

# Holding Out for a Hero: Reaganism, Comic Book Vigilantes, and Captain America

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The world about us has changed and is continuously changing at an ever-accelerating pace. So have we. With the increase in media coverage and information technology, we see more of the world, comprehend its workings a little more clearly, and as a result, our perception of ourselves and the society surrounding us has been modified. Consequently, we begin to make different demands upon the art and culture that is meant to reflect the constantly shifting landscape we find ourselves in. We demand new themes, new insights, new dramatic situations. We demand new heroes.

—Alan Moore, “The Mark of the Batman”

He’s gotta be sure  
And it’s gotta be soon  
And he’s gotta be larger than life

—Jim Steinman, “Holding Out for a Hero”

**H**EROES HAVE ALWAYS BEEN IMPORTANT IN AMERICAN SOCIETY, BUT they were particularly vital in the eighties. In the previous decade, America had been victimized both abroad (the 444-day kidnapping of American embassy employees in Iran) and at home (with double-digit inflation and an oil shortage), and the country suffered from the resulting low self-esteem. Ronald Reagan ran his 1980 presidential campaign on the assumption that the worst thing wrong with the country was that “America was losing faith in itself” (Reagan 205), and that the people needed new faith, a renewed sense of purpose, a hero to make them believe in themselves again. Reagan

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believed he could be that hero, and the majority of voters, in electing him, agreed. But as the decade rolled on and cracks in Reagan's hero facade gradually appeared (record deficits and the Iran Contra affair, among other things), the true nature of this new American hero became increasingly questionable. Perhaps more importantly, however, many Americans (as evident in some elements of the popular culture) began to wonder if such things as heroes could even exist in the eighties.

This article, then, will analyze superheroes in eighties comic books to find out how heroship in popular culture actually worked. Specifically, I will look at three things. First, I will examine how the 1980s particular intersections between morality, politics, and conceptions of justice and order necessitate more specific definitions and labels for those who try to be heroes, whether within or outside the law in light of Reagan and Reaganism. Secondly, I will analyze Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1988) to demonstrate two separate ways in which comic books in the eighties portrayed vigilantes, mainly based on the characters' relationship to the status quo. Finally, I will look at the Reagan-era portrayal of the World War II superhero, Captain America, to show how past norms of herodom reacted with the political climate of Reaganism, and to show that true heroship did not occur without defining oneself as an entity separate from the powers that be and transcending traditional notions of law, order, and justice.

Reagan's hero status was, during his administration, constantly defined by his supposed political outsider position. However, even though the president entered office in part on a pledge to reduce the size of the federal government, government instead increased by leaps and bounds during Reagan's tenure. That increase was not just in size but also in power. Popularly, though, this power was not seen as being exercised by Reagan but by his advisors. While Reagan liked to portray himself as a Washington outsider, the majority of the staff consisted of savvy, experienced politicians who were seen as controlling the president, tying his hands in such actions as the weak American response to the Soviet Union's downing of a Korean Air Lines jet in 1983. One of the frequent cries in the media (especially in the early eighties) was that the president's staff "wouldn't let Reagan be Reagan."

Reagan, however, was commonly seen as a bit of a cowboy hero figure both at home and abroad. Those who saw him in a positive light

took the cowboy bit to mean he was an outsider, a renegade who was not afraid to do what he thought was right. Those who used the cowboy image as a slur cast the outsider/renegade image with a negative spin, seeing the president as an uncivilized vigilante. What is missing from these contrasting images, however, is that while Reagan may have been either a conviction-driven renegade or a crude vigilante, he was also an experienced politician in his own right, having been a powerful governor of the country's most populous state, and having made great strides to build good relations with congress. Even if Reagan was a cowboy, this did not in fact remove him from centralized power; it merely blurred in the eyes of the public the president's true relation to governmental power. As a propaganda tool, then, Reagan's outsider image had political value far beyond its factuality (or lack thereof) in that it helped deflect any criticism of the government in general from hitting the president.

It is my contention here that Reagan's cowboy image had specific political value in that it helped the public view him as an antipolitician. This visage obscured the strength of Reagan's ties to centralized government, and Reagan was able to appear heroic even when the government's actions were not seen as such. The cowboy image also made Reagan *de facto* appear heroic, because the cowboy is an archetypal American hero. The president's political persona is important here because Reagan *de facto* represented the culturally/politically dominant strands of American society as more than just a governmental leader. Reagan's total embodiment of this cultural/political element is what leads us to refer to the entire cultural/political dominant theme of the eighties (in a synecdochic turn of phrase) as Reaganism, with the president himself as its leader and hero.

Reagan's renegade/cowboy image effectively blurs the real political relationship between central authority, morality, and mainstream values not just for the president but for Reaganism in general. Most of the specific elements of Reaganism are outside of the scope of the present article; the Reaganism view of heroes, however, largely mirrored Reagan's tendency of hiding his relationship with authority behind a renegade image. It was the popular culture of the era that pointed out how Reaganism emphasized a system of law and order based on politics as opposed to a system of justice based on morality. As such, vigilanteism, politics, and morals are all key factors which define how heroism operated in the 1980s.

