

# Fighting the Battles We Never Could: *The Avengers* and Post-September 11 American Political Identities

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*"The idea was to bring together a group of remarkable people, see if they could become something more. See if they could work together when we needed them to, to fight the battles that we never could."*

—Nick Fury, *The Avengers*

On June 26, 2012, Marvel's *The Avengers* became the third movie in history to earn \$600 million dollars at the box office.<sup>1</sup> The film was well received by fans and critics alike and it stood at the apex of a series of superhero movies released in the last decade. The mass appeal of the superhero, as evidenced by this success, has never seemed more powerful than in the years since September 11, a day that floored the likes of Captain America, who wept amidst the rubble with Spider-Man. "Some things are beyond words. Beyond comprehension. Beyond forgiveness" (Straczynski, Romita, and Hanna 2001, 2–3). In this atmosphere of uncertainty, comic book writers struggle to deal with the realization that, when America needed its heroes the most, they could only stand among the wreckage of the smoldering twin towers with the rest of us and ask "why?"

The post-September 11 resurrection of the superhero genre, particularly in film, is a direct response to the feelings of helplessness and terror that Americans experienced in the days and years following the attack. This renewed interest is also a revealing look at the psyche of a nation as it struggled with war, retribution, and its own constitutional and democratic imperatives. Numerous cultural critics have long appreciated the psychological catharsis that the "hero" myth provides people<sup>2</sup> and, in the long days following America's wounding, the country witnessed the manifestation of its pain, desire for revenge, struggles with its principles, and thirst for the use of its awesome military power in several super heroic cinematic experiences from *Thor* to *X-men: First Class* to *Iron Man* and *Captain America*.

Scholars such as Terry Kading and Henry Jenkins have established links between superheroes and the public's ability to make sense of the unthinkable horror of the attacks both through exposure to super heroics in texts leading up to the attacks (Kading 2005), and in the immediate aftermath of them (Jenkins 2006). In the various examples from superhero comics explored by these and other scholars, the comics provide commentary on and criticism of the post-September 11 geo-

political climate.<sup>3</sup> At the same time that superhero comics were exploring ways that the genre could portray the post-September 11 world, Marvel Studios began to develop and release works that realized the vast superhero universe in film.

The group culmination of the Marvel superhero films, *The Avengers* (which followed a series of individual lead-in films introducing its principal characters), was a particularly well-designed expression of American political identity in the post-September 11 era: each character represents a distinct identity or kind of behavior with which the United States has been struggling to reconcile itself while collectively representing the reactions of a nation to a direct, domestic attack. This community response deviates from more traditional portrayals of America under siege that might otherwise be understood as a community of innocents rising up against the barbaric other as seen in the more traditional "American war story" (Engelhardt 1995). The clear black-and-white "virtuous 'us' versus an immoral 'them'" argument, which was a hallmark of the "Manichean" narrative of the attacks by the George W. Bush White House and the media, is problematic here because of both the less than virtuous characteristics of many of the heroes in *The Avengers* and a need to express a more complex understanding of the attack's toll on the American psyche. In addition to the representation of the collective response to attack, the efforts to combat the threat to world peace portrayed in the film also mirror several issues faced in post-September 11 US domestic and foreign policy.

Iron Man, commonly understood to represent the military industrial complex, shows a newfound capacity to depersonalize war and is placed in counterpoint to Captain America, who represents traditional notions of patriotism and acceptance of authority. Having been frozen in an uncomplicated era when the enemy was clear, the fighting was up close, and the prize was the defeat of fascism in all its forms, Captain America is discursively tied to a period with a clearer delineation between "us" and "them." Throughout the film, the hostility between the two heroes speaks to the tension between the traditional, righteous protection of democracy and just war and the new, ill-defined kinds of warfare that test the nation's devotion to civil liberties and human rights. In several scenes, Tony Stark refers to Rogers' man-out-of-time status and wonders aloud why everyone was so enamored of the Captain during World War II: "You're pretty spry for an older fellow" and "That's the guy my dad never shut up about?" The particular nature of the tension between them is exemplified during their exchange in Banner's

