

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Love in the Time of the Korean War: Romance Comics and the Normalization of America's International Security Commitments

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Abstract

This article examines the role played by comic books in justifying the Korean War to adolescent readers in the United States. Specifically, it argues that romance comics—perhaps the most widely read youth publications of the early 1950s—helped to prepare teenaged girls for the trials and tribulations that an emerging Cold War would entail. Love-themed comic books dealt with issues like dating and marriage at a time of mass mobilization and international political emergency, and in doing so, attempted to redefine the meaning of courtship and sexual maturity during a new era of permanent national security crisis. By studying this enormously influential literary genre, we gain important insight into both the popular cultural dimension of a “forgotten war,” as well as a richer appreciation of the ways in which girls have been asked to make their own sacrifices on the altar of American military preparedness.

By 1953, Kitty Anderson and Chuck Brady were inseparable. High school sweethearts, the two had been dating since their freshman year. Kitty's chance encounter with an army sergeant, however, soon upended the affair. “From the very moment Tod Kirk held me in his arms,” Kitty remarked, “something came over me!” “What is there about Tod that makes me feel so . . . so romantic?” she wondered. Chuck eventually suspected infidelity, and the accusations began to fly. “I know what it is,” he surmised. “A uniform! You've fallen in love with a uniform, Kitty! I've noticed your adoration for soldiers lately!” Unwilling to surrender to his romantic rival, Chuck decided to enlist: “I guess I should have joined the service long ago! Funny what a uniform does for a man!” But the plan misfired when he failed his vision test and Uncle Sam refused to induct him.¹

Kitty could not believe it. She accused Chuck of faking a disability to avoid military service. “Kitty . . . does a uniform mean that much to you? Couldn't you love me as a civilian?” Her icy reply ended the conversation: “Perhaps I could have . . . once! But I could never love you now realizing you're a coward!” Her ex-boyfriend, Kitty said, was a “shirker,” and she needed “a man who I can be proud of.” But broken hearts often refuse to heal. After several months of misery, Kitty finally resolved to reconnect with her former lover. Upon entering the Brady residence, however, she was amazed to find Chuck dressed in the uniform of the United States Army. He

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¹“I Wanted My Man in Uniform,” *True War Romances* #15, 1954.

confessed everything. “I was afraid of the service! I didn’t want to go! So I . . . I made up that story about weak eyes! But after that tongue lashing you gave me, I realized how wrong I was . . . how unpatriotic I had been! I had lost you through my cowardice . . . I couldn’t lose my honor too!” All was quickly forgiven. Chuck would soon be shipped off to Korea, but Kitty pledged to remain faithful while her soldier boy slugged it out with the communists on distant battlefields. “Darling,” she declared, “I’ll wait for you forever!”²

And with that, one of the thousands of stories comprising so-called romance comic books during the early 1950s came to an end. Such predictable plotting, simplistic character development, and didactic thematics were all characteristics of the genre. The remarkable aspect of Kitty and Chuck’s saga was, in fact, exactly how unremarkable it appears when compared to other miniature melodramas depicted in the era’s myriad publications. But there is significance to sameness and power in ubiquity. In postwar America, comics were everywhere and read by, without exaggeration, nearly every young person. Indeed, no serious history of midcentury children’s reading in the United States can afford to ignore them. It matters that over and again, target demographics were taught to revere military men and pledge loyalty to their uniformed lovers during a moment of international political crisis.³

One cannot read such comic books and fail to notice how thoroughly engaged they were with the era’s current events, particularly those that dealt with the Cold War and one of its hotter moments, the shooting that started in Korea in June of 1950. Writers and illustrators were taking tangled and complex world affairs and trying very hard to make them intelligible for an audience not old enough to vote, not old enough to serve in the military, and not old enough to shape foreign policy in any immediate way. And yet, despite all that, in the pages of the comics they read, young people were invited to regularly reaffirm their allegiance to the United States and vicariously participate in America’s efforts to lead the so-called free world to victory over the forces of international communism (Figure 1).

Chuck and Kitty’s saga, however, signaled something new in comic book history: a widespread and concerted attempt, during the late 1940s and early 1950s, to draw teenaged girls into diplomatically and militarily charged conversations. By then, of course, the genre’s male readership had already grown accustomed to such appeals. Combat comics were common during the Second World War, and therefore, when the United States remobilized soldiers, sailors, pilots, and marines for service in Korea, their likenesses once again began to appear in issues of *Men in Action*, *The Fighting Man*, *War*, *Yanks in Battle*, *War Heroes*, *Warfront*, and *War Fury*. Such publications were overwhelmingly marketed to boys and rather predictably presented the conflict in East Asia as a freedom-loving people’s righteous struggle against unprovoked communist aggression. Young men, however, were not the only constituency who needed to be sold on the Korean War, and by extension, America’s expanding overseas security commitments during the Cold War. Girls, after all, avidly consumed comic books too and would also have to be approached as potential partners in the country’s quest to rid the world of the “Red Menace.” Historians have analyzed martial comics as key examples of the Korean War’s manifestation in American popular culture. Less well recognized has been the conflict’s omnipresence in romance comics sold to girls during the early 1950s.⁴

²“I Wanted My Man in Uniform,” *True War Romances* #15, 1954.

³On the broad circulation of comic books in postwar America, see Bradford Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore, 2003), 56–58.

⁴On war comics and the Korean conflict, see Leonard Rifas, *Korean War Comic Books* (Jefferson, NC, 2021); Paul S. Hirsch, *Pulp Empire: A Secret History of Comic Book Imperialism* (Chicago, 2021); William W. Savage, Jr., *Comic Books and America, 1945–1954* (Norman, OK, 1990), 51–59; and D. Melissa Hilbish, “Advancing in Another Direction: The Comic Book and the Korean War,” *War, Literature, and the Arts* 11, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 1999): 209–27. Importantly, not all of these comics were interventionist in their politics. An influential and more “pacifist” counternarrative appeared in the funny animal comic books of Carl Barks. See Daniel Immerwahr, “Ten-Cent Ideology: Donald Duck Comic Books and the U.S. Challenge to Modernization,” *Modern American History* 3, no. 1 (Mar. 2020): 1–26.



Figure 1. During the 1950s, romance comic books like *G.I. Sweethearts* increasingly grappled with the Korean conflict and Cold War military mobilization. *G.I. Sweethearts* #32, 1953.

Though the genre's prehistory began with early twentieth century love-themed pulps, the first romance comic—titled *Young Romance*—debuted in the fall of 1947. Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, the legendary artistic duo who had created Captain America in 1940, noticed a previously

untapped comic book market among adolescent girls. Studies conducted by several publishing firms had determined that while boys and young men were well-served by the crime, war, and superhero genres, girls seemed to “age out” of the industry once they lost interest in the so-called funny animal comic books designed for younger children. Simon and Kirby’s innovation, then, was to engineer a new series of stories meant to address the issues facing adolescent women as they navigated the challenges of high school and dating, as well as the prospects of marriage and adulthood. In Simon’s own words, the “dearth of comic book material for the female population” seemed to beg for more “youthful, emotional, yet wholesome stories supposedly told in the first person by love-smitten teenagers.” The result of that insight, *Young Romance*, appeared on newsstands with a simple tagline: “Designed for the More Adult Readers of Comics.” It was a smash hit, selling nearly the entirety of its first print run.⁵

Success quickly bred imitation. Within the space of a few years, the genre accounted for one of every four comic books sold by retailers. By 1950, nearly 150 different publications circulated millions of romance stories throughout the United States (and beyond). Underappreciated by scholars, however, is the chronological confluence of what has been termed the Love Comics Revolution and the moment when an escalating Cold War first turned hot. Just as romance comics hit their midcentury high-water mark, the United States marshalled its military to prevent a communist conquest of the Korean peninsula. It was only natural, therefore, that writers would begin to incorporate political subjects and geostrategic considerations into their melodramas. Comic book plots had been ripped from the headlines since the industry emerged during the Great Depression. The trick for the romances, however, was to depict the Korean War in terms that authors believed would be intelligible to their largely female and adolescent readership.⁶

The resulting texts provide a fascinating vantage point from which to view unofficial efforts to manage teenaged political sentiment on the American homefront during the Korean War. Romance comics tackling the conflict sought to model appropriate responses to the nation’s new military crisis. If the war comics marketed to boys depicted battlefield heroics as their sex’s primary contribution to an emerging struggle against Soviet expansion, their female-coded counterparts clearly demonstrated that women’s suffering would also undergird the new Cold War. Here, in the pages of this enormously popular genre, girls crossing the threshold into adulthood were coached about how to love and grieve during a seminal moment in world affairs. Romance comics told feminine audiences that their own sacrifices were necessary to the continuation of free markets and free societies around the world. Easily intelligible morality plays rewarded characters who faithfully supported their men in uniform, while illustrated parables warned against women’s seduction at the hands of smooth-talking socialists. It was a dangerous world, these publications insisted, for those first beginning to dip their toes into the dating pool. But young women had important duties to perform if the United States was to endure in the face of new challenges emerging overseas.

