Terrified Protectors:
The Early Twenty-First Century Fear Narrative
in Comic Book Superhero Stories

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Comic book superheroes are an important part of the American social fabric. Many citizens dismiss these brightly-colored crime fighters' exploits as juvenile fiction or trash culture, but superhero narratives are a highly significant American cultural and social force. Superheroes like Superman, Spider-Man, Batman, and Captain America have formed a national mythology that reflects and responds to an ever-changing society. Since Superman's debut in 1938, these costumed avengers have become a cultural barometer for American society as a whole. Superheroes tell Americans how the nation's citizens are acting and often also provide an example of how they should be acting. These social and cultural understandings are especially interesting during the 2000s, when numerous events forced Americans to confront a decade filled with terror. The way that comic book creators addressed fear in comic book universes provides a helpful understanding of how Americans coped with these dark days. If superheroes are the nation's reflection and its role models, then the decade's stories reveal a country gripped by fear, suspicion, and mistrust. Throughout their history, superheroes had often assisted those in need, but during the first decade of the twenty-first century even they could not save Americans from the terror that engulfed the nation.

The September 11th terrorist attacks cemented widespread national feelings of terror. On September 11, 2001, terrorists hijacked four commercial airlines on the east coast of the United States. The hijackers flew two of the aircraft into the World Trade Center twin towers in New York City, one airplane severely damaged the Pentagon, and the other plane crashed in a Pennsylvania field. The 9/11 attacks galvanized the nation while also pushing many Americans towards base feelings of fear and paranoia. Citizens quickly began to worry about unseen enemies and unknown conspiracies. Many believed that a terrorist could be anyone hiding anywhere just waiting to do harm. As Americans mourned, many asked how this could happen in the U.S. and what would be the terrorists' next target. Only a week later on September 18th, as the nation was still reeling from the 9/11 attacks, an unknown terrorist mailed the first of a series of letters containing deadly anthrax spores ("Timeline"). During the next month and a half, twenty-two people would become ill and five would die due to contact with the anthrax pathogen contained in the letters

(Johnston). Suddenly, nothing, not even the most mundane activities, seemed safe anymore. Almost every American was confused and terrified and few understood how their worlds could have changed so quickly. Terror had come to the United States and many Americans wondered if they would ever feel safe again.

After the 9/11 attacks, Americans quickly began to adjust to the new social order and rapidly started to restructure their lives in a seemingly terror-dominated world. The Patriot Act and other federal legislation curtailed civil rights as airports and other public places instituted strict search policies that changed long standing ideas of mobility and personal freedom. These standards became even more stringent when only a few weeks later Richard Reed tried to detonate a so-called "shoe bomb" on a commercial flight. Soon Americans were being frisked in line for sporting events and told to protect themselves from possible chemical and biological weapons. President Bush declared war on terror and U.S. troops quickly invaded Afghanistan, but domestically terror appeared to be winning. Americans were frightened and this fear did not appear to subside as the decade progressed.

In 2003, the U.S. armed forces also invaded Iraq, which forced our nation to fight terror militarily on two separate fronts. The Bush administration began holding political prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and various secret places across the globe all in the name of combating terror and quelling American fear (Kurnaz 15-18). The decade continued with talk of the U.S. military conducting torture and ever-depressing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Declarations such as "they hate us for our freedom" and the "axis of evil" only served to heighten feelings of fear and push Americans towards increased terror and paranoia. The U.S. had become a place where the government and news media encouraged fear, and many believed that being afraid was the only acceptable option in a world that appeared to many to have gone insane. This is the world in which comic book creators wrote the decade's superhero stories. A world in which nearly all societal outlets were not only encouraging but demanding that citizens be afraid. Although comic book superheroes carry the potential to inspire great hope and courage during the first decade of the twenty-first century, most of our spandex-clad champions followed society's drummer and instead preached fear and paranoia (Weisberg 177-178).

