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Excelsior!: Stan Lee's philosophy for Liberty and Justice for All

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***Excelsior!:* Stan Lee's philosophy for Liberty and Justice for All**

**A Senior Capstone Submitted to
The Faculty of the Division of Public Affairs
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Bachelor of Arts in History**

By

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Abstract

Excelsior was Stan Lee's famous catchphrase which is a Latin word meaning "ever upward." What began as a clever sign off for Lee's comics became his life motto. Stan Lee has always worked hard in his life to create equality for all, oftentimes through his comics. This is the reason for the title *Excelsior*, to commemorate Stan Lee for making the world a little more super.

This essay will examine the evolution of Stan Lee's valuable contribution to the American values of equality, patriotism, and fairness through an analysis of his several comic book superheroes, from The Fantastic Four up to the modern-day Marvel Cinematic Universe. I will begin with analyzing patriotic superheroes and then shift focus to black superheroes and see how they have changed over time and discover what their purpose was for society through the eyes of Stan Lee, major ideas will be how each of these groups have been strategically used during different times in history and finally I will dive deeper by analyzing characters such as Black Panther, Black Widow, Captain America, Iron Man, The X-Men and several more who have all had a deeper meaning since their creation.

First the essay traces Stan Lee's emergence to Timely Comics which began in 1939 and later became Marvel Comics. Stan Lee was hired as an office assistant when the company opened and went on to become one of the most important figures in the comic book world. The year 1961 marked the transition from Timely to Marvel and the first comic written by Stan Lee ushering in a new style of superhero comics.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Acknowledgements	3
Table of Contents	5
List of Figures	6
Introduction	7
Background: Stan Lee and the Marvel Universe	8
World War II and the “Golden Age Of Comics:” Captain America versus the Nazis	9
History of Comics Censorship	15
Comics in the Cold War with Iron-Man and Captain America	19
Racial Equality and the first Black Superheroes	22
Conclusion: The Legacy of Stan Lee and His Characters	32
Bibliography	37

List of Figures

- Figure 1-Philipp Lenssen, *Captain America #1*, taken on April 7, 2007, Flickr 10
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/philipp1/449758744>
- Figure 2-Julie Morales, *Tales of Suspense #39 First Iron-Man*, November 24, 2019, Flickr 19
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/185691065@N08/49114089952/>
- Figure 3-Gage Skidmore, *Stan Lee Excelsior*, July 11, 2015, Wikimedia 34
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stan_Lee_Excelsior_by_Gage_Skidmore.jpg

Introduction

Stan Lee is synonymous with Marvel Comics and his body of work represents a valuable lens of understanding for the evolving American values of equality, patriotism, and fairness. Lee's influence began in the 1940s and continues beyond his death thanks to the immense success of Disney's Marvel Cinematic Universe. The first usage of Stan Lee's famous motto, *Excelsior*, was in 1968, in the "Stan's soapbox" section of *Fantastic Four* #71. Lee, prior to using *Excelsior* had experimented with other catch phrases, but this one stuck. *Excelsior* is a Latin word, meaning "Ever Upward!"¹ Stan Lee was always doing his part to make things better for the people who were going through hardships by encouraging them to keep going. He truly believed that together, people can make things better--a powerful message to the youth of America. There is one Marvel character who best exemplifies all the things Stan Lee wanted to show the world through his comics; mainly for American patriotism, an adherence to what is right and just, and showing respect towards everyone. This hero is none other than the Star-Spangled clad Captain America created by American comic book writer Joe Simon and artist Jack Kirby who often teamed up to create numerous characters in the 1940s, better known to comic book historians as the "Golden Age" of Comics. Kirby and Simon are responsible for creating numerous characters, including Captain America, for Timely Comics, the predecessor of Marvel Comics. Steve Rogers, the original Captain America, makes his debut as a member of the United States Army during World War II, fighting the tyrannical forces of Nazi Germany and many other villains throughout time. He remains one of the most important superheroes ever

¹ Knowledgeatwharton. "Marvel Comics' Stan Lee: The Legend Who Created Legends." Fair Observer. November 18, 2018.

created and symbolizes more than just a fight against evil, but also how to show compassion and maintain a boy scout-like adherence to fighting for what is right.

It makes sense from a historical context perspective that Steve Rogers would transform into Captain America during World War II, a zenith in homefront U.S. patriotism; however, the U.S. comic book icon continued to evolve and change over time as the United States did the same. Through a careful analysis of the symbolism and rhetoric in the Captain America comic series--and the Marvel men behind him--major shifts in what it meant to be patriotic in the United States are evident. These shifts are most notable by a comparison of the symbols and rhetoric in World War II era Captain America, Cold War era Captain America, and the New Captain America. The prevalence of comic books and the films inspired by them, makes this a significant element in the American identities of U.S. youth culture.

Background: Stan Lee and the Marvel Universe

Marvel owes much of its success to Stan Lee. Without him, all his creations, and his inspiration to do his part in making the world a better place, would not exist. Born Stanley Martin Lieber on December 28, 1922, Lee started his comic book career at the young age of 16, when he was hired by a relative through marriage, Martin Goodman. Goodman was a publisher at Timely Comics, which later became known as Marvel Comics. Lee's first job was as an office assistant for editor Joe Simon.² Lee served in the Army during World War II, beginning right after he was promoted to editor at Marvel in early 1942. By then he was writing comics under

² Knowledgeatwharton. "Marvel Comics' Stan Lee: The Legend Who Created Legends." Fair Observer. November 18, 2018. https://www.fairobserver.com/region/north_america/marvel-comics-stan-lee-died-life-stan-lee-comics-21390/.

the Marvel label. Over the next few decades, Lee's talent and leadership was synonymous with the growing "family-run" business." He was central to the transformation of a small comic company into a huge corporation, one that came to dominate the industry alongside the other mainstay, DC Comics. Lee created hundreds of characters over his time at Marvel and some of them became the most famous superheroes ever created. Some of Stan Lee's most famous characters were The Fantastic Four first seen in November 1961, Spiderman who had his first appearance in August of 1962, The Hulk released in May 1962, Doctor Strange in July 1963, The X-Men first appearing in September 1963, and Daredevil, which debuted in April 1964.

