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"With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility": American Comic Book Censorship and the Cold War Consensus

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BY CARISSA YOUNG

"Faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive and able to leap tall buildings in a single bound"— Comic books have been a dynamic commodity in American history.[1] During the Great Depression and World War II, comic books and graphic novels emerged as a new form of mass culture which uniquely targeted adolescents. Known as the "Golden Age of Comics", the period from 1938 to early 1950s saw an unparalleled rise of comic sales. Scholars have estimated that in 1944, ninety-four percent of American children ages 6-11 and eighty-five percent ages 12-17 read comic books regularly.[2] The superhero genre, largely modeled after the success of Superman, became extremely popular during WWII when writers like Jerry Robinson, Will Eisner, and Stan Lee penned new soldiers to win the war: Batman, The Spirit and Captain America.[3] Most of the superhuman celebrities that have dominated popular American culture with lunchboxes, backpacks, and billion dollar blockbuster films were "born" during WWII. Children paid over 20 million dollars a year to see Captain Marvel and others brutally defeating the Axis enemy.[4] Despite their trivial association today, comic books were an important medium through which nationalistic ideas were imparted to children.

Regardless of their patriotic themes during the war, these youth-centered commodities caught the negative attention of the larger population. In the 1950s parental organizations, psychoanalysts, and church groups called for a closer investigation of comic book content. A psychiatrist, Dr. Frederic Wertham, published *The Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) which claimed that comic books gave children

"criminal or sexually abnormal ideas."[5] The best-selling book and the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency effectively ended the "Golden Age" of comic freedom. Anticipating the impending threat of government censorship, a group of comic publishers developed the Comic Code Authority (1954).[6] The Comics Code "Seal of Approval" on the cover of a comic book marked that it was morally acceptable for sale in the U.S. Ultimately, the Comics Code Authority and the Comics Code, the set of rules established at the convention, radically transformed the standards for comic publishing.

While historians have noted that the 1950s controversy ended the Golden Age of comics, few have understood the shifting attitudes that made the anti-comic campaign so effective. Why had a commodity that was deemed an inoffensive pastime for children during the war, become the center of an impassioned debate during the 1950s? Building off of the work of historians Amy Kiste Nyberg and Paul Lopes, I will show that this large scale backlash was not simply prompted by a desire to protect children from profane material. Instead, it reflected broader cultural shifts of the 1950s toward cultural consensus. The anti-comic crusade and the Comics Code both hoped to temper a counter-cultural media to fit the family-centered conservatism of the Cold War.

Today, comics are associated with hobby shops and cultural subgroups, but in the 1950s they represented an enormously successful industry with a significant popular following. During the war, comic book writers and publishers capitalized on the conflict by publishing superhero and war titles. The fact that the number of new comic issues jumped from 22 in 1939 to 1,125 in 1944 despite wartime paper rationing demonstrates the pervasiveness of comic literature.[7] The end of the war signaled victory for the allies, but comic publishers feared they would lose their best material and sales would take a hit. Comic publishers frantically diversified their issues, adding new genres of comic books to the stands, creating a multiplicity of genres in

addition to the conventional superhero: teen, crime, romance, westerns, horror, history, animal, and animated classics. Titles such as *Millie the Model* (1945) and *Archie's Girls, Betty and Veronica* (1950) targeted the untapped market of teen girls; Romance titles targeted older females and boasted titles such as *Young Romance, Romantic Secrets, Sweethearts, Love Mystery* and *Cupid.*[8] By the end of the war, publishing companies attempted to reach even wider audiences with female-targeted genres.

