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Introducing Nationalist Superheroes

The painting in this book's frontispiece (and on the cover of the paperback edition), *Massacre in Haditha*, by British Jordanian artist Tanya Tier, is a revisioning of Pablo Picasso's *Massacre in Korea* (1951—see Figure 1.1). In this painting Picasso expressed his horror at the American machine-gunning of civilian refugees during the Korean War (at No Gun Ri, 1950).[1] These refugees had been trying to get behind American lines during the early stages of the war to avoid being caught between the two armies; however, the Americans, concerned about North Korean infiltrators, massacred the whole group. Picasso's painting can be understood as representing a violent, geographic concern about shoring up the barrier between "our" territory (behind the lines) and its constitutive outside.[2] Moved to rework the painting for a more contemporary audience when she saw the mirror image of Picasso's vulnerable civilians in the twenty-four Iraqis murdered by American Marines at Haditha in November 2005, Tier used the visual language of superheroes:

> [With the figures] dressed as the iconic fictitious characters which are so entrenched in American culture, the powerful imagery of the superhero is a reference to the jingoism and propaganda deployed by governments and western media commentators when reporting the conflict. The US government in particular needed to establish and convince the public—in the most simplistic of terms—that their soldiers are the "good guys." Donning the superhero uniform gave the troops permission to become defenders of the faith, protectors of the American people and safe-guarders of American interests. The way the conflict was being portrayed in the US media reduced it to the level of comic book fantasy or video game, an imaginary world where the good guys ("us") always triumph over the bad guys ("them").[3]

Tier understands superheroes as more than propaganda for U.S. foreign policy; she sees the superhero genre as contributing to public discourse around the

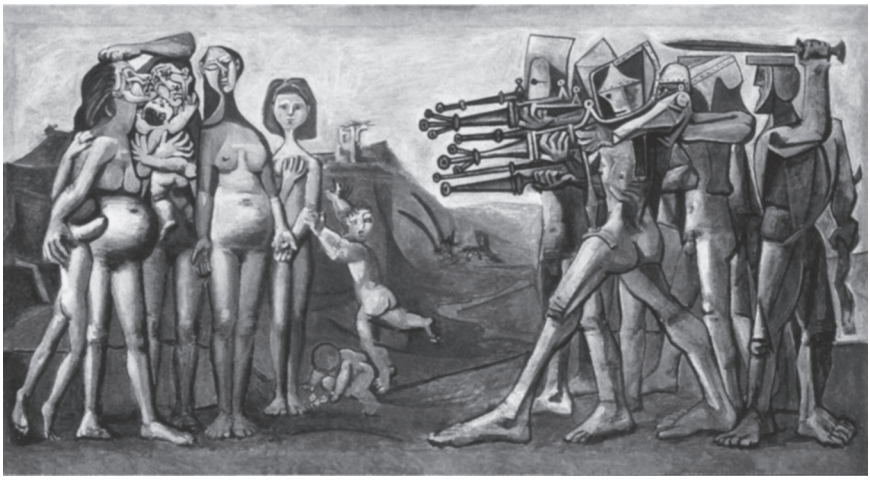

Figure 1.1: *Massacre in Korea*, by Pablo Picasso (1951). (Copyright © Succession Picasso/ DACS, London, 2011. Used with permission.)

invasion of Iraq. To Tier's own commentary I would add only that the garish colors that she uses for the superheroes in her painting add a sense of absurdity—how can people who look so silly be doing something so serious?

The combination of power and silliness embedded in *Massacre in Haditha* is central to the politics of superheroes—they are both bluntly obvious and seemingly innocuous. Superheroes suffuse our everyday existence via TV cartoons, big-budget cinema, and everyday objects such as T-shirts and Pez dispensers, occupying narratives in which Manichean categories of good and evil are embodied by heroes and villains, usually marked as such by their name and costume for all to see. Tier's superheroes juxtapose America's simplistic moralistic framing of its foreign policy with its near-limitless capacity to inflict violence on others in a way that simultaneously illustrates the enormity of this power and belittles it.