After writing and editing the company to success through the 1960s, Lee was once again promoted, this time to publisher and editorial director of the company. Lee eventually became chairman emeritus in the 1980s after he moved to the West Coast to oversee Marvel's film ventures in Los Angeles. He went on to create many more comics over the years and helped build one of the most successful film franchises in history. Stan Lee, unfortunately, passed away on November 12, 2018. Even though Stan is not with us anymore, his creations and his drive to always be ahead of the game by including real historical issues in his stories will always be remembered and continued on by the next generation at Marvel Comics.

World War II and the "Golden Age Of Comics:" Captain America **versus the Nazis**

This section will examine the Captain America comics from the very beginning when the character was created in 1940 by Jack Kirby and Joe Simon. This surveys Steve Rogers

transformation into the famous war hero while inspecting the symbolism used throughout the Captain America comics in the “Golden Age” and what this character meant to the people of the United States in a time of war.

Marvel characters during World War II, as one may expect, were often fighting against Nazis in their stories. When the “Golden Age” came to a close, superhero comics became less and less popular. Marvel briefly went in a different direction, but did not make meaningful characters again until 1956 at the beginning of the “Silver Age.” The “Silver Age” of comics lasted from 1956 to 1970, this is when publishers began to release superhero stories for the first time since the “Golden Age”. This was due to the strong demand of superhero comics beginning in October that year. In 1961 the Marvel universe was established for the growing interest in superhero stories. Writer Stan Lee was brought on to create comics unlike any other. The 1960’s was another highpoint for Marvel releasing many popular characters, Stan Lee was responsible for the majority of the writing at that time.

Stan Lee’s first story, which was only a short text written in 1941, was found in *Captain America #3*. He signed his name as Stan Lee. He later explained his reasoning for this as wanting to save his real name for when he wrote serious literature. But, as we know now, Lee’s future was not to become a novelist, but to become a writer, editor, and publisher of some of the most famous comic books ever made.



Figure 1: Captain America #1.
Photo by Philipp Lenssen.
Courtesy Flickr.

In the spring of 1941, World War II was raging, even though the United States was not yet directly involved. However, the selective service draft began before the U.S. joined the war effort, in September of 1940. Young men over 18, especially motivated by the growing German threat in Europe, began their training. Marvel Comics, like all forms of entertainment, helped promote the U.S. war effort.

Captain America, or Steve Rogers, is a product of this era of comics. Rogers wants nothing more than to do his duty and help defend his country against the men who are threatening it. The only thing holding Rogers back is his health, no doctor will clear him to join the fight. Soon after being declared 4-F, this is a classification given to someone who is trying to join the armed forces deeming them unacceptable for service due to medical, dental, or other reasons. This was the lowest designation an individual could receive. Steve Rogers met a brilliant scientist who was looking for a man with a pure and noble heart who can stand up to all of America's enemies. The scientist created a one-of-a-kind serum that grants whoever receives it superhuman abilities, however it had never been tested and was considered dangerous. This experiment allows him to join the war effort. After having this serum injected into him, Rogers has abilities no man has ever seen before, superhuman strength and speed. But, it was made clear to the reader that what's most important was his morals. That is what makes a true hero. This is the day that America's greatest defender was born, and he is given the fitting name: Captain America. Captain America was also different since he fought for all Americans. In the first issue of Captain America, a frail and weak Steve Rogers transforms into a strong and healthy man. The doctor who created the serum went on to say in *Captain America #1* "We shall call you Captain America, son! Because, like you America shall gain the strength and the will to

safeguard our shores!”³ It later states that the name Captain America became a symbol of courage to millions of Americans, and eventually he does become this symbol in reality.

He is later known as a symbol for this great country and has sworn himself to defend it with everything he has.⁴ Steve Rodgers was no more; Captain America was born.

Captain America is recognizable by his red, white, and blue uniform, his shield is painted with stars and stripes, and he carries an overt patriotic bravado like no other hero. Captain America would eventually become the major hero for World War II culture and showed how much a brave and patriotic man could make a big difference. The first Captain America comic, showed America's hero punching Adolf Hitler in the face on the cover, almost a full year prior to the United States declaring war on the Axis powers.⁵

Comic book makers began looking at the bigger picture, they started to find ways to have their comics help with issues happening around the world. The debut of Captain America was a call to arms, this was the spark the nation needed to join the fight together against foreign oppression. The spring of 1941 marked the U.S mobilization in the war but comic books had already been at war long before then. Captain America comics ended up selling over one million copies during the war period and is still a fan favorite to this day in his several appearances in the Marvel films.

The years during the period of war were very profitable for the majority of American companies and the comic book industry was no exception. Publishers wanted to positively boost

³ *Captain America: The 75th Anniversary Vibranium Collection*. Marvel Worldwide, 2016. Captain America #1

⁴ Wright, Bradford W. *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003.

⁵ *Captain America: The 75th Anniversary Vibranium Collection*. Marvel Worldwide, 2016. Captain America #1

their image by making connections with their products to patriotism and the war effort.

Examples of this include Superman urging readers to donate to the American Red Cross, Batman and Robin wanting people to purchase war bonds and stamps, and Captain America and his sidekick Bucky Barnes teaching readers how to collect scrap metal and paper. Publishers from all over the industry began printing an open letter from Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau Jr. asking boys and girls to buy savings stamps.

The war in Europe continued to rage on throughout 1940 and 1941, and so did the war in comic books. The United States was used as a battleground in comics, German saboteurs and spies conspired against the American defense system. Marvel's Human Torch was defending U.S. munitions plants from the foreign hostiles. Captain America fought German agents in almost every issue, and the Destroyer battled with the Nazis from inside enemy territory in Europe.

