

Truth, Justice, and the American Way (Whatever That Is):
Comic Book Superheroes and Political Projection

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TRUTH, JUSTICE, AND THE AMERICAN WAY (WHATEVER THAT IS)

Comic Book Superheroes and Political Projection

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I think you don't want to think of your superheroes as being liberal
or conservative. I think those guys should be above that.
—Mark Millar.¹

I. Introduction

Superman didn't always fight for truth, justice, and the American way. The phrase itself doesn't even originate from the comic books. It actually comes from the opening of the Superman radio show, which ran from 1940 to 1951. Every show would start like this:

Up in the sky! Look! It's a bird! It's a plane! It's Superman! Yes, it's Superman—strange visitor from another planet who came to Earth with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men. Superman—defender of law and order, champion of equal rights, valiant, courageous fighter against the forces of hate and prejudice, who, disguised as Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper, fights a never-ending battle for truth and justice!

You don't need x-ray vision to notice that it's still missing that key phrase. That's because I lied a little bit: every show would start like that *until 1942*. As the effort in World War II picked up, American listeners evidently needed a little more gas in the patriotic tank. *That's* when his never-ending battle was appended to include “the American way.”

It seems odd that a superhero would fight for truth, justice, *and* the American way. Shouldn't “the American way,” if it's any good, already *include* truth and justice? Well, perhaps it does, but not quite: what “the American way” entails, insofar as it pertains to the causes

¹ Michael Kantor and Laurence Maslon, *Superheroes! Capes, Cowls, and the Creation of Comic Book Culture* (New York: Crown Archetype, 2013), 267.

championed by superheroes, is a specific *definition* of truth and justice. Furthermore, it is a definition that is as prone to change and reinvention as American culture itself is, swinging left and right with wartime and peacetime, new presidents and developments, and general social trends.

This paper intends to make, and then investigate, several claims. The first is that the inherent nature—the ontological essence—of the superhero concept *is* political; that nothing in a society can be called a “hero,” let alone a *superhero*, without some kind of political weight attached to it. From there, I will attempt to untangle the exact political alignment of the superhero concept, and then I will trace its more visible ebbs and flows throughout the twentieth century to today. Then, I want to look at how our admiration of superheroes and our personal politics intersect by addressing the role comic books played in various elections of the 2000s. Lastly, I’ll assess the opposite of the superhero—the supervillain—to see how the various antitheses of “the American way” as judged by comic book writers are embodied by nefarious, evil characters.

II. What is a Superhero?

Before we begin our adventure, I would like you to participate in a little thought exercise. An experiment, if you will. Right now, I want you to think of real people that you may, for whatever reason, describe as “superheroes.” You don’t need any formal definition for this. I just want you to think for a moment—really, set down this essay for thirty seconds or so once you finish this sentence—and think about either real people you personally know, famous people you don’t know, or professions at large that come to mind when prompted by the phrase “superhero.” I’ll give you a little bit of time.

...have you got one yet? Or have you got several? Whatever the case, remember who or what you thought of, because they or it will be important later.

Danny Fingeroth, the former editor of Marvel's Spider-man comics, wrote that "a hero embodies what we believe is best in ourselves. A hero is a standard to aspire to as well as an individual to be admired."² When describing *superheroes*, though, there's an implied sense of distinguished escalation. The immediate assumption is that the "super" refers to their "super" powers or abilities, but "super" in the common sense means *especially* or *particularly*. A superhero may or may not have superpowers, and a hero can be just about anybody. But a *super hero* is someone *especially heroic*. Everything a regular hero is, or everything all the world's heroes put together are, a single superhero is the absolute pinnacle of. They're not just the best we could be, but the best anyone could possibly be, and they're not the best for a fleeting moment, they're the best *full-time*. "They're about imagining a better world," wrote Will Brooker, "and creating an alternate version of yourself—bigger, brighter, bolder than the real thing—to patrol and protect it."³

So when a comic book superhero is created, its creator(s) are projecting their own "bigger, brighter, bolder" selves onto the page. If I may borrow an old adage, they are being the change they want to see in the world, but vicariously. And when superheroes get popular, it's a sign of people agreeing with that vicarious change. Dissecting the moral compass of a specific hero tells us more than just their own backstory—it'll tell us something specific about the values, struggles, and beliefs of its individual creators, the society they were a part of, and even where they fit into that society.⁴ But unless that society dies the moment that superhero is born, then that society will

² Danny Fingeroth, *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us about Ourselves and Our Society* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 14.

³ Will Brooker, "We Could Be Heroes," in *What is a Superhero?*, ed. by Robin Rosenberg and Peter Coogan, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 11.

⁴ Chris Deis, "The Subjective Politics of the Supervillain," in *What is a Superhero?*, ed. by Robin Rosenberg and Peter Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 95.

inevitably change—and so will its values, struggles, and beliefs, and therefore, in turn, so will the superhero. As Fingeroth argues,

The superhero—more than even the ordinary fictional hero—has to represent the values of the society that produces him. That means that what, say, Superman symbolizes changes over time. In the 1950s, he may have been hunting commies. In the 1970s, he may have been clearing a framed peace activist against a corrupt judicial system. Either way—the hero does the right thing. Perhaps more importantly, he knows what the right thing is.⁵

This is where the discussion of the superhero enters the realm of the political. If a superhero represents the values of a society, and is capable and willing to do “the right thing” within that society, who’s to say, exactly, what those values are and what the right thing is? Political divides have always been founded upon differences in opinion on those very topics. It’s not necessarily as explicit as “is Aquaman pro-life?” or “does She-Hulk believe in small government?” No: it’s about larger, more abstract questions about what defines a hero in a given society, and the kinds of political alignments we can associate with the answers we come up with. Should a superhero follow the law to the letter and oppose those who break it, or should they skirt law and order to fight for the oppressed no matter what? This might be a trick question because legally speaking, a superhero is a vigilante. They all skirt law and order by definition, at least a little bit. Although some superheroes get around this by being canonically deputized law enforcers, whether justice is found inside or outside the law is all ultimately subsequent to that original sin of the genre.

