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Foreign policy in media: an examination of the Captain America films.

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FOREIGN POLICY IN MEDIA: AN EXAMINATION OF THE *CAPTAIN AMERICA* FILMS

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my closest confidants and cheerleaders

Valerie Smith,

Randy Hernandez, and

Justin O'Reilly

who relentlessly supported me in my quest for higher education and provided me with the tools and resources necessary for success.

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ABSTRACT

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Kathryn Hernandez

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Popular culture and media are consumed daily by billions around the world, media which can contain meaningful and politically relevant material. The three Captain America films from the 2010s represent this phenomenon in the presentation of Captain America as a nationalist superhero with geopolitically relevant storylines. The direction and production of these films illustrate significant parallels to foreign policy choices of the United States. Through an interpretive analysis of the Captain America films: *Captain America: The First Avenger*, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, and *Captain America: Civil War*, this project seeks to analyze Captain America's image and innate representation as superior and dominant. Important moments from each film were collected and categorized in order to create a cohesive understanding of important themes, narratives, and messaging present in the movies. Establishing the presence of politically relevant material within the Marvel Cinematic Universe opens a door for future research pertaining to other fictional characters within this world, as well as the substantive effects on the audience.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: THE HERO

Steve Rogers, Captain America, is "a symbol to the nation. A hero to the world. The story of Captain America is one of honor, bravery, and sacrifice. Denied enlistment due to poor health, Steven Rogers was chosen for a program unique to the annals of American warfare. One that would transform him into the world's first super-soldier" (*Captain America: The Winter Soldier* 2014, 18:26). A hero from a classical age both within the world of the films he inhabits and the real world, Captain America is nothing short of a popular culture icon. Unfrozen from ice in his story, reborn into the modern era with his place in the popular Marvel Universe films, Steve Rogers is the quintessential American hero, as patriotic and as recognizable as G.I. Joe or the Marine Corps. His character, developed through decades of comic book creators, illustrates a persona dedicated to his country, willing to sacrifice everything to protect it, and proudly adorned with its symbols. This project analyzes the representation of Captain America and the "Americanness" portrayed throughout the characters and the storylines (Schmid 2020). Understanding how media portray politically relevant characters and narratives illuminates the importance of popular culture and lays the foundation for additional substantive research on the impact of this popular culture genre.

Beyond the hit *Avengers* films, the pillars of his resurgence are the three *Captain America* movies which serve as the primary sources of data for this analysis. These movies were released in the same decade and gained a lot of support from citizens around

the world. They show how popular culture might reveal political messaging, and be consumed and enjoyed transnationally. The widescale success of these films, with strong themes and geopolitical plotlines, makes them worth exploring. These movies have made more than half a billion dollars since their theater release and psychical disc premiere, with *Captain America: Civil War* earning more than a billion dollars in box office tickets and home theater sales ("Captain America: Civil War (2016) Financial Information"). The Captain America franchise was extremely successful and popular, in part due to its top tier cast and its placement into the wider Marvel Cinematic Universe. In addition to the money made from the film screenings, their success with fans has led to increased revenue from official merchandise and events like Comic-Con as well as a commitment to the character through fan art, cosplay, fanfiction, or themed spaces.

The wide reach of these movies speaks to their relevance as significant artifacts of popular culture. This distinction, as well as the overt symbolism of the primary protagonist, contributed to the selection of these movies. Mostly, though, these films were chosen due to the close adaptation of the original comic book series previously analyzed in the work of scholar Jason Dittmer (2005; 2007; 2012; 2013). Taking inspiration from the significance of his observations and the inherently political nature of a "nationalist superhero," I wanted to show how the films worked as a transition from the comics (Dittmer 2013, 7). This observation contributes to the novelty of this project, builds upon current political science research, and provides a framework for additional research into Captain America content.

The selection of Steve Rogers to earn the title of Captain America is an important part of the film franchise, and becomes particularly pertinent in regards to the portrayal of

American values. While strength and bravery can be found in many different members of the United States military, Captain America as a noble and worthy superhero is directly connected to the personality and worthiness of Rogers. He is meant to represent the best of what America has to offer: humble, willing to sacrifice himself, patriotic, strong, and determined. He outshines his fellow soldiers not merely in his physical strength, but also by using his mind, his kindness, and his consideration of the team. Yet, he humbly claims that there is nothing special about him. He does not see his circumstances as a result of any superior characteristics, for he is "just a kid from Brooklyn" (*Captain America: The First Avenger* 2011, 1:34:43). His inability to see his own capabilities is a positive character attribute that reveals his pure and superior morals. He is humble and struggles to acknowledge his position, often having to be reminded or reassured of his responsibilities and capabilities.

Though there have been other Captain America films produced since the introduction of his comics, dating back to the 1940s and including some animated, made for television, and live action movies, they did not pertain to the scope of this project as they reflect alternative interpretations of the titular hero primarily due to their focus on domestic issues and place Captain America in scenarios of fighting low-stakes crime. Additionally, focusing only on the three *Captain America* films of the 2010s allowed me to observe overarching themes and narratives that contribute to the success of the film transition and the maintenance of political messaging found within the original comics. The creators of the 2010s *Captain America* films utilize the continuous setting and characters to build upon stances and themes established in the preceding movies. Clouding these themes with different portrayals of Captain America, creators, stories, and

characterizations could have resulted in a loss of these continuities and the merit they add to the analysis.

The Captain America films released prior to the films utilized in this analysis include made for television productions like the 1979 movie *Captain America* as well as longer and more intensive projects released in theaters such as the 1990 film also titled *Captain America*. Although the film or television adaptations provide a plethora of data for an intensive analysis of Captain America comic adaptations, the primary one worth noting for this particular project is the first of these works, the 1944 black-and-white film *Captain America* which brought the character from the page to the screen for the first time. While this is novel and noteworthy in its own right, this film is not included in this analysis due to its stark differences to the modern content this project focuses on. Additionally, the important themes included in and shaped by this analysis such as symbolism, American exceptionalism, and geopolitical importance are not important themes present in the 1944 film. In fact, the basic components of the film work against these categories of analysis and would not contribute to the results of this project. This film falls more in line with similar film projects of the era rather than a new form of material established in the comics. Finally, the 1944 *Captain America* movie reflects domestic issues in ways that contrast the placement of Captain America in the international system within the *Captain America* films utilized in this project. The movie acts as a crime drama, following Captain America and local police officials in the search for the leader of a criminal organization, existing within Hollywood as a film noir rather than a traditional superhero action film. Future research would benefit from observing this film, both as an adaptation on its own and as a comparative project of multiple

movies. On its own, this movie could be analyzed as a form of using Captain America to produce rhetoric on domestic issues, exemplifying American strength and the sanctity of American laws, or as an example of advanced biological technology shown in Captain America content. As a comparative project, it would be interesting to observe how different film projects approach the legacy of Captain America and how an increase in comic book material produces a variety of politically relevant outcomes. Since this is the introduction of Captain America in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, for the purposes of this project, a reference to "the first film" points to the first of the three *Captain America* movies produced in the 2010s.

The analysis of the films focuses on organizing and interpreting data in three categories: symbols, American exceptionalism, and geopolitical importance. These categories drove the analysis and interpretations. The representation of symbols is present throughout each of the movies, woven into the plot lines, dialogue, costumes, set, and Captain America's image and organizations. Categorized data related to American exceptionalism included dialogue, scene blocking, the relationship between Captain America and the other characters within the film, and the presentation of Cap's villains. Data categorized as geopolitically important include the presence of existing international organizations, narratives about America's standing in the world, transnational conflicts, or depicted parallels to U.S. foreign policy decisions. The categories utilized here were helpful in maintaining focus on key concepts. Sticking to these categories contributed to a concentrated analysis of specific material, collected to answer a specific question. Furthermore, the focusing on these categories limited the analysis to testing Dittmer's findings in the context of comic to big-screen transition.

In this project, I seek to analyze three artifacts of pop culture and determine the presence of politically relevant themes, messages, character development, and narratives within the three *Captain America* films. This analysis strives to observe how fictional media contribute to a conversation on American success and the representation of American actions and superiority. I begin this project by exploring existing literature that observes fiction through the lens of political relevance, symbolism, similar analytical methods, and comic book analyses. Then, I explore concepts such as nationalist superheroes, as defined by academics in their own research. From there, I analyze-the films as the primary text and observe the change in media format. This comparison provides a novelty to the project and acts as an advancement to existing research. The next portion of the project goes over the coding process and the primary claims made by the leading scholar in this field. These overarching claims stem from a multitude of articles and books surrounding Captain America comics and the themes, messages, and important stances Captain American content conveys for both domestic and international audiences. These claims are related to the geopolitical importance of Captain America, particularly in his role as a leading nationalist superhero. The following section outlines the data collected and describes overarching themes, messages, and the presentation of character shown in the three Captain America movies released in 2011, 2014, and 2016. The final section will connect these analyses together to interpret findings of how modern Captain America adaptations convey the traits and characteristics cited in the majority of Dittmer's Captain America academic literature and relate to the legacy outlined in the comics. Finally, this project suggests future research that explores the relationship

between pop culture and themes of international relations, foreign policy directives, and U.S. military action.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This project exists at an intersection of political science and popular media studies and benefits from literature related to multiple fields of study. Political science literature establishes a methodological foundation for this project. Additionally, scholars explore the political importance of fictional characters in media, particularly as fiction pertains to policy preferences and out-group perceptions. A much smaller field of political science literature explores the role of nationalist superheroes in both international and domestic contexts. Because much of this literature has focused on superhero comics, this project builds upon this literature through its application to film adaptations. In addition to the relevant political science literature, work in other academic fields like psychology, sociology, and communications focuses on social importance of popular culture characters or themes that influence audiences. The findings of this research show how popular culture reflects and re-affirms political values.

The Political Importance of Fictional Characters

Fiction is a widely inclusive section of entertainment, including dozens of formats, genres, and audiences. Numerous studies focus on a variety of different topics, shows, and salient issues. As it is with all major categories of entertainment and information, the more specific the field, the more detailed the results of the research. With fictional media as a whole, there is too much content and too many details out there to provide researchers with a comprehensive answer as to the political relevance of all fictional characters of any one piece of popular culture. Focusing on more specific facets

of fictional characters, or in-depth analyses of individual characters within large-cast productions, however, provides a limited scope that is useful for determining how plotlines, themes, and characters can contribute to political discourse through their media.

A considerable number of studies explores the importance of fictional characters, particularly in modern media, with some focusing on individual roles and others taking an aggregate look into genre and format. Mutz and Nir (2010) explore television show characters and their impact on policy preferences in the United States. They examine crime dramas to evaluate the impact of shows on opinions towards the death penalty and perceptions of the criminal justice system. Their small sample limits the meticulous attention needed to establish substantive results, though they find a correlation between fictional dramas and policy preferences. Also in the television genre, Swigger (2017) establishes the influence of sitcoms on preferences for reproductive rights and birth control access. These studies show that fictional television has a priming effect on human participants and that the positive portrayal of a character can earn the audience's empathy and inflate any effect on policy preferences (Swigger 2017; Mutz and Nir 2010).

In analyses of the political relevance of fictional television programming, various scholars observe characters, themes, narratives, and the form or strength of citizen engagement (Zoonen and Wring 2012; Ramasubramanian 2011; Hoewe and Sherrill 2019; Street and Scott 2011). In some cases, these analyses can be related to fantasy characters that are far removed from traditional realities. In other cases, popular media characters that are relatable, deserving of sympathy, and everyday people can influence perceptions (Ramasubramanian 2011; Zoonen and Wring 2012). In one study, having non-white characters prominently featured in fictional television or film correlated to

shaping white "viewers' level of support for governmental policies promoting out-group causes" (Ramasubramanian 2011, 509). This correlation, argues Ramasubramanian, is reliant upon positive portrayal of out-group members in order to "undermine existing negative stereotypical beliefs" (2011, 510). A similar study by Hoewe and Sherrill (2019) about female leaders in political dramas found a connection with political engagement among women viewers of shows like *Madam Secretary* and *The Good Wife.* These shows were sampled due to their primary female protagonist, their liberal stances on civil rights, and the portrayal of black characters (2019). Representation of marginalized groups in popular culture conveys acceptance and normalcy in women and people of color participating in civic engagement, communicating to viewers "counterstereotypical information" (Ramasubramanian 2011, 510). These studies on women and people of color found an increase in political engagement, political independence, political interest, or out-group sympathy related to fictional characters portrayed on television. This established research primarily focuses on the effects of popular culture characters and politically relevant plot lines. Their work is less focused on the minute details exhibited in the media than on societal changes for audiences. Both types of literature contribute to the conversation about popular culture and political relevance while feeding the continuation of this research. If academic work did not explain the real-world implications of this content, there would be no room for interpretive analysis of the subject matter. Interpretive analysis, by contrast, provides nuance to the reasons that these works could have an effect on society.

