

“Tony Stark’s War”:

Iron Man and Youth Political Expression from 1962 to 1975

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Introduction

“To critically examine the history of comic books is to better understand the changing world of young people, as well as the historical forces intersecting to change it.”

-Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation*¹

In 1962, inside a laboratory nestled within a closely guarded US defence perimeter cut from the dense forests of South Vietnam, the millionaire, scientist, and military-industrialist Tony Stark gives a weapons demonstration to a US army general. Worried that Stark had overstated the efficacy of his transistor-powered weapons, the general groans, “Come on, Stark, that just isn’t possible!” Stark, flashing a canny smile, triggers an explosion that cracks the door of a safe clean in half; turning to the now bewildered man, he teases, “Now do you believe that the transistors I’ve invented are capable of solving your problem in Vietnam?”² Young, handsome, and the purveyor of US industrial might, Stark seems to promise certain victory in the United States’ Cold War effort. Over a decade later, in 1975, Stark—this time under the guise of his superhero persona, Iron Man—returns to Vietnam on a mission to deliver armaments to a US troop unit. In the process, he bears witness to the deaths of a village of Vietnamese civilians perpetrated by weaponry of his own design. Struck with grief and wandering amid the ruins of the village, “I did it!” he wails. “You hear that, God or Satan or whoever in Hell is listening!” His final action is to bury the bodies in a mass grave, the epitaph atop simply reading “WHY?”³

Tony Stark’s transformation from confident Cold Warrior to guilt-ridden Avenger did not take place in isolation. Documented in the pages of Marvel Comics’ *Tales of Suspense*

¹ Bradford W Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore (Md.) ; London: Johns Hopkins University Press , Cop, 2003): 1.

² Stan Lee, Larry Lieber, and Don Heck, “Iron Man Is Born!,” in *Tales of Suspense* #39 (Marvel Comics, 1962); 3.

³ Bill Mantlo, *Iron Man* #78 (Marvel Comics, 1975). While the story is set as a flashback in 1967, the comic itself was published in 1975.

and, later, *The Invincible Iron Man*, from his debut in 1962 through the 1970s, the vision of the United States embodied by the character of Iron Man altered and evolved through a process of dialogue with the series' young readership. Existing at a crossroads between the youth culture and the politics of the mid-century, Iron Man provided his young readership with an ideological guide to the Cold War that, over the course of two turbulent decades, readers either subverted, maintained, or rejected as a part of their own political expression. As young people became the face of political schism within American society, the character of Iron Man served as a reference point from and against which youth oriented, and sought representation of, their own political identity. By using the Iron Man comics as primary historical sources, this thesis explores the relationship between youth political expression, identity and the superhero comic through the 1960s and 1970s.

Superhero comic books have long suffered an academic neglect born from their reputation as “perennially lowbrow” juvenile entertainment.⁴ While recent years have seen a growth in scholarship interested in exploring the comic book industry itself, as well as an increased interest in examining the comic book as a cultural medium, works that utilize comic books as primary sources remain relatively rare.⁵ Highlighted by historian Matthew J. Costello, there is consensus among comic book historians that superhero comics are “highly responsive to cultural trends” and are able to provide “a unique window into American popular culture.”⁶ This approach acknowledges the value of treating comic books as primary sources, but has struggled to expand beyond an understanding of the superhero comic as a piece of “American mythology” or a “social mirror,” merely serving as “barometers of the

⁴ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, xiv.

⁵ For histories primarily concerning the comic book industry and medium, see Jean-Paul Gabilliet, Bart Beaty, and Nick Nguyen, *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press Of Mississippi, 2013), Gerard Jones, *Men of Tomorrow* (Basic Books, 2004), Paul Douglas Lopes, *Demanding Respect: The Evolution of the American Comic Book* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), Jeremy Dauber, *American Comics: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2022).

⁶ Matthew J. Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis: Comic Books and the Unmasking of Cold War America* (Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd, 2009), 5.

place and time in which they reside.”⁷ This approach does not examine the ways in which readers understood and related to their superheroes, and does not address the role of dialogue between the reader and comic book in the shaping of the comic’s narrative. Likewise, comic books have been perceived by scholars as primarily a cultural entertainment medium in which political messaging is a secondary function; as such, there have been few attempts to investigate comic books as a meaningful part of US political history through the twentieth century.⁸ This thesis seeks to address these gaps in the scholarship by suggesting that the narrative content of superhero comics is, fundamentally, the result of an interplay between young readers, publishers, and occasionally third-party interests that, in turn, allowed the superhero to become a form of political engagement for its readership.⁹