The 9/11 attacks shocked and frightened comic book superheroes just as they had terrorized the rest of the nation. Fictional characters like Spider-Man and Superman appeared grief-stricken and ultimately unusually powerless. In *Amazing Spider-Man* #36, writer J. Michael Straczynski and artist John Romita, Jr. chronicle how Peter Parker deals with the September 11th aftermath. The single issue story reveals that many Marvel universe luminaries are as saddened, terrified, and frustrated as their real world counterparts. In one scene, supervillain and would be world conqueror Dr. Doom is shown crying because of the September 11th tragedy (Straczynski and Romita 9). Much as the heroes could do little during the titanic battles of World War II, they also were helpless against the 9/11 attackers. Both DC and Marvel published special editions in which firemen and policemen were declared true heroes and superheroes displayed their support for the nation. The DC edition showcases an Alex Ross painted cover in which

Superman and his superdog Krypto stare in wonder and disbelief at a poster featuring brave policemen and firemen. This cover is an homage to *Big All-American Comic Book* #1, in which a boy and his dog are overwhelmed at the site of a superhero poster (Jourdain).

Unlike comic books published during World War II, DC and Marvel did not send their heroes to war or express racial or cultural stereotypes in their comic books. Virtually no major superheroes fought terrorists at home or abroad. America's new enemy was much too nebulous and ill-defined for superheroic battles. At first, comic book writers and artists appeared unsure how to fight against the nation's new foe. For the first few years following the September 11th tragedy, most superhero comic books continued much as they had before and the majority of the stories remained relatively the same. What comic book creators eventually did was create a decade long nightmare for heroes and villains alike. Although comic books had been becoming darker during the 1980s and 1990s, those changes generally reflected individual characters adopting more aggressive methods of fighting crime and corruption. While some may see these twenty-first century stories as mere extensions of earlier dark tales, the new stories created entire universes seemingly governed by fear. Comic book stories had been getting darker and more violent for decades, but the 2000's shifted them into a realm of overwhelming fear and forced readers to question who could be trusted. Much like their real world counterparts, fear soon controlled the DC and Marvel universes.

Although DC and Marvel both reacted quickly to the September 11th attacks, each company soon returned to its previous storylines. Superman, Spider-Man, Batman, Captain America, and a host of other characters battled supervillains and continued in the same manner as they had in the previous years. Safe stories like *Batman: Hush* - a classic Caped Crusader tale, *Marvel 1602* - a reimagining of Marvel characters in Elizabethan England, and a Justice League of America and Avengers team-up dominated the sales charts ("Aggregated 2003 Comic Book Sales Figures"). Superheroes, like many Americans, seemed to be attempting to understand their new reality and chose to continue to act the same way until they understood what to do. It is not unusual for comic books to lag a few years behind social and cultural transformations especially when these changes are quick and unexpected. As the U.S. invaded Afghanistan, upgraded security, curtailed civil liberties, and moved towards war with Iraq, comic book heroes remained an oasis of pre-9/11 life. Slowly, this began to change and the terror that filled many American's lives invaded the fictional super-universes. It took superheroes several years to mirror the terror that had engulfed the U.S., but soon costumed heroes became as terrified as most other Americans were.

As the Marvel universe became a more fearful and frightening place, much like American society, one of the first comic books to change was one of Marvel's oldest and most successful supergroups. The Avengers first appeared in 1963 when the Incredible Hulk, Iron Man, Thor, Ant-Man, and Wasp teamed up to battle threats too powerful to tackle alone (Lee and Kirby). The Avengers soon became Marvel's premier superteam as fans thrilled at the rotating cast and the group's extraordinary exploits. The 2004 *Avengers Disassembled* miniseries brought terror to the beloved

supergroup, while killing members and destroying the existing team. Although comic books are replete with stories in which popular characters are killed and special places destroyed, *Avengers Disassembled* is the first in a new series of stories that created modern havoc and terror in the Marvel universe. The series's writer, Brian Michael Bendis, noted that this story was different from other events because things would change in a permanent way (Bendis, "Avengers"). In fact, *Avengers Disassembled* is the initial tale in a new Marvel canon that would begin to question twenty-first America's frightening foundation.

