

Re:Search

Super Power, Power Struggle: *Captain America*, Authority, and the Atomic Bomb

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ABSTRACT

Jack Kirby was one of the most influential and innovative American comic book creators of the 21st century. Kirby's body of work reflects the evolution of comic books as the medium shifted toward more complicated narratives and characterization. Kirby's *Captain America* series—beginning in the early 1940s and spanning over two decades—is a prime example of this. As time went on, Kirby's portrayal of the titular super soldier became more dimensional. This not only reflects how comics and the comic book industry transformed over the years, but also changing attitudes toward American militarization at the time. A character that originated as a patriotic endorsement of military force began to take on a more critical tone. In the advent of the atomic bomb, the *Captain America* comics began to question the legitimacy of domination in terms of Max Weber's definition: "the possibility of imposing one's own will upon the behavior of other persons." This project examines the claims to authority made by both heroes and villains in these comics, through a lens of Weber and other theorists interested in power dynamics—including Hobbes, Hegel, and Nietzsche.

KEYWORDS

Authority, *Captain America*, Comic Books, Domination, Jack Kirby, Power

“The legitimacy of charismatic rule . . . rests upon the belief in magical powers, revelations and hero worship.”

– Max Weber, “Power and Authority: When and Why Do People Obey?”

Comic book heroes often possess exceptional strength or intelligence; Jack Kirby’s Captain America happens to have both. However, Captain America is unique in how he is not just a superhero—he’s a super soldier. Unlike most heroes who are either born with special abilities or have powers thrust upon them, Steve Rogers (C.A.’s birth name) volunteered. In the 1941 origin story “Meet Captain America,” scrawny weakling Rogers is deemed by a military medical examiner physically unfit to enlist, but is then chosen to undergo an experiment. Rogers is taken to a secret lab and “calmly . . . allows himself to be inoculated with the strange seething liquid” that transforms him into Captain America (4). The *Captain America* series was rebooted in the 1960s, and with the reboot came a revamping of C.A.’s origin story, which further emphasized his “self-awareness” in the transformation (Hatfield 71). But this is not the only way in which C.A. of the Silver Age (1960s) differs from his Golden Age (1940s) predecessor. C.A. no longer represented a gung ho nationalistic endorsement of American military involvement as he did in WWII. In the advent of the atomic bomb, the reimagined Captain America questions the legitimacy of American domination.

Captain America Comics in its original format was, as Charles Hatfield notes in *Hand of Fire: The Comics Art of Jack Kirby* (2011), a “prewar triumph” that “generated a kind of graphic excitement that galvanized the then-new superhero genre” (21). “Superheroes in the forties,” Hatfield asserts, “were linked to the war effort and served as effective instruments of wartime propaganda” (21). In fact, *Captain America* championed an anti-Nazi stance before the US even officially entered the war. As Bradford W. Wright points out in *Comic Book*

Nation (2001), “the brash and unforgettable cover of *Captain America Comics*, No. 1 depicted the ultra-American hero slugging Adolf Hitler in the face almost a full year before the United States declared war on the Axis . . . Captain America’s dramatic debut was a call to arms, urging the nation to united against foreign aggression” (30-1). Richard Reynolds echoes this sentiment in his essay “Masked Heroes,” explaining how “World War Two gave the superheroes a whole new set of enemies, and supplied a complete working rationale and worldview for a super-patriotic superhero such as Captain America” (100).

Captain America started off as a transparent symbol for pro-war sentiment, but would gradually be transformed into a character with more depth. The end of WWII brought about an industry-wide shift away from the superhero genre due to “falling readerships” (Reynolds 100). As Hatfield summarizes, “seemingly dependent on the war, costumed heroes fell sharply in popularity in the latter forties . . . as culture in the United States shifted from wartime jingo” (114-15). This marked the end of an era commonly referred to by comic book scholars as the “Golden Age of Comics” (Reynolds 100). Wright notes that Marvel tried and failed to revive *Captain America* during the Cold War era; it went from being “Marvel’s top-selling title” during World War II to a series that “lasted only a few issues” (100). The reason for the failure, according to Wright, was that “the postwar comic book market had not only grown, it had grown up. Even young people understood that the Cold War was not going to be won as quickly and easily as the comic book version of World War II. The existence of the atom bomb alone removed all doubt about that. Times had changed since 1945, but . . . superheroes had not changed with them (123).