lab when Stark is speculating about S.H.I.E.L.D.'s intended use of the Tesseract. Incensed with Stark's bugging of S.H.I.E.L.D. intelligence, Rogers responds to Stark's statement that, "an intelligence organization that fears intelligence? Historically, *not* awesome," biting back with a furious: "We have *orders!* We should follow them!" Rogers traditionally has seen the world in black and white, with a clearly defined enemy, and to that end, he has followed an operational hierarchy as a way of showing patriotic support for the war. This attitude is already unraveling at the beginning of the film, however, as Rogers resists Fury's call to arms. In addition, Stark's snooping points to the message that in this war (a proxy for the Global War on Terror) no one is playing by the rules of *Jus ad bellum*, and an organization such as S.H.I.E.L.D. (representing the department of homeland security, the CIA, and the government in general) requires external checks and balances. The two characters for the most part, are presented in sharp contrast to one another, as exemplified by Stark's desire to "watch the

The fact that Loki turns him in the first few minutes of action suggests the duality of espionage and underscores the idea that in a world of double and triple dealings there are no "good" spies. This is further supported by the duplicity implied and portrayed by Black Widow. As a former Russian double agent, she is by nature, untrustworthy in some sense, and when interacting with Loki, she again feigns innocence and weakness to glean information from him.<sup>4</sup> This shadow of duplicity represented by both characters deepens the moral quagmire as emblemized by these two agents.

By the nature of their work, these kinds of people will always be outside both the legal and ethical norms that govern others. The moral confusion inherent in the role of espionage in the face of a "war" is revealed in a scene when, imprisoned, Loki spits viciously that Black Widow "lies and kills in the service of liars and killers. You pretend to be separate, to have your own code, something that makes up for the horrors, but they are part of you and, they will never go away."

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watchmen" and by Rogers' uneasy patriotism. Potentially indicative of the post-September 11 blurring of ideological lines, however, the oppositional positioning of the two characters is complicated by certain moments in the film when each man steps out of the sphere that otherwise defines him. Iron Man, for example, reacts uncharacteristically emotionally to the death of Agent Coulson, and Captain America doubts authority and searches around the S.H.I.E.L.D. complex for hidden weaponry. These moments pave the way for each character to realize that he must temper his more hard-line ideological beliefs to work alongside the other. As the story progresses, Rogers redefines his patriotism, some of his values, and the parts of himself that allowed him to succeed in World War II, and Stark is forced to come down from his pedestal and reconcile himself with a "new" American patriot.

Also thrown into the mix are two spies, Black Widow and Hawkeye, who harken back to the Cold War era in both their origins (Black Widow is a former Russian double agent and Hawkeye is an eagle-eyed assassin for hire) and their experiences (both Hawkeye and Black Widow discuss previous missions in Eastern Europe). With blood on their hands, a strange devotion to the humanity in only one another, and a particular skill set (stealth killing), their presence provides viewers with a better understanding of the tensions inherent on a democracy defending itself while forcing the audience to engage with the idea that the underbelly of their nation's prosecution of foreign policy is outside both international and constitutional law. Hawkeye's first words in the movie are, "I see better from a distance." He is perched in the shadows, watching the action unfold, and his method of protection and killing (bow and arrow) is removed, in contrast to the up-close personal destruction that fellow Avengers are prone to deliver.

Black Widow's response to Loki's goading is to reveal that she is haunted by the "red" in her ledger and would like a chance to atone for her past, a revelation which points to the ethical cost of waging a secret war to the individuals who serve in these clandestine capacities.

Bruce Banner/Hulk is perhaps the most intriguing character through the arc of the story because his human intelligence, reason, and empathy are constantly juxtaposed with the unbridled anger of the beast that lies within him. In his "normal" state, he is mild mannered to the point of awkwardness, he exhibits signs of severe social anxiety and fear, and he is constantly aware that the "other guy" may overtake him. He is extremely intelligent and has the respect of the others for that intelligence. Banner is also a doctor shown to be caring for the poor in India when he is recruited by S.H.I.E.L.D. to help locate the Tesseract. Yet, when he changes into the Hulk, he becomes emblematic of the imperfect human response to crisis and represents the age-old human/monster divide. Banner describes his condition to Stark thus: "I don't get a suit of armor; I'm exposed, like a nerve . . . It's a nightmare." The duality of his nature speaks to the contradiction between the human capacity for great intelligence, kindness, and empathy, and an astonishing ability to twist those characteristics and use them to "smash." That Banner's beast is unleashed directly following the attack on the S.H.I.E.L.D. helicarrier is significant in how he represents that imperfect human response, unleashing an all-out, all-encompassing rage. At this point, he shows no signs of having the beast under control and is easily understood as a metaphor for the desire to destroy anyone and everything that threatens his self-identity, security, and safety. Banner is both the reluctant citizen, called to fight terrorism but able to apply his intelligence, logic, and reason not to fall wholesale for S.H.I.E.L.D.'s mission *and* the

