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Afterword: Why *Civil War* Matters, Why This Book Matters

MARC DIPAOLO

Civil War changed my life. It guided me in emotionally and intellectually processing terrifying, history-making current events in a way that mainstream news organizations had entirely failed to do. It helped me come to grips with the American political landscape: what was working, what wasn't, and what I wanted to do about it. Finally, it helped me discover and nurture the social justice activist lurking inside me when I had previously spent my formative years scornfully/admiringly regarding social justice activists as "better people than me."

I say that "*Civil War* changed my life" knowing full well that many of you will not relate to the sentiment. The idea that a work of serious literature could change the person reading it seems quaint in these jaded times, when no one seems likely to admit to any form of art moving them to even the slightest emotional feeling. How much more unlikely would it be for someone to admit that a superhero funnybook could shake them to their emotional, intellectual, and ideological core? I say this knowing that my reading of *Civil War* is not the same as others' readings, that my context reading it was personal and specific, that I read primarily the issues written by Mark Millar, J. Michael Straczynski, and Brian Michael Bendis, and that my fan affinity for Spider-Man has always been so keenly felt that it facilitated a particularly gut-wrenching emotional reaction to the events of the story. So I'm not expecting anyone else to have read the story in the way that I did or to have reacted to it as I did. So, in order for my reaction to *Civil War* to make sense, I have to explain to you why I feel fiction is powerful and why this particular event comic series resonated with me so strongly.

Fiction can be very powerful. As a college professor, I've met many students over the years that have chosen their vocational major because they were inspired by a film or television show they watched during their formative years. I've known young people who have joined the FBI because of their love of Dana Scully, studied forensics after a full-on immersion in various *CSI* shows, made their own independent film because of *Clerks*, became vocal majors thanks to *Glee*, or become a marine biologist because of *Jaws*. Indeed, I believe a small part of my desire to pursue a doctoral degree stemmed from my lasting childhood affection for Doctor Doom, Doctor Strange, Doctor Octopus, and the Time Lord known as the Doctor. So fiction can inspire normal, everyday children to dream of growing up to be one kind of person or another during the relative tranquility of peacetime.

During wartime, fiction has the potential to be even more powerful in the way it can channel the heightened emotional states of civilians and military personnel alike.

The fiction produced in response to 9/11 had a *particularly* powerful affect on me and on friends of mine. *Battlestar Galactica*, *24*, and *Civil War* were evocative war on terror allegories that reflected and shaped public opinions and anxieties in very real, palpable ways. The show *24* briefly convinced me that torture was not only an acceptable form of interrogation, but it was the only way to go. The persuasive, tightly constructed narrative bullied me into believing that any reticence on my part to sanction the U.S. torture program was treasonous. Around the same time, a friend of mine switched political allegiances from Democrat to Republican and converted from atheist to Roman Catholic in part because of how emotionally involving he found the abortion episode of *Battlestar Galactica*. “The Muslims are breeding and we are not, so we better ban birth control,” he told me in a very reasonable and logical voice. He condemned me for not nodding in assent. That was the last conversation I had with him. Another friend who grew up watching 1980s action movies often told me during our college years that he hoped to become a sniper one day, like Tom Berenger. He enlisted after 9/11 to defend Americans from the Taliban and fulfill his lifelong dream of becoming a sniper. These possibly radical, anecdotal examples notwithstanding, the period immediately following 9/11 was incredibly traumatic for most Americans, especially following on the heels of the economically stable, militarily painless (what Kosovo War?), culturally trivial 1990s.

I have written elsewhere (in autobiographical essays for the books *Generation X Professors Speak* and *Unruly Catholics from Dante to Madonna*) that my Reagan-era suburban childhood and Opus Dei sympathetic parish priest helped condition me to uncritically embrace a zealous love for the Republican Party during my teenage years. After all, the party celebrated the same “family values” that Italian-Americans such as myself embraced, most notably an end to the “marriage penalty tax” that Dan Quayle campaigned against. While conservative comics fans often complain of political correctness in comics, I found that, as a center-right thinker, there were very few comics that offended my sensibilities outside of the occasional “very special issue.” Spider-Man never discussed politics in terms that offended me, but I assumed he leaned center-right like I did. I was a nerdy teen bullied in public school who learned to hate the “proles” I grew up beside, just as Peter Parker was a nerdy teen bullied in public school who learned to hate the proles he grew up beside. I had dreams of being recognized for my genius as he did, only I wanted to become a famous author/filmmaker and Peter wanted to be a trailblazing scientist. We shared ambition, a mordant sense of humor, and even—depending on how he was drawn—a physical appearance. Like virtually every other die-hard Spider-Man fan or long-term Spider-Man comics writer, I felt that I was Spider-Man and that I owned Spider-Man.