In the main story, several foes attack the Avengers, kill a number of members, and destroy the team's headquarters. After several lengthy and destructive battles, the Avengers learn that one of their own associates, the Scarlett Witch, caused each of the attacks. Unbeknownst to the readers and the Avengers, the Scarlett Witch had slowly been going insane for years and had come to blame her super-teammates for the loss of her children. The Scarlett Witch used her powerful abilities to alter reality in an effort to punish the Avengers and terrorize her former friends and teammates. The series ends with the Avengers disbanding leaving a void within the Marvel universe (Bendis, "Avengers"). Part of the reason that Marvel published *Avengers Disassembled* was undoubtedly so the comic book company could create a new Avengers team consisting of more popular members like Spider-Man and Wolverine. The series paved the way for the new Avengers by turning a long-time team member into a mentally disturbed murderer who cruelly and calculatingly slaughters her fellow heroes though. The Scarlett Witch does so by changing the universe's very essence and recreating a new warped reality. This new reality creates a terrifying state of existence in which random attacks kill, maim, and destroy without warning and seemingly for little or no reason. No one can really ever feel safe because an enemy may attack at any moment in any way. Although this is the underlying plot of a superhero story, it sounds suspiciously similar to the way that many Americans were feeling in 2004.

Like Marvel, DC also began creating unsettling comic book stories in 2004 that mirrored the uneasiness and vulnerability that many American felt. While Marvel terrorized the Avengers until they disbanded, DC assaulted its superteam, the Justice League of America (JLA), in thoroughly disturbing ways. The 2004 mini-series *Identity Crisis* contains a story which forces the reader to question both superheroes and the world itself. The series begins with longtime character Sue Dibny's murder and the investigation and terror that it causes. The slain Mrs. Dibny is a B/C level character best known for being both stretchy-superhero Elongated Man's wife and his longer time professional partner. As the heroes attempt to determine who killed Sue, their prime suspect becomes Dr. Light, a villain that writer Brad Meltzer reveals once attacked and raped Sue in the past. After the rape, as both punishment and precaution, several members of the JLA agreed to wipe Dr. Light's memory and to change his personality, effectively lobotomizing him. These past events shock several younger heroes who also learn that later other villains received mindwipes as did the hero Batman when he protested Dr. Light's treatment/punishment. During the course of the mini-series, the killer orchestrates the deaths of Robin's father, Jack Drake, and the villain Captain Boomerang, while also threatening superheroes's spouses

such as Lois Lane. The series ends when the heroes discover that the murderer is the Atom's ex-wife, Jean Loring, who planned the crimes in order to win back her former spouse (Meltzer). *Identity Crisis's* storyline clearly states that neither friend nor family members can be trusted. Jean Loring kills and threatens both friends and colleagues in order to get what she wants. Numerous superheroes trade their morals and values for safety and violate the rights of other heroes and villains that disagree. No one is safe and no one can be trusted. Our heroes and their families are not who or what we thought they were and now everyone must be seen with fear and suspicion. As many Americans began to distrust those around them, so did their heroes. No one either real or fictional could be viewed outside a fear-filled lens.

By 2004, both Marvel and DC seemingly felt the need to produce gritty hard-edged comic books that mirrored American society's fear and frustration. Both companies turned long-established characters into murderers and recreated worlds in which no one could be trusted. Both the Scarlett Witch and Jean Loring killed their friends and colleagues, and each helped to destroy or weaken highly regarded and important organizations. Both DC and Marvel appeared to be repositioning themselves as more representative of American society and embracing the terror that many Americans felt. Former DC editor Valerie D'Orazio confirms the publisher's wish to create darker stories when she writes about DC's motivation for publishing *Identity Crisis* in her internet blog, "Occasional Superheroine." In several 2006 blog entries, D'Orazio describes working for a fictional comic book company that publishes a story in which a character is raped. It seems obvious that D'Orazio is describing *Identity Crisis* and is changing names and identities in order to avoid litigious actions. D'Orazio claims that the comic book company she worked for wanted to become more socially relevant and increase sales by producing more aggressive stories. D'Orazio asserts that editors decided, "They needed a rape. Because there's nothing quite so badass as rape, let's face it." (D'Orazio). D'Orazio states her company decided that sales were low because stories were "too good-natured and nice" (D'Orazio). The publisher created what one can assume is *Identity Crisis*, and "our books changed. There was rape, and murder, torture, death, and mutilation. Superheroes did amoral or outright evil things and the line between good and bad was blurred" (D'Orazio). This was not the first time that a comic book company produced more sensational stories to sell more issues; comic books by their very nature are violent and thrilling. What is important about this change is how much it mirrored American society. Go back and re-read Valerie D'Orazio's last quotation a few sentences ago. Now replace the word "books" with "society" and change "superheroes" to any abstract group that you believe committed violent acts (i.e. terrorists, the government, the military, etc.). This passage could easily describe twenty-first century American society and its many perceived changes. Superheroes were becoming more like many citizens perceived other American groups and organizations. Society had changed and comic books were changing with it.

