AS AMERICA BECAME SUPER SO DID ITS HEROES: A CLOSER LOOK AT

SUPERHEROES THROUGHOUT THE 20TH CENTURY IN AMERICA

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By

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Superheroes have been a part of everyday life in America through the 20th century. Since the popularity of DC's superman in the 1930's, their popularity soared to new heights during the decades following WWII. During the 20th century several characters have come and gone with varying fame. Nonetheless, some have stood the test of time and are still popular in today's society. Two of those characters that have become arguably the most popular are Captain America and Iron Man. They both have unique qualities that have made them able to maintain a high level of popularity through the ever-changing times in America.

Captain America. Few superhero names, if any, come with such a sense of identity. The connection to American values has been set within his character from his debut on the comic scene in 1940. Blatantly stated, the main role for Captain America is to protect the United States from harm, foreign or domestic. The writers for Captain America have been putting him through a rollercoaster of moral dilemmas and character changes since his earliest of days. These changes seem to come almost side by side with changing American values or emotions due to real world events.

If Captain America is one of the most iconic names, Iron Man is debatably the most popular in recent years. Since the first *Iron Man* film debuted in 2008, only the films starring the character Batman have been as successful in pop culture. Iron Man and Captain America have been seen side by side in comics since *The Avengers* series began in 1963. Captain America was set to be the wise and enduring leader of

the superhero group, while Iron Man took on a different persona. In contrast to

Cap's humbleness and good morals, Iron Man is really a playboy millionaire arms

dealer. Although different, both characters still represent American values. Captain

shows the side of America pre superpower era, representing hard work, humility,

and a never wavering loyalty to the flag. Iron Man embodies more of the American

lifestyle in post-Cold War days, epitomizing some of the more negative aspects of

American Exceptionalism, masculinity, and invincibility.

Starting with Captain America's origins in comic books in a post WWII

America, one can see who the superhero was really meant to be. He is built upon

the morals of an innocent America, one that is humble and hardworking. As the

United States grew as a country things started to change in society. When the

United States entered into the war in Vietnam the public opinion on war changed

dramatically. Captain America was forced to change and go through the same things

that the citizens of the United States were going through. After the distaste of war

from Vietnam became a distant memory and the United States entered and won the

First War in Iraq the public's outlook on war changed once again. The more positive

stance towards violence and war lasted until the attacks on New York City happened

on 9/11, 2001. 9/11 changed everything in America. The role of superheroes in

American entertainment was not immune to the wake of change instilled by Al

Qaeda terrorists.

A character changing through the decades is expected as to keep up with what is popular in society at the time. However, the way Captain America changes is somewhat unique due to his apparent symbolism. Looking more closely at specific examples of Captain America it is easier to see the connection between the changes in his character and the changes in everyday life in America. Using the patriotic ripples that extended from the United State's victory in WWII Captain America started as a superhero that was completely loyal to America. He was consumed by this identity of patriotism and pride for his country. His comic debut showed this in its entirety.

"*Captain America Comics #1* went on sale around the end of 1940, with a March 1941 cover date."[1] The cover of the very first comic showed the protagonist punching Nazi leader Adolf Hitler; it sold nearly one million copies.[2] This new found popular superhero in American culture came to fruition a year prior to the Pearl Harbor Attacks during WWII. Captain America was already very popular at the time before the attacks, but post attacks the public seemed to fully divulge into the story of the patriotic superhero.

The superhero's origins are directly tied to WWII and using the idea of a superhero filled with American ideals to fight and defeat the Axis powers. Captain America was not the first patriotic superhero to come to light during the time of

[1] Thomas and Sanderson, *The Marvel Vault: A Museum-in-a-Book with Rare Collectibles from the World of Marvel.*
[2] Fromm, "The Privacy Act Of Carl Burgos."

