘traumatized’ local populations, building support for jihadists” (177). The real-world political context surrounding the events of *Captain America: Civil War* thus explains why the U.S. government would accept American superheroes being held accountable to the UN. If the international community views the Avengers as American weapons, then the casualties and destruction they cause abroad only adds to the image that the U.S. government is incapable of handling the weapons it deploys. In order to preserve their international reputation, the U.S. government acquiesces to a global governing body, rather than trying to claim power and accountability for itself.

The rhetoric used to describe the actions of the Avengers abroad is also symbolic of unchecked American exceptionalism, allowing the film to critique this state fantasy. American exceptionalism can mean many things, with one such definition being that America is “‘exemplary’ (meaning a model for other nations to follow)” (Pease 9). This idea of America as an exemplary nation has been used to justify both the War on Terror, and the resulting nation-building projects in Afghanistan and Iraq. When President Bush announced the War on Terror, he told the nation and the world, “This is not, however, just America’s fight. And what is at stake is not just America’s freedom. This is the world’s fight. This is civilization’s fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance, and freedom” (“President Bush Addresses the Nation”). By positioning an attack on America as an attack on the entire civilized world, and America’s war as a war that should be supported by anyone who believes in freedom, Bush emphasized America’s exemplary nature as the leader of the free world and used it to justify his response to 9/11 on an international stage. This was the narrative that many accepted,

despite the falsehoods and failures that surrounded the War on Terror, because “the political efficacy of the fantasy of American exceptionalism is discernible in its supplying its adherents with the psychosocial structures that permitted them to ignore the state’s exceptions” (Pease 12). Thus, believing that America had the right to serve an exemplary role abroad allowed American citizens to ignore the negative repercussions of that role. This is clearly the narrative that the Avengers subscribe to as well, as they are accused throughout the film of ignoring the consequences for the actions that they felt they had the right to carry out around the world. Since their inception within the cinematic universe, the Avengers have been described as “Earth’s mightiest heroes,” giving them an implied exceptionalism, as no one else can do the things they can. Yet, as Zemo complains in *Civil War*, the Avengers just go home after their battles, while the populations of the cities in which they fought have to deal with the aftermath. In calling for superhero accountability, the film therefore draws attention to the consequences of exceptionalism, exposing the fantasy necessary for claims of exceptionalism to be believed.

It is because he is forced to confront this fantasy on a personal level that Tony Stark signs the Sokovia Accords and encourages his fellow heroes to do the same. Tony is made to feel personal guilt for the consequences of the Avengers’ actions, just as in the comics, when the mother of a young man who was killed in Sokovia tells him that she holds him personally responsible for her son’s death. Stark then tells the Avengers, “We need to be put in check. Whatever form that takes, I’m game. If we can’t accept limitations, if we’re boundary-less, we’re no better than the bad guys” (*Captain America: Civil War* 30:10). This line demonstrates that Tony has realized that he was laboring under a fantasy in order to justify his actions, and that despite his good intentions, his actions were not necessarily good. The War on Terror began because foreign terrorists killed innocent civilians on American soil, but the wars waged by the

U.S. have resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of civilians worldwide. Neta C. Crawford estimated the number of civilian deaths in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq in 2018 at 224,000, but stated that the number was likely “an undercount” due to limited reporting and indirect deaths not included in her tally (2). This lack of a clear consensus about the number of civilian deaths in the War on Terror, in addition to the fact that most of the deaths have been so distant from America, means that the U.S. government has escaped full accountability for the consequences of his actions. Tony Stark wants to be held accountable in order to relieve his own guilt and to support his belief that he is one of the good guys, and because the UN offers this opportunity, he is happy to comply.

As in the comics, Steve Rogers opposes Tony, arguing that accountability to the UN is no better than accountability to themselves. Steve characterizes the Sokovia Accords as a document that “just shifts the blame,” thereby allowing the Avengers to avoid taking responsibility for their collateral damage (*Captain America: Civil War* 30:25). Rather than creating accountability, reporting to the UN would allow the Avengers to create distance between themselves and the people they are meant to protect, and between themselves and the consequences of their actions. As James Fallows argues, “For our generals, our politicians, and most of our citizenry, there is almost no accountability or personal consequence for military failure. This is a dangerous development—and one whose dangers multiply the longer it persists” (Fallows). This lack of accountability made it easier for politicians to approve and Americans to support wars, like the one in Iraq, that resulted in major losses and only questionably positive outcomes. The further those politicians and people are distanced from the soldiers who are actually serving and dying, the easier it is to justify the wars. Steve Rogers worries that if they can blame any failed missions and resulting civilian casualties on the UN, rather than themselves, then they will become

complacent about putting people in danger because it is supposedly the right thing to do. Thus, Steve argues that accountability only works if the accountability is to oneself, rather than to an institution.

The fact that Steve does not trust the institution to which the Avengers are meant to be accountable is another large part of his argument against the Sokovia Accords. When James Rhodes, a fellow Avenger, expresses disbelief that Steve could possibly think their own judgments are more sound than those of the UN, Steve replies:

[The UN] is run by people with agendas and agendas change... If we sign this, we surrender our right to choose. What if this panel sends us somewhere we don't think we should go? What if there's somewhere we need to be and they won't let us? We may not be perfect, but the safest hands are still our own. (*Captain America: Civil War* 30:37).

Steve's stance reflects that of someone who has seen governments make questionable calls about engaging in certain conflicts. While Steve's personal distrust of government institutions is likely tied to S.H.I.E.L.D. falling to the authoritarian organization HYDRA, for viewers his argument aligns with the distrust of the government's reasoning for the Iraq War. The U.S. invaded Iraq on the beliefs that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction, and that he had been involved with 9/11 because of his ties to al Qaeda, both of which proved false. In the time leading up to the invasion of Iraq, however, "Every meeting was about to go to war. There was no meeting to discuss *whether* to go to war. The president had never questioned its rightness and its rightness made it the only course" (Woodard 432, *emph. orig.*). This lack of understanding that war may not be the right course sets the precedent for jumping into conflicts without knowing whether or not they are actually necessary, and that is not a risk Steve is willing to take. The combination of having to follow orders blindly and shifting of responsibility from the self to

others is enough to convince Steve that being accountable to an institution like the UN is likely to cause more danger than it curtails.

Steve's criticism of the UN means that the real-world shortcomings of the peacekeeping institution take a central role in the argument between the two sides in the civil war. As Steve points out, the UN is "run by people with agendas," and is inherently a political institution (*Captain America: Civil War* 30:37). Furthermore, the UN, unlike institutions of the American government, is not publicly accountable. While the film does not go into detail about how exactly the Avengers and the UN will come together, Secretary Ross does say that the superheroes will "operate under the supervision of a United Nations panel only when and if that panel deems it necessary" (23:31). UN panels are typically groups of experts who "assist the Security Council in examining particular situations" ("Groups and Panels"). One such group was created during the War on Terror to monitor al Qaeda and the Taliban and make recommendations to the Security Council. One of the members of that group, Victor D. Comras, writes that the role of the group "made Security Council members uncomfortable," and the group was terminated in 2004 after criticizing member countries of the Security Council (xv). Thus, even groups of experts meant to provide objective recommendations are not exempt from the politics of the UN, which supports Captain America's feeling that the Avengers should not hand their accountability to this panel. Cap's skepticism of a renowned governing body thus forces the audience to consider the dangers of putting blind faith in institutions.

While in theory it makes sense to hand the Avengers' goal of protecting the earth to an international peace and security organization, the reality of the ways in which the Avengers and the UN function are largely incompatible. Comras critiques the UN when he writes, "Diplomatic niceties and political realities hamper timely and forthright action" (218). Yet, often throughout

the film, it becomes clear that the Avengers need to be able to operate in a timely manner in order to meet impending threats. When Bucky is in government custody, he is brainwashed again and makes a violent escape, necessitating an immediate response from the Avengers to recapture him. Black Widow remarks that she hopes Tony has an Iron Man suit with him, to which he replies, "I'm an active duty noncombatant" (*Captain America: Civil War* 1:06:51). Tony is therefore forced to fight the super soldier with only a robotic glove, rather than his full Iron Man suit, and Bucky gets away as a result. While this is only a minor threat, many of the opponents the Avengers face are world-threatening, and must be confronted immediately. Later in the film, Bucky tells Cap about an army of super soldiers who have the ability to "take a whole country down in one night," and Cap concludes that they must go after the soldiers themselves because they do not have the time to wait and see if the UN panel will allow them to go (1:14:45). The bureaucracy of obtaining permission to use force legitimately hinders the Avengers, and creates more threats than it resolves. This same issue was pertinent during the War on Terror, such as when the failure of the UN to add the names of individuals linked to al Qaeda to their list of terrorists made it "difficult for governments to freeze their assets" (Comras 120). The real-world failings of the UN support Cap's skepticism about being accountable to the UN and allows the film to critique the institution's failings.

In an interesting turn, Captain America is presented as having the ideological argument about accountability that looks to the future, whereas Iron Man seems more stuck in the past. In the comics, Iron Man frames the fight as Cap being stuck in the past while he pushes toward the future, telling Cap, "We aren't living in nineteen forty-five anymore... Just give me a chance to tell you our plans for my twenty-first century overhaul" (Millar No. 3, 11). Cap's history as a World War II soldier is used against him, as he is portrayed as not understanding the benefits of

registration because he is old fashioned. In the movie, on the contrary, the context of the MCU means that Cap is arguably more in touch with the realities of politics than is Iron Man. In his most recent solo movie, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), Cap sees S.H.I.E.L.D. destroyed from the inside and learns that government figures whom he once believed were his allies were in fact his enemies. Tony Stark, conversely, has been grappling more with personal issues than with political ones, as *Iron Man 3* (2013) portrays his struggle with PTSD, and the events in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* cause him tremendous guilt about almost destroying the world with one of his inventions. Thus, Captain America learns from the past and does not want to repeat mistakes by blindly trusting a government institution, while Iron Man is haunted by the past and wants to return to a time when he was not personally accountable for so much destruction. Iron Man represents the emotional response to traumatic incidents like 9/11 and failures of accountability like the War on Terror, while Captain America symbolizes the pragmatic one. While neither response is completely discounted by the film, Captain America's perspective is borne out by history and therefore has a logical advantage over Iron Man's argument.

In all superhero movies, the physical battles in which the superheroes engage cause immense destruction, but *Captain America: Civil War* is the first movie in the MCU to address these consequences. While neither Tony Stark nor Steve Rogers take this matter lightly, Tony is focused on becoming accountable no matter what form that takes, while Steve is unconvinced that accountability to a political institution is truly any better than the way the Avengers currently operate. Captain America is a symbol of American values, and the fact that he opposes government accountability in a film released during a period when distrust in both domestic and international politics was strong, means that his skepticism is portrayed as a positive thing. The

film thus uses superheroes to confront the global damage that America caused during the War on Terror while also questioning the notion that an international governing body is capable of curtailing that harm.

### **Morality: Muddled Motivations and Revenge**

Because the political context surrounding the movie seems to favor Captain America's argument in the ideological battle over the Sokovia Accords, the questions about morality that the film raises are less about the Accords, and more about the various characters' justifications for fighting. Unlike in the comics, neither team uses excessive violence against the other, nor does either side ally themselves with villains in order to win. In fact, the stakes of the big fight between the two superhero teams feel very low, something for which the film was criticized, with one reviewer suggesting the alternative title "Captain America: Heated Debate" (Brody). The friends on opposing sides exchange quips the entire time and seem unwilling to hurt, let alone kill one another. The reason each of the individual heroes aligns with either side is unclear, as is the question of whether the heroes should be fighting one another or the third-party villain, Zemo. Finally, the fact that multiple characters are driven to violence out of a desire for revenge raises the question of whether violent retaliation is the best course, or whether it can be effective at all.

The most spectacular scene of the movie is a battle between the two teams of superheroes as Iron Man and his allies try to prevent Captain America from breaking the Accords by taking Bucky to stop Zemo and his army of super soldiers. The stated reasons for each team to be fighting are clear, but not every member of each team is fighting because of their ideological stance about the Sokovia Accords. For example, Spider-Man fights for Iron Man, and Ant-Man

fighters for Captain America, but both relatively new superheroes are fighting simply because they were asked to by more experienced heroes whom they admire. When Captain America asks Spider-Man what he was told by Iron Man to get him to fight, Spider-Man replies, “That you’re wrong. And you think you’re right. That makes you dangerous” (*Captain America: Civil War* 1:37:17). It is unclear based on this response if Spider-Man even knows about the Sokovia Accords or the history of the Winter Soldier, the two reasons why Iron Man has turned against Captain America. Rather, Spider-Man is fighting because he blindly trusts in Iron Man’s reasons to fight as legitimate. The same is true for Ant-Man on Captain America’s team. When Cap asks him whether he has been told what they are up against, Ant-Man’s answer is, “Something about some psycho-assassins?” (1:27:59). Once again, Ant-Man appears to know his own team’s reason for fighting, but is not aware of the larger ideological conflict. Additionally, Ant-Man spends a good deal of time fawning over Captain America, which suggests that he would be willing to do anything Cap asked of him simply because of who Cap is. Spider-Man and Ant-Man’s willingness to join the fight based on faith once again mirrors the way in which the public trusted that the government’s reasons for engaging in the Iraq War were based in reality.

