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**The Ultimate Critique: Neoconservatism, Captain America
and Marvel's *Ultimates***

BY

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Abstract:

This work builds on the analysis of negotiations in the presentation of Captain America through different generations of American popular culture to critically analyze frames invoking the role of patriotism in American culture and attitudes towards violence.

The newest rendition of Captain America in the Marvel's *The Ultimates* comic represents a neo-conservative interpretation of the character and the country that he represents. In contrast to the mainstream Marvel character, the *Ultimate* Cap is pragmatic to a fault, is fiercely defensive of conservative values, is short on words and often relies exclusively on his physical prowess to resolve disputes.

Through the reinterpretation of the familiar themes of the Captain America story, the creators of *The Ultimates* offer a critique of the American War on Terror, the policies of the Bush Administration and perceptions of American hubris in its international dealings. The *Ultimate* presentation of American patriotism presents a system of policy consistent with neoconservatism in which traditional values are preserved at all cost, communication with opponents is viewed as compromise with one's enemies and displays of force are considered essential to negotiating disputes with other nations and institutions.

Introduction

The adventures of Captain America have been chronicled since *Captain America Comics* #1 hit the stands on December 20, 1940. Over the years, the character has endured significant renegotiation in order to update him for changes in contemporary culture, providing an indirect snapshot of American cultural development. As American society has evolved and adapted to new challenges, the character's history and motivations have also evolved, and these changes document the necessity of reinventing American myths to avoid confronting derogatory elements of American history and yet preserve a sense of narrative continuity.

Through the reinterpretation of the familiar themes of the Captain America story, the creators of *The Ultimates* offer a critique of the American War on Terror, the neoconservative policies of the Bush Administration and perceptions of American hubris in its international dealings. The Ultimate presentation of American patriotism presents a system of policy in which traditional values are preserved at all cost, communication with opponents is viewed as compromise with one's enemies and displays of force are considered essential to negotiating disputes with other nations and institutions.

Comics in Scholarship

Comic books have received scholarly attention since the early 1940s. The early literature focused on the pedagogical potential of comics in the classroom setting (Bender; Frank; Grann and Lloyd; Gruenberg; Hutchinson; Sones). However, after an alarmist public outcry against comic books over their alleged link with a rise in juvenile delinquency (Nyberg 18), scholarship involving comic books dwindled to a few studies on the effect of comic book violence on children.

In the late 1970s, a few articles appeared describing the political discourse represented in Silver Age comics, leading to a renewed interest in comic books and a renewed sense of their relevance as popular culture (Brocka). Brown (28) described comic book fans as highly motivated discussers of cultural knowledge. The culture that comic fandom creates was described by Fiske (30) as a "shadow cultural economy" that reflects bourgeois standards.

Superhero narratives generally maintain the status quo (Wolf-Meyer), and Captain America himself is certainly no exception. According to his own continuity, the U.S. government created Cap in order to battle the Nazi disruption of the pre-WWII American way of life (Simon and Kirby). Cap was introduced as a hero specifically designed to oppose Adolph Hitler (Ro 13) a year before America entered World War II, and created quite a stir when his first cover, which depicted Cap punching the Nazi leader in the jaw, was criticized by American isolationists (Kalish 26). For his first year of existence, Cap defended domestic America from Nazi spies and hidden plots, while the Nazis in the real world were officially still not America's enemies.

Once the war began, Cap came to "epitomize not only the values and fighting spirit of the national war effort but also the fortunes that comic book publishers would reap for their enlistment into patriotic wartime culture" (Wright 36). Cap fought Nazis and Japanese agents during the war and even beyond (the comics continued the war narrative beyond the historical conflict's conclusion), but his comic slumped in the late 1940s and was cancelled when the post-war culture turned away from superhero comics. The character was re-launched in 1954 as a "Commie Smasher," but his return lasted only a handful of issues when sales did not meet expectations.

When Marvel Comics rose to prominence in the early 1960s, Captain America was successfully revived and became a heavy contributor to the sales and mythology of that company's continuity. But could a character created by the 1940s' establishment offer a credible critique of the 1960s' American society? MacDonald and Macdonald argued that the 1960s' and 1970s' Captain America had evolved into a character that had "accurately caught the changing mood of the past thirty years" (253).