This understanding of superheroes as simplistic, brawny, and reflecting a uniquely American understanding of power and morality is widespread and seemingly "commonsense," for both their fans and their critics.[4] In fact, this ability to serve as a proxy for American geopolitical identity has made the superhero genre the subject of critical debate for many decades. However, one of the goals of this book is to reposition the role of superheroes within popular understandings of geopolitics and international relations from being understood as a "reflection" of preexisting and seemingly innate American values to being recognized as a discourse *through which* the world becomes understandable. In this view, the pop-cultural dimensions of politics (e.g., superheroes) are neither the result of political meta-beliefs (such as American exceptionalism) nor the condensation of economic ideology.[5] Rather, superheroes are

co-constitutive elements of both American identity and the U.S. government's foreign policy practices. Obviously, superheroes are not the only, or even the most important, elements of the muscular geopolitical discourse identified as Americanism. Nevertheless superheroes serve as a crucial resource for legitimating, contesting, and reworking states' foreign policies, and as such have arguably grown in importance over the past several decades.

The nationalist superhero subgenre is the focus of this book because this subgenre speaks most clearly to a phenomenon that has been at the center of work in the field of critical geopolitics: the state-centrism that has become the focus of political thought over the past century.[6] While there has been a lot of emphasis on state actors positioning the state as the only legitimate venue for politics, scant research considers the processes by which geographical imaginations of everyday people come to have the nation-state centrally embedded within them.[7] The fusion of the nation (an identity through which people define themselves) and the state (a sovereign governmental apparatus) into the nation-state is accomplished precisely through the banalization of elision. The terms *nation* and *state* are thrown around with imprecision, and the same adjectives (e.g., *British*, *Brazilian*, *Belarussian*) are used to identify both the nation and the state. As Matthew Sparke argues, it is the hyphen in *nation-state* that

> came to represent two mutually reinforcing geographic processes. On the one side were the diverse state practices such as border policing, migration control, and planning that regulated territorial belonging. On the other side were the modern space-producing social and cultural dynamics that, in generating taken-for-granted national landscapes, national monuments, national maps, and so on, gave state regulation its space and place of legitimacy.[8]

The purpose of this book is then to describe not just what nationalist superhero narratives *say*, but also what kind of work they *do* in setting the political stage. This introductory chapter contributes to the book's overarching goal by introducing the subgenre of nationalist superheroes, tracing the influence of the subgenre's origins on its politics, and illustrating the diffusion/adaptation of the subgenre from the United States into the British and Canadian contexts.

Methodologically the remaining chapters of the book proceed largely using discourse analysis of comic books to examine how the territorial nation-state is produced as a dominant scale of identity and politics, supplemented when possible with reference to interviews with writers as well as readers' letters to the editor. This is done to show both groups' understandings of the nationalist superhero discourse and to trace the active negotiation between the two groups. Ultimately it is not writers and artists who construct meaning from comic books, but readers. Nevertheless the permeability of the barrier between these two groups makes it difficult to envision the production of nationalist superhero discourse as anything but a collaborative effort; not only do the groups

mix in regular conventions and via social media, but also many of the names on letters to the editor make their way to the bylines of the title page.[9] These interactions might be understood as Charles Tilly's "creative interaction," which he exemplifies with jazz or soccer: "participants work within rough agreements on procedures and outcomes [e.g., genre conventions]; arbiters [market capitalism] set limits on performances; individual dexterity, knowledge, and disciplined preparation [cultural capital among writers, artists, and readers] generally yield superior play; yet the rigid equivalent of military drill destroys the enterprise."[10]

This understanding of narrative as emergent highlights the complex question of authorship;[11] while literary scholars have questioned the idea of the author for several decades now, the question is particularly vexed in regard to mainstream, commercial superhero comics. Even the question of authorship at its most basic is problematic: who is the "author," the writer or the artist? This question can be answered only in more specific contexts, as the relative power relations between these two roles have ebbed and flowed in recent decades. Further, how much agency can be exercised by either of these roles in the face of editorial or corporate opposition to a plot or specific image? How does even the tacit *potential* for editorial intervention shape the creative process? Interviews with writers, conducted for this project, can call attention to the behind-the-scenes negotiation between writers, artists, and editors, but by definition they are partial accounts that tend to emphasize the writers' agency. The preceding questions become all the more interesting given the transnational basis of some of these relationships. Many of the examples traced in this book are of British or Canadian writers and artists creating nationalist superhero tales while working for American editors at an American company (Marvel Comics). Are these "indigenously" produced comics, or are they forms of cultural imperialism? Or are both of these terms inadequate for this form of cultural production?