If popular culture in general through the 1980s was rife with vigilante characters, the comic book industry was doubly so (quasi-heroes such as The Punisher and the aptly named Vigilante immediately leap to mind). Vigilantes are typically defined as individuals who “defend [the established] order by resorting to means that violate these formal boundaries” of that order (Rosenbaum 4). The defining factor is on formal rules and boundaries, and the established order labels vigilantes as criminals and outsiders based on their actions. Under this definition, vigilantes simply are characters who take the law into their own hands.

However, what is really at stake in the vigilante-based popular culture (and in Miller and Moore’s novels specifically) is not the status of the character in regard to law, order, or even morals. Michel de Certeau showed that “a relation (always social) determines its terms, and not the reverse” (xi); for our purposes, substituting the term “political” for “social” in the above quote clarifies how vigilanteism *really* works, because vigilantes do not earn their status through their actions but are labeled as such for their political beliefs. Simply going outside the bounds of the law is not enough to make one a vigilante—as extra-legal activities are often common within the system (a fact which would become painfully apparent during the 1991 Rodney King incident). Instead, a vigilante’s activity becomes labeled as such only in the event of political differences.

So what would you call characters who take the law into their own hands yet are politically aligned with the politically ruling group? Kotecha and Walker call such people police vigilantes. Says Kotecha and Walker:

the shortcomings of law enforcement seem to be perceived more accurately by the police themselves. Police vigilanteism can be defined as acts or threats by police which are intended to protect the established socio-political order from subversion but which violate some *generally perceived* norms for police behavior.

(159, emphasis added)

Police vigilantes are obviously part of the system; they do not differ in acting outside of the rules, only outside of the rules as they are socially constructed. Police vigilantes are also always acting explicitly in accord with society’s moral code. Because society is varied (and variable), one is never permanently a police vigilante—the term itself is merely a matter of (a usually political, sometimes transient)<sup>1</sup> opinion. Police

vigilantes are coddled and even celebrated, while those who work without official sanction are shunned and hunted. Simply put, whether a character resides in a positive or negative light is largely a political matter and is thus not really an issue of right or wrong.

Perhaps the best real life example of the political value of the vigilante facade from real life is the case of Bernard Goetz.<sup>2</sup> On December 22, 1984, Goetz was riding the subway when he was approached by several African American youth who asked him for five dollars. The youth claimed they were only asking Goetz for some spare change, while Goetz claimed he believed he was going to be mugged. In response, Goetz pulled out a gun and shot the four youths. The four youths claim they were victims of unprovoked violence. Goetz was acquitted of attempted murder in his 1987 criminal trial. One of the youths, Darrell Cabey, brought a civil lawsuit against the then infamous “subway vigilante”; in 1996, the court awarded Cabey \$43 million in damages (“Court TV Verdicts . . .”).

The truth about the shooting will never be known. Yet even if we assume that the youths did plan to mug Goetz, we still have to answer an important question. Was Goetz a vigilante, or did he act as would any harassed city dweller would? Those who see him as a vigilante claim Goetz was a racist, a lawbreaker, and a cold-blooded killer. Those who see him as an urban hero claim he simply had to defend himself because the system would (or could) not. Each view has severe implications. Those supporting the vigilante view must acknowledge the racial and class differences as overriding factors yet still have faith in the government to maintain law and order—the police, in this liberal mindset, should be the ones to handle criminals. Those viewing Goetz as a hero obviously see the police as ineffective and place their faith in the individual rather than the government—as the system, in this conservative mindset, has broken down. At any rate, both views are more concerned with politics than with legal issues, and this politic dictates the moral slant inherent in each view.

In the world of popular culture, perhaps the most popular vigilante figure is Batman, and the most celebrated Batman work is Frank Miller’s 1986 graphic novel *The Dark Knight Returns*. Against the backdrop of impending nuclear war with the USSR, a fifty-year-old Batman comes out of retirement to rid Gotham city of an ultraviolent street gang called The Mutants. With the help of a new Robin (Carrie Kelley, a teenage admirer), Batman defeats the Mutant leader, causing

the gang to fracture; many of the ex-Mutants, choosing to follow Batman (albeit in a more violent manner), call themselves the Sons of Batman and become vigilantes. After the Batman sympathizing Police Commissioner Gordon retires, Batman finds himself battling the new commissioner (Ellen Yindel, who issues a warrant for Batman's arrest as her first act in office), along with the Joker (freshly escaped from Arkham Asylum, Gotham's mental hospital) and even Superman (ordered by President Reagan to take Batman down). Batman wins over Yindel by restoring order after a nuclear attack, defeats the Joker in hand to hand combat, and fakes his own death after battling Superman in Gotham's crime alley. The novel ends with the revived Batman retreating to the ruins of his batcave to train the Sons of Batman as an alternative law enforcement army.