Remember those real-life superheroes I asked you to think about earlier? I hope you do, because I would like to revisit them now. I would imagine that as far as professions go, your mind jumped to those who save lives on a daily basis, like firefighters and emergency medical

⁵ Fingeroth, *Superman on the Couch*, 17.

technicians. You also may have thought of those who are capable of extraordinary feats, like star athletes. Or maybe you thought of something less acknowledged but no less impressive, like a single mother with the endurance and drive to work three jobs while raising her kids. All these people could be considered superheroes in some sense, as could any other, depending on what you personally thought a “superhero” was. What unites them is that sense of reverent, distinguished escalation from what we think of as “normal.”



“Wow!”—Superman and Krypto admire a mural of police, firefighters, and other first responders. Art by Alex Ross.

They embody bravery, athleticism, selflessness, and other heroic traits to a degree far beyond what we think a “regular” person is capable of, and they do it every day. That is what makes them *super* heroes.

Where did you get your definition of a “superhero” from? Did you compare the people you thought of to fictional superheroes? Do you see people around you with the strength of Superman, the ingenuity of Batman, and the compassion of Wonder Woman? Or is the inverse true: do you read an X-Men comic and see Professor Xavier embodying a former mentor of yours, or Captain America charging into battle with the bravery of a friend you admire? *The characters that we define as superheroes influence the real people we think of as superheroes, and vice versa.* That point is going to be important going forward, because you may have noticed how apolitical my suggestions have been up to now.

Did you think of a police officer when you thought of a real-life superhero? It seems to make sense, because police officers are, ideally, defenders of the innocent and enforcers of the law. In practice, though, police have been under no shortage of fire in recent years for numerous

high-profile cases of abuse, brutality, and extrajudicial execution.

The Black Lives Matter movement has sought to frame this police behavior as *villainous*, and I'm sure that everyone would agree that things like corruption and abuse of authority are villainous activities. Yet some still trust the police and inherently think of a police officer as a heroic figure. This is a political decision. By trusting the police to do the right thing, you politically oppose those who do not trust them. This creates a very significant split in our society's values, and therefore, a split in what our society would consider a superhero.



Superheroes don't always wear capes. Happy [#NationalSuperHeroDay](#) to the men & women of ICE who protect & serve our nation everyday



A tweet from the Immigrant Customs and Enforcement agency's official twitter account, describing their officers as superheroes.

Who do you think is more of a superhero: someone who leads their family on an illegal journey across America's border to secure a better life that they never could have had otherwise, or an immigration officer who discovers, captures, and arranges for the deportation of anyone staying in the country unlawfully? Your answer will absolutely be informed by your political stance on illegal immigration, as well as your beliefs on how immigration law should be enforced.

Superheroes are characters that we're supposed to look up to, but the kinds of people we look up to are informed by our political beliefs—you don't get a lot of socialists admiring Ronald Reagan, for example. So when we look up to a superhero, when we choose to make them a character we admire and respect, we are doing so because they explicitly conform to our political beliefs. Otherwise, we wouldn't agree with them about what "the right thing" is and therefore wouldn't approve of their so-called heroics (if we didn't agree with Spider-man, we would all be like J. Jonah Jameson). However, in order to prevent their market from being fractured into heated political camps, the authors of superhero comics are very stingy with making explicitly political

characters. Their alignments are kept deliberately vague and, as I will explain shortly, the whole concept of a “superhero” is so ontologically contradictory that no one political camp can easily lay claim to most individual characters. Superheroes seem capable of embodying all of society’s values at once, including all the values that are in direct opposition to each other. As a result, anyone who admires a superhero will project their own political beliefs onto them as a sieve that filters out the values they disagree with. What is left is a character that conforms completely to the ideology of the individual reader, and the reader will assert that this is the most correct reading of this character. Any events that outright contradict this tailored interpretation are easy to brush off as “bad writing,” an “out of character” moment, or the coercive editorial bogeyman at work. To react to a crack in this faith with deep reflection on the political nature of one’s admiration of a character? That’s much harder, and doing so risks not being able to admire that character anymore, because *what if we’re wrong?*

This sieve approach to determining the political alignment of a superhero is crucial because without it, a superhero character is so politically contradictory that the question itself becomes meaningless. The most important thing to consider when analyzing or judging an individual superhero is that they are a *cumulative* product. Comic books are serialized, so the character’s personality and history is built one issue at a time and the writers, artists, and other personnel that write the issues periodically change. Sometimes, a character may appear in two or more ongoing series at once, and each book would have its own creative team writing the same character simultaneously. This lack of consistency in authorial authority means that any given writer can decide to adjust the political alignment of a character as they see fit, especially when they want to cast one political alignment in a more heroic light over another. As a result, superheroes can come to embody a gamut of radically different ideologies over their publication history, not just

depending on which writers take the helm (micro level) but also on which time period they were writing in (macro level). A superhero in a story from a relatively conservative decade like the 1950s might be ideologically unrecognizable beside its counterpart from a more liberal decade like the 1990s.⁶ But even amidst larger cultural trends, superheroes aren't always easily pigeon-holed, and may occasionally reflect the minority or niche opinion.⁷ For example, in the early years of World War II as the conflict was confined to Europe, the prevailing attitude in America was isolationist. The comic book creators at the time, being mostly



The cover to the first issue of *Captain America*, depicting the titular hero socking Hitler several months before the United States would formally enter the war.

working class Jewish immigrants, had very good reasons to be antsy about the war. They defied the mainstream by advocating for intervention and, to bolster their efforts, depicted their superheroes leading the charge.

So, superheroes are concepts that we inherently admire, but what we admire about them is constantly under threat of being changed by cultural tides or writers' whims. For a brief moment, I want to consider the opposite idea—that there is some pure, ultimate Superhero archetype that is immutable, enduring, and universal. If such an archetype exists, what *is* the inherent politics of the Superhero? As we've discussed, individual superheroes may change and waver, but at the very core of this superhero myth, there must be some kind of isolatable moral example. In order to find it, let's go back to the beginning, to those working class Jewish immigrants.