The question of authorship becomes even more complicated when the audience is considered. While all commercial popular culture is in some way a prisoner of its audience, comic books in particular have always lived close to the edge, trying to track the latest trends in broader culture. Comics that sell poorly rarely last more than an issue or two after they become unprofitable. This relentless exposure to market forces means that the audience, or at least the specter of the audience, looms increasingly large in the production process and therefore shares in the author-ity of narrative.

So who is this audience? Stereotypes abound, some with connection to truth and some outdated exaggerations. The popular image of comics as children's fare dates from the medium's earliest days, when they were included as inserts in other periodicals or used as giveaways in products sold to mothers. Certainly the average reader of a superhero comic during World War II was a preadolescent male, although millions of comics were also sent overseas as entertainment for the troops (Figure 1.2). However, as the medium has aged, so has its readership. In the 1960s and 1970s comics become popular fare on college campuses, and the introduction of direct distribution (skipping news-

Figure 1.2: A small boy, approximately six years of age, sitting and reading a *Captain America* comic at a newsstand, circa 1942. (North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina Library at Chapel Hill. Photo by Hugh Morton. Used with permission.)

stands entirely and instead going only to specialist stores) in the 1980s eroded the younger casual fan base in favor of older fans who had been collecting for their adult lives. While the audience of superhero comics certainly skews male, it is not as overwhelmingly male as stereotyped in popular culture.[12] Letters to the editor are not, of course, necessarily accurate representations of audience opinion, as those who write are, of course, both self-selecting (requiring time, enthusiasm, and so on) and editorially selected. Letters-to-the-editor columns are typically full of praise for the creative staff, but this makes the eruption of controversy all the more notable and interesting. Often editors cultivate controversy and let debates unfold for months at a time to show the cultural relevance of their product and give the impression of their comics as part of the public sphere. For these reasons and more (most especially the lack of alternative archives), analysis of letters to the editor has become common in comics studies as a way into comics' reception at the time of publication.[13]

In the United States the superhero genre has become nearly synonymous with comic books (many other genres exist, but they are commercially dwarfed by superheroes). Even if the superhero genre is primarily associated with the United States and carries the trace of its origins, it is nevertheless a resolutely transnational phenomenon whose appeal exceeds national borders. This book's engagement follows the primary genealogy of nationalist superheroes from

their original American context into Canada and the United Kingdom. Nationalist superheroes have been used in the past as a way of "localizing" the comic book as a commodity and trying to subvert nationalistic pride to sell American-style comic books in countries with their own publishing tradition.[14] Comic books in Japan and the Francophone world (the two main centers of comic book production outside the Anglophone world) tend to emphasize genres other than superheroes, although both have their own superhero or superhero-esque traditions. In Japan, for example, there are long traditions of both super-robots (such as Astro Boy), collective teams (such as the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers, in which each member is fairly similar to all the others and teamwork is key; these are different from U.S. superhero teams, which are always groups of distinct individuals), and occasionally combinations of both (such as Voltron).[15] To the French the notion of the superhero is not so foreign, but nevertheless it is marked as a distinctly American phenomenon. For instance, Fantax, arguably the first French superhero (first published in 1946), is actually Lord Horace Neighbour, a diplomat at the British embassy in Washington, D.C. This externalization of the superhero to the Anglo-American context indicates its identification as exotic to the French milieu.

This chapter now turns to an examination of the nationalist superhero as a particular subgenre, initially by examining the origins of the subgenre, as this starting point provides the array of cultural resources with which subsequent practices of production and consumption play. This focus on the generic conventions continues with a critique of the nationalist superhero subgenre as crystallizing a relationship between power, authority, and violence that contributes to both traditions of American exceptionalism and exclusivist state-centrism. The chapter concludes by tracing the diffusion of the subgenre to Canada and the United Kingdom, where it was transformed both by the exigencies of the publishing industry and by the local contexts of nationalism.

