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From the Watergate to the Regan Years:

When Captain America stopped being a soldier

Theo Touret just finished a Master's dissertation in History on "Captain America: rewriting of US and defense of American values, 1940-2014" at the University of Picardy-Jules Verne (Amiens, France), under the supervision of Prof. Marjolaine Boutet.

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The Captain America of the Golden Age of Comics¹:

In 1940, Jacob Kurtzberg (who will be known as Jack Kirby later) and Joe Simon invented the character of Steve Rogers, a young American, frail, weak, who wasn't able to fight for his country despite his strong patriotism and his will to protect the free world from the evil Axis. Recruited by an exiled German scientist, Doctor Eskrine, he became a guinea pig for the Project Rebirth, a mysterious secret program for the US military. Injected with the serum of the super-soldier, infused with "vita-rays", Steve Rogers became Captain America. Stronger and faster than any athlete, proud of his nation, inheritor of the words of the Founding Fathers, brave and patriot, Captain America was the embodiment of the American Dream.

The character was first and foremost, like Simon and Kirby themselves admitted², a propaganda superhero whose mission was plain and simple: take part in the war effort and become a symbol of unity among the public opinion. Captain America (or Cap') was pretty straightforward, violent without hesitation towards USA's enemies, and a soldier. His false public identity was a clumsy private at Camp Lehigh, his everyday life being that of a modest soldier. It was a good way to make the hero humble, and at the same time highlighted the army's routine.

If there were lots of different characters who incarnate Captain America after the disappearing of Steve Rogers, none of them lasted more than one or two years of publication. Nor possessed the power of the super-soldier serum. Furthermore, Rogers was by far the most popular. If Cap incarnates the American Dream, Rogers represents the Common Man, the man from the Depression and the WWII-era. If Steve Rogers could be Cap, then all Americans were able to do great things and vanquish the evil forces of the Axis.

So we have got a lot of war stories with Cap as a hero and a freedom fighter, from 1940 to 1950. If superhero comic's books were really popular in the early 40's, it became more and more difficult to sell them after the war. In 1950, *Captain America Comic* was cancelled. Between 1954 and 1955 there was a short tentative to relaunch it. Titled "Commie Smasher" the series was probably one of the worst things in all Marvel's long story of publications. The run was racist, intolerant, tainted with the Red Scare and presented an excessively violent Cap. Without surprises it was a commercial failure, the readers found the stories too manichean and repetitive.

Despite "Commie Smasher", Cap was still one of the most popular superheroes from the war and the Golden Age of Comics. He was a living part of the American history, and a well-known symbol. It's probably for all these reasons that Stan Lee brought him back in 1963³.

It is important to notice that this article concerns essentially Steve Rogers, Captain America from the Earth-616 the main continuity⁴ of the Marvel universe.

The Silver Age of Comics⁵, a new Captain America?

If it wasn't for Stan Lee, the comics' books industry and genre would have been completely different. At the beginning of the sixties Lee decided to reinvent how superheroes stories were written. Marvel became known as the "House of Ideas", and Lee and others famous author like Steranko or Steve Ditko started plenty of new stories. From the Fantastic Four to Spiderman, the characters became deeper, troubled with everyday issues, more real and human. It was in this context that Cap was reintegrated in *Avengers #4* from March 1964. On the cover we can read "Captain America Lives Again!" In this issue Cap awakened after a long sleep frozen in an iceberg at the North Pole. We learn that Steve Rogers was not dead at the end of the war but just trapped, and that all the stories between his "death" in 1944 and 1955 were the stories of aliases hired by the American government "to keep the dream alive." This retcon⁶ was the perfect excuse to dislodge Steve Rogers for the terrible "Commie Smasher" year and to start new adventures with the first most famous Captain America.

Nevertheless, the Silver Age Steve Rogers is different. Being frozen in time changes a man's view of the world. He suffers greatly from the loss of his sidekick Bucky Barnes, a young teenager who accompanied him during the war.

This loss and the traumatism of being frozen for almost twenty years developed a strong PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) in the character. Cap is wounded from his wartime, not only because of his dead friends but also because of the stress of the experience. The soldier became a veteran.

