

## Philosophy in Review



# J. Richard Stevens, "Captain America, Masculinity, and Violence: The Evolution of a National Icon."

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Volume 40, Number 2, May 2020

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1069832ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069832ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (print)

1920-8936 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Admirand, P. (2020). Review of [J. Richard Stevens, "Captain America, Masculinity, and Violence: The Evolution of a National Icon."]. *Philosophy in Review*, 40(2), 82–84. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069832ar>

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**J. Richard Stevens.** *Captain America, Masculinity, and Violence: The Evolution of a National Icon.* Syracuse University Press 2018. 400 pp. \$44.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780815633952); \$29.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780815630913).

Is there any more pliable, in-your-face American cultural symbol than Captain America? Decked out in the stars and stripes, and red, white, and blue, Captain America begs for a close, contextual historical reading, from his origin in 1941 to the present day. In this intelligent and perceptive book, J. Richard Stevens traces the many different interpretations and versions of the comic book hero over the decades, connecting the story arcs, fan reactions, and retcons (when a comic more or less hits the restart button) to core aspects of whatever zeitgeist America's cultural, political, and historical forces were immersed in, from Nazis, the Cold War, and Vietnam, to the post 9/11 war on terror and issues of torture and human rights. Focused on issues of power, justice, and ethics—especially as performed in masculine tropes—Stevens' book is intended for both the comic and non-comic reader. You need not be a specific fan of Captain America (I'm not, preferring comics like *Saga* or *Descender/Ascender*). Either way, Stevens has closely read every Captain America issue and provides copious details of plot and background. Unfortunately, as described in a footnote, Stevens was unable to use any image from the comic books because he 'met significant and unexpected resistance from Marvel' (356: fn147). To be clear, the blame actually resides with Disney who have always been mother-cub protective of their characters, or ones they have acquired (Disney purchased Marvel in 2009). Disney's intransigence is a shame because the comic medium is unique for its blend of words and images on the printed (or digital) page, and academic books on comics (or any book, really) benefit when pertinent images expand and showcase what is covered in the main text. Stevens notes he initially sought forty-four images for inclusion. The footnote ends: 'This book contains no images of Marvel or Disney properties' (356: fn147).

Who is Captain America? The question depends on context and time period, and entails more than one person, as the mantle of Captain America, though normally associated with Steve Rogers, gets worn by a few different people. Rogers, an originally flaccid US soldier who agrees to be tested with a Super Soldier Serum to bash and smash the Nazis, is the classic and most well-known version, and that is the version I'll focus on here. This focus does not mean there will be a straightforward continuity of personality, or even history. With various creators writing and drawing Captain America over the years, agendas, changing cultural tastes, and unavoidable real-world issues morph and mold who Captain America becomes. Like Batman, Captain America's origins are laced with an initially high body count as killing the bad guys was part of the status quo. While Batman quickly adjusted to not killing (perhaps most famously and tragically with battles with the monomaniacal Joker), it took longer for Captain America to put down the gun or foreswear being judge, jury and executioner, and instead chide and rebuke the likes of Wolverine or The Punisher. The problem becomes: how does the same character, who had once killed, now innocently chide others for such violence—again, another reminder why Captain America really is a national icon, as Stevens' subtitle shows. For is not America the innocent country, par excellence? As Stevens writes: 'Captain America is an image that shifts over the years to fit the foreign policy climate during which his tales are presented (or at least the contemporary understanding of those policies in the popular consciousness)' (48).

Book chapters are cleverly titled and encapsulate what will be covered; for example: 'Commie Smasher! (1953-1954)' or 'Captain America's Response to the War on Terror (2002-

2007).’ There are nine chapters in the book, including the introduction, with the eight chapters structured in Captain America’s chronological history. The 2018 paperback version includes an Afterword, updating key events since the 2015 hardback publication, highlighting the fears and changes from Disney’s acquisition of Marvel, the rise in interest and relevance to the word ‘masculinity’ in the main title, and the rise and reach of the phenomenally successful Marvel films starring Captain America (especially the *Avengers* films) and Cap’s linking with actor Chris Evans. The 2018 Afterword could only note that *Atlantic* correspondent and best-selling author Ta-Nahisi Coates would be taking over the writing of Captain America. As of November 2019, Coates has written seventeen issues.