Unlike the new heroes who join the conflict, Black Widow was one of the first superheroes to openly support the Sokovia Accords, but she seems reluctant to engage in the fight. She says to Captain America, “You’re not gonna stop,” and when he agrees, she turns on her own team member to allow Cap to escape. Her unwillingness to hurt her friends in defense of her cause and her decision to change sides show that she is not willing to commit to unending violence, even to support her beliefs. Her desire to stop the violence before it becomes relentless reflects current views of many on Afghanistan. Craig Whitlock writes that “those in charge of the war have followed the same talking points for 18 years. No matter how the war is going — and

especially when it is going badly — they emphasize how they are making progress” (Whitlock). In a government interview, however, a USAID official said that thinking they could accomplish their goals “that fast and that well was insane” (“Senior USAID official”). Black Widow’s decision to switch sides in order to stop the violence early on reflects the knowledge that engaging in an unwinnable war will lead to endless fighting, even as some parties continue to insist that fighting is necessary. Furthermore, when Tony lashes out at her for switching sides, Black Widow retorts, “Are you incapable of letting go of your ego for one goddamn second?” (*Captain America: Civil War* 1:48:12). This scene comes after one of Tony’s allies, Rhodey, has been paralyzed by an injury from battle. Black Widow blames Tony’s belief that he will be able to effectively and efficiently defeat Captain America for the violence that led to Rhodey’s injury, in much the same way the USAID official condemned overconfidence in the U.S.’s ability to succeed in Afghanistan. Black Widow helps put an end to the violence through her choice and stops Iron Man’s team from making the same mistakes as the U.S. government and, in doing so, demonstrates the fallibility of the ideology that led to war in the first place.

Unlike the comics, this ideological fight is not the film’s sole source of conflict, as it adds the third-party villain Zemo to complicate the question of who the real enemy is. Throughout the movie, Zemo’s goal is to bring Iron Man, Captain America, and Bucky to him so that he can turn them against each other by showing Iron Man that Bucky killed his parents. In explaining his plan, he says, “I knew I couldn’t kill them. More powerful men than me have tried. But, if I could get them to kill each other...” (2:08:30). The method that Zemo employs to defeat the Avengers mirrors that used by terrorist groups, including al Qaeda. One study on the strategies of terrorism argues that, “Terrorists are too weak to impose their will directly by force of arms. They are sometimes strong enough, however, to persuade audiences to do as they wish by

altering the audience's beliefs" (Kydd and Walter 51). In the big fight between the pro- and anti-Accords teams, none of the superheroes intentionally use violence that could seriously harm the others, indicating that, despite their ideological differences, they do not see their fellow heroes as bad people who need to be punished for their actions. Once Zemo shows Tony the deaths of his parents, however, Tony's beliefs change and he becomes determined to hurt Cap and Bucky. Despite his physical weakness in comparison to the Avengers, Zemo is able to provoke the heroes to turn against one another so that his goal is accomplished even without his participation in the fight.

While the parallels between Zemo's strategy and those used by terrorists clearly identify him as a villain to the audience, a lack of communication between the superheroes prevents them from recognizing Zemo as such. Captain America realizes that Zemo is the real enemy after he sees Zemo brainwash Bucky, and spends the majority of the film trying to defeat him rather than fighting against the Sokovia Accords. Iron Man initially tries to prevent Cap from going after Zemo because allowing him to do so would go against the Accords that Iron Man has signed. Once he learns about the army of super soldiers that Zemo is supposedly building, however, Iron Man betrays the government to which he feels accountable in order to help Cap fight the bigger enemy. It is only because Cap feels he can no longer rely on Iron Man that it takes nearly the length of the entire film for the two to come together. The conceit of the film requires the heroes to fight one another before fighting Zemo, but the inability of the heroes to identify the true villain is exacerbated by the lack of communication among the Avengers once they end up on opposing sides. Recent papers released on the conflict in Afghanistan show similar failures of communication and clarity among the U.S. government and the military about who they were meant to be fighting. A former adviser to an Army Special Forces team said, "They thought I

was going to come to them with a map to show them where the good guys and bad guys live. It took several conversations for them to understand that I did not have that information in my hands” (“U.S. military adviser”). The unclear nature of the conflict contributed to the high expense and extended length of the war. As the film ends without a substantial resolution between Iron Man and Captain America and the conflict reappears in films released three years after *Captain America: Civil War*, not knowing who the true villain is clearly had a similar effect on the Marvel Cinematic Universe as it did on the Afghanistan War.

It is not only Zemo’s presence in the film that complicates the identity of the villain, but also the haste with which the superheroes jump to revenge as their best option. The futility of revenge is a major theme throughout the film and allows for an exploration of the emotional response to trauma, something that takes a backseat to the ideological battle in the comics. The presence of dynamic actors in film is more suited to depict complex emotion than are the static images in comics, and the adaptation utilizes its emotional capabilities by adding revenge as a major motivator for both the villain Zemo and the hero T’Challa (Black Panther). While each character is driven to use violence against a person or people who is responsible for the death of their loved ones, both of their quests for revenge end in personal failure. Zemo wants to tear the Avengers apart for killing his family in Sokovia, but once he succeeds in doing so he attempts to commit suicide because his mission did not change the fact that his family is gone. T’Challa spends the whole film pursuing Bucky, who he believes to be responsible for the explosion at the UN that killed his father. Upon finding out that it was Zemo, rather than Bucky, who caused his father’s death, T’Challa ultimately renounces vengeance and stops Zemo from taking his own life. While T’Challa is not successful in avenging his father’s death, his decision to stop both his own and Zemo’s violence mirrors the choice made by Captain America when he surrenders in

the comics. Both heroic and villainous characters fail to achieve anything meaningful through the quest for revenge, but T'Challa distinguishes himself as a hero in his ability to see a way forward that does not involve vengeance.

The value of putting a stop to revenge is further emphasized by the film's portrayal of an endless cycle of violence that stems from this senseless act. In 2004, Osama bin Laden addressed the American people saying, "As I watched the destroyed towers in Lebanon, it occurred to me [to] punish the unjust the same way [and] to destroy towers in America so it could taste some of what we are tasting" ("God Knows"). It is because bin Laden saw violence and pain inflicted upon his own people that he was moved to commit an act of terrorism against the United States. While the film does not refer directly to his words, the characters who seek vengeance are shown to have similar thought processes as bin Laden. Throughout the movie, Zemo causes numerous deaths with the explosion at the UN and his attempts to get information about Bucky. Yet, when T'Challa asks him if all he wanted was to see the Avengers tear themselves apart, Zemo responds with the story of his family's deaths, making it clear that what he really wants is for the Avengers to feel the same pain he did. In pursuing that goal, however, he inflicts the same pain and loss that he felt upon other innocent people who stood between him and the Avengers, thus perpetuating a cycle of violence without finding any comfort for himself. T'Challa, on the other hand, is able to see the futility of the violent actions of those around him. He reflects to Zemo, "Vengeance has consumed you. It's consuming them. I am done letting it consume me" (*Captain America: Civil War* 2:08:57). T'Challa is thereby able to prevent any more innocent people from getting hurt in either his or Zemo's missions for revenge. And, by choosing to not let Zemo kill himself, T'Challa ensures that he will face real consequences for his destructive actions. Through

these two opposing characters, the film critiques the instinct to respond to violence with violence as a futile and dangerous choice.

Tony Stark also seeks violent revenge against those who have caused him pain even though he openly acknowledges its futility, meaning that the film recognizes just how tempting the turn to violence can be. When Tony watches the tape that shows the murder of his parents at the hands of Bucky, he immediately turns to retaliate against Bucky. While Cap is able to subdue this initial reaction, Tony attacks him physically once he admits that he knew about the murder but never told Tony. The softened blows that were exchanged in the battle between the two teams are gone here, as Tony dons the Iron Man suit and fights with the clear intention of killing Bucky. Naturally, Cap fights on Bucky's side to prevent the death of his best friend, telling Tony, "This isn't going to change anything," to which Tony replies, "I don't care. He killed my mom" (*Captain America: Civil War* 2:06:02). Throughout the movie, Tony has attempted to bring Bucky into custody for the explosion at the UN, and Cap into custody for failure to sign the Accords, so that both men can face the consequences of the law. Once he has a personal stake in the matter, however, Tony ignores the proper channels that he has been fighting for in order to inflict pain himself, despite knowing that his violence will not be productive. Not only does Tony give up his ideological fight because of revenge, but he loses the physical fight to Cap and Bucky as well. In a scene that closely mirrors the comics, Cap gains the upper hand in his fight with Tony and removes the Iron Man mask, leaving Tony vulnerable. Cap then raises his shield above his head as though to strike a final deadly blow. Rather than being prevented by doing so by others as he is in the comics, Cap instead drives the shield into the heart of the Iron Man suit, leaving Tony alive, but unable to continue the fight. Once again, Cap is the one who is able to put a stop to the violence, although in this case the only source of violence is Tony's desire for

revenge. As Cap and Bucky walk away from the fight, the camera pans out from Tony so that he is framed by the Iron Man helmet and Captain America's shield, both of which have been discarded on the ground. By following his instinct for vengeance, Tony lost not only his friend in Cap, but his own identity through the abandonment of the things he stood for as Iron Man. While Cap's mercy allows Tony to walk away from the fight largely unscathed, his defeat at the end of the film shows that revenge not only leads to pointless violence, but to the sacrifice of personal values as well.

Both the heroes and villains in *Captain America: Civil War* are portrayed as sympathetic, yet flawed. To fight for one's beliefs or on behalf of the people who one admires is natural, as is the instinct to respond to the loss of loved ones with a desire for vengeance. The film presents the actions of the superheroes in such a way that the audience understands their motivations, while still portraying the negative consequences of those actions. Violence is shown to be a means that leads only to harm, both physical and ideological, in the same way it was when it led to 9/11 and the War on Terror. The movie thus allows its characters and its audience to feel their emotional reactions to trauma, while still criticizing the choices that stem from those emotions.

## **Conclusion**

While *Captain America: Civil War* never gestures directly to 9/11 and the War on Terror in the same way that the *Civil War* comics do, its explicit political content and reflection on questions of accountability and morality put it in conversation with the culture and politics of America in the wake of those events. Its skepticism of the UN and other governing bodies, its debate over how to take responsibility for failed actions, and its condemnation of endless violence are all present in contemporary American culture because Americans are now able to

look at the response to 9/11 with the benefit of hindsight. In scrutinizing decision-making during conflicts and criticizing the actions of superheroes and villains alike, the movie forces audiences to confront the repercussions of America's past mistakes that can still be felt today. While most superhero films culminate in a world-threatening battle between hero and villain, *Captain America: Civil War* subverts this tradition by removing the villain from the equation before the finale, which is a small-scale fight between heroes. This structure allows for the film to begin with a global response to devastating events, and conclude with the examination of the repercussions that violence and loss of ideology have on a personal level. The movie thus reflects that Americans may have moved on from the destruction caused on 9/11, but that individual Americans still feel the effects of the event in the societal anxieties they are exposed to in their daily lives.

Despite *Captain America: Civil War's* disruption of the traditional superhero film structure, it is nevertheless a product of Marvel, one of the most mainstream creators of superhero stories. The film was also released by Disney, an entertainment conglomerate that relies on blockbuster tent poles like this one to turn a massive profit for the company. These commercial considerations mean that the creators of *Captain America: Civil War* are somewhat restricted in the types of stories they are able to tell, and consequently in the political messages that they are able to include in their films. Superhero stories that are distributed by independent publishers and studios are able to be more deliberately subversive and political in their content because they have fewer commercial considerations. Garth Ennis's series *The Boys* is an example of such a story as it was published by Dynamite Entertainment, and accordingly is able to expand upon the political themes explored in the previous two chapters in more explicit ways.