⁶ DiPaolo, *War, Politics, and Superheroes*, 21.

⁷ DiPaolo, *War, Politics, and Superheroes*, 11.

III. The Oscillating Ontology of the Superhero

Jerry Siegel, Joe Shuster, Bob Kane, Bill Finger, Will Eisner, Martin Nodell, Jack Kirby—all of them were Jewish writers and artists, and their liberal politics dominated the comic book industry in its nascent form.⁸ They were working in the late 30s and early 40s, in the shadow of the Great Depression and Roosevelt’s superheroic New Deal. The sweeping social reforms of the age stirred the pot of progressivism, and those socially conscious politics framed the environment these comic book creators were working in. The progressive political sympathies of the time and the working class values of the urban Jewish immigrants behind the desks and easels would be distilled into the heroes they created. These ideals, Mark DiPaolo says, were the ones that became the “ideological backbone of the comics industry,” and as a result, superhero comics have been “consistently more left-leaning than the rest of American popular culture” since their inception. So that’s that, then: the superhero, archetypically, is a progressive idea.⁹

Well, perhaps not. While some superheroes had the privilege of progressive, pre-war origins, the post-war comic book industry spent the bulk of its existence under the thumb of the Comics Code Authority. While a general set of guidelines based on the Hollywood Production Code of the 1930s was put in place by the Comics Magazine Association of America in 1948, it went largely unenforced.¹⁰ Concerned citizens (mostly parents of comic-reading children) were aghast at the graphic violence, glorified crime, and sexual content in comic books, so a moral panic swelled against the industry, reaching its zenith in 1954 with the publication of *Seduction of the*

⁸ Jason Dittmer, ““America is safe while its boys and girls believe in its creeds!’: Captain America and American Identity Prior to World War II,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 25 (2007): 406.

⁹ DiPaolo, *War, Politics, and Superheroes*, 21-22.

¹⁰ David Hadju, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How it Changed America* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009), 128-130.

Innocent, psychologist Fredric Wertham's infamous laundry list of comic books' corruptive effects on the youth. Wertham asserted that comic books led to juvenile delinquency, psychological poisoning, and just plain poor taste. He accused Superman of undermining "the authority and dignity of the ordinary man and woman in the minds of children."¹¹ The comic book scare eventually reached the Senate, where the subcommittee on juvenile delinquency brought publishers to Washington to defend their craft. Needing a way to quell the growing crusade against them without giving their whole industry over to government regulation, in 1954, the Comics Code Authority was established—a bigger and beefier update of the original CMAA guidelines that was expressly designed to appease outraged parents and disapproving politicians alike. It was, as you can imagine, written with a *slight* conservative slant. To take a brief glance:

Crimes shall never be presented in such a way as to create sympathy for the criminal, to promote distrust of the forces of law and justice, or to inspire others with a desire to imitate criminals...Policemen, judges, Government officials and respected institutions shall never be presented in such a way as to create disrespect for established authority...In every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal punished for his misdeeds....Respect for parents, the moral code, and for honorable behavior shall be fostered...¹²

With these restrictions in place, and with most wholesalers refusing to carry any comic books that didn't bear the CCA seal of approval, superheroes' Overton window of "the American way" was radically repositioned. Jiří Růžička claimed that if superheroes had to lie somewhere on the political spectrum, "they would most certainly lean to the right as they protect the traditional societal values based on a capitalist model."¹³ Under the CCA, that's all they *could* fight for. By being beholden to the strictly traditional values enforced by the CCA, superheroes—and comic

¹¹ Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York: Rinehart & Co., 1954), 98.

¹² U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, *Comic Books and Juvenile Delinquency: Interim Report*, 83rd Cong., 2d sess., 1955 (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1955).

¹³ Jiří G. Růžička, "American Superheroes and the Politics of Good and Evil," *New Presence: The Prague Journal of Central European Affairs* 12, no. 2 (2010): 46.



Superman makes a diplomatic offer to be King of Earth. Even if everyone in the United Nations votes “no,” what would—or could—they do to stop him? From: Leo Dorfman and Curt Swan, “Superman, King of Earth!” *Action Comics* 1.311 (April 1964).

books at large—were relegated to being plays of conservative morality. The CCA wouldn’t begin to loosen their ideological grip until the 70s, and the organization wouldn’t become totally obsolete until the 2000s. Comic books spent their most formative years in this cage of conservatism, and their time under its influence shaped the way that superheroes would act and think for the whole second half of the century and beyond.

While the CCA may have forced comic books to be conservative, there exists a deeper well of ideology that superheroes, as a concept, plumb all by themselves. I speak, of course, of authoritarianism. What could be more of an authoritarian power fantasy than that of the almighty superhero, the lone incredible being who decides themselves what is right and wrong, and how to punish those whose behaviors they deem to be in the latter camp? Josef Stalin, history’s second-favorite authoritarian, was even called the “man of steel.” Nickie D. Phillips and Staci Strobl claimed that “using authoritarian power to maintain a certain cultural, social, and political status

quo” is a “dominant part of many superhero comic books,”¹⁴ but I would go even further and say that it’s completely *integral*. Any superhero that appoints themselves as an upholder of their own sense of justice and righteousness, and uses force to punish those who act opposite that sense, is an authoritarian—and anyone who doesn’t do any of those things isn’t a superhero. The insidious aspect of this quandary is that even though we may recognize a superhero as an unrestrained, authoritarian vigilante, we may still *agree* with superhero. We look up to them and trust their judgement, and because they are fictional and because they are explicitly labeled the *hero*, there is no moral ambiguity in doing so. They’re an image of “friendly fascism.”¹⁵

Yet floating above all of these arguments about whether superheroes are progressives, conservatives, or authoritarians is an even more significant but simpler question: can a superhero even *be* anything? Umberto Eco wrote in “The Myth of the Superman” that the very nature of superheroes, serialized storytelling, and the comic book industry prevents the characters from engaging with, or even existing alongside, complex political stances. Instead,

Superheroes are forced to operate on a very simple, almost juvenile dichotomy of good and evil because any steps above that raise uncomfortable questions and political implications about what’s right and what’s lawful. So the superheroes play it safe: “evil” is ultimately boiled down to attempts to steal, extort, or destroy private property and livelihood, and “good” is the opposite, namely charity.¹⁶

According to Eco, the black-and-white world of the superhero is one that exists not just out of cowardice on the part of the writers and publishers, but also out of necessity. To inject political complexity into a superhero story is to kill the superhero.