Romance comics as a whole should therefore be seen as essential to the discursive process by which an abstract concept like the Cold War was made more concrete in the lives of youths. Recent scholarship has worked to demonstrate the part that ordinary people (as opposed to high-ranking members of the policymaking and military establishment) played in giving shape to the U.S.–Soviet geopolitical rivalry that increasingly defined world affairs after 1945. Given the outsized influence of the Cold War in American life for roughly fifty years (not to mention its predominance in the historiography), it can sometimes be difficult to remember that there

⁵Simon and Kirby quoted in Michael Barson, *Agonizing Love: The Golden Era of Romance Comics* (New York, 2011), 8–14. See also Jeremy Dauber, *American Comics: A History* (New York, 2022), 92–99; Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 127–33; and Peyton Brunet and Blair Davis, *Comic Book Women: Characters, Creators, and Culture in the Golden Age* (Austin, 2022), 225–49. The only book-length treatment of romance comics is Michelle Nolan, *Love on the Racks: A History of American Romance Comics* (Jefferson, NC, 2008).

⁶Circulation figures are discussed in Nolan, *Love on the Racks*, chs 4–5.

was a time when individuals had to be convinced as to the conflict's existence. Simply put, the Cold War's emergence cannot be presupposed. It was instead constructed over time. As a contingent state of affairs, the Cold War required popular participation so that a consensus could coalesce regarding the necessity of expending blood and treasure for the curtailment of so-called communist aggression. And while it is nearly impossible to measure with any exactitude the response of young readers to this material, we can at least cite the pervasiveness of romance comics as evidence of their broad popularity. Adolescents would not have bought them (and the genre would not have become, by 1950, the industry's most profitable) if they had found the messaging unacceptable. As with most forms of mass culture, marketplace success is our most reliable indicator of audience reception. And romance comics, by that measure, were received with enthusiasm.⁷

Comic books generally—and romance comics in particular—were thus an important cog inside a larger media machine meant to manufacture the concept of a postwar clash of competing civilizations. They served as a sort of propaganda-by-proxy; corporations may have created their content but those private actors still disseminated messaging that largely aligned with state interests. Indeed, comic book coverage of the Korean War, in its blusterousness, often got out ahead of a Truman administration keen to emphasize the limited nature of this so-called police action. Collectively, then, such publications helped to transform elite national security speculation into broad public agreement regarding the inevitability of confrontation between superpowers. The cultural work romance comics did was doubly important given their audience's youthfulness. They promoted the struggle among emerging adults as a multigenerational affair requiring commitments that would extend into an indefinite future. Kids were told to settle in for a long fight. And girls were shown the ways in which romantic intimacy—their own particular front in an emerging Cold War—could help advance the cause of victory.⁸

In the same way that policy papers such as NSC-68 cemented among elite opinionmakers the idea of a bipolar rivalry requiring the United States to assume a permanent war footing, comic books helped their millions of regular readers accept the reality (and necessity) of such a state of affairs. The Cold War, in other words, materialized not only due to decisions made in Washington, D.C., Moscow, and other centers of adult political power. It also took shape inside corners of the country's culture where children congregated to read some of their favorite artistic output. Romance comics therefore allow us to broaden our histories of Cold War culture by incorporating more of the voices speaking to adolescent girls about international affairs. Similarly, mass-produced teenage love stories offer an opportunity to study a largely neglected facet of a mostly forgotten conflict, which is to say, the popular culture of the Korean War.⁹

⁷On the Cold War's "constructedness," see Masuda Hajimu, *Cold War Crucible: The Korean Conflict and the Postwar World* (Cambridge, 2015) and Benjamin O. Fordham, *Building the Cold War Consensus: The Political Economy of U.S. National Security* (Ann Arbor, 1998). For an earlier example of the comic book's ability to promote pro-war public sentiment, see Mike Milford, "Veiled Intervention: Anti-Semitism, Allegory, and Captain America," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 20, no. 4 (Winter 2017): 605–34.

⁸During the Second World War, by contrast, the American state—under the auspices of the Writers' War Board—exercised more direct control over comic book content. See Paul Hirsch, "'This Is Our Enemy': The Writers' War Board and Representations of Race in Comic Books," *Pacific Historical Review* 83, no. 3 (Aug. 2014): 448–86. For more elite-driven efforts to sustain the conflict, see Steven Casey, *Selling the Korean War: Propaganda, Politics, and Public Opinion in the United States* (New York, 2008).

⁹The historiography of U.S. Cold War culture has grown steadily over the past three decades. Most important to this essay has been Peter J. Kuznick and James Burkhart Gilbert, eds., *Rethinking Cold War Culture* (Washington, 2001); Joel Isaac and Duncan Bell, eds., *Uncertain Empire: American History and the Idea of the Cold War* (New York, 2012); Christian G. Appy, ed., *Cold War Constructions: The Political Culture of United States Imperialism* (Amherst, MA, 2000); Margot A. Henriksen, *Dr. Strangelove's America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age* (Berkeley, 1997); John Fousek, *To Lead the Free World: American Nationalism and the Cultural Roots of the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000); and Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore, 1991). Most histories of the Korean War, meanwhile, tend not to engage with its presence in U.S. popular culture. They point to a dearth of Hollywood films and the absence of much literature as evidence of the conflict's ephemerality. See, for

Comic Book Panels and the 38th Parallel

Comic books were thus crucial to the process by which midcentury American kids learned how and why to care about the Cold War. Comic book illustrators, however, were not the first to justify for juveniles the application of American military power. The publishers of children's literature, in fact, had often attempted to explain American foreign policy for young readers. It is within that broader chronology of adolescent popular culture—a long-standing literary project meant to teach kids about the international indispensability of the United States—that we should understand the regularity with which comic book panels weighed in on events along the 38th Parallel. This was less the sudden appearance of foreign affairs in the lives of young readers, and more the continuation of a venerable tradition. Adults had often sought to legitimate the exercise of American power abroad by investing the rising generation in policymaking outcomes. That same impulse reemerged once the United States committed to the Korean conflict in the summer of 1950. What made Korean War romance comics stand out within this longer tradition of youth engagement, however, was both their ubiquity and the effort they made to draw teenaged girls into the maelstrom. Previously, the “gentler sex” had not been so systematically targeted by imperially inflected fiction.¹⁰

We should not, however, confuse romance comics with feminist texts. Nearly the entire canon was constructed by male authors, illustrators, and editors who did little to challenge their culture's gender conventions. Female characters sometimes wear uniforms, occupy bunkers, or otherwise transcend domestic trappings, but by story's end they generally return to their “proper” sphere both chastened and committed to waging the Cold War in a more sex-appropriate manner. Many tales, in fact, followed the exploits of women who initially traveled to East Asia not out of patriotism but because they thought it would be a good place to meet men. The protagonist of “Lovelife of an Army Nurse,” for example, confessed that “I had no illusions about patriotism, helping the suffering, or doing my share for victory.” Instead, “the lure of exciting romance, of moonlit rendezvous with love-starved heroes behind the battlefronts, prompted my enlistment as an army nurse.” After arriving in Korea, she admitted to putting “my own desires before those of the dying, often suffering soldiers.” A chance encounter in a foxhole, however, led to an epiphany. The courageous deeds of the troops—one of whom lost a leg to save her life—demanded from American women a greater seriousness of purpose. Wedding bells rang for the nurse and her amputee once the “temptress” resolved to “become the kind of girl he will be proud to love.” The figure of the frivolous nurse chasing boys into war zones was a common one. Typically, they are set to some higher calling by a man and resolve to help finish the fight in Korea: “We won't quit until this crazy world is safe again for the children!” (Figure 2).¹¹

The Korean conflict thus presented an opportunity to convince flighty girls of the fact that the free world needed their boyfriends' and husbands' full attention at the front lines. Title after title of these tales drove the point home; women who began as a “Furlough Flirt,” a “Soldier's

example, Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: A History* (New York, 2010), 67 or Paul M. Edwards, *To Acknowledge a War: The Korean War in American Memory* (Westport, CT, 2000), 16–17 and 23–26. But this is because comic books' significant engagement with the war has thus far gone mostly unappreciated.

¹⁰Brian Rouleau, *Empire's Nursery: Children's Literature and Origins of the American Century* (New York, 2021). Though not dealing with romance comics, several other recent studies have considered Cold War content in midcentury youth media. See, in particular, Jennifer Helgren, *American Girls and Global Responsibility: A New Relation to the World during the Early Cold War* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2017); Victoria M. Grieve, *Little Cold Warriors: American Childhood in the 1950s* (New York, 2018); Margaret Peacock, *Innocent Weapons: The Soviet and American Politics of Childhood in the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2014); and Susan Eckelmann Berghel, Sara Fieldston, and Paul M. Renfro, eds., *Growing Up America: Youth and Politics Since 1945* (Athens, GA, 2019).