This section will cover the "Golden Age" of comic books and follow the story of Captain America, his exploits throughout World War II, and the symbolism of his fight against the Nazi regime. This era was also the most successful period of comics mainly due to the war and the creation of a patriotic superhero with great American values like Captain America.

World War II was great for the comic book industry, it created a never before seen interest level by publishers, creators, readers, and government policy. This is known as the "Golden Age of Comics," which is remembered as a simpler time prior to the Cold War. Comics always gave their support to the war effort, and after the war ended it was a confusing time for many people. Everyone needed to adjust back into a society without war. Comics shared these

stories with fans through Captain America, who discovered that adjusting to the complexities of the world after the war was a much larger challenge than punching Adolf Hitler in the nose.

The next comic begins with Captain America looking at how he fought against Germany during the war and looking at different aspects of the comics themselves to see how this hero helped in the war effort. Captain America has become one of the most reprinted and discussed comics in the last few decades. Captain America is unlike any other hero, he is one of the most amazing superheroes not because he is the smartest or the most powerful but because he is wise and knows better than anyone else what is worth fighting for. His overall philosophy is to be a good American. That is a big part of why so many people have rallied around him to devote themselves to help him in his fight. One of the most profound statements he has made is, “the strength of this country isn’t in the buildings of brick and steel, It’s in the heart of those who have sworn to fight for its freedom!”⁶ This quote sums up everything Captain America fought for.

This heroic act of going toe to toe with Adolf Hitler got Captain America a lot of notoriety, it was so popular in fact that the cover of *Captain America #2* once again showed Captain America lunging at Hitler about to punch him. However, this time the writers gave us something new. In the comic itself, Captain America and his loyal sidekick Bucky Barnes attack the Reich, finding Hitler. Captain America then puts America’s *potential* number one enemy in a trash can. Many other stories had similar formulas to the Captain America comics. Heroes and sidekicks and some others even were in the military. The major difference is the symbolism of

⁶ Captain America: The First Avenger. Directed by Joe Johnston. Released July 19, 2011.

Captain America, adorned in the red, white, and blue, literally delivering a striking blow to Adolf Hitler.⁷

In the comic entitled, *Captain America and the riddle of the Red Skull*, once again the illustrated cover depicts a fight between Captain America and Nazi soldiers. The villain is Red Skull, a supernaturally empowered Nazi, who is responsible for the murders of many high-ranking officers in the United States Army. Examining the way that Red Skull dresses, he is the opposite of Captain America; he wears all red and brandishes a large swastika on his clothing while Captain America proudly wears the stars and stripes.

History of Comics Censorship

This section will cover the censorship of comics over time and how comic book creators had to deal with many believing comic books were bad for the youth and had nothing to offer. This played a vital role for how comics were created and sometimes made things very difficult for Stan Lee and the Marvel company. Comic books had a very tough time from the beginning. Censorship often arose for comic books due to panic. From the 1930s to the modern day, comic books have been viewed as low-value speech. Many people insisted that comics corrupted youth, hurt their reading capability, and made them delinquents. This led to comics being burned in certain towns.

In the 1940s, comic book burnings were taking place even when soldiers were returning from the war. Even though comics were associated with mainly younger readers, 25% of the

⁷ Lee, Stan, Mike Friedrich, and Jack Kirby. *Captain America: The 75th Anniversary Vibranium Collection*. Marvel Worldwide, 2016.

printed materials going to the military in World War II were comics. Comics went under heavy criticism and starting in the 1950s had to adhere to the Comics Code Authority. Comic books were faced with an angry public and threats of being regulated by the government. The comic book industry was in big trouble. The Comics Magazine Association of America was established, the creation of the Comics Code Authority took place, this censorship code cleaned up the content of comics for many years to come.

Quickly comics were reduced down to a level that was appropriate for only the youngest readers. Anything that could possibly appeal to an older reader was eliminated by the censorship code. This censorship destroyed the comic book industry, creators like Stan Lee lied about their professions because nobody wanted to be recognized as a comic book writer at that time. The work for comic book companies was drying up, the number of published titles dropped from 650 titles in 1954 to 250 in 1956. This caused over 800 creators to lose their jobs. Violations were punishable by one year in jail, a \$500 fine, or both. This law was passed on May 2, 1955.

This was a very dark time for Marvel after what was a very bright and prosperous era during the “Golden Age.” In a time of great desperation Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko, and many more came up with a way to rethink how superheroes were created to appeal to younger audiences. This was the beginning of the “Silver Age” of comics after a long time of creators barely staying afloat or shutting down for good. After the code was enacted Marvel almost shut its doors, in 1961. Lee, who was editor at the time, tried a new approach with Jack Kirby with *The Fantastic Four*. Marvel Comics ushered in a new style of storytelling, leading to more sophisticated characters and complex storylines that captured the attention of an older group of readers.

Marvel fights the code

Times were changing and Stan Lee knew that Marvel had become a huge success that had all kinds of audiences, even college students which was unheard of for the time. The new characters reached 50 million comics sold in 1968. In 1971, the Nixon administration's Department of Health, Education and Welfare noticed Marvel's notoriety and contacted Stan Lee to request him to create a comic book story about drug abuse. Depictions of drugs of any kind were still prohibited by the Comics Code, that didn't stop Lee from completing the government's request. He wrote a three part story in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #96-98, which showed Peter Parker's friend Harry Osborne in the hospital after abusing illegal drugs. Marvel asked for permission to publish the special issues and was turned down, they were published anyways without the seal of approval. The absence of the seal did not hurt sales.