¹⁴ Nickie D. Phillips and Staci Strobl, “The World is Shifting: Terrorism, Xenophobia, and Comic Books after 9/11,” in *Comic Book Crime: Truth, Justice, and the American Way*, ed. by Nickie D. Phillips and Staci Strobl (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 46.

¹⁵ Fingerioth, *Superman on the Couch*, 21.

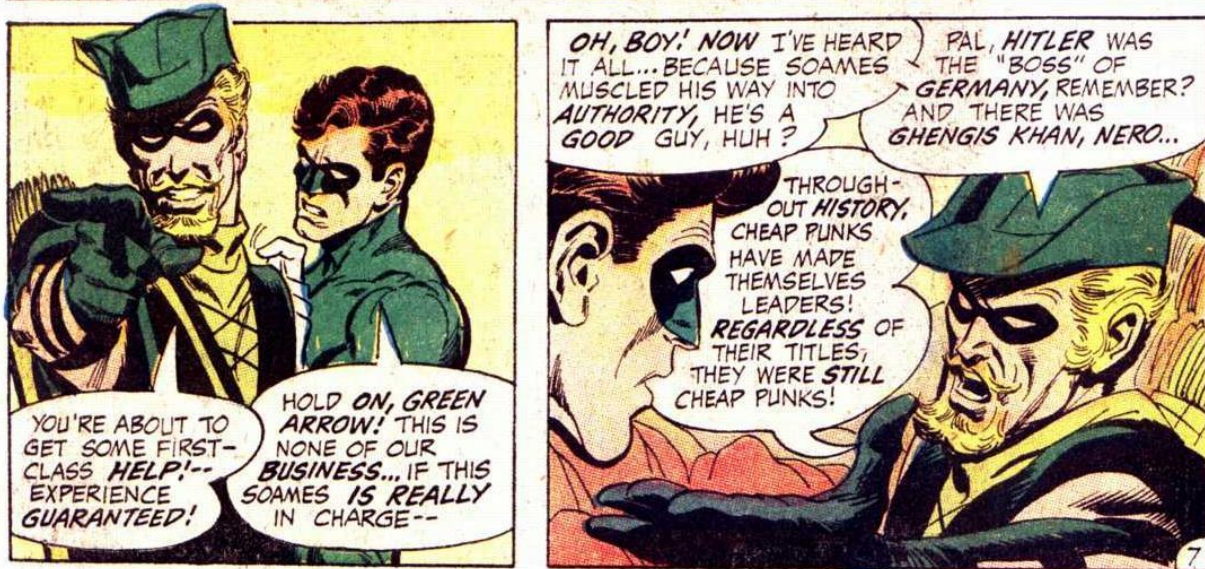
¹⁶ Umberto Eco, “The Myth of Superman,” *Diacritics* 2, no. 1 (1972): 22.

Eco wrote “The Myth of the Superman” in 1972, but as he was writing, DC Comics seemed to have been actively publishing a counterexample. From issue 76 in 1970 to 122 in 1979, writer Dennis O’Neil and artist Neal Adams were the team behind the company’s acclaimed *Green Lantern* series. Their run on the book would also be known as *Green Lantern/Green Arrow*, because both heroes shared the book and worked as a team throughout. In the Silver Age of comic books, these characters were rather underdeveloped, and the only crucial thing they had in common was the color of their costumes—but O’Neil saw this as an opportunity to reinvent the two as political opposites, and have their disagreements on what it meant to be a hero fuel the conflict of each issue.

O’Neil cast Green Lantern as a cosmic beat cop, not just someone who was at the beck and call of old and powerful authorities on the other end of the universe, but someone who never thought to question that relationship—until he crosses paths with Green Arrow. The emerald archer became more than just a nod to Robin Hood; he became an explicit update. In the 70s, Green Arrow was a radical champion of the oppressed, committed more to social justice than legal justice. His leftist philosophy would contrast sharply with Green Lantern’s casual conservatism, and it’s his influence that convinces Green Lantern to break his oath to the Guardians in order to expose a sleazy landlord. This dismissal of the Guardians’ authority incurs their wrath, however, and when Green Lantern begins to grovel in front of them, Green Arrow steps in:

Listen...forget about chasing around the galaxy!...And remember America...It's a good country...beautiful...fertile...and terribly sick! There are children dying...honest people cowering in fear...disillusioned kids ripping up campuses...On the streets of Memphis a good black man died [Martin Luther King, Jr.]...and in Los Angeles, a good white man fell [Harvey Milk]...Something is wrong! Something is killing us all...! Some hideous moral cancer is rotting our very souls!¹⁷

¹⁷ Dennis O’Neil and Neal Adams, “No Evil Shall Escape My Sight!” *Green Lantern* 1.76 (April 1970), 21.



When they discover that a cruel landowner has a whole mining town under his thumb, Green Lantern and Green Arrow have a fundamental disagreement about whether they should get involved. From: Dennis O'Neil and Neal Adams, "Journey to Desolation!" *Green Lantern* 1.77 (June 1970).