Creator Jack Kirby’s military experience likely had an influence on the evolution of a more dynamic C.A. Kirby went on hiatus from his work on *Captain America Comics* when he was “called into military service” where he “saw heavy combat in the European theater, eventually returning with a medical discharge in

1945” (Hatfield 22). Kirby had been changed by the war. In the words of Mark Evanier, who served as an apprentice to Kirby, “Jack loved to look back, especially to his days in World War II. He came out of said war with frozen feet and hundreds of anecdotes . . . and then at night, at least once a week, Kirby would have nightmares of those days. It’s tough to leave something like that behind” (3). When the superhero genre made a more successful revival at the start of the 1960s, an era dubbed “the Silver Age”, all of these factors weighed upon Kirby’s next crack at the character of Steve Rogers—how comics had changed, how the world had changed, and how he, a veteran and comic book artist, had been permanently altered (Reynolds 101).

C.A.’s character evolved with its author and industry, reflecting a shift in attitudes toward American domination. Domination, in this sense, refers to the definition established by philosopher Max Weber in *Economy and Society* (1922): “the possibility of imposing one’s own will upon the behavior of other persons” (181). Weber points out that a dominating force will take great strides to “establish and to cultivate the belief in its legitimacy” (181). In other words, a dominating force will attempt to justify its claim to authority.

According to Weber, there are three main claims to legitimate domination: “legal authority, traditional authority, or charismatic authority” (192). Legal authority refers to domination based on “the legality of enacted orders” (192). For example, the authority granted by the state to its police officers would classify as a kind of legal authority. Weber defines traditional authority as “resting on established belief . . . in the legitimacy of those exercising authority” (192). An example of this kind of authority would be a king, whose authority is based upon primogeniture. The final kind of authority, charismatic, is defined by Weber as “resting on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, *heroism* or exemplary character of an individual person” [Emphasis added] (192).

At least in terms of Weber's definitions, Captain America's claims to domination are at root similar to the claims made by his arch nemesis, The Red Skull. Though on the surface they seem polar opposites—one a patriotic symbol of American democratic values, the other a jingoistic caricature of Third Reich tyranny—both make claims to domination based on charismatic authority; their authority rests upon the unique traits and abilities they possess (as hero and villain respectively). How then are a villain's claims to authority portrayed as illegitimate, whilst a hero's are justified? Before delving further into how C.A. and Skull foil one another and what implications can be drawn in a macrocosmic context of American military involvement, some further insights into how domination functions in the text can be gained by looking at the interactions between C. A. and another Nazi villain: Rathcone.

In "The Chessboard of Death," C.A. squares off against a hunchbacked Nazi spy named Rathcone. With Rathcone, Kirby first introduces a motif that he revisits again and again in his work on the super soldier's narrative: the deserving villain. Rathcone is the first of many villains who claims some kind of edge over the rest of humanity that justifies his desire to rule. Not only does Rathcone see himself as superior to all humans, but he fixates his villainy only on those whom he considers worthy of his time: highly ranked American generals and the most powerful soldier of all, C. A. Rathcone's obsession for a worthy adversary to conquer—and ultimately prove his worth—is symbolized by a chessboard populated with miniatures of his foes; the bulk of Rathcone's depictions involve him tinkering with the figures on the board, plotting his next victim. In one scene, Rathcone has a conversation with the miniature version of his next target, Admirable Perkins, saying, "Even though you are a capable man, Admiral Perkins . . . I am your superior! You will never lecture tonight, for I am removing you from the game!" ("Chessboard" 2).