The Batman of *The Dark Knight Returns* is explicitly labeled a vigilante in the novel by both the new police commissioner and the president. Tim Blackmore writes that in this novel,

Miller's Batman voices a common concern about the rights of the criminal superceding the rights of the victim. The ever-growing list of rights guaranteed the criminal frustrates both police and the victim. It is not surprising that Bernard Goetz was easily acquitted by a jury of his peers. (44)

The rights of suspected criminals are given remarkably short shift in this novel. While cornering one of Harvey "Two-Face" Dent's accomplices, Batman—in response to the foe's nervous cry "Stay Back—I got rights"—replies in a Dirty Harry-esque style, "You've got rights. Lots of rights. Sometimes I count them just to make myself feel crazy" (Miller 45). It should be noted that this speech takes place after Batman throws the accomplice through a window.

In *The Dark Knight Returns*, Batman is seen as a hero by those who would typically fit the stereotype of conservative/Republican. Many of his supporters are tired of the crime which runs rampant through Gotham City but see the police as inadequate to the job; one of the "man on the street" interviewees says "frankly, I'm surprised there aren't a hundred like him out there—thousand people are fed up with terror—with stupid laws and social cowardice. He's only taking back what's ours" (Miller 65). Along with the distrust of authority, those who see Batman as a savior also stress individual rights; Lana Lang, managing editor of the Daily Metropolis, finds the support for Batman

“a symbolic resurgence of the common man’s will to resist . . . a rebirth of the American fighting spirit” (Miller 41). As is often the case, this conservatism reaches into controversial extremist political areas; another “man on the street” says “He’s kicking just the right butts—butts the cops ain’t kicking, that’s for sure. Hope he goes after the homos next” (Miller 45).

The epitome of this conservative, individualist Batman spirit is the case of advertising agent Byron Brassballs. While in the subway (in a bizarre mirror of the Bernard Goetz case), he was accosted for money by a beggar on crutches. Brassballs suspected a mugging, so he pushed the beggar on the tracks in front of an oncoming train. When questioned, he says, in a Goetz-like fashion, “how was I to know he didn’t have a gun? They never show you that until they’re ready to kill you.” The adman further justified his behavior by claiming “I was just trying to protect myself” in a deadly environment where the police could not help him (Miller 110).

On the other hand, many of those who see Batman as a vigilante fit the stereotype of liberal. One “man on the street” supports treatment over punishment, saying Batman “makes me sick. We must treat the socially misoriented with rehabilitative methods” (Miller 45). The parents of Carrie Kelley (the new Robin) fit the ex-hippie stereotype; they say Batman “obviously [is] a fascist. Never heard of civil rights . . . they all love him. The American conscience died with the Kennedys . . . all that marching we did—it’s like it never happened, now” (Miller 45). Ellen Yindel, Gotham City’s new Commissioner, has the requisite belief in the ability of the government to solve any crisis; “Despite Gotham’s plague of crime,” she states, “I believe our only recourse is law enforcement” (Miller 116)—and this involves issuing an arrest warrant for Batman as her first official act.

When the superheroes are labeled vigilantes by the government, though, it is not simply because they are conservative where they should be liberal, or vice versa. The issue is instead one of control. Superman realizes that although his services are needed by the government, the rulers (and the people in general, to some degree) resent *having* to rely on powers stronger than themselves. “They’ll kill us if they can, Bruce,” Superman says. “Every year they grow smaller. Every year they hate us more” (Miller 129). Superman, fearing the public is the main threat to his existence, became a police vigilante instead of a vigilante proper and surrenders his freedom by becoming a tool of the

government. Superman no longer wages war on crime. Instead, the superhero is governmentally limited to fighting America's police action conquest of the small island of Corto Maltese.

Early in the novel, when the president (who is never directly named in the novel but is clearly Ronald Reagan) orders Superman to talk to Batman, where the political sympathies for the two heroes lie is blatantly apparent. While the president does say that if the world were different he would give Batman a medal, he predominantly equates him to a "crazy bronco." Superman's political acquiescence is apparent in more than just his polite "Yes, sir"s. The president and Superman's conversation begins with a upward shot of an American flag and zooms in on that flag throughout the talk. During the close-ups, however, the image changes and morphs into the Superman logo (Miller 84). Superman's very identity is by this point subsumed by and inseparable from that of the government, perhaps fittingly so for a government agent/police vigilante.

Batman, on the other hand, remains a vigilante proper because he never compromised his crime-fighting methods to satisfy the government. When Police Commissioner Gordon retires from his job, Batman's government support dries up. New Commissioner Yindel is an active foe of his and leads salvos of gunfire on Batman on several occasions. She does not become a supporter until she sees Batman and the Sons of Batman restore civil order from the looting and riots of the nuclear winter-induced night.

The novel climaxes with a fight to the death between Superman and Batman. Batman defeats the sunlight-starved Superman seconds before his own heart apparently gives out. While punching and kicking, Batman tells Superman "we could have changed the world . . . now . . . look at us . . . I've become . . . a political liability . . . and you . . . you're a joke" (Miller 195). What separates the two heroes is not their morals (although both have strong, though differing conceptions of right and wrong) but how they apply those morals to their crime-fighting. Batman is a political liability because his morality is fiercely independent. He only fights those *he* (not the government) believes are wrong and is consequently treated as a vigilante—vigilante being the key term for those who will not fall in line to authority's domination. Superman, though, is a joke because he allows his morality to be placed under the government's service. Superman is left merely fighting the battles to which the current regime assigns him.