Over the years, my instinctual, elitist embracing of an Ayn Rand-style philosophy—an instinctual, elitist tendency shared by both Peter Parker and his co-creator, Steve Ditko—was mitigated by a liberal arts college education, a realization that the Republican Party was pretty damn ruthless in refusing to recognize the legitimacy of *any* Democrat president (no matter how conservative), and the dawning understanding that there is a lot of poverty and human suffering in the world that could—and should—be mitigated by the wealthy and influential. I learned, as Peter learned from his blue-collar, left-leaning uncle, that “with great power comes great responsibility.”²¹ But this was a lesson I have needed to learn time and again. Peter has needed to learn it time and again as well. Just as I was on the verge of leaving my right-wing past behind for good, 9/11 frightened me into briefly rein-

vesting in the party and its view of homeland security, military might, and the safety of the American people.

It took a very long time for Ground Zero to be reclaimed and renewed after the Twin Towers fell. During that extended period of seeming inactivity at the site of the attack, every time I went past the gaping hole in the ground that used to be the World Trade Center, I wondered when the next attack would be and if the collateral damage would include the entirety of my borough and everyone I knew. After 9/11, Muslim service station owners across New York City taped “Wanted: Dead or Alive” posters of Osama bin Laden upon their glass front doors to reassure their patrons that (a) they didn’t *really* look like bin Laden and, therefore, weren’t him and (b) they weren’t on his side. I felt bad for them and understood why they were scared of falling victim to a racially and religiously motivated attack. I was worried about much the same kind of attack coming from folks who looked kind of like them.

I was angry and I was scared, and I was even elated when George W. Bush promised that those who brought the Towers down would soon be hearing from the United States. I was elated, even though I knew this was the alcoholic buffoon who had conspired to steal the presidency from the rightfully elected president of the United States, Al Gore. I was elated even though I was so angry at how the 2000 recount went down, and at the role the Supreme Court played in his installation in the White House, that I permanently severed all of my lifelong ties with the Republican Party. And yet, here I was, cheering Bush’s vow to seek revenge on those who had killed my fellow New Yorkers. I wore an American flag on my lapel for the first time. Before then, I had been too cool to wear such a pin. The news coverage of Bush and the war on terror was uniformly positive. The Democratic Party and Tony Blair threw their full support behind his agenda, and America was “united.” The supposedly liberal NPR would spend the next several years offering its covert support for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as well, until those wars started to go on for too long and it became “safe” for NPR to criticize them for being “poorly planned” and for having “no exit strategy in place from the outset.”

During this period, a handful of Hollywood actors, activist stand-up comedians, documentary filmmakers, and out-of-the-mainstream journalists seemed a little worried about the excesses of the Bush Administration pushing the Iraq War, creating torture and surveillance programs, and accusing anyone politically to the left of Rush Limbaugh of high treason. The 2005 relaunch of *Doctor Who* written by Russell T. Davies mocked George W. Bush, Tony Blair, and Fox News mercilessly in episode after episode. The criticisms seemed more than apt, but the show was irritatingly grotesque and the criticisms were blunted for me by their being made by an outsider, and not by an American who lived in New York during 9/11 as I did.

Thankfully, Marvel stepped up to the plate.

First, Mark Waid wrote the Fantastic Four story *Authoritative Action* (2004), which seemed refreshingly critical of the Iraq War. And then there was *Civil War*. Spider-Man was behaving like I had been behaving of late. The reformed conservative is given an invitation to become rich, famous, and respected by becoming a member of Tony Stark’s inner circle and joining in the effort to quell Captain America’s rebellion. He convinces himself he is doing his bit to protect America in the aftermath of 9/11 ... *um* ... Stamford by briefly suspending civil liberties until the crisis passes, not knowing that the crisis will never pass, and further encroachments upon civil liberties were on the way. When he finally realizes he is on the wrong side, largely because of his discovery of what was going on at Gitmo ...

um ... the Negative Zone ... he switches sides. In being tempted to join Dick Cheney on his voyage to the dark side, Spider-Man is doing what I was doing, and what James Kirk would later do in *Star Trek into Darkness*. The good news is that Spider-Man grows as a person and admits his mistake. In *Amazing Spider-Man* #537, after Spider-Man rejects Tony Stark's definitions of freedom and safety, Falcon observes, "I mean, it takes a lot of courage to change your mind about something after going so far down the road. Saying 'I was wrong' has to be the hardest sentence in the English language" (Straczynski 20).