The stunned Guardians take in Green Arrow's words, and eventually, they admit that their distance from Earth may have put them out of touch with the injustices that occur there. They send one of their own to the planet, and the Guardian, Green Lantern, and Green Arrow climb in a pick-up truck (no superpowers for this trip) in search of "a special kind of truth." "There's a fine country out there someplace," quips Green Arrow, "let's go find it!"¹⁸

Their road trip across America would pit Green Lantern and Green Arrow not against spandex-clad supervillains, but against the very ills that were plaguing society in the 70s. They would come up against government corruption, exploitative industrialists, poverty, overpopulation, drug addiction, and in a mirror to current events, a murderous cult leader inspired by Charles Manson. All throughout the 70s, the series served as a way to throw superhero ideology against actual political problems, but through it all, while Green Lantern and Green Arrow may have learned from each other, neither ever truly changed their alignment.

¹⁸ Ibid., 23.

At least, neither changed their alignment under O’Neil’s tenure. As discussed earlier, as superhero comics go on, creative teams change. Writers and artists move on and are replaced. O’Neil wasn’t going to stay on one book forever! He left the book at the end of the 70s, and while he certainly left a memorable run behind him, control over the characters left his hands. Later authors would perpetuate, ignore, or even go back on O’Neil’s character decisions in later stories. For example, his left-leaning Green Arrow would be a stranger to the tougher, more conservative superhero written by Mike Grell between 1988 and 1993.

IV. Leaping Off the Page

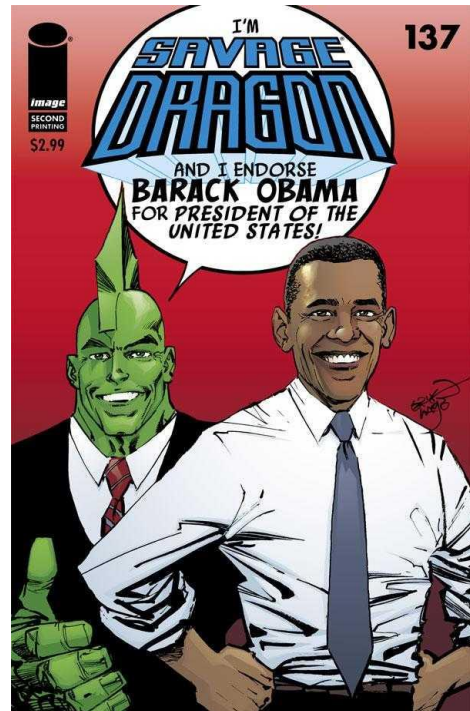
Despite the fluidity with which new writers and artists can work on superhero comics, superhero characters are owned, with few exceptions, by the companies that publish their comics, and like with any intellectual property, maintaining a superhero’s widespread appeal is very important. From a business perspective, it makes sense to keep superheroes’ political alignments as inoffensive as possible. For the most part, there’s a dedication to maintaining plausible deniability against angry accusations of left or right propaganda, and for staying pragmatic for the audience at large. Overtly political superheroes, like O’Neil’s Green Lantern and Green Arrow, are exceptions to the norm. Despite this corporate attempt to keep popular superheroes, shall we say, “neutral” in the face of certain political events, the real world sometimes co-opts superheroes anyway, stripping them from the vacuum-packed pages of the comics and reframing them for their own ideology. During the 2004 presidential election, for example, buttons sporting “Spider-man for John Kerry” were illegally distributed in Manhattan.¹⁹ In the 2008 election, there emerged an unofficial, jocular website endorsing “Batman for President” with the campaign slogan “No

¹⁹ Ibid., 14.

welfare. No taxes. No mercy,” and “revitalizing the inner city through capitalism, philanthropy, and two-fisted justice” as a platform.²⁰

Superheroes and superheroic imagery actually played a surprising role in the 2008 election, and may have contributed to Barack Obama’s sweeping popularity. The first big splash was on a variant cover of *Savage Dragon* issue 137, published by Image Comics, on which the titular superhero proudly endorsed the candidate (because Image allows character creators to retain the rights to their creations, the creator/writer of *Savage Dragon*, Erik Larsen, could make the endorsement of his own volition). This issue would prove immensely popular and sell out four print runs.²¹ Prolific comic book artist Alex Ross would also endorse Obama by depicting him as a superhero in a triumphant print—a print that became a popular t-shirt that would eventually find its way to Barack Obama himself.

Two months later, Obama would reveal in an interview with *The Telegraph* that he was an avid comic book collector, with the Marvel properties *Spider-man* and



The superhero Savage Dragon proudly endorses Barack Obama for president on the cover to *Savage Dragon* 1.137 (September 2008).



Barack Obama holds a t-shirt, featuring a print of him dressed as a superhero painted by Alex Ross, at a public event during his 2008 presidential campaign.

²⁰ “The Candidate Whose Day Has Come,” *Batman For President* (blog), January 31, 2008, <http://www.batmanforpresident.com/2008/01/31/hello-world/>.

²¹ Jonathan V. Last, “It’s a Bird, It’s a Plane, It’s...Obama,” *The Wall Street Journal*, last modified July 10, 2009, <https://www.wsj.com/article/SB124719493132621465.html>.

Conan the Barbarian being his favorites.²² When Obama won the election, Marvel capitalized on the publicity by featuring the story “Spidey Meets the President” as a back-up feature in *The Amazing Spider-Man* issue 583. Published one week before Obama’s inauguration, “Spidey Meets the President” has the wily web-slinger protecting the president from a would-be impersonator at his swearing in. Spider-man reflects on how Obama could have handled the supervillain threat all by himself and that “it looks like Washington is in capable hands,” effectively branding Obama a hero in his own right and informally endorsing the president-elect.²³

Whether unofficially through buttons and blogs, or officially through explicit or tacit endorsements, when a superhero vouches for a specific politician, it carries a lot of weight. It’s shorthand for a valuable political message: this candidate is a superhero. Being compared to a superhero suggests that the candidate and that superhero are cut from the same ideological cloth, and that they will have the same approach to truth, justice, and the American way that fans of the superhero may admire. In the wake of the housing crisis, lingering war on terror, and persisting recession, America needed a superhero to fix the mess. By embracing comic book culture, Barack Obama became that hero, and his hero-image played a significant part in his campaign of “hope and change.” Obama’s republican opponent, John McCain, wasn’t so lucky as to receive such special treatment, but as explained earlier in the paper, it’s against the nature of the superhero genre and larger comic book industry to lean right.