Rathcone delivers his assassination orders to his minions via a speaker, remaining concealed in his chamber to protect his identity. “You never see him!” one minion tells another, “But the time will come when all America will bow down before him—before the Fuehrer of the new regime!” (2). Rathcone thrives on perpetuating this mysterious and fearful persona, perhaps because he deems his minions unworthy to interact with him one-on-one, or else to conceal his disfigurement (which would be seen as a weakness). Since Rathcone never elaborates exactly what about himself makes him a superior being, it is perhaps his ability to conceal his weaknesses and still command his followers that he sees as justification for his rule—that might makes right.

Ultimately, however, Rathcone does not live up to his own delusions of grandeur and is defeated by C.A. Before delivering the blow that incapacitates him, C.A. taunts the fleeing Rathcone, “You can’t get away that easy, Rathcone . . . *old* Fuehrer!” harkening back to earlier on when Rathcone’s associate claimed he would become “the Fuehrer of the *new* regime” [Emphases added] (15; 2). The narrative, in a way, seems to be presenting Rathcone as merely a stepping stone for C.A., a villain to test his mettle before confronting the man who will become his ultimate nemesis, The Red Skull. The first splash page of the comic foreshadows this, depicting Rathcone with his chessboard and C.A. sneaking into his chamber (see figure A). Rathcone doesn’t seem to notice C.A. as he is focused on his chess opponent—a skeleton wearing a top hat. This skeletal figure—who never appears in the actual Rathcone narrative—suggests that although C.A. will defeat Rathcone, the ultimate enemy to conquer is death (personified by the Red Skull).



Fig A: Rathcone and his Chessboard.
Image from “The Chessboard of Death”

C.A. and The Skull first square off in “The Riddle of the Red Skull,” and like Rathcone before him, Nazi assassin Skull cultivates a fearful and mysterious persona. He is also equally narcissistic, seeing himself as a superior being and only seeking adversaries he deems as worthy. When Mrs. Manor, the wife of one

of Skull's targets, interrupts the scene of her husband's murder, the Skull only incapacitates her and refuses to kill her, claiming that his method of death "is only for important people" ("Riddle" 10). Skull attempts to personify death itself, fashioning himself as a kind of grim reaper figure. In the moment before killing, Skull forces his victim to meet his eyes and "look at death" before seemingly ending their life with just his gaze alone (2). Although he does not actually possess godlike powers (he uses a hidden electric device), the Skull thrives upon forcing his victims into submission, and thus perpetuating the fantasy that he is a superior being.



**Fig B: The Skull murders Major Croy.
Image from "The Riddle of the Red Skull"**

Both Rathcone and The Skull are examples of charismatic authority because they justify their right to power based on a belief in their own exceptionalism. On the surface, it would appear that C.A.'s authoritative claims are based on legal authority because he seeks to punish wrongdoers and his means

to do so were granted by the US government. However, C.A.'s near-godly power transcends him above the realm of the legal authoritative systems Weber describes. This analysis rests upon Thomas Hobbes' theory of the nature of man fleshed out in his influential text *Leviathan* (1651). Weber's arguments are modeled after Hobbes' basic premise that individual wills can be dominated by an authoritative figure, and thus understanding Hobbes is vital to the critical conversation about domination and authority. As Hobbes argues in *Leviathan*, although one man may be "manifestly stronger in body or of quicker mind than another," in the grand scheme of life all humans are roughly equal, and thus they possess an equal opportunity to obtain power and equal risk to be dominated (1598). This, Hobbes argues, creates the need for systems of justice in society, or else man would exist in a state of nature—"war . . . of every man against every man" (1599).

Hobbes suggests that "justice and injustice are none of the faculties neither of the body nor mind," but "qualities that relate to men in society, not in solitude" and that "where there is no common power, there is no law, where no law, no injustice" (1600). In other words, Hobbes argues that a ruling power must exist to keep men in line, such as a king. But where a king's power, as previously discussed, originates from tradition, superheroes in their nature are exceptional *in body and mind*. Thus, their role as a disciplinarian of men stems from what Weber defined as charismatic authority.

