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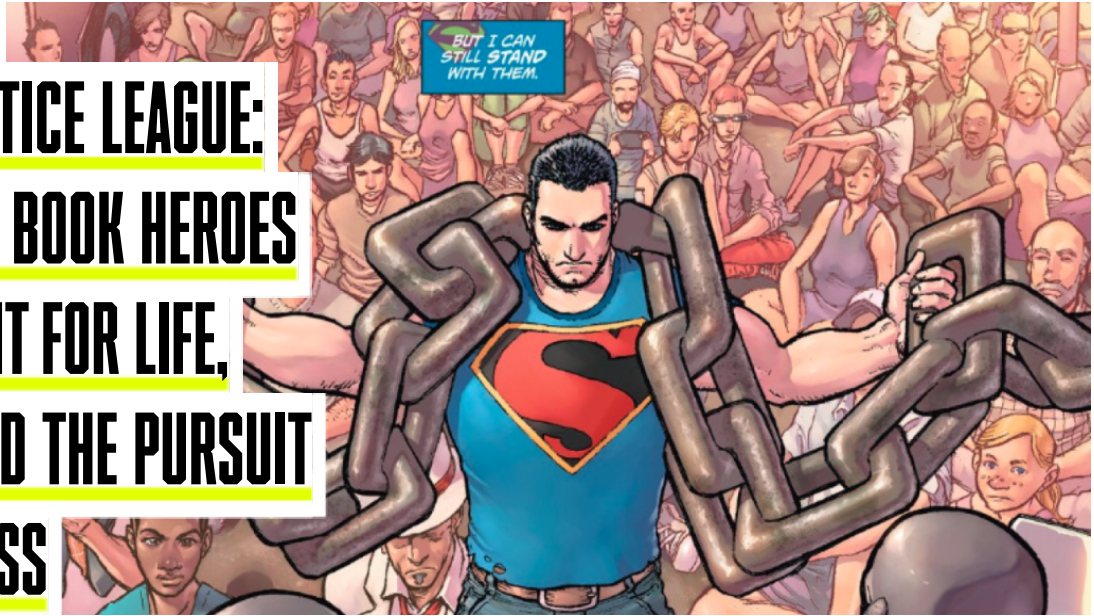
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# SOCIAL JUSTICE LEAGUE: HOW COMIC BOOK HEROES HAVE FOUGHT FOR LIFE, LIBERTY, AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

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Strapping on their utility belts, capes, shields, and boots, superheroes have been fighting in the hallowed halls of justice for the better part of a century. These costumed heroes spend their days and nights fighting oddball villains and nefarious foes, but their enemies have always been more than the likes of The Joker, Lex Luthor, or the Red Skull. While they fight in the streets, the skies, on other planets, or right here on Earth, heroes like Superman, Wonder Woman, Captain America and others have also been fighting on the front lines of politics and social issues since they first set foot on the pages of American comics.

In 1938, two Jewish boys from Ohio introduced the world to the very first superhero when Superman burst onto the pages of *Action Comics #1*. Over the intervening decades, the Man of Steel has come to mean many things to many different people, likely far beyond what his creators ever imagined. He's a symbol of truth and justice, a beacon of

hope for generations of comic book fans young and old, and in his more than 75 years as the first and most famous superhero he has taken on causes both lofty and deeply personal.

When Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster created Superman they weren't looking to create America's superhero. Superman was the hero they had always wanted, and perhaps the hero they always wanted to be. In 1932, Jerry Siegel's father died in a robbery at his store (accounts differ, but he either died of a gunshot or a heart attack). In his book, *Superman: The High-Flying History of America's Most Enduring Hero*, author Larry Tye describes early Superman artwork depicting the Man of Steel saving a man being held up at gunpoint. While Siegel never explicitly said it, Tye and other comic historians believe the connection between the early comic and his real life tragedy is obvious: Superman was a way for Siegel to save his father's life, even if he couldn't bring him back from the dead.