WWII. However, he has had the longest run in comics and the largest fan base in Marvel history. At one point Captain America Comics circulated nearly one million issues per month. At the time this was more than some credible news sources, for example *Time* was circulating less per month.[3] Despite the popularity of Captain America he has gone through changes since his time as a WWII superhero.

His physical costume has stayed relatively the same with the change of only his shield. The first depictions of Captain America portray him with a triangular shield that is not the same as his iconic circular shield with a star on it. One can even see the shield and older costume in the *Captain America: The First Avenger* movie in a scene that is set in WWII times. The scene shows Captain being used as a propaganda tool for American soldiers stationed overseas fighting the war.[4] His shield is a very important part of his character throughout the decades of his involvement in Marvel Comics.

As WWII became a further distant memory Captain America lost some of his popularity to the point where his comics, *Captain America Comics*, were officially discontinued in 1949. This lasted until the revival of Steve Rogers and Captain America in 1964 in his debut in *The Avengers #4.* Captain now had the famed circular shield that he used as his main weapon and defensive accessory. (See Picture 1). This is an important thing to note about the character of Captain America because his only weapon that he has is technically a device made for

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[3] Sanderson and Gilbert, *"1940s". Marvel Chronicle A Year-by-   Year History.*
[4] Johnston, *Captain America: The First Avenger*.

defense. This portrays many things in a more subtle way, such as America as a

country not being the enforcer in war but will defend itself if attacked.

Picture 1

The shield became very evident after 9/11 in the United States because it was shown as the country defending itself. Even during the "preemptive attacks on terror" during the Bush years, America always refuted back to 9/11 saying that they were defending the country and ensuring the safety of the citizens back home. The shield provides a sense of defense first mentality that many Americans would want to be able to say that their country has. The shield is one of the things attached to Captain America that has changed very little. Mentally the Captain went through many dramatic changes.

Captain America begins to change during his time as a leader of The Avengers in the 1960's. The change of Captain America coincides with the changing attitude of citizens in America in terms of their opinion on violence and war. The 1960's in the United States were a time of dramatic change. "The sixties and the thirties were the only modern decades in which large numbers of Americans wondered out loud whether their country might disintegrate".[5] The events of the time, specifically the events that caused the origins of distrust that citizens held towards their government, had an affect throughout the country. During the time there were those that had been critical of government, and suspicious of their motives for years. These naysayers of government got their point proven when the CIA was ousted as backing several groups, most notably the NSA. "Here at last was the evidence that the government was just as duplicitous as they had suspected".[6]

[5] Kaiser, *1968 in America: Music, Politics, Chaos, Counterculture, and the Shaping of a Generation*.
[6] Ibid.

Captain America changed in many ways to show some of these newfound feelings that had just been thrown into the lives of Americans.

One of the character traits that was deeply instilled within Captain was his unwavering loyalty to the United States government seemed to be unbreakable. He did everything that his commanding officers asked of him without questioning why he was asked to do it, because it was the government who after all turned regular Steve Rogers into Captain America. During the 1970's the character of Captain takes an unexpected turn. He begins to have thoughts of doubt creep into his mind, specifically about the righteousness of the United States government. This turn of events within the character leads him to the ultimate decision to call it quits on his time as Captain America. He decided his life, as Steve Rogers, would be better off if he could just distance himself from the corruption happening within the United States government. For a few issues titled, "The Secret Empire" (*Captain America and Falcon* #169-176), he decides to become a new character named The Nomad, giving emphasis to the words meaning as "a man without a country". (Picture 2).

Picture 2 is the comic cover depicting Steve Rogers giving up on his Captain America suit.

This all happens shortly after many real life things in America changed the thought process of people in the United States. Captain America doubting his government can be almost directly linked to the Watergate scandal that began in 1972 and shocked the country with the resignation of President Nixon in August of 1974. Many citizens felt cheated and filled with unrest due to the new feeling of distrust towards the government. Watergate, along with some other scandals that were brought to light, such as the 1975 Senate Church Committee Hearings that shed a negative light on the CIA and the U.S. government as a whole, seemed to disrupt the allegiance to the flag that most citizens had in days past.