Definitions and Conventions

So what is a superhero? Peter Coogan argues that the superhero genre is linked to the characteristics of the protagonist in ways that other genres are not—murder mysteries need not be about detectives, for instance, but are instead defined by the kind of narrative that unfolds.[16] Coogan identifies the hero's altruistic mission, special powers, and secret identity (i.e., costume and code name) as the core elements of the superhero genre but concedes that not every superhero meets all three criteria and that some elements are common to other genres. This somewhat tortured attempt to focus on the protagonist in order to shore up an exclusivist notion of the superhero genre as distinct from science fiction or fantasy leads to some pretty arbitrary boundary marking on Coogan's part: "If a character to some degree fits the mission-powers-identity qualifications of the definition but can be firmly and sensibly placed within another genre, then the character is not a superhero."[17]

Rather than obsess about who is a superhero and who is not, I see it perhaps more useful to consider genres as continually in interaction with one other, each a hybrid form, continually in process, with influences from a wide array of antecedents. The naming and delineating of what is, or is not, within a genre is itself an act of power and control. Richard Reynolds argues that "the superhero genre is tightly defined and defended by its committed readership—often to the exasperation of writers and artists, many of whom have proclaimed it to be a worn-out formula from as long ago as the 1970s."[18] Coogan's protagonist-focused genre definition is drawn from Judge Learned Hand's definition of the superhero in a 1952 copyright infringement ruling—a legal context that values exclusivity and intellectual originality rather than hybridity and intellectual borrowing, and which explains the Coogan definition's focus on the protagonist (the case was about whether Captain Marvel was a copy of Superman) rather than on narrative elements of the superhero genre (which are not copyrightable).[19] Following from this, it is correct to assume that *this* book attempts no final definition of superheroes, nationalist or otherwise.

This book's empirical focus is not on superheroes generally, but instead on a subgenre identified as that of the *nationalist superhero*. To be clear, my calling forth of this subgenre is just as much an act of power as Coogan's attempt to define the larger superhero genre. The term *nationalist superhero* is not in wide usage, and above all it reflects my interests in geopolitics and nationalism. My intention is not, however, to produce a once-and-for-all delineation of the subgenre; rather, it is to conjure up a working definition of *nationalist superhero* that is both flexible and useful for my purposes. These are superhero narratives in which the hero (or very rarely, the heroine) explicitly identifies himself or herself as representative and defender of a specific nation-state, often through his or her name, uniform, and mission. It is, admittedly, a thin line that separates Captain America from Superman: the latter fights for "truth, justice, and the American way" and has his origins in an American immigrant narrative.[20] Still, Superman is generally a prosocial hero, fighting for the American people (among others) rather than for America as an abstract idea.[21] Captain America, on the other hand, was written as a super-soldier created by the U.S. government and later sees himself as the living embodiment of the American Dream (rather than a tool of the state). When you add in the star-spangled uniform and the name, the comparison is not even close anymore. The World War II American newsstand would have been covered in nationalist superheroes, but in the post–World War II era, nationalist superheroes such as Captain America are a tiny proportion of the superheroes in publication; there are many more generally prosocial heroes such as Spider-Man and Batman than there are nationalist superheroes such as Union Jack or Captain Canuck. Because of this extreme minority status, many of the arguments that follow in this book can also be made about superheroes in general, and indeed my research draws on the insights of the broader literature on superheroes.

Nevertheless, the nationalist superhero bears an additional burden that other superheroes do not—embodying the nation-state. This embodiment has implications for the kind of stories that are likely to be told and the ways they are likely to be read. Larry Porter wrote a fan letter to *Captain America* to express his vision of the hero as distinct from other superheroes:

> Captain America should be a globetrotting adventurer who is heavily involved with [U.S. spy agency] SHIELD. He should be fighting against the things that threaten the freedoms and liberties that he has sworn to protect. [. . .] Too many times, it seemed like Cap was really only interested in protecting New York City from the latest spandex-clad bad guy.[22]

Comics writer Rob Williams puts it this way: "There's just so much inherent subtext, metaphor and gravitas the moment you dress a character in a flag and make him the symbol of a nation. You can't help but carry issues and a certain depth into such a story, even if you're ostensibly telling a knockabout action narrative."[23] Thus, while superheroes like Iron Man and Spider-Man can be seen as rooted in U.S. foreign policy, they are not freighted in the same way as Captain America and his ilk.[24]