### **From Krypton to Earth**

Superman was a hero for his creators, and people like them, in other ways as well. He represented aspects of their lives in ways that other heroes of the time didn't. For one, Superman has always been representative of the immigrant experience, a fact at the heart of why Superman has endured as a quintessential American hero. We are a country of immigrants, and no one knew that better than Superman's creators. Siegel and Shuster were both children of immigrants. Shuster, himself, was actually an American immigrant, having moved to Ohio from Canada with his parents, who had, in turn, immigrated from Eastern Europe.

Superman, meanwhile, is the ultimate immigrant. He is not just from a strange country, but a strange planet. He's not just an immigrant, but a refugee, sent to this planet to escape his own as it was being torn apart, his parents sending him to Earth in an effort to give their child a better life. What's more, he is an immigrant success story, perhaps the greatest one. As Clark Kent, he manages to grow up

happy and healthy and is able to embark on a successful career as a reporter. As Superman, he is the most powerful superhero on the planet, an alien with his own culture and traditions, and he is beloved, welcomed into our land and our hearts with open arms and open minds ... with a few notable exceptions.

Even in stories where his status as an immigrant is portrayed less optimistically, it is still a commentary on the immigrant experience in America. In Zack Snyder's *Man of Steel*, much of the Superman origin story - specifically those parts surrounding the Kents - is rooted in the idea that some people may never accept immigrants, especially those who could be seen as a threat. As much as we might hate to admit it, this is just as American as Superman's search for truth, justice, and the American way. For more than a year, we have listened to politicians, policy makers, and our own friends and family debate whether it is reckless to allow immigrants from countries like Syria past our borders based on the extremely remote possibility that even one of the millions of refugees fleeing a war-torn nation might be a terrorist in disguise.

### **Nationalism and ethics in fictional journalism**

Superman's relevance to social issues doesn't stop at causes specific to his creators. Even well after the time of Siegel and Shuster, Superman has continued to stand for something greater than simple crime fighting. In 2011, during the widely publicized and hotly debated release of *Action Comics #900*, Superman took a bold stand against his status as an "American" hero. While Superman had long been a hero of the world, rather than a hero for a single country, his identity as an American was widely accepted, both in the real world and, more importantly, in the fictional world of his comics.

During a short story in *Action Comics #900*, penned by *Man of Steel* co-writer, David S. Goyer, it is revealed that Superman recently appeared at a protest in Tehran supporting the protesters in their fight against the Iranian

regime. While Superman was showing his personal solidarity, the Iranian government saw his involvement as an action sanctioned by the U.S., and therefore an act of war.

The bold move, however, comes when Superman informs the President's national security advisor that, due to this incident, he is going to appear before the United Nations to renounce his American citizenship. Says Superman, "I'm tired of having my actions construed as instruments of U.S. policy. Truth, justice, and the American way — it's not enough anymore."

The story came amidst ongoing tension between the U.S. and several countries in the Middle East, including Iran. While Superman places the blame for the incident on himself, stating that it was foolish of him not to assume his actions would be seen as a reflection of American politics, the act of renouncing his citizenship in order to pursue his heroics on a more global scale also stood in stark contrast to the ideas of national identity and staunch nationalism.

Superman didn't remain a "citizen of the world" for very long. By the end of the year, DC Comics had rebooted their entire slate of titles, including *Action Comics*, bringing brand new versions of their heroes to life. This version of Superman had his own moral battlefields on which to make his stand. This time, though, the declarations and dramatic moves came from Clark Kent, and his battlefield was the bullpen of the Daily Planet. In the pages of *Superman #13* in October 2012, Clark Kent stood up in the middle of the famed paper and decried the state of journalism as more entertainment than news, quitting his job to pursue the truth on the internet.

### **Punching Nazis and taking names**

Superman may have been the first superhero, but he is far from the only one who has taken a stand for moral and social

causes, and one of them made that stand in a conflict Superman couldn't touch. Superman never got involved in WWII, specifically because a fictional super-powered being would have distracted and detracted from the real-life bravery and sacrifice of the men (and women) serving in the armed forces. But there is one hero who is synonymous with the American Armed Forces during the Second World War: Captain America.

The first issue of *Captain America* hit the stands in December of 1940, a full year before the U.S. entered World War II. The war, however, had been raging across Europe since 1939, Hitler's Nazis running roughshod over the western part of the continent. But despite the conflict, and the obvious threat posed by Adolf Hitler, many in the U.S. were opposed to getting involved. The creators of *Captain America*, however, were not among them, and they used their new platform to fight back. The very first issue of the new series depicted Captain America punching Hitler in the face, an iconic image now, but a divisive one at the time.

