Captain America recently visited my home state of Idaho. To be more precise, in early February 2010, readers of issue #602 of Captain America learned that the superhero’s evil double, also calling himself Captain America, was in Boise, plotting with a right-wing militia-type organization called the Watchdogs. Meanwhile, the good Captain America, joined by African American superhero Falcon, arrived in town to infiltrate the group and foil their plans. Hiding atop a building on the main street, the good guys saw a crowd of angry protesters, presumably Watchdog sympathizers who bore a striking resemblance to the conservative Tea Party activists who appeared on the scene this past year. In the sea of white faces, one could spot placards with slogans including “No New Taxes,” “Stop the Socialists,” and “Tea Bag the Libs Before They Tea Bag You.” Falcon joked that it would be a challenge to slip undetected into the crowd of “angry white folks.” Conservative activists, however, did not find the joke funny. Soon, Fox News aired the story and Marvel Comics apologized, promising to pull the explicit reference to Tea from subsequent reprints.

The Captain America Tea Party flap is a potent reminder that, as historian Bradford Wright has written, “Comic books are history.” As primary sources of popular culture, they have emerged from a specific context, reflecting the politics, prejudices, and concerns of a particular historical moment. Comics have also shaped the outlook of America’s young people. As Wright notes, they “have helped to frame a worldview and define a sense of self for the generations who have grown up with them.” Among the comic books that have fulfilled that function, superhero comics have occupied a special place ever since Superman first came on the scene in 1938. For teachers seeking to use new types of approaches to engage students, superhero comics offer a surprisingly valuable window into twentieth century U.S. history. In addition, as uniquely American inventions, they are particularly appropriate for American history courses. In my classes, I like to focus on three of the most popular superheroes of all time in order to suggest ways in which they provide insights into shifting historical contexts and ongoing themes: Captain America, Wonder Woman, and Spider-Man. Captain America and Wonder Woman both first appeared during World War II and have continued to mirror developments in the wider American society. Despite their gender differences, the two represent a similar tradition of patriotic crime fighting. Spider-Man’s genesis during the Cold War and his more conflicted psyche align him more closely with the baby boom generation.

Captain America

Nine months before Japan attacked the U.S. naval fleet at Pearl Harbor, Captain America was already at war with the Nazis. The first issue’s cover, in March 1941, showed Captain America punching Adolf Hitler in the face (see illustration on page 42). Not coincidentally, co-creators Jack Kirby (born Jacob Kurtzburg) and Joe Simon were young Jewish Americans, anxious for the U.S. to join the war against Hitler. Jewish artists and writers played a pivotal role in the development of superhero comics. They included Joe Schuster and...
Nine months before Japan attacked the U.S. naval fleet at Pearl Harbor, Captain America was already at war with the Nazis. Not coincidentally, co-creators Jack Kirby (born Jacob Kurtzberg) and Joe Simon were young Jewish Americans, anxious for the U.S. to join the war against Hitler. When this comic appeared in March 1941, many Americans opposed entry into the European war and some sent “threatening letters and hate mail” to Captain America’s creators, according to Joe Simon. (Courtesy of Marvel Entertainment, LLC)
Raised by a band of Amazon warriors on the all-female Paradise Island, Princess Diana—known as Wonder Woman in the world of men—displays her superhuman powers in this January 1945 Sensation series published by DC Comics. The children are orphans who secretly stowed on board Wonder Woman's plane when it returned to the island. She safeguards both the children and their animal friends as they prepare for the Nazi invasion. (DC Entertainment, Inc.)
In 1963, Stan Lee and Steve Ditko gave their readers an adolescent superhero. Teenager Peter Parker is bitten by a spider on a school field trip and transformed into the amazing Spider-man. In this issue, published in February 1966, Spider-Man is trapped in the underwater lair of Doctor Octopus (masquerading as the Master Planner), while back home his ailing Aunt May faces certain death unless he can break free, against all odds, and get her the ISO-36 serum she so desperately needs. ( Courtesy of Marvel Entertainment, LLC)
Jerry Siegel, the creators of Superman.) Indeed, Captain America's origin story has strong and only thinly disguised autobiographical elements. Steve Rogers grows up in an immigrant family (Irish instead of Jewish) on the lower east side of Manhattan. As an aspiring art illustration student, Rogers is caught up in the widespread zeal to defeat the Axis but unable to qualify for the regular military. Instead, he volunteers to participate in a Professor Josef Reinstein-conducted scientific experiment. An injection of Reinstein's super-soldier serum transforms Rogers from the proverbial ninety-pound weakling to an exemplary specimen of American manhood. The Gestapo murders Professor Reinstein before he can create an army of super soldiers, but Steve Rogers refuses to surrender. Armed with a stars and stripes-decorated shield made of vibranium-admantium (ostensibly one of the hardest known substances) and attired in red, white, and blue, Captain America embarks on his career defending the United States. He is the ultimate patriot. As his co-creator Jack Kirby noted, "We weren't at war yet, but everyone knew it was coming, that's why Captain America was born; America needed a superpatriot. He symbolized the American way of life."