The comics seem to almost run in cycles along with public opinion. Starting by looking at comics post WWII one can see that superheroes were seen as superior to all evil characters and without flaws internally as well. As the Vietnam War reached its peak the staunch disapproval from society influenced the comic world once again. The superheroes within the comics became much less focused on their enemies and more focused on the battles they waged within themselves. This transitioned again during the 90's and the first Iraq War.

In the 90's the economy boomed in America and the U.S. went to war so quickly that the real protesting never got started until the War was basically over. Superheroes once again found their militaristic characteristics popular in society. They became more superior than at any other time in history, side by side with American Exceptionalism reaching its highest point. This can be seen in the comics

with superheroes never facing a foe that they could not defeat and also by the superheroes not having troubles within themselves. The comic readers in America at the time were experiencing highs in the country not felt since the boom of WWII. The economy was booming and the increasing quality of life in America seemed to be on an inexorable rise. The Bill Clinton administration took the domestic idea of American Exceptionalism to new heights through the 90's and into the new millennium before America would experience an attack on American soil not seen since the attacks on Pear Harbor.

American Exceptionalism encompasses many things in its meaning. The best way to define its expansive reach into American past is to go back to the origins of the country. In reference to the future Massachusetts Bay Colony John Winthrop stated, "We shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us." An exclamation of this extent was surely to set the precedent of what the country was to become. Before America was founded as a country and before it became the superpower of the world, the citizens beamed with pride and enthusiasm. It should be noted that the idea of American Exceptionalism is not always a positive one. The flip side of the pride and enthusiasm is a country that can be seen as arrogant and filled with self-interest. The two sides go hand in hand with the creation and growth of both Captain America and Iron Man.

Undoubtedly a date that changed the world was 9/11/2001. The United States faced its toughest time as a country since The Civil War. The everyday life

that American's knew was forever gone. In result the superheroes needed to change along with the new public perception of America. The characters all changed within their respective comics but maybe more noticeable is the way they changed on the big screen of Hollywood. Captain America donned several new qualities that were only before touched on in the comics of past time.

Looking more closely within the films of Captain, with specific examples, these different 9/11 motivated feelings become easier to perceive. Beginning with the initial scenes of the first Captain America film, *Captain America: The First Avenger*, the character of Steve Rogers, who later becomes Captain America, is portrayed as a person with a no quit attitude and good morals. One scene portrays a shorter, weaker version of Steve Rogers attempting to enlist in military recruitment for the fifth time using various addresses. After overhearing how many times he has tried and failed but still came back to try again, Dr. Erksine decided to enlist Steve into the Strategic Scientific Reserve as part of a "super-soldier" program.[7]

Steve Rogers is then enlisted in the program and run through a military type boot camp that tests the will of the soldiers in it. Rogers in finally elected to be the subject to test the newly perfected serum that will enhance him physically. Previously an old version of the serum was used on Schmidt, a German military man and eventual villain of the movie, in whom the negative side affects were

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[7] Johnston, *Captain America: The First Avenger*.

permanent.[8] The scene is important because it touches more on what is inside of Steve Rogers that is important. It is more about his morals and mental strength than his physical prowess. It is also important that only an American could withstand the serum and procedure and become physically altered for good and not evil.

This scene plays right into the belief many citizens held in terms of American Exceptionalism. Similar to the "City on a hill" feeling from before, Americans have inherently found themselves superior to all other countries for many years. The fact that Captain America is the way he is due to his morals and his mental strength plays on that same idea. The idea that there was no way a man from a foreign country would have the morals and mental fortitude to handle the procedure and keep his head on straight is a direct example of American Exceptionalism at work. During the scene Steve Rogers is asked by Dr. Erksine, "Do you want to kill Nazis?" he responds, "I don't want to kill anyone. I don't like bullies; I don't care where they're from."[9] This shows again the morals are in the right place for Steve Rogers and it is his personal characteristics that make him into Captain America.