²² Jon Swaine, “Barack Obama: The 50 Facts You Might Not Know,” *The Telegraph*, last modified November 7, 2008, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/barackobama/3401168/Barack-Obama-The-50-facts-you-might-not-know.html.

²³ Zeb Wells and Todd Nauck, “Spidey Meets the President!” *The Amazing Spider-Man* 1.583 (January 2009), 28.

V. Supervillains: Super(straw)man

So what have we covered so far? We have established that superheroes are characters we inherently look up to and that we see them as our best possible selves. Our choice of personal heroes are, to an extent, influenced by our personal politics, which is why ideological harmony between an individual and a superhero is so important. Where a superhero's political alignment is ambiguous, an individual will project their own to fill in the gaps. Where it is explicitly contrary, they may simply ignore or disregard it. The ontological politics of a superhero are undeniably authoritarian, but simultaneously a mishmash of both progressive and conservative principles, which exist on a sliding scale depending on which superhero you're looking at and in which time period you're assessing them. I've provided Dennis O'Neil and Neal Adams' *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* series as an example of how one creative team politically invigorated previously bland superheroes, and then used aspects of the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections to demonstrate the connection between comic book and real-world politics. Where else to go from here? Well, we've been talking about nothing but superheroes...why not address the other side of the coin?

I'm a firm believer in demonstration through counter-example. How do you define, say, a potato? You go and find the one object in the world that is the complete opposite of a potato—something that embodies everything a potato isn't—and then you say “certainly not this.” So understanding the politics of a *supervillain* will be useful in determining the politics of the *superhero*. “The ideology of the supervillain is base,” wrote Chris Deis, “because the superhero and supervillain exist as mirrors of one another, the politics of the latter is further highlighted through comparison to the former.” He asserted further that the labels themselves—who is the

“hero” and who is the “villain”—are “wholly dependent on social context” and could easily be inverted depending on a certain reader’s point of view.²⁴

Comic book writer Grant Morrison, in his best-selling book *Supergods*, provides a lengthy list of the general shapes that supervillains have taken throughout the decades of the twentieth century. It’s impeccably apt, and I’ll sum it up in snippets here:

- 1930s:** “Enemies of the workingman: the corrupt bosses, machine men, and domestic tyrant...”
- 1940s:** “a parade of goose-stepping maniacs” from the Axis powers of World War II.
- 1950s:** the walking Red Scare, embodied by aliens, spies, and other shadowy suspects from Eastern Europe.
- 1970s:** “Killers, muggers, polluters, junkies, and deceivers of youth [or] Ernst Stravo Blofeld types...”
- 1980s:** The “sleazy, amoral corporate predator.”
- 2000s:** Villains who had already won, and whose victory threatens the heroes with obsolescence.²⁵

Even without naming any specific villains or schemes from these eras of comics, you probably still have a fairly good grasp on what Americans thought was “evil” at the time, and why they may have thought that. You can trace the political evolution of comic books from the progressive 30s to the patriotic parade of the mid-century, and then through the unspoken growth of the 60s to the easing of the CCA and potential for greater social commentary in the 70s. And then, the Reagan years of the 80s: capitalism run amok as villainous inspiration.

Political ideologies are easy to twist into supervillains because a supervillain, after all, is an extremist in a colorful costume. You’d have to be “extreme” in some way or another to be a supervillain at all. As a result, whenever a comic book writer wants to throw an entire ideology under the bus, all they have to do is create a supervillain that preaches a warped version of that ideology. The valiant hero, ever the steadfast moderate, knows better than to succumb to the dark road of radical tactics, and every villain vanquished is a victory for pragmatic centrism. Villains

²⁴ Deis, “The Subjective Politics of the Supervillain,” 97.

²⁵ Grant Morrison, *Supergods* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2011), 361-362.

like the Red Skull are easy examples of villainous Nazism, and he was followed by the communist menaces of the Crimson Dynamo, Red Ghost, and Red Guardian later on. Militant feminism was demonized by villains like Man-Killer in the 70s. The 80s, for all of their political volatility, gave rise to villains such as Nuke (a cybernetically enhanced and mentally unstable Vietnam veteran), Everyman (a disillusioned member of the lower class determined to avenge all those that the American dream failed), and Flag-Smasher (who opposes nationalism and patriotism in all forms).²⁶ You can see the pattern, I'm sure: as more ideologies worth demonizing appear, more supervillains are made to embody those ideologies.

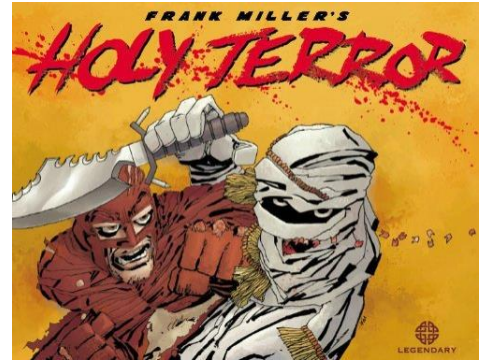


The anti-nationalist supervillain Flag-Smasher explains his politics in his first appearance. From: Mark Gruenwald and Paul Neary, "Deface the Nation," *Captain America* 1.312 (December 1985).

You would think that during the War on Terror there would have been a flood of villains inspired by Islamic extremists, but that well proved surprisingly shallow. Although Marvel explicitly acknowledged the attacks of 9/11 in a timely issue of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, and superhero comics as a whole have exploited political instability in the Middle East whenever it's been narratively convenient for them, there's not a single Islamic terrorist supervillain comparable to a war-foe figurehead like the Red Skull. Obviously, because Islam is a widely and internationally practiced religion and not a purely political ideology, it cannot be condensed into a single maniacal villain the way Nazis or communists could (and still can be) without causing wild controversy and offense.

²⁶ All of the villains I've listed in this section are from Marvel Comics. While this is an extreme generalization, Marvel seems to have a much richer stable of political supervillains than DC does.

