

# Captain America returns to battle

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With the US military engaged in brutal, colonial-style wars in the Middle East and North Africa, and the economic crisis forcing millions of people in the US out of work, their most basic social rights under attack, Hollywood could hardly have produced a film less moving or less *convincing* than *Captain America*. It is a film that reinforces many of the very sentiments and illusions that so desperately need challenging at present.

During the Second World War, the sickly Steve Rogers (Chris Evans) is desperate to serve his country. Repeated attempts to enlist in the military have come to nothing, as the aspiring soldier's poor health forces one doctor after another to reject him.

On his final attempt, however, Rogers is discovered by Dr. Abraham Erskine (Stanley Tucci), the lead scientist in a secret government program, whose mission is to create an army of super-human soldiers with the aid of an experimental serum. Because Rogers is weak, says Erskine, he understands the value of strength and will be the perfect candidate.

Injected with the serum, Rogers's body transforms. He grows taller, his frail physique suddenly becomes muscular. His strength and agility are amplified. Immediately after his transformation, however, Erskine's lab is destroyed by an agent of Hydra, a sinister Nazi agency led by supervillain the Red Skull (Hugo Weaving). Rogers chases down the agent, but the damage has been done. The secret program is destroyed, leaving Rogers the only super-soldier created.

Adopting the moniker of Captain America and armed with an indestructible shield that he throws like a discus at his enemies, Rogers will go on to battle the Red Skull and Hydra in Europe.

*Captain America* is a poor film by almost any

standard. Actor Chris Evans is awkward as Captain America, but then it's doubtful anyone could have done much with the character. Rogers/Captain America is the ultimate all-American, "just a kid from Brooklyn" with an "aw-shucks" demeanor. He's not a character so much as a sentiment.

Like so many of the superhero movies, Captain America features those familiar lines about power and responsibility, strength and weakness. One is exposed to one banality after another, as the richness and complexity of life is reduced to aphorisms and the opposition of pure good against pure evil.

The film is shot with that peculiar combination of muted colors and soft lighting that betrays a considerable degree of nostalgia on the part of the filmmakers.

As one would expect, the work is imbued with an intensely reverential attitude toward the US military and accepts uncritically that its interventions abroad are a force for good, or at least have been such a force in the past. In fact, the Captain America character was created with promoting those very notions in mind.

Created by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, Captain America debuted in Timely Comics, a predecessor of Marvel Comics, in 1941. Horrified by the brutality of the Nazi regime in Europe, the two comic book artists were eager for the US to intervene. "The opponents of the war were all quite well organized," Simon says in Bradford Wright's *Comic Book Nation*, "we wanted to have our say too." And so they did.

The front cover of the debut issue of *Captain America* showed the hero punching Adolf Hitler in the jaw, and in his first adventures, Captain America and his teenage sidekick Bucky fought Nazi spies and "Fifth Columnists" in the US. As an added bonus, young readers of the original comic book could receive a novelty Captain America badge in the mail if they

signed a somewhat Orwellian pledge reading, “I solemnly pledge to uphold the principles of the sentinels of liberty and assist Captain America in his war against spies in the USA.”

With the United States’ entry into the war, it wouldn’t be long before Captain America joined them. It was not uncommon to see in the pages of his comics crude and racist images of Japanese soldiers pummeled by the living American flag that was Captain America.

In adapting *Captain America* for the screen, there appears to have been an effort on the part of the filmmakers to smooth over the more offensive and embarrassing elements from their character’s past and the American chauvinism that is inherent in their source material. During his excursions on the battlefields of Europe, Captain America is given a team of soldiers from various national and ethnic backgrounds. The team members are given little else to do, in fact, beyond representing the required nationalities and ethnicities.

A war bonds tour, in which the Captain participates, provides the filmmakers with an opportunity to play up for laughs some of the more absurd elements of the character’s propagandistic origins. Nothing, however, can “tone down” the sight of the muscle-bound Captain America, decked out in his American flag costume with his American flag shield, crusading heroically around the globe, fighting off evildoers.

Joe Simon and Jack Kirby had a particular role in mind for Captain America when they created him, and it’s not accidental that Captain America has now reemerged with force, under similar conditions, to play that role once again. There is expressed in this film, and other recent superhero films, something of the moods and interests of an affluent layer of the upper middle class who have shifted increasingly to the right, throwing in their lot with the Obama administration and its interventions overseas, including the “humanitarian” war in Libya.

Captain America is a symbol that one is meant to rally around, a pure and heroic figure from the “Greatest Generation.” He’s the embodiment of an idealized America of the past that stands up for the little guy and, like Steve Rogers, hates the bully.

But one doesn’t watch this film with a swelling of national pride in one’s heart. There is only the unpleasant mixture of boredom and disbelief.



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