While Captain America often remains an idealized version of American interests and inhibitions—powerful but humble, loyal but serving truth—his own perception of his role and its link to the US political and military machinery changes drastically. He initially embodied what Stevens calls the ‘American monomyth,’ enabling American violence against others because of America’s belief in its intrinsic innocence and goodness. This ideology was particularly applicable during World War II, but changing social contexts led to a decrease in Captain America’s popularity and identity, and eventually his abandonment (69). When he was initially retconned in the 60s, stories that returned to World War II did not have the same timeliness or urgency, and violent methods he once practiced were no longer authorized by the Comics Code Authority. Captain America needed to find a new way.

In the chapter, ‘Liberal Crusader (1969-1979),’ Stevens explains how Steve Rogers becomes immersed in America’s own search for identity in a Vietnam and Watergate Era where questions of America’s complicity and failures were at the forefront. To account for such changes, Captain America is said to have been iced post World War II as his ideals were a threat to the growing American military-industrial complex. Reborn as it were in the 1960s, this Captain American initially struggled to adjust to the changing mores and customs, so different from his experience of the 1940s. He takes to the road, trying to understand the real America in all its racial, class, and political nuances and complexities. The Falcon (an African American superhero) even joins him as a partner in his comic, providing limited, but still important highlighting of racial prejudice in American society (and in American comics where African Americans remained mostly marginal or character-stock figures (for an excellent account of Black superheroes, see Adilifu Nama’s 2011 book, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes*, University of Texas Press).

How to be a ‘liberal’ patriot in such challenging times remains an arduous path, as many Americans can testify today in light of the latest tweets from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue (or South Florida). Perhaps echoing Michael Jordan’s infamous response that Republicans also buy sneakers, Captain America as a commercial entity can’t be identified as politically liberal or conservative. This is not just because writers and artists change. Stevens cites a panel from a Captain America comic in 2010 in which protest signs stirred their own protest, as Tea Party members claimed the signs in the comic were meant as a rebuke of their platform. They called for a boycott. Fox news even jumped on the anti-Captain America bandwagon. Marvel promptly went into apology mode, explaining how it was an editorial mix-up and the artist never intended for this connection and ‘was a simple perfect storm of screw-ups. It happens, we’re human’ (269).

The question of masculinity and Captain America also remains fraught. As noted, Steve Rogers was initially a wimpy soldier desperate to help the American war effort. While the comic often claims his resolve and humility are what really renders him potent, the use of violence to defeat enemies has sometimes even entailed civilians who argued for free speech and challenged government policies. The Captain only won that battle after a swift right hook. While more recent iterations

would clarify that even detested speech had to be protected in the right of freedom of speech, many plots and subplots inevitably repeat, with slight twists. Such is the beauty or the problem of comic serials that generally are intended to last ad infinitum (and is likely why my favorite comics like *Y: The Last Man* (Vertigo, 2003) have definitive ends; even in Larry Hama's *G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero*, dead characters always stay dead). Captain America died with great fanfare in 2007, but of course, was resurrected and retconned. He'll die again, at some point, too, and also be resurrected, and so it will go.

Reading Stevens' book has not made me want to read old issues of *Captain America* (is this why Disney wouldn't let him use images?), though I would look forward to Steven's next book, especially if it again balances close reading of texts with engaging connections to current events and ethical themes. Because of my respect for Coates, I may see what his take on the hero is in light of Stevens' work here, especially in the area of racism and Captain America's mixed history. As US presidents often play ongoing cameo roles in a Captain America comic, I'm also curious to see how Coates would present the current US President. In the summer of 2019, *Maus* creator Art Spiegelman was prevented from naming that US President 'Orange Skull' (playing off Captain America's enemy, the fascist, Red Skull) in a book scheduled to be published by Marvel. He was told it broke their apolitical policy so he had to delete the line. He decided to publish the full essay in *The Guardian* instead.

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