Earlier, when Yindel asks the retiring Commissioner Gordon why he put up with (and even supported) the vigilante activities of Batman, the one image that comes into Gordon's mind is that of Franklin Delanore Roosevelt. Gordon tried to reconcile his image of Roosevelt as a hero with evidence that the president let the Japanese attack Pearl Harbor in an effort to draw Americans into World War II. In the end, though, "I realized I couldn't judge it. It was too big. He was too big" (Miller 96), too important for simple political/moral judgments because what he did was, in the end, right and necessary for the survival of the country. In this regard, FDR could be seen as the ultimate police vigilante.

Gordon feels exactly same way about Batman, and Commissioner Yindel (upon watching Batman restore order where her forces could not) ends up agreeing that Batman's importance should place him above such political categories as vigilante proper. One can never truly escape politics, however. *Dark Knight* ends with Batman giving up his superhero persona and becoming Bruce Wayne full time. He has not given up crime fighting; instead, he is establishing and heading an army of crime fighters to replace his presence on the streets. He is also still involved politically—more so, perhaps, as he has placed himself as an alternative to the leaders of the establishment. Bruce Wayne's new persona does not belong to either the vigilante or police vigilante category. The new role of Batman is as the leader of an alternative system of justice not opposed to the system but removed from it.

While the world of *The Dark Knight Returns* is by no means morally simple, it is downright elementary compared with the landscape of Alan Moore's 1987 novel *Watchmen*. Against the backdrop of impending nuclear war with the USSR, a mentally unstable vigilante named Rorschach investigates the death of the Comedian, a costumed hero working as a government agent (as independent costumed heroes were outlawed by antivigilante legislation). Rorschach discovers that the Comedian was murdered by Ozymandias, a retired hero turned entrepreneur. After eventually teaming up with Nite Owl (his old partner), the Silk Spectre (a reluctantly costumed heroine), and Dr. Manhattan (the only hero with truly superhuman powers), Rorschach confronts Ozymandias at the retired hero's arctic headquarters. While there, they learn of the businessman's strategy to unite America and the USSR against a common enemy by staging a fake alien invasion. Ozymandias's scheme does in fact unite the two superpowers, and

all the heroes save Rorschach agree to keep the plan a secret in spite of the death of half of New York City in the “invasion.” Dr. Manhattan kills an escaping Rorschach to keep him quiet, but his notes detailing Ozymandias’s plan wind up in the hands of a radically conservative newspaper publisher.

The similarities between *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* are numerous. Both novels are set against the backdrop of impending nuclear war. Both take place in the typical large American city (*Dark Knight* in the generic Gotham, *Watchmen* mainly in the specific New York City). In both, superheroes are only allowed to function with government consent (Superman is Reagan’s pawn in *Dark Knight*, while the Comedian and Dr. Manhattan are Nixon employees in *Watchmen*). Also, both focus largely on the actions of characters labeled as vigilantes (*Dark Knight* is a Batman story, while the closest thing to a protagonist in *Watchmen* is Rorschach). However, where *Dark Knight* deals with political matters in the specific/micro sense (that is, the Democrat/Republican, liberal/conservative binaries), *Watchmen*’s complexity comes from its concern with politics in a larger/macro sense—that is, as general structures of power.

The world of *Watchmen* is never simplistic. Comic critic Richard Reynolds observes that “the superheroes of *Watchmen* . . . lack any supervillians to measure themselves against” (116). Nor is there any clear structure of authority in the novel. Police exist, but they never deal with the major conflict (potential nuclear holocaust), nor can they; the scope of the problem seems larger than any force in the novel—and thus has the aura of being unstoppable. The government also exists, but there is no direct contact between its officials or its superhero agents (the two heroes explicitly working for the government—the Comedian and Dr. Manhattan—are more interested in their own goals than those of the government). In short, *Watchmen* is set in a world marked by fragmentation of authority and disconnected forces—a postmodern world, if you will (Hartley 234).

The heart of the novel—much to the chagrin of its author Alan Moore (117)—is Rorschach. Rorschach is the closest thing to a traditional vigilante in *Watchmen* in that he is violent beyond necessity, attacks police when cornered, and blatantly refuses regulation; when vigilanteism was declared illegal and the other superheroes were forced to retire, Rorschach expressed “his feelings toward compulsory retirement in a note left outside police headquarters along with [the

mangled body of] a dead multiple rapist”—the note simply said “never!” (Moore 23, ch. IV). Rorschach also believes it is society, not him who is mentally diseased. “Why,” he asks, “are so few of us left active? Healthy, without personality disorders?” (Moore 19, ch. I).

