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## American Patriotism in the Marvel Avengers Film Series (2008-2018): An Analysis of Captain America and Iron Man

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AMERICAN PATRIOTISM IN THE MARVEL AVENGERS FILM SERIES (2008-2018): AN  
ANALYSIS OF CAPTAIN AMERICA AND IRON MAN

A Thesis

by

JACKELYNE KARMEN BRISEÑO

Submitted to Texas A&M International University  
in fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

August 2019

Major Subject: History and Political Thought

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## ABSTRACT

American Patriotism in the Marvel Avengers Film Series (2008-2018): An Analysis of Captain

America and Iron Man (August 2019)

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Chair of Committee: Alfonso Vergaray

The idea that patriotism can be reinforced through imagery and oration has been discussed by scholars within the political science literature. Film is one medium scholars have used to examine patriotic sentiments. In this thesis I provide an analysis of the Marvel Avengers film series (2008-2018), focusing on Captain America and Iron Man, and how each represents a different form of American patriotism. I argue that Captain America represents Lincolnian patriotism, which places an emphasis on a commitment to American ideals and the duty one has in upholding them. Iron Man, in contrast, represents the dominant tradition, which is centered on the narrowly self-interested individual and a belief in the benefits of technological advancement. I conclude noting the limitations to understanding Captain America and Iron Man as representatives of American patriotism. Ultimately, I hope to demonstrate how an analysis of these two superheroes in the Marvel Avengers film series helps scholars and viewers think critically about American patriotism.

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To friends and family but especially to my mom: *gracias. Gracias, ma, por siempre dar me animo durante todo este proceso y por siempre recordarme de lo fuerte que soy. Fuisteis no solo mi mamá pero mi amiga, la con quien siempre me podía reír sin importar lo estresada que estaba. Te quiero mucho, ma! Gracias!*

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Patriotism has been celebrated and criticized by scholars and non-scholars alike. While some scholars have focused on the virtues of patriotism, others highlight how it can lead to violence and narrow-mindedness. Among those scholars, there is an impressive array that advocate for a qualified form of patriotism that they claim sufficiently addresses the negative features of patriotism.<sup>1</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum (2013), for example, initially advocated for a cosmopolitan approach, but later changed her position to embrace a benevolent form of patriotism. I follow these scholars who argue that patriotism, despite its potential dangers, should be nurtured in order to benefit the common good. Although these scholars share this general attitude towards patriotism, they disagree over its meaning. Some forms of patriotism call for a strong, favorable approach towards the betterment of one's country, others compare patriotism to family loyalty, while still others advocate for a romantic love. They all, in one way or another, harken back to the etymological definition of patriotism, or *patria*, as love of country.<sup>2</sup> I rely on that general definition, while focusing on American patriotism.

In this thesis I provide an analysis of Captain America and Iron Man within the Marvel Avengers film series. I argue that each is a representation of American patriotism. Bringing out their contrasting ways of being an American patriot can help scholars and non-scholars consider what it means, and could mean, to be an American patriot.

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This thesis follows the style of *the Journal of Politics*.

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<sup>1</sup> See Charles Taylor, Richard Rorty, Maurizio Viroli, Ben Barber, Hilary Putnam, Robert Pinsky, Mary Dietz, Alasdair MacIntyre, Wendy Brown, and John Schaar.

<sup>2</sup> See for example, Alasdair MacIntyre's *Is Patriotism a Virtue* (1984), Stephen Nathanson's *In Defense of Moderate Patriotism* (1989), Martha C. Nussbaum's *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (2013), and John Schaar's *The Case for Patriotism* (1973).



I use Lincolnian patriotism to outline how Captain America is a near perfect manifestation of it. Iron Man, as Captain America's opposite, represents a different kind of American tradition that dates as far back as Lincolnian patriotism. The dominant tradition, as outlined by Patrick J. Deneen (2007), is used to demonstrate Iron Man's patriotism. Iron Man's patriotism is self-interested whereas Captain America's patriotism is fundamentally based on ideals. I do not intend to argue which is a better form of patriotism to embody. Rather I show how both can help people think critically about American patriotism.

Patriotism can be nurtured in various ways. Nussbaum (2013) discusses the use and importance of imagery and oration to instill patriotic sentiments. She does not, however, consider the use of film and how that too can cultivate patriotism. That said, other scholars have examined the relationship between film and patriotism. Steven Johnston's *The Truth about Patriotism* (2007), for example, analyzes patriotism in pop culture, specifically focusing on an analysis of the war film *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). Patriotic themes within this industry are typically manifested in war films such as *Pearl Harbor* (2001), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), and *Dunkirk* (2017). Although effective, war films that are based on historical events are not the only kinds of films we should consider in regards to patriotism.

The Marvel Avengers film series provides us with a representation of American patriotism and American culture that not only extends beyond war, but also includes several films, which give us the opportunity to analyze patriotism within the characters in a much longer timeline. The kind of patriotism that is in the Marvel Avengers film series is unique and should also be considered as films which can represent American patriotism. Furthermore, it is important to note the incredibly large audience base that these films have, which magnifies the films potential to reach a wider audience in relation to American patriotism. There are plenty of

characters in the Marvel Avengers film series that would provide any reader or viewer with a critical analysis,<sup>3</sup> but for the sake of this thesis I focus on Captain America and Iron Man.

Lincolnian patriotism will be used as one of two guiding conceptions of American patriotism throughout this thesis. Abraham Lincoln popularized a form of American patriotism, which was not tied to geographical locations or historical lineage on the land, but rather to the ideas and principles established in the Declaration of Independence. Generally, patriotism calls for affiliation and devotion to land or community, which can then translate to love of country. Lincoln believed that American patriotism is rooted in the idea of freedom and justice for all. Lincoln himself has stated that all political sentiments he acquired were derived from the Declaration (Schaar 1973, 292). In short, American patriotism is not a location, but an idea. I refer to this form of American patriotism as Lincolnian patriotism.

American culture has unique characteristics that have motivated its people since before the American Revolution. Patrick J. Deneen (2007), following his teacher Wilson Carey McWilliams and others, refers to this as the “dominant tradition,” which is composed of the following major characteristics: self-interest, individualism, and an entrepreneurial spirit. The dominant tradition is intimately tied to America’s liberal tradition.<sup>4</sup> Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Adam Smith all discuss the dominant tradition in some fashion, with some focusing on the conquering of nature more than others. Nature plays an important role within the dominant tradition because it can be viewed as an obstacle for mankind to further advance his mission. According to the dominant tradition, nature must be conquered and

<sup>3</sup> See Annika Hagley and Michael Harrison (2013).

<sup>4</sup> See Louis Hartz’s (1955) classic *The Liberal Tradition in America*. In addition to the liberal tradition, Deneen claims there is an “alternative tradition” in America. I provide a fuller account on page 33.

manipulated to serve humanity's interests of individual, economic and technological growth.

The dominant tradition will be one of the primary focuses of this thesis.

I begin this thesis providing a literature review, followed by a synopsis of the Marvel Avengers film series. In chapter two, I demonstrate how Captain America is a representation of American patriotism and how he fits seamlessly with patriotic sentiments expressed by Lincoln. In the third chapter I argue that Iron Man represents the dominant tendency, and what that does to his version and approach to American patriotism. I conclude the analysis by acknowledging some of the limits that each character represents in regards to American patriotism.

Captain America is commonly referred to as a patriot by scholars who have studied him, but I intend to showcase how he is a truer representation of Lincolnian patriotism above all else. His motivation stems from a sense of indebtedness. He understands the cost that America's founding fathers paid for his freedom and believes firmly that his duty is to uphold the values they sacrificed their lives for. Those values—freedom, justice, and equality for all—are accompanied by underlying factors that help him judge and determine his plan of action. The claim that Captain America is an American patriot is not novel. If anything it is obvious given his body armor and name. I intend to argue that his form of patriotism reflects a particular type of patriotism that is unique to America and the ideals that it represents. Rather than argue that Captain America is an American patriot, I focus on demonstrating the kind of American patriot he is and which kind of American patriotism he aligns more with.

I follow the analysis of Captain America with a focus on Iron Man and how he represents the dominant tradition in America. By representing the dominant tradition, Iron Man showcases how American patriotism can manifest in someone who, unlike Captain America, is more individualistic and self-interested. Through Iron Man, I will demonstrate how American

patriotism can shift and realign itself all the while still living within the characteristics of the dominant tradition. Therefore, the dominant tradition can still be motivated towards serving the common good, even through someone as narcissistic as Iron Man. If there is a superhero who has undergone the most dramatic transformation in the MCU, it would be Iron Man. I utilize Deneen's (2007) outline of the dominant tradition, which places individualism, self-interest, and economic mobility as some of the greatest characteristics that drive and motivate American culture.

### ***Literature Review***

In recent decades, patriotism has found its way into some of the greatest modern debates by academics, politicians, and world leaders. The term had been stagnant until the 1980s, with few philosophers engaging with it in academic literature.<sup>5</sup> The recent interest in patriotism in the last several decades was thanks to the revival of communitarianism and increase of nationalism throughout the world, and the morality surrounding patriotism has been debated ever since. Prominent thinkers have helped us understand the causes and effects of patriotism (MacIntyre 1984, Nathanson 1989, Schaar, 1973) while also giving us their insight into the term. The greatest hurdles are trying to resolve whether patriotism is a virtue, which encompasses morality, or a vice that leads to destruction and chaos.

Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) defines patriotism as “a kind of loyalty to a particular nation which only those possessing that particular nationality can exhibit” (4). However, this does not mean we should be blindly loyal to a particular nation. MacIntyre (1984) adds that patriotism and its particular loyalties can be confined within the constructs of morality and so long as the patriot abides by this morality, patriotism can be considered good. Captain America aligns well

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<sup>5</sup> Primoratz, Igor, "Patriotism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/patriotism/>>.

with his definition of patriotism. In the first film, Captain America engages in an argument with Tony Stark/ Iron Man, who openly admits to hacking the United States' government and uncover information being kept from them. Captain America is angered by this and tells him that they were given orders which they should follow. After a brief verbal combat, Captain America considers Stark's perspective and goes in search for answers. He later discovers that the government was using alien technology to build weapons of mass destruction, which he confronts his government on. There are multiple examples throughout the film series that showcase Captain America obeying his moral compass more than government officials. This aligns with MacIntyre's (1984) take on patriotism and fits well within his definition.

Stephen Nathanson (1989) aligns more closely with that of Captain America's based on his actions and reactions throughout the film series. Nathanson (1998) defines patriotism as "a virtue so long as the actions it encourages are not themselves immoral" (538). Captain America seems to be on his country's side by serving his patriotic duty to save it when he finds out that the government is creating weapons of mass destruction. The kind of anger witnessed by views in this scene aligns closely with the argument that Nathanson (1998) is making: so long as we can hold on to our virtues, patriotism is not a vice. Nathanson (1998) continues this argument by comparing patriotism to love of family. One will undoubtedly have a closer emotional bond and love for one's own family, and Nathanson (1998) considers this permissible and something that may in fact "reveal certain virtues" in someone so long as love and devotion to that family does not cause harm to others (538). What is interesting about this portion of the argument is how Captain America fits into it. Although we can agree that he can fall within Nathanson's (1998) working definition of patriotism, Captain America does not have a community he calls home, or

a family, or a spouse. He considers America his home and acts more like a teammate with his fellow Avengers than a family member.<sup>6</sup>

Nathansan (1998) argues for a form of patriotism that tries to find just solutions to issues concerning his or her country and other countries across the world, particularly when his or her country is in direct conflict with another. When faced with the decision to choose, Nathansan (1998) argues that moderate patriots, unlike MacIntyre's (1984) patriots, try to resolve conflicts and find reasonable solutions to them, whereas MacIntyre (1984) suggests a more passionate devotion that would put his or her country above all else in all cases. The moderate patriot also has the ability to do this, but only after considering other alternatives. More importantly, Nathansan (1998) argues that the moderate patriot can also sympathize with those less fortunate and would acknowledge their rights as human beings. Captain America has often shown this sympathy as the Avengers film series progresses. In *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), Captain America's primary focus before battle is getting the people to safety. What is vital here is that that individuals belong to the country of Sokovia, a fictional country in Southeastern Europe, where Captain America has no personal ties to anyone and no strong bond to the country itself. Yet, he is still willing to risk his life for its people and values their safety the same way he valued the safety of the New Yorkers years prior.

John Schaar (1973) makes up the majority of the literature review utilized in this thesis to outline Lincolnian patriotism, but there are other authors who have discussed patriotism at large whose thoughts and works contributed to my knowledge on patriotism in general. Among them, Maurizio Viroli (1997), who argued that liberty was the ultimate goal, and advocated for individual freedom without any kind of oppression (13). This relates to Captain America's sense

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<sup>6</sup> In *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), Captain America is asked by Falcon where they are headed, to which he replies "home"; the next scene is the Avengers arriving to the Avengers headquarters outside New York City.

of patriotism, as he is clearly not serving his government, but trying to protect and serve the ideals that it was founded upon. Viroli (1997) aligns in some aspects with Schaar's views, and would be critical of the dominant tradition as he felt that true corruption was found in individuals who favored their own interests above the common good (26).

Viroli (1997) would be critical of Iron Man, who even though he is now focused on riding the world from evil, he is still serving his own interests and more often than not, making his own decisions based on how he sees the world needs to be saved. MacIntyre (1984) acknowledged a sense of indebtedness when he stated that "understanding what is owed to and by me and understanding the history of the communities of which I am a part of is ... one and the same thing" (6). This idea of knowing what has been sacrificed for you and understanding that you must uphold and sacrifice for the future generations is a sentiment shared by Captain America, who continuously risked his life in the name of American ideals. A sense of indebtedness is one of the most significant motivators for Captain America.

Captain America is not new to academic literature, and authors such as J. Richard Stevens (2015), Jason Dittmer (2012), and Mark D. White (2014) have provided insight and depth to the character. Although these authors focused primarily on the comic book version and other relative themes,<sup>7</sup> I want to acknowledge their work and help in the development of this paper. Of these authors, White (2014) provides the greatest insight into who Captain America is by evaluating his morality, virtues, and ideals, and how they directly correlate to his actions and decision-making process. White (2014) argues that Captain America is not just muscle. He is composed of a deep sense of understanding that revolves around what White (2014) identified to

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<sup>7</sup> For reference: J. Richard Stevens' *Captain America: Masculinity and Violence* (2015), Jason Dittmer's *Captain America and the Nationalist Superhero* (2012), and Mark D. White's *The Virtues of Captain America: Modern-Day Lessons on Character from a World War II Superhero* (2014).

be his primary virtues: courage, humility, righteous indignation, sacrifice and responsibility, and perseverance. All of these virtues identified by White (2014) fit within the concepts of Lincolnian patriotism and are utilized to help Captain America navigate the many decisions he makes throughout the film series.

Schaar's (1973) explanation of American patriotism serves as a near-perfect example to Captain America's version of patriotism due to Schaar's (1973) analysis and depiction of Lincolnian patriotism. Lincolnian patriotism revolves around a sense of indebtedness, engaging in critical thought regarding potential threats to the foundation of American ideals, commitment to a country's ideals, willingness to sacrifice for the greater good, and love of good or otherwise the desire to protect innocence.<sup>8</sup> American patriotism revolves primarily around three of those themes: (1) critical thought, (2) attachment and love for the country's ideals, and (3) love of the good, which also encompass indebtedness and sacrifice.

Iron Man, unlike Captain America, is not an obvious American patriot, despite clearly being described as one in the films.<sup>9</sup> Yet there is still some form of American patriotism that manifested itself within the character. That said, there are several sources which helped provide insight into the complexity of the character and thus the relationship that Iron Man has with the dominant tradition. One of the contributors was Matthew McEniry's (2016) *Marvel Comics into Films*, which discussed how the adaptations were related to and differed from the comic book series. This not a special focus on Iron Man, but there was enough content in this book to provide more information the character without having to solely rely on a personal analysis of

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<sup>8</sup> Innocence in this paper is defined not by finding innocent individuals—which would most likely be impossible—but innocence from the chaos or actions that are plaguing a certain city or country. In the films, the civilians were innocent from whatever fight was occurring between the Avengers and their enemy, therefore they would be classified by Captain America as innocent.

<sup>9</sup> I note this in detail later, but for reference it was mentioned at the start of Iron Man (2008) and the start of the Iron Man 2 (2010).



him. Stark has a love for himself above anything or anyone else, and that he is an individualist who, despite being a part of the Avengers team, has always put himself at the center of all decisions he makes. Stark, unlike Captain America, is not a clear representation of anything but an American characteristic outlined by Deneen (2007). By being reflective of American culture Iron Man is also showcasing how he approaches American patriotism.

Iron Man cannot be described as a Lincolnian patriot, but he does embody the dominant tradition. In the second chapter, I outline exactly how Iron Man fits into the idea of self-interest, individualism, and an entrepreneurial spirit that believes technology will further humanity's mission and purpose. As mentioned above, Iron Man has undergone of the most dramatic shifts in character development throughout the series. He began the first film with the belief that American patriotism meant supplying the U.S. military with weapons through his company. By the first Avengers (2012) film, he risked his life to save humanity for the sake of saving humanity, not necessarily because he wanted a medal for it. However, I also demonstrate how Iron Man, despite this transformation, is still an embodiment of American culture and thus the dominant tradition. He will always be self-interested and individualistic. He has his own agenda on how to save the world and he will pursue it because he believes he is right. Even though he may have good intentions, he still shows the characteristic described by Deneen (2007). Furthermore, he will never be able to be Iron Man without technology. For Iron Man, technology means life. It means the future and it means the ability to save the world. He is a contrast to Captain America and, though clearly flawed, a representation of American culture.

Through their complexity, global attention and viewership, Captain America and Iron Man provide the unique platform to demonstrate how American patriotism manifests in two very different characters. More importantly, how these two characters are both American patriots by

definition, even though they have different motivations, different ideals, and a different approach to almost everything. Captain America and Iron Man hardly agree, but they both risk their lives for the common good. With millions of views each year and a franchise that has generated over 14 billion in revenue, the MCU has not only given movie-goers something to look forward to every year since 2008, but it has also provided political science scholars with the chance to see patriotism in a different way. Captain America and Iron Man, through the Marvel Avengers film series and their standalone films, give us both entertainment and a look at how American patriotism can manifest.

Before setting out to construct my argument, a synopsis of Captain America and Iron Man within the Marvel Avengers film series is necessary. The films are broken down into three phases: Phase One (2008-2012), Phase Two (2013-2015), and Phase Three (2016-2019). There are a total of twenty one films that span over a decade, but for the purpose of this thesis I will be focusing on nine, which include the standalone Iron Man and Captain America films as well as the Avengers films. For reference, the Marvel films take place real-time and within the geographical world as we know it (e.g., 2008 in real life is 2008 in the MCU, two years in real life is two years in the MCU, cities such as New York and Berlin exist within the MCU, etc.).