Reading this story made it clear to me that I had made the same mistake that Peter Parker had. I had joined Bush's side as Spider-Man had joined Iron Man's, and Spider-Man's defection to Captain America's side made me realize that I needed to make this second move as well. I needed to join the small, ragtag band of liberals that still had the gumption to stand up to homegrown tyranny when it was dangerously unpopular for them to do so. At the height of Bush's popularity, most of the press and the Democrats had rolled over and agreed to Bush's entire agenda, so there wasn't much of an opposition to join. Still, I was inspired by Spider-Man to sign on with what remained of the Democratic wing of the Democratic Party, as well as ally with the disaffected independents and some of the saner libertarians to work toward creating a loyal, patriotic opposition to Bush's misguided efforts to harm the nation in the name of defending it. So I saw myself as defecting to the oft-maligned Captain America, Michael Moore, George Clooney, and Dixie Chicks contingent. Saying "I was wrong" was very hard indeed, but I was glad I did admit my mistake to myself and correct my course. I was also glad to know that Falcon would support me in this decision, if he were real.

I think it is important to note that, in the final analysis, Spider-Man pays a high price for his mistake. His aunt is almost killed, his privacy is destroyed, and his liberty is in jeopardy. The only way he can undo some of the damage he's done to his own life is to make a deal with Satan to change the course of history with black magic. As a result of this demonic pact, Spider-Man's civilian identity becomes secret from the public once again and Aunt May's life is saved, *but* Peter's marriage to Mary Jane is wiped from existence and May forgets that her nephew is Spider-Man. Consequently, Peter loses his two closest confidants, is essentially estranged from both of them in the new course of history, and is left fundamentally alone for years. These are high costs indeed, and they further cement the point that it may well be wiser to make a deal with Satan than to get into bed with the Republican Party. (If you can avoid dealing with either, then that would be even wiser.) I didn't suffer as much as Peter did, but I bear the guilt of knowing I tacitly approved of far too many evil laws for a longer period than I should have, and I have to live with that mistake.

While my lifelong liberal friends found this political and spiritual journey of mine irritating because they saw through the Republican Noise Machine from the beginning, and weren't fooled for a minute, my conservative friends were horrified that I had decided to jump ship and join the legions of foolish young people in voting for that black man for president. Well, I'm not a superhero. I'm a flawed, regular guy. Spider-Man woke me up, and made me rethink my entire worldview. The experience I've just described to you was so life-altering that it inspired me to write a book about it that was half autobiography, half monograph study of political propaganda in superhero narratives. It is called *War, Politics and Superheroes: Ethics and Propaganda in Comics and Film*. I put my heart and soul into that one.

Over the years, I've occasionally assigned *Civil War* as reading in interdisciplinary honors classes to students of mine who were six years old when 9/11 happened. They grew

up in Oklahoma, the reddest state, raised by conservative parents who were not inclined toward affection for President Obama. Their *Civil War* is not my *Civil War*. First of all, the way Marvel collected the story into trade paperbacks makes little sense. The miniseries on its own lacks the richness it has when the Bendis and Straczynski issues are added in. The artwork is too busy for non-comics readers to follow. There are too many characters that laymen have never heard of cluttering up the narrative. Still, the students generally love it after they've hacked their way through it. Occasionally, a liberal student sees it as a cool precursor to *The Hunger Games* in its populist opposition to domestic tyranny and empire building. More frequently, conservative students tell me they embrace it because they see Captain America as a Tea Party Republican standing up to Iron Man's Barack Obama in opposition to the Affordable Care Act and gun control initiatives symbolized by the Superhuman Registration Act. While I wish these students were better at understanding my reading than they are, I am proud of them the first time they come up with this reading because it means I have taught them to interpret political allegory on their own, in ways that don't always parrot what I do. The teacher learns from the students. In the cases of both the liberal and conservative students, they tend to see in the narrative a worldview that already mirrors their own, which means *Civil War* is not likely to get them to switch parties the way it got me to. Well, no matter. It still got all of them to think in terms of social commentary, political allegory, and the role of grassroots activism in the political process.