In the same film, *Captain America: The First Avenger,* one can see the transition of Captain America's innocence to that of skepticism and worry that his government has become unreliable.[10] This plays on the same feelings many Americans had during the time of crisis in 2001. Before the 9/11 attacks U.S. citizens

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[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.

felt a sense of innocence and false security loomed above them at all times, due only to the fact that they were American. This is how Captain America is portrayed in the film, as he is seen as just waking up from a coma of 70 years and innocent before rushing out into modern day Times Square in New York and realizing he is not in the same country at all. Americans knew that after 9/11 the country would no longer be the same.

The government was questioned immediately following 9/11 and the FBI and CIA fell under some heavy scrutiny from the public on how they could have let this attack happen. Since the 1960's with the JFK assassination or later times in the 70's, such as Watergate and the Vietnam War, Americans had come full circle to trust in their government again without a large amount of cynicism from the public. 9/11 rehashed many of these feelings for the American people. They now no longer felt safe and began to question official government agencies that are tasked with keeping the country safe. *The 9/11 Commission Report* was written with approval of the United States government and was for many one of the tools used to help understand what really happened on that dreadful day in 2001.

The 9/11 Commission Report is important to note in terms of superheroes due to the way it was written and how that changed the American ideals of what a superhero really is. The committee tasked with putting together the report was very diligent in deciding how the book would be sequenced. This proved to be essential to the success of *The Report* across the country, as many praised it as a

refreshing government written report. Most noticeably the book was celebrated for

Chapter 1. It is written in a way that puts the reader back to the scene of that day.

The first sentence in the preface uses the word, "narrative" so it becomes

apparent that the government is being upfront about making this seem like a story.

Continuing on to the first sentences of Chapter 1 they read, "Tuesday, September 11,

2001, dawned temperate and nearly cloudless in the eastern United States. Millions

of men and women readied themselves for work."[11] An ordinary day like any of the

other days in September was how the morning began and the commission decides

to pull this memory out of readers. To go from an ordinary day to the chaos of the

attacks reminds every reader of the sense of confusion and helplessness most

citizens had felt on that day.

The sense of confusion and helplessness being so evident in _The 9/11_

Commission Report is important to note because it directly tied into superheroes in

the aftermath of the event. Superheroes had never before been seen as a group of

characters that were helpless in the hands of the enemy. The superhero has become

ever so vulnerable since the days of 9/11. There is one example of Captain America

when he is seen in a special edition comic issue, _The Amazing Spider Man #36,_

published by Marvel that centers on the attacks of 9/11. He is seen amongst the

rubble of the World Trade Centers, looking onward in a powerless fashion. (See

Picture 3). This is significant because it shows Captain America being the only

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[11] Kean and Hamilton, _The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States._, 11.

superhero that has dealt with now WWII and the terror that reigned supreme on

9/11 and now also the modern threat of terror from the Middle East. Going through

9/11 changed the way American Exceptionalism would be viewed both domestically

and from abroad.

Picture 3

The idea of American Exceptionalism can be viewed as something with either positive or negative connotations around it. Looking at both Captain America and Iron Man it's easy to see both sides of the coin. Captain portrays some of that idealism and optimism that grew in America in the years immediately following WWII. While on the other hand Iron Man reflects the sometimes arrogant and cocky part of the Exceptionalism. Captain America is a humble superhero that needs no credit in the good deeds of his missions. Iron Man/Stark wants to bask in the glory of the heroic missions he completes. America has had times where both different feelings seem to describe the feelings of citizens in the country.

Captain America physically embodies the United States in a greater sense than any other superhero. However, if looking at truly what makes America the country it is Captain America, only displays one portion of the concoction. A character that is easily arguable as an equal in regards to an accurate representation of the United States is the superhero Iron Man. The fictional character of Tony Stark becomes the superhero Iron Man through his technological innovations in weaponry, creating the first ever Iron Man suit. Iron Man differs from Captain America in many ways. The most noticeable differences in the contrasting representations of the United States are what they embody within their personalities. Both Iron Man and Captain America's stories are intertwined due to both of them being leaders of the superhero group The Avengers.