Symbols in Popular Culture

A broad literature articulates the importance of symbols. Political scientists, analyzing a wide variety of topics, emphasize the role of symbols in all sorts of civic

engagement (Dittmer 2005; Šifta and Chromý 2017; Burnier 1994). Though political symbols can differ in form, nature, and portrayal, superheroes – particularly nationalist superheroes – are a relevant symbol closely associated with the countries they represent (Garrett 2014). Garrett's analysis of Hong Kong's 2013 protests exemplifies this phenomenon, with President Obama "parodied, mocked, and ridiculed" designed as a warped version of Captain America as George Orwell's "Big Brother" (2014, 112). This real-life occurrence of popular culture icons actively penetrating society emphasizes the claim that "the production and consumption of popular culture" contribute to "symbolic aspects of national identity" (Dittmer 2005, 626). DiPaolo's exploration with the DeviantArt platform depicted an "array of portrayals of Obama as a superhero figure" (DiPaolo 2011, 15). Superheroes and political figures are thus adaptable symbols that can be used either for support and or criticism. In Garrett's observations, communities in other countries utilized the Captain America uniform and stylization to mock the United States by presenting him as a "caped crusader threatening the world" (Garrett 2014, 112). This characterization is starkly different from positive associations to strength and leadership by fans of the series. According to Dittmer (2012), nationalist superheroes have a "generic status as defenders of the status quo" that allow them to be malleable in order to fit the stories of journalists (Dittmer 2012, 154). The superhero, as a publicly identifiable popular culture character, can be used to appeal to audiences of all kinds.

Nationalist superheroes as territorial symbols have a unique ability "to embody and to narrate" their country in ways more traditional symbols cannot (2005, 630). They are also recognizable by a wide variety of individuals, allowing other formats and

organizations to use the established character as a symbol for communicating their own messages. They serve as a source of entertainment as well as a politically relevant actor.

Interpretive Analysis as a Method

Content and discourse analysis are related methods that are commonly used in this field of research. They are particularly useful for projects related to comic books and film. They give researchers the ability to use the content as the primary data source and allow for more direct and meaningful interpretations. Many components can be included in the content analysis, including the writing style, art style, messaging, protagonists and villains, and the crises being solved. This usefulness allows for a wide variety of directions that research can take, each resulting in their own implications for political and social relevance.

While content and discourse analysis focus on quantitative research and the frequency of specific aspects within text, interpretive analysis alleviates the restrictions of text and allows for an interpretation of visuals as well as words. Films, music, dance, and art can be interpreted for messaging for a variety of reasons. According to Carpenter (2016), interpretive analysis of popular culture can be used to "help students or policymakers comprehend real-life policy through fictional metaphors" (2016, 54). Additionally, interpretive analysis can provide nuance to developing fields of academia wherein the effects of popular culture are studied (2016). These contributions have been particularly relevant in international relations (IR) literature. Young and Carpenter argue that a turn to popular culture in IR research has "tended to treat popular-cultural artifacts as political texts themselves, approaching them in interpretive modes rather than testing hypotheses about their impact" (Young and Carpenter 2018, 563). This type of work speaks to politically relevant discourse reaching a variety of audiences or establishing

dominating themes in global media, but falls short of explaining forms of narrative impact and can always be built upon to provide substantive findings of effect.

The Influence and Relevance of (Superhero) Comic Books

Much of the literature specifically exploring the relevance of comic books focuses on audience response and studies children and their perceptions of groups, situations, and developing ideas about gender roles and stereotypes (Hirschfelder et al. 1999; Kort-Butler 2012; Dinella et al. 2017; Philips 2022). Hirschfelder et al. (1999) investigate how the portrayal of indigenous populations in superhero television cartoons affect stereotypes of indigenous peoples understood by children. Stereotypes, put forward explicitly and implicitly in storylines, combined with militant violence to perpetuate beliefs related to Black and indigenous groups in America affect the children reading them (Hirschfelder et al. 1999; Philips 2022). Though narratives and storylines vary from comic to comic, character to character, and sometimes from one format to another, superhero comics often share a similar foundation in how their story progresses. According to Dinella et al., superhero stories often feature a "male protagonist" with "male sex type traits such as aggressive, outspoken, and leader" (Dinella et al. 2017, 263). This assessment, an interpretation adopted by other scholars (see Dittmer 2013, Stevens 2015, Edy and Castleberry 2021), extends to a representation of predominately white, male superheroes exemplifying a "hard, masculine state" protecting "the soft, feminine nation" wherein the heteronormative character traits of male superheroes permeate the major themes and messages of superhero content (Dittmer 2013, 28). Each of these studies articulates an effect of the comic book content, though the strength of this effect is varied. The most common result depicted an impact on children's perceptions. The author encourages future research as to whether these perceptions transitioned to "other domains" such as

television or film adaptations (Dinella et al. 2017). Although these articles are exploring an impact, their motivator is the content of the superhero media with a specific focus on character development and themes or metaphors within the episodes. Each of these articles includes a component of interpretive analysis, collecting observations from the television shows in order to study their effect on particular groups.

Comic books, and the characters within them, reveal varying degrees of political relevance, with "ideological and political messages" included sparingly and "strategic political communication" as a major component of the content (Brantner and Lobinger 2014, 249). Through analysis of the television or film work, the form, content, character of the comic books universe differentiate the politically important content from those that inadvertently reference a politically salient event or issue. Brantner and Lobinger (2014) utilize the term "politainment" to describe this crossover, connecting social engagement to a "humorous form" of political messaging (2014, 249). The term is broad and encompasses many different forms of political entertainment included in comic books and their characters. Entertaining political messaging stemming from comic books can include formats from the political cartoon in the local newspaper or large-scale television adaptations by major media production companies to the appropriation of comic book places and characters for campaigns and opinion editorials. While some content may mock or parody political figures, criticizing their actions of beliefs as political actors, other elements may contribute to conversations on political issues. Marvel is viewed as a major political actor, creating storylines that are politically relevant at a given time, as well as producing characters and plotlines that take stances on national security, privacy

laws, terrorism, conflict, and American institutions (Veloso and Bateman 2013; Dittmer 2012).

Furthermore, the varying degree of political relevance is related to the role of the political component within its story. The primary points of political relevance could be connected to the main protagonist, to the territorial setting of the comic, or to the plot points (Dittmer 2005). Each of these formats can result in long-term associations with political issues or single-issue references. When discussing the political relevance of comic books, Marc DiPaolo (2011) considers points in history when superhero creation came about in comics, with "classic comics" and the "most successful film and television adaptations" occurring in times of "political turbulence" (DiPaolo 2011, 1). Examples of this phenomenon are found both within the Captain America origin story as a character developed in the time of World War II and with the publishing of the X-Men comic book series in 1963. These comics were the "zenith of post-Civil Rights left social movements" and contained narratives and plot lines about "social and cultural differences" that speak to tensions of the civil rights era (Fawaz 2011, 357). Popular and identifiable comic book characters, with origins founded in domestic or internationally salient issues, inherently become politicized figures, "making explicit the mutually constitutive relationship between fantasy and political life" (2011, 357). This relationship, wherein conflict brings about the superhero characters who then speak on new and continuing societal issues, are symbiotic with sales and substantive value feeding each other.

According to Dittmer (2005), creators convey politically relevant messaging to their audience. He argues that "through the medium of their comic book, [artists and writers] help develop structures of expectations that consequently influence the way

readers view the world and locate their own place as Americans within it" (Dittmer 2005, 627). The platform, established by edition-loyal readers, allows comic books to reach individuals before they become politically engaged, either due to the youth or low political interest of most comic book readers (2005). Politically salient storylines for individual comics with territorial and patriotic character traits contribute to the political relevance of many superhero comics and speak to the type of political engagement that popular culture fictional content can have with consumers.

Film and Television Adaptations

Superhero comic book adaptations in other formats are not studied as extensively as the original paper forms. Comic books, due to their long shelf-live and multi-decade storylines, allow for the large collection of data related to political relevance. Researchers are able to follow one series, in one or more settings, through time-series analysis that yields substantive research results. Adaptations are more restricted. For adaptations, the original content must already be firmly established and have a following worthy of re-creation. In the case of Captain America, the first movie adaptation was in 1944, just years after the first comic book was published. This release was followed by a television show in the 1960s, more than twenty years after the first comic book and the first film adaptation was released. In the time between the first Captain America comic book issue and the format adaptations, a multitude of politically relevant and influential comics was released each year. Furthermore, the films are individual experiences and cover only a fraction of the storylines available from original comics. The two- to three-hour runtime of each film restricts the substantive content that can be taken from them.

Moreover, comic books and their adaptations suffer from a "reputation as low-brow, allegedly inferior text forms [that are] often not been taken seriously enough to be

analyzed and discussed in depth" (Maruo-Schröder 2018, 1). Much of the literature surrounding superhero films is related to the innovative and revolutionary contributions Marvel superhero films had to the realm of Hollywood blockbuster movies or the success of their ticket sales (see Brinkner 2016, Rauscher 2010, Pagello 2013). However, comic book adaptations to the screens can convey meaningful political messages. This phenomenon is shown through Hagley and Harrison's (2013) analysis of *The Avengers* wherein the authors' abstract interpretations of the heroes, the conflict, and the villain as a representation of the political climate in post-September 11th America. According to Hagley and Harrison, "the efforts of the Avengers [in the film] are representative of the melding of various nationalist identities for a common cause and highlight the resilience of the American people after the September 11th attacks" (Hagley and Harrison 2013, 124). Though these commercial films are produced to achieve commercial success, the overarching themes and metaphors can nonetheless produce substantive messages for viewers. Two major production companies, Marvel and Warner Bros. – producing Marvel and DC movies respectively – create and release films related to the "permanent state of the (Western) world under attack," a trope introduced post-September 11th (Maruo-Schröder 2018, 3). Marou-Schröder (2018) explains both Marvel and DC movies and their themes of vigilante superiority in terms of evading and ignoring justice systems. According to her interpretation, their positions as heroes and the crises they face require them to work outside of political institutions, which is both understood and accepted by viewers due to the "greater good" motif utilized in production (Maruo-Schröder 2018, 6). Prior research addresses the films about Batman, The Incredible Hulk, Superman, Iron Man, and Captain America.

George Gonzalez analyzes the superhero television show *Justice League Unlimited* and its representation of anti-establishment values and portrayal of "rampant and ominous militarism" by the United States government post-September 11th (2016, 6). In this show, overarching themes and symbols create "political art" that gives insight into social issues, and exemplifies a loud voice of dissent reaching a substantial audience (2016, 12). Gonzalez studies individual episodes and discusses how their themes, representation of characters, and overall messages are politically driven, reflecting guarded stances on neo-liberal democratization, militarism, and globalization (2016). While Gonzalez exemplifies how contemporary foreign policy issues have been woven into superhero television adaptations, Kort-Butler analyzes three separate superhero television series to explore their stances on domestic issues of crime and the criminal justice system. In all three shows, "police were depicted as easily overcome and lacking in sufficient resources to fight serious crime", which they argue to represent "police ineffectiveness" with and without firearms (Kort-Butler 2012, 56; 57). Her findings also revealed suggestions of a weak or corrupt justice system, found through plot lines and dialogue in *Batman: The Animated Series* and *Ultimate Spider-Man* (2012).