As a divided and terrified America neared the decade's mid-point, superhero comic books no longer served as a refuge. Stories that had once provided escape from many of society's problems now mirrored a terrifying American

culture. 2004's *Avengers Disassembled* and *Identity Crisis* marked the start of new stories that would emphasize fear and uncertainty among heroes and villains alike. Marvel continued this new direction with the 2005 mini-series *House of M*, written by *Avengers Disassembled* author Brian Michael Bendis. In this new limited-series, the ultra-powerful mutant and villain of *Avengers Disassembled* the Scarlett Witch, Wanda Maximoff, alters reality and creates a world in which formerly despised mutants control every aspect of society. In this new existence, humans are legally and socially inferior to mutants, a reversal of the "normal" Marvel universe. Mutants and a select number of human superheroes live much better lives as Wanda has created a society that now appreciates mutants at the expense of humans. In short, the Scarlett Witch became a terrorist and used her mental weapons to remake society for the betterment of her people. Although Wanda did not appear to hate human society for its freedom, she did dislike the perceived political and social injustices humans inflicted on mutants. Wanda's attempts to reshape society ultimately fail and the original reality is restored. Additionally, the Scarlett Witch vastly reduces the number of mutants to less than 200. Not only did the Scarlett Witch's terrorist plot fail, but it backfired as well and harmed her cause. (It should be noted that the Scarlett Witch herself cleaved the mutant population when she began to feel disenchanted with her fellow mutants.) The series ends with most former mutants no longer possessing superpowers and everything else returning to normal (Bendis, "House of M"). Although the terrorist plot had been extremely frightening, in the end it failed. The Marvel universe was an ever-terrifying place, but even in a fictional world the terrorists could not be allowed to win.

As Marvel stories were exploring issues of social terror, DC was continuing to create a darker and more frightening universe. If 2004's *Identity Crisis* showcased the idea that everyone must be viewed with fear and suspicion, then 2005's *Infinite Crisis* asks if we could even trust ourselves and the very world around us. The storyline begins in a special countdown issue in which former Justice League leader Maxwell Lord murders his former teammate, Ted Kord, the Blue Beetle. Both of these characters are best remembered for their appearances in the light-hearted Justice League stories of the late 1980s. When the former buffoonish Max Lord brutally shoots the often silly Blue Beetle in the head, the reader understands that no one, no matter how seemingly unassuming, can be trusted. Soon the reader learns that Lord has used his mental powers to take control of Superman, leaving the Man of Steel defenseless and untrustworthy. Superman, the ultimate American weapon, has fallen into the hands of the enemy and has literally been brainwashed to do evil. As the series ends, Wonder Woman is forced to kill Maxwell Lord by snapping his neck and thus freeing Superman from his mental imprisonment. The episode forces the reader to ask the following question: if Superman is so vulnerable to outside influence, then can he really ever be trusted, and if we cannot trust Superman, can anyone ever really be trustworthy again? (Johns).