One strategy I have found useful in incorporating Captain America into a wider discussion of World War II is to discuss the comic in conjunction with other efforts to exhort Americans to support the war effort. These include government propaganda posters, feature films, and news reel footage. I have had success comparing Captain America to contemporary depictions of Japanese and Germans. This provides an opportunity to introduce issues of race and ethnicity, as well as to discuss the concept of the "enemy."

Once victory against Germany and Japan was secured, Captain America's career continued. In 1946, Captain America was a member of the All-Winners Squad that included Human Torch, Sub-Mariner, the Whizzer, and Miss America. Then, during the 1950s, Communists replaced the Nazis as the epitome of evil for many Americans. In keeping with this Cold War mentality, the superhero became Captain America...Commie Smasher! He confronted the villain Elector, an electricity-charged monster, attired in green with a red hammer and sickle on his chest. In one story line, Captain America foiled Elector's plot to blow up the United Nations. The authors reminded readers that "Americans play not to win, but for the sake of sportsmanship and fair play...which Nazis and Reds know nothing about at all!" It seems, however, that this anti-communist line did not resonate with readers since it lasted for only three issues (5). Still, Captain America's anti-communism illustrates for students the stridency of Americans' attitudes toward the Soviet Union and "Reds." I use him in conjunction with the film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* in an attempt to convey the anxiety and fear that Joseph McCarthy and others exploited.

After having been frozen in an Atlantic iceberg for twenty years, or so readers were told, Captain America returned in 1964. Negotiating the 1960s was as problematic for Captain America as it was for the rest of the United States. His African American superhero partner, Falcon, helped him work against poverty, racism, pollution, and political corruption. Captain America, however, was uncharacteristically silent about the Viet Cong—a reflection, perhaps, of overall American ambivalence regarding the Vietnam War. At the height of the Watergate scandal, Captain America shared Americans' disenchantment and disillusionment—he even stopped calling himself Captain America, choosing instead the moniker "Nomad, the man without a country" (6).

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Obama, and then compare the two. In my discussions with students, I have noticed that just as white students can identify with African American celebrities—including their new president—students of color are able to identify with white superheroes.

**Wonder Woman**

Whether Americans were ready for a female superhero was another matter. The year 1941 gave birth not only to Captain America but Wonder Woman as well. Her creator, William Moulton Marston (1893-1947), was a member of the Massachusetts bar, held a doctorate in psychology from Harvard, and invented the lie detector. In 1937, he and comic impresario Max Gaines began discussing superhero comics and their impact (or lack thereof) on girls. Despite ridicule from much of the comic book industry, Marston (writing under the pseudonym Charles Moulton and in association with his wife, Elizabeth Holloway Marston, and son Peter), debuted Wonder Woman in 1941. The Wonder Woman saga is steeped in classical mythology. Princess Diana, a member of the Amazon tribe of female warriors, came into being when her mother Hippolyta, following the goddess Aphrodite’s directions, molded a shape from clay and then breathed life into it. Princess Diana boasts considerable strength, great speed, and possesses a magic lasso made from Aphrodite’s girdle that compels people to tell the truth. When American pilot Steve Trevor’s plane crashed on Paradise Island, Diana rescued him and nursed him back to health. Eventually, Diana—disguised as a nurse—accompanied Trevor back to the United States. Later, as Lt. Diana Prince, she continues to fight injustice in the man’s world as Wonder Woman. Marston described Wonder Woman as “beautiful as Aphrodite, wise as Athena, stronger than Hercules and swifter than Mercury.”