Central to this argument are the ‘Letters to the Editors’ sections. Printed in most major comic books published after 1964, these featured letters written by readers to the editors of the comic. These pages represent invaluable primary sources in the study of youth political culture and its relationship to comic books, as many of the letters are explicitly political. Lending credence to an understanding of superhero comics that foregrounds their political content, the ‘Letters to the Editors’ section provides a forum for its readers to engage in political discourse, as they often wrote in to opine on the politics of a narrative, or to respond to the opinions of other readers. In the case of Marvel Comics, the editorial team cultivated friendly and open political discourse with its readership, and rather admirably

⁷ Jeffrey K Johnson, *Super-History: Comic Book Superheroes and American Society : 1938 to the Present* (McFarland & Company, 2012), 2.

⁸ While not written by professional historians and largely inadmissible for inclusion in this body of research, it would be a mistake not to mention the existence of a large body of amateur comic book histories written by fans of the medium. Despite often lacking in veracity, these histories depict the mythology of the comic book industry, and are labours of love representative of the affection held for comic books by long-time readers. Likewise, because historical interest in comic books is a relatively new phenomenon, much of the primary source information from the medium’s history has only been preserved through the archival efforts of dedicated readers. In many ways, writing an academic history of comic books is only possible because of the community associated with the medium.

⁹ This thesis was largely inspired by Bradford W. Wright’s *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003). Wright’s exploration of the interaction between comic books and youth culture provided much of the impetus for a closer examination of this dynamic through Iron Man. Likewise, the essays collected within Joseph J Darowski’s *The Ages of Iron Man* (McFarland, 2015) provided an excellent guide to the research and development of this thesis.

published and personally responded to letters from across the political spectrum. This practice cultivated affection and reader loyalty for Marvel. The company's commitment to open dialogue allowed their comics to retain ideological diversity in their readership during periods of polarization. As such, in exploring Iron Man's relationship to youth political culture and expression, the diverse opinions of readers featured in the 'Letters to the Editors' pages will be treated as a survey of reader opinion at the time at which the comic was published.

Yet the letters to the editors present methodological challenges. As with the comic book industry more generally in the mid-century, the inner workings of the 'Letters to the Editors' pages are opaque to the historian. The character of the selection process that determined what letters were to be published is somewhat unclear and is subject to change as the editorial team shifts.¹⁰ Likewise, the letters provide limited information regarding the demographics of the writer. As such, the letters used in this thesis are interpreted within a broader political context as to minimize the risk of overstating or understating the prevalence of any one opinion. This thesis avoids making sweeping claims regarding the demographic character of Iron Man's readership, as, with limited exceptions, the data provided by readers' letters does not support doing so.

Through a reading of Iron Man that situates the character's narrative in conversation with the youth culture of the 1960s and 1970s, reader opinion, and broader political developments, this thesis argues that the character of Iron Man assumed a meaningful political significance to young people. Through the war in Vietnam, conscription, the myriad of social and protest movements that populated college campuses in the 1960s and the

¹⁰ Contextual clues do provide a limited means of de-mystifying the 'Letters to the Editors' columns. This research has involved looking at the concurrent letters pages in several of Marvel's other publications for pieces of information from the editors regarding reader sentiment, the publishing process, and changes in editorial approach. It is the opinion of this author that, for the most part, Marvel editorial was sincere in their attempt to represent a large swath of reader opinion in the letters they published, and that trends in readership opinion can be broadly understood as reflected in the published material.

conservative backlash of the 1970s, the period examined by this thesis was one in which politics overwhelmingly centered around matters of youth. Young people shouldered immense political burdens, but prior to reaching the age of voting at twenty-one, had little access to formal political expression. Through the dialogue established between the comic and its young readers in the 'Letters to the Editors' pages, Iron Man was able to serve as a form of indirect representation for his readership, and emerged as a proxy political figure against which young people articulated and oriented their own sense of political identity.

Chapter One: Comic Books and Youth Politics

The connection between American youth and the superhero comic began in the early 1930s with the creation of Superman. Jerry Seigel and Joe Shuster—both high-school students from working-class Jewish immigrant families living in Ohio—had been influenced by the newspaper comics of the period and created Superman not only as an expression of their shared career aspiration of creating comic-strips, but also as a symbol of their concept of a common social good.¹¹ Superman embodied his creators' hopes for the future and reflected the discontent of American youth in the 1930s: he was a “Great Depression social reformer,” a populist agent of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal policies who fought injustice and inequality within an America that had grown disillusioned with the inability of its institutions to ease social and economic hardship.¹² Unlike the often cynical, sardonically cast political commentary of newspaper comics, much of Superman’s commentary came through his aspirational example—the comic satire remained, but was reconfigured within the superhero to more expressly articulate the aspirations of its young readership. The adoption of the comic medium gave young people a means of political expression, and the superhero comic was created in turn.