Tales Of Suspense

A new line of comics was introduced in January 1959, called *Tales of Suspense* mainly coming out during the 1960s, and in issue 72, Iron Man and Captain America team up to fight Nazis yet again. Red Skull arranged for giant beings called sleepers to attack twenty years after his death. In 1965 the first sleeper agent arrived, once again wearing the Nazi symbol. These creations were built to bring back the third Reich. The second issue of these comics has Captain America and his sidekick Bucky travel to Paris, France, which at the time was under the oppression of the Nazi regime. The two heroes later go to a concentration camp in 1941. This is stated by Captain America in the issue after he figures out a riddle that leads them to the Black

Forest concentration camp.⁸ There are many German soldiers at the camp but otherwise is not very detailed and very little is seen. Captain America was the very first patriotic hero who was all about bringing glory to the United States, he also had one of the first comic book fan clubs that gave kids a chance to join called The Sentinels of Liberty. These children would be given a membership card that had statements which read: In God we Trust, Allegiance to the flag and the constitution, and to make oneself a better citizen and defend my government forever. The pledge on this card also read that all members would assist Captain America in his fight upon the enemies who attempted treason against the United States of America.⁹

In issue 255 Captain America makes a speech, saying “America at its best has always stood for the rights of man and against the rule of tyrants! If America needs a man to stand for her principles, to battle the forces of tyranny then as God is my witness, I shall be that Man!”¹⁰ The end of this issue has Captain America battered and bruised; he asks himself if it is really worth it. Suddenly over the television the news says that Captain America has saved five thousand lives that night. The star banded banner begins to play and Rogers ends that adventure with saying “It's worth it.” In #445 in the comic book series Captain America is said to be “the symbol of a nation and the greatest hero this country has ever known!”¹¹

Issues #445 through #447 bring the return of Red Skull and Germans who are attempting to use a supernatural power to bring back Hitler and the Nazi regime. Captain America once

⁸ *Captain America: The 75th Anniversary Vibranium Collection*. Marvel Worldwide, 2016. Captain America #2

⁹ *Captain America: The 75th Anniversary Vibranium Collection*. Marvel Worldwide, 2016. Captain America #2

¹⁰ *Captain America: The 75th Anniversary Vibranium Collection*. Marvel Worldwide, 2016. Captain America #255

¹¹ *Captain America: The 75th Anniversary Vibranium Collection*. Marvel Worldwide, 2016. Captain America #445

again foils the plans of a German takeover. More swastikas and Red Skull are present in #448, a comic titled, *American Dream*. This title is interesting since Captain America is living his American dream by fighting for his country and all the people in it. The same comic, #448, has one panel that is showing a speech by President Franklin Roosevelt.¹²

Comics in the Cold War with Iron-Man and Captain America

The Cold War redefined what it meant to be patriotic for Americans and comic books of the era helped define the Cold War patriotism for America's youth. Stan Lee and Marvel's answer to the Cold War was an evolved Captain America and Iron Man. Both heroes embodied the fight against Communism and brought more attention to the Cold War in the United States. Here Stan Lee focuses on America's new enemy and brings Captain America back into action to defend his country with the aid of a new hero who was made famous during the Cold War. That hero was Iron-Man.

Just like during World War II, America's comic book heroes joined the fight during the Cold War. Romance and anticommunism were the two most successful themes used by comic book distributors during the early Cold War. Both of these themes were used to frame the Cold War for young readers, but also to suggest the part they could play in it. The fear that Communism brought to people provided the comic book industry with a chance to give another performance like the one they did in World War II. They did this



Figure 2-Tales of Suspense #39, Iron-Man. Photo by Julie Morales. Courtesy Flickr.

¹² *Captain America: The 75th Anniversary Vibranium Collection*. Marvel Worldwide, 2016. Captain America #448

by pointing out the social anxieties of the time to the readers and by boosting the image of American patriotism. The editors even began specific comic books where titles were targeted towards boys and others towards girls. Boys had stories about U.S. soldiers and secret agents fighting communism in Korea, Europe, and America. The girls had stories about the vital American home front and how housewives who stay home during the war are just as heroic as the men fighting.

Stan Lee's first new comic in the Cold War era was *The Fantastic Four*, released in 1961. *The Fantastic Four* fully embraced a Cold War version of science fiction and the technology that Americans were just beginning to dream about. The origin story for the four people was that they fly into space and are hit by cosmic rays, which granted them super powers. The reason they were in space to begin with was that they were on a dangerous mission where they were flying a new experimental rocket in order to outpace the Soviet Union. This was a timely response to the Soviets having already put a man into orbit, Yuri Gagarin, in April that same year. Stan Lee created a story that reached out to millions of Americans and showcased the very real fear of the Soviet's technological advances, but also holding on to hope that the United States had the capabilities to come out on top.

The fiercest anti-communist hero in the Marvel universe was, unequivocally, Iron Man. Tony Stark a.k.a. Iron Man made his debut in March 1963. Stark was a billionaire who made his money in weapons manufacturing. Stark built his weapons for the United States and believed that he was helping people. On a trip to Asia to gather information, Stark was injured and taken hostage by Communist forces in the area. The leader of this group was named Wong-Chu, who was not only a Communist but also based on exaggerated racial stereotypes. The only way Stark

was able to escape was thanks to a man named Yinsen, who aided Stark in the first construction of the Iron Man armor which is used to defeat Wong-Chu and escape with his life.¹³ In the first *Iron Man* film of the MCU, the Chinese Wong-Chu is replaced with a stereotyped Middle Eastern terrorist.¹⁴

To make the patriotism of the Cold War complete, Iron Man was introduced as part of the world, and an ally of Captain America. A majority of the issues where they teamed up, they faced off against the Russians. Communist symbols were often utilized by the artists in the comics.