Iron Man and Captain America have been seen side by side in comics since

The Avengers series began in 1963. Captain America was set to be the wise and

enduring leader of the superhero group, while Iron Man took on a different persona.

In contrast to Cap's humbleness and good morals, Iron Man is really a playboy

millionaire arms dealer. Although different, both characters still represent

American values. Captain shows the side of America pre superpower era,

representing hard work, humility, and a never wavering loyalty to the flag. Iron Man

embodies more of the American lifestyle in post-Cold War days, epitomizing some of

the more negative aspects of American Exceptionalism, masculinity, and

invincibility.

Iron Man debuted in comics in 1963 when Stan Lee, president of Marvel

Comics, included his new superhero in *Tales of Suspense* #39. It was said that Lee

had wanted to create a new character that would go against the typical characters of

the time.[12] Lee said,

> "I think I gave myself a dare. It was the height of the
> Cold War. The readers, the young readers, if there was
> one thing they hated, it was war, it was the military....So
> I got a hero who represented that to the hundredth
> degree. He was a weapons manufacturer, he was
> providing weapons for the Army, he was rich, he was an
> industrialist....I thought it would be fun to take the kind
> of character that nobody would like, none of our
> readers would like, and shove him down their throats
> and make them like him....And he became very popular."

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[12] Lee and Mair, *Excelsior! : The Amazing Life of Stan Lee.*

Iron Man was truly a character of the time he was created. The 1960's in America were a time of great technological advancement in many different sectors including weapons manufacturing. However, these advancements were being done by teams of researchers in their labs supported by bigger corporations. The idealistic American inventor of the past seemed to be fading. The character of Tony Stark played right into the ideals of the famed individual inventor who wanted credit personally for the new technological advances he created.[13] The story of Tony Stark and him becoming Iron Man has stayed the same through the years with minor detail changes.

Iron Man's origin story is interesting for many reasons. In the 1960's version Tony Stark was taken hostage by a wild group of vigilantes during the Vietnam War. He is forced to use his innovation skills and knowledge in weapons to create an arc reactor that stops shrapnel from reaching his heart. This becomes the key to his Iron Man suit and he uses it and its energy to escape from his captors. Iron Man has a unique origin story because of how the writers have chosen to change it. They adjusted the story in the 90's to make Tony Stark get caught in the Gulf War, then again later to see Stark in Afghanistan. The opening scene of the movie *Iron Man,* which premiered in 2008, tells the tale of the beginnings in the most modern form.

The movie starts out with a symbolic scene that is quite easily comparable to real events that transpired within the U.S. Jesse Walker describes the scene in his

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[13] Genter, ""With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility"': Cold War Culture and the Birth of Marvel Comics."

article titled *The Politics of Superheroes* when he states, "In its [*Iron Man*] very first scene, soldiers ferry Tony Stark, an engineering genius and wealthy munitions manufacturer, through Afghanistan. Terrorists attack the convoy and capture Stark. The last thing he sees before he passes out is one of the weapons used in the assault. It has a Stark Industries logo on it." [14]

The scene here is deliberately engaging in American foreign policy. Having Stark being blown up by one of his own weapons is used in direct correlation to the fact that American weapons were used against United States military.[15] This not only happens in the film but in real wartime situations when many enemy fighters are using the same weaponry that American troops are. These terrorists are many times less skilled in military actions as the American troops are, but the weaponry makes a big difference in the on-the-ground fighting. As to whether the terrorists are getting these arms through the black market or through a corrupt dealer is hard to prove, but nonetheless, the enemy is armed heavily due to American munitions dealers. The news of this caused a big reaction in American culture and many called for a change in the way munitions are handled. Private contractors came under heavy scrutiny once the public learned of the news; similar to how Stark was looked down upon as a weapons dealer.

