Author Biography

Mackenna is a fourth-year history major, with minors in German and Asian studies. Her research interests include the history of popular culture and the Cold War. In her free time, she enjoys reading comic books and binge-watching Survivor and The Amazing Race. After graduation, she hopes to work as an editor in the comic book industry.
“Captain America Must Die”: How a Super Soldier Became a Patriot
by Mackenna Johnson

Abstract

This paper analyzes the character of Captain America in the midst of the Cold War, and particularly asks how and to what extent the character reflects his contemporary sociopolitical atmosphere. To achieve this end, I first establish the vital role of popular culture, especially comic books, in modern historical research. I then discuss the history of Captain America, the sociopolitical situation of the 1970s, and, finally, introduce the Secret Empire and Nomad storylines of the 1970s, which form the basis of my argument. The most valuable primary source in this paper is not the comic books themselves, but an interview that I recently conducted with the former author of Captain America, Steve Englehart. Ultimately, I argue that Englehart redefined Captain America’s version of patriotism and created a character that was more effectively able to reflect on and respond to social and political events.

In bold letters: “The Death of a Hero,” next to the lifeless figure of Captain America tied to a chimney, slumped and bleeding. Two figures stood behind the slain man with bowed heads, one African American with high-tech wings strapped to his back, the other blonde-haired and clad mostly in black. This was the cover of Captain America #183, published on March 10, 1975, 34 years to the month after Steve Rogers debuted as America’s star-spangled, Hitler-punching superhero. But for Rogers, gone were the days of patrolling New York City with his trusty sidekick Bucky. Gone was his clear bad versus good mentality. In fact, it was not even Steve Rogers bound and wearing the Captain America costume he had once donned; instead, he stood in the background as Nomad: The Man Without a Country.

1 Steve Englehart, Captain America #183, ed. Len Wein (New York: Marvel Comics, 1975), 18. See Appendix D.
This was the last issue in a saga of betrayal and disillusionment with the American government, a saga Steve Englehart wrote that stretched beyond the fictional world of comic books. In the early 1970s, America’s political climate was fraught with scandal and anxiety. Between the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal, conflict loomed large in the news. Because of this, comic book readers could no longer relate to a character that blindly and unthinkingly followed the government’s command. This paper will explore how Steve Englehart utilized the Captain America comics in the 1970s as a platform for himself and for his readers to come to terms with their political and social frustrations. I will argue that Steve Englehart redefined Captain America’s brand of patriotism to fully encompass the sentiments of the American people for the first time.

Since DC Comics published the first Superman comic in the late 1930s, comic books have remained an ever-present force in American popular culture. Between Marvel and DC, the two powerhouses in comic book publication, there are at minimum five or six million pages of literature, and this increases by thousands of pages every month. Because comics scholarship is a recent field, most research focuses on comic books as a whole, leaving plenty of room for new voices to focus on smaller pieces of this monomyth. One common theme among scholars is the accurate representation of comic books as a modern mythology, giving insight into contemporary American values just as the Greek myths did in their time. It is necessary here to clarify that, though comic books exist around the world, America is by far the largest producer of comic books, meaning they are inherently a product of American culture. Scholarly works such as Marco Arnaudo’s The Myth of the Superhero give valuable insight into the ties between comics and society. However, such general overviews can only be superficial, for it is the individual characters and story arcs that truly reveal how thoroughly comic books and society intertwine.

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3 Ibid, 63.
There are, however, works that focus more specifically on particular characters, such as J. Richard Stevens’ book *Captain America, Masculinity, and Violence*, as well as his article “Let’s Rap with Cap” from *The Journal of Popular Culture*. His works analyze the development of Captain America as a character throughout his existence, since 1941. Though Stevens is the author who focuses most notably on Captain America, his work is still broad and only briefly mentions the comic events this paper will address. Therefore, his work is necessary to understand the character and its history, but it does not sufficiently discuss Steve Englehart’s highly significant Secret Empire and Nomad storylines.