unrestrained, devastated, angry citizen whose response after an attack is to destroy everything in his path. Loki's reliance on the unleashing of Banner's alter ego to destroy S.H.I.E.L.D. is testament to one of the basic mechanisms of terrorism: to divide, to terrify, and to unleash anger and hatred that decimates the previous harmony of a group and demands revenge, which most often leads to further division and loss of life.

As seen in his pre-Avengers introduction movie, *Thor*, the hero manifests the American warrior ethos. In that film, when his "might is always right" attitude was allowed to go unchecked, it led him into dangerous and uncalculated forays into unknown enemy territory for the temporary prize of feeling victorious and strong. In *The Avengers*, Thor, chastened by his warmongering and reconciled with his father Odin's wiser stance on diplomacy, is the exterior force of the all-American avenging team. Thor's presence in the lineup serves multiple purposes of commentary about how America conducts its War on Terror. In the first instance, Thor blasts his way into the aircraft carrying Loki as prisoner from Germany back to the United States and kidnaps his brother.

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Thor declares that Loki will "face Asgardian justice" sparking an intense battle between Thor, Iron Man, and Captain America. The futility of the battle is underscored when Thor's hammer, Mjöllnir, crashes into Captain America's star-spangled shield and creates an energy burst so ferocious that it knocks the heroes off their feet and levels a small area of forest. Realizing that there can be no victory in a fight between equally matched powers who disagree but are not in opposition to one another, Captain America asks "are we done here?" In this particular scene, and most especially when he joins the Avengers in their mission while maintaining his independent Asgardian identity, Thor moves from representing jurisdictional tensions to serving as a proxy for the shifting and fractious relationship between the United States and her allies that united after September 11, but that slowly withered and cracked as the United States continued to prosecute the war in ways that some European and traditionally more neutral countries resented.

The villain who unites a number of these films is Loki who, as Kading and Jenkins have asserted, can stand in easily for international terrorists. Loki is, like the terrorists he represents and the terrorism they practice, a much more complex villain than the one-note supervillains of past superhero texts. He is most definitely hell-bent on world destruction and domination, but his previous ties to his brother, Thor, make a strong commentary about connections both explicit (US dealings with bin Laden in the 1980s) and implicit (American imperialism as a motivator for Jihad) between the US and terrorist forces.

Loki's relation to common perceptions of radical terrorists is revealed most explicitly by the language that he uses and the manner in which he draws people to his side. In his first scene he arrives at S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters, intoxicated by the knowledge given to him by the Tesseract and proceeds to wreak havoc in the name of his new and esoteric sense of righteousness. Loki appears almost to be drugged in this scene, and when he converts Hawkeye and Erik Selvig to his cause they immediately exhibit signs of being similarly intoxicated by the knowledge and certainty that Loki has bestowed on them.

In a scene where Loki forces a group of German hostages to kneel before him, he preaches to them about the divine state of man: "Is not this simpler? Is this not your natural state? It's the unspoken truth of humanity. That you crave subjugation! The bright lure of freedom diminishes your life's joy in a mad scramble for power, for identity. You were made to be ruled and in the end you will always kneel." In defiance, an elderly man stands slowly and says "not to men like you." Referring to his elevated demigod status, Loki replies "There

are NO men like ME." The elderly man then states simply: "There are always men like you." This exchange is a powerful and cathartic moment for an audience that understands the power of the terrorist and the reach that a small group has in its ability to destroy lives as revealed in this interaction with the elderly German man who has seen the horrors of a past totalitarian ideology and refuses to kneel. There are several more allusions to Loki as the "terrorist" that reveal something of the post-September 11 confusion about the nature of the threat posed to the world by terrorism. For example, Loki repeats several times that he is here to save humankind from "freedom." The S.H.I.E.L.D. council members appear on the television screens to Fury and ask "are you saying that this Asgard is declaring war on this planet?" Fury replies, "Not Asgard, Loki," pointing to the non-state totalitarian ideology that leaves state actors with the difficult decision regarding whom to sanction in the aftermath of an attack on their territory. Finally, Loki is shown to be undone by his need to bloat, to publicize, and to have the world know that he is the source of destruction. The mission to destroy the world seems an afterthought to Loki's desire for people to see his power and to know that it is his decision as to whether they live or die. This speaks to the cult of personality that underlies worldwide terrorist organizations and ultimately leads to their demise as they are imprisoned without trial, cut down in raids, or hunted down by predator drones. In the scene where Black Widow uses Loki's vanity to get him to reveal his plan (to unleash the Hulk), Loki's compulsion to pontificate sets a