¹¹“Lovelife of an Army Nurse,” *Wartime Romances* #1, 1951; “Korea Sacrifice,” *True War Romances* #10, 1953. There were, of course, some exceptions to the generally male world of comic book publishing. On women in the industry, see Peyton and Brunet, *Comic Book Women*, 239–41.



Figure 2. Comic books often depicted the romantic escapades of war nurses. "Romance of a War Nurse!" *Girls' Love Stories* #18, 1952.

Pickup," or who went "Pilot Crazy" ended their courtship careers with a newfound respect for the call of duty. Schemers who scammed servicemembers or encouraged men to dodge the draft (not to mention "two-timing gals" who "strung [soldiers] along after they went overseas") were shown to be ashamed of their selfishness, "begging forgiveness for being a fool" and swearing to

be “a true and faithful wife” from that point forward. Or, as another contrite “army wife” insisted, “the vows I made—to love, honor, and obey—will never be broken.” “Until the present emergency has passed,” reconstructed women pledged to do “my part to help my husband and all the other boys who are serving our country.” The least that men discharging their patriotic duty in Korea ought to expect, after all, were women who remained loyal to their partners overseas. Romance comics therefore often showed cuckolded soldiers confronting cheaters who apologize and promise to be better. “It was my own fault for being so weak!” female philanderers proclaim. “My suffering has taught me that a war bride can be faithful when the love is strong enough to bridge the miles between her and her beloved!”¹²

Once coming to such realizations, these women then genuinely devoted themselves to their men, their country, and, by extension, the cause of American victory over the forces of communism. Melodramatic farewells at train depots and airports ended with girls declaring that “I’m in love with you! I want to wait for you! I’ve learned that real happiness comes to those who wait for it!” Romantic endurance “would take strength and courage,” but that perseverance was written about as a woman’s duty, the necessary counterpoint to male martial valor during the Korean War. Adolescent girls were being taught to understand that in this emerging Cold War, marital vows might be superseded by a citizen’s patriotic obligations. Hence the repetition of plots where wives and sweethearts urge their beloved to dodge the draft or avoid enlistment, only to be chided by reputable men who “don’t want to have anything to do with that kind of trickery.” Women repeatedly come across as hysterical, driven by a desire to gratify their most immediate demands for emotional fulfillment. Rational men, meanwhile, repeatedly justify taking up arms in Korea as “the only right thing to do,” given that a Soviet-sponsored victory there “will affect everything in our way of life!” Comics thus taught women about appropriate responses to both war emergencies and the longer-term stresses that global communist aggression would likely place on the domestic front (Figure 3).¹³

The women depicted as villains, meanwhile, were those who reacted with disappointment after hearing their partners excitedly proclaim that “I’ll soon be going overseas to do my part in Korea!” Mocking the call to combat—“Why are you so anxious to jeopardize our happiness in a murderous war?” one skeptic asks—always ended poorly for the woman in question. To undercut a husband’s aspiration to battlefield honor was portrayed as an act of emasculation. “Can’t you understand a man’s duty is to do whatever his country expects of him?” one draftee lectures his despondent wife. Women who wonder “what am I supposed to do while you’re overseas fighting” were told to acknowledge new realities. “You’re no different from thousands of other women! They learned to get along somehow!” The Cold War was in the process of reordering daily life, and these comics both gave vent to frustrations associated with this process and preached stoic acceptance of changed circumstances to their female audience.¹⁴

An *Atom-Age Combat* episode titled “My Rival,” for example, spelled all this out quite explicitly. The story began with the wife of an American pilot bemoaning the long hours her husband spent up in the air. She jealously mistook the man’s jet as a romantic rival, but those petty resentments were eventually allayed once he explained his responsibility to test new equipment before it could be sent to Korea. “This is a strange age we live in,” the woman’s concluding confession cried out, “with forces at our disposal that nobody ever dreamed were possible!” As a result, “wives have to learn to live with this age, not to be jealous of how it drains their husbands’ strength and minds, but to be patient and understanding!” *G.I. Sweethearts* imparted roughly the same lesson in charting the emotional evolution of a woman who required

¹²“I Was a Furlough Flirt” and “I Was a Soldier’s Pickup,” *Wartime Romances* #5, 1952; “Pilot Crazy,” *Wartime Romances* #6, 1952; “I Was a Lonely War Bride,” *Romantic Marriage* #15, 1952.

¹³“Trapped by the Truth,” *Wartime Romances* #7, 1952; “Deserter Wife,” *Wartime Romances* #7, 1952; “Disloyal Love,” *Wartime Romances* #3, 1951; “Come Back, My Beloved,” *Sweethearts* #102, 1951.

¹⁴“Homefront Hero,” *True War Romances* #11, 1953; “I Betrayed My Husband,” *Romantic Marriage* #19, 1953.

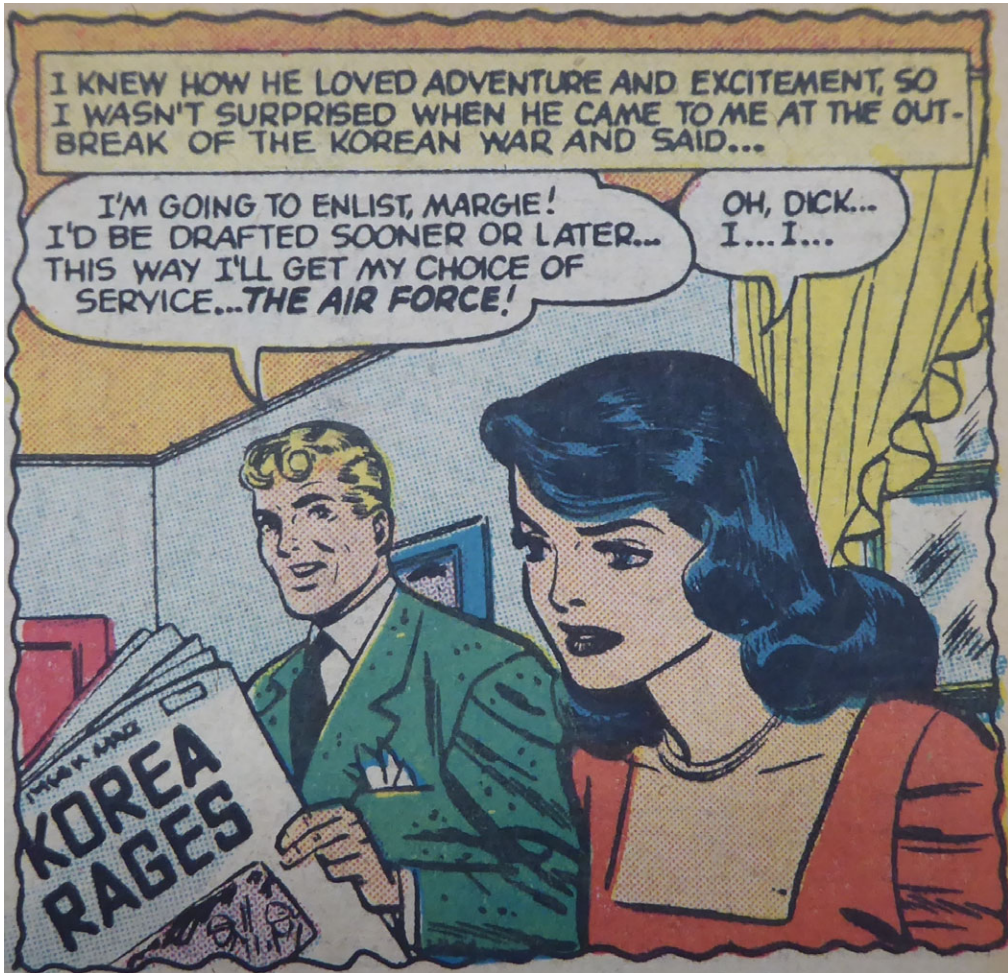


Figure 3. Many romance comic plots attempted to help teenaged girls negotiate the strain that Cold War military mobilization would place on their relationships. “Margaret Daley’s Other Love,” *Love Tales* #50, 1952.

that her Air Force husband quit flying risky missions. “You’re only offering me half a marriage, John! The rest of it I’d spend standing on this airfield wondering if you’re dead or not! Perhaps I’m greedy but I want *all* of the man I marry . . . or none!” But she was soon set straight, apologizing for her “childish antics” and conceding that the burden of an international fight for freedom must be jointly shared by men, women, and the state. The Cold War would inevitably intrude upon intimate life, these comics contended, and girls ought to grow up accepting the absolute necessity of surrendering—if only temporarily—their men to the era’s pressing military and diplomatic business. Their role in both world and domestic affairs was to tend a “love [that] will never die,” thereby incentivizing the safe return of heroic husbands. Such explicit epiphanies were usually left implicit. Yet they aligned entirely with postwar America’s “best” medical advice, adamant as it was that, to quote one of the era’s textbooks, “being a woman means acceptance of [your] primary role, that of conceiving and bearing a child.”¹⁵

¹⁵“My Rival,” *Atom-Age Combat* #2, 1953; “The Wives They Leave Behind,” *G.I. Sweethearts* #35, 1953. Medical text quoted in Elaine Tyler May, *Barren in the Promised Land: Childless Americans and the Pursuit of Happiness* (Cambridge, MA, 1995), 154.