The journey begins with Iron Man (2008), who after being held captive for several months by terrorists was able to create the first Iron Man suit and begin fighting criminals across the globe, mainly focusing on the terrorist group that first held him hostage. Two years later, in Iron Man 2 (2010), Iron Man is struggling to deal with his own morality. In this film we are formally introduced to the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division (S.H.I.E.L.D.), run by Nick Fury. We are also introduced to Natasha Romanoff/ Black Widow, a S.H.I.E.L.D. operative and one of the original Avengers. The villains for these films are not

relevant. One year after the events of Iron Man 2 (2010), Captain America returns to the modern world.

Captain America: The First Avenger (2011) is released one year after the events of Iron Man 2 (2010). The film is a flashback to how Captain America got his superpowers, and his name, during the events of World War II. Steve Rogers, after being dismissed as physically unfit to serve in the U.S. military, agrees to undergo a science experiment to enhance his physical form and make him capable of serving. In this film, he fights Red Skull alongside his best friend and World War II soldier Bucky Barnes. Red Skull is head of a Nazi science division known as Hydra. During the film, Hydra breaks off from Hitler's command, deeming him unfit to rule, and begins to devise a plot to take over the world. Red Skull uses the power of the Tesseract, which holds one of six Infinity Stones, to try and enact his plans. In his attempt to stop the Red Skull, Barnes is killed. Captain America stops the Red Skull, but not before losing the Tesseract in the Arctic Ocean and purposefully sinking his aircraft in the process to avoid detonating the aircraft's weapons. He is found by scientists seventy years later, in 2011.

One year after Captain America is brought back to life, the events of Marvel's The Avengers (2012) take place. The plot revolves around Thor's brother Loki, a demi-god from another realm, who tries to use the power of the Tesseract to enslave all mankind on earth. He is getting help from Thanos, a being from another universe who seeks to take control of all six Infinity Stones. Thanos lends Loki an extraterrestrial army in order to take control of the earth in exchange for the Tesseract. The Avengers are assembled for the first time: Captain America, Iron Man, Black Widow, Hulk, Thor, and Hawkeye. Nick Fury, Director of S.H.I.E.L.D., is also a main cast in this film and he uses his influence and resources to try and help the Avengers succeed. The final battle takes place in New York, and the Avengers are successful in saving the

world, although they cause considerable damage to the city in the process. This marks the end of Phase One.

Phase Two begins with the release of Iron Man 3 (2013), one year after the events of Marvel's The Avengers (2012). Iron Man is left traumatized after the events of Avengers (2012), and spends his time building Iron Man robots to calm his anxiety and fears. He battles his own villain that is not relevant to the thesis. One year later, Captain America: The Winter Soldier (2014) is released. In Captain America: The Winter Soldier (2014), Captain America, Black Widow, Agent Maria Hill, and Nick Fury are targets of Hydra, who has infiltrated S.H.I.E.L.D. and grown from inside the organization since its apparent dismantling after the events of WWII. Captain America is also forced to fight his best friend Bucky Barnes, who apparently survived the events of the first Captain America film and is now under the complete control of Hydra due to scientific experimentation. Bucky Barnes is the Winter Soldier, one of the deadliest assassins in human history.

Phase Two ends with Avengers: Age of Ultron (2015). In this film, Iron Man, now struggling to deal with his post-traumatic stress from the first Avengers film, intends to create Ultron, a system that would essentially protect earth from another extraterrestrial invasion. Ultron is a form of advanced artificial intelligence, and develops his own form of critical thought and process. In this process, he deems humanity the cause of world destruction and resolves to end human life on earth. The Avengers battle Ultron and are able to stop him. This marks the end of Phase Two.

Phase Three, with the final phase of the MCU timeline, begins with the release of Captain America: Civil War (2016). In Civil War, the Avengers are asked to sign The Sokovia Accords, which would require the Avengers to receive permission from a council designated by the United

Nations to determine if and when the Avengers' assistance would be required. Iron Man, War Machine, Black Widow, and Vision agree with the Accords. Captain America, Falcon, Scarlet Witch, and Hawkeye do not. This creates a massive internal conflict between the team and leads to their breakup. In the process, Captain America reunites with the Winter Soldier/Bucky Barnes. Those who did not sign the Accords, including Black Widow in the final moments of the film chose to help Captain America and the Winter Soldier escape, are classified as wanted criminals by the U.S. government and the United Nations. They all go into hiding until the events of Avengers: Infinity War (2018).

Avengers: Infinity War (2018) does not mark the last film in the timeline, with Ant-Man and the Wasp (2018) and Captain Marvel (2019) being released within one calendar year after, and Avengers: Endgame (2019) being released in April 2019. In Avengers: Infinity War (2019), Thanos has begun his mission of obtaining all six Infinity Stones. He wants to use the power of the stones to eliminate half of all existence in the universe. The film marks the first time that all characters mentioned, including new ones, come together on the big screen. There are plenty of attempts to stop Thanos from both Iron Man and his team and Captain America and his, but they are unsuccessful. Thanos is able to wipe out half of all life forms in the universe.

## CHAPTER II

### CAPTAIN AMERICA AS A LINCOLNIAN PATRIOT

In this chapter I outline how Captain America is a reflection of Lincolnian patriotism, specifically outlining three distinct characteristics that embody Lincolnian patriotism: (1) attachment and love for the country's ideals, (2) critical thought, and (3) love of the good, which also encompass indebtedness and sacrifice. I begin the chapter with a short timeline of events that occur within the Captain America solo films, which are still heavily relevant to the overall analysis of this thesis. The remainder of the chapter is broken into three sections, each outlining the three characteristics of Lincolnian patriotism discussed above and how they directly correlate to Captain America's sense of American patriotism.

Captain America, known to his friends as Cap or Steve Rogers, was born in Brooklyn, New York City, New York in 1918. During World War II, Captain America was denied entry into the American military due to his physical health.<sup>10</sup> While arguing this decision with his childhood friend, he is overheard by a German scientist, who believes Captain America possessed certain virtues in his commitment to wanting to do something necessary and just. When given the opportunity to subject himself to a scientific experiment that would enhance his abilities and grant him superhuman strength, Captain America agrees. He uses his new ability to fight injustice in World War II and quickly becomes a national hero and icon. After being frozen in ice by mistake for several decades, Captain America wakes up in the modern world and is asked to help assemble a team known as The Avengers (2012). Throughout the span of several films, Captain America continuously demonstrates a commitment to the common good above all

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<sup>10</sup> Physical health in this respect really meant that he appeared—and was—too physically weak.

else. He lets his principles guide him and does not allow the influence of government, society, or even friends, determine how he will approach a situation or make a decision. Although he serves the U.S. military in the first solo film, Captain America's commitment is to something else entirely. His actions reflect a commitment to American ideals founded within the Declaration of Independence.

### ***Attachment to American Ideals***

Abraham Lincoln believed there was a patriotism exclusive to America<sup>11</sup> that gave Americans the uniqueness of bonding over “a political idea” rather than a territory. Understanding these principles and the price paid for them during the American Revolution instills a sense of patriotic duty to uphold them. Thus American patriotism enables a sense of indebtedness and sacrifice to uphold these American ideals (freedom, equality, and justice for all). Lincoln was fundamentally tied to the American ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence. Lincoln's attachment to these ideals were profound, extending beyond the individual and the political arena: “Think nothing of me—take no thought for the political fate of any man whomsoever, but come back to the truths that are in the Declaration of Independence . . . do not destroy that immortal emblem of Humanity” (Lincoln & Leidner (2009), pg. 22). The truths that Lincoln refers to (e.g. that all men are created equal, freedom, justice, equality for all) are the foundation to Lincolnian patriotism. There is a call to action in being an American patriot that extends beyond military service.<sup>12</sup> A patriot has an obligation to protect these rights against forces that attempt to dissolve them. It requires sacrifice and humility in understanding

<sup>11</sup> John Schaar as well as other scholars have agreed that Lincoln believed this to be true.

<sup>12</sup> Although Captain America is a soldier and was determined to fight in World War II, his sense of patriotism was already a part of his character before doing so.

its significance. American patriotism calls on its citizens to continue to protect these ideals and live by them as best as they can.

Viewers might assume that Captain America is no longer a patriot after watching *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) and *Avengers: Infinity War* (2017). In *Civil War*, Captain America refuses to sign The Sokovia Accords, an agreement formulated by the United Nations (UN) and signed by over two hundred countries that states they will determine when and where the Avengers assemble. Captain America fundamentally disagrees with the Accords because it could, in theory, stop him from trying to save humanity from a threat if not granted approval from the UN. This leads to a great internal conflict within the Avengers, eventually leading to their breakup, and sets the stage for the character dynamics that kick off *Avengers: Infinity War*.

In *Civil War*, we witness Captain America turning against his friends and fighting for what he believes is right. We are not shielded from the pain this causes him, and we realize that this decision was difficult for him, as he knew it would end his friendship and collaboration with half of the Avengers team. This demonstrates that he is not spared emotion and pain, but he is willing to sacrifice the things he loves in the name of what he believes is right. Most individuals would not consider turning against family or friends, even if it is for something that is right and just. And Captain America, by making this difficult but necessary decision, sends a message to viewers that although it may be difficult, we must uphold those ideals. This demonstrates just how strongly Captain America believes in these ideals and how determined he is to protect them.

A true patriot is able to separate the government from his or her country and the ideals it was founded upon. Captain America, even before he became a superhero, was always invested in protecting those ideals.<sup>13</sup> Thus, even as he presents himself in a dark navy suit and resembles

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<sup>13</sup> As mentioned before, this is why he continuously tried to enlist for World War II, even though he was not physically able to fight.



no affiliation to the American flag, he is still Captain America because he not only keeps his name and identity, but he is still fighting for the rights of others and sacrificing his own life in the process. His sense of duty and fulfillment are directly related to the American ideals that are at the soul of who his character is and who he identifies as.