## Chapter 4

### “The Colors and Tights Approach”: Fighting Superheroes and Corporate Power in Dynamite’s *The Boys*

#### Introduction

In the third issue of Garth Ennis and Darick Robertson’s *The Boys*, the protagonist, Hughie, arrives in New York City to join the titular anti-superhero group. On a two-page spread, the top half of each page depicts a conversation between Hughie and the Boys’ leader, Billy Butcher. The bottom half of the two pages is a drawing of the city itself with two notable features. The first is that the Brooklyn Bridge has been completely destroyed, and the second is that the Twin Towers are prominent in the skyline, despite the fact that this issue of the comic is set in 2006. One piece of dialogue from the conversation above this illustration is included in a text box on the picture of the city: “You don’t play with matches if you don’t want to start any fires” (Ennis No. 3, 8). While the events of 9/11 are not specifically mentioned until the twentieth issue, this iconic New York City landscape near the beginning of the story tells the reader two things: 9/11 did not happen the same way in this universe, and whatever caused the destruction of the Brooklyn Bridge is a major component of the story.

*The Boys* is set between 2006 and 2008 and follows Hughie Campbell, a Scottish man who gets a rude introduction to the world of superheroes when A-Train, a member of America’s premier superhero team the Seven, chases a super-villain to Scotland and accidentally kills Hughie’s girlfriend in the process. Hughie is then recruited by Billy Butcher to join the CIA group the Boys, which is responsible for policing superhero activity. Butcher believes that his wife was raped and killed by Homelander, the leader of the Seven, which is why he joined the Boys and why he sees a kindred spirit in Hughie. In this universe, all superheroes are created

when they are injected with a serum called Compound V, a substance with which the Boys have also been injected in order to give them the physical strength necessary to fight the superheroes. The creation of superheroes is carried out by Vought-American, a corporation with a great deal of influence in the U.S. government and the aspiration to use its superheroes, or “supes,” to become a dominant defense contractor. While working with the Boys, Hughie meets and falls in love with Annie January, better known as Starlight, the newest member of the Seven whose worldview is shattered when she discovers that Vought-American’s superheroes are debased and even downright evil. As Hughie goes deeper into the world of supes alongside Butcher, Mother’s Milk (M.M.), the Frenchman (Frenchie), and the Female, he discovers the atrocities of which supes are capable, the corruption of Vought-American and the U.S. government, and the sinister ends towards which he was unknowingly working. *The Boys* culminates not with a showdown between the Boys and the Seven, but with the deaths of the majority of the Boys at the hands of Butcher, who is not satisfied with revenge on those responsible for the death of his wife, and is determined to bring about the destruction of all supes. While Hughie manages to survive and stop Butcher from carrying out his plan, the comic concludes with supes still flying about freely, Vought-American rebranding itself in order to stay afloat, and the status quo largely unchanged.

While *The Boys* is, ostensibly, a superhero story, Ennis takes every opportunity to turn the genre on its head and gesture toward larger political issues. The supes that Ennis creates are caricatures of recognizable ones and, while they motivate much of the plot, they are not the comics’ most developed characters. In most superhero stories, the heroes act as vigilantes, not beholden to any governing body. By imagining what would happen if superheroes existed in our own world, however, *The Boys* speculates that superheroes would be a mixture of celebrity and politician, and would be controlled by corporations. This idea of privatization allows Ennis to

explore the capitalist anxieties that accompany the idea that corporate power has become the most influential force, both within society at large and within the government. What lies at the heart of this anxiety is the concept of control. After 9/11, there were concerns about the dominance of the U.S. government as it infringed upon the civil liberties of the American people and waged controversial wars abroad. At the same time, however, there was the sense that this governmental dominance was necessary in order to protect the country from terrorist attacks like the one it had just experienced. Ennis's portrayal of various government institutions, including the CIA group the Boys, reflects this tension within the government and the failure of governance that accompanied it. He also shows that the corporation Vought-American is guilty of the same failures of accountability and moral shortcomings as the government was in the wake of 9/11. Through his depictions of the government, the supes, and Vought-American, Ennis criticizes the amount of power that corporations exercise in society, while his depiction of Hughie as the everyman shows how the public is both affected by and complicit in the failures of post-9/11 American society.

### **Privatization: The Government**

One of the most explicit criticisms made in *The Boys* is that of the government's involvement in the military-industrial complex. In the universe of *The Boys*, the White House is occupied by President Robert Schaefer, a neoconservative referred to as Dakota Bob, and Vice President Victor Neuman, a Vought-American stooge more commonly known as Vic the Veep. Together, the two men represent what government privatization looks like when it is carried out by competent and incompetent actors. By portraying the government as being beholden to corporate interest, Ennis both critiques the role of the military-industrial complex during the War

on Terror and establishes the amount of power that corporations exercise in comparison to the government.

Dakota Bob is shown to be a capable president, but one who is willing to sell off the government to benefit his business friends, rather than to benefit the American people. His handling of 9/11 is used to demonstrate his competence, as he uses intelligence warnings to know of the attacks beforehand and orders NORAD to shoot down the planes. While the public supported his actions on that day, they respond more negatively to his decisions surrounding the subsequent War on Terror. Stillwell lays out the extent of how the president's corporate ties influence his judgment in conflicts:

Dakota Bob has been good to his people. From Halliburton all the way down to Blackwater, he's come through for them again and again. He sold off most of the federal government, and on top of that he delivered Pakistan -- the C.I.A. said hunt bin Laden in Afghanistan, but Bob came through with a real war. Can you imagine what those contractors must be making, doing half the work badly and charging twice the going rate? That man is a team player. (*Herogasm* No. 3, 18).

While Dakota Bob is not allied with Vought-American, and in fact expresses open distrust and dislike for the company, Stillwell's words show respect for the president's ability to keep his corporate backers happy. At the same time, his speech also indicates that the president has blatantly ignored what was considered the correct course of action by intelligence agencies in favor of action that will bring money to his friends. A Secret Service member later confirms that public opinion has turned against the president since 9/11, as he says that "people hate his guts nowadays" (*Herogasm* No. 4, 14). Dakota Bob's actions therefore exemplify how the public

good is ignored in favor of private interests when the government becomes accountable to corporations.

The allusion to Halliburton that Stillwell makes also creates an obvious connection between Dakota Bob and former Halliburton CEO Dick Cheney, and allows Ennis to highlight how both men go largely unpunished for their corruption. As Cheney was widely considered to be the most powerful Vice President in history, it makes sense that the character who parallels him would be president in this universe. Additionally, Halliburton subsidiary Kellogg Brown & Root was awarded multiple contracts in Iraq, including one to supply services to American troops and one to restore oil fields that had been damaged by fires. Halliburton and KBR made billions from these contracts, but whistleblowers reported that the company was unprepared to handle the contracts, so “contract managers hired whomever they could find, rarely checked invoices, and sometimes pocketed money on the side” (Chatterjee 217). Both Halliburton and Cheney received a great deal of criticism from the press and from other politicians, as some speculated that Cheney had pushed for the war in order to benefit his former company (Blake). Despite being vilified by some, and paying penalties and settlements for its involvement in a Nigerian bribing scandal and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, Halliburton still prospered from the Iraq War and never had to make reparations for its improper actions during the conflict. Similarly, Dakota Bob loses public support because of his involvement in the military-industrial complex, but neither he nor the companies he backs face any serious repercussions. Thus, Ennis shows how deeply entrenched the military-industrial complex is in America, as the president is able to benefit from it while facing only a decrease in popularity as a result.

While the privatization of the federal government is shown to be at the expense of the American public, some of Dakota Bob’s actions that are undertaken for corporate interests

actually end up benefitting the people, creating a more nuanced picture of corporate accountability. Mallory, the man who originally founded the Boys, tells Hughie that, “As a hireling of various special interests...Bob wanted Vought-American’s agenda torpedoed” and made it easy for the Boys to operate (No. 55, 5). Because *The Boys* clearly depicts Vought-American as an antagonist that needs to be defeated, Dakota Bob’s willingness to work against the corporation is framed as something that aids in that goal. He is the reason that the Boys get funding, that they are able to carry out their work without going through Congress, and that they can claim a presidential directive and clear any obstacles that they might face. The implication is that when the government works for corporate interests, it can sometimes end up working for the benefit of the people as well. Corporate influence within the government is not depicted as an inherently negative thing; it is only when corporate interest becomes more important than public interest that it becomes harmful. The goal of Vought-American is to become a defense contractor by convincing the government to allow its superheroes into national defense. If that were to happen, no other company would be able to compete with Vought-American, since it is the only producer of supes. On the one hand, it is in the interest of other defense contractor to oppose Vought-American, something which benefits the American public because the supes are dangerous to the people. On the other hand, Blackwater is a defense contractor that Stillwell names as having influenced Dakota Bob to start a war in Pakistan, something which is not in the interest of the American people. As such, government accountability to corporations is not portrayed as being intrinsically evil, but rather as having no morality at all because it is beholden only to the companies’ bottom lines.

While Dakota Bob is a competent leader who has a nuanced relationship with corporate interests, Vic the Veep is depicted as being completely helpless without Vought-American,

which gives the company unprecedented power within the government. It is implied throughout the comics that Vic the Veep is mentally handicapped, meaning that Vought-American treat him like a machine that they program to say whatever they want. In the words of the company, this trait makes him “the perfect politician” (*Herogasm* No. 4, 13). This is what allowed Vought-American to take control of the situation on 9/11, as Vic the Veep was told to incapacitate Dakota Bob, then taught the phrase “Tell NORAD to order weapons hold” (18). As a consequence, the Air Force was prevented from shooting down the final hijacked plane so that the Seven could attempt to stop it. Vought-American believed that if their supes stopped a terrorist attack, the government would have no choice but to put them in national defense. Instead, the Seven was completely unprepared to handle the situation and sent the final plane crashing into the Brooklyn Bridge. In this instance, Vought-American, and by extension Vic the Veep, were acting with only long-term profit as a goal and with no thought given to the people who could potentially be harmed. Vic the Veep serves to show that when profit becomes the only thing to which government actors are accountable, the public are the ones who get hurt as a result. Ennis has said that “Vic the Veep was meant to be the most grotesque parody of Bush, Jr. imaginable” (Phegley). The character therefore confirms the anxiety felt by Americans at the time that their president was not working with their interests in mind, or that he was not mentally equipped to do so. By caricaturing the most criticized aspects of George W. Bush’s character, Ennis shows the need for strong and intelligent leaders to fight against corporate interest in government.

Through his interpretation of the Bush administration, Ennis sends the clear message that allowing the government to privatize corporate interests in turn allows for corrupt figures to hold the most powerful offices in the country and the world. Additionally, the ability of Vought-

American to gain so much influence within the U.S. government indicates how powerful the company is when compared to other institutions. While Ennis is far from the first person to criticize the military-industrial complex, and even acknowledges how entrenched it is in American society, he does go to great lengths to condemn the degree of power consequently exercised by corporate America, and the inability of the U.S. government to protect its people from that power.

### **Profit and Corruption: Vought-American**

Nowhere is Ennis's critique of corporate power shown more clearly than in the relationship between Vought-American, particularly as embodied by the executive James Stillwell, and the superheroes it creates. Throughout the comic, Vought-American is shown to use many of the same strategies to gain power as the post-9/11 government, particularly in the way they manipulate the narrative surrounding their company and go to great lengths to keep the public in the dark about the atrocities they have committed. Because these actions are recognizable as being tied to the failures of the U.S. government after 9/11, the reader is primed to see that Vought-American's actions stem from lack of accountability and subsequent corruption, and that the actions are being condemned by Ennis. The issue with Stillwell and the supes is that they only care about the bottom line, meaning that they are able to justify any action as long as it does not hurt profits. As a result, the corporation permits a certain level of corruption in order to gain power. Furthermore, Vought-American is shown to be stronger than even the superheroes, which serves as a denunciation of the amount of power corporations have been able to amass in society. Through post-9/11 signifiers and the power dynamic between

Stillwell and the supes, Ennis depicts Vought-American as being both the most dominant and the most dangerous force in the comics.

The most blatant example of how accountability to Vought-American corrupts individuals comes from the degraded and evil characters of the superheroes. *The Boys* is a send-up of the traditional superheroes with whom readers will be familiar, and therefore takes pleasure in making its parallel versions of recognizable heroes act as diabolically as possible. The Seven is introduced when A-Train kills Hughie's girlfriend, a scene that is drawn drenched in blood and results in Hughie holding his girlfriend's severed hands. When Starlight joins the Seven, she is sexually assaulted by three of its members, a scene with heightened sexual violence that caricatures Starlight's horror. Both scenes are drawn to maximize their shock value, emphasizing both the ridiculous and appalling nature of the supes' actions. While this excessive depiction of superheroes satirizes conventional superhero stories, it also demonstrates the lack of supervision that supes have in their connection to Vought-American. As Homelander puts it: "We follow the rules, and we're rewarded with a pleasant lifestyle and the occasional bonus" (*Herogasm* No. 5, 18). The superpowers that the supes possess give them incredible strength, yet Vought-American manages to keep them in line simply by allowing them to indulge in their vices. Supes are allowed to be morally corrupt as long as they continue to follow company orders, thus showing that Vought-American holds its products accountable, but not to any kind of ethical standard.