Although there is little established literature on film adaptations, there is growing interest in the field. Students are producing numerous dissertations and theses projects on this topic, indicating an interest by junior scholars looking to join the field (see Mongey n.d.; Mascaró n.d.; Stafford n.d.). Increased interest among young scholars indicates a lot of room for further research regarding film and television adaptations of a previously popular medium.

Nationalist Superheroes

Jason Dittmer's (2013) book, *Captain America and the Nationalist Superhero: Metaphors, Narratives, and Geopolitics*, is an important resource for this project. It provides relevant information for establishing background and academic context for the literature review section, and serves as a source for shaping the data-collection component of this project and the analysis of the film. Dittmer's detailed book covers a wide array of information related to Captain America and the geopolitical importance of nationalist superheroes. His work is often referenced in the academic literature on similar topics. His work provides a strong foundation for this area of political science as well as the broader study of comic-based media by other disciplines.

The concept of a "Nationalist Superhero" is defined in Dittmer's book as "superhero narratives in which the hero explicitly identifies himself as representative and defender of a specific nation-state, often through his name, uniform, and mission" (2013, 7). This specific territorial attachment to the characters' views, objectives, and portrayal distinguishes the nationalist superhero from other superheroes that may grace the pages of comic books or the cinema screen. Nationalist superheroes are uniquely positioned in a world of political relevance because of what they represent and how the characters are portrayed. Captain America, like many other nationalist superheroes, is branded with his country, both in explicit representation and in the ideals ostensibly protected in the storylines. These plots, additionally, are not restricted to the territorial attachment for that character. In fact, Captain America is introduced in an international conflict, facing a real-world foreign enemy, and often fighting on foreign soil (Dittmer 2013; DiPaolo 2011). By existing and participating in an international system, fictitious nationalist superheroes embrace the "political, cultural, and geographical 'exteriors'" while

representing domestic ideals and interests (Żaglewski 2021, 576). Within the stories of nationalist superheroes, "national identity is not a taken-for-granted "'thing'" that is carelessly assigned to the hero "but rather something produced through narrative, artistry, and consumption" (Dittmer 2013, 124).

While the United States is commonly used as a background for superhero content, other Marvel heroes like Iron Man and the Incredible Hulk fight "for the American people rather than America as an abstract idea" (Dittmer 2013, 7). This characteristic distinguishes nationalist superheroes from other heroes. Though there are now a multitude of other nationalist superheroes representing many countries around the world, Captain America initiated this sub-genre of media in the 1940s, often serving as a platform for political opinion and engagement (Dittmer 2013). The creation of nationalist superheroes for other countries spawned an academic interest in these figures. Żaglewski (2021) explores Polish superheroes, categorizing isolated protagonist narratives as either for the "establishment, anti-establishment, or colonial" (Żaglewski 2021, 578). This distinction is dependent on the character's relationship with the status quo and the country's power (2021, 578). In many superhero narratives, the "mythos reinforces the notion that the status quo is positive, but it is constantly under attack" (Kort-Butler 2012, 52). These characteristics are often used to distinguish nationalist superheroes. DiPaolo (2011) also utilizes these groupings in his analysis of superhero comic books, finding relevant examples of each categorization. He defines anti-establishment narratives as ones in which "the superhero stands in opposition to an evil government, corporate, or aristocratic villain" and colonial narratives as "the superhero traveling overseas to an untouched, uncivilized country to civilize it and plunder its natural resources" (DiPaolo

2011, 12). Under the establishment narrative, "the superhero acts to preserve the status quo, and protects the government and populace from invading foreign hordes, criminals, and terrorists" (2011, 12). These categorizations are employed by multiple scholars to analyze superhero content. They are not mutually exclusive. Storylines present in comics that have been produced for decades move through the three groupings, further influenced by changing staff and writers throughout the years.

A common component emphasized in the literature related to nationalist superheroes in either isolated analysis or in conjunction with other works is the protagonist's origin story and how that relates to the themes and messages portrayed in the content. According to Dittmer (2013), "a fundamental part of a superhero's narrative is the hero's origin, which effectively locates them in the super-hero universe and defines who and where they are in relation to established characters, events, and plot lines" (Dittmer 2013, 65). Canada has multiple comic book characters that would be considered nationalist superheroes due to their branding and representation, the most popular of which is Captain Canuck. Canuck's origin story, created in a time outside of war, was directed at domestic social issues of crime and rising multiculturalism. His origin story posits Captain Canuck as a representative of determined pacificism, embracing "cultural distinctiveness" (Beaty 2006, 432). Though nationalist superheroes like Captain Canuck and Captain Britain are territorially attached to their countries by branding and origin, neither character has been featured quite like Captain America in other platforms. These characters are recognized by the fictional lore associated with the film franchises, but have "no major place in the Marvel Universe" (Murray 2017, 256). Origin stories of nationalist superheroes shape the characters' personalities, ideals, and objectives, and

also provide room for re-use in other politically uncertain times. This result is often due to their larger-than-life and nearly unrealistic crises they face. For instance, in the 1980s, "World War II-era characters were all radically revamped [with] a retelling of their origin" in relation to the Reagan Administration (DiPaolo 2011, 2). How characters come about permeates the way they are portrayed in other times for different generations.

As Captain America comics continue to be produced and further contribute to a growing source of storylines and narratives surrounding the same base character, this resource is growing as an opportunity for academics to explore the political relevance of popular media consumption over time. Recent and ongoing creative projects in both film and television continue the story of Captain America even as he is replaced by another individual. This perpetuation could lead to a growing number of projects exploring the political importance of Captain America comics and digital adaptations in order to observe the content of superhero media or the potential affect they have had throughout different decades in U.S. history. Furthermore, there is potential for research on the international influence of these characters, particularly in how the nationalist superhero phenomenon has been adopted by countries all around the world (Dittmer 2012; Beaty 2006; Murray 2017).

Assigning Claims to Categories: Literature About Captain America

The organizational process of academic claims pertaining to Captain America was a critical part of this project with the coding of film content utilizing academic categories. Scholarship related to Captain America is directly tied to the comic book narratives, characters, and settings of these works. Dittmer makes claims as to the political importance of Captain America as a character, the geopolitical relevance of the settings and narratives, as well as what he represents as a figure. These analyses are a critical part

in shaping my analysis of the Captain America films. This project analyzes the three Captain America movies of the 21st century in order to determine if claims made by Dittmer are maintained by a media adaptation. The alternative outcome would illustrate the character losing his relevance as a politically important fictional figure.

Dittmer speaks to the importance of Captain America as a geopolitical actor as well as in the symbolism portrayed in the narratives and comic art, the themes of American exceptionalism. These themes, as well as symbolic elements and geopolitical importance, form the categories from which I sorted these claims. The collection and organization of these claims assist the project in two ways: a) by providing a jumping off point for film analysis with specific concepts to look for in the three films; b) by looking at film adaptations of content already established as politically relevant to determine the political relevance of adapted material.

Table 1 outlines the series of claims related to overt symbols present in Captain America comics as established by Dittmer. Table 2 describes claims related to American exceptionalism in Captain America comics. Table 3 is categorized by relevant claims about the geopolitical importance of Captain America and his storylines. Each table includes a quotation, an elaboration on the context of each claim within any cited example, and the source of the listed claim. This section outlines the categorization of Dittmer's claims of relevance in order to understand the primary factors in the film analysis. Any two claims may appear similar in a direct quote, but vary with the context or source being used. In each of Dittmer's articles or book, the questions or method vary, sometimes leading to similar conclusions about Captain America as a character being discovered by different techniques. They therefore may use similar words to describe

Table 1

Category	Claims	Example	Source
Symbols	"the character is clearly a symbol of the nation"	Captain America maintains the level of symbolism associated with flags or eagles, but is able to "rescale" to "perform national functions" while minimizing the separation of "nation and body"	Dittmer 2007, 404; 405
	"literally embodying American identity"	Captain America, through his politically relevant storylines connect the "scale of body" to wide-scale political projects of societal betterment or national security.	Dittmer 2005, 627
	"territorial symbol of America"	He is a component of the "cult of the flag," portrayed proudly in red, white, and blue which can serve as a positive attribute while also being a point of mockery for villains.	Dittmer 2005, 629

different meanings. An example is found within the American exceptionalism category of Table 2. Two quotations utilized that portray the idea of Captain America representing American exceptionalism. The quotations are similar to each other, but the context of these claims are different. Dittmer's 2005 article describes the typification of American exceptionalism as the protection of American purity and virtue. It starkly differs from his 2013 book statement, wherein he discusses how the military power of the United States is represented through Captain America comics. Including one without the other ignores the complexity of large concepts like American exceptionalism and the multiple ways they can be interpreted.

Table 1 specifically revolves around claims of the symbolic importance of Captain America. Throughout Dittmer's work, it is established that Captain America is a symbol of the territorial United States, a symbol of American values, and a canvas for overt symbols related to American imagery. Captain America's suits and costumes, combined with the visual imagery of eagles on the uniforms of soldiers, or flying in the background, all contribute to a visual communication of America. This representation communicates to the audience a dedication to supporting and protecting the United States, especially when it comes to his participation in military combat throughout the comic series. It also illustrates an integration of patriotism for the country and patriotism for oneself. Captain America is awarded symbols as an individual that are typically reserved for the nation as a whole. This identification communicates an inherent responsibility to stand for the United States as a territorial protector in order to continue to be worthy of national symbols. Dittmer's interest in Cap's adoption of the American flag as a recognizable attribute of the character peaks at the scale of his character and the scale of what he represents. His motivations and passions are connected to large, abstract ideals such as freedom, statehood, and honor and therefore live up to a reputation that is larger than a single mortal being. As Dittmer points out, these attributes contribute heavily to a positive perception of Captain America as a hero and as a protector, but leave him vulnerable for "mockery" or attacks from his villains (Dittmer 2005, 629).

The claims illustrated in Table 2 describe relevant themes of American exceptionalism in Captain America comic books. American exceptionalism has multiple definitions and can be used in different ways in order to make a variety of arguments. In the case of Captain America, Dittmer utilizes American exceptionalism both in the

Table 2

Category	Claims	Example	Source
American Exceptionalism	"other characters were held out as examples of what Americans are not supposed to be"	Captain America's villains consist of traitorous, unpatriotic Americans; foreign fascists; or Hitler himself. Throughout storylines, unpatriotic actions are disciplined through the events of the comic book while patriotic actions are inscribed as just and correct."	Dittmer 2007, 412; 413
	The portrayal of Captain America "is consistent with the idea of American exceptionalism"	Conflicts within Captain America storylines often occur on foreign soil, contributing to the idea of American exceptionalism wherein "American innocence is protected by its isolation from the rest of the world."	Dittmer 2005, 637
	the sense of "being part of something extraordinary, the American nation, is inherent to the storylines of Captain America"	Captain America is written to be willing to die for his country, reinforcing "the centrality of the nation" as an "extension of citizenship."	Dittmer 2005, 630
	Featured villains may embody forms of "anti-Americanism"	Not only did the Nazi-era of Captain America comics exhibit overt signs of anti-Americanism with Axis Powers' representation, but dialogue directly contributes negative, and anti-American attributes, to the villains, including insults of "loser", "coward", "bigot", and "greedy."	Dittmer 2013, 97
	Captain America is a direct representation of "American exceptionalism"	"Superheroes are not reflections of, but are instead co-constitutive of the discourse popularly known as American exceptionalism." Captain America is a strong and leading representative of this phenomenon due to his "function within the international order."	Dittmer 2013, 10

understanding of military superiority and in messaging moral superiority, similar to Reagan's "city on the hill" rhetoric.