Captain America believes that as a patriot, it is his duty to uphold traditional American ideals that embody themes of freedom, equality, and justice for all. At the most basic and fundamental level, Captain America is fighting for the freedom of others throughout the Avengers film series. He fights Loki, who planned to enslave all of mankind under his command; he fights Ultron, who wanted to obliterate all of humanity; and he fights Thanos, who wanted to annihilate half of all existence in the universe. His fights transition from protecting New York City from an alien invasion to unsuccessfully trying to defeat Thanos in the fictional country of Wakanda, Africa. And he sacrifices himself to protect others, even though they did not ask for his help.

This is the perfect example of Lincolnian patriotism: fighting for the rights of others, citizens and noncitizens alike, because it is just and it is right. When asked if he wanted to join World War II to kill Nazis, Captain America—who was not yet Captain America—answered that he “doesn’t like bullies.”<sup>14</sup> This statement is powerful because it shows no national affiliation. Bullies are bullies. Whether they are domestic citizens, foreign citizens, or even extraterrestrials is irrelevant to Captain America.

The promise that was given to Americans in the Declaration of Independence is what American patriotism is tied to and therefore unique from all other forms of patriotism. As Schaar (1973) puts, “Americans, a motley gathering of various races and cultures, were bonded

<sup>14</sup> Fiege, K. (Producer), & Johnson, J. (Director). 2011. *Captain America: the First Avenger* [Motion Picture]. United States: Marvel Studios.

together not by blood or religion, not by tradition or territory, not by the walls and traditions of a city, but by a political idea” (291). In this version of American patriotism there is a commitment and dedication to principles.

### ***Critical Thought***

Lincolnian patriotism calls for having a critical eye as patriots to anything or anyone who might threaten the ideals that founded America. With that in mind, even the government is subjected to criticism if it is not abiding by American ideals.

Not only is this necessary, but it is also required from patriots, who by default are charged with protecting these ideals at all costs from domestic and foreign threats. Therefore, a patriot must recognize such threats and upon recognizing them is called to action to fight against them. The Sokovia Accords could have essentially stopped Captain America from fulfilling these patriotic duties that have been deeply embedded into his being since before he was Captain America. It is also for this reason that Captain America can stop serving his government while still serving his country: his duty is to American ideals, not people in power who make decisions. The Declaration of Independence places a high importance on the idea that governments are created to serve the commonwealth, and that they “derive their powers from the consent of the governed” (“Declaration of Independence: A Transcription” 2018). Captain America’s Lincolnian patriotism aligns with this sentiment, believing firmly that he does not respond to the government. That is not to suggest that he will not cooperate or collaborate with the government when needed, but he is also not ideologically obliged to abide by every command.

Captain America will always be naturally critical of anyone or anything that might essentially stop him from doing the right thing. If an individual’s reason for disagreeing and questioning the law falls within this patriotic sentiment, he or she is not only acting patriotic but

truly understands the burden that this patriotism instills. It requires individuals to not only recognize these ideals but also uphold and defend them, which Captain America does.

Viewers of the Avengers series might be inclined to assume that Captain America is no longer an American patriot after seeing his costume change in Avengers: Infinity War (2018). In the first Avengers film, Captain America is sporting a custom American-themed suit. The suit is red, white, and blue, incorporating the use of stripes and a silver star in the middle of his chest (see below). In Infinity War, viewers will notice that the star and the stripes are ripped off Captain America's suit,<sup>15</sup> leaving dents and tears and becoming only a memory of the armor he once fought in. His signature shield, which also incorporated traditional American colors (red, white, and blue) and the same star on the suit, was ditched in Infinity War and upgraded to a solid dark blue shield instead. He is a wanted felon by the UN and the United States, along with a handful of previous Avengers who sided with Captain America on the issue and did not sign The Sokovia Accords.

In the following page I have included a portrait photo of Captain America in the second Avengers film, Avengers: Age of Ultron (2015), and the most recent Avengers film, Avengers: Infinity War (2018). I invite the reader to pay close attention to not only Captain America's suit but also his overall physical appearance (sleeves rolled up, beard, etc.).

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<sup>15</sup> I should note that we never see Captain America do this himself, but at the end of Captain America: Civil War (2016), he drops his shield and "resigns" being Captain America as he accepts he will be a wanted criminal due to not wanting to sign the Accords. For this film, we can rightfully assume that it was him who ripped out the star and the stripes from his suit.

**Figure 1: Captain America during a fight scene in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015)**



**Figure 2: Captain America teaser poster for *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018)**



For viewers, this may seem as though he is no longer an American patriot. The suit that is so iconic to his character bears little resemblance to the fighting gear he uses in Infinity War. He is, for the first time throughout the film series, not clean-shaven and has his sleeves rolled up. Not only did he disobey orders and become a wanted criminal, but he purposefully removed any resemblance to America from his attire. However, when we take into consideration how Captain America is a representation of Lincolnian patriotism, his actions are anything but unpatriotic.

The first sign of this is that Captain America still keeps his name. He may have resigned his attire, but he did not resign his identity. Even though Iron Man refers to him as Steve Rogers at the start of Avengers: Infinity War (after the events of Civil War have taken place and the Avengers have split), he is still called Cap by his friends throughout the film. Not once does he object to being called or referenced to as Captain America.

It is this kind of patriotism that led to revolutionary historic moments such as the Civil Rights Movement. “It is the only idea of civic obligation that can provide a full defense for civilly disobeying laws or orders circumscribing liberty of violating the principle of equal justice for all” (Schaar 1973, 295). By default, this calls for an implementation of critical thought and criticism towards any person or institution that goes against American ideals. In Captain America: The First Avenger (2011), he disobeys commander orders to infiltrate a Nazi camp and save prisoners of war. The extent of this defiance is continuously tested throughout the film series and gradually increases in significance and extremity. Ultimately, it ends with his decision to not sign The Sokovia Accords. Captain America, however, has always had a natural disregard for orders, even when he was in the military. He questions decisions made by the government or any institution representing it (military, S.H.I.E.L.D.) throughout his stand-alone films and the Avengers film series. In every account, these decisions were disregarded because Captain

America felt they were unjust. Most of the time, these decisions inflicted some kind of restraint on him to do what he felt was the right thing. This varied from saving prisoners of war during World War II against commander orders, fighting Loki in New York City without approval from S.H.I.E.L.D., and attempting to protect earth from Thanos even though his government wanted him arrested.

At the start of Infinity War, Captain America arrives at the Avengers headquarters, located north of New York City. Upon arrival to the United States Secretary of State orders War Machine<sup>16</sup> to arrest Captain America and his teammates, also former Avengers. When told by the secretary that he has “some nerve” showing up at the headquarters, Captain America tells him that “Earth just lost its greatest defender” referring to Iron Man, “so we’re here to fight [Thanos]. And if you get in our way, we’ll fight you, too.”<sup>17</sup> He tells him that he is “beyond asking permission” to save people.<sup>18</sup> Once again, we witness Captain America upholding American ideals—freedom, justice, equality for all—and not blindly subservient to the government.

The notable difference is that Captain America is no longer working with or for the government in his pursuit of freedom and justice. We witness in the first Avengers film that Tony Stark begins hacking S.H.I.E.L.D’s database in order to find out what the government’s motives are for using alien technology. Stark assumes that it is for malicious intent, but is quickly challenged by Captain America who tells him that they “have orders” and they “should

<sup>16</sup> War Machine is another Avengers who previously agreed and sign The Accords. He was on the side of Tony Stark/ Iron Man and is therefore not being pursued by the UN or American government.

<sup>17</sup> Fiege, K. (Producer), & Russo, A. and Russo, J. (Directors). 2018. *Avengers: Infinity War* [Motion Picture]. United States: Marvel Studios.

<sup>18</sup> Fiege, K. (Producer), & Russo, A. and Russo, J. (Directors). 2018. *Avengers: Infinity War* [Motion Picture]. United States: Marvel Studios.

follow them.”<sup>19</sup> Stark responds to this by asking Captain America if he is not just the least bit curious as to why Nick Fury, head of S.H.I.E.L.D, was meddling with this technology in the first place. Captain America does not tell him anything, and looking visibly bothered, decides to start looking around the ship they are on for hints or clues. He eventually finds weapons that the government was manufacturing by utilizing this technology. This scene, on the surface, may seem as though Captain America was always fully supportive of his government’s actions and never questioned their motives. However, when we consider that he took Stark’s comments seriously and began investigating for himself, it is clear that Captain America has always been sensitive to the government and has always been open to doubt its decisions and motives. Captain America has fought for his country, but he does not blindly defend the decisions of its leaders. His impulse is to consider any criticism or suspicion and, if he deems it reasonable as we witness in the first Avengers film,<sup>20</sup> he investigates.

### ***Love of the Good***

Love of the good and love of one’s own is referenced in scholarly works regarding patriotism. Love of the good refers to love of humanity, whereas love of one’s own refers to love towards one’s own community, family, country, etc. Love of humanity is inherently more difficult to construct and commit to because it is in some sense abstract. It is more difficult for one to have a love for others who they do not know or share commonalities with versus their own family or community. For the purpose of this thesis I will be referencing love of the good as having a love and commitment to humanity.

<sup>19</sup> Fiege, K. (Producer), Whedon, J. (Director). 2012. *The Avengers* [Motion Picture]. United States: Marvel Studios.

<sup>20</sup> Tony Stark mentioned that the intentions of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s involvement with the Tesseract were suspicious, and that he was hacking their database to find out more. Although visibly angered by this, Captain American realized Stark may have been right and decides to investigate S.H.I.E.L.D.’s ship.