Andrae noted that while iconic heroes like Superman – whom Engle cites as deeply representative of American character – tend to reinforce dominant ideology, they also offer social criticism. This is certainly true of Captain America over the years, as the character has been forced to adapt every few years to changes in American culture. This "man out of time" element of Cap's mythos allows him to continue to represent conservative values while consistently offering a liberal critique of the culture through which he walks. Glock pointed out that superhero narratives, particularly those that have

been running for more than six decades, are a valuable source for understanding cultural transition since “reinterpretation becomes part of [their] survival code” (13).

Since 1941, there have been approximately 1,800 comic books in which Cap had played a central role. A survey of the mainstream Marvel *Captain America* books resulted in the following divisions (each a Cap created for a new era):

1. The Anti-Hitler Cap (1941-1950)
2. The Commie Smasher Cap (1953-1954)
3. The Man Out of Time (1964-1971)
4. The Liberal Crusader (1971-1979)
5. The Individualist Consumer (1979-1990)
6. The Superficial Icon (1990-2002)
7. The Soldier (2002-2005)
8. The Renegade Civil Warrior (2006-2007)

Perhaps no rendition of Captain America is as interesting or revealing of post-9/11 American society as the postmodern treatment given the character in the pages of *The Ultimates* and *The Ultimates 2*.

Postmodern comics

Most superhero comic books contain social commentary: some offer social criticism directly through their narrative, while others indirectly encode representations and values of their age.

Postmodern comic books, like most forms of postmodern media, utilize some form of metanarrative critique in addition to the presence of commentary. In addition, postmodern comics often blend together a convergence of genres whose juxtaposition serve to deconstruct or simply explore the metanarratives normally associated with the genre, often using intertextual humor to create moments of absurdity and awareness that challenge the fourth wall of the narrative.

The Ultimate line of Marvel Comics can certainly be considered an example of a postmodern comics narrative. Set apart from the mainstream Marvel franchise, the stories told in the Ultimate comics carefully juxtapose established iconic history with new configurations of narrative intended to create meaning through intertextual tension. Through these books, Marvel writers and artists deconstruct many tenets of the Marvel superhero genre, challenging the notions of secret identities, superhero team dynamics,

the relationship between super-powered heroes and the state, the rationale behind costume design and use and even the psychological implications of possessing super powers.

The Ultimate Marvel Universe

The Ultimate Marvel Universe launched in 2000 in order to fill a fan need for orientation surrounding the theatrical release of upcoming marvel films.

Marvel knew that the intertextual nature of comic book movies would lead new readers (and particularly young readers) to their counterpart comics and anticipated a certain amount of confusion when a young reader tried to reconcile the basic elements of the movie narrative with the complexities of the comic narrative.

Spider-Man posed a particularly difficult challenge. Whereas the movie began with the character's origin and portrayed the exploits of a teenaged hero, this era of the comic book had long passed. The Spider-Man portrayed in Marvel Comics is in his mid-thirties, is married to super-model Mary Jane Watson-Parker, teaches at his old high school and is involved in storylines which challenge his sense of adult responsibility.

Began as an entry point for new fans, the Ultimate imprint quickly gained support among existing fans through intertextual humor and carefully linked stories that hold the Ultimate narratives to a higher level of relevance to each other than in the mainstream Marvel Universe.

A striking example of this intertextual humor can be found in *Ultimate Marvel Team-Up #2* (Bendis, Hester and Parks). As Spider-Man confronts the Hulk for the first time, he makes many humorous intertextual references. As the Hulk looms over Spider-Man, the hero looks up and mutters, "Hey, listen, man ... Don't make me angry. You wouldn't like me when I'm angry." (Bendis, Hester and Parks, 15).

This line, famously repeated every week in the opening credits of the 1978 *Incredible Hulk* television show, rewards long-time fans of Marvel entertainment properties, while still remaining accessible to newer audiences.

Following the success of the *Ultimate Spider-Man* and *Ultimate X-Men* books, Marvel announced the upcoming launch of *The Ultimates*, a book based on the mainstream *Avengers* property.

From the beginning, *The Ultimates* was written with social commentary in mind. Contrasting the book with the mainstream *Avengers* title, writer Mark Miller described *The Ultimates* as “an exploration of what happens when a bunch of ordinary people are turned into super-soldiers and being groomed to fight the real-life war on terror” (Estrella).