Other grittier comic book genres emerged in the 1940s and 50s to survive the postwar slump. Entertaining Comics, or EC, lead the industry in crime and horror books, the genres most criticized by Wertham and others. Children increasingly spent their nickels and dimes to read the grisly tales of *The Vault of Horror, The Crypt of Terror* and *Tales from the Crypt. Crime Doesn't Pay, Crime Can't Win, Crime Patrol,* and *Crime SuspenStories* were among the most popular of the crime genre.[9] The publishing of these new assorted genres ensured that comic books could be found in nearly every home in American during the early 1950s.[10] Comic books became a staple of youth culture, much to the chagrin of adults

However, this period of unbridled growth did not last; the 1950s saw the rise of a widespread, but largely unfounded, belief that reading comic book harmed children's learning. The criticism was not new; Sterling North, literary critic for the *Chicago Daily News* had already launched a large-scale public campaign against "the highly colored enemy" in 1941, claiming that comic books stunt children's literacy. Parenting magazines of the 1940s and 50s published countless articles about "the comic problem."[11] One journalist wrote, "These comics may be leading back to the drawings of the caveman, reducing our vocabulary to monosyllables such as 'Oof!' and 'Zowie!'"[12] Historian Amy Kiste Nyberg evaluated the claim that comic books harmed children's intelligence by looking at several psychological studies that were conducted in the 1940s about the effect of comic

book reading on adolescents.[13] Furthermore, some educators felt that comic books could be a useful "stepping stone" to get children into reading. [14] Analysis of the debate caused Nyberg to ask, "Why did adults find children's preoccupation with comic books disturbing, despite evidence that suggested that it was an apparently harmless leisure activity?"[15] Educational grievances cannot account for all of the concern about comic books.

Adding to fears about literacy and comics, many believed that reading comic books caused juvenile delinquency. Psychologists and journalists of the era consistently linked comics to the criminal and violent behavior of children. Dr. Frederic Wertham presented the most demining evidence of the connection in his 1954 book *Seduction of the Innocent.* In his psychological practice, he came across countless delinquent adolescents and found one commonality between them: they all read comic books obsessively.[16] He wrote of his discovery:

> Slowly, and at first reluctantly, I have come to the conclusion that this chronic stimulation, temptation and seduction by comic books, both their content and their alluring advertisement of knives and guns, are contributing factors to many children's maladjustment... If I were asked to express in a single sentence what has happened mentally to many American children during the last decade I would know no better formula than to say that they were conquered by Superman.[17]

Wertham presented many cases in which children had committed "sadistic" acts of violence. He aimed to link the patterns in delinquency to the rise of comic book popularity. In *Seduction of the Innocent,* Wertham described the case of a 10-year-old boy who pushed a small boy into water so that the small boy drowned. In interviews the boy admitted to loving crime comics where, "Sometimes they get killed, the gangsters, the cops kill them. Sometimes they hit each other when one of them does something wrong. Sometimes they use knives."[18] The interview caused Wertham to conclude, "... our patient

would not have been pushed to the murder if his mind had not been imbued with readiness for violence and murder by his continuous comic-book reading."[19] According to Wertham, kids learned violence from comic books. Another example comes from the *New York Times.* It reported that two boys, ages 11 and 12, flew a stolen plane 120 miles "on knowledge obtained from comic books."[20] The public believed that the deviance present in comic books elicited deviance in their readers.

Despite the fact that Wertham and his supporters exposed shockingly violent comic content. Nonetheless, concerns about crime and juvenile delinquency do not fully explain the explosion of criticism. The abundance of graphic and gruesome comics indeed fueled the fire for Wertham's argument.[21] Themes of violence, horror, and crime clearly dominated American comic books. However, the link between these themes and childhood delinquency was not as strong as Wertham suggested. Famous comic artist Stan Lee replied to Wertham: "He did a study that demonstrated that most of the kids in reform schools read comic books. So I said to him, 'If you do another survey, you'll find that most of the kids drink milk, too. Should we ban milk?'"[22] Defenders of comic books, like Lee, doubted Wertham's theory of causation and posited that the relationship between delinquency and comics was merely a correlation. Historian James Gilbert argued that the fear of juvenile delinquency in the 1950s was not based on actual statistics. While the FBI warned about rising youth crime in the 1950s, according to Gilbert, Children's Courts showed "little increase, and where it did, much of that was of the victimless variety, or related to a challenge of authority."[23] If indeed comic books enticed adolescents to commit violent crimes, the explosion of comic book popularity should have coincided with a dramatic increase in adolescent crime rates, but this did not occur. Furthermore, the censorship and decline of comic books in the late 1950s did not result in a corresponding decline in juvenile delin-