Rorschach is definitely the servant of his binary system of morals, seeing the world only in modernist, black and white terms—like a Rorschach test. Early in the novel, Rorschach contemplates the impending nuclear holocaust and asks himself:

Why does one death [that of the Comedian] matter against so many? Because there is good and there is evil, and evil must be punished . . . but there are so many deserving of retribution.  
(Moore 24, ch. I)

Rorschach’s morality is Manichean, much like that of Superman (whom Oliver Queen labels a “schoolboy” for his simplistic moral philosophy [Miller 186]). Rorschach, however, is more closely bound to his sense of right or wrong than is the caped crusader and thus refuses to compromise those morals by working only on government assigned missions. Nor, however, would Rorschach’s psyche allow him to abandon his quest for justice. “We do not do this thing because it is permitted,” he tells his court-appointed psychiatrist. “We do it because we have to. We do it because we are compelled” (Moore 15, ch. VI).

The two superheroes who explicitly work for the government, however, are no more tied to the government than is Rorschach. Dr. Manhattan thinks only in his own logic and for a while cannot even bring himself to even *care* about humans, let alone their regulations. While on Mars, he tells Laurie (the Silk Spectre) that he questions:

the point of all that struggling, the purpose of this endless labor, accomplishing nothing, leaving people empty and disillusioned . . . leaving people broken . . . in my opinion, [life is] a highly overrated phenomenon.  
(Moore 12–13, ch. IX)

Dr. Manhattan cannot then be a true supporter of either the government or the established order as he believes in neither (even though he formally allies himself with both). Nor, for that matter, can the Comedian because he simply is almost totally devoid of morality; Dr. Manhattan calls the Comedian the most “deliberately amoral” person he has ever met (Moore 19, ch. IV).

If any character in *Watchmen* would seem to fit the traditional definition of the vigilante, it would be Ozymandias, and he operates more like a businessman than a hero-type. Ozymandias sees the world as truly diseased, and the arms race means “less cash [for mankind] to spend upon their old, their sick, and their homeless” (Moore 21, ch. XII). His solution is to slaughter a large segment of the population in order to instill peace via survival instinct into those remaining by staging a false alien invasion. Wholesale slaughter means nothing to Ozymandias if human order is ultimately saved. Ozymandias, however, is not really a vigilante (or even the aforementioned police vigilantes) because he is not actually working in opposition to the established order. Instead, the new order he creates and heads (politically in that he brings forth its existence, economically in that his company is perhaps its major benefactor) is more powerful than the ordinary governments could ever dream of becoming. Ozymandias does not subvert the established order, he supercedes it, thus *becoming* the establishment . . . or at least *an* establishment. While this may be a violent revolution, Foucault would argue that peace always is violent in some regard: “peace would then be a form of war, and the state a means of waging it” (123).

In both Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* and Moore’s *Watchmen*, vigilanteism is merely a political name placed on alternate methods of controlling the world. The term vigilante merely denotes political opponents. Both Batman and Ozymandias create new orders designed to supplant the established order, not work in its gray areas. Even though the works of Miller and Moore are extreme examples of 1980s heroes, the issues raised in both titles permeate the superhero comic world. One of the mainstream characters that had to struggle hardest with what it meant to be a hero (and consequently vigilanteism) in the eighties was the 1940s all-American superhero, Captain America.

Captain America was originally a 1940s youth named Steve Rogers who was too skinny and frail to serve in the Army in World War II. After receiving super serum injections in a government science experiment, Rogers gained superhuman strength and, along with his sidekick Bucky Barnes, served as a costumed super soldier both domestically and in World War II Europe. After both Captain America and Bucky Barnes went down in a plane crash and were presumed dead, several other people briefly adopted the Captain America costume; the most unusual of these imposters was perhaps the red-baiting, racist Captain America of the 1950s. In *Avengers* #4 (1964), though,

the Avengers superhero team discovered Captain America floating in an arctic ice block. Since his return from a twenty-year absence spent in suspended animation, one of the hallmarks of Captain America's character was that of a man out of time; Rogers continually struggles to this day with the gap between his 1940s morality and that of the more modern world he inhabits. The most notable example of this moral reappraisal happened in issues 175–83 when, after finding out that Number One, leader of the Secret Empire (another group of villains bent on world domination), was really a megalomaniac government official,<sup>3</sup> Steve Rogers abandoned the Captain America persona. Instead, Rogers fought crime under the name Nomad, Man Without Country for a while before deciding in issue 183 that America needed protecting even from those within America who tried to destroy the American Dream, and that was a task for Captain America.

Trying to keep Captain America current was a continuous problem, especially in the 1980s. In a 1990 interview, Mark Grunwald, then editor of *Captain America*, admitted that “comic books’s primary responsibility is to entertain . . . but to do that, it must be relevant to people’s lives . . . the juxtaposition of fantasy and real experience is exciting and allows for social themes to emerge” (in Hulteen 39). So it was in Marvel Comics’s best interest to have superheroes that fit the current mood. In the eighties, this was done by stressing Captain America’s civilian identity Steve Rogers . . . giving him a job, making him move out of the Avengers’s Mansion, giving him a girlfriend, and so forth. However, Captain America’s editors and writers still struggled with ways of making the hero side relevant to the 1980s, a drastically more morally complex era than that of his origin. In an introduction to the superhero written for children, David Kraft delineated the difficulties in adapting Captain America to (post-) modern times: “Captain America still fights against injustice and oppression, no matter what form they take. Today’s world is not as simple as the world of the 1940s. And evil is not as open or direct as it was then” (16). Furthermore, “events are faster-paced and more complex. Captain America knows that the situation in the world is different now. And he knows that to be a symbol of America, he must also be a symbol of the times” (Kraft 61). In short, Captain America must adapt to postmodernism if he is to be a hero in a postmodern world.