Around the time in which Englehart authored *Captain America*, there was a shift in attitude toward greater readership and increased respect for comics. In fact, statistics from 1971 showed that as many as 60% of eighteen-year-olds and 94% of eleven- to fourteen-year-olds read comics regularly. This likely resulted, at least indirectly, due to a change in the Comics Code. The Comics Code, which the Comics Magazine Association of America developed in October of 1954, mandated that comics not show excessive violence or, most significantly for this essay, represent the government unfavorably. Part A, section 3 of the Comics Code stated, “Policemen, judges, Government officials and respected institutions shall never be presented in such a way as to create disrespect for established authority.” However, in 1971, the Comics Magazine Association of America loosened this regulation by adding, “If any of these is depicted committing an illegal act, it must be declared as an exceptional case and that the culprit pay the legal price.” This revision effectively created a loophole in the code that ultimately allowed Steve Englehart to cast a critical lens on the United States government during his *Captain America* authorship.

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Initially, *Captain America* Comics found success when they debuted in 1941, the first cover boldly displaying the superhero punching Adolf Hitler.\(^7\) After World War II ended, though, the character lost his relevance as he continued to fight the Nazis. As a result, Marvel discontinued the series. Almost twenty years later, Captain America reappeared and explained that a freak accident trapped him in ice, holding him in suspended animation until 1964.\(^8\) From that point on, authors used the character as a means of juxtaposing Cap’s patriotic values with significant events such as the civil rights movement and anti-Vietnam War protests. Instead of a character with agency, Captain America became a one-dimensional tool that authors tried to mold to fit the zeitgeist. However, this approach often fell flat, until Englehart became the author of *Captain America* in 1972.

To understand the unique situation that made Steve Englehart a successful *Captain America* author, it is necessary to explain the period of time just before he took over. In the years during which sales of the comic declined, readers wrote letters to the editor to debate their views of patriotism. J. Richard Stevens wrote on this topic extensively in his article “Let’s Rap with Cap.” The Bullpen, the term for Marvel’s editors, authors, etc. working behind the scenes, published letters from readers, similar to letters to the editor in newspapers and magazines. In the late 1960s, fans began to write to the Bullpen to share their opinions regarding Captain America’s character and whether it fit with their ideas of patriotism. These letters revealed their authors’ sentiments regarding the US government in the midst of the Vietnam War and just before Watergate. Written by everyone from college students to members of the military, the letters operated in *Captain America* as a forum for readers to discuss two starkly contrasting views of patro-

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7 Jack Kirby, *Captain America Comics* #1, ed. Joe Simon (New York: Timely Publications). See Appendix A.
tism. On the one hand, liberals argued that Captain America should involve himself in the political and social controversies of the time; on the other, conservatives maintained that the patriotic thing to do was refrain from criticizing the government. The vastly different views for and against the Vietnam War, one of the most controversial wars in American history, spurred on the extreme representations of either side. Seeking to please their readers, comic authors altered Captain America’s character over time, involving him in student protests and discussions on civil rights, but were unsuccessful in making the character believable. Perhaps this was because tensions were too high, or because they tried to give voice to the side that they believed had more support. Whatever the case, over the course of this debate, Captain America became one of Marvel’s worst-selling comics. Divided and floundering, this was the atmosphere in which Steve Englehart entered as the author of the comic, given the mission to make it sell.

The key to Englehart’s success with Captain America was his ability to test the character’s beliefs in a way that spoke to contemporary American readers. In the real world, the Vietnam War was a constant source of tension, especially as it became increasingly unpopular into the 1970s. This caused many of Captain America’s readers to question their definitions of patriotism. Though the debate in the letters to the Bullpen had subsided by the time Englehart authored the comic, there were still some readers who wrote responses to developments in the character. Minor criticism ultimately led the Bullpen in 1973 to reply, “our editorial position is really your editorial position.” In other words, they were willing to change the direction of the character based on fan response. Despite this, none of the letters criticized the anti-establishment attitude the comics soon adopted, and, indeed,

10 Ibid, 623.
11 Steve Englehart, Captain America #165, ed. Roy Thomas (New York: Marvel Comics), 20.
Englehart himself cannot recall any negative reader feedback as he forced Captain America to confront the “political drama” of the time.\footnote{12}{Steve Englehart, phone interview by author, May 10, 2017.}

This process began in Captain America #163, when old enemies of Cap’s hired a crooked advertising agent to spread propaganda against Cap, calling him a rogue vigilante with an anti-American agenda.\footnote{13}{Steve Englehart, Captain America #163, ed. Roy Thomas (New York: Marvel Comics), 5.} Steve Rogers, the man behind the Captain America costume, learned of these ads two issues later. Yet Rogers laughed them off as obvious lies that no sane person could believe, given his stellar reputation and decades of service to the country.\footnote{14}{Steve Englehart, Captain America #165, ed. Roy Thomas (New York: Marvel Comics), 9.}