The Trials and Tribulations of Cold War Mobilization

That emphasis on procreation only increased once the baby boom gathered steam after 1946. Romance comic writers therefore worked overtime to ensure that teenaged girls did not confuse the Korean struggle with the war emergency of the 1940s. During the latter period, women had been encouraged to enter the workforce and materially contribute to eventual Allied victory. The conflict with communism, by contrast, would not require Rosie the Riveter to come out of retirement. Instead, multiple stories seized the early 1950s national security crisis to denigrate working women and curtail the rising generation's career ambitions. "What can a wife do with the time she has on her hands when her husband goes away to war?" asked the splash page of one story; gainful employment seemed to be the only unacceptable answer to that question. Such sentiments tend to align romance comics with what has been called the era's fixation upon "domestic containment." Homes, housewives, and heterosexual marriage became bulwarks against threats looming overseas (Figure 4).¹⁶

Women whose spouses had been called up to fight in Korea may have initially declared that "you really can't expect me to sit home and knit sweaters," but they eventually caved when told to "stop being a businesswoman and start being a wife!" "I'm going to be where I belong," asserted another reformed career girl, "with my husband!" "Business success wasn't enough!" cried similarly contrite working women: "There was one thing that was missing . . . a man!" Girls who "started to work in the defense plant in my home town" and "made more money than [they'd] ever had" discovered that "the clothes and fun" paychecks bought cost a great deal more in "heartache" inflicted by steadies unwilling to compete with employers for their partner's attention. "Oh Promise Me" took the most direct route. In it, the woman who insisted to her Korean War vet husband that she was "not going to give up my job to satisfy your male ego" eventually acquiesced: "I've learned that being a mother and wife is the most rewarding career a woman can have!" No man inside the pages of these comics stood up to show support for wage-earning wives, at least not once confronted with the prospect of children entering the picture. Even a woman's college education came across as extraneous. As one recently engaged girl explained to her fiancé after dropping out of school, "what you've taught me is more important than any classroom lesson!"¹⁷

Romance comics instead worked to prepare women for other tribulations that would arise as a result of Cold War mobilization. "Army Camp Wife," for example, explored the shabbiness and material deprivation that newlyweds might experience while living on or near a military base. In the story, readers become flies on a wall, privy to heartfelt conversation between two young wives, one of whom has threatened to leave her husband over his inability to finance a more lavish lifestyle. "I've a right to a decent home! Don't I count at all?" the aggrieved party plaintively asks. "No!" her friend emphatically replies. "Our men are the important ones . . . our men who will go off to battle someday! Don't you see . . . we have to make sacrifices, too! This is our way of showing our soldiers that we're strong enough to wait for them to come back from the battlefield!" Naturally, the woman about to leave apologizes and promises to "always wait for my soldier to come back to me!" She then addresses readers directly, asking them to "remember it takes courage to be a soldier's wife!" Girls would demonstrate patriotic commitment to their country by making do with what Uncle Sam could provide them, sustained by the knowledge that such sacrifices would be repaid once the world had been rid of America's communist foes.

¹⁶"Career Wife," *Wartime Romances* #10, 1952. "Domestic containment" in Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York, 1988).

¹⁷"Wartime Wife," *Wartime Romances* #13, 1953; "Wrong-Way Girl," *Wartime Romance* #8, 1952; "Anything for Money," *Wartime Romances* #5, 1952; "Oh Promise Me," *Stories of Romance* #10, 1957; "Who Wants to be Good?" *Wartime Romances* #18, 1953. See Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York, 2000) for a careful deconstruction of these largely imagined fantasies of utopian suburban domesticity.



Figure 4. As in this splash page where a returning Korean War veteran declares that he had hoped to come home to “a wife, not a business executive,” romance comics castigated career women for their failure to prioritize the needs of their husbands and families. “We Waited Too Long,” *Heart Throbs* #31, 1954.

“We’re not letting our men down! And I know you won’t either!” the comic pointedly concludes.¹⁸

Other complaints, however, seemed more serious. For example, with large numbers of the opposite sex called up for service in Korea, females faced the prospect of a “world without men.” “What can all lonely young girls do with so many boys in the army?” “There just aren’t enough boys to go around!” characters cried out. With “so many fellows off in the army and all . . . we’re bored and lonely and miserable! No dates tonight! No dates any night! I’m only eighteen and ready to be an old maid!” Dire depictions of love in the time of the Korean War appeared in multiple romance comics. “You can see us everywhere,” another began. “We’re young, restless girls in our late teens or early twenties! We’re a wandering, *lost generation* of lonely females! Most of our young men have gone into the service and are either in training camps, or overseas fighting on a distant battlefield!” In depicting Lynn and Betty, two high school seniors, as girls driven into the arms of the “middle-aged wolves” populating a seedy nightclub, the story warned about the dangers of desperate dames compelled by circumstance to become juvenile delinquents. “But what else can we *do*,” they wailed. “There aren’t any fellows left in town since

¹⁸“Army Camp Wife,” *True War Romances* #13, 1954. Other stories also confronted the problem of “poverty” among military families. See “What Will My Friends Say?” *Stories of Romance* #12, 1957.

the draft!” As one of the ersatz advice columnists appearing in the pages of these romance comics gravely intoned, the mobilization of so many eligible bachelors “is the problem of Katherine M. and *every young girl!*” Like the other scarcities that supposedly jeopardized American national security during the 1950s (the bomber gap or the missile gap come to mind), this ‘date gap’ was an imaginary problem that nevertheless spoke to real fears.¹⁹

Publications therefore confronted it head on. Some editors responded by creating correspondence clubs designed to connect female fans with enlisted men. “With more and more boys going into the armed forces every month,” *Wartime Romances* announced in 1952, “many of our readers are finding dates few and far between.” “Most of the girls agree,” the announcement continued, “that the next best thing to a date is getting a letter from a boy in the service.” In writing to frontline forces, young women could serve both their country and themselves. They would bolster troop morale while (potentially) making a love connection. “Thousands of boys are disappointed at mail call because not enough letters are being written to them. Let’s go, girls! A letter to a boy you’ve never met may spark a romance you’ll never forget!” Other publications taught girls how to write alluring love letters to “your guy overseas,” sure to act as “guaranteed boy-friend bait.” It is unclear, however, how successful these efforts were.²⁰

The more common response to the Korean War’s dating drought, however, was for writers to promote romantic resignation and celibacy as patriotic virtues. The sages of these stories urged readers “to forget about dates while we wait for the boys to come back.” Or, as the female narrator of “Search for Love!” more didactically proclaimed, “I learned how dangerous it can be to be desperately lonely!” Try to meet “the right people at the right places,” she insisted. “Don’t settle for the cheap or tawdry! It can cost you *your whole future!*” Girls were urged to understand that when a boyfriend tells you that “I’ll be leaving soon for Korea” but “it won’t seem so rough if only you’ll be waiting for me when I get back,” a bargain essential to America’s greater war effort was being struck. Rolling back the Red Tide abroad remained contingent upon female fidelity at home. Departing men, meanwhile, promised that their service guaranteed “a better world to live in and raise that family we often talk about!”²¹ (Figure 5)

This was why so many comic books spent time insisting that young women see soldiers as safe romantic bets. In surveying publishers’ output, one is struck by the sheer quantity of stories that sought to do little more than correct the record regarding the supposed crudity and adulterousness of servicemen. Tales like “Never Love a Soldier,” “No More Soldiers for Me,” and “I Didn’t Want to Fall for Him” made their intentions clear from the beginning. A girl prejudiced against the idea of dating within the military’s ranks (one coldly dismisses her khaki-clad suitor by declaring “a uniform is about as welcome here as a sore throat!”) is ultimately forced to admit that she was wrong. G.I.s are consistently shown to be more chivalrous and attentive romantic companions than their civilian counterparts. Originally convinced that “all a soldier thinks about is adding another girl to his list,” characters eventually opened their eyes to the “warmth and decency” embodied by patriotic young men. “No one would have believed I had once been a silly cynical girl!” went the common refrain of women awakened to the joys of courting Uncle Sam’s boys. Troops also rose to their own defense. “What makes you think you have the ability to look through a man’s uniform into his soul?” We are not “*all* guilty of the same thing that *one* man may have done!” Girls prejudiced against servicemen were asked to

¹⁹“World without Men,” *Wartime Romances* #13, 1953; “Prescription for Happiness,” *Love Diary* #24, 1952; “Search for Love!” *Love Diary* #34, 1953. On the scarcity of men during wartime and its impact on courtship practices, see Beth L. Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore, 1989), 34–42.

