
FILM REVIEW

Ethical Decision Making and the Avengers: Lessons from the Screen to the Classroom

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Captain America: Civil War takes place in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, where enhanced individuals battle to protect the world. In *Civil War*, a conflict divides the members of the Avengers, a group of superheroes who each have enhanced skills or abilities through specialized training; technological modifications; genetic enhancements; and/or biological experiments. The movie includes characters such as Tony Stark/Iron Man; Steve Rogers/Captain America; Bruce Banner/Hulk; Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow; Wanda Maximoff/Scarlet Witch; Thor; Clint Barton/Hawkeye; Sam Wilson/Falcon; James Rhodes/War Machine and others introduced later. Previously they worked individually to fight for the public good, but under the financial sponsorship of Stark and the leadership of Rogers, they have banded together as a private organization: The Avengers.

Enhanced individuals have been an issue of contention throughout the Marvel Universe. While some citizens see superhumans as protectors who provide a safety net, others see the superhumans as potentially harmful. As Secretary Thaddeus Ross states, “while a great many people see [The Avengers] as heroes, there are some who prefer the word *vigilante*” (Russo & Russo, 2016). Ross prefers the descriptor “dangerous,” as the Avengers are a “group of U.S. based enhanced individuals who routinely ignore sovereign borders to inflict their will on whoever they choose and seem unconcerned about what they leave behind” (Russo & Russo, 2016). However, the Avengers address government failure by protecting Earth when government cannot. The world-ending events occurring are out of the scope of government resources, and the private Avengers organization steps in to fill this protector role, essentially becoming government contractors. In this way, the Avengers are public administrators who can demonstrate the complexity of decision-making processes in the sector.

Civil War follows the group after the events in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, in which the Avengers defeated a sentient AI of their own making, Ultron, and, in the process, destroyed the city of Sokovia. *Civil War* begins with the Avengers in Lagos trying to stop the theft of a biochemical weapon. During the mission, Scarlet Witch inadvertently destroys an occupied

building, resulting in civilian casualties. In reaction to this and other Avenger damages, the UN proposed the Sokovia Accords, a treaty that calls for the regulation of the Avengers and limits their decision-making authority. Rogers is opposed to the Accords, and does not sign; he is called away to the funeral of past love Peggy Carter before further discussion with the group. During the funeral, Carter is eulogized with one of her quotes: “Compromise when you can, but where you can’t don’t. Even if everyone is telling you that something wrong is right. Even if the whole world is telling you move, it is your duty to plant yourself like a tree, look them in the eye and say ‘No, you move’” (Russo & Russo, 2016). These words resonate with Rogers, who feels forced to compromise with the Accords.

Meanwhile, government officials arrive at the Vienna Convention to ratify the Sokovia Accords. An attack at the convention leaves 70 wounded and 12 dead, including King T’Chaka, the ruler of Wakanda, who is survived by his son, T’Challa, later revealed to be the Black Panther (Russo & Russo, 2016). There is evidence that Bucky Barnes/Winter Soldier is behind the attack, and the Avengers who signed the Sokovia Accords are tasked with arresting him. Rogers, Barnes’ best friend, decides to help him, violates the Accords, and is branded a criminal. The remainder of the movie follows opposing factions of the Avengers team working to prove Barnes’ innocence (Rogers’ team) or have him arrested (Stark’s team).

Viewed through a public administration lens, *Civil War* examines threats to an organization through government regulation, external private threats, and internal conflicts. The latter is the focus of this review. World leaders have called for the regulation of the group through the Sokovia Accords. Avengers who do not sign the Accords must retire; thus, government regulation can end the organization. Colonel Helmut Zemo demonstrates the external threat. He is a Sokovian soldier whose family was killed in the destruction of Sokovia during the events of *Avengers: Age of Ultron* and devised a plan to tear the Avengers apart internally. Zemo states, “An empire toppled by its enemies can rise again but one that crumbles from within, that’s dead forever” (Russo & Russo, 2016). Zemo uses information about Barnes to cause an irreparable rift between Stark and Rogers. Unbeknownst to Zemo is that the Avengers are already divided because of the Sokovia Accords, an internal conflict.

The Sokovia Accords were created to regulate the Avengers and prevent more destruction. However, not all Avengers were consulted in the drafting of the policy, and there are different polar views on the Accords. The top-down approach from government (and Stark) did not allow for group input. If the group had been consulted in the policy formation, a bottom-up approach could have been used to reach a more acceptable agreement, as demonstrated when Rogers asked Stark about the potential for input from the Avengers in key decisions if the Accords were in place. Stark is the greatest supporter of the Accords, due to his own guilt over the death and destruction the actions of the Avengers have caused. On the other hand, Rogers is the greatest opponent of the Accords. He believes that the group is accomplishing the mission of making the world safer despite the costs, and does not believe the group should give up decision-making power, as they will be forced to comply with orders from others. This lack of control is similar to the lack of control that Barnes has when activated as the Winter Soldier and Rogers sees the regulation of the Avengers in the same light. By giving up control, they will have to follow orders with which they may or may not agree as a group. This internal dispute boils down to whether the Avengers should be government-regulated or continue self-governing as a private organization.