It is because Vought-American handles all the public relations for their supes that they freely act debased in secret while maintaining appealing public personas. Superhero comics exist in the world of *The Boys* and, as Butcher explains, act as "the official version" so the "public gets to read about thrillin' heroics an' crusaders for justice, an' in the meantime the supes get on with all the horrible shit they're really doin'" (*The Boys* No. 7, 13). Through these fictions of

superhero exploits, Vought-American projects the image that supes are accountable to the American public, when in reality, they have no concern for the people they pretend to protect. For instance, one supe whom the Boys encounter, Swingwing, is known as “the gay-friendly superhero” and is forced by Vought-American to go to community meetings, despite the fact that he is actually homophobic (No. 8, 12). Additionally, the Boys eventually discover that Swingwing is responsible for the death of a young gay man who had admired him, meaning that he actually harms the very group of people he is meant to attract. Comics allow Vought-American to convince marginalized groups that superheroes are there to protect them, and by producing a comic that appeals to every demographic, they maximize their own sales and profit. The company is manipulating narratives that target the traumas of their audiences for their own gain, much like the U.S. government did with rallying support for Iraq War. In this way, Vought-American maintains control of its supes by cutting the public out of the equation while making them feel as though they are still part of it.

The lengths to which Vought-American is willing to go to cover up its malicious activity in order to turn a profit are demonstrated many times throughout the comics and emphasize how ignorant the public is about the reality of the world in which it lives. One of the clearest examples of this manipulation is the G-Men, a team of outcasts clearly intended to be a perversion of Marvel’s X-Men. The Boys begin to investigate the G-Men after the suicide of one of its members and discover that all of the members of the team were abducted and sexually abused as children. While the Boys are prepared to take on the G-Men, Vought-American beats them to them to the punch and massacres the entire team of superheroes, an undertaking which includes trapping a group of child supes in a box and dropping it into the ocean. Afterward, an employee of Vought-American solidifies the details of a contingency plan that involves telling

the public that the G-Men are fighting a villain in a different dimension and using lookalikes to convince people that the team is still alive for as long as possible. Meanwhile, Stillwell meets with Homelander to tell him that the Seven will now be responsible for making up for the G-Men's missing revenue. All of this is handled very calmly by the Vought-American people, indicating that these kinds of contingency plans are always in place and that killing hundreds of heroes is only significant because of its possible effects on profit. *The Boys* therefore offers insight into what corporations are really doing as opposed to the narratives they spin for the public, and suggests that the public should likely be more informed about corporate action than they are.

It is because *The Boys* is a superhero story that Ennis is able to demonstrate corporate power's place atop the hierarchy of power within society. Homelander is hailed as the most powerful superhero in the world, yet Stillwell never expresses any fear of him. Most of the superheroes are happy to work for Vought-American because the company allows them to indulge in their vices. Homelander, however, becomes fed up with being treated as a public relations machine rather than the superhero he is, and subsequently plans a supe coup of the U.S. government in order to free himself from Vought-American. When the coup begins, Homelander shows up at Stillwell's office to kill him. The supe has the ability to read vital signs and says to Stillwell: "Still eighty over sixty. You're about to be torn limb from limb, and you're completely calm. I think I've finally met a superhuman" (No. 64, 6-7). In the panels in which this dialogue is delivered, Stillwell is sitting in his desk chair while Homelander towers over him, covered in the blood of the people he has already killed, but Stillwell's face expresses no emotion whatsoever. While he has been portrayed as expressionless throughout the comics, Homelander's words confirm that Stillwell is not acting, but is truly unafraid of the supe. To emphasize this further,

Stillwell goads Homelander, calling the supe's actions "a spoiled child's personal Auschwitz" (7). Stillwell knows that Homelander has lived his entire life under the thumb of Vought-American and that he is therefore incapable of thinking for himself, rather only of inflicting violence from which Vought has already proved itself capable of recovering. Homelander's actions may cause destruction and send a message, but Stillwell and his corporation can manipulate and control any force of power, from superheroes to the government, making Vought-American the most powerful entity in the comics. The juxtaposition of superpowers and corporate power reveals just how dangerous the latter is that it need not fear even the strongest of superheroes.

While the comics consistently portray profit as a corrupting motivation, the conclusion to Stillwell's story shows that the corporation is vulnerable, thereby creating an optimistic end to the series. The Boys release all of the information they have on Vought-American to the press, including their involvement in 9/11 and pictures of Homelander committing horrific acts of violence. This causes the public to turn against Vought-American and the company becomes the subject of a congressional hearing which is accompanied by protests by the American people against the corporation. Stillwell blames a subordinate for all the company's misdeeds and rebrands as American Consolidated in the hopes that people will forget what happened under the name of Vought-American. Despite these tactics, Stillwell still does not emerge from the story victorious. Hughie blackmails Stilwell so that he can no longer attempt to get supes into national defense, and when Stillwell sees that the only thing his company can create is another team of supes who have the exact same problems as the old ones, his expressionless demeanor is finally broken. He leans against a window with his hand covering his face in what is clearly the beginning of a breakdown as he says only, "Bad product" (No. 72, 17). Even with his ability to

partially deflect public and government accountability, Stillwell knows that rebranding will not be enough if he continues to present the world with the same faulty commodities. The ending of *The Boys* thus shows that corporate power, while a dangerous force, is not absolute if these corporations eventually have to answer to someone else. The comics demand readers recognize the threat that companies like Vought-American pose to the American people, and affirms the power of the people within the market.

Overall, *The Boys*' depiction of corporate drive for profit and subsequent corruption serves as a wakeup call for readers so accustomed to seeing corruption in their society that they no longer notice or object. As Stillwell says once Vought-American's misdeeds have gone public, the most common response to something like WikiLeaks, or to the revelation that his corporation pushed for supes in national defense, is for people to say, "Yes. The world works the way I always suspected" (No. 66, 13). Ennis's criticism of corporate America is not a novel one, but his presentation of them is. By placing these issues within the context of a post-9/11 superhero story, he demonstrates just how powerful and therefore dangerous corporate America can become when left unchecked. When a corporation controls the strongest superheroes in the world, it is clear that that corporation has too much power. It is then up to the public identify and combat the corruption that comes from the bottom line, rather than remaining complicit in it.

### **Disillusionment and Complicity: The Boys**

The idea of complicity is one that Hughie must confront through his work with the Boys. As the Boys are a CIA special operations group, they work as a clandestine part of the U.S. government. Their existence is due to a presidential directive from Dakota Bob and they answer to the Director of the CIA, Susan Rayner. Despite these authority figures who preside over the

group, the Boys are given a great deal of freedom and often avoid the little oversight that they do have. As a result, the group, and Butcher in particular, are able to use the means which they are given by the government to achieve their own ends in whatever way they deem appropriate. The Boys engineer conflicts with the supes instead of merely monitoring them, and the methods with which they confront the supes are almost always violent ones. Because Hughie comes into the group as an outsider at the beginning of the comics, both coming to the U.S. and joining the Boys for the first time, he begins with vague ideas about what the CIA and the Boys do and discovers throughout the comics what his job really means. Hughie therefore serves as a surrogate for the audience as he learns how the lack of accountability within the CIA can clear the way for morally corrupt individuals, just as the American public discovered this fact after 9/11.

Hughie joins the Boys with fantastical ideas about what the CIA does, and learns that the narratives that he believed are in fact beneficial in allowing the agency to act without democratic oversight. When Butcher first introduces himself to Hughie and says that he works for the CIA, Hughie's response is to ask, "Well do you know about all the secret stuff, like? You know, like Area Fifty-One an' the Illuminati an' everything... I mean you're talkin' about the people who really run the world" (No. 2, 14). As Hughie goes on to explain his theories about the CIA, he is drawn with wide eyes and his hands near his face to indicate that he is talking animatedly and truly believes what he is saying. While Butcher quickly informs him that the job is more about maintaining the status quo, Hughie's initial conception of the agency is a representation, albeit an exaggerated one, of the air of mystery and importance that surrounds the CIA for most outsiders. Much later in the comics, once Hughie is accustomed to his role within the Boys, he meets Greg Mallory, the original founder of the anti-superhero group and one of the founding members of

the CIA itself. In discussing the origins of both groups, Mallory explains the difference between public perception and reality: “First of all, a spy is not an impeccably-dressed man in an Aston-Martin. He’s generally a seedy little man you wouldn’t look at twice... He’s also bitter, spiteful, malcontent... Then again, he gets the job done. Because no one’s looking at him twice” (No. 54, 8-9). Mallory’s words highlight not only the overly romanticized view of clandestine activity that many people have, but also the idea that people are not always who they appear to be. Through his introductions into the CIA, Hughie is told that the people whom he thinks control the world are not as powerful as they seem, and that he cannot always trust idealized views of people to be accurate. These are lessons that Hughie has to confront in his new role, and ones that reflect the shattered worldview many people had to come to terms with during this time period.

It is through Hughie’s relationship with Butcher that he is most clearly manipulated and learns that his trust can easily be misplaced. Hughie experiences many moments of disillusionment due to the violence that his new job necessitates, and he considers quitting many times. In one such moment, Butcher shares with him that his wife was raped and killed by a supe which is what motivates him to keep fighting. He goes on to say, “I think you should stay ‘cause you’re good at it. You like it. You’ve got a score to settle so you want it. All than, an’ I always wanted a little brother” (No. 6, 19). The panel that comes after these statements shows the two men sitting together on a bench. Hughie’s posture is relaxed and both he and Butcher are smiling as they look at Butcher’s dog, Terror. It is a moment of real camaraderie between the two men, as it creates a common bond between them and convinces Hughie to stay. In issue 55, Mallory mentions that Butcher did have a brother. Hughie asks whether Butcher’s brother was older or younger, but there is no direct reference to Butcher’s earlier statement. It is only later that Hughie realizes just how much he has been manipulated. At this point, Butcher has already killed

M.M., and Hughie gets blown backward by the explosion Butcher set to kill Frenchie and the Female. As Hughie lies dazed, the panels depicting the events happening in the moment are interrupted with a flashback to the scene of Hughie and Butcher on the bench. In this rendition of the scene, Hughie's facial expression is emphasized and he is clearly touched that Butcher thinks of him as a little brother. After a series of jumbled flashbacks depicted on a page without panels, Hughie remembers his conversation with Mallory in which he learned that Butcher did have a younger brother who died, and Mallory implied that had his brother survived, there might have been someone who could stop Butcher. The illustrations then return to Hughie in present day, where he says, "Oh my fuckin' God Almighty. I'm supposed to stop you" (No. 69, 22). The visual medium of comics allows for these flashbacks to re-contextualize moments from earlier in the story, and shows how willingly Hughie trusted Butcher as an authority figure. Hughie's evolving view of Butcher demonstrates the ease with which trusted figures can lie to those who are eager to believe them.

The dynamic between Hughie and Butcher parallels the changing relationship many American people had with their government in the years following 9/11 when faith in the government slowly eroded. At the beginning of the comics, Hughie has experienced a personal tragedy, and Butcher has authority as a member of the government and offers an opportunity for retaliation. A study done in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 found that after the Twin Towers were hit but before Bush addressed the nation, there was no immediate rally effect in favor of the presidential administration, but the dominant emotions felt by the American people were "anger and anxiousness" (Schubert et al. 570). Following Bush's address to the nation on the evening of 9/11, his approval ratings "improved dramatically" and the study's participants reported that he "did not calm their fears, but he did give them hope" (572). In his speech Bush addressed the

incredible sense of loss that the American people were feeling, and promised that “the full resources of our intelligence and law enforcement communities” were already working to find those responsible so they could be brought to justice (“Selected Speeches” 58). Following a traumatic and emotional event, the American people needed hope, which came when the authorities promised retribution. It is the emotional vulnerability that follows moments of immense loss that prompts those affected to turn to those more powerful than themselves for action. Hughie does this with Butcher just as many Americans did it with Bush, and both found their initial hope misplaced and themselves misled by trusted government figures.

When he needed someone to believe in, Hughie put his faith in Butcher, and as a result, he remains in the dark about Butcher’s true motivations and cannot accept that his corruption is possible. After Butcher has killed all of the members of the Boys and Hughie has learned that he plans to massacre anyone who has been injected with Compound V, the two get into a physical altercation in which both are seriously injured. As they wait for the police to find them, Hughie says, “I just can’t get it into my head that this is who you’ve turned out to be” (No. 71, 7).