²⁰“Correspondence Club’ for Our Readers and Servicemen,” *Wartime Romances* #10, 1952; “boy-friend bait” in *Love Journal* #22, 1954. For similar correspondence clubs, see for example *Diary Secrets* #23, 1954 and #24, 1954.

²¹“Search for Love!” *Love Diary* #34, 1953; “Induction Blues,” *Love Letters* #29, 1953.



Figure 5. A crucial dimension of the cultural work performed by romance comics was the assurance they provided that strong relationships could survive the new Cold War intact. “G.I. Heartache,” *Love Secrets* #50, 1956.

remember that “they’re in uniform for a purpose”—killing Reds—and this made them “really worth waiting for!”²²

Some comics went so far as to claim that the draft was the best possible thing for a young couple. As a recently inducted Ed explained to his fretful girlfriend: “Don’t you see, Doris, darling . . . the army has actually made a man of me! I’ve satisfied my yen for travel . . . I’ve found a career for the future . . . and most important I learned after leaving you for so long that I could never get along without you!” Doris enthusiastically agreed, announcing that “I had learned my fears of losing him to the army were as groundless as was his insecurity concerning our future welfare!” More than a few of these narratives read like scripts stuffed with lines that women could rehearse for men who might be wavering in their commitment to country or parents hesitant to consent to their daughter’s engagement to a serviceman. “Wartime Blues,” for example, spent several pages on a conscript who “felt all his hopes” and “all his future were finished the day he was drafted.” His fiancée, however, makes the case that their undying love (as well as their unborn child) conferred upon him a sort of immortality. By the end, the prospective

²²“Never Love a Soldier,” *G.I. Sweethearts* #36, 1953; “No More Soldiers for Me,” *G.I. Sweethearts* #39, 1954; “I Didn’t Want to Fall for Him,” *G.I. Sweethearts* #42, 1954; “Something About a Soldier,” *Secret Story Romances* #12, 1955; “The Girl He Left Behind,” *Love Romances* #34, 1953. Sailors also came in for reputational rehabilitation. See “I Was a Sailor’s Sweetie!” *Love Tales* #54, 1952.

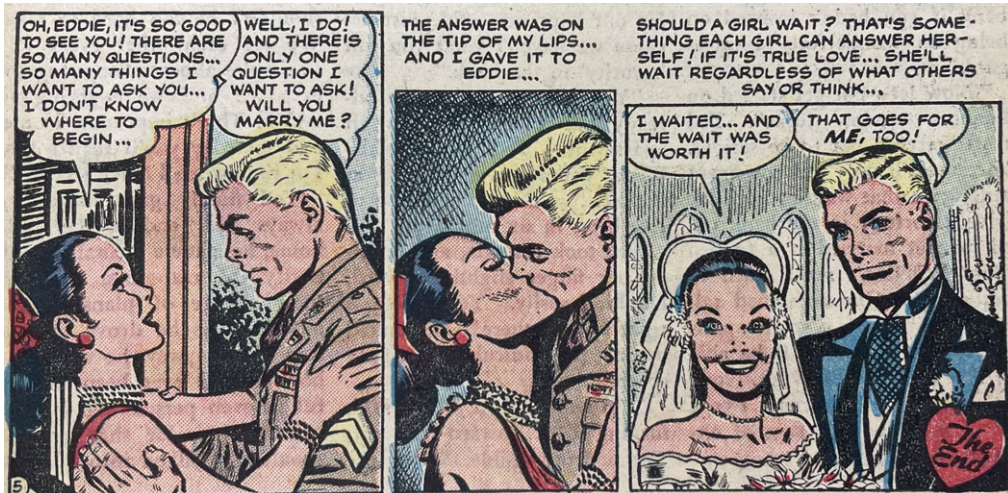


Figure 6. Romance comics insisted that patient “waiting” for the return of boyfriends and husbands deployed abroad was often the most important role a woman could play during the Cold War. “Should a Girl Wait,” *My Own Romance* #31, 1953.

G.I. comes to believe that “no soldier really dies so long as he leaves something of himself behind! I’m not worried about my future any more!” His betrothed is no less sanguine: “Yes, my dearest, you’ll come back and we’ll be waiting!” There lay the watchword within the romance comic genre: “waiting.” “You don’t know what it means to a man to have a girl wait for him!” announced one returning veteran, even as his faithful girlfriend reaffirmed the same lesson in the final panel. “It’s worth waiting for the man you love!” (Figure 6).²³

The real enemy romance comics sought to combat, then, was cynicism. Young people about to turn the corner into adulthood amidst renewed war and the looming threat of nuclear holocaust could be forgiven for feelings of despondency. What was the point of love, marriage, family, and other such markers of maturity in the face of those obstacles? Illustrated stories were careful to make the case that these changed circumstances only heightened the need for steadfast romantic connection, even if it meant challenges ahead. Writers imparted the lesson that courtship’s rewards still outweighed its risks. “To be in love is to soar to the heights of ecstasy and to be loved is to drink deeply from life’s golden cup” exclaimed one narrative. The point was simply to be candid about the fact that “when the man you adore wears a uniform and when each tear-stained kiss may be the last one, love can mean anguish, too!” There was a “price [to] pay for falling in love with a man whose next stop is Korea!” Soviet aggression meant that, as one husband expostulated, “there *isn’t* any security in this cockeyed world anymore!” “Just knowing you love me,” however, “is enough!” It served as the only mutual defense pact that mattered.²⁴

Romance comics therefore implored readers to hold out hope that “one of these days we’ll forget about guns and tears and everything else that makes up a war!” “We’ve got to have faith” soldiers told their sweethearts. “Keep thinking about the things I’m going to fight for! That little house we talked about in some quiet town! We’ve *got* to have something to believe in!

²³“Did I Lose Him to the Army?” *G.I. Sweethearts* #41, 1954; “Wartime Blues,” *G.I. Sweethearts* #32, 1953; “I Miss Your Kiss!” *Secret Story Romances* #20, 1956. On the absolute necessity of women faithfully “waiting” for enlisted lovers to return, see also “Nancy’s Answer!” *Lovers* #74, 1956; “We Only Have Today!” *Young Romance* #46, 1952 and “Nancy Hale’s Problem Clinic,” *Young Romance* #55, 1953. “Take a Chance on Love,” *Lovers’ Lane* #19, 1951 even includes Defense Department talking points about government allowances for servicemen’s wives.

²⁴“Farewell Date,” *True War Romances* #2, 1952; “G.I. Heartache,” *Love Secrets* #50, 1956; “My Boy Friend Was Afraid of Love,” *Love Letters* #51, 1956. These themes similarly align with ideas expressed in May, *Homeward Bound*.

Something to keep us going!” Nihilistic girls, meanwhile, evidenced changes of heart as a result of their lovers’ pleas. “I’ve learned that love is worth all the heartaches that sometimes go with it” announced one such convert, who shared her story for the benefit of others in similar circumstances. “No, it wasn’t easy for me to watch Larry march off the next day into that senseless inferno men call war! But in my heart there was faith and hope! Whatever the future held, Larry could count on me to be waiting! I’ll keep on dreaming and believing . . . and praying too, my darling!”²⁵

In some ways, the stress romance comics placed on the need for patience reads like a backlash against the infamous Dear John letter. Wartime, of course, has always spelled trouble for lovers separated by distance and diverging life experience, but during the Second World War, cultural outlets elevated the plight of the brokenhearted soldier to heights previously unseen. As magazines, radio, and movies fretted over the ramifications for military readiness that such breakups might entail, “Dear John” became something of a stock figure. The trope was therefore fresh on the minds of comic book writers who, in an effort to prevent another rash of romantic setbacks during the Korean conflict, began to portray for couples the virtues of commitment. Furthermore, while it is often difficult to ascribe specific comic plots to individual writers, we do know that many of the industry’s postwar editors, authors, and artists were veterans. They were likely to have had some experience, whether first or second hand, with the emotional havoc that “Dear John” might wreak. Hence the firmness with which characters implored readers to stick with their significant others serving overseas. Martial goals were being served, therefore, even in the pages of romance comics unlikely to circulate among soldiers.²⁶