quency. Crime comics and horror comics contained a significant amount of grisly images and explicit violence and, perhaps, parents were justified not to want their kids to consume such graphic material. However, a closer look at the delinquency argument reveals that concerns about criminality and comics do not sufficiently explain the extreme negative response and resulting push for censorship.

Instead, there were a few unspoken, and possibly unintentional, motives behind the anti-comic crusade: to promote ideal American family values, delineate proper gender and sexual conduct, and promote democratic order. After the end of WWII, the relationship between the communist Soviet Union and the United States became contentious. The Cold War conflict between American democracy and Soviet communism infiltrated common domestic issues, such as agriculture, suburbanization, and consumerism. American Cold War leaders wished to prove the American way of life as more desirable than all other countries, especially communist ones. Thus, national appearance became a central issue. American industry, families, morality, and government all had to be obviously superior to those of the Soviets. It was also vital to minimize conflict among citizens and create what historian Matthew J. Costello deems a "cultural consensus."[24] In many ways, comic books, with their controversial images and plotlines, posed a threat to the consensus so crucial for "winning" the Cold War. The comic crusade aimed to censor comic books to reflect the supremacy of particular American institutions

Importantly, critics of comic books framed the debate around the American family, emphasizing the protection of childhood and parental responsibility. Opponents of comics frequently used phrases such as "seducing the impressionable", "entrapping American's children" and "violating innocent minds."[25] In a society increasingly centered on the family home, comic books were characterized as a danger to the security and happiness of the home.

In 1948, on a public radio debate titled "What's Wrong with the

Comics?" John Mason Brown, a critic for the *Saturday Review of Literature*, called comic books "the marijuana of the nursery; the bane of the bassinet; the horror of the house; the curse of the kids; and a threat to the future."[26] In other words, comics were a dangerous immoral object that had infiltrated the family. Comic artists preyed on children and parents had an obligation to do something about it. A 1953 article in *Catholic World* expressed how letting children read comic books reflected upon the parents. It read, "Parents have to realize that everytime their children sit down to peruse a comic book their own failure as parents is being exposed."[27] The author expressed the need for parents to be more involved in the products their children consumed. Critics conveyed comic books as a threat to the decency and strength of the American family.

Likewise, the Comics Code revealed the public's anxiety about comics' portrayal of marriage and divorce. In her extensive study of romance comics from the post war period, Jeanne Emerson Gardner discovered that the portrayal of romance and married life in comic such as *True Romance* and *Young Love* was anything but idyllic. In fact, many comic stories featured women falling in passionate love outside of their mundane marriages. One panel from a particularly telling issue of *Girl Confessions* in 1954 contained a young wife saying, "Between taking care of the baby, washing diapers, cooking and cleaning, I became more irritable as time went on...Why can't he stop for a few minutes and give me some help?"[28] Like this unhappy woman, many characters in romance comics found themselves trapped in flawed marriages. However, the anti-comic crusade wished to put an end to this negative portrait of married life, which conflicted with the 1950s ideal. Romance comics could not continue their habit of, as Gardner wrote, "exposing the wrongs of the institutions [marriage and consumerism] they promoted as right."[29] Instead Comic Codes stated new rules:

> (1) Divorce shall not be treated humorously nor represented as desirable

> (3) Respect for parents, the moral code, and for honorable behavior shall be fostered. A sympathetic understanding of the problems of love is not a license for morbid distortion. (4) The treatment of live-romance stories shall emphasize the value of the home and the sanctity of marriage.[30]

The Code cemented the notion that there would be no more unhappy marriages in American comic books. This "morbid distortion of the problems of romance" reflected badly upon the American institution of marriage and the increasing concern with the suburban family home.[31] During the 1950s, the Comic Code Authority forbade publishers to reveal "cracks in the facade" and encouraged them to uphold the sanctity of the American family.