Nietzsche would take this a step further. Like Weber, Nietzsche functions on a model of Hobbes, but differs in how he would argue a hero's godlike power ascends them into the position of "creator of values" (*Beyond Good and Evil* 6). As Nietzsche contends in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), a person in power will "honor whatever he recognizes in himself" and those "who [have] power over [themselves]" (6). Designation of moral values, according to Nietzsche, is "first applied to *men*" and "derivatively and at a later period applied to actions" (6).

Charismatic authority for Weber rests upon the likelihood that an authoritative figure will be obeyed; thus, an authority is defined by his actions as they are perceived by his subordinates. Nietzsche, on the other hand, emphasizes the autonomy of authority—the power to define others in relation to the self.

As Mark D. White notes in *The Virtues of Captain America* (2014), one of C.A.'s core values is a sense of honor, which “does not depend on the behavior or ethics of those around him” (80). White goes on to describe C.A. as a “lone wolf” in that “the content of his character, while having been influenced by the ethics of the men, women, and organizations he worked with over the years, does not *depend* on any of them” [Emphasis added] (80). In the original comics, C.A. maintains a secret identity of Private Steve Rogers. As Rogers, he is still subject to the authority of his military superiors (to humorous and ironic effect). When *Captain America* was rebooted in the 1960s, a Rogers displaced in time (after being trapped in suspended animation for 20 years) re-emerges with his ties to the military now only symbolic. Kirby revisits C.A.'s origin story in a flashback in “The Hero that Was.” This time, C.A. is narrating his own story, and his agency within the transformation is emphasized. The retelling of the origin story from C.A.'s perspective reincarnates a new version of the super soldier as a self-governing entity.

In “Meet Captain America,” Steve Rogers is first introduced as he enters Professor Reinstein's (the inventor of the super soldier formula) laboratory to begin the experiment. “The Hero that Was” traces the narrative to an early origin point when Rogers, “too frail for military duty,” is denied his recruitment (an event which is only summarized by Professor Reinstein in the first origin story, not shown) (9). Rogers is devastated by the rejection; he insists that there must be some capacity in which he can serve and that he will do “anything – *anything!*” (9). This prompts an officer to interrupt and ask if Rogers would “become a human guinea pig—in a deadly experiment.”

Rogers agrees and is taken to an antiques store, a cover front for the super soldier operation. In the penultimate scene before his transformation, an interesting array of objects is highlighted in the foreground, almost as if the antiques are observers.



**Fig C: A Momentous Project Housed in a Small Shop
Image from “The Hero that Was.”**

Depicted on the far left is a mythological figure carrying a lyre. The figure appears to be Pan, the Greek god of shepherds. Flanking the scene on the opposite side are two colonial figures, one of whom is removing his hat in a gesture of respect. Pan symbolizes a protective authority—the shepherd who watches over his flock. The colonial figure is positioned almost as if he is saluting Rogers, who will soon be endowed with the authority and responsibility to protect his country. These themes are echoed again in the scene directly

following C.A.'s transformation, in which Professor Reinhart exclaims, "Rogers is *not* super human—but he has become a nearly *perfect* human being! He personifies the ideal of—*mens sana in corpore sano*—a sound *mind*—in a sound body!" (16). Reinhart is alluding to the Roman poet Juvenal's Satire X, "So Much for Prayer." An excerpt translated into English follows:

Then you might pray for a sound mind in a healthy body.
Ask for a heart filled with courage, without fear of death,
That regards long life as among the least of nature's gifts,
That can endure any hardship, to which anger is unknown,
That desires nothing, and gives more credit to all the labours
And cruel sufferings of Hercules, than to all the love-making
All the feasting, and all the downy pillows of Sardanapalus.
The prayer I offer you can grant yourself; without doubt,
The one true path that leads to a tranquil life is that of virtue. (355-
364)