If the character is still the embodiment of the ideals upon which the USA were built, he became gentler. Captain America does not kill people anymore. He is not fighting against Japanese or Nazis but supervillains or gangsters. He turned into a vigilante and a superhero, and he spends more time with the Avengers than with the Army or alone lost in a sad nostalgia of the Greatest Generation and the 40's.

It's really important to precise that Captain America is one of the superheroes who is the more tied with American history. When the USA were at war, Kirby and Simon created a soldier. The world was pretty simple then, black and white, the Allies against the Axis. The sixties are very different.

It's a time for social revolutions, with the rise of the Black Power and the Black Panthers⁷. It's a time for war, with the American involvement in Vietnam from 1964, with hundreds of thousands of men fighting in the jungle against communism and the Vietcong (536 100 men in 1968⁸). It's a time for social struggle, between the New Left and "the silent minority" as Nixon called the conservators who didn't protest against the war or for more social reforms. In this context of social disruption it would seem logical that Cap became once more a propaganda symbol in the cold war or at least the embodiment of conservative values.

It's not what happened at all. Stan Lee and Marvel found the subject of the Vietnam War too complex for them to decide if Cap should fight or not. The readers' letters in the discussion section "Rap with Cap" from the comics show us that the readers were really divided around that question⁹, just like the society was divided about the conflict. Captain America only went twice¹⁰ in Vietnam during the whole war, and always for rescue missions, not to fight the Vietcong. The soldier has grown tired of war, and starts questioning the society in which he lives, but also his actions during the World War II.

In *Captain America* #122 from February 1970 Cap's monolog says it all:

"I'm an anachronism who's out-lived his time. This is the day of the anti-hero, the age of the rebel and the dissenter! It's isn't hip to defend the establishment, only to tear it down! And in a world rife with injustice, greed and endless war, who's to say the rebels are wrong? But I've never learned to play by today's new rules, I've spent a lifetime defending the flag and the law! Perhaps I should have battled less and questioned more!"

This is of course a reference to the social groups which campaigned for a fairer society or against the Vietnam War. Captain America, who never discussed orders in the WWII or hesitated to take a life for his country changed. This change, orchestrated by Marvel, shows the customers that Cap is able to adapt to his readership, and to be more in match with the big questions of his time.

The Watergate and the Secret Empire:

The seventies were a time of political secret agendas and conspiracies. On March the 8th 1971, secret files were stolen from the FBI. The public opinion then learnt that Hoover, FBI's director for more than forty years, had organized several illegal political espionage. His COINTELPRO program, a way to fight political dissents, allowed the FBI to record more than 2000 phone calls and read 58 000 correspondences¹¹. This scandal started to break the faith of the Americans in the government.

But this case was nothing compared to the Watergate. In 1972, 3 members of the CREEP, the committee for the reelection of Nixon, were arrested for breaking in the Watergate, the democrat's political headquarters. Nixon tried to censor the scandal but the *Washington Post* with the help of Mark Felt (anonymously), Hoover's second in command, started a journalistic investigation which led to the biggest political scandal the United States had ever known. The investigation reveals that Nixon had lots of his political opponents spied with secret recorders. Moreover, he also spied on some of his own allies and entourage. These recordings were supposed to help Nixon get a political advantage against his detractors and over his subordinates. Of course it was highly illegal and in total contradiction with the American democratic spirit. It was only a matter of months before the Senate and the Congress, predominantly democrat, started an official investigation. On August the 9th 1974, Nixon quitted the presidency. To this day, he is the only president of the history of the United States to have resigned.¹²

After the Watergate scandal, only 18% of the American said that they "still trust in the White House."¹³

These historical events of corruption and political secrecy appear in Englehardt's *Captain America* run from the issue #165 (September 1973) to issue #175 (July 1974). Steve Englehardt, born in 1947, is well-known for his work on *The Avengers* and *Doctor Strange*. Certificated in psychology and art, he is also the man who decided to "fix" the Commie-Smasher era in the main continuity by explaining that the American government hired copycat of Captain America during the Cold War, and that the violent deeds of the hero were not Steve Roger's¹⁴. In his stories, he tried to explore a lot of social issues by developing the character of Sam Wilson known as The Falcon and black side-kick of Steve Rogers, and by focusing attention on Captain America as a defender of America ideals and not the American government.