So much so, in fact, that commitment to the American military mission in Korea served as a sort of shorthand for romantic compatibility. Fantastical accounts suffused with Red Scare sensibilities—consider titles like “I Fell For a Commie,” “Communist Kisses,” “Backyard Battleground,” and “Tyranny Broke My Heart”—featured impressionable girls swept off their feet by sweet-talking suitors spouting Marxist lies. The smitten teenagers come to their senses, however, after their boyfriends attempt to fill their heads with nonsense about UN aggression in East Asia and Moscow’s munificence. The histrionic taglines of these seduction stories—“tales of love and communism, laughter and death”—urged adolescents to be on the lookout for traitorous Romeos seeking to lure unsuspecting lovers into acts of disloyalty. There was a “secret battle taking place—*right here, right now!*” writers warned, “an unheralded, underground fight between communism and democracy for the youth of America!” Romantic vigilance was therefore a girl’s basic duty. Comics encouraged young lovers to police one another’s politics for evidence of ideological nonconformity. Threats to the American way of life were not confined to Korea, but one’s support of the war there could serve as a litmus test for a prospective partner’s loyalties (Figure 7).²⁷

Of course, one should notice how much of this melodrama played out among white and American protagonists. It was comparatively rare for actual Koreans to appear in these stories. A fair number of the comics themselves were set in Korea as they chronicled the romantic conquests of nurses and members of the Women’s Army Corps (WAC), but the local population went unnoticed. They were, for the most part, treated as an afterthought, as inconsequential to their own country’s history. The exceptions to that rule, however, usually made for interesting reading. Miscegenation, for example, was rendered nearly invisible by comic book artists despite the reality of sexual relations—whether consensual, nonconsensual, or as “war brides”—between American servicemembers and Korean women. At a time when

²⁵“Farewell Date,” *True War Romances* #2, 1952.

²⁶These arguments are largely owed to Susan L. Carruthers, *Dear John: Love and Loyalty in Wartime America* (Cambridge, UK, 2022).

²⁷“I Fell For a Commie,” *Love Secrets* #32, 1953; “Communist Kisses!” *Confessions of the Lovelorn* #56, 1954; “Backyard Battleground,” *Daring Confessions* #5, 1953; “Tyranny Broke My Heart,” *Flaming Love* #1, 1949.



Figure 7. During the Red Scare, romance comics warned young women about the dangers of their own seduction at the hands of socialistic suitors. "I Fell for a Commie," *Love Secrets* #32, 1953.

many states had laws criminalizing interracial marriage, romance comics were always careful to police the color line by ensuring that homogenously white characters courted within their respective racial ranks. Though one is tempted to say the genre did more to elide, rather than regulate, the question of race. The short, four-issue shelf life of Fawcett Publishing's experimental title *Negro Romance* suggested the unprofitability of transgressing mainstream

social convention. Southern retailers, in fact, categorically refused to sell any romance comic that could be construed as a challenge to the established racial hierarchy. President Harry Truman's Executive Order 9981 may have officially desegregated America's armed forces in 1948, but no one reading comic books during the Korean War would have guessed as much.²⁸

The very few Korean women who managed to escape this implicit embargo on nonwhite comic book characters seem to serve little purpose except to demonstrate for readers the necessity of the United Nations (UN)-backed and U.S.-led invasion of the peninsula. One *True War Romances* story titled "Beloved Enemy," for example, dramatized a love triangle among an Army surgeon, his American nurse, and a female Korean interpreter. Throughout the tale, the character of "Chia-San" embodies the Orientalist tropes of Asian inscrutability and animal sexuality. She is described as "beautiful" and "mysterious," someone who exudes "strange undercurrents" that "had reached out to encircle my beloved." "She's just a native girl" cries Janet Drew, "but I've never seen such deadly beauty! Chia San! Are you a saint . . . or a devil . . . come to torment me?" She "could only stand numb and helpless, watching through blinding tears," bearing silent witness as handsome Don Brady "weaken[ed] to her fatal power!" Once exposed as a North Korean infiltrator, however, Chia San was imprisoned for espionage. Janet and Don, meanwhile, reaffirm their feelings for one another. Asked if he ever truly loved Chia-San, the doctor laughs in reply. "Love . . . her? No, Jan! I was trapped . . . trapped by her strange, mystical beauty! But I love only you!" In the final panel, readers are assured that "here in this strange land, Don and I work and wait knowing that victory will come some day as it has come for our love!" In romance comics (as in other popular media at the time), a "Yellow Peril" took the shape of alluring "native women." Their superficial charms, however, were no match for the faithful love of good American women.²⁹

Only a small handful of stories attempted to humanize their Korean characters. One rare example was titled "His Fraternity Pin." In it, two exchange students from Korea, Lee Pon and Kim Wang, meet and fall in love on a California college campus. Both begin their American journey with high hopes, but Kim is depicted as the victim of racist verbal assaults and outright discrimination. As a result, he begins to gravitate toward leftist political organizations, a "circle of malcontents who followed the communist line to the letter." Lee seeks to reason with Kim and a bitter argument ensues. "These new friends of yours . . . they are communists . . . ruthless, destructive! Are you blind? They are only for Russia with its secret police . . . its slave labor camps . . . its firing squads! You lived near the 38th Parallel! You knew what went on over the border!" "Nonsense!" Kim replies. "I am giving myself to a greater cause! Russia is the true people's democracy!" Denouncing American nativism and bigotry, he vows to join the North Korean army, "crush the western imperialists," and "drive them from the earth!"³⁰

When Lee and Kim meet again years later, he is a dying soldier and she serves as a nurse behind UN lines. While watching Kim draw his final breaths, Lee berates him for being "a communist, dedicated to the cold, ruthless forces that were destroying my country." A question hovers in the air as she turns away for the last time: "How could you fight for tyranny and evil?"

²⁸On women, sex, and the Korean War, see Ji-Yeon Yuh, *Beyond the Shadow of Camptown: Korean Military Brides in America* (New York, 2004); Grace M. Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War* (Minneapolis, 2008); and Susie Woo, *Korean Children and Women at the Crossroads of US Empire* (New York, 2020). Dauber, *American Comics*, 98–99, describes the racial homogeneity of romance comics, while the rapid demise of *Negro Romance* is discussed in Nolan, *Love on the Racks*, 73. Its limited run, however, prevented *Negro Romance* from engaging with the Korean War in any way.

²⁹"Beloved Enemy," *True War Romances* #7, 1953 and see also "Korean Girl," *Exciting Romances* #7, 1952. Similar themes explored in Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination* (Berkeley, 2003); Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley, 1993) and Ruth Mayer, *Serial Fu Manchu: The Chinese Supervillain and the Spread of Yellow Peril Ideology* (Philadelphia, 2014).

³⁰"His Fraternity Pin," *Wartime Romances* #16, 1953.

The story is hardly ambivalent in its politics; no excuses are made for Kim's Marxism and North Korea is painted as an evil regime. But in confronting the skeletons of bigotry in America's own ideological closet, this particular tale contains a complexity most of its peers lacked. It was, if nothing else, evidence of a growing disenchantment with Korean War jingoism among both industrial artists and the public.³¹

Beginning to Forget the "Forgotten War"

By 1952, an older attitude of comfortable ease, of nostrums about inevitable American victory, became the real casualty of the Korean War's popular cultural front. The conflict had initially led an untroubled life in the illustrated medium's pages, which cheered U.S.-led military intervention once the shooting started. The benevolence of an emerging American Century went mostly unchallenged in comic book coverage of the Korean War's first twelve to eighteen months. With the UN invasion of the North turned back by Chinese forces, combat reduced to a messy stalemate along the 38th Parallel, General Douglas MacArthur's controversial dismissal, and the news media circulating haunting pictures of shellshocked combatants, however, more and more comics began to detail the omnipresence of death, fatigue, fear, and bitterness among previously unshakable soldiers and marines. The climate of disillusionment was only exacerbated by the 1952 election season, where Dwight Eisenhower's landslide victory seemed like a public repudiation of the war.³²

That tonal shift became apparent among romance comics as well. A perusal of story titles suggests that something had changed. Cheerful narratives about the pleasures (and innocent inconveniences) of dating or marrying military men were by then being replaced by grimmer fare like "My Man Didn't Come Back," "Was My Corporal the Same Man?" and "The War Changed My Soldier." Writers expecting the United States to rout its rivals in Korea instead confronted a protracted conflict with no clear winner. Their protagonists increasingly asked uncomfortable questions and faced deeply unpleasant situations. Most often this revolved around the toll combat fatigue could take on returning veterans, as well as their wives and sweethearts. Teenaged girls were shown what happened when a man "came back [from Korea] with a chip on his shoulder" or "wouldn't readjust to normal life." As another woman wailed, "Steve was different! His eyes held a restlessness, a bitterness they'd never had before!" "Don't be too shocked," readers heard with growing frequency, if your soldier "seems like a total stranger when he comes home! War can change a man!" After all, "nearly two years at the front does something" to him, so that, as comic book characters confided to one another, "when he got home all he did was brood. I hardly knew it was the same person!" Some illustrators depicted returning combat veterans as violent-tempered drunkards and womanizers who leave their significant others wondering why "my man has come home and nothing is the same!" One went so far as to show the attempted suicide of a handicapped veteran fearful of becoming a "helpless burden" upon his wife. Though lacking twenty-first century diagnostic tools and today's medical terminology, this was clearly an attempt to spark a conversation about post-traumatic stress (Figure 8).³³

As the Korean War dragged on, romance serials confronted these steadily growing concerns. Various stories depicted disfigurement, disability, and men who "came back from Korea, body

³¹"His Fraternity Pin," *Wartime Romances* #16, 1953.