For both of these definitions of American exceptionalism, there are many notable claims within Dittmer's work. American exceptionalism due to military superiority is

illustrated in the Captain America comics through the creation of Captain America himself. Within the Marvel Universe, Steve Rogers is the first, and most powerful, biological weapon created for the purpose of military dominance. He is created first and foremost in preparation for World War II, in order for the United States to gain a leg up on both Japanese and German forces. He is a weapon to be used against natural enemies, amplified by his military training and personal dedication. Dittmer emphasizes the definition of American exceptionalism related to moral superiority and the feeling of being involved with something special and great. In his analysis of the Captain America comics, Dittmer argues that not only is his portrayal in line with the idea of American exceptionalism, it is also an important motivator for his actions. According to Dittmer, Captain America willingly makes sacrifices for the United States as he is determined to protect and defend no matter the cost. His individual success is closely connected to the success of the state. This connection emphasizes "the centrality of the nation" for the character and illustrates an "extension of citizenship" for a patriot like Cap (Dittmer 2005, 630).

Dittmer not only views Captain America as a result of and proponent of American exceptionalism, he also argues the inverse with Captain America's villains being inherently "anti-American" (Dittmer 2013, 97). Dittmer describes the variety of Captain America villains as morally corrupt foreign leaders in search of dictatorship, fascists, or unpatriotic Americans. These characters are "examples of what Americans are not supposed to be," which becomes a strong and consistent message as the storylines continue to be developed and published (Dittmer 2007, 412). Throughout the comics, these characters are disciplined or punished by Captain America as he weaponizes his

honor, statehood, or physical superiority in order to come out on top. This continuous asymmetry of ability and morals develops a relationship in which Captain's America's actions are viewed as correct or in good faith while also justifying the violence and punishment against anti-American villains who exist counter to Captain America's missions for U.S. interests.

Table 3 illustrates claims about the geopolitical importance of Captain America and how his persona and storylines contribute to a dialogue about real conflicts, social issues, and international cooperation. First and foremost, Captain America's role as a solely American superhero establishes the character on a global scale. His position as a soldier of the United States with storylines inspired by true global events results in geopolitically relevant content from the comics. The World War II narratives of the early comic books depicted Captain America punching Hitler in the face and collecting donations for troops on the different war fronts. His heroism in joining Europe in the war in order to swoop in and save the day communicates a larger connection to "cultural claims of righteousness" by the United States in military operations around the world (Dittmer 2005, 641). It furthermore suggests an image of a "war-mongering'' Europe and a ''peace-loving'' America through the depiction of Captain America's hesitancy to use violence and death as a counter to threats (Dittmer 2005, 629). Captain America acts only "in the name of security" (2005, 630). He resorts to violence only as a last resort in order to ensure security and maintain his principles.

Captain America's position as a territorial symbol establishes him as a geopolitically relevant character in his adamant defense of sovereignty. The borders of the United States are important to the objectives of Captain America, but also for

Table 3

Category	Claim	Example	Source
Geopolitical Importance	"nationalist superheroes serve as protectors of the notion of sovereignty and the preservation of territorial extent"	Territorial borders are crucial for nationalist superheroes because it establishes a domain and jurisdiction for justifiable action.	Dittmer 2013, 103
	Captain America contributes to the American geopolitical narrative by being ultimately defensive in nature	Captain America storylines are true to the geopolitical narrative of America "only acting in the name of security."	Dittmer 2005, 630
	Captain America has ability to connect the political projects of American nationalism, internal order, and foreign policy (all formulated at the national or global scale) with the scale of the individual, or the body	His position as an "explicitly American superhero" creates a position for him to act domestically for the "idealized American nation" and as a "defender of the American status quo" as he operates on both the domestic and global scale.	Dittmer 2005, 627
	"Captain America serves as a voice for a resistant, counterhegemonic narrative that illustrates the connections between the American way of life and American military operations around the world"	A consistent and prevalent narrative is one of fighting American enemies in transnational conflicts, relating to "physical claims of space" and "cultural claims" of superiority and righteousness.	Dittmer 2005, 641
	"Captain America not only defines what America is, but it also firmly ensconces the reader within its geo-graph"	Through narratives, conflicts, and dialogue, post-September 11th Captain America comics convey to readers the valuable parts of being an American, and how America exists "in relation to the rest of the world."	Dittmer 2005, 641

determining the severity or importance of the threat. Issues directly related to United States' territory result in action against them by America's super-soldier. The evolution of U.S. military presence around the world has empowered Captain America within the comics, extending his territory for protection to other countries, based on the U.S. presence from military bases or state-level alliances. Captain America's expanding operations and defensive military decisions reflect changes in U.S. foreign relations at the

time and speak to America's place in the world as the comics were published. While America maintains its position as a hegemon throughout the comics, even into the 21st century, the variations in U.S. foreign policy are illustrated within Captain America's strategies and efforts.

These claims cover four points regarding the Captain America films. From overt to cryptic, Captain America content conveys politically relevant themes and messages, whether it acts as an example of political symbols in popular culture, a physical embodiment of America's place in the geopolitical environment, or whether it pertains to representing American exceptionalism. I hypothesize that many of these claims will transition well to film. For instance, his role as a political symbol featuring a costume of stars, stripes, and American colors will adapt easily to films as it is still a visual medium for symbolic expression. Second, geopolitical claims of importance will adapt to the films, particularly the first one. The storyline of the first movie is closely related to Captain America's origin story, and primarily takes place on foreign soil. Moreover, the plot line of the first Captain America film uniquely and explicitly covers an international conflict with military forces at the forefront of the opposition. The second and third films reveal villains as third-party actors, seeking to significantly alter the global status quo while the first movie focuses on foreign leaders and the discrepancy between U.S. democracy and dictatorships. Third, some claims will not adjust to film primarily due to the limitations in screen time for each film. Because many of the claims put forth by academics have been a result of comic book analyses, which can include decades of content, a series of three films is limited to what it can include in less than seven hours of content. Furthermore, each film follows only one storyline, whereas the comics have

dozens of storylines introduced and recycled. Fourth, the second and third Captain America films include characters from the Marvel Universe, and thus spend less time on the adventures of Captain America, and rather the interaction between the nationalist superhero and others. This focus will result the majority of important interpretation coming from data found within *Captain America: The First Avenger*.

This project contributes to a growing sub-field of political science literature by observing the primary themes, representations, symbols, and messages of the most recent Captain America content being produced on a large scale: three large-budget cinematic productions: *Captain America: The First Avenger*; *Captain America: Winter Soldier*; *Captain America: Civil War*. By analyzing the films as the primary texts, and utilizing what has already been established about Captain America as a recognized national symbol, this project contributes to the conversation on the presence of politically relevant messaging in popular culture. It could furthermore test the results found by other scholars pertaining to nationalist superhero content. Finally, this project fills a gap in academic literature by observing the strength of political messaging through film adaptations. The primary claims found in the literature about Captain America interpret the hero as an active political entity, as presented through the comics. This project seeks to apply that claim, with others, to the films in order to see how the Captain America films grow upon or fall short of the politically relevant messaging in the original stories.

CHAPTER 3: FILM ANALYSIS

Although there have been several films that have been adaptations of the original comic book series, as well as films that have included the character of Captain America, this analysis focuses on the three most recent Captain America films, released in the 2010s. The first of these solo Captain America film internationally premiered in 2011 as a contribution to the Marvel Cinematic Universe's growing franchise. The film, *Captain America: The First Avenger*[1], introduces the character in the cinematic universe of superheroes, and depicts its own interpretation of Cap's origin. In the movie, he is a product of World War II and a weapon created by the United States government to fight Adolf Hitler and his forces in Europe. *Captain America: The First Avenger* is fast-paced and quickly places the superhero in the context of World War II, from training in boot camp to undertaking a rescue mission in a fortified military research base. This film takes inspiration from the very first set of Captain America comic books presenting a discourse on America's handling of World War II.

From the introduction of Steve Rogers, the character is depicted as noble and patriotic. He surpasses the standard citizen when it comes to the support of America participation in World War II. The beginning scenes of the movie introduce him as a young man looking to serve his country and enlist in the United States Army in 1943.

[1] The film was released under an alternate title in Russia, Ukraine, and South Korea. In these countries, the character name in the title was dropped and the movie instead premiered as *The First Avenger*.

Due to various health issues, and falsified enlistment forms, Rogers is turned away time and time again. He is resolved to achieve what he wants, and is chosen by a special agency of the war effort due to this dedication and passion. His passion is not for the violence that attracts so many of the other soldiers portrayed in the film, but instead for the moral achievement of defeating bad men and putting down those who seek to harm others. When asked by Doctor Abraham Erskine, a Jewish-German scientist working for the United States Army, "do you want to kill Nazis," Steve replies "I don't want to kill anyone, I don't like bullies; I don't care where they're from" (*Captain America: The First Avenger* 2011 16:35). This response initializes the representation of Steve Rogers, and later Captain America, as a willing, but unenthusiastic, participant in the violence of the film, framing both the villain and the war as a bully-versus-victim conflict. This conversation is the pivotal moment of the beginning of the film, introducing the average Joe about to become a nationalist superhero and outlining how the traits and characteristics found in Steve Rogers were what the military leaders and scientists were looking for in their super-soldier defending the United States.

The second and third Captain America films, by contrast, derive from the comic reboot in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks. These films, through symbols, metaphors, and analogous storylines, comment on the tensions experienced after catastrophes occur. *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* explores the relationships among soldiers, and amplifies a theme of patriotism. This film is the only one of the three to take place exclusively on American soil. This location differentiates *Winter Soldier* from the other films and consistently shows American landmarks that convey a sense of place and importance to the story. The film begins with a tour of Washington D.C.,

providing a stop at the Washington Memorial and the Lincoln Memorial, as well as the mall separating the two. Viewers also see the Capitol building and the Smithsonian Museum in the first quarter of the movie. These landmarks not only convey the setting of the film, but also reveal the territory and jurisdiction of Captain America, existing within and protecting the nation's capital.

This film also illustrates Captain America's ability to incorporate nationalism into his own decision-making and his tendency to bring out patriotism in his associates. Towards the end of the second film, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, Rogers infiltrates S.H.I.E.L.D. Headquarters in an attempt to stop the weapons launch that would give HYDRA the power to wipe out millions of people they see as a danger to the organization. He speaks on the intercom system of the building, attempting to pass a message along to S.H.I.E.L.D. agents that were not a part of the HYDRA Unit, hoping to appeal to their sense of loyalty, nationalism, or honor. He informs them of the HYDRA infiltration and inspires them to stand up to those seeking to harm him or continue on with the weapons release. In the command center, multiple individuals stand up to those pushing for the Heli-carriers to be unleashed on the public, leading to a shoot-out between HYDRA soldiers and S.H.I.E.L.D. agents. When disobeying HYDRA commands, two people state "Captain's orders" when refusing to initiate weapons launch (*Captain America: The Winter Soldier* 2014, 1:37:50). This emphasizes the militarism etched into the creation and operation of S.H.I.E.L.D. and highlights the hierarchical nature of military order and action as an ongoing addition to the films and an important intervening factor for Captain America as a character. Additionally, this movie focuses on emphasizing security even at the expense of liberty, though it is often opposed by

Captain America. His critique of weaponizing fear and pre-emptively striking those who could threaten the security of both S.H.I.E.L.D. and HYDRA point to extreme measures taken by the United States government in the beginning of the War on Terror. Pre-emptive drone strikes and the Patriot Act are both examples of post-September 11th security initiatives seeking to eliminate suspects and threats.

Finally, *Captain America: Civil War* addresses tensions among groups and people following major attacks that kill innocent civilians. As discussed below, this film also introduces characters not yet present within the Captain America movies, though they have long existed within the Marvel Cinematic Universe. *Captain America: Civil War* illustrates tensions between various agents, organizations, and situations that lead to tragedy and outcry. The film follows the aftermath of the *Avengers* film, in which the superheroes (including Captain America) seek to stop a danger to Planet Earth, though the casualties and devastation that arise from an epic battle are amplified once the danger has been eliminated. The average person is scared of superheroes because their actions in the previous months and years have resulted in great national damage and the need for excessive and expensive clean-up. Furthermore, the villains always fail to meet their ultimate objectives, and are thus seen as incapable or not existential threats to the everyday person. Their disappointments are due, in part, to the Avengers whose victories diminish the perceived danger and dystopian aims of the villains. The essentially easy victories make it difficult to blame the villains alone for the tragedies and property/personal damage. Indeed, the Avengers have dirty hands in the devastation to Earth and consequently must answer for their actions. These tensions – the Avengers versus themselves, the Avengers versus the people, the Avengers versus the evil agents –

parallel the debates following September 11th and the shift in American foreign policy focusing on the War on Terror. The U.S. achieved quick military victories against weak nations, but wrought long-term costs to the people and lands they invaded.