In these comics, Cap is highly criticized by an organization called *The Committee to Regain America Principles*, or CRAP. Of course, beyond the joke with the acronym, there is an obvious parallel with Nixon's CREEP. Both had "funny names" and are conservative societies. In the comics, the CRAP tried to discredit Cap by making him appear as a violent warmonger with no respect at all for the American laws or his fellow citizens. They criticized his independence as an Avenger and a superhero.

Their purpose is of course to "break the symbol" that Cap incarnates. As we progress in our reading, we learn that the CRAP hides a way much more dangerous club, the Secret Empire, a conglomerate of powerful economic and political personalities. They framed Cap of murdering a man, and he has got no other choice but to flee from the justice. Then the Secret Empire creates a new superhero, Moonstone, a photogenic muscular guy infused with alien powers, and makes him the most mediatised superhero in all the country. Without a doubt, their aim is to win the public opinion with a charismatic figure.

The final step of their plan can now begin: the Secret Empire attacks the White House with a modern and highly weaponized flying saucer, its members dissimulated in hoods. Moonstone faces the vessel in front of all the televisions of the country, and as they plan, he is defeated as he does not even try to fight. As Moonstone surrenders to the Secret Empire, he asks to all American citizens to surrender as well against such a mighty enemy, pretending that the USA can't win such a fight. Of course this masquerade is part of the plan: if the Americans see their hero beaten, on the White House' lawn, while being recorded in all the country, their will to fight will be broken into pieces and they will accept any condition of surrender.



From *Captain America* #175 (July 1974). We can see Buscema's talent (the penciller) expressing the feeling of betrayal on Cap's face when he discovers the truth.

As their plan is almost a success in *Captain America* #174, Moonstone said:

"Maybe the truth got out on the Watergate but that's the exception..."

Thus confessing the Secret Empire's responsibility in the Watergate. In the next issue, Captain America and his allies reappear and defeat the Secret Empire's members and Moonstone, revealing their treachery and lies. As the leader of the evil organization has run away, Cap chases and subdues him. When he loses his hood, we are not able to see his face, but we can see Captain America shocked. Cap says "Good Lord! You?! But you're, you're..." and the man answers "Exactly! But high political office don't satisfy me! My power was still too constrained with legalities! I gambled a coup to win the power I craved and it appears that my gamble has finally failed! I'll cash my chips then!" just before killing himself. Of course that man was the President of the United States, which is why Captain America is so desperate by this situation. The man who is supposed to wield the power of the

country is a betrayer, a murderer and a liar.

When Cap leaves the crime scene he has got a worn out look, and does not talk to any of the reporters waiting outside the White House. He walks past his allies without saying a word, and we can read with the narrator's voice:

"This man trusted the country of his birth. He saw its flaws but he trusted in its basic framework, its stated goals, and its long term virtue. This man now is broken inside like millions of other Americans. In his own way he has seen his trust mocked... And this man is Captain America!"

This run is interesting for several reasons. Firstly we have to keep in mind that the American readers discovered the story at the exact same time that the Watergate investigation progressed. They saw some news on the television about the scandal and then read the new issue of Captain America. They can of course relate to the comics. Moreover, the hero is Captain America, not the Avengers or Spiderman or anyone else. Englehardt criticized a few things in his story that we know are real: the corruption of the governmental agencies at the time, the disillusion of having a crook as president, and most of all, the power of the mass medias which were able to turn the public opinion against Cap. The message is clear, when the American lose their faith in Cap, in the embodiment of the American Dream, in the spirit of the Founding Fathers, they become a prey for the corrupt and the manipulator. They therefore lose their freedom. This story of Cap is very faithful to the real history in a lot of ways: the deception of the American people, the omnipresence of the Medias as well as the television and the disillusion which the Watergate incarnates.

After this run, Captain America drops his uniform for a while and becomes known as The Nomad, the man without country. It's important to precise that Englehardt here wrote a milestone in the long life of Captain America. It was the first time that the man had left his suit and had been so disappointed by his own country. The author really tried to make Captain America a more complex and human character with fewer military features. It also fixed a lot of continuity issues to rehabilitate the worst periods of the character.