In another interview, Millar explained his approach to the comic’s politics:

[The] *Ultimates* is a pro-status quo book. If anything, it was kind of a right wing book, like Rush Limbaugh doing super comics. It was like, ‘Hey superheroes should all be on the government payroll and go out there and fight the war on terror,’ you know? (Khoury)

The storyline in *The Ultimates 2* would evolve into a stinging critique of the status quo at a time when popular support for American began to wane, but in both books, the American establishment is reflected most strongly in the Nick Fury characterization, as well as Millar’s portrayal of Captain America.

Ultimate Captain America

Unlike his liberal mainstream Marvel counterpart, the Ultimate Captain America is first and foremost a soldier. Frozen in the 1940’s and released in a post-9/11 world, Ultimate Cap maintains a conservative mindset consistent with the stereotypes popularized from the earlier era of American culture.

Like his mainstream counterpart, Cap struggles to adjust to the dramatic changes that occurred in American culture while he was frozen. Unlike his counterpart, Ultimate Cap clings fiercely to his social and religious values. In *Ultimate Extinction #2*, this struggle manifests itself when the heroes find themselves facing the likely destruction of earth:

Ultimate Cap: “Do you believe in God, Nick?”

Nick Fury: “Don’t all good soldiers believe in God?”

Ultimate Cap: “I asked one of your specialists if he believed in God. He laughed at me. Where I came from, everybody believed in God. And if someone asked too many questions about God, it was because they’d gone nutty from reading too many books. God was there. God loved us. That was the whole deal.

God gave us a sense of what’s right, and strong arms to fight evil for him.

It's not a big world, and there were enough of us to stand under God and take on the evil in it, see? ... But there aren't enough of us, are there? It's an evil too big for me to hit. I never thought there'd be such a thing. I can't do anything. ... Yesterday I was a 'super-soldier.' Today I don't even know if I still believe in God." (Ellis, Peterson and Ponsor, #2, 7-8)

Through portrayals like these, Millar and Hitch explore traditional American military culture: if God is at the center of all political and military action, then what happens when God's champions face defeat? Fortunately for Ultimate Cap, he is often spared such defeats in the end.

However, Cap's 1940's morality does not lead him to be overly idealistic. In mainstream Marvel continuity, Captain America is idealistic to a fault: he refuses to use firearms, he often refrains from striking an unsuspecting opponent from behind and he strives never to kill his opponent.

Ultimate Cap shows no such compunctions and is a pragmatist when it comes to using force, is fiercely defensive of conservative values, is short on words and often relies exclusively on his physical prowess to resolve disputes. In his first confrontation with the Hulk in *The Ultimates #5*, Ultimate Cap immediately kicks the monster in the groin and later kicks a defenseless Bruce Banner in the face (Miller and Hitch, 113, 123).

Ultimate Cap doesn't hesitate to strike immobile opponents when he feels an advantage can be gained:

Captain Mahr Vehl: "Captain, do you have a thing about kicking people when they're down?"
Ultimate Cap: "No, Captain – I always figured that was the best time to kick 'em." (Ellis, Peterson and Ponsor, #4, 17-18)

In contrast to the more liberal mainstream Marvel character, Ultimate Cap routinely carries weaponry consistent with a war-time soldier (automatic weapons, small arms, hand grenades, etc.) and routinely amasses a large body count on missions. Taking life is acceptable if it removes a threat. When approached by X-Men mentor Charles Xavier in *Ultimate War #2*, Cap proves unmoved by appeals to save the villainous Magneto's life:

Ultimate Cap: "No deals, soldier. I couldn't care less about any of that new age junk or why he didn't put this monster to bed when he had the chance." (Miller and Bachalo, 46)

This blending of ruthless pragmatism and emphasis on positions of strength is consistent with the neoconservative ethic.

Neoconservatism

The precise definition and origin of neoconservatism are hotly contested by scholars, public intellectuals and political operatives. However, many of the above voices agree that the movement (or “tendency”) arose in resistance to the American leftist counter-culture of the 1960s and that it has had influence on recent Republican presidencies, most notably that of George W. Bush.

Fusing portions of the rhetoric from the 1960 New Left movement with a more plain-spoken rhetoric of the common man, one of the goals of neoconservatism has been "to make criticism from the Right acceptable in the intellectual, artistic, and journalistic circles where conservatives had long been regarded with suspicion" (Dionne, 1991, 56).