The ethical dilemma the group faces is whether to implement government policy as is (regulation), despite reservations, or if they should act against government for what they believe (self-governing). This dilemma highlights the disconnect from the role of the public administrator as neutral implementer of policy and the public administrator as a citizen with their own values; beliefs; system of morality; attitudes; cultures; and personal experiences that have shaped their lives and their personal perspectives (Abel, 2009; Wright, 2015). Public administrators align their responsibility as public servants with their moral attitudes (Shand & Howell, 2015), which cannot be mandated by government. Moreover, public administrators' beliefs can contradict the expectations of their public servant role—the policies that they must implement—and may differ from the beliefs of people whom they serve.

Current real-world issues show the difficult decisions faced by public administrators. [The “zero-tolerance policy” of the Trump Administration (<https://www.justice.gov/opa/speech/attorney-general-sessions-delivers-remarks-discussing-immigration-enforcement-actions>; <https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/956841/download>), followed by the introduction of so-called Child Separation Act (<https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/6136>), would remove children from their families at the border]. There are many protests about this, some recognizing it as a form of child abuse and a violation of human rights. However, border patrol employees are expected to perform their duties and uphold the law despite their beliefs. Conversely, Kim Davis, a Rowan County, Kentucky county clerk, refused to issue marriage certificates to gay couples after same-sex marriage was legalized, by claiming that she was under the authority of God. She was penalized for this disobedience, and was not reelected in the subsequent election, showing lack of public support for her decision. For her, her religious and moral beliefs overrode a policy created to increase equality and social justice. Both sides believed that they addressed the public good by their actions, but could not be persuaded by the others' belief. This impasse causes friction in government delivery of public services and tensions between government and its citizens.

Civil War embodies the tension between unquestioningly implementing policy and standing up for personal beliefs. Captain America's loyalty does not lie with government; instead, he puts his faith in the people. For him, democracy is not following an elected group but having faith that individuals can come together to make the right decisions for the public good. Democracy is about the people and not the institutions. In contrast, billionaire private-sector mogul, Tony Stark, seeks regulation, as he no longer believes that he can make correct decisions, due to the destruction created by the group's past actions. He has lost faith in himself, and, therefore, in the people.

Public administrators are often faced with comparable ethical decisions; decisions that seem to have no capacity for consensus building, such as the Avengers' decision on the Accords and arresting Barnes. Some believe that public administrators must look beyond their own self-interest or interests of any single person; agency; or constituency, and focus on the public interest and greater public good (Wright, Hassan, & Park, 2016). This group would side with Stark in regulating the Avengers and arresting Barnes. Conversely, ethical decision making in public administration involves subjective decisions that cannot be determined by a set of predetermined, uncompromising rules. Instead, public administrators must be trained to make ethical decisions (Abel, 2009; Dubnick, 2000). As Dubnick (2000) explains: “ethical thinking is not the search for universal rules or strategies for applying

them. Instead, it involves our ability to creatively extend our imaginative sense of morality to situations in which existing rules do not easily apply” (p. 151). This is what Rogers seeks in his pursuit of truth for Barnes.

Civil War highlights the difficulty in decision making when making ethical choices that impact the public good. Good intentions can often lead to disastrous consequences as demonstrated in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, with the failed attempt at creating Ultron as a peacekeeping program. Good intentions, however, can be tempered with trained public administrators, who have the tools to make ethical decisions. Institutions of higher education can train and prepare future public administrators by focusing on ethical decision making and giving students tools to address tough situations. Unfortunately, there has been a decreased focus on the study of ethics and morality in public administration (Menzel, 1997), in which ethics classes are offered but not required for graduation (Menzel, 1999). However, there is need for educational systems to develop the values of future public servants for them to act ethically, morally, and legally (Abel, 2009; Menzel, 1999). Students need to have the capability to have empathy and willingness to hear other perspectives on an issue (Spicer, 2015). In this highly polarized time, when political affiliation divides the country instead of bringing citizens together, public administrators need to learn to make responsible decisions for the public good. These decisions may go against government policy, as in cases of whistleblowers or civil disobedience, but public administrators must be ready and prepared to make these difficult ethical decisions.

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