Both the second and the third Captain America films take place after the events in at least one of the separate Avengers movies. *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* is set after the first Avengers film while *Captain America: Civil War* is set after the first two Avengers movies. The events of these two movies – *The Avengers* (2012) and *The Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) – are relevant in two ways. In both *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* and *Captain America: Civil War*, other superheroes are major characters, tending to the storyline and Cap's growth as a character. The main on-screen conflict of *Captain America: Civil War* is a direct result of the events of *The Avengers: Age of Ultron*. For example, Black Widow, a skilled fighter with assassin-level training and inherent traits of cunning and charm, becomes a major character in the second and third Captain America films. Her presence within these movies highlights Captain America as an embodiment of American superiority. Several additional key players of the universe are introduced in *Civil War*, recruited by different sides of the conflict to gather as many enhanced, superpowered individuals as possible.

Symbolism is a significant reason that Captain America stands for specific principles, operates where he does, and fights specific foes. His costume, his character traits, the setting, the villain and ally archetypes, and the words that he says translate easily to film, allowing for a similar understanding of who the character is and what he is there to do. In each film, Captain America is the product of overt symbolism. First and foremost, Captain America is named after the country he is seeking to protect. The many

Figure 1

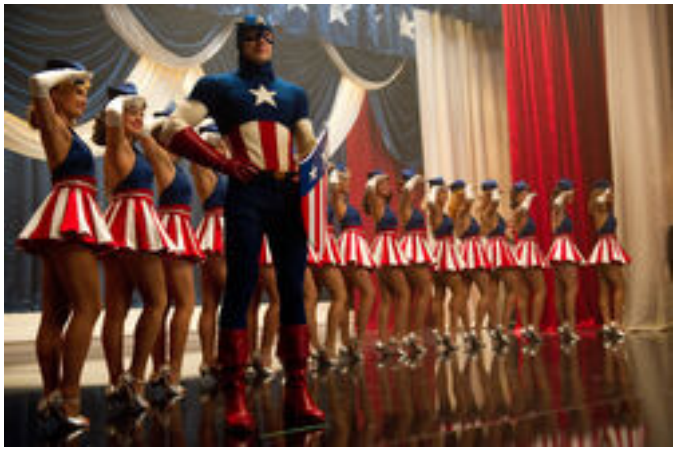
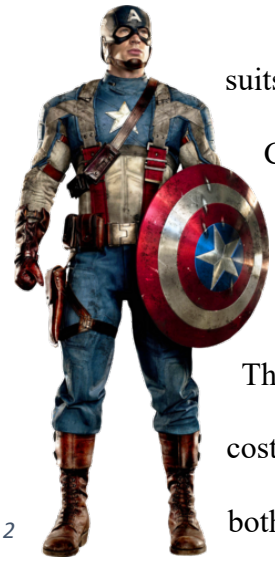


Figure 2



suits worn by Captain America represent the United States. Though his costume changes both within and between films, each costume has stars and stripes interlaced with red, white and blue, a large star at the front of both the chest-piece and shield, and an A for America adorning the headpiece. Figure 1 and Figure 2 are the two costumes from *Captain America*. The costume he wears throughout the USO tour, performing for groups and encouraging donations to the United States military, is very theatrical as it features bright colors, stark contrasts, and the reddest boots of any costume he wears. This costume is different than the ones he wears into battle, with the navy and the toned down red highlights, leaving little white likely due to the inevitable dirt, dust, and blood that will stain it. Although they are different in appearance, both take inspiration from the American flag to tie the character to his namesake country. The costume change itself within the first movie is an illustration of symbolism, with the stark change in tone.

The USO tour costume shown in Figure 1 is worn at a time in the movie that is happy. Steve Rogers has just experienced dramatic changes. He is no longer sickly; he is no longer a poor boy from Brooklyn attempting to achieve a goal. Instead, he is living his dream as a member of the United States military. He was specially chosen to receive the super-soldier powers that made him big, strong, and popular. His achievements coincide

with the bright costume. His situation changes once he changes in the second uniform. His friend is now missing, as are dozens of additional U.S. soldiers captured by enemy troops, and his commanding officers do not want him or anyone else to rescue them. He is treated as a figurehead, not participating in any real fighting, and viewed as a disappointment by the American soldiers fighting on the front lines. The units have lost several soldiers, and the tensions are high within camp as the weather gets colder and colder. The conflict of the movie grows at this point, with the villain fully introduced and causing mayhem. This tonal shift coincides with the costume change, an effective means of employing symbolism for the audience.

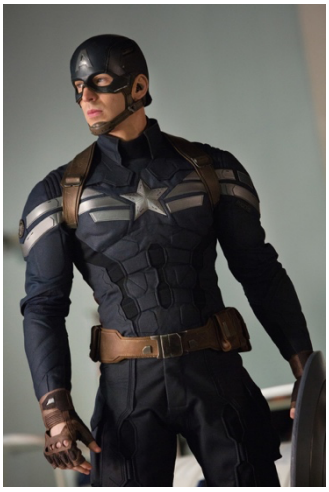


Figure 3

The second film also utilizes two costumes that depict American symbols in different ways. The movie begins with Cap in his stealth suit, a uniform that restricts the red to his shield, shown in Figure 3. This uniform is used only for stealth missions assigned to him by the S.H.I.E.L.D. His costume change, returning to his original style shown earlier in Figure 2, is worn as the tone shifts from Captain America S.H.I.E.L.D. soldier to Captain America superhero. This difference is marked by the key objectives for each mission and the overall authority commanding each operation. As a soldier, Captain America kneels to authority, recognizing and respecting the hierarchical nature of the United States military and by extension the S.H.I.E.L.D. organization. Following the invasion of S.H.I.E.L.D., Captain America answers only to his own goals and principles. He wears this battle suit for the remainder of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* and in *Captain America: Civil War*.

A patriot through and through, Captain America not only physically represents the American flag, adorned with red, white, and blue stars and stripes, but he explicitly defends the flag he represents, both symbolically and literally. In the climax of the first film, with the final battle between Captain America and Red Skull, the villain is speaking his mantra. He purports to support a future that transcends nations, claiming "I have seen the future, Captain. There are no flags" (*Captain America: The First Avenger* 2011, 1:44:10). Cap's simple response to this statement, "Not my future" (2011, 1:44:15) reveals the strong connection of Captain America to both the sanctity of sovereignty and the flag itself as a symbol of the nation.

Additionally, the first film explicitly references key words such as "bravery" and "freedom" multiple times, both in the context of World War II and the specific actions of Captain America (2011). The core value of freedom directly affects the decision-making of Captain America in each of the three films and provides symbolic context for Cap's motivations and objectives. His violence towards German scientists and soldiers during the first film is justified in order for "people to be free" (2011, 17:38). This is a similar theme in *Captain America: Civil War*. In this film, Captain America stands for freedom and defends an individual's right to choose. When discussing whether or not the Avengers should agree to the Sokovia Accords, an agreement that would massively limit the capabilities of all superheroes including Captain America and reduce his ability to realize his objectives, Captain America is the voice against the treaty. When confronted with the rationale to establish a check on the Avengers' powers, he says, "If we sign this, we surrender our right to choose." (Captain America: Civil War 2016, 30:48). Losing the freedom of individual action, and by extension, the ability to defend his state at any time,

threatens the engrained responsibilities of Captain America, placed there by himself, his military superiors, and the title and responsibilities of the role.

Captain America's name, setting, suits, and patriotism are the clearest symbols that represent his territorial identity and the long-term effect on his actions. The connection to the United States is neither ambiguous nor inconspicuous. Captain America is presented in a way that establishes the relationship between him and his country. This connection is established in the very first introduction of Steve Rogers as a young boy from Brooklyn and is only made clearer in the transition to physical displays of patriotism by Captain America.

American Exceptionalism

The primary way that American exceptionalism is depicted is in Captain America's relation to other characters. The first of the three films is the only movie that does not focus on Captain America's relationships with others. Although there are additional characters in the first movie, some of whom are also good guys, Captain America is the only real hero of that movie, and he has to achieve his goals in spite of his allies, not because of them. Operating explicitly without the consent of his superiors, Captain America in *The First Avenger* acts without many of the resources that would be available with the support of military funding or soldiers for back up. With the exception of his love interest, Captain America is the only one advocating for the rescue of hostage soldiers and the permanent defeat of Red Skull. In the second and third films, two or more superhero allies work with Captain America in support of his ultimate objectives. There are interesting relationships with the primary foes of the films. In both *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* and *Captain America: Civil War*, there are intentional and important distinctions in how a character's nationality relates to his or her personality and

good versus bad designation. This theme weaves through both the allies and the villains of each film.

Allies

The first movie establishes that Steve Rogers and his fellow fighters are American citizens or working for the American military. Each of the major figures – James Buchannan ("Bucky"), Peggy Carter, Doctor Abraham Erskine, and General Chester Phillips – fits this description. In the second and third movies, however, this balance shifts. The characters are still, for the most part, American citizens or agents of S.H.I.E.L.D., but the framing of the characters varies based on their connection with Captain America and the United States. For instance, in the second film, Captain America's primary ally is Natasha Romanov. The Black Widow is a Russian citizen who is introduced in the comics as a Russian spy defecting to the United States. Though *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* is the first appearance of Romanov in the Captain America films, she is present in other movies within the Marvel Cinematic Universe dating back to 2008. Her character, though an agent for an American agency and an ally to Captain America, is awarded personality traits and actions that would never be applied to Captain America. This contrast between Captain America and Black Widow is illustrated throughout the film, but is apparent in the very first action sequence including both Rogers and Romanov. Black Widow uses guns and appears to kill everyone who comes in her way, but Captain America knocks his opponents unconscious, seemingly unwilling to make the kill. This theme continues throughout the movie, exemplified in a later action sequence dealing with Jasper Sitwell, a HYDRA agent who has infiltrated S.H.I.E.L.D. and assumed authority after the apparent assassination of leader Nick Fury. The tensions between Captain America and his allies against Jasper Sitwell and the other

HYDRA infiltrators comes to a boiling point on a roof in Washington D.C. Captain America threatens Sitwell near the edge of the roof, insinuating his inevitable fall if Sitwell does not comply. Sitwell, knowing and resenting Captain America's values, calls Cap's bluff, comfortable in his assumption that neither he, nor any other HYDRA agent, is worth the betrayal of Captain America's values. He asks, "Is this little display meant to insinuate you're going to throw me off the roof? Because it's really not your style, Rogers" (*Captain America: The Winter Soldier* 2014, 1:14:33). Cap smiles coyly, and responds: "You're right. It's not. It's hers" (2014, 1:44:36). Then, the Black Widow proceeds to kick him off the roof.

Similar to how Captain America's hesitancy to kill is an example of virtue that is contrasted against Russian-Avenger Black Widow's treatment of human life, there is also a difference between the two when it comes to meeting their objectives through principled or unprincipled methods. In the beginning action sequence, while Captain America is trying to protect lives and rescue the hostages, Black Widow is searching for information, deceitfully. By not disclosing her specific intentions, she endangers the rescue mission that Cap is leading and reveals a fundamental mismatch between Captain America's pure intentions and the less-pure intentions of his allies. Furthermore, he has to rescue her when her actions jeopardize their escape. As Nick Fury, the leader of S.H.I.E.L.D., later says, Natasha Romanov is "comfortable with everything" while Captain America is less comfortable with things that may be morally impure (*Captain America: The Winter Soldier* 2014, 14:19). Black Widow is also shown to be deceitful and risqué outside of her S.H.I.E.L.D. role in scenes about their personal lives. While this representation is mostly established within the second movie, there are allusions to this

difference within the third film, as well. Black Widow from the very beginning of the film is represented as paranoid and looking for a way out of her duty to protect. Her support of the Accords is initially framed by Captain America as a decision to protect Black Widow's interests and feed her fear. In *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, during discussions about Captain America's loneliness – his unfortunate seventy-year nap results in him waking up in a world where those he knew and cared for are either dead or on their death bed – Black Widow questions Cap's solitude, citing his ability to attract any kind of partner he would want. She relies on being disingenuous while Captain America strikes for ingenuity in every decision. When learning that his trauma blocks him from meaningful personal relationships, Black Widow suggests that he mislead the women he is seeking to attract by saying "truth is the matter of circumstance" (2014, 57:48). This deviousness is inconsistent with Captain America's values, and his reaction is illustrative. Captain America is both offended and disheartened by her suggestion, even though following this advice would provide companionship without Captain America having to relive and recite his decades of trauma and loss.