This lesson is demonstrated by the scandal that surrounded Frank Miller's 2011 graphic novel *Holy Terror*, which was announced in 2006 as a project called *Holy Terror, Batman!* Originally pitched as a story where the caped crusader would "kick Al-Qaeda's ass," Miller said "it is, not to put too fine a point on it, a piece of propaganda...Superman punched out Hitler. So did Captain



Frank Miller's 2011 graphic novel *Holy Terror* was originally supposed to feature Batman fighting terrorists from al-Qaeda.

America. That's one of the things they're there for."²⁷ By 2008, however, Miller revealed that Batman was no longer a part of the story, and that it would instead star a new hero he created called "The Fixer." Upon release, it was met with the exact kind of response you would imagine. A review from *Wired* called it "one of the most appalling, offensive and vindictive comics of all time," worse than "a vulgar, one-dimensional revenge fantasy," and "a screed against Islam, completely uninterested in any nuance or empathy toward 1.2 billion people he conflates with a few murderous conspiracy theorists."²⁸ My point is that it's a lot harder to make a politically symbolic supervillain nowadays, especially in our current political climate of abstract, more amorphous threats to country.

The alternative is to retool old supervillains to fit new political ideologies instead. Occasionally, a supervillain will be used to subtly slight a specific figure. DiPaolo writes:

Like the great fables of the past, which disguised the fact that they were political satires by casting members of the animal kingdom in the roles of public figures, contemporary liberal superhero stories comment on real-life figures such as President Bush and Osama bin

²⁷ "Comic book hero takes on al-Qaeda," *BBC News*, last modified February 15, 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/4717696.stm>.

²⁸ Spencer Ackerman, "Frank Miller's *Holy Terror* is Fodder for Anti-Islam Set," *Wired*, last modified September 28, 2011, <https://www.wired.com/2011/09/holy-terror-frank-miller/>.

Laden by reinventing classic heroes and villains as commentaries on parallel figures in real life.²⁹

In DC Comics, Superman archenemy Lex Luthor was elected President of the United States in an arc that began in January 2001—an event that coincided perfectly with George W. Bush’s real-world election to the office. In 2008, Marvel Comics launched an event called *Dark Reign*, which dealt with supervillain Norman Osborne (alias the Green Goblin) becoming the director of the fictional government organization S.H.I.E.L.D. Occurring after Barack Obama was elected, the timing of the *Dark Reign* event could be traced to criticisms of Obama’s controversially conservative cabinet picks.



At the same time that George W. Bush was being inaugurated as President of the United States, so was supervillain Lex Luthor in *Lex 2000* 1.1 (January 2001).

During the 2016 election, Marvel condemned the swelling “alt-right” in the first issue of *Captain America: Steve Rogers* by depicting the Red Skull as a mouthpiece for their nationalistic, anti-immigrant rhetoric. He addresses a crowd of disgruntled, frustrated men:

I have just come from Europe—my homeland, in fact. And do you know what I saw there? It was an invading army. These so-called 'refugees'—millions of them marching across the continent, bringing their fanatical beliefs and their crime with them. They attack our women, bomb our cities. And how do our leaders respond, Do they push them back and enforce the borders, as is our sovereign duty? Of course not. They say, 'Here, take our food. Take our shelter. Take our way of life, and then take our lives.' Despicable. So it is good to be here, where some men still know how to fight. When I was a young man, there was a great war. And our two countries did not see eye to eye. But all sides—they all agreed on certain things. The fundamental responsibilities of a nation—protecting the land through strength. Preserving the heritage and culture of the people. Offering them opportunity. Now look at the world today. Look here—at the dead husk that was these 'United States.' How the mighty have fallen...Your entire culture is under siege. The principles this country was founded upon lost in the name of 'tolerance.' Your religion, your beliefs, your sense of community—all tossed aside like trash. And you cannot even speak out against it, lest you be called a bigot!³⁰

²⁹ DiPaolo, *War, Politics, and Superheroes*, 25.

³⁰ Nick Spencer and Jesús Saiz, *Captain America: Steve Rogers* 1.1 (July 2016), 8.

While designed to villainize the alt-right, this decision had its consequences: members of the alt-right began to share the page on forums, message boards, and social media, claiming that the Red Skull was the real hero that would make America great again, and far-right news site Breitbart criticized Marvel for their transparent attempt at smearing their beliefs and attacked the company for previous instances of “pushing far-left ideology.”³¹ Richard Spencer, the *de facto* leader of the alt-right (and no relation to the issue’s author Nick Spencer), tweeted in the aftermath of the release that “The Red Skull was right!”³² So the lesson to be learned here is that ideologies do not take kindly to being villainized, and that those who prescribe to villainized ideologies may perceive like-minded villains as heroes, harkening back to Chris Deis’s points about the relativity of the terms and emphasizing my own points about political projection and the ways in which our politics inform our role models.

There is one more way to create a political supervillain that I would like to address before we move on: when you cannot turn a single ideology into a supervillain, and when you cannot turn a supervillain into a politician, then you may *turn a politician into a supervillain*. Superheroes have mingled with depictions of sitting presidents before, but the interactions are typically inoffensive. It’s only very rarely that a politician will be directly villainized in the comics. This cuts out the middleman of symbolic representation and allows the writers to directly contrast the (villainous) politician with their (self-justifying) hero, and affords more specific, laser-focused critique of a specific individual. The most famous instance of this device was at the conclusion of *Captain America* volume 1, issue 175, where the star-spangled man foils the plan of the

³¹ Warner Todd Huston, “‘Captain America’ Comic Equates Criticism of Syrian Refugee Problem with Nazism,” *Breitbart*, last modified May 25, 2016, <http://www.breitbart.com/big-hollywood/2016/05/25/marvel-comics-captain-america-equates-criticism-syrian-refugee-problem-nazism/>.