According to Irving Kristol, the "acknowledged godfather of neoconservatism" (Stelzer, 2004, 4) there are three central tenets of Neoconservatism: a low tax, pro-growth approach to economics that entrusts market viability to the actions of individuals; a concern about the waning civic and cultural mores of American democratic culture; and an expansive foreign policy that seeks to export democracy to other societies while resisting cooperative international authority structures. The foundation of these neoconservative tenets assumes “the incredible military superiority of the United States vis-à-vis the nations of the rest of the world, in any imaginable combination” and seeks to maintain (and appropriately use) this strength to further the advancement of the American values (Kristol, 2003).

Chernus (2006) argued that the root of neoconservatism is a fear that American counterculture has and will continue to undermine the authority of traditional values and moral norms. Chernus explained that because neoconservatives tend to hold a view of human nature that defines individuals as innately selfish, they worry that a society with no commonly accepted values based on religion or tradition will end up in a type of individualistic cultural civil war.

To resist this outcome, the neoconservative holds strength as America’s most important social value and by extension, fears that weakness will lead to moral confusion and anarchy.

These views also heavily influence the neoconservative foreign policy. As neoconservative writer Charles Krauthammer (2001) wrote, “States line up with more

powerful states not out of love but out of fear. And respect.” David Brooks (2001) added “Every morning you strap on your armor and you go out to battle the evil ones. It's more important to be feared than loved.” Neoconservatives were sharply critical of the post-Cold War military reductions and a perceived lack of willingness to use military force to support America’s strategic interests.

After the end of the 1991 Gulf War concluded with Saddam Hussein still in power, neoconservatism began to be identified with the desire to revisit Iraq and remove Hussein with military force. A 1998 open letter to President Bill Clinton arguing for the removal of Hussein was signed by dozens of political operatives who would eventually play key roles in the Bush Administration and the 2003 plan to invade Iraq a second time (Solarz et. al., 1998).

Rogue regimes appear to be a particular concern, and to deal with these threats the neoconservative favors military might (and even pre-emptive action) over international law and diplomacy. In an essay written before the invasion of Iraq, Kristol and Kagan (2000) sum up the neoconservative doctrine of strength:

A strong America capable of projecting force quickly and with devastating effect to important regions of the world would make it less likely that challengers to regional stability would attempt to alter the status quo in their favor. It might even deter such challengers from undertaking expensive efforts to arm themselves in the first place. An America whose willingness to project force is in doubt, on the other hand, can only encourage such challenges. In Europe, in Asia, and in the Middle East, the message we should be sending to potential foes is: “Don’t even think about it!” That kind of deterrence offers the best recipe for lasting peace; it is much cheaper than fighting wars that would follow should we fail to build such a deterrent capacity (16).

The Ultimates Critique

Ultimate Cap’s reactionary mentality (and that of several of his teammates) was reportedly a conscious choice on the part of Millar’s. The writer claimed that he was in the midst of the first issue of the original series when the 2001 attack on the World Trade Center occurred (Khouri). Taking inspiration from life, Millar framed the story as a response to recent violent attacks (though the characters never confront al Queda or make more than passing reference to the September 11 attacks).

Though many of its members are civilians, the Ultimates team is a military unit funded and supported by the American government as an extension of the military. As the characters struggle to adapt to their changing roles in society, the comic considers the public versus the private dimensions of the super-hero team. Unlike traditional

government-supported programs, the Ultimates are marketed and merchandised through private corporations. This arrangement (as well as the cooperative funding arrangements made with researchers Tony Stark, Henry Pym and Bruce Banner) demonstrates the fusion of industry consistent with neoconservative philosophies of society.

As private industry overlaps with public funded initiatives, the narrative explores the paradox of celebrity in American culture. Often, it is the image of protection that is emphasized by the Ultimate leaders rather than the reality. Privacy, secrecy, exposure, publicity: all interact as plot devices in the *Ultimates*.

The characters are very aware of their celebrity status, and revel in the attention. In an amusing scene (Millar and Hitch, 88-90), the team members sit around discussing which actors would best play them in a movie about them (Brad Pitt is mentioned for Captain America, Samuel L. Jackson is mentioned as Nick Fury, Johnny Depp is mentioned as Tony Stark, Matthew McConaughey as Pym, Steve Buscemi as Bruce Banner). This scene plays heavily on the intertextual humor generated by the fact that many of these actors served as role models for Brian Hitch's artwork.