Writing in the Phi Beta Kappa journal, _The American Scholar_, Marston explained, “It seemed to me, from a psychological angle, that the comics’ worst offense was their blood-curdling masculinity” (9). While many ridiculed Marston’s idea, Wonder Woman received immediate acclaim and at her peak sold 2.5 million copies a month. Wonder Woman even included a continuing feature, _Wonder Women of History_, credited to associate editor and tennis champion Alice Marble. This segment provided biographical information on famous women including Annie Oakley, Florence Nightingale, and Amelia Earhart. The main premise of Wonder Woman is that girls do not need super power, but, with proper training, they can exceed traditional expectations. Olive Norton is a great example. Olive wanted to play baseball with her brothers, and, of course, they responded negatively. Wonder Woman proclaimed, “You can be as strong as any boy if you’ll work hard and train yourself in athletics, the way boys do.” So Olive accompanied Wonder Woman to Paradise Island for some Amazon training. When she returned, Olive jumped off Wonder Woman’s invisible airplane into the baseball diamond, hit a home run, rescued her brother from quicksand, and helped Wonder Woman capture a spy (10).

Certainly the changing role of women during World War II is a focus of inquiry for historians of women. I give students the single panel with the above quotation and ask them to discuss among themselves its meaning. I also ask students to compare images of Wonder Woman to images of Rosie the Riveter. This provides the opportunity to examine traditional families, the impact of World War II on those relationships, and ways in which the end of the war created tensions as women and men sought to return to their previous situations.

**Recurring Themes**

Writers were never really comfortable with a woman superhero, and Wonder Woman’s career demonstrates that clearly. In the 1950s, the DC Comics in-house editorial policy specifically discouraged including women in the stories (11). During the high tide of the women’s movement, when Wonder Woman should have been in the spotlight, she lost her super powers and opened a fashion boutique. In the 1970s, however, Wonder Woman experienced a renaissance via television, albeit in a highly sexualized portrayal. Wonder Woman enjoyed a comic book rebirth in 1986, and by 1989 her iconic status was reconfirmed—she is certainly the greatest female crime buster in comic book history (12). My experience has been that students always enjoy tracing Wonder Woman’s evolution through an analysis of her changing appearance. This exercise usually results in discussions of women’s sexuality, the relationship of gender to power, and changing attitudes toward women in general.

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An overarching motif in Wonder Woman comics is her attempt to understand the masculine perspective, since only women inhabited Paradise Island. In Wonder Woman comics, the strongest characters, even the villains, are women. She values women for their essential femaleness and has to learn to appreciate men’s parallel qualities. At the same time, Wonder Woman illustrates the notion that women never really received the attention they deserve in comic books, and Wonder Woman herself has been subjected to intense criticism and scrutiny that her male counterparts have avoided.

American exceptionalism and ideas of patriotism are recurring themes in United States history, and Captain America and Wonder Woman serve to illustrate both. Captain America’s premiere as a response to United States enemies during World War II. It coincided with the efforts of American citizens to confront a tremendous challenge and counteract what was (in the view of many United States citizens) propaganda from the Axis Powers—“the ruthless war-mongers of Europe” as opposed to “peace-loving America.” As the “ultimate patriot,” Captain America proclaimed that “today I take my place as I always have: a soldier among his comrades, each dedicated to the eternal battle for freedom, justice and honor” (13).