Viewers of the Avengers film series might conclude that Captain America, by defending fictional countries in Africa and Eastern Europe, is no longer an American patriot because he is not fighting for America specifically. When we consider Lincoln's conception of American patriotism, however, we realize that he is. An American patriot will fight for all, not just his own. That is precisely what Captain America is doing throughout the entire film series and his stand-alone films, confronting enemies across the world, and even his friends and teammates when necessary. Captain America's form of patriotism is a form of patriotism that can live in peaceful tension with cosmopolitanism concepts. A commitment to American ideals does not mean Captain America can only love and acknowledge American things. This approach gives equal importance to innocent people in America and around the world.

Captain America acknowledges, recognizes and respects others regardless of their citizenship (or which planet/ universe/ realm they come from). He is sympathetic to their causes and tries to enlighten misguided characters throughout the series when he encounters them. During Avengers: Age of Ultron (2015), Peter Maximoff/ Quicksilver and Wanda Maximoff/ Scarlet Witch are introduced. They grew up in a country plagued with war and chaos. At the time, Tony Stark was selling weapons to the United States government, which ended up killing the twins' parents and leaving them orphaned at a young age. When given the opportunity to undergo scientific experiments that could grant them superhuman abilities,<sup>21</sup> they accept. Ultron finds the twins and uses their abilities to try and defeat the Avengers throughout the film. When briefed by Agent Maria Hill on their abilities, Captain America sarcastically asks, "What kind of monster would let a German scientist experiment on them for the sake of their country?" Agent

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<sup>21</sup> Wanda possess telekinesis powers and Peter has incredible speed.



Hill responds, “We are not at war, Captain.” “They are,” he says.<sup>22</sup> This is not the only example we see of Captain America justifying the actions of his enemies, and at some point in the film he even tries to sympathize with the twins and tells them they he knows they *think* they are doing right, but they are misguided. Captain America is sensitive to more than one perspective. The ideals that we value such as freedom and justice for all truly do encompass everyone, and if we have a commitment to these ideals then it is our obligation to fight injustice across the globe. According to Schaar, America is a country formed by a “dedication to a set of principles . . . to uphold and advance certain commitments among ourselves and throughout the world” (pg. 291, 1973).

Captain America provides us with a representation of Lincolnian patriotism in one of the biggest box office hits of the decade. By acknowledging this, we invite audience members to think about American patriotism in a different way that goes beyond a textbook. In a time when we can truly benefit from attaching ourselves to our American principles and pursuing a call to action in protecting them, this kind of representation should be discussed and considered within the academic community. Captain America is not an attainable figure, and I do not believe we should focus our efforts in trying to replicate who he is and what he can do. I do, however, believe that there is more to the superhero than tights and a shield. I hope I have demonstrated how Captain America can help us think about a form of patriotism so unique and valuable to American identity. Moreover, I hope I have inspired the reader to carefully consider how this superhero can contribute to the conversation revolving around American patriotism through a film series viewed by millions across the globe.

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<sup>22</sup> Fiege, K. (Producer), Whedon, J. (Director). 2015. *Avengers: Age of Ultron* [Motion Picture]. United States: Marvel Studios.

## CHAPTER III

### IRON MAN AND THE DOMINANT TRADITION

American patriotism does not always present itself with a Lincolnian perspective. There are many forms of patriotism that derive from different sources and motivations. For Captain America, those motivations were presented in the previous chapter. This chapter is an analysis of how Iron Man represents the dominant tradition and how this influences his form of patriotism. Although Iron Man fights alongside Captain America<sup>23</sup> he represents a different kind of American patriotism that stems from a different set of motivations, past experiences, and characteristics.<sup>24</sup> Mainly, Stark represents a manifestation of the dominant tradition, which revolves around the ideas of self-interest, individualism, and entrepreneurialism

I will begin the chapter with a brief summary on the main differences between Iron Man and Captain America, with the intention to demonstrate how Iron Man cannot be classified as a Lincolnian patriot. I will follow with a discussion of what the dominant tradition and alternative traditions are and the characteristics associated with them. For that section I will be primarily relying on Deneen's (2007) *Wendell Berry and the Alternative Tradition in American Political Thought*, in which he outlines two distinct American characteristics that have shaped American culture for centuries. I will follow Deneen's (2007) section with a character history of Tony Stark/ Iron Man. The remainder of the chapter, and the greatest focus, will be an analysis of how Iron Man's patriotism follows characteristics from the dominant tradition: (1) motivation around self-interest, (2) individualism, and (3) an entrepreneurial spirit that utilizes technology to advance its mission.

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<sup>23</sup> With the exception of the events of Captain America: Civil War (2016) and Infinity War (2018).

<sup>24</sup> For information on major differences between Captain America and Iron Man, see Nicolas Michaud and Jessica Watkins (2018).

Iron Man and Captain America, even when they are on the same team, are always presented as opposites. This extends to how they demonstrate their patriotic attachment to their country. Through a comparison of both characters I hope to demonstrate to the reader how this can help us understand the many ways American patriotism can manifest. The main contributor to why Captain America and Iron Man are so different could be due to their contrasting backgrounds and past experiences. Iron Man spent his youth building a franchise and wanting to live up to his father's name, while Captain America spent his youth surrounded by influences of World War II and propaganda about serving in the American military. Civic education was explicit for Captain America, whereas Stark had a very different view of patriotism. Captain America's beginnings helped instill in him a sense of patriotic duty that aligned with Lincolnian perspectives, while Iron Man's lifestyle narrowed his views to focus on economic growth and self-advancement. The political and national atmosphere, and the time difference, all contribute to this contrast in character as well.

Lincolnian patriotism requires Americans to embody or possess several characteristics that Iron Man does not have. Among them, a sense of indebtedness and a commitment to American ideals such as liberty, equality, and justice for all. A sense of indebtedness, among his own virtues, is what motivates Captain America. Iron Man's motivations, on the other hand, stem from a sense of guilt and shame. Tony Stark, through Stark Industries, contributed to the loss of human life and chaos by supplying the American government with powerful weapons. It was not until he realized that his weapons were being used by terrorists as well that he chose to dismantle the company's weaponry.

Tony Stark was forced to create Iron Man because he was being held captive by terrorists who wanted him to replicate a missile Stark created that was "so powerful you only have to use it

once.”<sup>25</sup> It was only after he was personally exposed to the damage he had caused that he realized the effects of his actions. He has been trying to right that wrong since his first solo film in 2008. Iron Man has never shown any kind of commitment to American ideals, and even when he was in agreement with The Sokovia Accords, it was clear these motivations stemmed from shame and guilt. Before being approached by the Secretary of State, Stark had an encounter with a woman who lost her son during a fight the Avengers were involved in. The secretary also began his appeal with a death count from every interaction the Avengers had. The reason Stark wanted to The Sokovia Accords was to rid himself of guilt, whereas Captain America did not want to sign because he believed it could stop him from doing the right thing (such as protecting the rights he swore to uphold). Both superheroes believed fully in their decisions. It could be argued that Stark criticizes his government, but upon reflection we realize this stems from his own individualism and self-interest.

That said, Iron Man is still a patriot by other definitions. There are specific references to Tony Stark being an American patriot in the first and second Iron Man solo films, and that kind of commitment is tested and developed further as the series unfolds. At the start of Iron Man (2008) and Iron Man 2 (2010) he is being presented and/or introduced to a crowd. In both instances he is explicitly celebrated as a “true American patriot.” He takes this title with great pride, even shouting “to peace!” after revealing his latest weapon to the U.S. military.

Although Iron Man cannot be classified as a Lincolnian patriot, he possesses characteristics unique to American culture, which Patrick J. Deneen (2007), among other scholars and philosophers such as Alexis de Tocqueville (2002), discuss in detail. The dominant tradition in American culture reflects certain traits in its inhabitants since the first settlement. The

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<sup>25</sup> Fiege, K. and Avi Arad (Producers), & Jon Favreau (Director). 2008. *Iron Man* [Motion Picture]. United States: Marvel Studios.

argument has several factors, but they all mainly revolve around the idea that there is a dominant tradition of mobility towards the accumulation of profit in the U.S. This tendency is dominant not just in name but also in its pursuit, as it bears no consideration for the kind of harm done to nature in the process.

Deneen (2007) identifies the following primary traits that fall within the dominant tradition: (1) motivation by self-interest, (2) individualism, and (3) an entrepreneurial spirit that utilizes technology to advance its mission. I intend to demonstrate how Iron Man is a manifestation of a form of American patriotism that combines some of the traits characterized by Deneen (2007). By understanding Captain America and Iron Man's differences, we can further understand how American patriotism manifests and how the Marvel Avengers film series helps us think about it in a different context.

At times referred to as the dominant tendency,<sup>26</sup> the dominant tradition in American culture highlights unique characteristics developed and nurtured by early settlers. The focus of the dominant tradition is expansion in two fundamental ways: individual and economic. It relies heavily on the idea that the individual is at a higher regard than the government, and places high importance on the level of self-interest that this tradition reflects in American culture. The alternative tradition, which is described as the "weaker" tradition can be described as the "the tendency to stay put" (Deneen 2007, 300). The dominant tradition implies the need to increase human power. This can be directed to overpowering nature, but there is a general increase and want towards upwards mobility within the dominant tradition. The alternative tradition, which combats the dominant one, argues that not all settlers arrived in America with the intention to increase wealth and prosperity. The alternative tradition encompasses the idea that other settlers

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<sup>26</sup> Wendell Berry used this term, which was referred by Deneen in *Wendell Berry and the Alternative Tradition in American Political Thought*.

who could not identify with the dominant tradition wanted to put down roots and foster and build community. Although more submissive in comparison, the alternative tradition is still a part of American history just as much as the dominant one. Captain America would not align with the alternative tradition, but for the purpose of this chapter understanding what the alternative tradition is and how it relates to the dominant tradition is nonetheless relevant.