sequence of events in motion, the result of which is that he destroys his army, loses his power, and is returned to Asgard as the prisoner of his brother, Thor.

The agency that brings these disparate superheroic forces together, S.H.I.E.L.D., itself stands in for the Department of Homeland Security. In a nod to the agency created in 2002 to combat terrorist threats on US soil, the film indicates that the acronym stands for Strategic *Homeland* Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division.<sup>5</sup> Representative of all of the covert forces employed by the US government in the declared “War on Terror,” both at home and abroad, S.H.I.E.L.D. mirrors a number of the more controversial acts of the agency, including warrantless wiretapping. In the movie, S.H.I.E.L.D. “hacks in” to satellite arrays to locate the errant Asgardian technology powering Loki’s army: “We’re sweeping every wirelessly accessible camera on the planet, cell phones, laptops. . . .”<sup>6</sup> In the film, in an argument between all the Avengers in Banner’s lab, Black Widow defends S.H.I.E.L.D.’s abuses of individual and even Steve Rogers’ privacy as a necessary “monitoring of potential threats.” When an incensed Banner asks, “*Captain America* is

like the United States post-September 11, the clear “boxes” in which each character could easily be placed (unwavering patriotic hero, “bad” agent turned “good,” tortured monster, genius-billionaire-playboy-philanthropist) no longer sufficiently define them. The post-attack world is much more nuanced and complicated.

In the film’s climax, these elements come together to wage war in a different way to prevail against enemies that are outside the traditional sphere of America’s foes and against whom the country has been victorious. In a nod to the wisdom gained through mistakes and missteps in the immediate post-September 11 world, *The Avengers* unpacks each element of the collective American response to terrorism and shows a somewhat romanticized victory in which every identity did absolutely what was necessary to succeed.

The uneasy meeting of the team at the end signals that, by nature, these identities remain in conflict. However, the circumstances of the plot allow for a reconciliation of sometimes disparate identities and motivations, and suggests that future iterations of the superhero team would, by nature, reflect the

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on threat watch?” Black Widow calmly responds, “we all are,” signaling her uncomplicated acceptance of the relegation of civil liberties to a lower priority in the face of security breaches and the prevention of terrorist attacks. Finally, in reference to the issue of whether or not torture is justified or effective, Thor insists that Loki’s desire to prevail will outweigh any momentary pain that S.H.I.E.L.D. can inflict on him. Fury’s cold response is: “A lot of guys think that . . . until the pain starts.”

The epic battle scene at the film’s conclusion involves a force of strange alien creatures that attack from the sky, destroy buildings, and harm civilians in a clear recreation of the events of September 11. This time, however, the heroes are successful in preventing disaster through the balanced combination of their American or pro-American identities and ideologies. All of the Avengers must find common ground in the recognition that their response to being attacked cannot involve a black-and-white reaction, nor can it be the simple deployment of missiles and use of technology. It cannot be resolved solely through underground espionage and “black operations,” it cannot ignore the pain, anger, and rage that the combined human psyche brings to the battlefield, and should not ignore the desires of allies nor court the abuse of jurisdictional authority. This community response is further underscored by the means by which the film is a product of its predecessors. Each superhero was first introduced in a stand-alone film that defined the heroes in the terms of their worldviews, quirks, and particular contexts. When facing a potential global threat, much

specific details and political realities future audiences might need to process contemporary American and international politics. They also signal a paradigm shift that points not toward ensured security, but toward more uncertainty. In the penultimate scene, each hero “returns,” either literally (Thor takes Loki back to Asgard) or figuratively (Stark drives away in an expensive sports car and Rogers rides off on a motorcycle reminiscent of World War II era bikes) to his or her previous world. But because of the crucible they have all just survived, they return as changed men and women, who no longer fit so easily in the categories they, or society, have defined for them. In this exit, there is not an air of triumph, but rather one of wariness of what might attack next. To this end, the final scene following the heroes’ exit features a conversation between Nick Fury and the S.H.I.E.L.D. council. When they ask why the Avengers might return when future conflicts arise, Nick Fury responds, “Because we will need them to.” Pointing to as yet unknown, but certain future attacks, Fury communicates that the post-attack world has changed, and the world has had to change with it, while also pointing toward a future of better cooperation, understanding, and success in the global War on Terror.<sup>7</sup>