³²The collapse of the American war effort is covered in Samuel F. Wells, Jr., *Fearing the Worst: How Korea Transformed the Cold War* (New York, 2020). On the thematic shift in combat comics, see Savage, *Comic Books and America*, 51–59.

³³"The War Changed My Soldier," *True War Romances* #12, 1953; "Was My Corporal the Same Man?" *G.I. Sweethearts* #44, 1955; "My Man Didn't Come Back," *G.I. Sweethearts* #39, 1954; "My Hero Came Home a Stranger," *G.I. Sweethearts* #32, 1953; "Home Coming," *Romantic Marriage* #17, 1952. See also "Which Way Lies Happiness," *Youthful Hearts* #1, 1952.

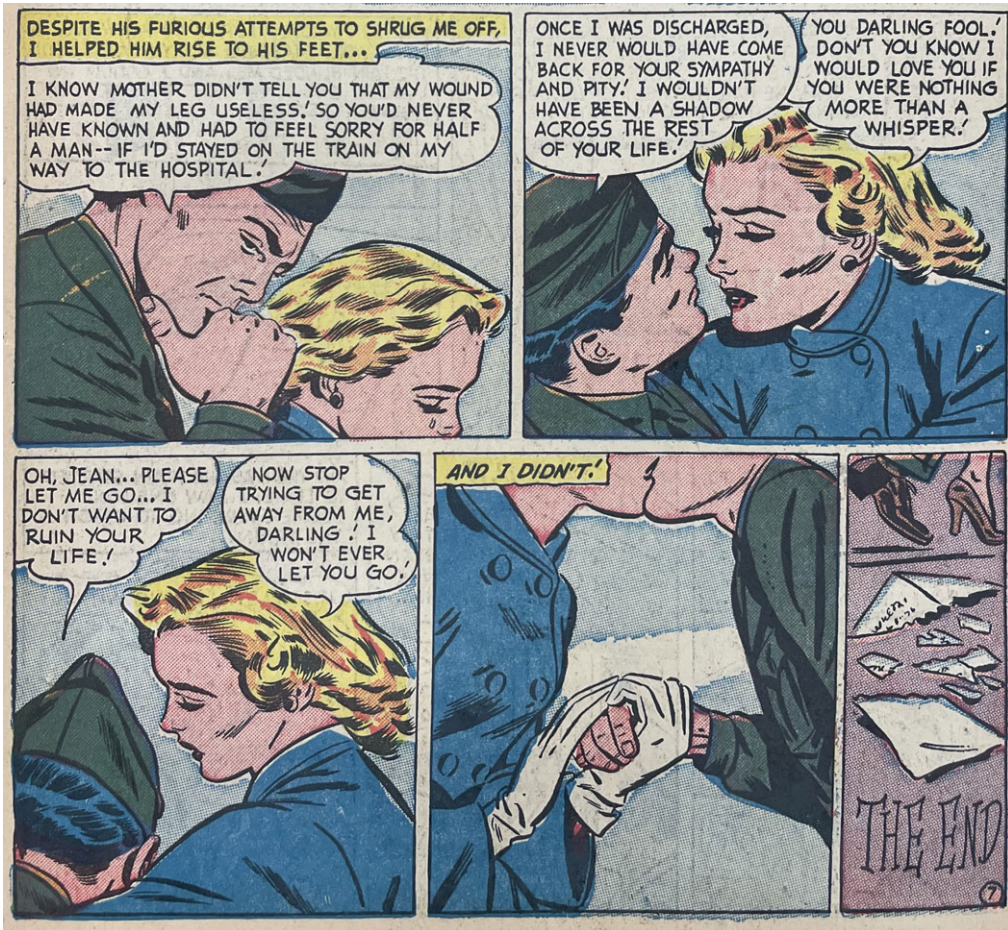


Figure 8. Romance comics published toward the Korean War's tail end increasingly wrestled with issues of death and disfigurement. But as in this story, women were encouraged to remain patient with and faithful to the wounded men in their lives. "Farewell to Love," *Girls' Love Stories* #21, 1953.

and spirit broken!" Some even slipped into the second person to suggest the pervasiveness of the problem: "You've come back from the war to your girl—with a gripe against the world! You're unhappy . . . your girl's unhappy! Well here is a story like yours . . ." A woman's duty to her country during the Cold War, moreover, was carefully spelled out and colorfully illustrated. Girls were shown that this titanic struggle would not be confined to battlefields half a world away. Its reach instead extended into the home, and their responsibility involved both accepting catastrophic losses and welcoming potentially damaged men back into the community. Returning soldiers, it seemed, would rely on the comfort, care, and concern that only their women could provide. The experience of Judith and Alan in one of many editions of *Girls' Love Stories* dedicated to the Korean War is emblematic of this thematic shift. "I hadn't changed," Judith explained while waiting for her discharged husband's train, "and it never occurred to me that Alan might have." The man she had sent off to war, however, returned home angry and confused. "In Korea," Alan articulated, "everything got mixed up in my mind! There was nothing but kill or be killed! Now . . . I'm back . . . but my mind is still there! I don't seem to *fit* any more!" The solutions these comic books offered were, of course, never particularly sophisticated. Emotional support and undying affection were almost always



Figure 9. The subjects of combat fatigue and post-traumatic stress arose more often within romance comic books as women were shown how to navigate the challenges of coping with traumatized Korean War veterans. "Homecoming!" *Girls' Love Stories* #22, 1953.

portrayed as enough to bring despondent troops back from the ravages of shellshock (Figure 9).³⁴

Death and grief also made more regular appearances in the pages of Korean War romance comics. Initially expecting a relatively bloodless affair, the genre had to evolve as casualty lists grew. It was inevitable that plots would eventually encompass the loss of loved ones overseas. In "Cupid Always Rings Twice," for example, Jessica marries Alan before he is shipped off to Korea. After her spouse is killed in action however, she struggles to move on. Courted by Charles, a new suitor, the widow initially resists rekindled romance until finally embracing the idea that her first husband would not want her to feel lonely forever. In the comic's dramatic final panels, Jessica breaks the fourth wall and begins speaking to the audience: "So, reader, take it from me—don't despair and give up all hope if you lose your first love, because there's more than one man in the world who can make you blissfully happy! That's why I, Jessica Wright, decided to tell my story in this magazine! I learned the truth the hard way, through anguish and heartbreak—and hope that this will show *you* the way to the heart-throbbing happiness that's every girl's right!" Other comics may have been subtler, but their messaging mostly remained the same. A contentedly married woman hears word of her husband's death in Korea and struggles with the ensuing anguish before her heart is eventually reawakened by new romantic prospects. Writers clearly believed that if women could be convinced that love was not a once-in-a-lifetime proposition, it might steel their resolve and promote a willingness to accept the

³⁴"Homecoming!" *Girls' Love Stories* #22, 1953; "Tell It to the Judge!" *Young Romance* #55, 1953.

losses that the burgeoning Cold War would inevitably entail. Faith in the curative power of love would be the army widow's solace. As a letter from one fictional woman's deceased husband implored, "darling, if I don't come back, please, please try to forget me! Life is too real, too wonderful, to let it slip through your fingers in memories. If someone comes along and you think you can love him, then love him, and be happy. Love is for the living."³⁵

Collectively, the implicit goal of such plotlines was to assuage American women as the Cold War turned hot. Certain losses and setbacks were shown to be unavoidable in the global struggle to check communist aggression. Romance comics thus acted as a roadmap, charting the country's course into new realities and showing young readers what it would mean to grow up, fall in love, and get married against the backdrop of an emerging U.S.–Soviet Union rivalry. Just for good measure, however, they consistently demonized women depicted as ducking out on their crippled companions. "I hope you don't take the *easy way* and forget about him when he needs you," they warned. Girls poised to ditch their combat-mangled guys taught readers how to take the high road: "*I'm the disabled one! You're no less a man than you ever were! It isn't arms or legs that make a man! It's the heart inside him—the courage and the strength!*"³⁶