Captain America is fully aware of the postmodern nature of the eighties, particularly the doubtful status of morality. When the new

Nomad (the role now filled by the fresh out of cryogenic storage sidekick of the 1950s Captain America) comments that the world seems more complex than before, Rogers responds:

The world's not really more complex, Jack, we've just stopped looking at things in black or white terms. One thing you're going to have to learn . . . fast . . . is that the American Dream we've both sworn to defend—is often light years removed from the American Reality. These are strange times we're living in. Hard Times. And people aren't so easily pigeonholed into good guys and bad guys. You've got to learn to trust your instincts . . .

(*Captain America* 284, 8)

Not only does Captain America display awareness of the postmodern nature of morals (by admitting reality does not conform to black and white terms), he also admits that his country has severe problems—no easy feat for someone who is essentially a patriotic superhero. In an earlier issue, Captain America admits that feelings of patriotism make it “easy to forget the dark underbelly of the American Dream” (*Captain America* 267, 27).

This postmodern awareness severely changes the essential nature of Captain America's character. In his initial comic run, Captain America was a soldier. But as early as 1971, Stan Lee admitted that Rogers had outgrown the soldier role, saying the hero “simply doesn't lend himself to the John Wayne-type character he once was. Although the writers of *Captain America* made occasional lapses (in issue 271, Captain America blurts out that his “whole life has been dedicated to that triumph of good over evil” (7)), Captain America in the eighties is a more thoughtful character than he was in the forties, more prone to contemplation over the nature of America.

This does not, however, mean that Captain America's sense of right or wrong disappears . . . it is just not as absolute as it once was. While Steve Rogers (both in and out of his Captain America identity) is just as prone to make speeches as he ever was, he just recognizes his opinions *as* opinions, morality as being largely relative, and that being a dissenter does not itself make someone anti-American. Says Rogers:

I understand the fire that drives men to want to improve our lot—to see a return to a better—more decent—time. But what happens to the individualist in a land where morality is wielded like a club?

Where decency is dictated by those with the loudest voices—and the greatest wealth?  
*(Captain America 280, 13)*

What is evil—and un-American—about Captain America’s adversaries in the eighties is not necessarily their morals but their desire to inflict their morals on others. Occasionally, however, the villain is someone like Every Man (from *Captain America 267*), whose actual message—that the American Dream is not attainable by all (or even most) Americans—is not far removed from Roger’s own beliefs. Such villains, however, inevitably use violent means to force their message, which is why Captain America treats them as enemies.

Even explicitly anti-American villains are not berated by Captain America for their ideals but for their execution of those ideals. *Captain America 312* introduces the villain Flag-Smasher, whose primary doctrine is anti-nationalism. Flag-Smasher gives a fairly lucid speech explaining why he is against the concept of countries in general, claiming that “every nation fosters the idea that it is better than all others . . . [this is] what has brought us to the brink of nuclear destruction.” Captain America responds by telling Flag-Smasher “I cannot fault you for wanting to see the world a better place” (essentially supporting him) before berating the villain for using violence. What is perhaps remarkable about this episode is the responses by the onlookers, which include such slogans as “if you don’t like America, take a hike!” and “go back to Russia, ya commie!” (18). Where the onlookers failed to appreciate Captain America’s views, however, the readers by large succeeded; letter writer Norman Breylogle, for example, noted that the crowd did not respond to Flag-Smasher’s message because they did not appreciate the villain trying to “ram [his] noble idea in their faces” (23).

While Captain America may have been tolerant of the personal beliefs of others, his own politics were always being called into question. Captain America was offered (and turned down) an independent party’s presidential nomination on the basis that having to uphold a political platform would prevent him from fighting for the American Dream (in *Captain America 250*). In another issue, several college students debate “Did Captain America vote for Ronald Reagan?” One student responds, “I believe he did. I see Captain America as a staunch Republican with a militant streak down his back a mile wide” (*Captain America 327, 7*). Even the majority of letter writers felt that Captain

America was a Republican, causing writer Richard Stern to clarify that Rogers is “about as dead-center in the political spectrum as one can get” (*Captain America* 246, 31).

Until October 1986, the only manner in which Captain America’s politics had been called into question was whether he was a Democrat or Republican. Starting in issue 323, however, Captain America met a fellow superhero named Super Patriot who questioned his loyalty. Super Patriot was the hero name of John Walker, a Georgia ex-soldier who underwent strength augmentation in order to build himself up to hero status—unlike Rogers, however, Walker only wanted super-powers so that he could become famous. Flanked by a manager and three cronies, Super Patriot fought whatever crimes fit into his media perception.