Possibly, the most damning part of *Infinite Crisis* is the return the Golden Age Superman who had been living in a paradise dimension since the end of 1985's *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. This Earth 2 hero was the original Superman who appeared in *Action Comics* #1 but had seemingly been

removed from continuity in the 1980s. This Superman had been secretly watching the events of the last twenty years and now returns to express his displeasure. He believes that the new DC universe is inherently broken and is a far cry from the idealized world that he inhabited. Although it is later revealed that several of his comrades duped him into many of his actions, the Golden Age Superman's core belief still resonates. The first superhero returned to Earth from heaven and declared that he was disappointed in how we lived and acted. He told us that he did not trust any of us, and we in turn should not even trust ourselves or the world around us. An icon had come back to life and declared that society had not taken the wrong path, but rather it had been built in a flawed and shoddy manner and thus was inherently defective. According to the Golden Age Superman, Max Lord's mental control of Superman and Wonder Woman's act of murder were not individual acts but rather symptoms of a universe that was rotten to its core. Citizens of such a place not only had to fear everyone around them but also themselves, because no one is safe from the dark forces that surround us all. This message seems to especially connect to an American society that had grown accustomed to terrorism, war, biological attacks, torture, and senseless violence in the previous few years. Seemingly, no one was safe and few could be trusted. In a 2005 *New York Times* article entitled "Recalibrating DC Heroes For a Grittier Century," several DC writers and executives noted that the company's stories were evolving with a bleaker and more sophisticated society (Gustines). The world had gotten darker and far more terrifying and not even the original Superman could save us.

American society's inherent fear continued to find its way into mainstream comic book stories. In 2007, Marvel produced *Civil War*, a company-wide crossover event written by Mark Millar. *Civil War*, built on plotlines from several earlier mini-series, including the previously discussed *Avengers Disassembled* and *House of M. Civil War* focuses on the battle that ensues when the U.S. government attempts to regulate superhero conduct. Unlike the Keene Act in the 1980's *Watchmen*, *Civil War's* Superhuman Registration Act does not ban costumed heroes, but rather requires all superhumans to register with and work for the U.S. government. This legislation divides the superhero community and pits current heroes and former allies against each other. The series creators ask the reader to question how freedom is often traded for security and what is lost in the process. As Iron Man leads the pro-registration camp and Captain American heads the opposition, the reader is presented with the unsettling fact that neither society as a whole nor their fellow costumed avengers actually trust superheroes. These brightly colored heroes once inspired awe and reverence but now often bring terror. This fact is displayed in one of *Civil War's* opening scenes in which several superheroes unwittingly destroy parts of Stamford, Connecticut. Writer Mark Millar shows these heroes to be weapons of mass destruction, which many denizens of the Marvel universe believe need to be regulated. *Civil War* ends with Captain America capitulating because the battle is physically and figuratively destroying the United States. Cap surrenders and, as Millar states, *Civil War* becomes "a story where a guy wrapped in the American flag is in chains as the people swap freedom for security" (Henriksen). At its heart, *Civil War* is a story about fear and distrust. As the Bush administration declared that unseen threats surrounded the nation, Marvel creators

emphasized the nation's differences and its growing and continuing fears.

While many U.S. citizens battled the fears and frustrations that came with the new millennium, in 2007 a murder shocked the nation and caused numerous Americans to mourn. Terrorists had assassinated an American icon and the U.S. populace would have to face yet another terrible loss. At least that is how many of the media sources of the day portrayed the story. In reality, villains had seemingly killed Captain America in a comic book story, but many news sources were taking the superhero's death very seriously and most were concerned about what it symbolically meant for the United States. In March 2007, Captain America/Steve Rogers is killed in *Captain American* #25. The story takes place shortly after the events of *Civil War* as the authorities have arrested the fugitive Captain America and are leading him through the streets in handcuffs (Brubaker). As protestors pelt the costumed hero with fruits and vegetables, an assassin guns him down. The Ed Brubaker penned tale was popular among fans and critics alike but apparently the story also struck a chord with the non-comic book-centered media. In a March 8, 2007, *New York Times* story entitled "Captain America Is Dead; National Hero Since 1941," writer George Gene Gustines exclaims, "The assassination ends the sentinel of liberty's fight for right, which began in 1941." A Bryan Robinson article for *ABC News* expressed the author's strong opinion in the title, "What the Death of Captain America Really Means: Bullets Killed Him, But the War on Terror Really Did Cap In." In the article, Robinson opines, "Bullets took the life of the Sentinel of Liberty, but he was really a victim -- and product -- of the times." Robinson writes, "You're not crazy if you think Captain America's struggle parallels the debates over the Iraq War, the Patriot Act, the Bush domestic surveillance program and other controversial programs in the post-Sept. 11 world." *American Chronicle* author Daniel Taverne believes that Captain America's death marked the end of the American Dream and in "many ways I'm not surprised that Captain America died, but after thinking about this for a while, I'm surprised he didn't already commit suicide." Syndicated columnist Leonard Pitts, Jr. stated that "Captain America's death… has more to do with what's going on in our world than his. Meaning terrorism, war and this creeping sense some of us have that our country is being stolen" (Pitts).