The attacks on American soil on September 11 caught a nation off guard, and the resulting War on Terror challenged the world to rethink its understanding of warfare, ideological terrorism, and a rapidly shifting global landscape. In *The Avengers*, the team is called on to “fight the battles we never could,” much like the sense of American global supremacy

espoused by the government and the media in the days immediately following the September 11 attacks. Fury's words here echo the vision of the United States seeing itself as the only force capable of successfully battling global terrorism, but at the same time injects uncertainty into that future.

In the end, the efforts of the Avengers are representative of the melding of various nationalist identities for a common cause and highlight the resilience of the American people after the September 11 attacks. These efforts also carry more negative connotations in that unity and common purpose only comes when threatened from the outside, and not before. Through the interactions of the superheroes as they struggle to meld as a team, viewers gain insight as to the construction of the American polity. Is an unwavering sense of patriotism a twenty-first century ideal, or, like Captain America, is it out of place? Can that patriotism be wielded negatively as a weapon, as many critics of the flag waving media indicated in the post September 11 landscape? Like Iron Man's identity crisis, is there room for conscience and warfare in the same entity?, When is it appropriate to fall strongly on one side or the other? Does the "red" in the country's ledger accumulated over years of US involvement in global conflict warrant some sort of atonement, and if not, does the nation face the potential perils of retribution? As in Thor's insistence that he knows best how to handle Loki, does a nation defer to local wisdom when involved in conflicts, or does it assert its own view more forcefully? These questions and many more arise through the interaction of the superheroes in *The Avengers* and are purposefully left unanswered. The nation was unable to prevent the attacks of September 11, and because of this inability to reconcile and prevent this tragedy in real life, the ideas, motivations, and attitudes bound up in the pre- and post-September 11 world are reconciled on the screen, albeit uncomfortably. The Avengers do swoop in and save the day, but the world left afterwards, is, like current reality, one of numerous questions and doubts. ■

#### NOTES

1. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/news/?id=3470>
2. Joseph Campbell devotes a whole book to the retelling of the universal "monomyth" (Campbell 1949).

3. One example of superhero comics' navigation of the post-September 11 landscape is Marvel's 2005 *Civil War* series, which presents a complex political climate of government (invasion, surveillance, profiling, and scapegoating). By pitting the forces of Iron Man, standing on the side of the registration of superheroes by the government, against the idealism of Captain America leading a team of heroes opposed to government control, the series aided its readers in understanding the political climate in the age of the Patriot Act, The Homeland Security Act, and the infamous "torture memo" released by the George W. Bush administration. The events of *Civil War*, and other superhero comics of the period, such as those discussed by Costello (2011) then, provide the backdrop and lead-in for Marvel's cinematic texts that presented the characters to a much wider audience.
4. It should also be noted that Black Widow is diegetically linked to Tony Stark's through her function as his employee and assistant. As a former weapons manufacturer, Stark has been complicit in arming international entities, similar to the United States providing arms to several groups involved in armed conflict around the world.
5. The original acronym for the agency from the comics was Supreme Headquarters, International Espionage, Law-Enforcement Division. As another reminder that the Cold War era days of high espionage have become much more complex, and more focused on protection of American soil from attacks from the outside in the post-September 11 landscape, "Espionage" is dropped from the acronym.
6. Similarly, in the *Civil War* series, S.H.I.E.L.D. creates a prison for super villains (and superheroes opposed to registration) in the negative zone, far removed from the standard penal system that comments on the indefinite detention of terrorist suspects at Guantanamo Bay.
7. This sense of a world changing paradigm shift marked by the attack is furthered in the immediate follow-up film to *The Avengers*, *Iron Man 3*, in which Tony says, haunted by the life-altering experience "Nothing has been the same since New York."

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