Over the course of the next few issues, the character commented with increasing frequency on the lack of connection he felt with the American public. Captain America, the personification of the World War II values of the United States, felt out of touch and unable to understand a public that did not fully support its government. After all, when Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, and Joe Simon created the character in 1941, he was the protagonist in a war that most Americans supported. Thirty-three years later, it was significantly harder to discern a clear line between good and evil, especially as the truth about the Watergate scandal gradually came to light.

The Watergate scandal was not exclusive to the real world; in fact, it was what triggered Steve Englehart to write a series of comic books that would change the essential nature of Captain America. Englehart, watching the “political drama” of Watergate unfold during the early 1970s, could not help but recognize the necessity of Captain America during such a turbulent time. He knew that a government scandal of such huge proportions would shock Steve Rogers to his core, so he imagined the character’s response and used a fictional government scandal, the Secret Empire, to reflect on real
current events.15 Englehart had already set the stage, using a propaganda campaign within the comics to discredit the hero, but it was only after the Watergate scandal went public that he incorporated the secret government element into the story. When finally, in Captain America #169, Steve Rogers saw the extent of the ad campaign against him, Englehart revealed that the agency behind the propaganda was the “Committee to Regain America’s Principles.”16 This name was an obvious allusion to the real life “Committee to Re-Elect the President.”

Over the course of the next several issues, the advertisements convinced more and more people that Captain America was a criminal and a vigilante working against America instead of for it. As Cap fought to restore his good name, the story unfolded, leading to the eventual revelation that a group called the Secret Empire had subversively taken over the government without anyone’s knowledge.17 The showdown that soon followed this reveal was one of the greatest and most significant in Captain America’s seventy-five year history. As one could expect from any comic book, the “good guy,” Captain America, confronted the “bad guy,” the Secret Empire. More specifically, he finally faced the group’s leader, Number One. Traditionally, and according to the Comics Code’s mandate, the hero should have triumphed over the villain.18

However, the trend of comic books at the time was toward something parallel but significantly different. In 1973, Gwen Stacy, the longtime girlfriend of popular Marvel Comics character Spider-Man, died suddenly and shockingly at the hands of a villain. This tragic event signaled that comics were no longer

16  Steve Englehart, Captain America #169, ed. Roy Thomas (New York: Marvel Comics), 7.
17  Steve Englehart, Captain America #173, ed. Roy Thomas (New York: Marvel Comics), 7.
playing by the rules, and that "[h]appy endings were no longer guaranteed." This led to a trend in which superheroes no longer defeated their villains cleanly, raising the stakes and showing that authors could bend the rules just enough to confront their characters with devastating consequences.

And so it was when Captain America finally came face to face with the man called Number One. As Cap and his friends fought the cronies of the Secret Empire on the lawn of the White House, Number One escaped and ran into the Oval Office. Captain America, stopping him, pulled off the villain's mask. Though the readers could not see Number One's face, Englehart strongly implied that the man was in fact the President of the United States. This revelation shocked Cap to his very core, and he walked out of the White House feeling completely defeated and betrayed. Because comic books actually go on sale a few months before the official publishing date—which, in these comics, was July of 1974—Englehart predicted the fall of President Nixon within the fictional world of comic books months before it occurred in reality.

The storyline that followed the Secret Empire event led to the creation of a character that more fully represented the American people and that no longer subscribed to the “good versus evil” values of the past. In what Steve Englehart called his “philosophical issue,” Steve Rogers debated with himself and his friends about whether or not he could continue on as Captain America, knowing the government he represented was unjust. He ultimately decided that he could not. This issue especially recalled the letters debate of the pre-Englehart era, reemphasizing that discussion and the letter writers’ views on patriotism. Even though Cap effectively sided with the liberals