Tony Stark is a character that has gone through many changes since his dawning of becoming Iron Man. When he decides to put on the Iron Man suit and

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[14] Walker, "The Politics of Superheroes."
[15] Favreau, *Iron Man*.

become the superhero, Stark grows as a person in ways more than just physical prowess. He is forced to look at the world differently than he did when he was just Tony Stark the weapons dealer. A prime example of this can be seen when looking at the first movie *Iron Man.* There is a scene in which Stark is doing an interview with an attractive reporter who is asking him some tough questions about how he deals with his morals and ethics after creating weapons of death all day long. He quickly rebuts her in a savvy James-Bond-like fashion. The reporter is then seen leaving his place in the morning showing the extent of how he uses his celebrity and suave moves to gain masculinity through the pursuit of women.

Stark/Iron Man is a character that is unique in many ways. Another important thing to note when looking at the correlation between Iron Man and America is the battles that were waged internally did more damage than some that were fought externally. The character of Iron Man is a complicated one because without the suit on he really is just Tony Stark, a vulnerable human. When the suit goes on and Stark becomes Iron Man he becomes an invincible hero that defeats the enemy with his technological advantages. This becomes taxing for Stark always having to go back and forth between the two. An addiction to alcohol is developed due to the constant clash happening within Stark. This became a storyline that changed Iron Man forever.

The iconic comic from the 70's, *Demon in a Bottle,* was what many believe

took Iron Man to the next level and gave his fans something to truly relate to. One
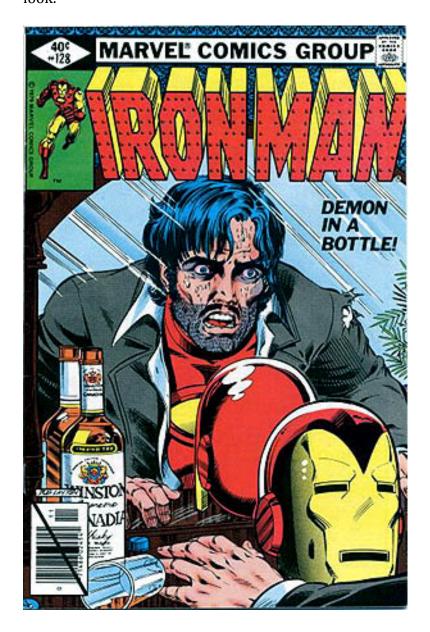
comic critic described the series as this,

> "'Demon in a Bottle' is regarded by many as the definitive
> Iron Man story. If not the first storyline to provide the
> character with true depth and human failings, it was
> certainly one of the most influential. Gone was the rich,
> happy playboy of the '60s. In his place was a man who
> threatened to give into his selfish desires and let his
> company suffer for it. And while alcoholic comic book
> characters are nothing new today, in the '70s it was a
> topic almost unheard of in superhero comics. And it's a
> struggle that has remained with Tony to the present
> day."[16]

This review shows exactly how influential it was to have Tony struggling with the

conflicts within his own mind. The timing of Iron Man struggling with identity

issues is no coincidence as America as a whole also had troubles during this time.

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[16] Schedeen, "Top 25 Iron Man Stories."

Attached here is the cover of the issue *Demon in a Bottle!* As one can see, this is not the typical superhero look.

The United States in the 1970's was a time of turmoil in terms of the identity of the country. The country was at the height of the Cold War with the USSR and the war in Vietnam had just ended. Both these things contribute greatly to the feeling of

confusion many citizens felt at the time. With the Cold War in the back of everyone's

mind it was hard for people in the U.S. to really identify as the superpower it once

was.

The concrete feeling of superiority and invincibility that many Americans

drew from the success of the country since the end of WWII began to tremor. The

country began to look inward and saw many problems it had not had in the past.