Speaking about the inspiration for Nick Fury's portrayal, Hitch said he and Millar:

always knew that it had to be Sam Jackson. The idea of a high ranking black officer came from Colin Powell, but there would never be anyone cooler than Sam Jackson. That would be who we would cast if we were making the movie (Evans).

Other examples of postmodern humor are at times overt and at other times subtle. When Captain America is found adrift in the ocean, Tony Stark tells Nick Fury, "It's like something out of Joseph Campbell book, General Fury. A country's greatest hero coming back in the hour he's needed most? I'm just glad I've got fifty percent of the merchandising rights" (56).

The evening gala scene celebrating the public launch of the team has several examples of subtle intertextual humor. As Tony Stark hits on a female reporter, the reader might notice that she bears a striking resemblance to Lois Lane and is accompanied by two men that resemble Clark Kent and Jimmy Olsen (70). In addition, when President Bush makes his first appearance, he politely but firmly refuses an offered tray of pretzels (71).

Such moments reward the observant viewer without distracting from the primary storyline in anyway. Many moments play on the juxtaposition of ironic elements of context, such as when Gail and Bucky praise Cap for being decent compared to other heroes, despite his more ruthless tactics:

Gail: “Congratulations on saving everyone, Steve. Sharon’s two youngest watch the Hulk video every day after we pick them up from school. It’s just nice to see them watching somebody decent for a change after Spider-Man or one of the horrible X-Men.”

Bucky: “Yeah, seeing drop that tank on his head and kicking him in the stones, it seemed like I was nineteen years old and back in Normandy again, buddy” (Millar and Hitch, 159).

Perhaps the most significant of these juxtapositions involves the many subplots generated by the metaphors implied through the super-soldier program itself.

The Super-Soldier Debate

The super-soldier race (resulting in the creating of “persons of mass destruction”) is a race among nations, among corporations and even among individual scientists. The original super-soldier, Ultimate Captain America, was created in the 1930s in response to an extraterrestrial terrorist threat (the Chitauri, or Skrulls) that was propping up the Nazi forces.

In fact, the *Ultimates* narrative reframed the wartime efforts of the Allied forces as opposition to this alien species, even justifying the use of the atomic bombs in Nagasaki and Hiroshima as an attempt to contain the extraterrestrial threat. America has always been involved in a “war on terror,” whether the populace was aware of this fact or not. Volume 1 of the *Ultimates* involves the build-up to a contemporary confrontation between the heroes and the alien species, a black-and-white opponent for a war terror.

From America’s perspective, the justification for developing, stockpiling and mobilizing “persons of mass destruction” are two-fold. First, the government is engaged in a secret war on terror that simply cannot be won by conventional means. Because the military is allowed to protect the nation behind a veil of national security, the *Ultimates* prove able to defeat the extraterrestrial menace.

The second rationale for the super-soldier efforts is reminiscent of the deterrence element of neoconservative foreign policy. In several moments of dialogue, Nick Fury

uses the classic appeal to strength favored by neoconservative intellectuals, such as the following exchange with President George W. Bush:

President Bush: "Is he as strong as you expected, General?"

Fury: "Stronger, sir."

Bush: "Is he smart?"

Fury: "Tactically of the scale the scale, Mister President. There's genuinely nobody in existence I'd rather have leading this team when they're out there on the field. Add this Thunder God guy to the mix plus all the other Super-Soldiers Banner can create from Cap's blood and I don't see anyone acting up for quite a while. Do you, sir?"

Bush: "No, I don't, General Fury. No, I don't" (Millar and Hitch, 71).

The appeal to strength also creates a need to avoid admitting responsibility for mistakes, even when those mistakes lead to the loss of life. When Bruce Banner becomes the Hulk and kills more than 800 people in a mad fury, the Ultimates are forced to bring him down. They succeed, but when it comes time to provide details on the conflict, Fury and Betty Ross decide to hide the government's involvement in the creation of the Hulk (Millar and Hitch, 127).

By hiding the truth from the public, the Ultimates are allowed to maintain their appearance of strength and integrity, and it is often argued throughout both books that the appearance of strength is an essential component of the Ultimates' mission.

However, by the second volume, Millar and Hitch began to shift the tone of the book away from the black-and-white certainty of fighting extraterrestrials trying to destroy the planet to reflect a more "gray" narrative. Millar explained he thought the book should be "a little more political given that we live in more political times." (Singh, 2004).