His interactions with Black Widow during the second film also introduce themes about masculinity, especially the protection of masculinity. In some of the combat scenes, for instance, near hits to Captain America's crotch are emphasized with extreme relief and dangerous music in the soundscape. This illustration is directly juxtaposed by the portrayal of Black Widow, and her feminization and hyper-sexualization. She is shown in her skin-tight black suit, which is complemented by editing and focus on her figure and backside. The theme of the defense of masculinity is exemplified by the protection of physical characteristics of men, but is also exemplified through the way Captain America

relates to feminine characters, both abstractly and literally. The relationship with Black Widow is a perfect example of the relationship between a feminized character and Captain America. On multiple occasions, Captain America comes to her rescue, carrying her out of burning buildings, shielding her from debris, and carrying her as he jumps off of ships and platforms. She is no damsel in distress, to be sure, but she does make critical mistakes or cannot hold her own in certain situations. When these situations arise, Captain America comes to the rescue. These themes are connected to American exceptionalism both through the nationality of Black Widow as well as patriarchal system in place within America that encourages the protection of masculinity. Though these connections are substantial enough to elaborate on in its own research, they associate to this project primarily through its link to Captain America's relationship with Black Widow.

Once Captain America is in the 21st century, his conventional values clash with his environment and those around him. As previously discussed, there are stark differences between the portrayal of Black Widow and Captain America. Though some of the discrepancies between the two are a result of editing, costumes, or make up, others boil down to a difference between their values. Captain America's values, for example, clash with Black Widow's during a scene in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*. While disguised in a mall, Black Widow suggests the two of them kiss in order to redirect any attention from them while HYDRA spies are in pursuit. He objects to her suggestion, but she initiates the kiss regardless. There are multiple occurrences within the second film wherein Black Widow introduces conversations related to sex and romance while Captain

America sits uncomfortably. Her attitudes sexuality clashes with his modesty. Also, her relentless goal of scoring him a date confronts his traditional preferences for courting.

Finally, there is an imbalance of strength and capability between Captain America and the Black Widow. Due to her own actions – whether it is tied to the deceit, or being unaware of ambush attacks – Black Widow needs rescuing twice in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*. The first instance follows her secret objective of gathering information on ship hijackers during the hostage rescue mission. Taking too long for her and Cap to escape the ship means a fiery exit for the two heroes with Captain America holding her as they leap to safety. The second rescue appears in the S.H.I.E.L.D. bunker that was introduced as a setting within the first film. We return to this location and observe the changes implemented during the decades since *The First Avenger*. This scene gives the protagonists critical information about the strength of HYDRA but ends with an explosion in the bunker, meant to obliterate anyone inside. Captain America shields Black Widow with both his body and shield, protecting her from the flames and falling debris. Once settled, he picks up an unconscious Black Widow and transports her once again to safety. This dichotomy illustrates a strength within Captain America that is not present in any other Avenger superhero. His values are directly tied to his Americanness through seemingly superior principles shaping his decision-making award him with special abilities that are not attained by other heroes. While high principles can be associated with other heroes, their morals are tied to standards associated with religion or calculation, instead of being tied to nationality and identity. Thor, for instance, lives by principles of Valor. These morals are placed upon him as royalty and association with Norse religion. His presence within the Avengers often places Thor on Earth, fighting

alongside Captain America in his fight for U.S. and global security. Thor does not fight for U.S. interests because of his loyalty to the territory. Furthermore, he does not partake in quarrels on Earth while adorned in Asgardian colors and flags. These high principles can be seen as tropes of a standard superhero, but differ from the ones illustrated through Captain America because of the connection between his morals and his nationality. Captain America screams the United States by walking into a room and combines his identity as an American with his identity of a superhero. His distinction as a nationalist superhero is conveyed to audiences through both his suit, shield, and virtues, illustrating themes of patriotism, exceptionalism and integrity.

Black Widow is not the only character contrasted with Captain America and non-American allies. In the third film, one of the main characters – and dangers – is Wanda Maximoff ("Scarlett Witch"). Wanda is from Sokovia, a fictional region established in the second Avengers movie as a bloc state of the Soviets. In *Captain America: Civil War*, Wanda's powers prompt one of the primary justifications for the ratification of the Sokovia Accords. Her massive strength, and inability to control it, threatens the world, especially anywhere the Avengers travel. The Scarlett Witch is one of the most powerful members of the Avengers, with mystical abilities that allow her to control and move material objects with her mind. Her power places her in a position to both help and harm those around her. In one of the first action sequences of the film, the Avengers are attempting to prevent HYDRA agents from receiving a biological weapon. Scarlett Witch moves a bomb out of the way of the local market but in doing so places the bomb in an office building, killing nearly a dozen people. It is Captain America who calls for fire and rescue. Scarlett Witch during *Captain America: Civil War* is represented as irrational and

in possession of undeserved power, similar to the depiction of states like Iraq obtaining weapons of mass destruction. The result of avoiding the possession of weapons of mass destruction in both the real world case of Iraq and the fictional situation in Nigeria is the death of innocents as collateral damage. In the film, some Avengers attempt to keep her confined for the safety of others, controlling her actions and movement. She leaves the compound, attempts to kill her protector, and outright refuses to sign a contract that would restrict any bit of her power. The fight against this containment speaks not just to her adolescent and potentially selfish priorities, but more so to her non-American status and likening to a weapon of mass destruction. The significance is illustrated through the justification of her confinement due to her nationality. When confronted about her captivity by Captain America, Iron Man informs him that "she's not a US citizen and they don't grant visas to weapons of mass destruction" (*Captain America: Civil War* 2016, 1:00:48). Not being American may not be a negative within the franchise, but the subtle framing of non-American allies contrasts their character development to that of Captain America.

Villains

The second clear depiction of American exceptionalism is in the way Captain America is connected to the villains of his story. Captain America's foes within the movies stick to the comic book depiction of anti-American forces representing evil in the world. In the first movie, Red Skull is the primary villain, an extension of Adolf Hitler and his regime during World War II. Red Skull is a German scientist who becomes hideously deformed from using an unstable version of the potion used to create Captain America. The super-soldier serum did not work as intended, though superior capabilities are still awarded to Red Skull. The introductory villain's objectives are entirely selfish,

seeking strength and power through massively destructive weapons powered by a mystical source known as the Tesseract. His goal is to overthrow Hitler and launch devastating attacks on countries all around the world, starting with the United States of America. The final battle between Captain America and Red Skull is about their differing ideals of security and destruction as much as it is their differing beliefs about sacrifice for a bigger cause. Red Skull is overtly anti-American, attempting to become the ultimate, supreme leader. His portrayal in this way successfully boosts Captain America's representation of the moral advantage. Red Skull is larger-than-life threat to most of the world. He is described as undefeatable by foreign armies or his own government. He is, however, defeated by a single man just trying to defend his country. Captain America defends a noble cause, one that will always defeat forces of totalitarianism, fascism, and other threats to democracy and peace.

There is a particularly interesting balance between American identity and villainhood within the second film: *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*. The obvious villain of the movie is not inherently evil, but unwillingly corrupted by evil forces. It sets up the only redemption arc of the franchise, where villains can overcome the bad they have done due to the complexity of their nature, ambition, and aims. While at the forefront, the villain of the story appears to be the Winter Soldier, also known as Steve Roger's friend James Buchanan "Bucky" Barnes. He is not actually the villain, but is instead a victim of the HYDRA organization, weaponized to harm Captain America. The character, named after a United States President, struggles with the torment from his foreign captors, which allows the more "American" parts of him to dominate by the end of the Captain America trilogy. In the first film, Bucky is shown as an ally of Steve

Rogers, even as a protector before Rogers becomes Captain America and surpasses Bucky's mortal strength. *Captain America: The First Avenger* portrays the apparent death of Bucky and mourns him in the ending sequence of the film. When the audience sees Bucky again in the second film, his entire character has changed, resurrected as a weapon rather than an American soldier. Physical and mental torture by foreign scientists in a foreign research facility force him to forget his friendship with Steve Rogers and his commitment to the United States military. These factors ultimately place him in a position of villainhood within the trilogy as a traitor to the United States and everything he stood for as a soldier in the 1940s.

This positioning of Bucky in the first and second films reverse images the transition in Captain America's role as a soldier to a hero. For instance, the framing of Captain America as a super-soldier, rather than a superhero, is an interesting part of the first film. In the other two films, he has been moved to the modern era and is interacting with early 2000's technology and media infrastructure. In this reality, Cap is a superhero, recognized for his heroism and patriotism. In the initial movie, however, Captain America is first and foremost a soldier. This designation establishes Cap's loyalty to military interests and authority that continues throughout the second and third films while avoiding the explicit label of superhero. Also tied into the creation of Captain America as a super-soldier first and foremost are military duties and ideals placed upon him. An example of these values is his relationship with Bucky, and his hesitancy to leave soldiers behind. This responsibility to protect fellow soldiers is present in the first film when Captain America invades enemy lines in order to rescue dozens of American soldiers captured by German forces. This resolve continues throughout the second and third film

as it pertains to Bucky and the numerous rescue missions to save and protect him. Rogers' long-term relationship with Bucky has been volatile indifference as he is eventually a hostile for a longer period than they were originally allies. Yet, his inability to allow Bucky to be harmed is closely connected with his role in the military and the relationship they built during and prior to enlistment. This connection directly affects the representation of Bucky as a villain, endearing the audience to him and illustrating his links to Rogers and the U.S. military.

The true villains of the second film are HYDRA soldiers who infiltrate S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters as spies and agents in order to gain access to a weapons system that can instantaneously destroy millions of individuals around the world who pose a threat to the HYDRA organization. The leader of this initiative is Alexander Pierce, played by Robert Redford – an actor that appears in conspiracy films of the 1970s criticizing U.S. decision-making. Many of these agents are not American, or they are citizens who are portrayed as corrupted and manipulated to participate in HYDRA operations. The individuals who make up this team are no real match for Captain America. This imbalance is illustrated successfully in one scene in which Captain America defeats a dozen HYDRA agents in an elevator. The fight sequence shows the exceptional instincts that Cap has and his ability to see danger coming even from friendly faces. It also shows his capability of hand-to-hand combat resulting in the defeat – though not death – of his opposition. When the elevator door opens, however, even more agents come towards him and the sheer number of armed individuals poses too significant a threat. This seemingly inevitable defeat, similar to a scene in the first film, exaggerates the abilities of his foe in order to make the win more impressive and amplifying Captain

America's strength and resolve. Captain America evades the soldiers by escape rather than combat in order to formulate an effective battle plan.

The interesting non-villain bad guy status of Bucky "The Winter Soldier" continues into the third film. Bucky is framed for a terrorist attack that killed state leaders around the world. He is sought by the United States military and wanted by the Federal government with a kill-on-sight order. Though the majority of the Avenger's team is available and will likely be assigned to find and put an end to the Winter Soldier, it is Captain America who believes that he is the one who should take him down. He is the "one least likely to die trying" (*Captain America: Civil War* 2016, 41:15).