The war against comics also endorsed regulations about sexuality. Aside from simply wanting to protect children from sexually explicit images, they also wished to eliminate themes they viewed as "sexually abnormal."[32] Some comic fans have labeled this portion of the comic conflict, a "gay witch hunt."[33] Batman and Robin; The Spirit and Ebony White; Captain America and Bucky: It seemed that nearly every comic superhero in the Golden Age had a trusty young sidekick. They were fiercely loyal to each other and dedicated to thwarting crime. Yet, the hero-sidekick relationship alarmed parents and psychoanalysts, who labeled it pederasty. Wertham wrote, "They [Batman and Robin] live in sumptuous quarters, with beautiful flowers in large vases, and have a butler. It is like a wish dream of two homosexuals living together ... the Batman type of story may stimulate children to homosexual fantasies."[34] Wertham's suggestion that the innocent storylines conveyed subliminal homosexual messages to kids sparked a barrage of questions. Was The Spirit so keen to protect Ebony because he was loyal to him or because he was in love with him? Did Wonder Woman's adoption of a daughter really have "lesbian overtones?"[35] The comic industry immediately responded to the speculations. Bob Kane, Batman's writer, retorted, "No, Batman is not gay. Why? Because he isn't written that way!"[36] When that didn't sat-

isfy, comic writers introduced more female love interests for the masked crusaders.[37] Roberta Pearson and William Uricchio argue that the introduction of characters like Cat-Woman and BatGirl intended to quell rumors of Batman's homosexuality.[38] Comic books rewrote stories and characters in order appease the public's fear of controversial sexuality in comic books.

The Comics Code of 1954 dealt with the issue of sexuality more blatantly. It stated that "sex perversion and sexual abnormalities or any inference to same is strictly forbidden."[39] The convention decided that comic books presented sexuality; it should be "normal sexuality." The American Psychological Association in 1952 officially labeled homosexuality a mental disorder in 1952.[40] Thus, the worry about homosexuality in comics likened itself to a fear of a disease that could infect children. In order to uphold the moral code and protect the health and normality of American youth, all hints of homoeroticism had to be eliminated from superhero comics.

The role of women offered another point of contention in the comic controversy, as female comic characters often behaved in ways that were not compatible with the 1950s standard for femininity. A collection of *The Spirit* comics from the 1940s and 50s called *Femme Fatales* gives insight into the typical portrayal of women in comic books. During the Golden Age, Will Eisner created the characters of Silk Satin, Madam Minx and Nylon Rose, all equally voluptuous and diabolical.[41] These women used their sexuality to lure men into traps and thwart The Spirit's heroic effort. They smoked, drank, swore and fought violently, a dangerous model for young girls. Even female superheroes fell short of societal standards. As Wertham wrote, "They are not homemakers. They do not bring up a family. Mother-love is entirely absent."[42] Wertham worried that girls who read comic books would look up to these fictional women as role models.[43] Wertham and others saw that comic books had the potential to shape young children's view of women.

Comic books, especially Wonder Woman issues, were criticized for presenting a controversial characterization of American women. Wonder Woman, argues feminist historian Lillian S. Robinson, was too strong and independent to fit well in the 1950s social climate.[44] Her crime-fighting persona distressed audiences in a time when "the most fundamental job of the American woman", as Secretary of Labor James O. Mitchell stated, was "being a good wife, a homemaker, a mother."[45] Wonder Woman did not fit the bill, and many critics reproached her as an "anti-masculine" lesbian.[46] Resultantly stripped of her powers and status as an Amazonian princess, Wonder Woman assumed the role of a career woman who quietly pined over Steve Trevor and fought crime through conventional means (she did not regain her superpowers until the 1970s).[47] Her transformation paralleled larger societal shifts about American womanhood.