On July 1, 2007, Colleen Long reported on Captain America's funeral for the Associated Press. She notes, "With the story line so relevant to present-day politics, and the timing of the latest issue so precise, it's hard not to think the whole thing is one big slam on the government" (Long). Long also quotes writer Jeph Loeb who explains the story saying, "Part of it grew out of the fact that we are a country that's at war, we are being perceived differently in the world. He wears the flag and he is assassinated - it's impossible not to have it at least be a metaphor for the complications of present day" (Long). Even satirist Stephen Colbert commented on Captain America's death when Marvel editor-in-chief Joe Quesada revealed that the slain hero had bequeathed his battle shield to the comedy host. Colbert accepted the shield, thanked Captain America for the honor, and declared, "Cap, I hope I can make you proud." Writers, fans, bloggers, and even "serious" news sources treated Captain America's death as a significant event. To many, the superhero's death became an analogy

for all the things that were wrong with the United States. Although Captain America death was "only" a comic book story, it somehow tapped into the nation's collective fear and apprehension. Many Americans saw Cap's death as a metaphor for the terror that filled their daily lives. Captain America was dead, and many Americans wondered how things had become so terrifying.

If 2007's *Civil War* and the death of Captain America are ultimately tales about the growing fear and discord in the United States, then Marvel's 2008 event, *Secret Invasion*, is about unrestrained terror. The mini-series's tagline "Who do you trust?" is not only an explanation of the comic's main theme but also could serve as the decade's one sentence motto. *Secret Invasion* is a basic alien invasion shape-shifter tale in which the characters are unsure who is friend and who is enemy. Even old allies could be enemy alien Skrulls in disguise and our heroes are never certain who should be trusted and who should be feared. This type of story is certainly not unique to the 2000's. In many ways, it resembles the *Invasion of the Body Snatcher*-type narrative that surfaced during the McCarthy-inspired fear of the 1950's. What makes *Secret Invasion* distinctive is not only the continuing thought that our super-protectors may be enemies in disguise but also the understanding that citizens are never safe from unknown enemies. If Civil *War* declared that superheroes are weapons of mass destruction, then *Secret War* questions what citizens know about these super-weapons. *Secret Invasion* asked the reader to question whom they trust and ultimately the answer was clearly no one. Just as many Americans feared undercover terrorists in their midst, Marvel heroes were now also suspect. *Secret Invasion*'s ending reinforces this fear when Tony Stark is disgraced and loses control of the superpowered community to Norman Osborne, the Green Goblin. When the citizens of the Marvel universe villainize hero Tony Stark after he helps to save the world and lionize mentally unstable and true villain Norman Osborne, the reader understands that no one can truly be trusted. No longer can it be assumed that the good guy wins in the end (Bendis, "Secret Invasion"). Instead, we are left with a world in which we can never truly know who is hero and who is villain; an idea that mirrors many Americans' understanding of the world at the start of the twenty-first century.