Super Patriot also spoke at mass rallies and concerts where he bad-mouthed Captain America. Captain America, he claimed, was no longer a suitable symbol for America, having become too old and weak to be the decisive hero America needed. Super Patriot questioned Captain America’s politics in the macro sense (i.e., his commitment to the authority) because in Walker’s world, patriotism was connected to unquestioning loyalty. When Captain America began to question his (or, more importantly, the government’s) conception of justice, Walker believed Captain America became too weak to be effective.

Shortly after meeting Super Patriot, Rogers becomes the object of a government plot to rid him of his superhero identity.<sup>4</sup> In issue 332, Captain America is hauled before a committee of government officials and ordered to either work only on government assignments or turn in his uniform and cease using the Captain America name. When Captain America points out that he is used to serving his country by operating independently, the head of the committee responds, “We are America, Rogers. We are your commanding officer” (9). Rogers promises to think about it.

After contemplating if the government would give him uncomfortable assignments such as sending him “to Nicaragua to help the Contras” (*Captain America* 332, 15), Rogers is forced to define what exactly being Captain America means to him. It does *not* mean following the directives of the committee:

Those men are not my country. They are only paid bureaucrats of the country’s current administration. They represent the political



system—while I represent those intangibles upon which our nation was founded . . . liberty, justice, dignity, the pursuit of happiness . . . that, really is my major stumbling block with their plan for me. By going back to my wartime role as a glorified agent of America’s official policies, I’d be compromising my effectiveness as a symbol that transcends mere politics. (13)

What Rogers realizes is that Captain America severed his connections to authority long before the current crisis. Although Captain America started out as a government agent, he ended up transcending politics and authority . . . which is what truly made him a hero. Allowing himself to be subjected to the directives of the committee might require him to compromise his ideas (as he tells the committee), and thus would force him to become a police vigilante figure instead of a hero. Finding that solution an unacceptable compromise, Steve Rogers resigns his role and turns in the Captain America uniform (and identity) to the committee.

The committee, not wanting to give up the Captain America role, enlists John Walker, the former Super Patriot, as Steve Roger’s replacement. Walker is ordered to give up his manager and two of his three partners—not to mention a significant portion of his freedom—to become the new Captain America, but Walker accepts such concessions with blind acquiescence. “A true patriot heeds his country’s call, no matter what,” Walker replies (*Captain America* 333, 9). The new Cap approaches his job with the enthusiasm of a “yes” man.

After extensive combat training, Walker and his partner Lamont (who first goes under the superhero name Bucky [after the original], then by Battlestar) are assigned their first mission: to infiltrate and arrest an ultra-right wing terrorist organization called The Watchdogs. In describing The Watchdogs, Walker’s boss says “they’re against pornography, sex education, abortion, the teaching of evolution—anything they believe to be immoral.” Walker, hearing the litany of Watchdog beliefs, thinks “hmmm . . . I’m against those things too!” (*Captain America* 335, 9). Nevertheless, the duo go against their convictions, take the assignment, and bust the majority of the Watchdogs. The new Captain America and Bucky duo at least initially stay in the letter of the law, thus avoiding the tag of police vigilantes. However, their denial of their own beliefs is less than heroic, and the best that can really be said of them here is that they are high-powered government employees.

The remaining Watchdogs eventually find out the new Captain America's identity after two of Walker's old cronies, bitter at being dropped at the government's request, interrupt a press conference and give out his real name. The terrorists respond by kidnapping Walker's mother and father. Walker attempts to rescue his parents, but they are killed in the crossfire when Walker attacks the terrorists (in *Captain America* 345). From this point on, Walker focuses more on retribution than anything else, hunting down and murdering all those he feels responsible for the death of his parents . . . including his two ex-partners. Walker's normal behavior continues to be increasingly violent, and the new Captain America uses his position as government agent to cover his tracks. During his reign as Captain America, Walker is perhaps the truest example of a police vigilante.

Steve Rogers, on the other hand, takes a while before he really has any idea of what to do with his new, Captain America-less life. Rogers feels his firing must be the result of a government-wide consensus, telling his girlfriend that "the commission was hand-picked by President Reagan, one of the most popular presidents in history. The president must be aware of what happened with him. It must be okay with him" (*Captain America* 336, 9). Believing that the entire authority is against him, Rogers dons a new uniform, calls himself simply The Captain, and continues battling crime while no longer working within the law or with government sanction . . . thus effectively becoming a true vigilante.

Rogers ends up in a series of conflicts with the Serpent Society (a collection of villains who all possess reptile-esque powers). One of the objectives of the Serpent Society is to poison the water supply of Washington, DC with a chemical which both turns the populace into the equivalent of zombie serpent-humanoids. Rogers pursues several members of the society into DC and winds up confronting a reptile-ized Ronald Reagan in the oval office. While dodging Reagan's attacks, Rogers talks the president back to normalcy by appealing to his Americanism: "Don't let your altered state make you forget your commitment to this nation's ideals, sir! Even more so than me, you are a symbol of the American people! You were elected to your office by them, sir—twice!" (*Captain America* 344, 39).