Stan Lee increased the output of the stories of Iron Man fighting the communist as the months went on. Iron Man faced Soviet villains like Titanium Man and Crimson Dynamo. Black Widow was a Soviet spy in her first appearance who fought against Tony Stark but later she defected to the U.S. side in the comics and in the movies. Iron Man's most notable enemy was The Mandarin. He was a Chinese super villain who had an astounding amount of power that he exercised in his attempt at world conquest. The Mandarin was used to symbolize the growing fear of a Communist China and played to the prevailing domino theory understanding of global communism--where the entire world could be turned communist one nation at a time.¹⁵

The Winter Soldier line of Captain America comics took place during the Cold War era. The agency that Captain America works with now, S.H.I.E.L.D which stands for Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division. They were researching several murders of important U.S. leaders that happened during the Cold War. One man was spotted

¹³ Tales of Suspense #39, 1963

¹⁴ *Iron Man (2008)*. Directed by Jon Favreau. Marvel Studios, May 2, 2008.

¹⁵ "How the Cold War Saved Marvel and Birthed a Generation of Superheroes." The A.V. Club. <https://www.avclub.com/how-the-cold-war-saved-marvel-and-birthed-a-generation-1798246215>.

fleeing all these murder sites. That man has a codename of The Winter Soldier and is believed to be Bucky Barnes, Captain America's sidekick during World War II. This Winter Soldier was said to be the KGB's secret weapon. Captain America is fighting another enemy of the United States showing the world how patriotic this hero is by taking on all of America's enemies single handedly. A contrast costume detail between the Winter Soldier and Captain America is he dons the stars and stripes of America while The Winter Soldier has a metal left arm complete with a red Communist star on his shoulder. Both hero and villain are draped in their respective countries icons.. Winter Soldier killed men in the U.S. army, the United Nations Diplomatic Negotiation Team, a NATO general, a British ambassador, a French defense minister, a United States colonel and countless others. The Winter Soldier was an American traitor who was used by the Russians, highlighting the extent the Russians were willing to go for victory during the Cold War.

Racial Equality and the first Black Superheroes

Marvel's First Black Superheroes

Race is perhaps the most striking lens to analyze comic books and comic book inspired movies. Race in Stan Lee's Marvel comics has changed considerably; this includes both representation and the use--and therefore significant perpetuation--of racial stereotypes.

The typical superhero, for all of the "Golden Age " and most of "Silver Age", was the white male who was stronger and or smarter than everyone else. Eventually, racial representation among superheroes began to look more like the diverse United States. This first changed for Marvel with the creation of Black Panther in July 1966. Stan Lee and artist Gene Colan had a

thought in the late 1960s when news about the Vietnam War and Civil rights protests occurred on a regular basis. The two Marvel men wanted to bring the headlines of Civil Rights into their own comics so they created a new hero who was a big part of the civil rights movement in Harlem, that hero was Captain America's newest sidekick The Falcon. This diversity is also part of the patriotic ideals embodied by the *Captain America line of* comics. In January 1974 in *Captain America #169*, Captain America partners up with Falcon, also known as Sam Wilson, a black man from Harlem. Together they fight for both America and racial equality. In the last few years the Captain America comics have made Sam Wilson the new Captain America, since Steve Rogers has retired from the role. He knows Wilson is the best fit for the job since he believes in the American people and stands up for them when no one else will. The Winter Soldier comics bring back Bucky Barnes, Captain America's young sidekick from World War II who has been brainwashed by the KGB and turned into an assassin for the enemy. This fits into the Captain America narrative since he worked with Falcon who is the first African American hero introduced to the Marvel universe, together they are fighting another enemy of America. Marvel has created many new characters of different races and although the predominant heroes are still white males today the inequality is not as large as it once was.

Falcon appears in *The Winter Soldier #12* to aid Captain America in his fight against the evils of America once again. In this comic, one illustration shows the apartment of Steve Rogers, decorated with framed portraits of World War II memorabilia. A poster that says buy war bonds and another that is the iconic Uncle Sam recruitment poster. This shows the true patriotic nature of Rogers and that he maybe doesn't know how to live without a war.

Marvel adds the city of Harlem, hometown of Sam Wilson into their Captain America series a few times. It was seen in *All-New Captain America #1* when Wilson officially takes over as the star spangled hero. The first page of this comic was a funeral service for Wilson's father who was gunned down in the streets of Harlem trying to stop a fight. Marvel depicted Harlem as a dangerous place but also one that had a lot of good people who were willing to fight for change as Wilson and his father did. The same page of the issue had people from all over attending the funeral showing the community coming together in Harlem and proving how big a difference one man made.¹⁶ Other important landmarks that included locations which stood for the strength of America were included in *Captain America #175*, Captain America and Falcon have their battle on the White House lawn. Including this U.S. landmark invokes patriotism. In the same issue another patriotic landmark, the Washington Monument is included.

The First black superhero in the Marvel universe was the Black Panther, or T'Challa, the prince and the later king of a fictional African nation called Wakanda. He made his first appearance in *Fantastic Four #52* in 1966. Black Panther makes his film debut in *Captain America: Civil War*. He later had his own film in 2018 called *Black Panther*. This was a breaking point as it was the first superhero movie to have a majority black cast.

Black Panther fights villains who had greater meaning than only being a comic book character, but as Lee often included in his stories the heroes and villains reflected the real world. One of these villains is Baron Zemo, created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. Zemo is usually seen in the Captain America comics with Steve Rogers and Sam Wilson. He is connected to Black Panther because of what he stands for makes him a villain of Black Panther and Captain

¹⁶ *Captain America: The 75th Anniversary Vibranium Collection*. Marvel Worldwide, 2016. The All New Captain America #1

America. Zemo is a symbol of oppression and the neglect of a leader.¹⁷ Zemo is proven to be oppressive by the teaching he received from his father at a young age in their home country of Germany which was the master race that should rule the world. Zemo would later on become a member of the evil Hydra organization which had affiliations with Hitler and the Nazi party. He often attempted to defeat Captain America and destroy the country Steve Rogers loved so much.