Americans experienced a similar cognitive dissonance surrounding the Iraq War, which had been prompted by the Bush Administration as part of the promised retaliation after 9/11. In a speech in 2002, Bush addressed the question of why Saddam Hussein had to be dealt with at that time, despite the fact that he had been powerful for years. Bush responded: “We have experienced the horror of 9/11. We have seen that those who hate America are willing to crash airplanes into buildings full of innocent people” (“Transcript: George Bush’s Speech”). Bush’s rhetoric created a clear link between Hussein and the 9/11 attacks, which contributed to the widely held belief that the Iraq War was an appropriate course of action for the U.S. in response. Even once it was clear that the attackers had been working on behalf of al Qaeda, an organization to which

Hussein had no link, “Sixty-nine percent of Americans said they thought it was at least likely that Hussein was involved in the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon” (Milbank and Deane). This unwillingness or inability to acknowledge truths that contradict formerly held beliefs can be seen in both Hughie’s response to Butcher and Americans’ response to Bush, demonstrating the strength of the trust afforded to authority figures in times of personal or shared crisis. Readers can therefore identify with Hughie’s emotional journey throughout the comics and his inability to reconcile Butcher’s corruption with the hopes that he initially had when joining the Boys. Ennis positions Hughie as both the protagonist and audience surrogate, then characterizes him through emotions that were prominent in the wake of 9/11, thereby encouraging *The Boys* to be read as a post-9/11 text.

While Hughie’s experiences may strike contemporary readers as familiar, the reader receives more information than Hughie to demonstrate the connection between lack of accountability and corruption. When Butcher introduces Hughie to the rest of the Boys at the beginning of the comics, he tells them all that they are now operating under presidential directive: “So that leaves us a lot less to worry about. No old bollocks about the budget, no rules of engagement, no lookin’ over our shoulders before we put some cunt in the hospital. An’ no bloody subcommittees” (No. 3, 13). The implication is that the group has almost no supervision and that they can use violence or illegal means to achieve their ends without getting into trouble for doing so. While Butcher’s words make it seem as though Congress does not need to be aware of the Boys’ actions, and that they are not subject to democratic oversight, only Butcher knows just how unaccountable they are. On an early mission in Russia, Director Rayner orders Butcher to abort the mission, an order Butcher ignores, while also hinting that he does not share all of his intel with Rayner. This happens towards the beginning of the comics and results in Butcher

killing 150 supes, but he never faces any repercussions for it, which sends the message that he can do whatever he wants. Additionally, when Rayner approves the restoration of the Boys, she looks at the file from when they last operated, which details all of the violence they inflicted. Her response to reading about this is to say, “Well. Too late now” (No. 2, 2). While the CIA may not approve of the Boys’ violent methods, it does allow them. The reader therefore knows from the beginning that Butcher is willing to ignore those in authority, and just how dangerous that trait makes him.

Only much later is Hughie made aware of what the reader already suspected: Butcher has ignored the Boys’ government directive in favor of his own. Hughie willingly works for Butcher long before he learns about the man’s true nature and intentions, meaning that he becomes complicit in the corruption of the group without realizing. The Boys were initially supposed to manage and police the presence of superheroes within society, both for the protection of the public and to prevent the supes from entering national defense. In recounting the history of the group, however, Mallory tells Hughie that once Butcher gained more influence, “Confrontation was more common. Events seemed to conspire to give the targets little choice; the screw would be turned until the humiliation was unbearable” (No. 55, 8). Mallory then concedes that he created the very thing he wanted to avoid: “A special forces unit. Answerable to no one, justifying its existence through the creation of its own missions and agendas, impossible to stop” (11). As Mallory has realized, the Boys are unaccountable, which has allowed Butcher to consolidate power for himself and use the group for his own ends. He engineers confrontations with the supes because he believes they are all capable of the same evil that led one of them to rape and kill his wife, and that that evil is the only thing of which they are capable. Butcher believes that the only way to fix the superhero system is to destroy it completely, which means

that all supes must be eradicated. Thus, a directive intended to allow the Boys to police without government interference instead allows them to do whatever they see fit without government knowledge.

The position of the Boys within the CIA and the manner in which their lack of oversight leads to immoral actions critiques the misconduct of the CIA regarding torture during the War on Terror, which further explains why Hughie is kept in the dark about Butcher's true nature for much of the comics. *The Boys* explicitly shows that Butcher avoids the oversight of his direct superior, Rayner, and Mallory confirms that the action Butcher takes against the supes is more brutal than what was originally intended of the group. Similar transgressions were discovered within the CIA's "enhanced interrogation program," which had been approved by the Bush Administration in response to 9/11, but which horrified the public and other members of the government when it came to light. Among the charges leveled against the program were the facts that "the interrogations of CIA detainees were brutal and far worse than the CIA represented to policymakers," and that "the CIA impeded oversight by the CIA's Office of the Inspector General" ("Report" xii, xvii). The actions undertaken as part of the program were clearly immoral and only questionably legal, much like Butcher's mission to destroy all superheroes. Additionally, although they were part of a conflict that had been largely supported by the American people, the public was unaware of these enhanced interrogation techniques until photographs of the Abu Ghraib prison were released in 2004, after which positive views of the Iraq War "reached a low" for the period from 2003 to 2005 ("More Say Iraq"). The American people did not know they were supporting the use of techniques that many would have otherwise condemned, and discovered only later how the CIA's lack of accountability had allowed the program to operate. Through Hughie, *The Boys* gives a firsthand account of a person who

discovers that he has been manipulated by an authority that has become corrupted due to lack of oversight.

Hughie has a similar experience with Butcher as the American people did with the CIA, although as a member of the organization he feels even more horror when he learns that he has been complicit in the abuse of power. Hughie protests many times against Butcher's rush to use violence in every situation, including when he captures A-Train and presents him to Hughie to be killed. Hughie is reluctant to kill the supe, so Butcher starts to play recordings of A-Train and the rest of the Seven discussing the death of Hughie's girlfriend and the choice of Starlight as a new member for sexual reasons. This is enough to convince Hughie that there is no other recourse than violence to make A-Train see the error of his actions, so he kicks the supe's head off, killing him (No. 63, 15). When given the chance to prove Butcher wrong and that supes are capable of more than evil, Hughie instead does what Butcher would do and kills A-Train, making him complicit in Butcher's evil. As the everyman character, Hughie's complicity suggests that the American people are complicit in the mistakes of their government as well. Despite this, Hughie later tells Butcher that he hated killing A-Train, and this confirms to Butcher that Hughie is "a good little bloke who can't help bein' reasonable" (No. 71, 6). It is because Butcher believes that Hughie is a good person that Hughie makes it to the end of the comics alive, and in the final issue Hughie tells Annie, "I saw all sorts o' nightmares an' made all sorts o' daft mistakes, but I got to stay the fella I am" (No. 72, 21). While Hughie may have been complicit in various misdeeds throughout the comics, the conclusion suggests that it is because Hughie was able to maintain his morality that he emerges relatively unscathed from the ordeal he goes through as a member of the Boys. Ennis's comics are largely pessimistic in the view they take toward corporate and political institutions and the impossibility of fixing them, but they also indicate

that even individuals who are complicit in that corruption can retain their morals, and thereby create some hope in a broken system.

The revelations that Hughie experiences in *The Boys* mirror the escalating ways in which the American public discovered the realities of the Iraq War following 9/11. Both Hughie and the American people were manipulated by respected and powerful figures in the wake of tragedies to support conflicts that they did not fully understand. And, both parties were largely kept in the dark, only to later discover that the reasons they had supported the wars were false, and that those wars were being fought using immoral methods. The reader therefore recognizes in Butcher the same characteristics that caused a loss of faith in the Bush administration after 9/11, and experiences that loss of faith once again alongside Hughie. By creating this parallel between the post-9/11 government and Butcher, one of the most violent and antagonistic characters in the comics, Ennis positions his comics as an explicitly post-9/11 text, and suggests that the only way to combat the corruption that Butcher represents is to rise above it on the individual level.

## **Conclusion**

While Marvel comics do take place in a world that is recognizable to the reader, Ennis's *The Boys* is even more realistic in its portrayal of the world that superheroes inhabit in the way that it openly depicts the failures and dangers of corporations and politicians in the United States. By placing a superhero story in such a recognizable setting, Ennis gives readers no choice but to confront the harsh realities of their own society. This is furthered by the fact that superheroes are portrayed as evil, and therefore incapable of helping the common people combat the corrupt institutions they face. While many critics see superhero stories as mere escapism, *The Boys* plays the opposite role in bringing the most uncomfortable realities to the forefront. The comics also

represent the various institutions that it criticizes through individual figures so as to bring corruption down to a human level, which makes it more recognizable and condemnable than when it is seen in a supposedly sacred and untouchable institution. This also lends itself to the conclusion of Hughie's character, who is able to survive through his personal morality, indicating that individuality is the best prospect moving forward from post-9/11 failures. This theme is taken up by the television adaptation of *The Boys*, which also uses Hughie's focus on the personal as a counterpoint to the evil institutions it shows.

## Chapter 5

### “Wasn’t I Chosen to Save You?”: Dominance, Exceptionalism, and Communitarianism in Amazon’s *The Boys*

#### Introduction

The alternative version of 9/11 that is presented in *The Boys* comics is adopted by the television show but removed from the temporal context of 9/11, as it occurs in the contemporary timeline, rather than as a flashback. Homelander and Queen Maeve, a fellow member of the Seven, are sent to save a hijacked plane because Stillwell believes that if they are successful, it will guarantee supes a spot in national defense. Instead, Homelander destroys the controls of the plane when killing one of the terrorists and convinces Maeve that they have no choice but to abandon the plane and its passengers so that no one knows they were involved. As the wreckage of the destroyed plane begins to wash up on shore, Maeve is clearly distraught about what they have done, while Homelander immediately sees a chance to manipulate the narrative. He lies to newscasters, saying that he and Maeve were alerted too late to help because supes have been excluded from the chain of command, and urges viewers to talk to their Congressmen. He goes on to declare, “And very, very soon, my friend, whoever did this to us will hear from all of us!” (*The Boys* Episode 4, 54:11). The rhetoric used is directly reminiscent of the bullhorn speech given by President Bush at the site of 9/11 when he said, “And the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon” (“From CBS News”). Despite being released 18 years after 9/11, the television series does not ignore the context of its comic source material, nor the ways in which society today continues to be shaped by the public and government response to the 9/11 attacks.

The first season of *The Boys*, adapted by Amazon Studios, uses many of the same characters and the same general setup as the comics, but diverges significantly in how it portrays characters and the plot lines they follow. As in the comics, the television series takes place in a world where superheroes are a part of everyday life, with the Seven acting as the most famous superhero team and Homelander as their leader. The supes are controlled by the company Vought International, which controls every aspect of their public appearances and marketing, including brand deals and superhero movies. The Vought employee who figures most into the story is Madelyn Stillwell, rather than James Stillwell, which is one of the many efforts the show makes to include stronger female characters than its comics source. In the show, Stillwell has a very close relationship with Homelander and aspires to get her superheroes into national defense. Hughie is once again drawn into the world of supes by Billy Butcher after his girlfriend Robin's death because of their shared desire for revenge, as Butcher believes that his wife Becca was raped and killed by Homelander. Butcher did formerly work for the government, but is now an independent contractor with connections in the CIA, meaning that members of the government play a much less prominent role in the show than they do in the comics. Butcher convinces Frenchie and M.M. to rejoin the Boys along with Hughie, and the four of them meet the Female about halfway through the season. Their attempts to bring down Vought and the superheroes involve the discovery of Compound V, the substance used to endow individuals with superpowers, and the revelation that supes are made, not born. Unlike in the comics, the Female is the only member of the Boys who has been injected with Compound V, meaning that the rest of the Boys are physically much weaker than the supes. As Hughie works alongside the Boys and is forced to use increasing amounts of violence, he also begins to fall for Annie January (whose superhero identity Starlight is the newest member of the Seven), and he questions his

commitment to Butcher's mission. The first season ends with the death of Madelyn Stillwell at the hands of Homelander and the revelation that Butcher's wife did not die, but is in fact still alive and raising Homelander's child. This ending serves as a cliffhanger for the upcoming second season of the series, meaning that the characters and plots have not yet completed their arcs as they have in the comics.