According to writer, Joe Simon, Captain America was an intentionally political figure, and the publisher received hate mail and threats severe enough to result in police protection. "The opponents of the war were all quite well organized," he said. "We wanted to have our say too." As the global conflict continued to escalate, and the U.S. entered the war, comic book creators would get more than just a say. They became part of the U.S. propaganda machine, urging the public to support the war effort at home, and the boys abroad. Captain America was a big part of that effort, as his primary opponent during the war were the Nazis and the Axis powers.

### **Volunteer and activist**

But while Captain America's early life may be synonymous

with his struggles against Hitler's regime, his enduring legacy is that as a volunteer. From his earliest depictions, Steve Rogers was the ultimate volunteer soldier and selfless combatant. Despite his slight frame and frail figure, which mad him unfit for duty in the eyes of the U.S. military, Steve's moral character and intense desire to help his country and his fellow man made him a perfect candidate for the program that would turn him into a super soldier.

That selflessness, and his fierce defense of the Truth, are the thread that has stretched through all of Cap's stories over the last 76 years. Captain America as stood up to tyranny of all kinds, including that of the U.S. government itself.

During the 2007 event series, *Civil War*, Captain America made what is possibly his most famous speech in the panels of *The Amazing Spider-Man*. During the famous arch, Captain America publicly opposes the new Superhuman Registration Act, calling on others to join his act of civil disobedience with a rousing plea:

### **Who run the world?**

At the same time Superman was fighting for truth and justice, and Captain America was punching Nazis, another hero burst onto the comic book scene, this time challenging society's views on women. Wonder Woman was created in 1941 by William Moulton Marston, a psychologist and women's advocate. Marston was inspired by the women in his life, including his wife, Olive Byrne (the woman who lived with them in an extended relationship), and Margaret Sanger, a pioneering advocate for the birth control pill.

In *Wonder Woman*, Marston wanted to create a character that was unlike her male counterparts. Many of the male characters who dominated the pages at the time were aggressive and violent. Wonder Woman was an attempt to create a character who was peace-loving and fought more with love than violence.

In a press release shortly after her introduction, Marston explained his motivation for creating the character:

“The only hope for civilization is the greater freedom, development and equality of women in all fields of human activity. Frankly, Wonder Woman is psychological propaganda for the new type of woman who should, I believe, rule the world.”

### **Out of bondage**

Marston's work on *Wonder Woman* was simultaneously about his views on feminism and his views on sex and sexuality, themes which were not mutually exclusive. Marston was interested in bondage, and much of the *Wonder Woman* iconography came from that perspective. In nearly every story written by Marston during his tenure, Wonder Woman was bound in some way with ropes or chains or other materials. While there is certainly an argument to be made about how Marston intended these themes to be interpreted - he himself admitted he was exploring ideas of dominance and submission - the sexual component is only part of the argument.

In her book, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*, author and historian Jill Lepore draws many comparisons between the art of the early Wonder Woman stories and the feminist art of the early 20th century. In an **interview with NPR** in 2014, Lepore discussed the importance of chains to the early women's movement of Marston's time. “Chains became a really important symbol,” said Lepore. “Women in the wake of emancipation in the aftermath of the Civil War really turned to the imagery of chains and enslavement to talk about the ways in which they have not yet been fully emancipated.”

And that imagery was, in fact, part of what inspired Marston to continue to tie up his heroine. Every time she was tied, Wonder Woman would have to break free of her own chains in order to defeat her foe. “That's [what] Marston would always say,” explained Lepore in the same interview. “In order to signify her emancipation from men.”

Of course, the sexual component was also part of Marston's argument, but while many might dismiss the idea of bondage, and the overall themes of dominance and submission, as inherently anti-feminist, Marston's desire to portray Wonder Woman as a sexually liberated character was in line with feminist ideas of the time, as well as being deeply subversive. In the early 20th century, and in many ways continuing into today, the women's movement wasn't just about getting women into the workplace. For women like Margaret Sanger, it was about sexual liberation as much as financial or political. Sanger, and women like her, fought for the rights for women to control their bodies. They fought for birth control, abortion, and female sexual pleasure, and Wonder Woman became, in many ways, a way for women and girls to see a strong, liberated woman, without explicitly promoting sex or sexual content.