Bucky's existence in between villain and ally provides interesting context for Captain America and speaks to the issues of nationality and power. *Captain America: Civil War* begins in 1991 Soviet Union with the release of the new Soviet super-solider. A red shield depicting a single black star, obviously inspired by Captain America's costume, is highlighted and the audience is reunited with the Winter Soldier again. Though multiple soldiers just like him are revealed, the most successful and dangerous of these super-soldiers is Bucky, the former American fighter. The American traits of strength and military superiority point to the usage of an American citizen as their own national protector. Overtly, Bucky serves as a counter to Captain America's strength as they both begin their military careers with American Army training and are imbued with patriotism. Bucky also stands for more abstract concepts. Cap represents the best of the United States Army, a weapon only to be used for American objectives. In contrast, Bucky's presence as a Soviet soldier with American training could speak to the practice of selling American weapons to different countries and militaries for their own conflicts

or objectives or the phenomenon of innovations being copied or adopted by other states following the introduction by the U.S. military.

In the final movie, *Captain America: Civil War*, Bucky journeys back to himself, abandoning the Russian training and enhancement. This development is an important progression in fulfilling Captain America's goal of not leaving a soldier behind. Bucky not only conveys symbolic traits that associates him with Captain America and his values, but still uses his U.S. military training day to day. In Captain America's search of Bucky's apartment, in Romania, he finds Bucky's bed made in the way U.S. soldiers are trained. Bucky's salvation is incredibly important to Captain America whose resolve to ensure this outcome is pivotal to the climax of the movie. Captain America views Bucky as a victim of his situation, held captive and tortured by HYDRA, and injected with chemicals that permanently altered his biological make-up. Most importantly, Captain America views him as an American who deserves to be saved.

Technical and Military Superiority

In addition to Captain America's relationships with both the foreign allies and foreign villains of his story, there are other symbols of American exceptionalism and superiority in the military and technical components of the movies. From the beginning of the first movie until the end of the third, there is an emphasis on the military superiority of the United States relative to the opposing countries and individuals. Within *Captain America: The First Avenger*, there were multiple instances of very advanced technological military and societal developments not yet possible during the 1940s. Depictions of Laser weapons, flying cars, a high-tech invincible shield, aircrafts that did not require constant re-fueling, and a super-human bioweapon illustrated a government entering a conflict with the ability and every intention to come out a winner. This

depiction continues into the second film, even though the conflict takes place on American soil decades later. The military developments in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* include aircraft with numerous built-in targetable guns. Each gun on the aircraft is programmed to directly target different individuals, resulting in a successful kill every time. Finally, in *Captain America: Civil War*, the military is significantly less involved in the storyline than advanced technology directed towards engineers and societal betterment, or on the development of the superheroes themselves. Tony Stark, for instance, reveals a new technology to students at a high-profile university wherein virtual reality can be used to recreate memories and allow people to re-live events that already happened to them. A more expensive and tumultuous route than therapy, this advancement reflects technological superiority as a feature of the film without having a plot surrounding military conflict.

Technological superiority is an important component of these films particularly as it pertains to the creation of Captain America – a biological weapon developed by military personnel. Though his opposition also tends to have technologically advanced materials – in the first film, Red Skull is in position of a highly powerful energy source and is forging military weapons out of it – the ultimate technological advancement is the creation of the nationalist superhero. While other states, namely Russia, eventually develop their own biologically-enhanced human weapons, the U.S. innovation is more powerful and always comes out on top.

Geopolitical Importance

A relevant theme throughout Dittmer's research is the geopolitical importance of Captain America as a character and how he places himself – and by extension the United States – in relationships with other states and actors. The character by title alone has

geopolitical relevance due to the inherent connection between his strength and the powerful status of the United States. Beyond that, the Captain America films incorporate agencies and entities that reflect the reality of the international system, with cooperative organizations existing to create multi-national agreements for global threats and solutions. In the second Captain America film, the World Security Council is introduced, a fictionalization of the United Nations Security Council, featuring representatives from economically and militarily powerful countries using votes and speeches to state their nation's interests on any given issue. Though it is not established that there are permanent members with veto power, and though there are fewer representatives than the fifteen members of the current United Nations Security Council, the representatives debate transnational issues based on their national interests. Alexander Pierce is the United States representative and, in the first display of the Security Council meeting, is the only member standing as he speaks. He is portrayed as the leader of this meeting as a means of illustrating American dominance of geopolitical collaboration. While Captain America is not actively in this scene, his work during the hostage-rescue situation is relevant to the discussion. The conversation is dependent upon his actions and the active situation wherein a superhero is a national weapon tending to the dominance of the United States. The World Security Council is particularly interested in the current state of the international system, in order to ensure global and national safety. The strength of the United States matters a great deal in the current geopolitical climate. The nationality of Captain America insinuates – and performs – a protection of American interests alone and proves to be a threat to other states. The danger of Captain America's focused interested and his relentless strength is illustrated both by the dialogue between members

of the World Security Council, as well as the hostage rescue incident being discussed wherein Captain America's strength proves to be too much for a group of enemy soldiers.

The third movie directly mentions and includes the United Nations as a canon institution within the series. The primary conflict of the film involves a disagreement among members of the Avengers organization due to the pressure by the United Nations for control and oversight of the group. The Avengers made decisions that harmed several different countries, often in the Global South. The monetary, social, and political costs that plague the nations visited by Captain America and friends far outweigh the capabilities of the country to shoulder the costs. The situation is similar to how the United Nations is often mobilized to face humanitarian crises that result from conflicts, poor resources, or unstable governments. The films suggest great power culpability. Though the pattern of Avenger interference resulting in catastrophes and crises continues through most of the superhero movies in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, it is illustrated in the third Captain America movie as well. A fight among multiple members of the Avengers and Crossbones – a minor antagonist introduced in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* with another appearance in *Captain America: Civil War* – results in a bombing of an office building, killing eleven individuals in Nigeria. Scarlett Witch and her superhuman allies are ultimately blamed because to their inability to destroy the weapons placed by Crossbones and his cronies. This is the motivating factor that drives U.N. intervention, emphasized by showing a United Nations meeting in Geneva. Had this conflict occurred in the United States, the home of many of the Avengers, and had this conflict not been a follow-up to other issues in other struggling countries, an international check on their power may not have been seen as crucial. The geopolitical factors of American

superiority, respect for sovereignty, and an apparent great power disregard for territorial jurisdiction drive U.N. action.

In addition to the international entities that try to influence the capabilities and capacity of Captain America, there are also geopolitically relevant themes and concepts interwoven within the film's plot and dialogue. A primary example is the introduction of the Sokovia Accords from the United Nations, an agreement eventually ratified by 187 countries, bringing the Avengers into the United Nations as a military force only to be used at its discretion. While Iron Man, Black Widow, and others believe in the Sokovia Accords, Captain America actively fights against it, as the status quo protects his autonomy and encourages America's continued leadership. Captain America sees an international movement to control him and his allies as well as a cap on the United States military power, requiring him to ask permission from other countries to act to defend U.S. security. This argument, as well as one of preserving freedom, are the main points of contention with Captain America and the Avengers who oppose his view. Those supporting the Sokovia Accords argue for international discipline in order to ensure accountability for superheroes often viewed as a group of dangerous, and potentially uncontrollable super-powered individuals. The Secretary of S.H.I.E.L.D. and U.S. Councilman on the World Security Council, when arguing in support of the Accords, labels superheroes as such, claiming "what else would you call a group of US-based enhanced individuals who routinely ignore sovereign borders and inflict their will wherever they choose?" (*Captain America: Civil War* 2016, 21:45 – 21:59). This belief extends to members of the Avengers, as well. One non-American character, named Vision, when explaining his support of the Accords claims, "Our very strength invites

challenge. Challenge incites conflict. And conflict breeds catastrophe" (2016, 28:31 – 28:43). With the United States controlling many of the super-powered individuals of these movies, the Accords are meant to act as a check on U.S. power related to the heroes. If they are unable to conduct superhero business in-line with American interests without international approval and recognition, the power is kept in check. International agreements, however, are seen to be a possible route for this outcome. Members of the coalition in favor of the Accords, including some Avengers and the United Nations within the film franchise, view the Avengers as a form of "unlimited power" wielded in a way that can reign terror upon domestic and international soils (2016, 23:14). The metaphorical view of the Avengers as powerful weapons wielded by countries to further their interests or ensure national security is reminiscent of nuclear weapon attainment and tensions that arise from arms races. *Captain America: Civil War* illustrates a theme of danger related to supreme weapons employed by different levels of war and peace. What starts as a description of nuclear weapons utilized excessively by the United States evolves into a warning of weapons of mass destruction owned by opposing sides of a conflict. This imbalance drives the primary issues of the first *Captain America* film and continues to be a chief plot point motivator in the second and third movies. Captain America's role within this metaphor is representative of the United States as a leader of the arms race. His persistent resistance to the Accords is not connected to an ignorance of his own strength, but rather a personal and professional desire for autonomy. This hesitancy parallels a similar real-world refusal of the United States to sign onto many international agreements that might limit its freedom to act, discussed in more detail in the findings section. The decision to tackle global issues alone is also very much a form

of U.S. foreign policy and is illustrated through Cap's representation as a U.S. symbol for national interest, national security, and core ideals of freedom and autonomy.

The first Captain America film is less associated with internationalism, but is set during a world war and thus is geopolitically important. The German forces of World War II were the primary antagonists Captain America sought to destroy. The first film, the only one in which the major conflicts take place entirely on foreign soil, and emphasizes the non-American citizenship of his villain. Red Skull represents German ambition during World War II, and the insatiable desire for world domination. His evilness is taken to extremes, illustrated through his goal of unlimited power and access to slave labor. *Captain America: The First Avenger* is meant to introduce Captain America as a character and articulate his origin story. For this reason, most of the film is dedicated to war prep and the creation of this weapon rather than interactions between governments. The conflict between Captain America and Red Skull represents a perspective in which the good United States is fighting the bad German forces in World War II. The second and third films grow upon this dichotomy and represent the United States military in a more nuanced light with morally gray characters and motives on both sides. This development reflects historical understanding of U.S. participation in conflicts. In World War II, the United States intervention is framed as it is described in *The First Avenger,* with the good United States fighting against bad Germany. In the post-September 11th narratives, popular narratives have shifted to include accountability for unintended consequences and civilian collateral damage.

The endings of the first two films are structured to symbolize the heroic self-sacrifice of Captain America in order to protect the American people. The first film

comes to a close with Captain America crashing a ship into icy waters to avoid an inevitable crash landing into New York City, meant to kill hundreds of thousands of American citizens. This crash landing is supposed to kill Steve Rogers. Captain America is set on a path to die, even though it would mean a successful mission. Instead his super-human abilities, and the preservative power of ice save the hero until his emergence decades later. In the second film, Captain America orders the firing of targeted weapons set with the objective of destroying the aircraft he is on. The dangers of these aircraft weapons far outweigh the importance that Captain America places on himself. This act is likely to kill the superhero, though the nobility and honor of Captain America surpass any selfish thoughts of survival. In both cases, Captain America survived, in spite of the dangers, saving millions of people. These apparent revivals, specifically in the ending of *Captain America: The First Avenger*, illustrate the resolve of Captain America and the state he represents while the ability of Captain America to survive in the second film illustrate the might and physical capabilities that are a result of his military training and biological superiority. The theme in *Captain America: The First Avenger* demonstrates a message of self-determination and a pull-yourself-up rhetoric trumping realistic factors of struggle, death, and loss while *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* and *Captain America: Civil War* expresses the success of U.S. interests when faced with foreign or domestic opposition.

CHAPTER 4: FINDING AND IMPLICATIONS: SUMMARY

This analysis of three *Captain America* films explores how a media transition could impact the political relevance of fictional characters that previously had established a pattern of political themes, messaging, or representations in a different format. While Dittmer has established the political relevance of Captain America as the star of his own comics, there is little analysis of the nationalist superhero's relevance as the star of his own large-scale blockbuster films. This project specifically explores the movies' ability to portray messages related to American exceptionalism, the geopolitical importance of Captain America and his storylines, as well as American values expressed in the main characters. When tackling this idea, I hypothesized that many of the symbolic and observable elements related to color and imagery established by Dittmer would make the transition to film well, as both are visual media. The adaptation takes printed illustration and changes into a physical actor on screen. The ease of the adaptation of visual symbolism is particularly true when it comes to the overt symbolism tied into Captain America's battle suits, armor, and costumes throughout the films. Though he wears different suits for different missions or with different organizations, each of them utilizes the iconic display of red, white, and blue with stars and stripes in order to illustrate the connection of Captain America to the United States. There was also significant symbolism in the territorial attachment to the United States that is unrelated to the colors or pattern of the American flag. His motives of protection and national defense as well as his status as a soldier symbolize actions of the United States military in the beginning of

the trilogy and evolve to symbolize foreign policy decisions and rationales of the United States towards the end of the series.