Once Princess Diana/Wonder Woman comes to the United States in the guise of her alter ego, U.S. Army nurse Diana Prince, she is in position to combat Nazis, particularly her greatest nemesis, Nazi Agent Baroness Paula Von Gunther. Wonder Woman foils each of Von Gunther’s nefarious plots, including one to monopolize America’s...
milk supply. Surely no beverage is as closely identified with American wholesomeness as milk. Even their attire aligns Wonder Woman and Captain America with the United States. Wonder Woman wears red boots, blue star-studded shorts, and a red corset with a golden eagle on the front. Captain America's blue uniform with red and white stripes at mid-body, a huge white star on his chest and a red, white, and blue shield, also with a white star, is American flag–inspired as well. Such blatant reminders of the characters' patriotism are ubiquitous in both sets of comics. For my students, the physical representations of villains in both of these comics are useful illustrations for this conversation. This topic, of course, particularly relevant today as students grapple with various popular culture responses to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Spider-Man

For young people today, however, neither Captain America nor Wonder Woman is likely to be as familiar a face as Spider-Man. He first appeared in March 1963, when Marvel Comics published The Amazing Spider-Man #1. The superhero's creators were Stan Lee (born Stanley Lieber to Jewish immigrant parents in New York) and Steve Ditko, the son of a Czech-born Johnstown, Pennsylvania steelworker. Unlike Captain America and Wonder Woman, Spider-Man was a product of the Cold War and emphasized greater attention to adolescents and their place in American society. Like Steve Rogers, Peter Parker was nerdish but brilliant—this time a high school science student living with his Aunt Mary and Uncle Ben. On a school field trip, Peter suffered a bite from a radioactive spider. The atomic power resulting from the bite gave Parker a series of super powers: spider strength, spider speed, spider agility, spider grip, and of course, his "spider sense." Peter Parker's transformation demonstrated the American love/hate relationship with atomic science as Spider-Man frequently expressed ambivalence regarding his new situation.

A defining moment for Spider-Man followed shortly after his acquisition of his powers. Peter Parker made the Spider-Man costume in an attempt to use his powers to launch a show business career. On the way to an appearance, he encountered a crook but chose not to confront him in order to avoid missing his show. That same crook killed Peter Parker's Uncle Ben and a devastated Parker learned that "with great power comes great responsibility." This theme of power and its burdens reflected the situation in the Cold War United States.

Spider-Man gave teenagers a hero they could identify with as the teanged Peter Parker is not a sidekick (as Robin is to Batman or Superboy to Superman) but rather the main character. Peter Parker suffered the teenage angst that is a hallmark of the 1960s, and in many respects, Spider-Man's life was not that different from the lives of his readers—he sometimes had difficulty holding a job, his love life was often problematic, and self-doubt plagued him. By 1965, however, Esquire Magazine readers ranked Spider-Man, along with Bob Dylan and Che Guevara, as a revolutionary icon (14). Despite the changing nature of American youth culture, Spider-Man continues to be one of the most popular superheroes, perhaps in part due to the fact that he often makes mistakes. Spider-Man/Peter Parker learns from those mistakes and goes forward. The 2002 Spider-Man film is one of the highest grossing films ever, and the two sequels demonstrate that Spider-Man continues to make connections with filmgoers. Peter Parker's foibles make him very accessible for students.

Conclusion

Carrying comic books into the classroom might seem an inadvisable move for a history instructor today. After all, the profusion of games, music, and movies on laptop computers, iPods, and cellphones in classrooms can be a serious distraction from the learning process. At the same time, however, establishing common ground with students is often the first step to effective teaching. You should know that the first Saturday in May is National Comic Book Day. Contact a local comic book store to obtain free comics for classroom use. Using superhero comics that emerged from the genre's "golden age" can be an effective way to explore U.S. history. For many reasons, superheroes resonate with students. A closer look at Captain America, Wonder Woman, and Spider-Man can enable teachers and students to examine concepts of gender, race, patriotism, and historical change through a fresh new lens.

Endnotes