The Comics Code set a standard for male-female relationships by responding to the widespread reproach of flirtatious and scandalous women in comic books. Rule #4 under the heading "Marriage and Sex" stated "The treatment of romance stories shall emphasize the value of the home and the sanctity of marriage."[48] The relationships between men and women in comic books, as evidenced by Will Eisner and *The Spirit's* many vixens, had become too controversial. The Comics Code restricted the portrayal of romance to fit with the strict gender norms of the conservative 1950s.

In many ways, the Cold War concern about the triumph of democracy and the American way influenced the debate about comic books. In the midst of the Cold War, Americans wanted to believe that America and its laws were superiorly modern and effective. Thus, any suggestion that large-scale conflict, such as crime and racism, existed throughout the country was injurious to America's success. Politicians and the media strived to consistently portray America as a virtuous nation that protected its moral citizens. However, crime and superhero comic books posed an obstacle for this positive inter-

pretation. The report from the 1954 Senate Subcommittee Hearings on Juvenile Delinquency expresses how superheroes cast a negative light on the American criminal justice system. It read:

> Members of the subcommittee believe that in this respect content of the comic books can be criticized. In many crime comics, law and order are maintained by supernatural and superhuman heroes, and officers of the law, ineffective in apprehending criminal, must depend on aid from fantastic characters. The law-enforcement officials who do solve cases often succeed through "accidental events." In contrast, actual law-enforcement officials are at a disadvantage in terms of prestige and the small part they play in apprehending criminals. The impressions obtained from the comic books are contrary to the methodical routine work characteristic of police investigation.[49]

The senate feared that the portrayal of incompetent cops and supernatural forces overtaking criminals painted a damaging picture of the justice system. One story found in *Blue Beetle #35* showed cops thwarted by the villain throwing pies in their faces, while the superhero successfully apprehended the criminal.[50] Congress feared that comic book highlighted social ills like crime and demeaned government entities.

The Comic Codes echoed the public's desire for a more positive portrayal of American institutions. Several of the rules dealt with the portrayal of crime:

> (1) Crimes shall never be presented in such a way as to create sympathy for the criminal, to promote distrust of the forces of law and justice …
> (3) Policemen, judges, Government officials and respected institutions shall never be presented in a way as to create disrespect for established authority…
> (6) In every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal punished for his misdeeds.[51]

The codes essentially banned any adverse depictions of the American government and its officials. The publishers at the convention wanted comics to present America as a place where good would always win, and the government would eradicate evil. Thus, the

American system, as opposed to a communist one, worked because its citizens lived safely and happily. Not only did comic crusaders desire to curb the criminality of children; they also had a political stake in reducing the depictions of crime.

The dissemination of comic books abroad heightened the anxiety about the negative portrayals of America. During WWII, hundreds of thousands of comic books were sent to soldiers and civilians abroad as morale-boosters and propaganda.[52] However, in the postwar period, the presence of comic books abroad caused alarm. One comic book boasted that it was "Published in 25 countries throughout the world!" Yet this same comic depicted corrupt Federal Agents and Police Officers bungling their jobs.[53] Wertham saw comic books as an "ill-will ambassador abroad."[54] After WWII, the United State of America found itself in a position of power throughout the world. It was imperative that these trivial children's magazines did not undermine their authority abroad. Wertham even dedicated a chapter of his book to the subject of American comic books abroad, showing the embarrassment caused by the widespread readership of "such trash."[55] Other European countries had already passed laws limiting the sale of comic books. Wertham claimed that the U.S. government's failure to ban comics demonstrated a failure of democracy. He wrote:

> The pure food and drug laws, the ordinances against spitting in the subway and about clean drink-cups protect bodies. Surely the minds of children deserve as much protection. I do not advocate censorship, which is imposing the will of the few on the many, but just the opposite, a step to real democracy: the protection of the many against the few.[56]

Wertham wished the Senate to pass laws banning the creation of horror and crime books, in part, so they would not reach international audiences. His supporters, such a senator Joseph F. Carlino, asked the subcommittee of Juvenile Delinquency to "give the world an example of American integrity" and ban comics.[57] Comic books, like

other aspects of American life, had an obligation to reflect the success of American democracy.