Due to the disparities in the form of the content, I hypothesized that certain claims would be unable to transition to films due to the limited screen time allotted to three specific storylines. This hypothesis, expectedly, is substantiated by the analysis of the three *Captain America* films. Much of the research on Captain America as a politically relevant character has been related to his comic book storylines which has allowed scholars to have a plethora of potential data. Since the release of the first Captain America comic in 1941, hundreds of issues have been published with different storylines directly related to ongoing political and social issues of America. The movies, however, were not only restricted to three storylines – one per movie – but also had to be partially relevant to other narratives and other characters within the larger Marvel Cinematic Universe. These restraints significantly limit what can be displayed within the movies and thus limits the scope of this analysis. Had there been even a fourth or fifth movie of this particular series franchise, more information would have been available to contribute to the determination of Captain America's relevance.

Finally, I had two similar hypotheses related to the first Captain America film and the interpretation of geopolitical importance. I hypothesized that the first film would provide the clearest adaptation of traditional themes, messages, and stances propagated in the original comics and additionally hypothesized that claims related to geopolitical importance would transition particularly well to the first film due its setting and the war on foreign soil. I theorized that the relevance of the first villain as a military leader of a foreign government would speak to political relevance with strong themes of American

exceptionalism. These hypotheses are not substantiated by the film analysis as the second and third movie do the most to establish themes of American exceptionalism and geopolitical importance. The first movie, being directly related to Captain America's origin story, primarily focuses on establishing the creation of the character and the important facets of his personality that directly relate to the relevant conflicts and antagonists. While the setting and conflict of the first movie are geopolitically relevant in some sense, set amidst a historical conflict and featuring the vilification of Adolf Hitler on the sidelines, the messaging of the movie is far from preaching democracy and peace and doesn't introduce transnational communications or American leadership in conflict.

The standard categorizations of superhero content were discussed in earlier sections with the anti-establishment, establishment, and colonial narratives put forth by DiPaolo (2011). The *Captain America* films from the 2010s most clearly apply to the establishment narrative with the determination to "preserve the status quo" as well as to "protect the government and populace from invading foreign hordes, criminals, and terrorists" (2011, 12). The audience sees this within the first film through the takedown of Red Skull, a foreign leader looking to destroy American cities and establish a global government with him at its head. In *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* this narrative is present through both Captain America's fight for The Winter Soldier and his interactions with HYDRA spies in S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters. Finally, in the third *Captain America* film, the audience experiences the establishment narrative through Cap's opposition to the Sokovia Accords and his determination to maintain the system that benefits him and his fellow Avengers. In each of these three movies, Captain America's goal is tied to the

protection of his country and the maintenance of the status quo, clearly indicative of DiPaolo's establishment narrative.

Though a simple analysis of the *Captain America* films yielded enough data for meeting the expectations from my initial hypotheses, the films also provided context for an interesting overarching theme of the franchise, particularly in the second and third films. The distinctive subject matters, the actions taken by Captain America as a proxy for the United States, and the overt stances taken on real crises or conflicts describe content that parallels U.S. foreign policy across decades. To begin, this likeness is illustrated through the plot line where Captain America leads the opposition narrative for signing the Sokovia Accords. Captain America finds the Accords to be inflexible and would result in demanded acquiescence to the United Nations. He would have to ask permission to take action against actors or institutions that directly opposed his self or national interests. Though he seems to agree with the idea of restrictions, Cap believes they should be self-imposed and reliant on his instincts and honor. This self-restraint phenomenon is similar to the United States' approach to international agreements. While the overall goal may coincide with positive outcomes or ones in-line with U.S. interests, the restrictions that come with an international agreement or treaty are not always considered advantageous by the United States. Examples of this foreign policy phenomenon include the International Criminal Court, the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, the Ottawa "Landmine Ban" Convention, the Child Soldier Treaty, and the Arms Trade Treaty. Each of these agreements was negotiated in order to provide some service or measure of security to the world, and may have, on a large-scale, been supported by the United States. Regardless of U.S. advocacy, support, or encouragement

for finding solutions for a variety of problems, the United States avoids ratifying or signing the agreements in order to prioritize and protect its interests and autonomy.

Engagement in multilateral institutions can be seen as a risk for the United States and in order to protect U.S. decision-making, foreign policy directives, or military action, the U.S. will avoid ratification in order not to be held responsible for defying the rules. The United States' decision not to move forward with signing the Ottawa Convention's Mine Ban Treaty, for example, relates to the inability of the U.S. to protect its soldiers as well as impedes U.S. action in "security commitments" and "national defense" (Alexander 2009, par. 3). The reasons that the United States has avoided commitment to the International Criminal Court (ICC) are similar. Commitment to a permanent institution like the ICC makes the United States vulnerable to "politicized prosecution" for alleged war crimes (Paust 2013, 564). The restrictions mandated by the Mine Ban Treaty and the International Criminal Court counter the ability of the United States to promote national security interests and to protect U.S. forces abroad. These two instances exemplify instances wherein the United States supported the general ideas within transnational agreements, like ensuring civilians do not die from land mines, but would not sign or ratify agreements in order to avoid losing control. Additionally, both agreements would require the United States to answer to an international body for its foreign policy decisions. The United States' priorities of ensuring autonomy and self-protection outweigh the benefits of collective organizations, especially those in search of limiting military effort.

Within the C*aptain America* films, this foreign policy phenomenon is illustrated through Captain America's actions and reasoning within the movies. In the third film, his

hesitancy to support the Sokovia Accords was a result of his prioritization of U.S. interests. Captain America was unyielding, willing to create tension and conflict to oppose the agreement. His perception of losing control over where and when he could be a hero ruled out Captain America's support, and he refuses to answer to an international body or to be vulnerable to punishment for acting without permission, similar to the United States refusing to ratify international agreements. The parallel between foreign policy decisions of the United States and Captain America's decision as an actor in his fictional geopolitical environment is an important way in which these Captain America films grow upon the political relevance established in the long-running comics.

Captain America's opposition to the Sokovia Accords is not the first instance in the trilogy where Cap yearns for the authority to decide what actions he is going to take. It initially appears in *Captain America: The First Avenger* when he acts without support of his superiors. To even become Captain America, Steve Rogers must work around the system, ignoring orders from several military officers that deemed him unfit for military service. Furthermore, he disobeys orders in the first movie in order to infiltrate the enemy's scientific base for the purpose of rescuing fellow American soldiers. His choices to disregard advice or directions from others in many ways depicts the strong resolve of Captain America. It does, however, also parallel the U.S. foreign policy decisions wherein military action was conducted with or without international support. Though he mostly informs others of his decision and the actions he's going to take in superseding scenes, his determination to act surpasses his need for support from his allies or his opposition. In American foreign policy, this stand-alone mentality could be compared to military action taken by both the Bush Administration and Obama Administration amidst

the War on Terror. In a post-September 11th world, American foreign policy hung under the weight of terrorism and the determination to avoid another catastrophic attack on the United States and to punish those who were responsible for the 2001 attack (Jackson 2011). President Bush's aggressive foreign policy decisions, and the U.S. "preemptive" military invasion of Iraq in 2003 illustrate military action conducted motivated by selfish national security interests without extensive military support. The narratives used by the Bush Administration continued to be utilized by President Obama with his expansion of security-related surveillance and the drone war, as well as his "adherence to Bush-era policies" (Zalman and Clark 2009, 102). The aggressive foreign policy rationales offered by the Bush and Obama administrations were not met with overwhelming support from the international community (McCrisken 2013). The lack of international support did not sway the United States' foreign policy decisions and actions.

In addition to the parallels connecting American foreign policy and Captain America's actions, data collected from the second and third films describe the real-world tensions and results of trauma in a post-September 11th America. The tensions between individuals and between institutions within *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* and *Captain America: Civil War* illustrate the difficulty of maintaining control post-catastrophe. While fear and self-imposed guilt drives some individuals, justice and vengeance drive others. This disconnect amongst characters drives action from both sides and ultimately contributes to the growing conflict of the third film. We see this tension most not from the superheroes themselves, but from those around them that have felt or seen the dangers they bring in the name of safety. From grieving mothers and college students to government employees, the fear of continued violence or the unwavering trust

in military force, splits the citizens as well as the Avengers. This effect is similar to U.S response to the use of military force in Iraq and Afghanistan and the wide divide between those in support of military action and those against it (Oliphant 2018).

In *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, Black Widow is called to testify at a Congressional hearing regarding the dissolution of S.H.I.E.L.D. after the infiltration of HYDRA spies. The senators are looking for answers as to how this infiltration occurred and the relevant blame that can be placed upon Captain America, Nick Fury, and other associated members of the Avengers, potentially recommending imprisonment for Captain America and his allies. When confronted by these allegations, she defends her fellow superheroes as they were the most qualified individuals to defend the world from attacks (*Captain America: The Winter Soldier* 2014). Her response is relevant to the idea of the United States acting as a unitary actor because it emphasizes the military and physical capabilities for protection over the avoidance of collateral damage. The actions of the Avengers are justified by Black Widow in this congressional hearing in the same way that U.S. military actions abroad are justified.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The Avengers, with Captain America at the helm, are some of the most ideologically relevant fictional characters in American media today – with endless box office records showing that these characters are modern icons to the American people and people around the word. The three Captain America movies in particular successfully adapt the political relevance established from the Captain America comic books of years past and the modern day. Furthermore, they go beyond narratives related to domestic social issues, and successfully illustrate parallels between Captain America as a character and the foreign policy decisions, rationales, and actions of the United States throughout the past several decades. By including plot lines surrounding international threat and terror, and supplementing that with symbolism of character, statehood, and national strength, the audience witnesses tensions present in times of major international fear and uncertainty. The first film begins in World War II and illustrates villainy as anti-American, installs the United States – through Captain America – as a leader in international safety and a force of military strength. Jumping ahead decades, the second and third films exist in a post-September 11th world and provide narratives and comparisons to U.S. society or actions during the War on Terror. At their core, these three movies are stories of the triumphant will of America as a country, an idea, and a people; even when at times the threat is closer to home than Steve Rogers realizes.

There is plenty of room for future political science to explore the importance of popular culture, both in fields of domestic politics and international relations. This

analysis sought to contribute to this conversation by examining three pop culture hits – the Captain America films. By observing films that were released globally and grossed billions of dollars through their production, a larger audience is reached. This factor contributes more relevance to this project as any political messaging or parallels depicted communicated to a large enough audience means more than content appealing to a small subset of the population. Though this project does not analyze any substantive influence of this political messaging, first establishing the presence of political relevance opens the door for future research to observe potential affects or connected outcomes. Additionally, this project establishes merit for future research on content adaptations in similar media and the gains or losses of political relevance in this transition. While research into other comic book adaptations is encouraged, format adaptations like politically relevant books to film or virtual reality (VR) to video games could yield data on the foreign policy or domestic politics that could reinforce the importance of pop culture. Additionally, genre transitions from action film to animated film, in order to attract a more diverse audience, could be an interesting setting to explore audience impact in an effort to further develop this subfield. To grow off the specific contributions of this project, it would be interesting to see future research explore the effects of geopolitically relevant themes and messages that were found in the *Captain America* films. Scholars could explore the comparative aspects of comic book to movie adaptations by exploring how people perceive the politically relevant comic book narratives and the ideological fantasy explored in the films. Additionally, research could explore how different audiences perceive the contents of the film both domestically and internationally, explored through field interviews.

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