Origins and Politics of the Nationalist Superhero Genre

The superhero genre and its conventions emerged out of the pulp heroes and masked crime fighters of the Depression, with the locus of publishing centered in New York City. Because of this, the genre crystallized in a particular spatio-temporal context that has implications for understanding the superhero genre today.[25] Equally, the beginning of World War II in Europe soon thereafter and the eventual entry of the United States into that war sparked the emergence of a subgenre: nationalist superheroes. Nationalist superheroes, while ultimately produced and consumed through an open and flexible set of cultural resources, owe the fundamentals of their genre to this point of emergence. Mikhail Bakhtin describes genres as "organs of memory" that carry their origins into the present; through them cultural artifacts "remember the past [. . .] and redefine present experience in an additional way," which Bakhtin refers to as "double-voicing."[26] Because tracing this double-voicing as the nationalist superhero genre localizes in new contexts is, in many ways, the task of this book, we now turn to the creation of the subgenre.

New York Origins

The archetype of the nationalist superhero is undoubtedly Captain America, although he was not the first. Captain America first saw print after the start of the war in Europe but still ten months before Pearl Harbor and America's

first bloodying.[27] That Captain America was fighting Nazis well before the U.S. armed forces were (he appears on the cover of *Captain America Comics #1* punching Hitler in the face) is an intriguing historical oddity, the explanation of which helps to explain the emergence of the subgenre itself.

Most superheroes avoided the war in Europe for reasons both creative and commercial. First, it was difficult to imagine a scenario in which a superempowered hero like Superman could intervene in Europe and not fundamentally alter the balance of combat.[28] More crassly, comic book publishers were in no hurry to alienate isolationists in the United States. Crucial to breaking the hold of this studious fence-sitting was the news of *Kristallnacht*, rumors of which swept through the Jewish American communities of New York. Given the heavy Jewish presence in the comic book industry among writers, artists, and publishers, it is perhaps then not surprising that superheroes soon began to turn their attention to purported German plots to strike at the United States. Jews had congregated in the comic book industry in part because of exclusion from higher-end illustration jobs, and their ethnicity inflected many of their products. Michael Chabon, in his novel *The Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, highlights the historical links between early superheroes and the Jewish tradition of the golem, an enchanted man made from clay to protect the Jewish community from oppressors. Writer-artist Will Eisner, who directly participated in this early Golden Age of comics, saw Jewish mythology as directly inspiring superheroes: "*We have this history of impossible solutions for insoluble problems.*"[29]

Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, the creators of Captain America, had teamed up as a freelance writer/artist (respectively) collaboration to sell ideas to the publishers. They saw in Adolf Hitler a believable "supervillain" making a bid for global domination: "There never had been a truly believable villain in comics. But Adolf was alive, hated by more than half of the world."[30] They imagined Hitler's antithesis to be a member of the U.S. armed forces, clad in a star-spangled uniform with a shield shaped like a police badge to connote impartiality and justice, and aided by his teen sidekick, Bucky. Here, however, they ran aground on the commercial circumstances of the early comic book industry—their badge-like shield too closely resembled that of an already existing nationalist superhero—the somewhat unimaginatively named hero "the Shield." With the threat of a lawsuit Simon and Kirby were forced to change the design to a round shield, which as it happens was much better as it allowed Captain America to hurl his shield as an offensive weapon and have it (rather implausibly) bounce right back to him.

Jack Kirby's art went on to be legendary within the comic book industry, and his career lasted for more than fifty years. At this early stage in his career, however, his artistic style was not yet developed into his distinctive later style. *Captain America Comics* provided a forum through which Kirby could express his view of America from an immigrant neighborhood in New York City (Kirby was the son of an Austrian immigrant and grew up in the Lower East Side of Manhattan in a Jewish neighborhood).

> He [Kirby . . .] cited his experiences growing up in a tough neighborhood where good boys learned to survive by acting tough and standing up to bullies as a primary inspiration for his comic book work and his politics[.] Kirby later recalled that he had been drawn to comic art because of its simplicity and directness, which he equated with the American way. "I thought comics were a common form of art and strictly American," he said. "America was the home of the common man, and show me the common man that can't do a comic."[31]

The comic's first issue (marked by the aforementioned Hitler-bashing cover art) sold more than one million copies and sparked a flurry of imitation not seen since Superman's appearance in *Action Comics* two years earlier. The fan club for Captain America that was started in response to this outpouring was called the Sentinels of Liberty and encouraged fans of Captain America to partake in his mission of protecting the United States from extraterritorial incursions by being aware of activities in their hometowns and reporting suspicious behavior to adults. The Sentinels of Liberty would even appear in the comic's narratives as allies of Captain America, further blurring the relationship between vigilance in the comic book and the vigilance to be exercised by readers.