The 1950s comic controversy had disastrous results for the comic book industry. Fifteen of the forty-two comic book publishers went bankrupt and closed in the summer of 1954 alone. An additional twenty publishers closed their doors by 1958.[58] The number of annual publications in 1952 had been in the 3,000s and fell to less than half that by 1956. The Golden Age had ended, setting the stage for the Silver Age. The few publishers who survived the crash (DC, Marvel, Archie, Harvey and Charlton) innovated to maintain moderate cultural relevance.[59] However, due to the anti-comic crusade, comic books would never again occupy the same place in American culture.

The early 1950s controversy about comic books represented, on the surface, a moral panic about childhood innocence. However, looking at the work of comic opponents and the industry's response (the Comics Code), one can identify several underlying themes within the debate. In order to stay afloat in the Cold War America, comic books must reflect the dominant cultural messages about family, marriage, sex, and democracy. Looking at the genesis and devolution of the comic book industry does not merely indulge comic book fans; it provides a vivid example of the dialectic nature of culture and consumerism. The Cold War move toward cultural consensus impacted the industry dramatically; the criticisms proffered by parental, governmental and psychological groups irrevocably transformed it. The formerly unrestricted comic book industry translated messages and values to their audience, but during the 1950s, many in the American public attempted to alter those messages. The comic book industry's hold on the minds and pocket books of American children gave it enormous power. Yet, these critics claimed that the industry had a responsibility to reflect responsibility to promote the values of contemporary America. Thus, comic books were swept away by the tidal wave of Cold War consensus.

NOTES

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[3] Irving and Kushner. *Leaping Tall Buildings,* 45.

[4] Paul D. Lopes, *Demanding Respect: The Evolution of the American Comic Book* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 12.

[5] Fredric Wertham, "Excerpts from the Writings and Speeches of Psychiatrist Fredric Wertham (1895-1981)." *Theater 33,* no. 1 (2003), 18.

[6] Amy K. Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (Jackson MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1998).

[7] Shirrel Rhoades, *A Complete History of American Comic Books*. (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 52

[8] Ibid., 54.

[9] Ibid.,, 45.

[10] Nyberg, *Seal of Approval,* 10.

[11] "Comic-Book Readers Are Just Aping Elders in Flight From Trouble, Psychologist Says," *New York Times,* December 28, 1949, 31.

[12] Nyberg, *Seal of Approval,* 14.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Fredric Wertham. *Seduction of the Innocent*, (New York: Rinehart, 1954).

[16] Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent,* 265.

[17] Ibid., 59.

[18] Ibid.

[19] "Boys, 11 and 12, Fly Stolen Plane," *New York Times,* May 22, 1948, 17.

[20] Rhoades, *A Complete History,* 54.

[21] Rhoades, *A Complete History, 62.*

[22] James Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s ,* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 60

[23] Matthew J. Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis Comic Books and the Unmasking of Cold War America* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 34.

[24] Hajdu, *The Ten Cent Plague,* 34.

[25] Found in Nyberg, *Seal of Approval,* 15.

[26] Ibid., 12.

[27] Found in Jeanne Emerson Gardner "'Dreams May End, But Love Never Does: Marriage and Materialism in American Romance Comics, 1947-1954" in *Comic Books and American Cultural History: An Anthology,* (London New York: Continuum, 2012), 103.

[28] Ibid., 106.

[29] Comic Magazine Association of America. *Comics Code ,* (New York: Comic Magazine Association of America), 1954

[30] CMAA, *Comics Code*.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Irving and Kushner. *Leaping Tall Buildings,* 4.

[33] Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent,* 190.

[34] Ibid.