Over the course of her history, Wonder Woman and her story (and depictions) have changed a great deal, but she remains a symbol of female power, both physically and emotionally. Decades later, Wonder Woman is still a hero who fights not just with fists, but with love and compassion, standing strong against those who would oppress others. That history **allowed her to become** an Honorary UN Ambassador for the Empowerment of Women and Girls earlier this year, an effort to expand Wonder Woman's ability to inspire and fight for the rights of women, as she has done her entire existence.

### **Politics and drug addiction**

The taking on of social and political issues wasn't just a job of early superheroes, though those themes did encounter strong resistance from comics publishers during the middle of the 20th century. Following the end of World War II, writers, artists, and publisher were put on a very short leash when it came to what they were allowed to depict in their stories. The introduction of the Comics Code Authority in the early 1950s forced them to remove depictions of anything deemed "unsuitable" for American audiences of the time. This included depictions of drug use, homosexuality, horror, gore, and anything that suggested a moral grey area.



The CCA changed the face of comics for decades until it was relaxed in the 1970s, bringing about the called Bronze Age of comics. This time is marked by an increase in horror-based books, as well as more “adult themes” to the standard superhero fare. It was then that superheroes and their stories were once again allowed to be politically charged, and publishers wasted no time. In 1971, both Marvel and DC attacked the idea of drug use/abuse in their stories, at the request of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. Marvel was the first, as *The Amazing Spider-Man* depicted a story (not approved by the CCA), which portrayed drug use as dangerous. Following that story, the CCA was revised to allow for these depictions so long as it was done in a manner which depicted drug use as “a vicious habit.” This paved the way for one of the more famous storylines in the ongoing *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* book, in which Green Arrow learns that his sidekick, Speedy, has become addicted to heroin.

This wouldn't be the last time *Green Arrow's* writers would take on an epidemic affecting the country. In 2004, the character Mia Dearden, who would become the second Speedy, was revealed to be HIV positive.

### **Iron Man attacks the Iron Curtain**

The Cold War era also led to the creation of new heroes specific to the conflict of the time. In 1963, Stan Lee decided to comment on the notion of nuclear war and the military-industrial complex when he created Iron Man.

“I think I gave myself a dare,” recalled Lee in an interview. “It was the height of the Cold War. The readers, the young readers, if there was one thing they hated, it was war, it was the military. So I got a hero who represented that to the hundredth degree. He was a weapons manufacturer, he was providing weapons for the Army, he was rich, he was an industrialist. I thought it would be fun to take the kind of character that nobody would like, none of our readers would like, and shove him down their throats and make them like him ... And he became very popular.”

As a result of the 2009 film, we've all come to know Tony Stark's origin story very well. Kidnapped by terrorists (or communists) only to discover that the weapons he manufactures are helping the enemy. In his early stories, Iron Man fought specifically against communism and saw its hero dealing with the increased reliance on corporations to create and invent, rather than the individual. The early stories (and, indeed, the current iteration of the character) depicted Stark's struggle to reclaim his inventions from corporate interests who were using them to harm others.

### Up, Up, and Away

As superhero comics have grown and changed in their nearly 80 years of existence, so has their portrayal of social issues. The Bronze and Modern ages of comics have opened doors for writers, artists, and publishers to take on different and more difficult subjects, and the changing face of American politics has spurred on that evolution.

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In the current field, comic books are making a point to take on LGBT issues (*Batgirl*, *Batwoman*), Islamophobia (*Ms. Marvel*), race (*Black Panther*), feminism (*Bitch Planet*, *Mockingbird*), and many other social issues at the forefront of political debate in the U.S. and around the world. Still others are taking up these issues from a much more subtle position, introducing characters of various races, genders, sexualities, and political opinions. Writers, artists, and publishers are working to make the superheroes of their books exist in a world that's a little more human and reflective of the real world that lives just outside their pages.