After a few issues, Rogers regains the Captain America role when Walker admits he is not heroic or idealistic enough to continue as the superhero. Walker is then assassinated,<sup>5</sup> and Rogers returns to being

Captain America. While Rogers still does not have official sanction, he is no longer working directly opposed to the government; consequently, the classic Captain America is back to being a hero. However, his experience as a vigilante (even a fairly law-abiding one) keeps him on his toes when dealing with the government. If being The Captain taught Rogers nothing else, it taught him that his status as a hero is reliant on his position on authority, and that authority plays a defining role in the life of the average citizen.

Captain America's continuing doubts about the dark side of the American Dream are not limited to the 1980s but have also caused him to re-evaluate history, both his own and that of the country. In Frank Miller's *Daredevil: Born Again* (1987), Captain America wonders what history would have been like if the super serum which gave him his strength had not been lost and an army of super soldiers could have been created. Thinks Rogers: "We could have won the war [World War II] with clean hands—not with millions of innocents murdered by atomic fire" (163).

Two important things are going on here. First, Captain America shows awareness of the Government's capacity to throw out the rules of morality as it suits their purpose; the government, after all, is responsible for murdering civilians via the atomic bomb. This is not, however, the first time Captain America realized the government could be wrong—the seventies Nomad stories are credited as starting a trend of questioning "the political underpinning for superhero actions" not just in *Captain America* but in superhero stories in general (Reynolds 101). What makes the *Daredevil: Born Again* scene so more remarkable is that Captain America clearly sees himself as the key to morality because he (or his kind) could have won the war with honor.

Captain America is not just setting himself apart from the system here, he is setting himself above the system. Even though he is often at odds with the government, Rogers still follows his morals and sense of justice. This makes Captain America more than a vigilante, and sets him on the level of Bruce Wayne (at the end of *The Dark Knight Returns*) and Ozymandias, as an alternate force of power. Perhaps what makes a hero in the eighties was the ability to follow morals while not necessarily working either outside the system (thus becoming a vigilante) or within it (as a police vigilante), but to transcend the system. Heroes in the eighties must be moral, but the most important quality perhaps is their ability to truly be larger than life.

## NOTES

1. In real life, Oliver North could be used as an example of a public figure which started out as a police vigilante but became a vigilante proper as public opinion turned against him; in the world of comics, the Batman of *Detective Comics* and *Batman* acts as an agent of hegemony (Uricchio 207) and is thus a police vigilante, while the Batman from *The Dark Knight Returns* is (as we shall see) something greater.
2. That Bernard Goetz was on the minds of popular culture producers is evident by Alan Moore's mention of him in the introduction to *The Dark Knight Returns* (n.p.).
3. Captain America's disillusionment with the government not too coincidentally coincided with the Watergate scandal.
4. The plot, it was eventually revealed, was masterminded by . . . you guessed it, another reincarnation of the Red Skull.
5. Or so it would seem . . . Walker soon returned as US Agent, and became a member of the West Coast Avengers.

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**Mike S. DuBose** is a Lecturer in University of Toledo's Department of English. His current scholarship focuses on images of control and models of dominance in the mass media. He is currently shopping his first book, which examines the intersections of popular culture and dominant political identity in the 1980s, to several major academic university presses.

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The secret story of the early days of Captain America, told from Bucky Barnes's point of view. From co-writers Ed Brubaker and Marc Andreyko with artist Chris Samnee (Thor: The Mighty Avenger). Issue(s). Please do NOT spoil content of NEXT issues [Report spoiler]. Do not spam or link to other comic sites. Show Comments Box. Loading [ Back to top ]. From 2015 ReadComicOnline.to. Copyrights and trademarks for the comic, and other promotional materials are held by their respective owners and their use is allowed under the fair use clause of the Copyright Law. Holding Out for a Hero: Reaganism, Comic Book Vigilantes, and Captain America M I K E S . D U B O S E The world about us has changed and is continuously changing at an ever-accelerating pace. So have we. In the previous decade, America had been victimized both abroad (the 444- day kidnapping of American embassy employees in Iran) and at home (with double-digit inflation and an oil shortage), and the country suffered from the resulting low self-esteem. Ronald Reagan ran his 1980 presidential campaign on the assumption that the worst thing wrong with the country was that "America was losing faith in itself" (Reagan 205), and that the people needed new faith, a renewed sense of purpose, a hero to make them believe in themselves again. Holding Out for a Hero: Reaganism, Comic Book Vigilantes, and Captain America. Mike s. dubose. The world about us has changed and is continuously changing at an ever-accelerating pace. If popular culture in general through the 1980s was rife with vigilante characters, the comic book industry was doubly so (quasi-heroes such as The Punisher and the aptly named Vigilante immediately leap to mind). Vigilantes are typically defined as individuals who "defend [the established] order by resorting to means that violate these formal boundaries" of that order (Rosenbaum 4). The defining factor is on formal rules and boundaries, and the established order labels vigilantes as criminals and outsiders based on their actions.