The Regan Years, the end of the Dream?

On November the 4th 1980, Ronald Reagan was elected President. The man promotes economic liberalism and populism at the same time¹⁵. He is strong willed, charismatic, and draws everybody's attention thanks to his passionate speeches. He makes the people proud to be American, and compares his country to a "light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden"¹⁶ which leads the rest of the world in the path of freedom and democracy. With his acting career, he is deeply connected to the American Way of Life and for a lot of people, he is a reminder of the standards of the Greatest Generation. Ronald Reagan had almost every value that Captain America respects.

But the Watergate has broken the faith of many (at Marvel too) and just one month before the election of Reagan, under the supervision of Mark Gruenwald, Marvel published *Captain America #250*. In this issue, Captain America is picked by the Populist Party as a candidate for the upcoming elections against Carter and Reagan. This fictional party was left-winged, with several social propositions. As the entire country is hipped with the idea of Captain America being President, he chooses not to run. As he says in the comics in front of the citizens:

"We must all live in the real world [...] but it is the dream, the hope that makes the reality worth living. In the early forties I made a personal pledge to uphold the dream, and as long as the dream remains even partially unfulfilled, I cannot abandon it! And so in all fairness I hope you can understand that I cannot be your candidate."

As he leaves the crowd that has been listening to him, the narrator quotes a speech of John F.Kennedy which deals with the notions of freedom and responsibility.

Of course throughout history, Marvel has generally (not always) supported the more liberal political views. After all, a lot of the first authors and writers, like Kirby or Lee, were Jews during the war and learnt to appreciate civic unity. The following authors kept this state of mind. Moreover, Marvel has to sell comic books to survive. So if you want to sell to a large customer base, you have got to be open-minded. In my eyes, this *Captain America #250* was a warning for the new President not to corrupt the office again, but also a good way to make money on the upcoming election. Nevertheless, the choice of doing this kind of story with Cap is no coincidence. All the crucial events in American history are most of the time integrated in Captain America. It's important to notice that in the comics, Cap pledges for none of the candidate. However, his Populist Party is way closer to the Democrats than to the Republicans.

We must not forget that in the eighties the way comic books are written changed. The Bronze Age¹⁷ is well established and the works became grimmer, more serious. Alan Moore's *Watchmen* is the epitome of the genre. The superheroes are corrupted, tired or blasé. The city became a sinister place with lots of crimes. The popularity of the Punisher at this time is also a good example. The customers are looking for more mature stories with antiheroes and vigilantes. This demand increased with Reagan's economical politic. The financial gap between the poorest and the richest increased and one quarter of the American at the end of the eighties got economic issues. For many of them, it is an everyday struggle. This pauperization of the society involves high criminal rates and a social misery for some people.¹⁸ No wondering why the comics got grimmer. This is an interesting evolution considering that other cultural hobbies, like

the cinema, are deeply involved in the “America is back¹⁹” movement which started with the election of Reagan. I believe that the difference resides in the fact that a lot of readers were tired of simple comic book or fictional stories. They were looking for something more fully-developed than a story a la *Rambo*.

For all these reasons, Captain America could not support the Reagan doctrine. The man called the Cold War an Evil VS Good conflict²⁰, but it was way much more complicated than that and Cap knew it. The world changed, the character too. Simplistic propaganda from the World War can’t work anymore. The tough lesson of almost twenty-five years of publications is that the world is not all black or all white. Yes Captain America still upholds the values of the Greatest Generation, but with more thought and patience. And Marvel does not want the character to become again just a propaganda icon.

It appears clearly in the work of Mark Gruenwald. Born in 1953, he was a huge comic book fan even at an early age, having his own fan-review named *Omniverse*. He is still today considered as an expert in the notions of continuity and multiverse, and he is well-known for his work on *Captain America*. His other works include *Squadron Supreme*, a universe where the superheroes decide to be more than just vigilante and choose to take the executive power and rule the world in some kind of enlightened absolutism.



Covers from *Captain America* #332(August 1987). We can see the American flag dripping blood as Steve Rogers seems worn out, prostrated. The metaphor here is obvious, America's heart is wounded when Cap quits.