The series opens with Ultimate Cap infiltrating Iraq to liberate American hostages, in clear violation of the ban against the use of "persons of mass destruction" outside of the continental U.S. This decision causes a rift with Thor, a Norwegian national who often serves as the tempering voice of conscience for the team.

According to Millar, the shift in tone and the choice of locale was not accidental:

... by the time "Ultimates 2" came along, we started to see a different tone. We were all saying, "Well, these guys are in Afghanistan, you should be trying to get them." But the Bush administration and the cronies started to go for Saddam instead, who had nothing to do with it. No ties with Al-Queda at all. The rest of the world was starting to see it as not such a black and white situation, and I think "Ultimates 2" ... was all about shades of grey. It was like, the most powerful nation in the world using these superpowered characters in a way that might not be as innocent as it seems. It was the abuse of the superheroes. (Khouri)

President George W. Bush makes several appearances throughout the series, though rarely as the executive power directing the plans. It is clear that in the world of the *Ultimates*, the military industrial complex runs largely unchecked. In fact, at several points in the narrative, characters refer to military intelligence classifications by how many levels above presidential scrutiny or governmental “top secret” clearance the material is classified.

Thor also expounds on this view, when he reveals his view of the American presidency in *The Ultimates 2 #2*:

Groupie: “—I said I love that piece in your book about America thinking it’s the new Roman Empire, but why have you stopped mentioning the President by name, Thor? Why don’t you personalize it anymore?”

Thor: “Because blaming him for what they’re doing is like blaming Ronald McDonald for the hamburgers. He’s just their front man. I doubt they even let him into the meetings.” (15)

Dissent is also not a value exposed by the government or the military. Among the heroes, Thor plays the voice of the dissident. While the others follow orders and don’t concern themselves with the implications of their actions, Thor consistently offers a social critique of American culture and military might, appearing on television (such as his appearance on *60 Minutes* in *Ultimates 2 #3*) shows to warn Americans about the dangers of imperialism:

... Forget this little street theater they’re numbing your brains with. Our primary concern should be the rumors of The Ultimates being deployed in Syria and Iran. Because that’s what’s coming up if we don’t get our act together, Bob. This team wasn’t put together to stop burglars and bank robbers. (6)

For his troubles, Thor’s very identity and origin are attacked. Reframed as an enemy, Thor is accused of being a traitor and is confronted and defeated by the rest of the team. Once his voice is removed, the team begins regular incursions into Middle East, disarming military threats to the American status quo and causing worldwide concern that the United States is establishing an expansionist empire.

Even incarcerated, Thor’s critiques continue, as he tries to open his teammates eyes to their manipulation by the military. These interactions serve as metaphors critical of the culture of fear that neoconservative officials use to justify their increasingly preemptive actions to disarm rogue nations. An exchange between Thor and Tony Stark in *Ultimates 2 #7* illustrates this critique:

Thor: "This is why you're going to lose, Tony ... the tighter you squeeze, the more they'll just slip through your fingers."

Tony: "And when did I become one of the bad guys?"

Thor: "Around the same time you took part in that preemptive strike against a Third World country."

Tony: "A Third World country with nuclear weapons."

Thor: "I think you'll find that the only nation that's ever used nuclear weapons against other human beings is the one you pledged and oath of allegiance to."

Tony: "Oh, stop being an idiot, Thor. These people were targeting neighbors at the same time they were reassuring us they didn't even have a weapons program. What would you have done in our situation? Crossed your fingers?"

Thor: "They've got you, haven't they? All they have to do is say 'nuclear weapons' and Tony Stark just falls in line like the rest of them. Do you think that's how they'll get you to invade all their other target countries? Supposing they decide China's a threat a few years down the line?"

Tony: "Now you're just being ridiculous."