While both versions of *The Boys* revel in violence and subversion of traditional superhero narratives, they are, like *Civil War* and its film adaptation, each heavily influenced by the time period in which they were created. The first season of *The Boys* television series was released in 2019 and therefore in a world where superheroes are dominant in popular culture, meaning its satire of the genre is even more poignant for audiences who may be experiencing what has been termed by some, including one reviewer of *The Boys*, as "superhero fatigue" (Rubin). In order to work as a send-up of more mainstream superheroes, the television show provides much more character development for the supes themselves than the comics do. As a result, the show also engages with more contemporary societal anxieties, with plotlines that address the #MeToo movement and homophobia, among other issues. The main thematic thrusts of the show are represented by various characters. The roles of Vought and Stillwell show the tension between dominance and protection, especially within corporate America. Homelander, and to some extent the rest of the Seven, symbolize through their superpowers the ideal of American exceptionalism and the various dangers that result from believing in that ideal. While the elements of the show that involve Vought and the superheroes are largely nihilistic, the character of Hughie provides a more optimistic perspective as he finds hope for the future through his relationships, thereby presenting an argument in favor of communitarianism. By focusing on three elements of the show's society — the corporation as represented by Vought, the superheroes, and the common

man in the form of Hughie — the show puts in conversation three different views of America. It criticizes the tendency of dominance to remove freedom and the harmful actions undertaken in the name of exceptionalism, while promoting a community-centered perspective of society and the value and universality of relationships.

### **Domination: Vought and Stillwell**

In the contemporary context of the show, Vought-International reads as a satire of an entertainment conglomerate like Disney that heavily markets and profits from the superheroes it owns. In the world of *The Boys*, however, the company does not just own the rights to various superhero characters who can be played by actors, but to the actual people who have superpowers. As a result, not only do the Seven and other supes fight crime, they also make brand deals, film blockbuster movies, and do any other public relations activities that Vought requires of them. Throughout the series, it becomes increasingly clear that Vought controls every aspect of these supes' lives, from the costumes they wear to their romantic relationships. While the Seven may be some of the physically strongest beings on the planet, they are dominated, in Philip Pettit's conception of the term, by Vought, which the show portrays as being the most powerful company in the U.S. The question of who dominates whom becomes less clear in the relationship between Homelander and Stillwell, as each character strives to prove that they do not need the protection of the other. Each of the characters that feels subordinate to another person or group suffers as a result, and the show thereby condemns relationships of dominance, whether that dominance comes from corporations or individuals.

Within the world of *The Boys*, Vought plays the role of the dominating party as it is defined by Philip Pettit. Pettit, a political theorist, defines domination as a relationship in which

“the dominating party can interfere on an arbitrary basis with the choices of the dominated: can interfere, in particular, on the basis of an interest or an opinion that need not be shared by the person affected” (22). The person who is being dominated is therefore in a position where they might not get a say in what is best for them, as the party in power has no obligation to consult them before acting. As such, “there is a sense in which that person is not free” (26). According to Pettit, freedom can then be considered to be the state of non-domination, and freedom is the ideal to which all individuals within a society aspire. In order for this freedom to be a possibility, “it must always be possible for people in the society...to contest the assumption that the guiding interests and ideas are really shared” (63). Thus, for a dominated person to have the chance to escape their position, they must have the chance to voice their own opinions in opposition to the dominating party. Vought claims to give its superheroes this chance, but the opinions of the supes are consistently ignored, and they are therefore kept in the position of domination without hope of escape. It is through Pettit’s lens of domination that the extent of Vought’s power within society and the desire of Stillwell and Homelander to claim dominance over one another can be understood. The inability of the characters in the show to create for themselves a state of non-domination precludes them from being truly free and establishes the nihilistic perspective that the series has of society.

The theme of domination also creates a connection to contemporary politics, as the desire for protection was prominent in post-9/11 America. In the years after the event, however, it became increasingly clear that in order to be protected, Americans also had to accept a degree of power from the government that could be used to dominate them. Many Americans responded to the attacks of 9/11 with fear, as “45.7% of New Yorkers reported being ‘very concerned’ about another major attack” in a study conducted one year after the event (Boscarino et al. 202). This

fear from citizens was coupled with promises of protection from the government. As President Bush said in his address to the nation on the day of the attacks, “Our first priority is to get help to those who have been injured, and to take every precaution to protect our citizens at home and around the world from further attacks” (“Selected Speeches” 57). This promise of protection affirmed the expectation that the U.S. government has the responsibility to ensure the wellbeing of its citizens and uphold their rights. The result of the promise of protection was, however, to infringe upon the rights of the American people as the government claimed more power for itself in the private lives of its citizens. As the *Civil War* comics explored, the Patriot Act required Americans to sacrifice their privacy in the hope that increased surveillance would prevent future terrorist attacks. The surveillance capabilities granted under the act were continuously extended for years after 9/11, despite the fact that 65% of Americans said that “anti-terror efforts should not violate liberties” in a 2015 poll (Jones). Additionally, other government initiatives in the wake of the terrorist attacks raised “serious constitutional questions,” including ones surrounding the practices of “racial profiling and increased registration requirements for non-immigrants” (Stoller et al. 197). Thus, Americans were convinced that, in order to receive the protection they desired, they had to accept increased government power against which they had little power to object as their civil liberties were violated. The superheroes are similarly forced to give up certain rights to Vought, and the relationship between Homelander and Stillwell demonstrates what happens when people are no longer willing to submit to that kind of domination.

As in the comics, superheroes are the strongest people in the world, but are still controlled by Vought-International because the company provides them with a comfortable lifestyle and prominence within society. The superhero imagery shown makes it abundantly clear that the supes are the most beloved and popular celebrity figures in the world of the show. While

Hughie is grieving Robin's death at the hands of A-Train, he goes to a convenience store only to find himself staring at A-Train's face on bottles of beer, boxes of cereal, and a life-size cutout of the supe holding an energy drink. Later in that episode, Hughie and Butcher go to Times Square, where a panoramic shot reveals that every screen is advertising some kind of superhero product. The omnipresence of this superhero imagery demonstrates Vought's position as a powerful societal institution as it becomes impossible for people to avoid their products. It is also clear, however, that Vought's cultural dominance is only possible because of the superheroes, raising the question of why these powerful beings would operate on behalf of the corporation, instead of for themselves. Homelander even asks this of Queen Maeve when he says, "They're just people, but they snap their fingers and we jump. Why? Why do we do that?" Maeve replies simply, "Because they sign our checks" (*Episode 3, 25:22*). The supes are able to live comfortably with financial security, but as a result their powers can only be exercised under Vought's control. It is therefore only if superheroes are willing to sacrifice their liberty that they are guaranteed financial and institutional protection from the country's most dominant corporation.

While most of the superheroes are content to maintain the status quo at Vought, it becomes increasingly clear just how much control over their own lives they have ceded to the company. Almost all of the members of the Seven and other supes feel the negative effects of Vought's authority over them throughout the show. A gay superhero is forced to be the face of a conservative Christian charity, Maeve suffers a breakdown after the rescue of the hijacked plane goes wrong, and the Deep is exiled and humiliated because Vought wants to get ahead of Starlight's sexual assault accusation against him and the company. Nowhere is Vought's heartless dominance clearer, however, than in its handling of the Seven's newest member, Starlight. Early on in Starlight's membership of the premiere supe group, Vought officials

present her with a new costume that is much more revealing than her old one. When she protests that she has the right to choose how her body is presented, Stillwell replies, “That is true, you do. But you won’t be doing it in the Seven unless it is wrapped in that” (Episode 3, 6:28). This threat to Starlight’s position with the Seven comes directly after Stillwell claims that the relationship between Vought and the superheroes is a partnership, making it clear that the partnership is blatantly unequal, favoring the corporation over the individuals. Vought’s pervasive marketing strategies, however, have convinced Starlight that being a part of the Seven is the greatest thing she can achieve as a superhero. The company is able to interfere with Starlight’s choice about how she presents herself to the public because of their powerful influence in society. Starlight therefore sacrifices her freedom of choice in order to pursue an idealized lifestyle that she quickly realizes is unattainable.

It is Starlight’s experience with sexual assault as a member of the Seven that prompts her to fight against Vought’s domination, and to realize just how absolute that domination is. Immediately after she joins the Seven, the Deep sexually assault Starlight, which triggers her steady disillusionment with Vought and its heroes. The breaking point for Starlight is at Believe Expo, a religious event hosted by Vought, in which Starlight used to participate as a child but which she now realizes is nothing more than corporatized Christianity. Forced to give a speech when she does not want to, Starlight goes off script and tells the audience that she was sexually assaulted and that she does not know what to believe anymore. When Stillwell tries to get Starlight back in line after this event and once again threatens to fire her, Starlight replies, “I think that firing an employee after she reported sexual assault on live TV might tank your stock price” (Episode 6, 11:35). Starlight emerges from the conversation successfully having employed Pettit’s strategy to combat domination: “Usually the only thing feasible will be to enable each of

the parties involved, if not to defend themselves against interference by another, at least to threaten any interference with punishment and to impose punishment on actual interferers” (67). Starlight uses a threat to Vought’s bottom line, the most important thing to the company, to prevent Stillwell from firing her and to reclaim control over her own image. Additionally, in the #MeToo era, this is a particularly empowering way for her to avoid domination. Her victory is short lived, however, as Stillwell quickly proves that she does not need Starlight’s cooperation in order to market her in whatever way the company sees fit. Starlight’s one recourse against domination therefore fails, and the inability of her #MeToo moment to provide her with any real power presents a nihilistic view of corporate culture. Both the physical strength of superheroes and an influential social movement fail to undercut Vought’s control over its products, thus demonstrating the bleak reality of a world in which one corporate entity has domination over others.

As the most powerful of all superheroes, Homelander is less content than some of the others to be controlled by Vought, as is evidenced by his relationship with Stillwell, as each character tries to exert dominance over the other. Both Homelander and Stillwell are powerful figures and consequently, each believes that they have the ability to protect the other but resents the notion that they need to be protected. Stillwell is blackmailed by the Mayor of Baltimore in the first episode of the show, and when Homelander learns about this his response is to shoot down the mayor’s plane, killing him and his young son. He says that he took this action for Stillwell, but she responds, “I am the last person you need to save” (Episode 2, 14:18). By taking action without consulting Stillwell, Homelander takes away Stillwell’s ability to choose how to respond to the blackmail, and thereby her position of control within the company. This is something she cannot tolerate because of her ambition to one day run the company herself, so

she admonishes the supe. Being reprimanded drives Homelander to the verge of tears and he expresses his frustration that all he is good for is making money for Vought. Stillwell's answer to this outburst is to tell him, "You just need to let me protect you" (15:45). Homelander's emotional reaction to not receiving Stillwell's approval demonstrates that he cares about her opinion, and therefore wants to undertake actions that appease her. On the other hand, he views himself as the most powerful being in the world, and believes that his powers are being wasted under the dominance of Vought. Homelander seeks Stillwell's validation, but not her control. Stillwell, however, wants to hold the position of higher power because of her role in the company. If she needed Homelander to protect her, it would undermine her authority over him, and over the corporation as a whole. Both characters see the need for protection as a weakness, and the ability to protect others as an assertion of dominance, and their respective desires to assert that dominance leads to a power struggle between the two.

For much of the show, Stillwell appears to be in the dominant position as Homelander is made to feel objectified through his treatment at her hands. Homelander grew up without a family and views Stillwell as a mother figure. He clearly has an Oedipal complex, a relationship dynamic which is made possible by the change in Stillwell's gender from the comics. As such, Homelander longs for her approval and for signals that she cares about him as a person, rather than just as a commodity that benefits her position at Vought. This is something of which Stillwell is aware, as an early episode shows Homelander using his x-ray vision through the wall of her office to watch Stillwell pump breast milk, and she later tells him that she can see when he watches her. She calls Homelander into her office to reprimand him for giving an unapproved speech, but she also allows the supe to lay his head on her lap and simulate breastfeeding as she tells him, "You're my good boy" (Episode 5, 54:58). Stillwell has the ability to give Homelander

something he desperately wants, and she uses this to control him in ways that improve her job performance. Thus, although Homelander is physically much stronger than Stillwell, she is “in a position to exercise backroom manipulation,” which gives her dominance over the supe (Pettit 60). The result is that Homelander is increasingly made to feel like an instrument being used by Stillwell, rather than a person. He repeatedly complains about this to Stillwell, telling her, “I love Vought as much as you do and I can do more” (Episode 2, 14:52). Homelander resents being left out of the decision-making process for the company, and Stillwell’s interference with his choice of his own courses of action is a clear sign of her domination over him. Rather than solidify her control over him, however, this diminishing of Homelander’s power only drives him to act more rebelliously in an attempt to claim dominance for himself.