This is why in *Captain America* #332 (entitled “Captain America! No more!” August 1987) Cap is summoned to an official encounter with a commission in the White House. That commission explains to him that his suit, shield and DNA are properties of the American army; that he agrees to a contract in the forties, and that contract was never about being a superhero but about being a soldier. He has got only 24 hours to choose: agreeing to become once more a mere soldier, or leaving his gear as the commission seeks a replacement.

The answer is probably one of the best dialogues of Cap ever written:

“Gentlemen [...] that in all good conscience I cannot accept your conditions of employment. Captain America was created to be a mere soldier but I have made him far more than that. To return to being a mere soldier would be a betrayal of all I’ve striven for [...] To serve the country your ways I would have to give up my personal freedom and place myself in a position where I might have to compromise my ideals to obey your orders. I cannot represent the American government. The President does that. I must represent the American people. I represent the American Dream the freedom to strive to become all that you dream of being. Being Captain America has been my America Dream. To become what you want me to be I would have to compromise that dream, abandon what I have come to stand for. My commitment to the ideals of this country is greater than my commitment to a 40 years old document.”

This dialogue takes place in the last page. We can see written at the bottom of the page: “End of an era”.

Never again will Steve Rogers from the main continuity be a mere soldier. Of course in the next stories, he will have his training and in some stories a military rank, but the time where he took his orders from the government is long gone. The character who once was a simple propaganda icon evolves as the same time as the American society. Captain America is then replaced by a character called US Agent, a violent troublesome copy who is the embodiment of the downward slide of conservative values. Captain America then left his suit once more and became known as simply The Captain for a few issues.

Gruenwald’s run was really interesting in many ways. The author tried to invent new super-villains and challenges especially for Cap. His purpose was to highlight the fact that Captain America is not a normal superhero. What he incarnates, the American Dream, is way bigger than Steve Rogers, or any human being, fictional or real. This ideal needs to be protected, but we all have to be very careful on how we are going to do it. US Agent is a really good example of a faithful soldier and an American patriot who almost killed a bad guy in his first mission as a replacement for Captain America²¹. These are the downsides of a hero who got great power but no restraint. The story arc warned the readers against the dangers of not thinking about their acts, and reminds us that crimes and felony can be found even behind the best intentions.

A more complex character, a more complex society?

All the changes that the character has known from 1940 to the end of the eighties could appear extravagant. But the truth is that Marvel was able to keep Cap true to himself while changing him. Captain America has this position of “Man out of time” due to being frozen for a long time in ice. He is the symbol of the Greatest Generation, seen as a golden era for a lot of American people. Indeed, they had freed Europe and managed a successful economy allied to a low unemployment rate: it was a “blessed time”.

This of course differs a lot from the sixties to the eighties. Yet the publication of Captain America continued because the Americans like this hero. With Cap, we, readers, witness the unfolding of American history. He always remains faithful to the constitution or the fundamental laws of the country, he always attempts to uphold the American Dream, but he is not stupid. He understands that the world is a different place in 1980 than it was in 1940.

Of course, in the end he is just a comic book character. He has got no real opinion on anything except the one from his writers. However with the notion of continuity at stake, and the necessity to please the readers, Cap has always showed the deepest respect for notions like freedom, justice or the Manifest Destiny²². During its long history of publications Marvel has tried to keep the character true to his legacy. When Captain America in the comics looks at something or someone, it is as if the philosophy and ideals of the Founding Fathers were also looking at it.

The stories of the seventies and eighties made a new Captain America. Historical events such as the Watergate or Reagan’s presidency have changed the history of the American people forever. If Marvel wants to sell comic books, readers have to be able to relate to the stories of their heroes. But, like we saw with the Vietnam War, readers cannot all agree. Unfortunately it is really hard to estimate how many fans of Cap were disappointed by these fifteen years of publications, but it’s certain that there were some. However, I think that the mainstream Captain America, the one we can see in Marvel’s movies, is inspired by these comic books. The idea that the government is corrupted or has a secret agenda, that the orders should always be questioned, has never been truer than today in *Captain America: Winter Soldier* or in the upcoming *Captain America: Civil War* for instance. *In my opinion*, Mark Millar’s *Civil War*²³ continues the work that Englehardt and Gruenwald started a long time ago. All of these stories ask the readers and Captain America the exact same thing: what should prevail? Security or freedom?