The end of the 2008 saw Barack Obama elected as U.S. president, and by January 2009 he had taken the reigns are the nation's leader. This move marked the start of a new era, but fears and doubts about both international and domestic problems persisted. As many Americans were attempting to redefine their society and themselves, the decade's terrors still haunted the country. While Barack Obama preached hope and promised change, many American citizens remained in a seemingly perpetual state of terror. Although on the surface the U.S. was changing, some old terrors lingered. To add to preexisting political and social fears, the U.S. had entered into a massive economic downturn that left millions unemployed and the economy reeling. As banks and other economic institutions began to fail at a staggering rate and housing prices dropped dramatically, Americans had yet another thing to worry about. War and terrorism were now joined by economic upheaval on this list of problems that plagued the nation. In late 2008 and into 2009, DC and Marvel continued to embrace the undercurrent of fear that still seemed to permeate American culture. Both comic book companies

published major storylines in which villains took control of society. As many Americans were forced to confront both new and old fears, comic book superheroes were living in worlds where evil won.

In July 2008, DC Comics began publishing *Final Crisis*, a seven issue mini-series written by superstar Scottish author Grant Morrison. The tale is an often dark and disturbing look at a world in which the good guys have seemingly lost their never-ending battle against the evil tyrannical god Darkseid. DC's one sentence promotional description of the story was, "The Day Evil Won" (George). In a 2008 interview, Morrison described *Final Crisis:* "the war between Good and Evil has been won by the wrong side and Evil is now in control of the DC Universe." He adds, "The Gods are here to destroy everything that we hold dear, everything that has meaning to us, everything that has value for us. They want to utterly crush the human species and reduce us all to slavery and that's as big a threat as it gets" (Renault). While DC had certainly published dark stories in which villains do terrible things (that is what villains do after all), *Final Crisis* is different because it presents a situation in which the superheroes no longer are sure that it is their birthright to win. In past stories, it was assumed that the universe was rigged so that good would always eventually triumph. Comic book superheroes were expected to defeat evil no matter how long the odds. *Final Crisis* attempts to strip away this bias and asks the reader to consider a world in which good and evil are on equal footing. In the series's first issue, the villain Libra explains the story's premise, "Strikes me that your enemies fight and win again and again because they truly believe their actions are in accordance with a higher moral order. But what happens in a world where good has lost its perpetual struggle against evil?" (Morrison, "Final Crisis #1).

This newly perceived balance of power and its psychological ramifications mirror post-September 11th changes in the United States. To many Americans, the events of 9/11 and the aftermath violated numerous understood but unwritten laws. Many citizens believed that terrorist attacks could not happen in the United States because some force of good protected the nation. These Americans were forced to come to terms with a society in which the rules, as they understood them, had changed. In their minds, evil had defeated good and now anything was possible. Much like the villainous Darkseid defeating the heroes of the DC universe, nothing was impossible because the old rules no longer applied. Interestingly, by *Final Crisis's* end, the old defunct rules give way to a new understanding of society and life. In issue #5, Darkseid has brainwashed most of humanity and only a few unaffected humans still possess free will. Just as all seems hopeless, a group of Darkseid's prisoners discuss the situation and an unidentified person states, "If your superheroes can't save you, maybe it's time to think of something that can. If it doesn't exist, think it up. Then make it real" (Morrison, Final Crisis #5). Although things look dire, citizens of this fictional world have to recreate hope and idealism in order to survive. In many ways, this plot point mirrors American society in late 2008 and early 2009. The nation was faced with a slew of seemingly insurmountable problems that violated the understood social structure. Many people believed that problems like this were not supposed to happen to the United States and its citizens. A majority of Americans attempted to create a new social and political understanding

by electing Barack Obama and embracing change. Just as in the DC universe, American society had seen many of its most cherished beliefs destroyed, but both places were attempting to rebuild their trust and hope again.

As an evil god was enslaving the DC universe, a villainous madman with the help of an evil god was presiding over the Marvel universe. While Darkseid mentally enslaved most of humanity in *Final Crisis*, Norman Osborne and his advisor the Norse god Loki politically manipulated the U.S. in Marvel's 2009 companywide crossover *Dark Reign*. After the events of *Civil War*, the Marvel universe is thrown into chaos and Norman Osborne, who is secretly the villainous Green Goblin, is credited with defeating the Skrull queen. Most Americans treat him as a hero and the U.S. President appoints him as the superhero community's supervisor. This happens while the true hero, Iron Man, is blamed for the Skrull invasion and is forced out of his leadership position in shame. This political transformation mirrors real world events and writer Brian Michael Bendis also noted a connection to the modern day U.S.: "Think about Katrina, think about any wars - immediately, people are thrown under the bus and ruined without even an investigation, and it's very politically motivated. It's very damning. And people kind of eat it up because they want it. They want someone to blame. They want to feel safe immediately. You know, there's an argument that people want to watch TV and not feel panicked. And some politicians use that fear to punish" (Rogers).