The power dynamic between Homelander and Stillwell shifts when Stillwell admits that he actually has dominance over her, which ultimately leads to her demise. In one of the final scenes of the first season, Butcher kidnaps Stillwell and straps her to explosives because he believes that Stillwell is the only thing Homelander cares about, and that hurting her is therefore the only way to hurt the invincible supe. When Homelander arrives on the scene, however, he does not rush to help Stillwell. Instead he confronts her, demanding that she truthfully tell him how she feels about him. Knowing that her life is in danger, Stillwell admits, “I’m scared. I’m scared of you,” a sentiment that Homelander forces her to repeat multiple times (Episode 8, 1:01:31). According to Pettit, one of the characteristics of “the power-victim,” or the person being dominated, is that he or she “cannot enjoy the psychological status of an equal: they are in a position where fear and deference will be the normal order of the day” (63-4). Stillwell’s fear of Homelander precludes her from completely dominating him, as her mental state is that of a person who is dominated. Knowing that Stillwell does not truly control him gives Homelander

the confidence that he no longer needs her. He proceeds to thank her for her honesty, then kills her, thus solidifying his own position as the most powerful being alive. Stillwell's inability to maintain her control leads to her death, and Homelander's own dominance is only confirmed by the death of the one person for whom he cared. Their relationship shows the vulnerability that comes from being dominated, but also the isolated nature of being the dominant power. While Homelander emerges from the first season victorious, he never receives the admiration from Stillwell that he so desired, once again demonstrating that an embrace of nihilism is necessary to achieve dominance.

*The Boys* critiques the concept of domination through its depictions of both the subjugated and the powerful. Starlight is dominated by Vought, and as such she is unable to use her superpowers for good in the way she desires and the emotional trauma she suffers from her sexual assault is used against her. Stillwell lives in fear of Homelander, which prevents her from ascending to the position of power she covets at Vought. Only Homelander truly achieves dominance, but in order to do so he must sacrifice his desire for the affection of a maternal figure. According to Pettit's theory of dominance, Homelander is therefore also the only character who attains freedom at the end of the series. The portrayal of dominance in the show suggests that for many in contemporary society, freedom is impossible, while others may obtain freedom, but only at great personal cost.

### **Exceptionalism: Homelander and The Seven**

When Homelander initially appears in the first episode, the camera is behind him and slowly pans up from his boots. His American flag cape billows in the wind as he walks, unfazed, towards a man who is shooting him directly in the chest. Homelander throws his assailant into

the air so forcefully that he disappears from the frame, before he turns to check on the boys he has just saved from harm. The centrality of the American flag in the framing of the scene, coupled with Homelander's confident demeanor in the face of harm pronounce him immediately as a perfect American hero. While his true nature quickly makes it apparent that Homelander is far from perfect, the superheroes in the world of *The Boys* are nonetheless viewed as exceptional figures. Not only are they venerated by the public, but the supes believe themselves to be a different order of being than others because of their powers. As such, the Seven, and Homelander in particular, symbolize American exceptionalism. The fixation on Homelander's past and the idea that supes were chosen by God reflect the myths of America's founding, while the destructive actions that the supes undertake simply because they can demonstrate the dangers of unchecked exceptionalism and its decline within contemporary society.

American exceptionalism has no agreed upon definition, but most scholars who write on the topic connect it to the founding principles of the country. Hugh Heclo uses Dr. Samuel Johnson's dictionary to define being exceptional as "being excluded from things comprehended in a general position," then argues that America has "an exceptionalism of condition, an exceptionalism of mission, and finally an exceptionalism of character" (29). The exceptionalism of condition is the element that connects to America's founding, and one of the most frequently cited figures in relation to American exceptionalism is John Winthrop, a founder of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In a sermon delivered to settlers in 1630, Winthrop said, "For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world" ("John Winthrop"). Winthrop's famous "city upon a hill" phrase is a touchstone of American

history, with President Reagan referencing the “shining city upon a hill” in his Farewell Address: “We made the city stronger — we made the city freer — and we left her in good hands” (“Transcript of Reagan’s Farewell”). The phrase describes America as a place that is looked to by others and therefore has a religious obligation to set an example for the world. The context of Winthrop’s original speech implies that America’s exceptionalism stems from the moment it was settled, before the country itself even existed. The centrality of America’s past and its religious roots to the concept of exceptionalism can be seen in the character of Homelander, who fixates on his past and uses religion to confirm his elevated status, although the supe casts these features of exceptionalism in a characteristically nihilistic light.

Homelander’s image relies on his idealized American upbringing, which is a fabrication of Vought, but which shows how the myths of America’s past can be marketed to an audience that wants to believe in them. In an early episode, Stillwell tells Homelander, “Your brand is hope, baseball, America, sunshine” (Episode 2, 13:58). This brand is seen in action later, when Homelander gives a tour of his childhood home for a reality television show. The tour begins with Homelander plastering a fake smile on his face and proclaiming, “My grandfather built this place with his bare hands” (Episode 6, 4:30). As the tour continues, Homelander shows off a framed picture of his smiling parents, model airplanes he built with his dad, and his collection of baseball paraphernalia. On the wall of his childhood bedroom is a framed copy of the Declaration of Independence, overlaid with images of the American flag, a bald eagle, and the Washington Monument. It is quickly revealed that this is a set decorated by Vought for the reality show, as Homelander was actually raised by doctors in a sterile lab, not by a loving family. Yet it is crucial for Vought to create a different image around Homelander in order to market him to the American people. As a blond-haired, blue-eyed superhero who wears the

American flag in his costume, Homelander represents American values like freedom, liberty, and family. Because these values stem from the country's founding, Vought feels that Homelander will sell better if they are part of his past as well. The show therefore cynically presents the ideal American family and life as something that has been corrupted by corporate America in order to be marketed. Far from being exceptional, the values that Homelander represents are instead ideas that can be faked, showing that the foundations of American exceptionalism are nothing more than empty beliefs.

This same cynical perspective is taken with regard to religion, as Vought sells the idea that Homelander and the rest of the supes were chosen by God, just as the founders believed America was. This is most apparent at Believe Expo, when Homelander makes a speech arguing that supes should be allowed into national defense, despite the government's opposition to this. He tells the crowd, "I say I answer to a higher law. Wasn't I chosen to save you? Is it not my God-given purpose to protect the United States of America?" (Episode 5, 34:51). He proceeds to float above the people in the crucifixion pose while reciting scripture to the sound of thunderous applause. Homelander's claim that he was given a higher purpose by God echoes the claims that Winthrop made at the settlement of Massachusetts. Homelander knows that his powers were not actually God-given, but he has still internalized the God complex that Vought has encouraged through its religious narrative. He uses his belief in his own power and the religious beliefs of others to manipulate them for his own advantage. Once again, then, a principle that is central to American identity is reduced to nothing more than a marketing technique. When the Boys find out that supes are not created by God, but instead by Vought injecting children with Compound V, Butcher gloats, "We got Vought for child endangerment, drug trafficking, and possibly the largest fraud in American fucking history" (Episode 6, 7:02). Butcher's confidence that this

information is enough to ruin Vought shows just how much the American public has subscribed to the idea that superheroes were sent by God to save them. The ability of Vought to manipulate the foundations of American exceptionalism and religious fundamentalism for its own profit suggests that exceptionalism is a myth that can be marketed because Americans so desperately want to believe in it.

The corruption and subsequent decline of belief in American exceptionalism that is evident in Vought's actions can also be seen in the fallout from the War on Terror, an undertaking that demonstrated the danger of allowing exceptionalism to dictate policy. Joanne Esch explains the existence of “three meta-narratives that recreate the myth of *American Exceptionalism* in the context of the ‘War on Terror’” which include “the myth of *Exceptional Grievance*, the notion that America has a calling and unique responsibility to fight terrorism, and the idea that America is fighting a ‘good war’ against evil” (372 emph. orig.). She goes on to argue that official rhetoric of the time used these three narratives to inspire support for the War on Terror. Thus, like Vought, the Bush administration used popular belief in American exceptionalism to its advantage. As has been explored in previous chapters, however, the War on Terror resulted in numerous damaging outcomes for the United States, including the loss of American, Afghani, and Iraqi lives, excessive military spending, and decreased faith in government due to the spread of misinformation about Iraq and the use of torture by the CIA. Thus, the American response to 9/11 shows that belief in exceptionalism can lead to actions that hurt both America and the countries it tries to aid. The dangers of unchecked American exceptionalism are taken up by *The Boys*, as the supes believe in their own exceptional status and use it to justify some of their most horrific actions.

The Deep's abuse of his supposedly elevated status as a member of the Seven leads to punishment and he exemplifies the fallout that can result from belief in American exceptionalism. When the Deep tries to coerce Starlight into oral sex, she begins to walk away from him until he says, "The thing is, I am number two around here. So, like, if I say so, you know, you'd be out of here" (Episode 1, 23:15). This is an overstatement of the Deep's status within the Seven, but he is clearly confident that his position as an elite superhero will protect him from any consequences. Additionally, the fact that Starlight believes his threat and complies only confirms to the Deep his invincibility. Later, when Stillwell tells the Deep that he will be taking a sabbatical from the Seven in order to minimize the damage of Starlight's accusations against him, he rolls his eyes in response, clearly believing that he did nothing wrong. He repeats this exasperated action upon arriving in Sandusky, Ohio where he is told that there is very little crime to fight. His brazen response to sexual assault allegations shows that he has internalized all of Vought's marketing about supes being different from ordinary people, as he clearly thinks that his misdemeanors should also be treated differently. While much of the Deep's exile is played for humor, his time in Ohio results in his own sexual assault and reminders that he is no longer welcome in the Seven, which leads him to have a breakdown and shave his head. He is forced to learn that, despite his belief in his own exceptional status, it is not guaranteed and his actions have a direct effect upon it, a lesson that the United States has also confronted in recent years. The Deep's desperate breakdown is the last scene of the season in which he appears, meaning that he ends the season with no hope of his prestige being restored going forward. The show therefore offers a bleak perspective on the decline of exceptionalism, suggesting that it can be difficult or impossible to reclaim once it is lost.

Unlike the Deep's, Homelander's belief in his own exceptionalism remains unchecked throughout the series, so he increasingly acts without consulting others, and oversteps the bound of his position without facing consequences. Homelander verbalizes this exceptionalism many times throughout the show. When he questions whether Starlight is helping Hughie and the rest of the Boys to take them down, he lashes out at her: "We're a different fucking breed. We shine with the golden light of providence, but you, you've been helping these fucking mud people to go against us" (Episode 7, 14:48). Not only does Homelander see himself as superior to average people, he believes that superheroes are an entirely different species, a position he justifies by once again calling upon religious rhetoric. Homelander knows that he was, in fact, raised in a lab by scientists, but he has internalized the image he presents to the world, and therefore thinks that it is impossible for anybody who does not possess superpowers to pose any kind of threat to him. This mindset leads him to act without Vought's permission as he ships Compound V to terrorist groups around the world. Once terrorists have supes of their own, the U.S. government has no choice but to allow supes into national defense, since they are the only ones who can effectively fight this new threat. The fabrication of a threat to justify a war has echoes in the claims about Weapons of Mass Destruction and ties between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda that helped to justify the war in Iraq. Yet, these were simply false claims. Homelander goes so far as to actually create a threat in the form of supe terrorists, one of which is shown easily taking out an entire SEAL team, and he is rewarded, rather than punished for his actions. In this way, Homelander exemplifies how an unbridled belief in exceptionalism can lead to a disregard for human life in favor of confirming that exceptional nature.

While the term American exceptionalism is not inherently negative, *The Boys* characterizes its superheroes as being exceptional in order to criticize the ideology. Not only

does Vought use the religious and principled foundations of American exceptionalism as a marketing strategy to manipulate the American public and make more money off of its supes, but the consequences of exceptionalism are shown to be either punishment and humiliation or egotism and violence. Thus, the ideology comes across as a dangerous myth and a tool that can be weaponized when placed in the wrong hands. Exceptionalism is typically connected with ideas like patriotism and liberty, positive aspects of American identity. In its failure to acknowledge these potentially constructive aspects of exceptionalism, the show once again takes a decidedly nihilistic stance on the state of American society.

### **Community and Universality: Hughie**

Despite its largely pessimistic tone, *The Boys* does provide a foil to its negative portrayals of dominance and exceptionalism in the character of Hughie and his belief in the value of community and relationships. At the beginning of the show, Hughie is drawn into the Boys by Butcher's promise of vengeance against A-Train for Robin's death. As the show progresses, however, he becomes increasingly wary of Butcher's singular drive for revenge as he begins to prioritize his friendships with the rest of the Boys and his developing romance with Annie. By favoring a non-individualistic perspective, Hughie not only avoids the dangers of revenge that are explored in *Captain America: Civil War*, but he presents an alternative to the dominance and exceptionalism represented by Vought and the superheroes. The culmination of Hughie's character arc at the end of season one is one of the few optimistic plotlines of the show, thus suggesting that communitarian and universal values can serve as a remedy to the parts of society that have already been corrupted.