Methodological approach:

This article is principally the English translation form my Master’s dissertation in History on “Captain America: rewriting of US and defense of American values, 1940-2014”. It is a small part of a bigger work which consists to cross Captain America’s comics with the American history. All the important American events from the World War II

to the 9/11 can be found in Captain America. For almost 70 years of publications, Marvel's writers have tried and often succeed to link the most notorious events of the real history with fictions.

This is particularly true with Captain America. As a symbol of all the American virtues, as the embodiment of the American Dream, the character is a very good opportunity from an historical perspective to study the United States and its population.

Moreover, Captain America's comic books are a really good media to express political or ideological opinions. Every time that the readers see Captain America criticizing or congratulating someone, they have to wonder why? Why such noble character choose to have this point of view? Steve Rogers become then not only a simple observer, but also a judge of the American history. His judgement incites the readers to think about the political or social events of their time. Their thoughts can be found in the reader's section in the comic books.

In the end, Captain America is a really good tool to make a social and cultural study of the United States.

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¹ The Golden Age of Comics describes the beginning of the industry of superheroes' comics books, between approximatively the end of the 30's to the late 50's.

² « I picked Adolph Hitler as the ideal villain. He had everything that Americans hated, and he was a clown with the funny moustache, yet guys were ready to jump out of planes for him. He was the first choice, and his antagonist would have to be our hero, and we'd put a flag on the guy and have Captain America. »

link: <http://herocomplex.latimes.com/books/joe-simon-and-jack-kirby-secret-origins-of-classic-tandem/#/0>

³ LEE Stan, *Avengers #4*, March 1964

⁴ Earth-616's Universe designates the main continuity of Marvel, where the majority of the stories take place.

⁵ The Silver Age of Comics describes the era between the late 50's and the early 70's. It was known for the new ways stories were written and the supervision of the Comic Code Authority in its beginning.

⁶ Retcon: Adding information to the back story of a fictional character or world, without invalidating that which had gone before.

⁷ VAN ERSEL Tom, *Panthères Noires : histoire du Black Panther Party*, Editions l'Echappée, Paris, 2006, 160p.

⁸ PORTE Jacques, *Les Etats-Unis et la guerre du Vietnam*, Editions Complexe, Paris, 2008, p372-373.

⁹ WRIGHT Bradford W, *Comic Book Nation : The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2001, p244

¹⁰ LEE, *Tales of Suspense #61*, January 1965 / LEE, *Captain America #125*, May 1970

¹¹ VAN ERSEL Tom, *Panthères Noires : histoire du Black Panther Party*, Editions l'Echappée, Paris, 2006, p89-90

¹² MELANDRI Pierre, *Histoire des Etats-Unis contemporaines*, André Versailles éditeur, Bruxelles, p565-566

¹³ *Ibid* p568

¹⁴ ENGELHARDT, *Captain America #153-156*, (September 1972- December 1972)

¹⁵ MELANDRI Pierre, *Histoire des Etats-Unis contemporaines*, André Versailles éditeur, Bruxelles, p652

¹⁶ *Ibid* p653

¹⁷ The Bronze Age of Comics describes the era between the mid 70's and the late 80's. It's a renewal for the genre, with stories that address societal issues such as drugs or urban poverty.

¹⁸ *Ibid* p674

¹⁹ « America is back! » was one of Reagan campaign's slogan. However it also designated the idea in the early 80's that the USA were not at all in decline, but a strong country which had to keep its efforts against the URSS. It was followed with a huge cultural movement of glorification of the American Way of Life, values, and military strength.

²⁰ *Ibid* p679

²¹ GUENWALD, *Captain America #335*, November 1987

²² The Manifest Destiny is the idea that the USA have a mission: to spread their institutions, as well as the ideals of democracy and freedom, to all the world. It is a holy duty conducted under God's will.

²³ MILLAR, *Civil War #1-7*, May 2006- June 2007