Another symbolic villain of Black Panther was Klaw, he represents colonial oppression by attempting to conquer Wakanda.¹⁸ Klaw was important to Black Panther's story since he is the reason his father was killed and how he brought oppression to the fictional African nation just as many men often did throughout history.

The All-New Captain America

The *New Captain America* created by Stan Lee highlighted the retirement of Steve Rogers as Captain America and the passing on of the role of America's greatest defender to Sam Wilson. Rogers personally chose Wilson, since he represents America and African-American people. As the torch was passed, Marvel released the first African-American titular superhero comic, *The Falcon*.¹⁹ In *Captain America #25*, Sam Wilson takes over as Captain America, being appointed by the original, Steve Rogers, who could no longer serve as America's greatest defender. Sam Wilson is the new Captain America.²⁰ This event also occurs in the 2019 film *Avengers: Endgame*. Steve Rogers gives his famous shield to Wilson turning over the

¹⁷ <https://comicbook.com/marvel/news/best-black-panther-villains-ranked/#7>

¹⁸ comicbook.com/marvel/news/best-black-panther-villains-ranked/#7

¹⁹ *Captain America: The 75th Anniversary Vibranium Collection*. Marvel Worldwide, 2016. Captain America #117

²⁰ *Captain America: The 75th Anniversary Vibranium Collection*. Marvel Worldwide, 2016. Captain America #25

responsibility of protecting the country from all its enemies. Falcon is the second black hero ever to appear in a Marvel comic (after Black Panther) introduced in *Captain America #117* which was released in September of 1969. He was originally a supporting character in the *Captain America* series, but Falcon eventually became Captain America's main crime fighting partner and they often graced the cover page together.²¹ The two hero's series lasted from 1971-1978. Falcon was also the first black superhero not to have the word "black" in his superhero name.

Falcon was introduced in the Marvel Cinematic Universe in 2016, just like the comics, he showed up as an ally of Captain America. Falcon has persisted in the Marvel films and is going to have an upcoming television series where he is one of two title characters.²² *Captain America #169* is titled "Captain America and The Falcon." This comic includes a meeting between Falcon and Black Panther. These characters meet because Falcon feels like he is worthless. Captain America tells him this is not true, but also agrees to arrange a meeting with Black Panther who possesses advanced technology and can help Falcon become stronger. Falcon says he wants to meet with Black Panther specifically because he is also black. He could have met with Tony Stark or Hank Pym, both white heroes in possession of impressive technology in the United States. Both of these men could have built him a new suit, but his choice is T'Challa. Black Panther was often featured in the *Captain America and Falcon* comics, Stan Lee and the other writers at Marvel were pushing to create more equality in their comics. Falcon's civilian identity is Sam Wilson. He worked as a social worker in Harlem, who endorsed a liberal civil rights

²¹ "Who Were the First Black Superheroes?" Who Were the First Black Superheroes?
https://www.historyguy.com/comicshistory/who_were_first_black_superheroes.htm.

²² <https://www.marvel.com/tv-shows/the-falcon-and-the-winter-soldier/1>

agenda but rejected black separatism.²³ He encouraged the youth to follow through with school and use their knowledge to break out of the poverty cycle. Sam Wilson takes the peaceful approach to fighting for his people's rights, he states "I ain't sayin we don't need to make it hot for the ones who been steppin on us for years, but maybe it's just as important for some of us to cool things down so we can protect the rights we been fighting for!"²⁴ The inclusion of a black hero in the Captain America series was important for Stan Lee. If Captain America, who is the embodiment of American patriotism, would have this man as a sidekick and friend, then that meant Falcon was a great American patriot and strong endorsement of an expanded version of American equality. Marvel comics and Stan Lee supported civil rights and were advocates for improved race relations in the United States. Marvel was far ahead of its rival DC Comics by creating these two characters in the 1960s. DC did not release a black hero until 1971, this occurred in the Green Lantern comics series in issue #87 when John Stewart was introduced as the replacement for the original Green Lantern. Lee and Marvel went on to create several black characters in the 1970s and was leading the industry with its line of black heroes and fulfilling their goal of creating equality and supporting the civil rights movement with their comics.

The All New Captain America #1, first released in 2014, where Marvel comics have Sam Wilson relinquish his role as Falcon and take over for Steve Rogers as the new Captain America.

²⁵ All of the issues of *All New Captain America* take place in 2014. This is a huge move for Marvel, since Rogers had been Captain America since the 1940s. However, it shows how much Stan Lee wanted to create equality for all. This shows the progressive views of Lee and that the

²³ "Who Were the First Black Superheroes?" Who Were the First Black Superheroes?

²⁴ Nama, Adilifu. *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes*. University of Texas Press, 2011.

²⁵ *Captain America: The 75th Anniversary Vibranium Collection*. Marvel Worldwide, 2016. *The All New Captain America #1*

company he built up is all for racial equality and wants everyone to know that anyone can be a superhero and an American patriot.

The cover of the first comic where Wilson is Captain America has him heroically standing wearing the famous red, white, and blue uniform as well as wielding the iconic shield, the weapon always used by Steve Rogers. Wilson kept the mechanical wings he used when he was Falcon, but this new uniform shows Steve Rogers' support and anointed him as the new symbol for "*Excelsior!*"

The *New Captain America* finally showed the backstory of Sam Wilson. Wilson, from a young age, is shown defending the people of his neighborhood in Harlem, always standing up for those unable to do so for themselves-- which is also how Steve Rogers behaved. Even though Wilson and Rogers were not always the strongest, they would fight for what they believed in, no matter what. When Wilson is fighting as Captain America he is often thought of as an inferior to Steve Rogers version of Captain America, since he does not have super strength or speed. But, Marvel made it clear that being Captain America has never been about how strong or fast you are, but how much heart and how much drive you have to protect the people of your home. This is the message behind why Wilson was chosen to take over. The *All New Captain America #3* has Sam Wilson fight one of Steve Rogers most iconic villains from his early comics, Wilson must go against Red Skull. He still fights for the Nazis and he keeps a symbol of this in the form of a Nazi flag.²⁶ Red Skull's reappearance heavily emphasizes the classic good versus evil patriotism of the original *Captain America* comic series. Red Skull is the last vestige of the Nazi

²⁶ *Captain America: The 75th Anniversary Vibranium Collection*. Marvel Worldwide, 2016. The All New Captain America #3

party and has not given up on destroying America. It also reinforced the concept that America will always have threats and will need heroes to protect it.