Thor: "I used to think you were the smart one, Tony." (12-13)

Through these events and conversations, Millar and Hitch use the team as an allegory for the American people (Estrella) and their fears for the implications of the American actions in Iraq. Millar pointed to his own concerns about the expansion of the American action in the world as inspiration for the story:

My feeling is that over the next year some kind of incident will happen or be arranged that prompts a nationwide call for the draft and pre-emptive strikes on Syria, North Korea, Iran and all the world hot spots. This isn't such a conspiracy theory here in Europe. Many mainstream politicians are very skeptical of what happening and worried about even the short-term consequences for the world. In the name of oil, this administration is stirring up a hornet's nest and, even though I'm a huge optimist, I think we're heading for some kind of Armageddon. I just can't see a good way out of this situation and, after decades of seeing Britain try to deal with the IRA, I know you don't defeat terrorists by killing their families. My own belief is that there'll be a couple of nuclear attacks in the States, the multinationals will move elsewhere, the American economy will completely collapse and make the 30s look like the 80s and the Middle East will be occupied by drafted teenagers from your home town. But don't get me started. I hope I'm completely and utterly wrong. (Estrella)

But the critique of direct military action is not the only criticism embedded in the *Ultimates*. The creators also present commentary about the nature of force and the proliferation of power in an international setting.

Initially, as Nick Fury struggles to justify the expense of billions of federal dollars, the team proves its mettle by stopping the Hulk (but not before more than 800 civilians are killed in the melee). Ironically, the Hulk is a governmental employee who was accidentally created in pursuit of the super-soldier serum.

Many of the non-mutant heroes and villains in the Ultimate universe are a product of the search to recreate Captain America's super-soldier formula, including the Hulk, Giant-Man, Spider-Man and nearly all Spider-Man's villains. The search for a super-

soldier results in the proliferation of super-powered beings (which in turn justifies the increased investment in additional efforts to create super-soldiers to defend against threats from “persons of mass destruction.”)

Additionally, the successes of the creation of the Ultimates team members leads other nations to begin their own “super persons” programs. The European Union fields a covert team. Several countries are rumored to be experimenting with gene manipulation and human augmentation.

Nick Fury demonstrates he is perfectly aware of the situation, explaining it to Ultimate Cap in *Ultimate Six* #5:

Captain, you, like the atom bomb, are one of the greatest success stories in the history of war. And ever since, like the bomb, every country with a Petri dish and five dollars has been scrambling to not only repeat you ... but to improve on you and stockpile you. (Bendis, Hairsine and Miki, 19).

However, this proliferation creates a state of hypocrisy in American society, as the government is forced to ban human genetic manipulation, while at the same time funding several projects attempting to create governmental super-soldiers through gene manipulation. Even the Ultimate Cap is unsettled by this realization.

The results of the international super-soldier proliferation comes to a head in the second volume, as the Ultimates face the invasion and occupation of America by a team of foreigners called “the Liberators,” featuring super-powered agents from China, Russia, North Korea and Syria. These agents justify their actions as an effort to halt the increased aggression by the U.S. throughout the world. In this manner, the existence of the Ultimates create the very threat they were assembled to guard against. But as this exchange between Loki and Colonel Abdul Al-Rahman (a Middle Eastern Captain America) from *Ultimates 2* #9 illustrates, the team is less motivated by aggressive tendencies and more concerned with the geopolitical implications of the neoconservative call for preemptive action in the world:

Loki: “All this carnage must be very satisfying after everything the Americans have done to your country, eh, colonel?”

Colonel Abdul Al-Rahman: “I didn’t come here for revenge, Loki. I came here to lead this international collective because America’s plans simply had to be curtailed. The world is a safer place now that this new Roman Empire has been restrained.” (24)

The Roman Empire frame is used to describe America’s war on terror mandate throughout volume 2. Once the Liberators have secured the major metropolitan areas of

the U.S., they begin to dismantle American symbols of power. As Liberator forces knock the Statue of Liberty into the harbor in *Ultimates 2* #9, Colonel Al-Rahman films the destruction and narrates:

We told you to stop making super people, America. We told you not to interfere with cultures you cannot understand. This is what happens when your ambitions outstrip your capabilities. The empire takes a fall (26-27).

It is telling that only one of the four team deployments in the two volumes of the *Ultimates* (the Chitari invasion) is fought against an opponent whose origin is independent of the *Ultimates* existence. The other three conflicts (with the Hulk, with Thor and with the Liberators) all occur as a direct result of the military build-up that created the team.

This fact is not lost on the heroes, who after defeating the Liberator forces at the end of the second volume, declare their independence from the American establishment and operate exclusively from private funding sources.