19 Tom DeFalco et al., Marvel Chronicle: A Year by Year History (New York: DK Publishing, 2008), 158.
20 Steve Englehart, Captain America #175, ed. Roy Thomas (New York: Marvel Comics), 18.
21 Steve Englehart, Captain America #176, ed. Roy Thomas (New York: Marvel Comics), 1. See Appendix B.
who argued that American citizens should not blindly follow the government, he still gave voice to conservatives coming to terms with the rise of multiculturalism. One page of the issue showed Captain America in the midst of people, Americans, of various ethnicities and backgrounds, while Cap attempted in vain to understand how he could possibly represent those millions of people. This debate also emphasized the overarching struggle to find an American national identity that real people encountered after the Watergate scandal. Englehart, though acknowledging that it was purely his own opinion, felt that Steve Rogers’ disillusionment with the government was a thing to which all Americans at the time could relate. Thus, while the fictional character could not reconcile recent events with his own values, he became a trustworthy, familiar symbol to real people attempting the same type of reconciliation. Andrew and Virginia Macdonald, writing for The Journal of Popular Culture merely two years after this storyline, called it the experience “most widely shared by the reading and non-reading public.” They pointed out that, regardless of the actual readership demographics of comic books, this was a story that represented Americans as a collective group.

Following the decision to take Steve Rogers out of the Captain America costume, Englehart led the character down a path of self-discovery in the wake of the destruction of his patriotic values. Though Rogers tried briefly to be a normal man without a superhero identity, he quickly learned that he was meant to “fight the good fight,” bringing to light an interesting fact about the comic’s author. Steve Englehart was in the army for sixteen months, until he received an honorable discharge as a conscientious objector. He maintains, though, that this history did not affect his approach to the char-

22 Steve Englehart, Captain America #176, ed. Roy Thomas (New York: Marvel Comics), 14. See Appendix C.
acter of Captain America. This was evident in the fact that Steve Rogers could not resist fighting for his beliefs, leading Rogers to create a new superhero identity for himself: Nomad.  

His time as Nomad was brief, and he constantly missed the recognition and respect he received as Captain America. During this stint, there were also minor characters who assumed the identity of Captain America to various degrees of unsuccessfulness. Red Skull, Captain America’s longtime nemesis and a remnant of Cap’s years fighting the Nazis during World War II, murdered the last Captain America impersonator. This murder finally forced Rogers to realize that, in the end, it was he who failed America because of his own inability to look beyond the government’s agenda and recognize the actual people whom he defended. He decided that Captain America would no longer be simply a pawn of the government, but would stand for the historical ideals of America itself, and he once more took up the mantle.

This also effectively concluded the extent and effect of the Watergate scandal in Captain America, making the argument that America was ready to recover, both within comics and without. Ultimately, Captain America reclaiming his shield showed good triumphing over evil, pursuant to the Comics Code, but once again at a tragic cost.

In 1972, Steve Englehart had the seemingly impossible task of making a World War II-era, patriotic superhero relevant in the midst of the exceptionally unpopular Vietnam War. His unique method of adding humanity to the character quickly led to a dramatic increase in sales, making Captain America Marvel’s best-selling series. While Englehart’s writing style made

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26 Steve Englehart, Captain America #180, ed. Roy Thomas (New York: Marvel Comics), 11.
27 Steve Englehart, Captain America #183, ed. Len Wein (New York: Marvel Comics).
28 Ibid, 18.
Captain America more relatable, it was his willingness to confront what he called the “political drama” of the time that ultimately led to the comic’s success.  

30 Marco Arnaudo commented that, “[f]ar from acting as a simple ‘yes man,’ Captain America has historically proven to be a sort of commentator on political fluctuations.”  

While this has remained unfailingly true since the 1970s, this fact of Cap’s character came about only as a direct result of Englehart’s authorship. Moreover, it was a direct result of the contributions of fan letters, as well as a political situation so rife with tension that Englehart could not help but destroy and rebuild Captain America’s personal definition of patriotism. Finally, Steve Rogers recognized that it was his duty to defend the rights of all Americans, not to blindly trust that the government would treat all citizens justly. His ordeal gave him the opportunity both to come to terms with his limitations, and to realize his ability to act as a voice for the voiceless. Though Cap does not exist in the world as a tangible human being, he is undoubtedly the amalgamation of the millions of people who make up America. As such, he is the face of us all, and we have Steve Englehart to thank for that.

30 Ibid.
Appendix ‘A’

Captain America Comics #1
Appendix ‘B’

Captain America #176
Appendix ‘C’

*Captain America #176*
Appendix ‘D’

Captain America #183
Bibliography