Wilson, like Rogers, overcame adversity. He lost his parents at a young age, had to take care of his two younger siblings, and yet still found time to volunteer to help the needy. Wilson is shown to be a natural hero and he did not need any superpower or technology. Steve Rogers was the same, a hero due to his moral compass before he was injected with super serum. Both men share parallel, but unique journeys, and both men always stood up for what was right and just. After casting aside his self-doubt in the first two issues, in *All New Captain America #3* Wilson asserts, “I am Captain America.” Cementing the concept that American patriotism comes more from a shared morality; which can be found in a willingness to face World War II or socio-economic inequality and hardship in Harlem. In these ways, both Captain Americas are portrayed as true symbols of America, despite their different skin colors.

The *All New Captain America* series, similar to past Captain America comic series, is not afraid to broach the issue of race. In *All New Captain America #4*, it starts off with a flashback where Wilson and Rogers are talking to each other about the state of the world and Wilson says to Rogers “How can I stop fighting until the world is a better place?”²⁷ Wilson really looks up to Rogers and is asking for advice on how he can be better for his people. Even more telling, *All New Captain America #5* begins with a man speaking to his son about Sam Wilson taking over as Captain America and provides some commentary to the controversy of having a black Captain America. The man states “we had to make everything politically correct and color

²⁷ *Captain America: The 75th Anniversary Vibranium Collection*. Marvel Worldwide, 2016. The All New Captain America #4

coordinated.”²⁸ The man’s son responds “Sam Wilson has been fighting alongside Steve Rogers as long as I can remember, and after all his years of serving with him, putting his life on the line for our wellbeing, he was the best man for the job.”²⁹ The father ends with “Sam Wilson isn't my Captain America; he hasn't earned the uniform.”³⁰ This unfortunately holds true to how people really feel about having heroes of other races, Marvel shows the inequality and the other issues in the world through its comics and Sam Wilson being Captain America is just one example of that.

An important strategy in Marvel’s transition to Sam Wilson as Captain America is a strong emphasis on a shared American dream between caucasians and African-Americans. Falcon represents a connecting of mid-century American values with a present-day colorblindness toward American patriotism. *All-New Captain America #6* shows the human side of Sam Wilson and his hopes and desires. Wilson talks about giving up his hopes and dreams for the protection of America, his home, he wants nothing more than to have a home, family, and white picket fence, but says he can’t because he needs to protect everyone else so that they can have families. He also says that Steve Rogers used to be the one risking it all for the people and now he has earned it to relax. Now he has to be the one that must risk it all since there is no one else to do the job. Wilson quite literally proves this point, exclaiming during a high intensity moment, “grab the bomb, save the world, save every family below. Ensure their tomorrows.

²⁸ *Captain America: The 75th Anniversary Vibranium Collection*. Marvel Worldwide, 2016. The All New Captain America #5

²⁹ *Captain America: The 75th Anniversary Vibranium Collection*. Marvel Worldwide, 2016. The All New Captain America #5

³⁰ *Captain America: The 75th Anniversary Vibranium Collection*. Marvel Worldwide, 2016. The All New Captain America #5

Because you're the one on the wall now, you're Captain America!"³¹ This shows that he has truly embraced the hero role, putting his people and his country before his own desires. In *The New Captain America #6* he, quite poetically, reemphasizes this belief by stating, "a world of tomorrows is returned..." as he appeared to be plummeting to his death. His dialogue selflessly continues "...it doesn't matter. It's done. My future for theirs."³²

The moment Sam Wilson crashes into the water he had a memory of his mother where she told him "if we only looked out for our own families, if every person only worried and cared for themselves what kind of world this would be. A community is necessary and cooperation is mandatory in order to achieve anything real and lasting in this life. If we stop trying to help other people, we give up everything and sometimes that has a price. That's a price your father was willing to pay. A price I'm willing to pay. And if you listen to your heart, I think It's a price you're willing to pay as well."³³ This is the inspiration of Sam Wilson and his fans can see that his attitude of helping others and being prepared to sacrifice it all at any moment comes from his parents at a young age, this is why there was no better candidate to be the next Captain America.

Perhaps the best evidence for the *Excelsior* ideal in the *New Captain America* comics is how Wilson fought against Hydra agents in every one of his adventures. These are the same villains that Rogers' Captain America fought. The Captain America comics share a common enemy, instructing the reader that white and black Americans face the same enemies. Hydra was behind the Nazi regime from the very beginning, they are also behind much of the Cold War, and

³¹ *Captain America: The 75th Anniversary Vibranium Collection*. Marvel Worldwide, 2016. The All New Captain America #6

³² *Captain America: The 75th Anniversary Vibranium Collection*. Marvel Worldwide, 2016. The All New Captain America #6

³³ *Captain America: The 75th Anniversary Vibranium Collection*. Marvel Worldwide, 2016. The All New Captain America #6

in more recent years they are still trying to take down America through terrorism--or even a revival of Nazism.

Conclusion: The Legacy of Stan Lee and His Characters

The final section will cover more about Stan Lee and his plan for how to teach his fans about *Excelsior* in his comics and what the characters meant to him. The conclusion will show what Stan Lee's beliefs were and what he wanted to achieve with certain characters and how he strove to make his dreams of a better world come true.