Communitarianism and universality have been used as arguments against dominance and exceptionalism respectively, so Hughie's embodiment of those philosophies sets him apart from the show's more nihilistic characters. In his theory of domination, Pettit argues that "freedom as non-domination is an inherently communitarian ideal" (120). Communitarianism, as Pettit understands it, is characterized by the value placed on equality and belonging to a community. Freedom as non-domination "is both a social and a common good," meaning that it is exercised in a groups and it affects everyone in a given group equally (122). The escape from domination is therefore connected to the idea of community, something which Hughie spends the season building through his relationships with the Boys and Annie. Relationships of the type Hughie forms are universal, rather than exceptional, in that they can be formed by anyone. One argument against the kind of boastful exceptionalism that the Deep and Homelander practice is that the ideals on which that exceptionalism is founded are, in fact, universal. William Kristol is a proponent of this argument, as he returns to documents like the Declaration of Independence and the Federalist Papers and finds a kind of exceptionalism which "claims that American principles are universally true and universally accessible in principle to any people at any time" (97). According to Kristol, then, the type of American exceptionalism that leads people to view others as inferior to Americans ignores the universality at the heart of American ideals. Hughie's choice to honor his relationships over his individual desire for revenge in the final episode of the season proves his morality, and therefore the morality of community and universality as opposed to dominance and exceptionalism.

After following Butcher and his quest for revenge for the majority of the show, Hughie finally stands up to Butcher when he realizes that vengeance will do nothing to bring back the relationships he lost or to preserve the ones he has now. The confrontation between the two

characters occurs after the rest of the Boys have been captured by Vought and Hughie realizes that Butcher is going to continue pursuing Homelander instead of rescuing their friends. When Butcher tries to convince Hughie that they need to abandon the others in order to get revenge before they, too, are captured, Hughie responds, “Then what? Becca comes back from the dead? Robin, too? This is never gonna stop — it’s just gonna be more blood and awfulness” (Episode 8, 22:22). Not only does Hughie point out the futility of responding to violence with violence, which was critiqued in *Captain America: Civil War*, he also denounces Butcher’s fixation on the past. The revenge Butcher is seeking can have no productive outcome, because no matter what he does, he will never be able to return to the time when he was happy with Becca. Since losing Becca, Butcher has been incapable of forming meaningful relationships or fully committing himself to a community, because he has only his own desires in mind. Hughie, on the other hand, realizes that he will never resurrect the life he once had with Robin, and that he must move forward. When Butcher tells Hughie that by forgoing the plan to get Homelander he is insulting Robin’s memory, Hughie responds, “I think I’m doing this for her” (22:58). Hughie’s relationship with Robin was cut short, but he honors her memory because he values the other relationships he has made and chooses to try to save his friends. Ironically, Butcher’s quest for revenge ultimately leads to the revelation that Becca is alive and raising Homelander’s son. Butcher is able to return to his past, but not in the way he wanted, meaning that the end to his story for the season is once again a pessimistic one. The juxtaposition of Hughie and Butcher shows how Hughie’s commitment to the community he has formed saves him from the same bleak outlook that Butcher faces at the end of the season.

Hughie is further rewarded for his sense of responsibility towards his relationship with Annie, since it is only through her that he and the Boys escape death in the final episode. When

Hughie finds out that supes are created with Compound V, he feels obligated to tell Annie because he believes that she has the right to know where her powers really come from. This, in addition to the revelation that Hughie has been working to bring down the Seven the entire team she has known him, destroys everything Annie thought she knew, and she renounces Hughie and her role as a superhero as a result. Hughie, however, refuses to give up on Annie or on their relationship, telling her that her job is to save people, and that she saved him by being there for him after Robin's death. This speech does not immediately sway Annie, so Hughie goes to save the Boys on his own. His initial attempt is successful, but they are quickly found and surrounded by men with guns. The camera focuses on Hughie's face as he puts his hands in the air, when suddenly he is illuminated by a blinding light, announcing the arrival of Annie as Starlight to rescue them. After taking out all the adversaries, Annie tells Hughie: "Like you said, I'm a fucking superhero" (Episode 8, 50:45). Hughie's belief in Annie's abilities and in the power of their relationship not only helps Annie rediscover her strength, it ends up saving them all. Once again, then, the show affirms that universal relationships are just as important to saving the day as superpowers.

Hughie's newfound focus on others, rather than on his own desire for revenge, allows him to forgive, and confirms that he is truly a good person. After Starlight's rescue, M.M., Frenchie, and the Female are able to escape Vought's captivity. Before Hughie and Starlight can follow them to safety, A-Train shows up to stop them. The supe clearly intends to hurt Hughie, whom he blames for the death of his girlfriend, but the Compound V he has been injecting himself with all season finally catches up to him, and he collapses from a heart attack. There is a brief moment as Hughie and Starlight stand above A-Train staring at one another, before Hughie quickly drops to his knees and starts giving the supe chest compressions. Starlight seems

surprised by Hughie's decision and reminds him, "He'll never stop coming for you" (54:30). Hughie acknowledges this, but continues in his attempt to save A-Train's life. At the moment when A-Train is physically incapable of defending himself or harming anyone, Hughie has the perfect opportunity for revenge. Even if he had reservations about actively taking the supe's life, he could easily walk away and let him die. Yet, Hughie barely hesitates in his decision to save A-Train, even when Starlight makes it clear that she would not blame him for making a different choice. This scene is a significant departure from the comics, in which Butcher presents Hughie with a restrained A-Train and goads him until Hughie kills the supe. The Hughie of the show, however, knows that A-Train is grieving the death of his own girlfriend just as much as Hughie grieves for Robin, and decides that life must be preserved, no matter whose life it is. Hughie therefore rejects the notion that A-Train is in some way exceptional, and in doing so he saves the man's life. Not only does Hughie prove to be a moral and forgiving character, but he shows that exceptionalism leads to danger while universality allows for connection.

At the end of the first season, Hughie has successfully rescued his friends, thereby affirming his commitment to the Boys, and repaired his relationship with Annie, thus creating hope for their future together. He does this by embracing communitarian and universal values, as opposed to the dominance and exceptionalism that most of the other characters strive to attain throughout the show. While much of *The Boys* is nihilistic in its view of society, Hughie has an optimistic ending to season one and, ultimately, an optimistic view of the world despite the hardship he suffers. The show does not, therefore, present the problems of society as irreparable. Hughie's regard for his relationship does not provide a solution for the subjugation or danger that result from domination and exceptionalism, but it suggests that people are able to combat those

forces on a personal level. Communitarian and universalist values may not fix the issues that affect society as a whole, but they do provide a way to live with hope in spite of them.

## **Conclusion**

In most superhero stories, the audience is primed to look to the superheroes themselves as examples of the values which the story supports. *The Boys* subverts this expectation, as the superheroes, most notably Homelander, embody the worst aspects of society and the destruction that they cause. Rather than looking to the dominant and exceptional figures to set an example, *The Boys* encourages viewers to admire the everyman in Hughie, who rejects his quest for vengeance in favor of community. In a post-9/11 world where trust in the dominant figures in society and in America's position in the world is on a decline, the show suggests that the only way forward is to instead find hope in the personal and the universal. Amazon avoids as direct a critique of capitalism and its relationship to government as its comics source material, which is perhaps unsurprising considering that Amazon itself is a multinational tech company. Nevertheless, by including numerous social issues in the depictions of Vought, the supes, and the Boys, the show identifies itself as an inherently political object, just like each of the pieces of superhero media studied in these chapters.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion: Superhero Media as a Political Object

The superhero stories studied in the preceding chapters can all be viewed as explicitly political content through their speculations of the various ways in which super-powered humans might fit into society. In this way, each raises questions about the role of power, who should control it, and how much of it is too much for any individual entity to have. These questions all became particularly pertinent in the years following 9/11 as Americans questioned their own position on the global stage, and whether their government was using its authority appropriately. In the *Civil War* comics, the failings of trusted institutions and actors are exposed as Iron Man's victory comes at the expense of his own morals and causes the death of the virtuous Captain America. *Captain America: Civil War* presents those same failings on both an international scale and a personal one, as the superheroes are forced to confront the consequences of their actions and destroy their relationships with one another as a result. Corporate power comes into play in *The Boys* comics, as superheroes are used to demonstrate how much power corporations have gained in society and the government, and the everyman character of Hughie shows that morality is still possible despite this. The television series corroborates this conclusion, as Hughie's positive belief in community is juxtaposed with the negative effects of both dominance and exceptionalism from the supes. Each of these stories brings to light how post-9/11 institutional faults had direct repercussions for the country as a whole, and for individual Americans.

The beginning of this thesis explored the skepticism that superhero comics have faced in academia, while the chapters on *Civil War* and the comics version of *The Boys* have used the images and text present in the comics to interpret them as political allegory. The portrayal of the various superheroes' powers and the ways in which they use them to enact violence allows the

comics to emphasize the extremes to which those with great powers are capable of going. *Civil War* and *The Boys* in particular add to the genre of superhero comics by subverting the common tropes. In *Civil War*, superheroes are forced to give up their secret identities, are in the wrong when they work with the government, and fight against one another rather than an evil villain. The superheroes in *The Boys* cause the deaths of civilians without any remorse, work for a corporation without any morals, and are the antagonists whom the central group is attempting to take down. While *The Boys* goes much further than *Civil War* in straying away from a purely heroic portrayal of superheroes, both comics force the reader to question whether the people in power deserve to be and whether the ways in which they exercise their power is appropriate. Additionally, by including a focus on the people who are hurt by the actions of superheroes, these post-9/11 comics draw attention to the ways in which the American people were negatively affected by the choices that the government made in response to the tragedy. The case studies done of *Civil War* and *The Boys* prove that superhero comics do not need to adhere to a simplistic formula, and can instead use the concepts of heroism and power to make comments on their abuse in American society.

The two adaptations examined in this thesis are less explicit in their political content than their comics sources, but are both able to make substantial changes to the original stories in a way that reflects the time that has passed between the publications of the comics and the releases of the adaptations. *Captain America: Civil War* is the thirteenth film released in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, meaning that it is part of a larger story and of a gigantic commercial franchise. Amazon's adaptation of *The Boys* is one of the most promoted original shows on their streaming service, meaning that the company relies on the shows to draw viewers. These commercial considerations can help to explain why the politics have been toned down in the

move from page to screen, as explicit political content can isolate some viewers. Despite this, *Captain America: Civil War* still has the heroes fighting one another and *The Boys* still positions superheroes as antagonists, meaning that they explore the same ideas of power and heroism as the comics. Both adaptations also, however, follow notably different plots and focus more on the character development of the superheroes than their sources. Additionally, the politics of each story are changed in the adaptations to reflect their distance from 9/11, as they contain fewer references to the event itself and instead focus on the repercussions of the War on Terror and extended government power that are still felt today. *Captain America: Civil War* and the first season of *The Boys* show why differing from source material can be beneficial for adaptations in reflecting their political context, and how commercial media can still contain political content, even if it is not always explicit.

Because of the fantastical elements and grand scale of superhero stories, they may seem not to offer any solutions that are applicable to an average audience, but this thesis has shown that the stories under consideration in fact encourage a turn to the local in response to the anxieties of post-9/11 America. The stakes in both *Civil War* and *The Boys* are very high, as the superheroes have the ability to cause immense destruction to society with their powers, and it is this ability that allows the stories to reflect upon institutions like the U.S. government and corporate America. For the individual characters within the stories, however, the stakes are much more personal. In both versions of *Civil War*, the emotional core of the story is the difficulty that friends have fighting against one another, and the consequence of the war is that Iron Man has to deal with the loss of one of his most important allies in Captain America. The comics and television versions of *The Boys* both focus on Hughie in order to emphasize how his personal morality and the value he places on relationships save him from the atrocities being committed

around him. The political implication of these stories, then, is that the systems of governance may be corrupted in a post-9/11 world, but that turning to the individual and to the local is the best way for people to combat that corruption. Not only do these stories reflect the ways in which Americans have struggled to adjust to the changing realities of their country, but they suggest that by prioritizing personal relationships, it is possible to move past the anxieties that Americans are facing. While the problems of post-9/11 society are so large that even superheroes are not capable of solving or defeating them definitively, individuals are still able to find hope in such tumultuous times by relying on their sense of self and their relationships with one another.

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