Simon and Kirby would not last on the comic book, their tenure being short as were many in the industry at this time. They accepted a better offer from another publisher, but their hero carried on in others' hands (Kirby would return to the title in the 1960s). The success of *Captain America Comics* and Hitler's public criticism of Superman as a Jew (Superman comics were banned in Nazi-occupied Europe) pushed all the comics publishers into the interventionist column well before the United States became actively involved in the war. Captain America and his various clones (as well as those few nationalist heroes who preceded him, such as the Shield), while resulting from a particular ethnic and commercial context, had managed to break out and enter the national consciousness. The conventions of the nationalist superhero were now well enough known that even those who never read comics understood the idea of a superhero explicitly connected to a state through name, costume, and values.

The Politics of American Exceptionalism

Captain America's small role in the shifting of the United States toward an interventionist attitude is but one manifestation of how superheroes, and especially their nationalist variant, can be understood as geopolitical. Superheroes are not reflections of, but are instead (along with many other elements) co-constitutive of, the discourse popularly known as American exceptionalism. American exceptionalism refers to the idea that the United States is distinct from other countries as a result of its historical development, its frontier experience, or simply its function within the international order.[32] A wide array of

arguments has historically been brought to bear in the effort to represent the United States as fundamentally unlike other countries. The discourse of American exceptionalism is not only produced through the arguments of political and academic elites; it is also co-constituted through popular culture.

Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence argue that in the 1930s an "American monomyth" emerged that became the basis for a whole range of narrative storytelling.[33] In this myth, a feminized community is endangered or exploited by a rogue masculine force. A nomadic hero arrives on the scene and, noting the exploitation, remedies the situation through equally masculine intervention.[34] This hero, however, never remains to partake in the domestic tranquillity that he (indeed, the hero is almost always male) has produced but instead moves on, presumably to save more communities. This is most obviously apparent in the western genre of movies, which emerged during this time to narrate the American experience on the frontier, a site simultaneously understood as being beyond the reach of the state's judicial apparatus and yet also the mythic locus of freewheeling American entrepreneurialism and individual responsibility. A gunman (usually wearing a white hat) rises up organically from civil society to impose order but then fades away, neither retaining the political power he has temporarily taken up nor even remaining in the town—but instead riding off into the sunset.

Jewett and Lawrence's American monomyth can be compared to Joseph Campbell's "classical monomyth,"[35] to which Campbell mistakenly attributed universality. Nevertheless, it is a common narrative structure that certainly has pride of place in popular culture (famously influencing George Lucas in his production of the *Star Wars* trilogy).[36] In the classical monomyth, a male youth comes of age by leaving the community, facing adversity and being transformed by it in a foreign land, and then returning home to take on a leadership role within the community. Jewett and Lawrence argue that the spatial elements of these narratives are central; indeed they highlight the hero's lack of reintegration into sociopolitical structures within the American monomyth. "We suggest that this new myth system, which crystallized its conventions of plot and character in the axial decade of the 1930s, shows a democratic face in that the protagonist is an Everyman, yet has a pop-fascist dimension in that these unelected, law-transcending figures exercise superpowers to overcome foes."[37] This quotation highlights Jewett and Lawrence's belief that the superhero genre clearly adopts the narrative of the American monomyth, with superheroes not physically moving from community to community but instead refusing to be bound by societal authorities, as evidenced by the secret identities and the occasional cooperation with, but not subordination to, legally constituted authorities.