Conclusions/Discussion

A close reading of both volumes of *The Ultimates* (and the derivative *Ultimate* titles in which the *Ultimates* appear) provide interesting perspective to the supposed outcomes of neoconservative philosophy. Though many conflicting subtle statements are woven throughout the series (and many of these rest in the context of comparisons to the mainstream Marvel narratives), a few dominant themes emerge:

1. Cultural values systems tend to close minds and isolate communities. Captain America struggles mightily in his attempts to adjust to the 21st century. His inability to accept changes to contemporary culture and approach people where they are lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding, which in turn leads to unnecessary conflict.

At different points in the series, Captain America alludes to “survival instincts” that have been programmed into him during his transformation. Claiming that these enhancements allow him to adapt to the present day, Cap becomes surlier and more brutish as the narrative progresses. He appears to have less and less tolerance for those different from him, and on two occasions he physically confronts teammates whom he perceives to have acted inappropriately (seriously injuring one).

This tendency causes problems for the team as a whole, and as each character fights for his or her personal views to be validated, key facts and snippets of information are missed, leading to the surprise invasion's early success.

2. Preemptive military action most likely leads to the creation of enemies and increases a nation's chances of being attacked. Each of the Liberators had a personal motivation for joining the attack, but most of them were either reacting to the behavior of the Ultimates who had invaded and disarmed their home country or were working to prevent their country from receiving such a visit.

The narrative leave little doubt that the surprise invasion would not have occurred without the more aggressive American policies in the rest of the world. Strength would appear to create resistance, not subservience. Hitch and Miller seem to be joining the chorus of voices who suggest that American involvement in other cultures (pursuing American interests to the detriment of others) causes many threats to America to emerge in the first place.

While not explicitly connecting the Liberators invasion to 9/11, the rhetoric surrounding the toppling of the Statue of Liberty seems to be consistent with the justifications given for terrorist attacks on the U.S.

The Ultimates narrative suggests that aggressive policies do not actually make a nation safer, but rather build up resentment among peoples that would care little about our civilization otherwise.

3. Building up military strength for its own sake leads to a proliferation of national threats, both domestically and abroad. As stated above, many (if not most) of the heroes and villains in the Ultimate Marvel Universe exist because of the pursuit of the super-soldier formula. In fact, this pursuit would appear to have created more super villains than heroes as well as creating the environment that led to the Hulk's Manhattan rampage and other collateral events.

Considering the analogy of "persons of mass destruction" to "weapons of mass destruction," the series considers the paradoxes inherent in America setting and enforcing weapons policies on countries while continuing to develop increasingly deadly weapons

of its own. Beyond the obvious hypocrisy is the cold implication that the introduction of larger and larger numbers of weapons will result in larger numbers of weapons and weapons knowledge on the black market of which other countries may make use. Additionally, the stockpiling of American weapons appears to encourage more rogue nations to seek counterbalances to American power. This critique flies in the face of the neoconservative notion of deterrence.

4. The pursuit of power will lead many individuals to corruption or gross misjudgments, even when their intentions are pure. Each of the characters in the narrative plays an interesting role in questions of power and responsibility.

Nick Fury plays the exemplar neoconservative: always pragmatically compromising ideals to work within the reality of the power politics before him. Captain America often blindly follows orders, even when those orders result in the country becoming less safe. The competition between several of the characters lead to motivations of jealousy, which not only cloud the judgment of the individuals members of the team, but also allows the entrance and manipulation of agents in league with the Liberators. Clearly, a central tenet of the Ultimates narrative is that the pursuit of power, even in the name of defense, often makes itself a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Power creates as many threats as it protects against, suggesting a karmic affect of policy initiatives. By choosing to use brute force to enforce unilateral policy initiatives, America stands to reap what it has sown.

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The Midwest Popular Culture Association / American Culture Association is a regional branch of the Popular Culture Association. The organization held its first conference in Duluth, Minnesota in 1973. After a five-year hiatus during the 1990s, the organization held a conference in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 2002. MPCA/ACA usually holds its annual conference in a large Midwestern city in the United States. In the last several years, conferences have been held in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Ohio. Upcoming Midwest, also called Middle West or North Central States, region, northern and central United States, lying midway between the Appalachian and Rocky mountains and north of the Ohio River and the 37th parallel. The Midwest, as defined by the federal government, comprises the states of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin.Â But like its neighbours to the northeast, the Midwest's growth rate has lagged behind that of the country as a whole. Despite regional economic shifts adverse to the Midwest, the region has continued to be the most important economic region in the country, leading all other sections in value added by manufacture and in total value of farm marketings.