The public disapproval of the War in Vietnam was just the start of things changing in

the United States. The 1970's were not a time of great prosperity in the country as it

went through one of the first recessions since The Great Depression of 1929. Gerald

Ford reassured Americans that "our long national nightmare is over"[17] during his

1974 inaugural address. He may have been right in regards to Watergate being

behind him. However, the back half of the 70's had many problems that he had to

tackle. Only a year later in January 1975 he said this during his State of the Union

Address, "the state of the union is not good".[18] To say Iron Man is a result of his time

is a dramatic understatement.

The 1970's in the United States were a time when America had to confront

it's own personal demons. Iron Man represents America in this way. His struggle to

maintain power while dealing with his own internal problems can be seen in

America during the turmoil of the Vietnam War. American addiction to the success

and power garnered in a post WWII world lead them to the internal conflicts they

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[17] Angley, "Careening from Crisis to Crisis in 'The Seventies.'"
[18] Ibid.

now faced, similar to Tony Stark relying on his suit to be the crutch to his unstable life. This can be seen even in modern times in his film series as well.

The third, and latest movie as of today's date in the Iron Man series is set against the most recently developed fears of the audience.[19] The plot line of *Iron Man 3* is similar to that of any of the other films in that Stark must use his genius and his Iron Man suit in order to defeat a villain that is set on a path of evil. However, the third movie is different in a few ways as well. The movie sees Stark struggle with himself internally much more than in the first two films. The struggle internally is similar to that of his fights within himself in the comics of old when he cannot get a hold of his drinking problem.

The drinking problem is never truly focused on as specifically as it is during the *Demon in a Bottle* comic. This new internal struggle comes from a different superhero movie series in which the Tony Stark/Iron Man character is involved in called *The Avengers.* Stan Lee used Iron Man as an original Avenger, along with Hank Pym, the Hulk, Thor, and the Wasp. Captain America joined the squad in the fourth issue of the comics after being found alive after years of him being missing. In *The Avengers* series there is a scene in which Stark comes as close to death as one can come and it changes him. In the *Iron Man 3* movie it becomes apparent that

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[19] The second movie in the Iron Man series is not discussed in this paper due to its differing plot line. The movie is essentially about stark finding a cure for his failing arc reactor that he needs to keep him alive, the founding of S.H.I.E.L.D, and Iron Man fighting a Russian mad man who copies Stark's suits. The movie does not add any quality points to reference in terms of superheroes in American life.

these panic attacks and flashbacks are affecting his work. He becomes obsessed

with building and designing different Iron Man suits.[20] The relentless work due to

fear and panic is similar to that of which happened in America after 9/11.

The United States government post 9/11 revamped its government spending

on military defenses like it never had before. The similarities in the reactions

between Starks near death experience and 9/11 are easily recognizable. As Stark

became restless and defense weapon infatuated so did America in its post 9/11

scramble to try to figure out its identity. 9/11 knocked the U.S. off its pedestal of

invincibility and caused many things within not only the military to change but also

within everyday citizens. Military enrollment skyrocketed post 9/11 with

Americans that felt it a patriotic duty to give back to the country that provided them

and their families with freedom.

The real enemy in *Iron Man 3* is not Tony Stark himself. This is just another

side plot that seems to have realistic anxieties that the audience feeds off. The real

enemy in the movie is the Mandarin. He is an unidentifiable terrorist that is

bombing different parts of the world. The bombings seem to have no forensic

evidence attached to them, which makes the Mandarin both extremely hard to catch

and it makes him nearly impossible to predict where he will strike next. Stark

publicly challenges the Mandarin, who responds by annihilating Stark's home. Stark

in his Iron Man suit is injured and his suit is badly beaten up to a point where he

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[20] Black, *Iron Man 3*.

does not have the ability to return to California and he gets stuck in rural Tennessee.