The newly powerful Osborne quickly creates his own Avengers team made up mostly of villains. Many of Osborne's Avengers are even given the heroic identities of former heroes. Spider-Man's nemesis Venom takes over the hero's identity. Mass murderer Bullseye seizes Hawkeye's heroic mantle, and Norman Osborne creates an identity that mixes Captain America and Iron Man known as the Iron Patriot. Osborne attempts to use his team and his influence to remake society and to complete a list of items including killing Spider-Man. Although Osborne ultimately fails and the heroes retake their rightful places/ identities, the damage done cannot be easily wiped away. The American public gave control of the superhero community to an evil madman who replaced hero with villain and attempted to recreate society. How can anyone feel safe if the American public can never know who are the true heroes and villains? *Dark Reign* showcased a Marvel universe in which the unwritten rules had changed and citizens could never trust things to be "normal" again. Society had seemingly transformed for the worse and the public no longer knew whom to fear and whom to trust. This story closely mirrored the real world U.S. where many Americans were facing these same unresolved issues.

Many DC and Marvel stories from the first decade of the twenty-first century mirrored the fear and isolation that flourished in American society. As the leaders and marketers of the war on terror encouraged Americans to be afraid, comic book superheroes advised readers to trust no one, not even themselves. Once again, superheroes became a product of the society that created them and presented a mirror for Americans to view themselves. Often what they saw was truly terrifying. Like most citizens, superheroes entered the decade unsure of the future and uncertain how to proceed. This lackadaisical attitude soon gave way to bewilderment at the unsettling dawn of a new

millennium and transformed into full-scale terror following the horrific events of September 11, 2001. Both corporeal and fictional Americans reacted with sadness, anger, and fear, and many loudly wondered if life would ever be the same again. Every America, both real and imaginary, changed as terror shaped every aspect of the nation. Unfortunately, comic book superheroes could provide little assistance or guidance; the nation's protectors were as unsure and afraid as everyone else.

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The first way of telling the history of superhero comics remains the most traditional. This is the 'superhero genesis tale'. It begins when a cape hits it big, then unravels when the superhero's creators and owners begin to quarrel. They introduced him with one of the most famous covers in comic book history: Captain America clocking Adolf Hitler in the face. For their second issue, Simon and Kirby sent the hero and his sidekick Bucky to infiltrate a concentration camp in Germany. In his earliest days he wore a propeller beanie to the office, and tootled about on an ocarina, bugging the older artists. Lee was savvy, though, and moved on to writing, spending WWII producing copy for the army. Academic journal article Americana : The Journal of American Popular Culture, 1900 to Present; Hollywood. Terrified Protectors: The Early Twenty-First Century Fear Narrative in Comic Book Superhero Stories. By Johnson, Jeffrey K. Read preview. Academic journal article Americana : The Journal of American Popular Culture, 1900 to Present; Hollywood. Terrified Protectors: The Early Twenty-First Century Fear Narrative in Comic Book Superhero Stories. By Johnson, Jeffrey K. Read preview. Article excerpt. Comic book superheroes are an important part of the American social fabric.

Like the cowboys of the past, twenty-first century cowboys still get up early on freezing cold mornings and make breakfast over an open fire. There is no Monday to Friday, weekends off or paid holidays. So why do men--because it is usually men--choose this life? Â subtitle: A Social History (book review) I never even heard of the Revolutions of the Revolutions of 1848 until I was a third year coll The Age of Reason by Thomas Paine. (Book Review) --â€œ Reader, whoever thou art, put thy trust in thy Creator, make use of the reason he endowed thee with, and cast The Age of Revolution: 1789-1848 by Eric Hobsbawm. (Book Review) This is another classic history. It was originally published in 1962, but has gone through numerous reprintings and is st