The important element here, however, was the implicit question embedded in all this handwringing about grim death and the reintegration of wounded soldiers into ordinary American life: was the Korean War worth so much agony? Love stories appeared increasingly agnostic on that point. Considering the larger domestic political climate—events in Korea, after all, fueled Joseph McCarthy's anticommunist witch-hunts—it was as close to a full-throated critique of American foreign policy that one could find in the realm of mainstream literature. And the military establishment was very much aware of this. While Congressional committees investigated comic book content, the Department of Defense circulated official memorandums worrying about a generation of juvenile citizens taught to be skeptical about America's efforts to contain the communist menace. When comics highlighted "the horrors, hardships, and futility of war," they tended to "discredit the Army and undermine troop morale." Those publications were soon branded both "subversive" and a "menace to national security." Such reading material, the report continued, "could be construed as trying to make Americans want to pull out of the war and to discourage young men from enlisting." Comic books had become so popular and so influential a genre that they were treated as a key to future combat readiness and by extension eventual American victory—or defeat—in the Cold War.³⁷

The backlash against all this so-called seditiousness came swiftly. Both the FBI and assorted Military Intelligence agencies, suspecting that communists had infiltrated comic book companies, opened investigations into various publishers. Self-appointed guardians of children's morals similarly sought to protect the nation's youth from creeping defeatism and possible Soviet brainwashing by circulating their own militantly anti-communist comics. Civic associations devoted to the preservation of decency likewise experimented with buyback programs, boycotts, and burnings as a means to curtail the comic book's bad influence. Prominent medical authorities such as Dr. Fredric Wertham offered expert testimony at Congressional hearings on supposedly skyrocketing rates of juvenile delinquency. He laid the blame for those disturbing trends squarely on the shoulders of comic book publishers. What was

³⁵"Cupid Always Rings Twice," *Lovelorn* #18, 1951; "Heart Asleep!" *Lovelorn* #47, 1954; "Wartime Blues," *G.I. Sweethearts* #32, 1953; "What Love Forgives," *Girls' Love Stories* #27, 1954.

³⁶"Love Is Forever," *Love Tales* #53, 1952; "My Heart Cried Out," *First Love* #34, 1953. Similar stories that explore these darker themes include "The Face of My Dreams," *Love Secrets* #36, 1954; "Grieve No More," *Romantic Secrets* #37, 1952; "With This Ring," *Love Romances* #26, 1953; "Margaret Daley's Other Love," *Love Tales* #50, 1952; "The Easy Way," *Love Tales* #56, 1952; "Free My Heart!" *Popular Romance* #23, 1953; and "My War Bride Rival," *Heart Throbs* #23, 1953.

³⁷For the Defense Department quotes and the concerns raised by the FBI and Army Intelligence, see Hirsch, *Pulp Empire*, 165–8.

to be done to stave off the utter ruination of the nation's youth, what Wertham called "the seduction of the innocent"?³⁸

The compromise most parties eventually settled upon was the Comics Code of 1954. Unlike the Writers' War Board, a propaganda and censorship arm of the federal government that had controlled comic book content from 1942 to 1945, the new Code consisted of a series of rules imposed by the industry upon itself. Recently suffering reputational damage, comics sought to burnish their patriotic credentials by disavowing even the mild critiques of U.S. policy expressed toward the tail end of the Korean War. The so-called General Standards policed by publishers therefore explicitly stated "government officials and respected institutions shall never be presented in such a way as to create disregard for established authority." "In every instance," the new rulebook continued, "good shall triumph over evil." Now, as a matter of publishers' official policy, communists were to be portrayed as irredeemably wicked, while the justness of American foreign policy could not be questioned. Comics whose content indicated a refusal to honor this new code were not granted the "Seal of Approval" prominently displayed on the covers of compliant publications. When retailers refused to stock comics that had not been certified by censors, they brought nonconformists to heel.³⁹

Historians continue to debate who lost the Korean War. The conflict's winners, however, were much easier to spot, at least to the readers of comic books. In a climate of growing disillusionment with the debacle in Korea and escalating censorship of children's media, the superhero ultimately emerged victorious. Marvel Comics, for example, was on the verge of bankruptcy by 1957. Stan Lee had let his entire freelance staff go and survived mostly by issuing reprints of old titles until the Fantastic Four, the Incredible Hulk, and Spider Man were introduced in 1961 and 1962. DC Comics also hopped aboard the superhero bandwagon. The Flash returned in 1956, while Green Lantern, Hawkman, Hawkgirl, and the Atom were all resurrected in 1959. By 1960 DC had brought enough of its stable of superheroes back from the dead that they could be combined into a new Justice League. Seeking to exploit audience nostalgia and resuscitate formerly lucrative storylines, the so-called Silver Age of comics saw old crusaders dusted off to do battle within fictional and fantastical worlds more divorced from diplomatic realities than Korean War era comics had been. Superheroes, comic book publishers discovered, did not attract the same levels of public scrutiny that militarily inflected publications had during the early 1950s. The Korean War, therefore, not only sank Harry Truman's approval rating; it also triggered a widespread reorientation in the content and themes of mass-produced youth literature. The same conflict that, on one side of the world, killed millions and restructured geopolitical relations, simultaneously reverberated through the lives of America's young people by reorganizing the comic book industry and triggering a very public debate about the responsibility of society to monitor the content of media meant for kids.⁴⁰

Romance comics were no less subject to these recessionary trends. Their peak corresponded almost precisely with the Korean War's duration. By 1955, it was clear that market oversaturation, a so-called Love Glut, would wreck the industry. The last of the genre's titles, *Young Love*, was discontinued in 1977. But long before then, romance comics had scaled back their efforts at politicization. Children had once been asked to help "win the war in Korea" and "rout out the Red rats on the home front!" Promises were made that "if we win there, it'll never come here!" Audiences had been told to "do everything you can to help us stop the Communist ravage that is at your very front gates!" In a "ruthless battle against the forces of freedom and liberty," after all, "their cause cannot, *must not* succeed, if we are to continue our American way

³⁸On Fredric Wertham and the comic book backlash, see David Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America* (New York, 2008).

³⁹Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (Jackson, MS, 1998), 166–9.

⁴⁰On the Silver Age of comic books, see Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (New York, 2016).



Figure 10. Though blissful images like this became rarer as the Korean War progressed, romance comics insisted to readers that courtship and love could still (and needed to) flourish during a new era of international crisis and looming atomic annihilation. *Young Romance* #46, 1952.

of life!” Some comics even included a section called “Your Role in the Cold War,” which instructed youths on how they might contribute to the defense of an “American way of life that is without parallel in the civilized world!” The stakes were portrayed as astronomically high.

Hundreds of different titles, among both the romance and combat genres, had organized their stories around the Korean War. And yet the conflict—which by 1951 witnessed a full-scale American retreat followed by the setting in of a grim war of attrition—did not lend itself to the boosterism attempted by comic book writers (Figure 10).⁴¹

In other words, impasse in East Asia was difficult to depict within the pages of an ordinarily exuberant and triumphalist genre like the comic book. Repeated American defeats in Korea were hard to square with comic books which insisted that one U.S. soldier, backed by the devotion of his wife or sweetheart, was more than a match for dozens of “commies.” The resulting cognitive dissonance therefore helped catalyze an age of skepticism, cynicism, and suspicion regarding the exercise of American power abroad. Pronouncements about American invincibility and inevitable victory were ultimately seen as embarrassing, the relic of a doomed effort to apply Second World War sensibilities to a new Cold War context. That shoe simply would not fit. As a result, the Korean War (and the not inconsiderable popular cultural efforts helping to sustain it) has mostly been swept under America’s historical and historiographic rug. It is high time, however, that we recover the important role romance comic books played in publicizing, dramatizing, and mythologizing the national security crisis along the 38th Parallel, and, in a larger sense, the crucial function such widely read literature performed in constructing and disseminating among American girls the very concept of the Cold War itself.⁴²

⁴¹“The Wedding Dress,” *Cinderella Love* #29, 1955; “The Voice,” *Kent Blake of the Secret Service* #13, 1953; “Nightmare at Noon,” *Spy Cases* #7, 1951. Bradford Wright mentions more than one hundred Korean War themed comic book titles in *Comic Book Nation*, 114. On the “Love Glut” and the subsequent slow death of romance comics, see Dauber, *American Comics*, 94 and Barson, *Agonizing Love*, 12–13.

⁴²On the lapsed cultural memory of a “forgotten” Korean War, see Michael J. Devine, *The Korean War Remembered: Contested Memories of an Unended Conflict* (Lincoln, NE, 2023); Daniel Y. Kim, *The Intimacies of Conflict: Cultural Memory and the Korean War* (New York, 2020); and Edwards, *To Acknowledge a War*.