For the purpose of this chapter I will be demonstrating how Iron Man is a representation of the dominant tendency. Tony Stark is a genius, graduating from MIT as a teenager and leading Stark Industries to the greatest weapons manufacturing company the world had ever seen. His parents died in a car accident when he was a teenager, and he struggled with living up to his father's name for his entire life. He was born into a life of privilege and opportunity. He becomes Iron Man when he is kidnapped and forced to fight for his life. Upon undergoing this traumatic experience he begins to reevaluate his life and his purpose in the world. He creates and continuously updates the Iron Man suit in order to serve the common good (e.g. demonstrate love of humanity). Iron Man, in terms of character development, has arguably undergone the greatest transformation of any Avenger in the MCU. He transitioned from sleeping with reporters who insulted his morality to wanting to have a child with a woman who he managed to truly love and be in a long-term relationship with. That might sound like a normal transition for many, but for Stark it was impressive. Although he maintains most of the characteristics relevant to the dominant tradition, Stark undergoes a notable transition throughout the Avengers film series.

### ***Self-Interest***

One of the most significant attributes of the dominant tradition is that humans are motivated by self-interest. Francis Bacon's famous *Meditationes Sacrae* (1597), in which he

states that “knowledge is power” encompasses the idea that nature is at our disposal as human beings, and goes as far as to suggest that she is—and should be treated as—a prisoner withholding information. Iron Man, a self-proclaimed billionaire, playboy, philanthropist, is a representation of how self-interest can manifest. Stark’s decisions are derived from personal experiences or beliefs, and only consider the common good in relation to his own personal guilt or sense of obligation.

Tony Stark, following his father’s example, developed Stark Industries primarily into a weapons manufacturing company and generated enough worldwide attention that it caused him to be abducted by terrorists. The terrorists were using Stark Industries’ weapons, and it was those weapons that killed American lives and successfully captured Stark. It was inside a cave that he created the first version of the Iron Man suit. Knowing that he and his captive companion would not be released, Stark decided to create a machine that would wreak havoc for the terrorists and destroy as much Stark Industries weaponry as possible. In the cave, without access to his technology,<sup>27</sup> his influence, or his money, is when he realized how much evil and chaos he had contributed to the world. His companion sacrificed himself to save Stark in their attempt to get out, and this moved Stark deeply. He was told to not waste his life—and he began trying to live by that statement from that moment on. It is important to note that even though he was committed to doing good, this kind of commitment was still derived from his own self-interest. He felt guilty about all the damage he had done and wanted to make the world a better place because of it.

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<sup>27</sup> It is important to note that although he did have weapons made available to him by the terrorists in order to build the Jericho Missile, it was certainly not the technology that he was normally use to. He had to make everything by hand instead of verbally instructing his machines to do it for him.

Once he was able to free himself and get back to the United States, Stark immediately requested a press release where he announced that Stark Industries would no longer be making weapons. This sends a shockwave throughout the press, the military, and his advisors and staff. The stock value drops almost 60 points for Stark Industries, and the board considers removing him from company power altogether. Nonetheless, he stands by his decision despite the sacrifices and the risks it involves.

Shortly after getting back to the U.S., news reports broadcast the negative impact that the terrorists are having in the Middle East (still using Stark Industry weapons). The news broadcast also states that because these communities have no political or governmental influence they are defenseless against the terrorists. Stark, upon realizing this, begins to build a second version of the Iron Man suit and personally begins to destroy terrorist camps in the Middle East. This forces the viewer to consider that perhaps Stark's intentions have shifted, along with his interests. He is no longer interested in making profit or making "things that blow up,"<sup>28</sup> instead he is focused on trying to make the world a better place and rid it of the evil he once contributed to. This kind of character demonstrates how Iron Man, even though he wants to serve the common good, is still acting on behalf of himself and his own version of how to make things better. Once again, when we evaluate his desire to rid the world of evil we realize that it is his way of dealing with his own morality and guilt. He may believe that his intentions are noble, and he may even die because of them, but ultimately his intentions are still motivated by his own self-interest.

Iron Man's self-interest hides between all actions he takes and decisions he makes throughout the Marvel Avengers film series. He is trying to survive in a world that is shaped and

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<sup>28</sup> Fiege, K. and Avi Arad (Producers), & Jon Favreau (Director). 2008. *Iron Man* [Motion Picture]. United States: Marvel Studios.



transformed by the very experiences he faces. He sees the world not as it is, but as a mirror reflection of his fears, his demons, and his aspirations.

### ***Individualism***

The individual is equally important and present in the dominant tradition presented by Deneen (2007). The origins of individualism in America date as far back as the Declaration of Independence. The effects of it are prominent. Deneen (2007) states that the rights of the individual are “inalienable” and creates a “central presupposition [that] the individual precedes, and in theory and practice is prior to, government and commonwealth” (302). Iron Man represents this kind of American individualism fully. Instead of waiting or trusting that the American government will resolve the world’s issues, he takes care of them himself.

The first example of this is in the first film when he is coming back from destroying a terrorist base and almost gets shot down by the U.S. military. The second and more important example is at the start of Iron Man 2 (2010), where he is subpoenaed by a congressional committee requiring him to turn over the Iron Man suit. He makes the senators look like a joke, mocking them and hacking their monitors. Additionally, continuously turns his argument against them by saying that they should be giving him a medal instead. “I’ve successfully privatized world peace” he states to a loud, excited audience.<sup>29</sup> He continuously reiterates that the world has never been more peaceful since the introduction of Iron Man and that the government should be thanking him instead for doing their job for them.

Iron Man, despite his transformative journey, is still individualistic. Iron Man considers his individual self above the law and above the government. He naturally distrusts them, as we witness during the first Avengers film when he successfully hacks into the government’s

<sup>29</sup> Feige, K. (Producer). Favreau, J. (Director). 2010. *Iron Man 2* [Motion Picture]. United States: Marvel Studios.

database to learn more about their intentions. As Deneen (2007) suggests, American individualism places a higher importance on the self than the government, and Iron Man lives by this standard even when he collaborates and agrees with the government in the later parts of the series.

Iron Man's individualism was so extreme that the greatest assembly of superheroes on earth passed him and his advanced technology off because they knew he would not be a team player. Originally debunked by S.H.I.E.L.D. for "not playing well with others,"<sup>30</sup> he eventually becomes one of the greatest Avengers in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. However, it was only under extreme desperation that S.H.I.E.L.D. was forced to reconsider Iron Man as an Avenger. Notably, he did not seem to mind that he was passed up for that opportunity and would even joke about it.

Referencing individualism, Deneen (2007) states that "modern life puts temporal blinders around our eyes, forcing us to see only the present and inducing blindness toward the past and permitting an exceedingly narrow view of the future" (307). Iron Man was living a luxurious modern life that revolved around women, parties, money, and fame when he was abducted. He was living with "temporal blinders," until being awakened by harsh reality of his actions and the consequences of them. Stark is a genius, but he has always struggled with being narrow minded in terms of how to deal with his problems and not thinking critically about his actions before taking them. Although he sometimes follows orders, every big decision that Iron Man has made has been alone and as an individual, with Captain America constantly reminding him that they are team and will succeed or fail together. He starts to accept this as the series continues to unfold, but never fully trusts beyond himself.

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<sup>30</sup> Feige, K. (Producer). Whedon, J. (Director). 2012. *The Avengers* [Motion Picture]. United States: Marvel Studios.

One of the biggest examples of this is *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), where he singlehandedly decides that earth needs a protective shield around it to protect it from another extraterrestrial invasion. The plan backfires and the Avengers spend the entire film trying to save the world once again due to Stark's decision and paranoia. This is an example of how the temporal blinders that Deneen (2007) references are still a part of Iron Man's character, even when he is trying to do the right thing. Additionally, even as Stark began trying to do the right thing for the common good he still paraded himself at events and soaked in the love and attention from the crowd. He loves the attention, and he still needs it in order to feel like he is making a difference and doing something good.

### ***Entrepreneurial Spirit***

Embedded into the self-interested individualism that shapes American characteristics is the entrepreneurial spirit. It is no surprise that Tony Stark is a self-proclaimed billionaire—and proud of it—when we consider how, according to the dominant tradition, “the fundamental aim of human society is the increase of economic growth” (Deneen 2007, 302). Stark was born to wealthy parents, but this was not enough for him. After presenting the military with the Jericho Missile, he playfully adds that he will throw in some champagne with every purchase of 500 million.<sup>31</sup> The infatuation and pursuit of economic development in American culture derived from the fact that money, unlike produce and machinery, does not spoil. It therefore became “both possible and desirable” to obtain (Deneen 2007, 302).

Deneen (2007) states that “society was devised [to] secure not only peace but the perpetual and unlimited increase of human wealth based upon the extraction, accumulation, and manipulation of natural resources” (302). Stark may have given up his weaponry facility, but he

<sup>31</sup> Feige K. (Producer). Whedon, J. (Director). 2012. *The Avengers* [Motion Picture]. United States: Marvel Studios.

did not give up his attraction towards wealth. Every film we are presented with a new and improved version of the Iron Man suit, and although more humble and humanitarian, Stark did not give up his wealthy, privileged lifestyle. “Nature is hostile to the goods of human life,” such as comfort, and “as such, it must be harnessed, controlled, and subverted” (Deneen 2007, 301), which Stark does. The most basic example of this is creating a new element to ensure his own survival. Additionally, although he does build eco-friendly facilities, the fact that he is still manipulating nature to his will by building powerfully advanced technology and machinery in the name of world peace still proves he is a representation of the dominant tradition, albeit a little less misguided than before. And despite his best efforts, there is one thing that Stark will never be able to give up, even if it means disregarding nature in the process: his need for and reliance on technology. Stark trusts technology more than he trusts other human beings. And for good reason. His suit has never failed him (at one point it caught him mid-air when he was thrown out of a skyscraper by Loki) and his own robots have saved his life in times of great need.