³² Richard Spencer, Twitter post, May 25, 2016, 10:36 p.m., <https://twitter.com/richardbspencer/status/735675883625709569>.

megalomaniacal Secret Empire. He chases their leader to the White House, and while the identity of their “Number One” is never shown on-panel, it is strongly implied to be then-president Richard Nixon, who was embroiled in the Watergate scandal at the time of publication. In a rather grim turn of events, the revealed mastermind commits suicide, and the magnitude of this reveal pushes Captain America to temporarily retire from the mantle.³³

Outside of comic books, Barack Obama’s superhero savviness was turned against him when unofficial posters of him as the Joker began appearing in U.S. cities shortly after his election. These posters depicted the president in the villain’s clown make-up from



Captain America unmasks the leader of the Secret Empire, who is implied to be then-president Richard Nixon. From: Steve Englehart and Sal Buscema. “...Before the Dawn!” *Captain America* 1.175 (July 1973).

the film *The Dark Knight* (2008) and were frequently attached to the accusatory caption “socialist”; they became a viral sensation and a popular symbol of protest for conservatives.³⁴

A more recent example of politician/villain hybridity comes, again, from the 2016 election season. In the first *Spider-Gwen Annual*, then-candidate Donald Trump is villainized as the cybernetic being M.O.D.A.A.K. (**M**ental **O**rganism **D**esigned **A**s **A**merica’s **K**ing, a play on the classic villain M.O.D.O.K.), who appears to have enslaved a group of Latinos. This story took a very heavy-handed stance against the then-candidate, depicting him as (literally) big-headed, bigoted, ignorant (the “filthy foreigners” he has enslaved are actually from Waco, Texas), and

³³ Steve Englehart and Sal Buscema. “...Before the Dawn!” *Captain America* 1.175 (July 1973), 18.

³⁴ Ben Walters, “Why the Obama as Joker poster leaves a bad taste in the mouth,” *The Guardian*, last modified August 5, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2009/aug/05/obama-as-joker-poster>.

defensive of his “powerful hands.”³⁵ M.O.D.A.A.K. is defeated by an alternate version of Captain America who is a black woman, and that character decision represented an extra mile walked to rebuke the chauvinistic and white supremacist rhetoric that was so prevalent in his campaign. The response to this issue was predictably polarizing: the site ScreenRant reported the issue with tight-lipped amusement³⁶, Slate sarcastically groaned that “this Marvel comic book making fun of Trump will surely bring about his political downfall,”³⁷ and Breitbart reported once again that their ideology was under attack.³⁸



Donald Trump as the big-headed, small-handed villain M.O.D.A.A.K. From: Jason Latour and Chris Visions, "Captain America," *Spider-Gwen Annual* 1.1 (August 2016).

VI. Conclusion

What can be drawn from this walk through the world of comics? When I began this essay I did so with the intent of pinning down that nebulous yet persistent idea of “the American way” as it manifests in the escapades and philosophies of comic book superheroes. What I’ve uncovered is that “the American way” is not necessarily the right way nor the left way, but whichever way the winds are blowing that day. Roger Stern, who edited *Captain America* comics in the 80s, once responded to a fan’s letter by saying his hero fought not for the American way, but the American

³⁵ Jason Latour and Chris Visions, “Captain America,” *Spider-Gwen Annual* 1.1 (August 2016), 16-17.

³⁶ Jasmin Mohamed, “Marvel Comics Introduces Donald Trump Inspired Villain MODAAK,” *ScreenRant*, last modified July 2, 2016, <http://screenrant.com/marvel-comics-donald-trump-modaak/>.

³⁷ Matthew Dessem, “This Marvel Comic Book Making Fun of Trump Will Surely Bring About His Political Downfall,” *Slate*, last modified July 2, 2016, http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2016/07/02/see_marvel_completely_destroy_donald_trump.html.

³⁸ Daniel Nussbaum, “Marvel Turns Donald Trump into Comic Book Villain,” *Breitbart*, last modified May 25, 2016, <http://www.breitbart.com/big-hollywood/2016/07/01/marvel-turns-donald-trump-comic-book-villain/>.

dream—“And anyone who thinks the American Way comes anywhere close enough to the Dream is living in a fool's paradise.”³⁹

And what is the American dream, if we want to apply that to superheroes, too? I'll be brief: if superheroes are agents of the American dream, then everybody dreams of a world where burly men and women in tight, colorful costumes and capes will beat up everyone who disagrees with them. They dream that those superpowered Galahads will serve the law and dole out justice in a way that perfectly aligns with how the individual thinks it should be done. They dream that, if they're so inclined, Spider-man attends socialist book clubs, or on the opposite end, that he extolls the virtue of Ayn Rand (which he actually did once). We want superheroes to smash politically vile villains like the Red Skull, unless of course we agree with the Red Skull, in which we would either think of Red Skull as the hero or want our hero to be more like the Red Skull.

And in Nick Spencer's currently ongoing *Captain America: Steve Rogers* series, that's the situation. Under Spencer's *Secret Empire* story arc, Captain America has been cosmically altered into being a loyal, lifelong agent of the Nazi-adjacent organization Hydra. He has taken over Hydra himself, locked most of the Marvel Universe's superheroes off of the planet with a planetary forcefield, and begun conquering the world as a dictator. This character, created by two Jewish men for the express purpose of punching fascists and motivating others to do the same, has *become* a fascist, and this complete ideological turnaround of a character synonymous with America is occurring immediately after the upset election of Donald Trump—but according to an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, “Spencer and Marvel editor-in-chief Axel Alonso insist that...*Secret Empire* has little to do with contemporary political parallels.”⁴⁰

³⁹ Peter B. Gillis and Jerry Bingham, “The Sins of the Fathers!” *Captain America* 1.246 (June 1980), 18.

⁴⁰ Christian Holub, “title,” *Entertainment Weekly*, last modified April 7, 2017.

<http://ew.com/books/2017/04/07/secret-empire-creators-preview-captain-americas-assault-on-the-marvel-universe/>.

If there is a single thing I could boil all of this down to, it is this: Nick Spencer and Axel Alonso are wrong. If superheroes, who they are, what they fight for, and why they fight are defined by *anything*, it's contemporary politics.

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