From here Stark befriends a 10 year old boy who becomes more valuable to Stark in

the way that he gives him back his childlike innovative skills to make whatever

around him work in his favor.[21] The scenes with the boy, Harley, are important

because they seem to mirror America trying to find its global innocence again. Since

9/11 America has been the aggressor, similar to Stark since he created the Iron Man

suit, and many see the country through a skeptical lens.

As *Iron Man 3* continues the two, Stark and Harley, end up tracing the

Mandarin to Miami where they plan to infiltrate his base with a hodgepodge of

scrapped together weapons Stark made while in Tennessee. Once inside the

Mandarin's base Stark confronts the enemy, whom he thinks is the Mandarin. He

quickly realizes that he has been fooled and this man is just an English actor named

Trevor Slattery. Slattery is clearly clueless of the ramifications that his acting has

caused.[22] The Mandarin remains a faceless enemy that mirrors what the United

States is going through post 9/11. The enemy for the United States is faceless in

today's world. Since the death of Osama Bin Laden there has been no one face that

has become the leader of terror on the free world. For example, there is no one face

for ISIS, currently America's greatest terrorist threat. The group works in the

shadows and the fear in America grows after each attack they successfully carry out.

[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.

The character of Tony Stark in *Iron Man 3* is not nearly the same as he was in the original movie of *Iron Man.* The image of the playboy millionaire without a care in the world beside himself is how we are introduced to Stark. The opening scene in *Iron Man* has already been touched on as being important for the fact that it is Stark's own missiles used by rebels that cause him to blow up while on a trip in Afghanistan. The scene is important in another way as well. Prior to blowing up in the Humvee the scene sets up Tony Stark as the cool businessman who is a celebrity. The iconic part surrounding this scene is the fact that the real heroes are the American soldiers who are stationed in Afghanistan and are set to the job of being Stark's security during the trip. The fact that it is the soldiers that are idolizing Stark instead of the other way around shows just how the American public quickly forgets who the real heroes are in the country.

In the years following 9/11 the pride and gratitude for men and women in the military was at an all time high. More recently however, it seems that the American soldier has been under higher scrutiny than days of past and more and more scenes of problems with the Rules of Engagement are coming into public light. Stark is the celebrity that people care about in the film, just as in today's society it is the celebrities that people care about and the soldiers remain nameless and under appreciated. The celebrity in Stark's personality fades as the series continues and in *The Avengers* he actually learns to be part of a team to defeat an enemy that seems to be overwhelming even for a group of superheroes.

In comparison with Captain America, Iron Man seems almost a lesser hero in terms of morality. This may be true and done on purpose by Stan Lee. He knew the public already had their superhero that was built on the morals of America. He took a chance thinking that the readers would end up growing fond of a character that was not the model citizen but was a true superhero in the fact that he saved lives of everyday citizens. Both characters are now icons of the comic world, and they without a doubt have their place in superhero history etched in stone.

Superheroes in American culture are unique due to their long stories that have transcended many decades of different feelings within the country's popular opinion. They have adapted to what was popular at the time without losing their original characteristics that made them so popular to readers in the first place. Iron Man and Captain America are arguably the two most iconic Marvel superheroes. Focusing on how historic events in America have changed both of them overtime it becomes evident that they are products of popular opinion in America.

Captain America is set to represent the good morals and hardworking America. Iron Man/Tony Stark is set to represent a different version of American Exceptionalism. He represents the innovative genius and capitalistic mindset America has seemed to develop later in the 20th century. The diversion between the two in terms of their American Exceptionalism can be boiled down to the different timing of their popularity. Cap being most popular during and following WWII, a time of idealism in America, when the future looked bright for a young newly

empowered country. Stark/Iron Man gaining popularity in more modern times due

to his more relatable human characteristics of vulnerability and self doubt.

Both characters have changed since their respective inceptions as Marvel

characters. They have both fought battles against enemies, either external or

internal, and have won using their exclusive characteristics that make them the

superhero they are. If one were to look no further than the superheroes in America,

they could get a real sense of what was happening in the country at the time and the

public's opinion on different events.

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