A television show from 2014 entitled *75 Years: From Pulp to Pop!* explains the history of Marvel from the very beginning, with interviews and dialogue from several employees of Marvel Entertainment. This includes writers, creators, animators, and even Stan Lee himself. This show had a large segment about Captain America, where the employees talked about his creation and what he meant for comics and the United States. Some of the statements made by the staff members was that he was a call to arms for America, that we needed to stop Adolf Hitler. When Captain America was first released, many Americans didn't want to be involved in the war. Popular opinion turned after Pearl Harbor was bombed by the Japanese and Captain America surged in popularity in response. Today, he is one the best-known superheroes and a mainstay in the Marvel catalog. Stan Lee said about Captain America that it was a "patriotic book that happened at the right time, it represented the men who were fighting on the front lines, Captain America was read by soldiers."³⁴ Lee went on to say, "It's what they wanted to see, good guys fighting bad guys."³⁵ One of the other employees said about Captain America "he is the

³⁴ *75 Years: From Pulp to Pop!* Marvel Studios, aired November 4, 2014, on ABC

³⁵ *75 Years: From Pulp to Pop!* Marvel Studios

quintessential American hero and was created as a response to what was taking place in Europe at the time. He shows the people what they stand for which is what Captain America was to an entire generation, a symbol of American resistance to fascism.” Captain America was reported to have sold better than Time Magazine during the war.³⁶

When the war was over and people moved on, comics were somewhat forgotten and left behind. Comic books lost some of its audience to the widespread popularity of television and many people looked down on those people that worked for comic book companies. In response, Lee changed his name because he did not want Stanley Leiber in the comics. He was embarrassed to be known as a comic book writer, so he changed his pen name to Stan Lee in the 1950s. Another writer stated that he loved when Captain America was running through Harlem with Falcon, he knew that Captain America stood for the American people, when America was angry as they were during the 1960s then Captain America was portrayed angry in his stories. One of the other comments made was about how great Marvel has been with equality in their comics, there is racial equality and women's equality, the employee goes on to say “it’s about embracing the differences everyone has, Marvel reflects diversity existing in the world.”³⁷

Stan Lee always fought against racism and believed that all people no matter what they look like need to come together and help each other to be better. This is in so many of his comics, especially Captain America, who is a model American citizen and always fought for equality for all, much like Lee. Stan Lee spent his entire life condemning racism and hatred through the heroes in his comic books showing everyone that he has been the true hero this whole time.

³⁶ *75 Years: From Pulp to Pop!* Marvel Studios

³⁷ *75 Years: From Pulp to Pop!* Marvel Studios

Throughout his career with Marvel he often spoke out against bigotry by pointing out the ways he attempted to fight it in the stories he created. In a 2016 interview, Lee said “America is made of different races and different religions, but we’re all co-travelers on the spaceship Earth and must help each other along the way.”³⁸

It is truly impossible to imagine U.S. pop culture without all of Stan Lee’s characters. Lee included messages of tolerance and acceptance while rejecting bullying and demonizing. “Those stories have room for everyone, regardless of their race, gender, religion, or color of their skin.” said Lee in a 2017 video published by Marvel. He continued on to say “the only thing we don’t have room for are hatred, intolerance, and bigotry.”³⁹

One of Stan Lee’s favorite examples of this was in the X-Men comics. These stories were introduced in September of 1963 and follow a group of “mutants: who were used as a metaphor for the civil rights movement taking place at the time. Instead of a battle between black and white or good and evil, this story showed how the mutants were hated by the normal humans in the world. Lee told *The Guardian* in 2000, “I loved that idea,” “It not only made them different, but it was a good metaphor for what was happening with the civil rights movement in the country at the time.”⁴⁰ This metaphor went even further with the two main characters resembling Martin Luther King with a peaceful approach of co-existence and the other end of the spectrum being Malcom X who wanted to defend his people against the hatred of the



Figure 3-Stan Lee “Excelsior!” photo by Gage Skidmore. Courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

³⁸ The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "Stan Lee." Encyclopædia Britannica. December 24, 2019.

³⁹ The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "Stan Lee." Encyclopædia Britannica. December 24, 2019.

⁴⁰Ciampaglia, Dante A. “How Stan Lee's X-Men Were Inspired by Real-Life Civil Rights Heroes.” History.com. A&E Television Networks, November 13, 2018.

time. Professor Charles Xavier or Professor X was meant to take after the values of Martin Luther King while Magneto resembled the ideals of Malcom X.

This is important to bring this up as a reminder of what Lee believed in from the very beginning. He knew that these issues were important and they needed to be discussed so he used his stories to shed light on what was going in the world. He opened the people's eyes to the truth of inequality. Stan Lee went on to have more stories featuring real world events and hardships whether it was Captain America fighting against Germany in World War II, the Russians in the Cold War with the help of Iron-Man, helping his friend Sam Wilson overcome racial inequality, creating the first black superhero, and so much more.

Stan Lee was always making the world a better place with his comics and helping his fans through tough times and showing them how they can make it better. He was able to make people who felt like they were different or did not belong feel special, the truth was they did belong and always have. He created characters that really had something that could appeal to everyone.

Lee's heroes did not only deal with superhero issues, but also everyday issues that were relatable to the readers--struggles that people face every day, often connected to the major issues of the time period. Lee explained in 2017, "Marvel has always been and always will be a reflection of the world right outside our window."⁴¹

Stan Lee made the world a more understanding place for all types of people. He created characters to show his readers how to make the world more welcoming. Furthermore, the heroes he created taught important relatable life lessons that corresponded to the social issues of their

⁴¹ Knowledgeatwharton. "Marvel Comics' Stan Lee: The Legend Who Created Legends." Fair Observer. November 18, 2018.

time period: equality, love and compassion. Stan Lee was a real-life superhero, he did not have super strength or speed, he could not fly. However, he had a much greater power, the ability to bring the world together, to unite humanity and make the world a little more super, one story at time. *Excelsior!*

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