My students' most common reading of *Civil War* recently surfaced in an October 20, 2014, *Slate* editorial by Jamelle Bouie, "Marvel's *Civil War* Is a Far-Right Paranoid Fantasy—and a Mess. Can the Movies Fix It?" The internet post was written in light of the breaking news that *Civil War* would become the basis for the plot of the third *Captain America* film and would star Chris Evans as Steve Rogers and Robert Downey, Jr., as Tony Stark. Bouie's reading of *Civil War* involves viewing superhuman registration as akin to common-sense gun-control laws—a reading that turns Stamford into the Sandy Hook school shootings, Tony Stark into Barack Obama, and Steve Rogers into a libertarian NRA member. As Bouie observes, "[Rather] than borrow from real world gun registration, it borrows from the loony anti-registration fears of gun fanatics, who imagine that registration and background checks are the beginning of a slippery slope to jackbooted thugs and a fascistic New World Order. Marvel could have given a sensible treatment of registration. Instead, it gave us a superhero version of NRA paranoid fantasies." This reading is intelligent and valid, and a far cry from seeing Stark as Dick Cheney and Rogers as Michael Moore, which was how I always viewed the story. In many ways, I find Bouie's interpretation interesting. I don't like the brevity of the piece, its dismissive take on one of my favorite comics, and Bouie's clear lack of knowledge of the story's original historical context.

My friend Bill Murphy, a visiting assistant professor of history at SUNY Oswego, contacted me when the article came out and suggested that I write a response to the piece in *Slate* that would be more informed and help broadcast my reading to the public. "Gun control wasn't an issue in 2006. Republicans who staunchly opposed gun control were in charge of the government, and the issue was dormant until Sandy Hook rekindled public debate about it. So it isn't fair to dismiss *Civil War* on those terms just because it happens to fit a current debate it wasn't written to comment upon."

"Maybe you should write the rebuttal," I joked. But he was right. Newspapers and web sites were starting to engage in more serious commentary on superhero movies, and it made sense for me to try to get my writing and my perspectives out into the news. The

problem, of course, is that the news isn't very deep or intelligent and it isn't a great forum for professors to express their ideas.

As a case in point, I held out some measure of hope that a journalist might find my book online and interview me the weekend of the release of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*. The film was so darn political, there were bound to be news stories about its allegorical dismantling of the NSA and its showcasing of Captain America's classic, *Civil War*-style opposition to tyranny and martial law disguised as homeland security. It turns out I was right. Rhys Blakely of *The London Times* sought me out for an interview to ask me what my feelings were about the film. I told him I was delighted to see a thematic adaptation of *Civil War* on the screen, updated in a way that foregrounds the revelations of whistleblower Edward Snowden about the NSA surveillance program and increasing concern over the use of predator drone strikes and surveillance. I said, "While I'm surprised and delighted at how liberal the film is, my most progressive friends think it isn't subversive enough and promotes stealth conservatism in a seemingly liberal exterior package. I know exactly where they are coming from and respectfully disagree. We have much the same friendly debates about President Obama."

I thought that was a fun quote for the article, but it wasn't what he was looking for, clearly. "Hmmm..." he said.

This moment was one of several hints during the interview that Blakely's editorial supervisors did not like the film precisely because it was anti-establishment and were hoping that my quotes would be less enthusiastic. When I discussed how Captain America has a history of being political, Blakely prodded me by saying, "But this is a news story. We need to be current. Have you heard that Vladimir Putin likes this movie?"

"Um ... no. Why do we have to drag him into this? I bet a lot of people interested in civil rights and social justice and freedom like this movie. What does he have to do with anything?"

"Do you think the global market makes it easier for Hollywood to make films that criticize America because they can recoup profits overseas that they lose domestically?"

"Sure," I said. "If that means filmmakers will no longer live in fear of offending a small percentage of really conservative, my-country-right-or-wrong folks and superhero fans can get more intelligent, progressive messages in movies, then that's very good news. And those folks can watch *Duck Dynasty* if they want something marketed to them."

The article was published on April 12, 2014, with the headline: "No More U.S. Superheroes: Subversive Hollywood Makes Putin's Day." The article was brief and read much like the headline suggested it would. This is the part of the piece that I appeared in:

Marc DiPaolo, the author of *War, Politics and Superheroes*, suggests that lucrative foreign markets have given superheroes new licence to explore anti-U.S. themes. "Hollywood doesn't have to worry about a backlash from the American market," he said....

It has been suggested that Vladimir Putin, the Russian president, might enjoy the movie, which could also be interpreted as a rebuke to NATO and the UN.

I posted the article on Facebook and one of my students, Joe Jenen, wrote me right away. "Are you okay?" he asked. "I read your quote in that article and it was weird. It didn't sound like you. Are you back in the right-wing corner, or something?"