The poem reflects upon how a desire for kingly power and a long, comfortable life is less spiritually gratifying than a life in which one overcomes hardship. The "cruel sufferings of Hercules" are considered by the narrator to be more virtuous than "all the love-making, all the feasting, and all the downy pillows of Sardanapalus," an Assyrian king. Like Hercules the demigod, the authority that Captain America's demigod-like power affords him comes with the price of a hero's trials, to be tested. In "When Wakes the Sleeper," an old foe returns to once again challenge C.A.—the Red Skull. With the Red Skull's return comes the familiar power struggle, but with new tensions influenced by monumental changes in real-world warfare that occurred in the intervening years.

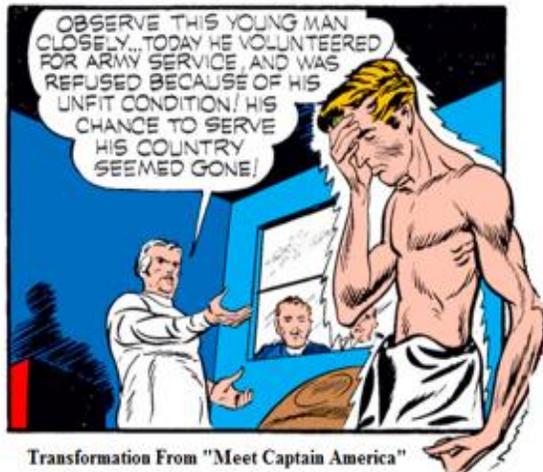


Fig. D: Comparing the original transformation scene from “Meet Captain America” [left] to the rebooted scene in “The Hero that Was” [right]. As Hatfield notes, Kirby updated “the mechanics of Cap’s origin by emphasizing the idea of radiation” (69).

When The Skull and C.A. face off again in “When Wakes the Sleeper,” it is a struggle of old enemies wrought by the tensions of the Atomic Age. The Skull has awakened The Fourth Sleeper, a robot with the ability to “alter the basic molecule structure of his own artificial body” so that he can “move thru tons of solid earth and rock” and erupt like a volcano (“When Wakes” 9). However, The Skull fails to gain control of The Sleeper, which then proceeds to go on mindless rampage to destroy what was previously believed to be an “indestructible” building (18).



**Fig E: The Skull tries and fails to master The Sleeper.
Image from “When Wakes the Sleeper.”**

C.A. and The Skull physically brawl over the key to control The Sleeper, each touting their own philosophy amid blows. The dialogue alludes to Nietzsche’s Master-Slave dialectic, in how The Skull justifies his authority to rule by saying that, “Men were all born to be slaves!” and “Men are no more than animals!” (“When Wakes” 17). Nietzsche’s Master-Slave dialectic is a response to Hegel’s Master-Bondsman, and Hegel’s version illuminates how the struggle between C.A. and the Skull is both physical and metaphysical. As Hegel describes, “the counterpoised selves have so much at stake that . . . they prove themselves and each other through a life-and-death struggle . . . each individual [preferring] to guarantee continued recognition from the other, while not extending that recognition in return” (Leitch 538). The irony, however, is that when C.A. obtains the key from The Skull, he discovers that it will not stop The Sleeper.

The Sleeper is an explosive weapon that, when unleashed by The Skull, puts the entire world at risk. It can be interpreted as an allegory for the power of the atomic bomb, which neither C.A. nor The Skull are deemed worthy to control. In an absurd *deus ex machina*, it is only when C.A.'s love interest, Agent 13, holds the key and fears for C.A.'s life that The Sleeper is destroyed. Atomic power has usurped the super soldier or super villain as the ultimate godly power, the kind, as Hobbes would say, "to keep [all of humanity] in awe" (1602). Thus, the ultimate authority is no longer super soldier but super weapon, and as "When Wakes the Sleeper" cautions, this new form of power is one that should not be patriotically praised but rightfully feared, a power that should not be monopolized by any one authority—whether it be man, hero, or nation.

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