Regarding technology, Deneen (2007) states the following: “Technological optimism and blind faith in progress can be embraced only if one simultaneously harbors a ‘hatred for the past.’

What appears to be our belief in the future—our technological optimism—in fact manifests itself as a free pass to live irresponsibly in the present” (307).

The statement above represents Iron Man perfectly. His hatred is for his own past, which caused in him a lot of guilt and shame. He believes that technology is the solution to the world’s problems, as proven in the events of *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2012) specifically. He has blind faith in technology because he does not trust humanity to make the right decisions, or himself and his team to be able to solve the world’s problems. This was his intention behind the creation of Ultron. It was meant to be a protective shield against any cosmic threat to earth. He knew

that his own teammates would not approve of the idea, so his individualistic nature called on him to take action for himself and build the program anyway. The plan backfired, as stated before. Ultimately, there is no Tony Stark without Iron Man and there is no Iron Man without technology. For Stark, the suit does more good than harm because he uses it as a shield—as a way to protect those who cannot protect themselves.

Stark began this journey celebrated as a true American patriot that believed his way of helping his country was by supplying weapons to its military. He took great pride in his work and in knowing that he was helping America and its interests. He felt good about it and he was celebrated for it. His own self-interest revolving around fame, money, and advanced technology is what classified him as an American patriot. He felt that by doing something which was good for him, he was also doing something for the common good (e.g. the U.S. military). Alexis de Tocqueville (2002) discusses this further in *Democracy in America*.

Tocqueville (2002) notices an American characteristic that essentially serves two purposes: the purpose of self-interest and self-fulfillment while also in some capacity serving the interests of the common good (504). Iron Man is misguided, and immediately after being rescued from the cave he begins to question what his company does and what it stands for. Before being abducted, he was confronted with facts about how much destruction his weapons had caused, Stark playfully counteracted those statement by stating all of the philanthropic work his company had done thanks to its weapons division. It was not until he was personally affected by his weapons that he took the matter more seriously.

Once he is abducted, this false view of patriotism begins to crumble and he is faced with a great deal of internal conflict. He decides that the profit and the recognition is not worth the cost of innocent lives being destroyed with his weaponry, and spends the next eleven years trying

to rid himself of his guilt and shame. Iron Man transitioned from supplying weapons to being a soldier in the battlefield. He transitioned from giving orders and receiving large checks to dealing with the loss of his teammates and risking his own life, and the lives of those he loves. He voluntarily chose to protect the earth and its inhabitants the same way Captain America did while still embracing and representing some of the character traits of the dominant tradition.

Marvel provides us with two very complex characters that show us how American patriotism manifests in different people and through different situations. Captain America and Iron Man have different motivations, and they more often than not are contrasts to one another despite being on the same team. Even Iron Man questions his ability to be a superhero because he knows that he does not have the traditional characteristics to be classified as one. “I’m not the superhero type with all these character defects,”<sup>32</sup> he states at the end of the first film. And he is right.

Iron Man is still self-interested, individualistic, and will never be able to live in a world where he does not have technology. He will always be focused on moving forward, on fulfilling his own personal mission—even if that mission is to save the world—without much regard for anyone else. His focus shifted from being the man of the hour to leaving behind a legacy of peace and prosperity. Although this kind of focus is not directly related to the dominant tradition, the means that Iron Man takes to achieve peace and prosperity are. Iron Man demonstrates how those traits can be active in a character and still drive that character to genuinely want to do good in the world, and to selflessly risk his life in the process.

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<sup>32</sup> Fiege, K. and Avi Arad (Producers), & Jon Favreau (Director). 2008. *Iron Man* [Motion Picture]. United States: Marvel Studios.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

The final chapter is broken in two parts: (1) limits of Captain America and Iron Man as representations of American patriotism, and (2) the conclusion. Within the limits section, I discuss the limitations of both superheroes, but also briefly discuss what those limitations are for us should we try to use their version of American patriotism as a way to adjust our own. Captain America cannot exist without war, and the kind of virtues and patriotism that he embodies needs war in order to be fully awoken. Iron Man, on the other hand, presents more human limits regarding his character and inability to separate himself from the dominant tradition. For both superheroes, however, there is an even greater limit: themselves. Although Captain America and Iron Man each represent different versions of American patriotism, both versions still depend on the individual to ultimately decide what is or what is not right and act accordingly. This represents a problem because there is no safeguard against what each superhero decides. In other words, they both believe they are doing right but there is no way of proving it. Additionally, both Captain America and Iron Man are usually at odds with one another, each believing that the other is mistaken or misguided. The need for Captain America and Iron Man to rely on their own individualistic perceptions is a limit to their character. Ironically, both still work in a team despite ultimately relying on themselves and their own individualistic perceptions.

Before I break down the specific limits of each character, I want to acknowledge the general limits of both of them being superheroes. The first and most obvious limit is that they are fictional. Their creation, encounters, villains, decisions, and entire universe is strategic and meant to apply to a specific narrative. That said, that narrative is sometimes meant to bridge the gaps that we see in our everyday lives. Superheroes are presented as the answer to things and

circumstances that we cannot fix or understand ourselves. Annika Hagley and Michael Harrison (2014), argue that the “resurrection of the superhero genre, particularly in film, is a direct response to the feelings of helplessness and terror that Americans experiences in the days and years following [September 11]” (120). Superheroes, as often conceived in response to national or global crises, have the ability to ease these feelings of helplessness and terror, at least momentarily. Superheroes are limited by the very reality they are created in response to. For example, Captain America was created as a response to Adolf Hitler at the start of World War II, and was already punching Hitler in the face, literally, even before the U.S. joined the war. He was created as a response to the feeling of helplessness and frustration that Americans were feeling. One of Captain America’s co-creator, Joe Simon, was the son of Jewish immigrants. As a result, superheroes are saviors meant to ease our anxieties about the world around us. They maintain a position which leads us to believe that they and they alone are the ones who can and will save us.

### **Limits**

This section will be focusing on the limits that both superheroes have. Some of their limits overlap, and some are unique to their own character. In this section I hope to demonstrate some of the limits that the reader must take into consideration when thinking about Captain America and Iron Man as representations of American patriotism. Before I continue, I would like to acknowledge that a limit to this thesis was the conscious decision to not focus or include the idea of masculinity and race. If this thesis expands to something greater, these are topics that I would like to explore as they are certainly evident throughout the films and both superheroes.

The first and most obvious limit is that both characters are white males. We must consider the kind of success that Captain America would have had as a superhero in the films and comic



book series if he was a Hispanic female. If he was of a different gender or race, he would be a symbol of that gender or race. Iron Man faces a similar circumstance. To ignore the question of race and gender regarding these superheroes is suggesting that the white male is a representation for all. The limits that both characters embody extend beyond their gender and race, and their physical forms entirely. Both characters present limits that are unique to their way of thinking and how they approach the world around them. By understanding this, we also inevitably understand how their forms of patriotism are influenced and differentiate from one another.

Captain America, although sometimes annoyingly perfect, does have limits to his character. Captain America needs war, and the kind of patriotism that he follows, no matter how noble and just, in some sense requires instability in order to be seen. As the events in the first Avengers were unfolding, Nick Fury, Director of S.H.I.E.L.D., was trying to recruit Captain America. At that time, he was haunted by the events of his solo film, which had taken place during World War II.<sup>33</sup> Captain America makes it clear he does not want any part of whatever Fury is proposing, asking him if he is trying to get him back into the world. Fury responds that he is “trying to save it.”<sup>34</sup> Captain America finds purpose in the Avengers initiative, which requires him to continuously sacrifice his own life and try to solve the problem at hand. Without war, Captain America has no purpose. Ultron, who was the main villain in the second Avengers film, *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), mocks Captain America on this: “Ah, Captain America... pretending you could live without war.”<sup>35</sup> Captain America only appears when there is war. Unlike Iron Man, Spider-Man, Doctor Strange, or Hulk, Captain America needs war or some kind of global conflict to be brought back into the frontline. He could not live in a world without

<sup>33</sup> As mentioned before, he was frozen in ice this entire time.

<sup>34</sup> Feige, K. (Producer). Whedon, J. (Director). *Avengers* [Motion Picture]. United States: Marvel Studios.

<sup>35</sup> Feige, K. (Producer). Whedon, J. (Director). *Avengers: Age of Ultron* [Motion Picture]. United States: Marvel Studios.

war or something to fight for. And in some ways, this makes sense. If everyone was living up to the ideals that Captain America is morally obligated to protect, there would be no need for him anymore. But that is never the case. There is always injustice and there is always suffering. Yet it is only in times of war that Captain America appears as the American hero we need and must rely on. The clear limit to Captain America is that in order for these noble intentions to rise, there must be destruction.

Additionally, like Iron Man, Captain America does not rely on anything or anyone to tell him that what he is doing is right. This is both a virtue and a vice. He does not fall victim to the pressures of society, or government, but he can fall victim to himself and his own biases or perceptions. Although Captain America has not committed a grave mistake, like Iron Man when he tried to build Ultron, he is still subject to the possibility of them. White argues that Captain America is not just made of muscle, and that he has certain virtues that help him understand situations and circumstances in order to make the best decision possible. Ordinary people, however, do not simultaneously possess the virtues that White identifies in Captain America.