"No," I said. "I was just totally misquoted. That's Britain's liberal media at work, taking my progressive sentiments and turning them on their head. The way they plugged me into that article's overall hysterical argument, they made it sound like I think that Marvel's very

apt depiction of the NSA is tantamount to anti-Americanism. So *Captain America 2* is weakening our country, leaving it ripe for Putin to take over, apparently.”

“Oh, good. I was worried you really thought that for a minute.”

“And now the rest of the world will think I think that. If anybody reads the article, or gives a damn who I am or what I think. Still. It is the principle of the thing.”

“Well ... you were quoted in the *London Times*! That’s cool.”

“Um ... yay? I guess? Hooray?”

Annoyed at the article I wound up stuck in, I scoured the Internet looking for better stories about the film and stumbled upon three fantastic articles on the *Sequart* blog about the film. “Ah! You see! *Sequart* knows how it is done, *London Times*.” So I wrote to the editors at *Sequart* and asked to become a columnist.

And what is the upshot of all of these autobiographical anecdotes and why am I foisting them upon you as an afterword to an academic anthology? A legitimate question.

While my tenure as a journalist at *The Staten Island Advance* was short-lived, I never behaved the way Rhys Blakely did. He knew he was misrepresenting me and did it anyway because he had the story written in his head before he interviewed me. I left the occupation precisely because I saw it becoming more and more sensationalistic and more of a blight on society than an educator of it. The kind of writing Blakely churned out on deadline was not journalism. It was not social commentary. It was bullshit.

Enter this book.

When Kevin Scott told he was beginning work on this project and invited me to participate, I was enthusiastic about the news. I’d already written a lot about *Civil War*, but I was eager to see what others had to say. Now that I see the end result of the collective labor, I’m delighted to see so many brilliant, reasonable, well-researched articles on the best mainstream superhero event story ever published. It is a culturally important tale and one that warrant serious study.

Here’s the important bit. Scholars such as those who have contributed to this volume and publishers like McFarland are doing an enormous public service. We have no real news service to speak of any more, and so little serious cultural and political commentary is being written about the pressing issues of our time. Scholarship such as this has a real potential to reach hardcore fans and even some casual fans. McFarland anthologies and monographs can be brought to the people at less cost than the \$120 cover price of most academic books and boast far more accessible writing styles than most academic books contain. Indeed, I first encountered McFarland at various horror and science fiction conventions I attended in New York, New Jersey, and Virginia during the 1990s. I bought their excellent volumes on *Godzilla* and *Doctor Who* years before I entered academia or even knew what an academic book was. I read those books at high school age and I loved them. I didn’t know I was accessing forbidden, elitist knowledge. Now that McFarland sells still more affordable versions of their books in electronic format and superhero scholarship akin to these articles appear on websites like *Sequart* and get tweeted, the reach of superhero studies scholarship is beginning to seem limitless. Superhero stories are important and they deserve to be interpreted by intelligent commentators.

So, if you are reading this book as a fan, as a scholar, or as a student, I congratulate you for thinking seriously about these women and men in pajamas who mean so much to contemporary Americans.

If you are a fellow scholar and/or a contributor to this book, I have a message for you.

We cannot rely on journalists to do their jobs any more. If we want smart readings of

comics, smart social commentary, and smart political science reaching mainstream audiences, it is up to academics to produce it, because almost no one else will outside of a small handful of indie filmmakers and activist comedians. Thanks for being part of one of the most important conversations of our time. Thanks for being part of this book. Don't stop now. There's a lot more work to be done.

See you in the trenches.

Note

1. The phrase "With great power comes great responsibility" did not originate with Uncle Ben. It first appeared in the final panel of narration in Spider-Man's first story, in *Amazing Fantasy* #15 (and was worded slightly differently. See Lee). Soon thereafter, due to regular restagings, it became associated with Uncle Ben. The concept has been around for centuries, but this specific phrase has, due to Spider-Man's angst and popularity, entered the popular imagination, and is widely used without any reference to Spider-Man, most recently in an International Monetary Fund working paper about mortgage insurance titled, *With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility: Macroprudential Tools at Work in Canada* (see Krznar and Morsink). Great power, indeed.

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Marc DiPaolo is an associate professor of English and film at Oklahoma City University. He is the author, most recently, of *War, Politics and Superheroes* (McFarland, 2011). He has edited and co-edited multiple collections, including *Godly Heretics: Essays on Alternative Christianity in Literature and Popular Culture* (McFarland, 2013), *Unruly Catholics from Dante to Madonna: Faith, Heresy, and Politics in Cultural Studies* (Scarecrow, 2013), and *Devised and Directed by Mike Leigh* (with Bryan Cardinale-Powell, Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).