This lack of integration, and the desire for liberation from society's shackles that it enunciates, has clear links to American exceptionalism. Donald Pease argues that the creation of the National Security State in the 1950s marked the beginning of a new spatiality:

> In conducting the cold war, the state was neither within the order nor outside the order. The state situated itself within the order that it protected but it occupied the position of internal externality of the exception. For in order to defend the order it also represented, the state was first required to declare itself an exception to the order it regulated. The State of the Exception is marked by absolute independence from any juridical control and any reference to the normal political order.[38]

Pease's notion of the U.S. state as an "internal externality" hints at the complex topology at work here; the United States is both exemplar and exempted. This ambiguity is found embedded in Scot Myers's letter to the editor published in *Captain America* in 1998: "The Japan backdrop was fabulous and really served to show how truly international Captain 'America' can really be. I hope you take advantage of this while, at the same time, keeping him the symbol of the best our nation has to offer."[39]

Copious amounts of ink have been spilled arguing for the freedom of American action from the very liberal international order that the United States has fought to produce since President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points.[40] This liberal international order includes the restrictions on the use of force found within the UN Charter, the legal requirements for the treatment of prisoners found in the Geneva Conventions, and the International Criminal Court (ICC).[41] Each of these institutions or legal frameworks has been in the news over the past decade as the U.S. government has variously pretended to follow the first, subverted the second, and outright opposed the third. Pierre-Robert Prosper, a diplomat in the George W. Bush administration, argued against the establishment of the ICC in 2002 in this manner: "What we've learnt from the war on terror is that rather than creating an international mechanism to deal with these issues it is better to organize an international mandate that authorizes states to use their unilateral tools to tackle the problems we have."[42]

By shifting the scale from the "real" international to the fictive national, it is possible to find arguments made within superhero comics that mirror those made by Prosper. For instance, the *Civil War* crossover spectacular found within Marvel Comics in 2006–2007 told the story of a schism within the superhero community over a proposed law that would require superheroes to register their true identities with the government and work as civil servants under properly constituted authority. This story line was widely seen by critics as an analogue for debates over the USA PATRIOT Act and related Bush administration policies that seemed to promise security in exchange for civil liberties, but this interpretation relied on the assumption that readers would identify with the anti-registration superheroes rather than with the vulnerable humans forced to scatter in terror whenever superhero and supervillain meet in their highly destructive melees. An alternative (but rarely voiced) reading would take the perspective of these usually unnamed members of the public and might see the

anti-registration superheroes as analogues for the Bush administration, which denied the claim on it made by other branches of the U.S. government as well as international actors such as the United Nations and its member states.

It is impossible to say why the most popular reading of this story line, with rebel heroes analogous to everyday Americans and pro-registration heroes seen as proxies for the Bush administration, became hegemonic in the media, but it certainly has something to do with the positioning of readers' subjectivities via generic conventions. Superheroes almost always serve as the moral center of their own story line, and the desire bubbling beneath the surface of many readers' engagements with superhero comic books—the desire to leap, fly, hurl, pound—further encourages identification with the superpowered. Geopolitics scholar Gearoid Ó Tuathail identifies a similar phenomenon in his exegesis of the film *Behind Enemy Lines* (2001): "*Behind Enemy Lines* articulates an [American] 'everyman' frustration with the confusion of the post–Cold War era and then delivers on the desire for a Manichean world of clarity and moral certainty. Action and righteous violence are made possible by a clarified world where there are recognizably othered enemies and adversaries."[43] The desire for this kind of cathartic violence in the face of frustration, whether the frustration over the inability of the United States to truly tee off on an enemy in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks or the more mundane frustration of a comic book reader with his or her banal existence within a society full of norms and requirements, speaks to the strong forces seeking to align the perspective of the reader with that of the superhero.

Another factor central to this interpretation of the *Civil War* story line is the emplotment of Captain America as the leader of the rebellion against the Superhero Registration Act.[44] This aspect is highly pertinent, given the historical use of Captain America as a self-proclaimed representative of the American Dream or American ideals (often as a mirror to hold up to the U.S. government's activities, which is more fully detailed in the chapters to come). Captain America's views on the Superhero Registration Act can be usefully juxtaposed with those of Pierre-Robert Prosper on the ICC, quoted previously. The following exchange is between Captain America and his girlfriend, Sharon Carter:

> **Captain America**: Should [superheroes] be denied the right to make that choice [exposing their secret identities]?
> **Sharon Carter**: Maybe . . . yes. Because they're risking other people's lives every time they jump into a firefight. And because it's against the law. And the rule of law is what this country is founded on.
> **Captain America**: No . . . it was founded on breaking the law. Because the law was wrong.
> **Sharon Carter**: That's semantics, Steve. You know what I mean . . .
> **Captain America**: It's not semantics, Sharon. It's the heart of the issue. The Registration Act is another step toward government control.[45]