Iron Man's limits, like those of Captain America, all stem from himself. There are no exterior factors that limit Iron Man's impact or capabilities,<sup>36</sup> at least none that are easily detectable. Iron Man is a victim to himself and his own fears and motivations. Part of these limits come from the dominant tradition, such as self-interest and the need to rely on technology to solve the world's problems, to name a few. Due to the fact that he cannot see beyond himself and his own desires, he will always fall victim to them. Another limit to Iron Man is that he is at the mercy of his own guilt, shame, and fear. Since the start of the first Iron Man (2008) film, Stark has been on a personal mission to rid the world of evil. After the events of Avengers

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<sup>36</sup> The first two solo films, Tony Stark/ Iron Man is dealing with blood poisoning from his heart reactor, but, through his intelligence and access to technology, he creates a new element and cures himself.

(2012), when Thor's brother Loki almost succeeded in enslaving all humanity with a hostile army of extraterrestrial aliens, Stark is left traumatized. He builds Iron Man robots nonstop, and almost ends human life by trying to create a shield around the earth known as Ultron. Both of these examples proved he was misguided and wrong, but in that moment he felt he was doing right and did not heed warnings from others, once again showing that his own limit lies within his inability to judge his actions and their effects due to the false belief that he knows best.

Ultron is perhaps the greatest manifestation of Iron Man's limits (manifestation might not be the right word, considering that Ultron is a robot). Ultron is incapable of understanding that his motives are misplaced and that what he is doing is wrong, for he firmly believes that causing a mass global extinction and ridding the planet of all humanity will create a better world. "He cannot tell the difference between destroying the world and saving it," Wanda, an Avenger states regarding Ultron, "where do you think he gets that from?"<sup>37</sup> She was referring to Tony Stark. Iron Man is far from believing that the only way to save the world is by ridding the planet of all humanity, but he does present us with several instances of doing something wrong that he felt was right. For example, creating Ultron in the first place. He knew his team would not approve or allow it, so he successfully got Bruce Banner/ Hulk to help him and built the system anyway. He stood by his decisions, despite knowing it involved a great risk. When Captain America confronts him, he tells them that trying to end a war before it starts can only cause more problems. Iron Man does not understand this, and does not try to. "Tony trusts that he can overcome any obstacle, avert any catastrophe, and fix any problem he faces—including those he inadvertently causes" (Smith 2019, 43). Although he is part of the Avengers team, he still acts on his own, trusting himself to come up with solutions and trusting himself to fix those solutions

<sup>37</sup> Feige, K. (Producer). Whedon, J. (Director). *Avengers: Age of Ultron* [Motion Picture]. United States: Marvel Studios.

should they backfire. At one point, Stark says he does not want to hear the “man was not made to meddle” medley.<sup>38</sup>

Iron Man, regardless of his noble intentions, will always have characteristics of the dominant tradition, which presents another limit to the character. The dominant tradition is part of who Iron Man is. Iron Man’s idea that he alone must save the world, and that it is his responsibility to do so, proves how he is still self-interested and self-centered, even though he does not realize it. He is haunted by visions of extraterrestrial invasions. In one specific vision, the entire Avengers team is dead, and he sees a world completely destroyed. Just as he is realizing what has happened, Captain America awakens at his feet to tell him on final thing: “you could have saved us.”<sup>39</sup> Iron Man is motivated by his own self-interest to save the world due to the shame and guilt that he has carried with him since the first Iron Man (2008) film.

Stark does not trust anyone. Captain America tries, but ultimately relies on himself to do what he believes is right. As mentioned above, this is a problem for both superheroes, and a problem for us if we are to use them as symbols of American patriotism. Neither Captain America or Iron Man can guarantee that the effects of their decisions will serve the common good. Their intentions might be intended to serve the common good, but they refuse to rely on anyone or anything but themselves when making difficult decisions. Thus, there is no safeguard against these decisions being wrong. In *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), Iron Man enlists the help of Spider-Man to turn in Captain America and the rest of the Avengers who refused to sign The Sokovia Accords. Captain America asks Spider-Man what he knows about him, specifically what Iron Man told him, to which Spider-Man responds “that you’re wrong, and you think

<sup>38</sup> Feige, K. (Producer), Whedon, J. (Director). 2012. *The Avengers* [Motion Picture]. United States: Marvel Studios.

<sup>39</sup> Feige, K. (Producer), Whedon, J. (Director). *Avengers: Age of Ultron* [Motion Picture]. United States: Marvel Studios.

you're right. And that makes you dangerous.” Captain America, not happily, mutters that Iron Man’s “got a point.”<sup>40</sup> Captain America realizes his own limits, but refuses to alter them nonetheless.

The kind of self-reliance presented by Iron Man and Captain America is not new to American philosophy, with some of its greatest proponents being Ralph Waldo Emerson. However, there is no reference taken by any of the superheroes when they make their decisions. They are solely basing their decisions on personal experiences. This is problem because anyone, even villains such as Ultron and Thanos, also claim this sense of self-reliance. The world may tell them that they are wrong, or crazy, but they nonetheless go through with their plans and their version of how the world needs to be saved. That is fundamentally subjective, and it presents a limit to the approach that our superheroes take. Beyond a limit, it is also dangerous.

Superheroes who have the ability to shape the world around us, who are human but not average people, can do a lot of good for the world but also a lot of bad if they are not careful. White argues that Captain America is equipped with a moral compass that embodies the virtues necessary to judge each situation carefully and make the best decision, but Captain America is not perfect. And he can be mistaken. Iron Man has been proven mistaken time and time again, yet he does not learn to alter his decision making process or adhere to the guidance and warnings from those he loves and admires most.

## CONCLUSION

Patriotism has been debated for decades, and it will continue to be debated by scholars, politicians, and members of society. Nonetheless, the effects of patriotism are felt either in its absence or in its presence. Patriotism can uphold the values and traditions of a nation while still

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<sup>40</sup> Feige, K. (Producer). Russo, A. & Russo, J. (Directors). *Captain America: Civil War* [Motion Picture]. United States: Marvel Studios.

servicing the immediate needs of the present day. When nurtured and done correctly, patriotism can help a country move forward without sacrificing its traditions and its morality. However, patriotism can also become dangerous, as other scholars have warned, as the most extreme versions of it can transform into sentiments of nationalism, which can be detrimental to a society and a nation. Being able to identify and understand how patriotism can manifest is part of safeguarding against that possibility. The Marvel Avengers film series provides us with two distinct examples of how patriotism in America can manifest, and how they can both attempt to serve the common good.

The first example is through Captain America, who represents a Lincolnian form of American patriotism. Lincolnian patriotism is rooted in American ideals and both understanding and upholding those ideals at all costs. As a Lincolnian patriot, Captain America understands the sacrifices that were made for him and for others in this country by the founding fathers. He feels a moral obligation, a personal duty, to uphold these values for the next generation, understanding that this requires sacrifice and a sense of indebtedness. He becomes naturally vigilant, as we should, against any foreign or domestic threat that might intervene or prevent him from doing what he believes is right for others. And through his commitment to American ideals, he becomes committed to serving the common good and protecting the ideals of freedom, justice, and equality *for all*.

The second example that the Marvel Avengers film series provides us with is Iron Man, who represents a form of American patriotism that, like Lincolnian patriotism, is also unique to America. The dominant tradition is rooted in the idea that America cultivated a certain type of individual since early settlement. This individual would come to embody the ideas of self-interest and individualism in seek of economic prosperity and growth. The use of technology

also played a main role in this committed pursuit. Iron Man represents these characteristics throughout his standalone films and the Marvel Avengers film series. He, unlike Captain America, embarks on a journey of morality and ultimately decides that he wants to offer the world something more than things that blow up. He becomes committed to serving the common good and trying to rid the world of evil. In that process, however, he still involuntarily represents the characteristics of the dominant tendency. Iron Man demonstrates how the dominant tendency can be shifted to doing good in the world while also serving the self-interest of the individual. The main factor to consider is that Iron Man continuously relies on and further advances his commitment and involvement with technology.

As we continue moving forward in the advancement of technology, we must also consider how that can shape or alter our approach to patriotism. Although I did not focus on artificial intelligence for this thesis, is it a common theme throughout the Marvel Avengers film series, and specifically in Avengers: Age of Ultron (2015). The incorporation of patriotism and artificial intelligence, although fictional, is another reason why the Avengers film series is in a unique position to help us contemplate patriotism in a different way. For example, patriotism for Captain America requires us to think critically about how we can and must uphold American ideals. His reaction to Ultron, as a representation of artificial intelligence, can be interpreted as a reflection of his fear or lack of trust in artificial intelligence to replace the human qualities necessary for Lincolnian patriotism. Captain America and Iron Man, though fictional, also have the ability to inspire generations and help scholars and non-scholars consider how American patriotism can manifest.

Captain America and Iron Man, although fictional, are representations of American patriotism that have manifested in one of the biggest blockbusters in film history. The Marvel

Cinematic Universe might not be the first film series that comes to mind when we consider American patriotism in film, yet it nonetheless provides us with two complex characters that can help us think critically about American patriotism in different ways. Two characters that, throughout the span of over a decade, provide the reader with various opportunities and insights into their approach to American patriotism. Patriotic themes within the film industry are typically manifested in war films such as Pearl Harbor (2001), Saving Private Ryan (1998), and Dunkirk (2017). The Marvel Avengers film series, through Captain America and Iron Man, also demonstrates how American patriotism can manifest and should thus be considered as a film which helps us think about American patriotism in ways that might not have been considered before.



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