Superman, and the idea of the superhero more broadly as it multiplied across the comic book industry, spoke to the imaginations, aspirations, and discontents of American youth. The general sense of lawlessness and helplessness that defined the Great Depression era, and more broadly the anxieties of an industrialized society, were confronted and corrected within the pages of Superman through the title character’s humanity, individual initiative, and vigilante-style justice.¹³ In this sense, Superman and the genre he launched allowed young people a political voice within a system that excluded them from formal

¹¹ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 1.

¹² Jeffrey K Johnson, *Super-History: Comic Book Superheroes and American Society: 1938 to the Present* (McFarland & Company, 2012): 7.

¹³ Johnson, *Super-History*, 13.

political expression. Unable to cast their vote at the ballot box, young Americans expressed their aspirations and anxieties through the money they spent on comic books at newspaper stands. The success of Superman established the template for the superhero comic as inherently political: if heroes are to be aspirational and appeal to the youth market, they must define themselves against some sort of present woe perceived by youth. In turn, through the superhero comic, the identity of American adolescence was both politicized and defined as a consumer market.

The Second World War brought change to the comic book industry. Already by 1940, the popularity of the superhero had begun to generate uncertainty among institutionalists who identified the superhero as an agent of subversion whose vigilante-style justice threatened to undermine respect for social authorities. Some argued that comics, with their “cheap political propaganda” and “Superman heroics,” represented a “national disgrace”—and comic book publishers were, in turn, found to be “guilty of a cultural slaughter of the innocents.”¹⁴ Though not all critics chose their words so strongly, the fact that the political voice of youth, as expressed within Great Depression-era superhero comics, was explicitly reformist and frequently discordant with the traditional values of their parents meant that their broad embrace by young people was cause for some concern among parents and professionals.¹⁵ In an article published to *The Journal of Experimental Education* in 1940, educational scholar Paul Witty commented on the gap opening between the identity of youth and their parents over the comic book. Witty recounted the efforts of parent-teacher associations to ‘taboo’ the sale of comic books, to which the children promptly responded with the development of their

¹⁴ Sterling North, “A National Disgrace and a Challenge to American Patents,” *Childhood Education* 17, no. 2 (January 1, 1940): 56.

¹⁵ Paul Douglas Lopes, *Demanding Respect : The Evolution of the American Comic Book* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009): 29.

own rental libraries.¹⁶ In this small way, comic books already had the makings of an emergent youth counterculture.

The social conditions created by the Second World War effectively halted criticism of comic books until the postwar, as the medium became a venue for wartime propaganda. As early as 1939, the US Congress began to ask comic book publishers to promote patriotic values to the American people, and comic book publishers, who were eager to burnish their image in the eyes of the parents who financed their readership, were happy to oblige.¹⁷ Publishers began to push the “super-patriot” through characters such as Captain America and Uncle Sam who were less New Deal reformers and more symbolic of a collective American moral identity, and appointed editorial boards to ensure their comics embodied “wholesome” moral standards as an appeal to parents.¹⁸ Despite the changing dynamics of the superhero comic as an expression of a youth political identity, American youth, for their part, found themselves overwhelmingly aligned with this new sort of hero. The comic book industry grew exponentially during the war, with 80% of American youth between the ages of 6 and 17 reading comics.¹⁹ For youth, the super-patriot was not only a resonant response to injustices abroad, but this sort of hero also acted as a psychological bulwark against an increasingly uncertain and threatening geopolitical context.²⁰ Recasting the greedy, corrupt businessman that had played the villain within the comics of the 1930s as the greedy, un-American businessman who opportunistically helped finance the Nazis made sense to all involved—and for the moment, the concerns and interests of youth, comic book publishers, the government, and parents aligned.²¹

¹⁶ Paul Witty, “Children’s Interest in Reading the Comics,” *The Journal of Experimental Education* 10, no. 2 (December 1941): 100.

¹⁷ Johnson, *Super-History*, 36.

¹⁸ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 34.

¹⁹ Mia Sostaric, “The American Wartime Propaganda during World War II: How Comic Books Sold the War,” *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 38, no. 1 (2019): 20.

²⁰ Gerard Jones, *Men of Tomorrow* (Basic Books, 2004): 232.

²¹ Scott, *Comics and Conflict*, 11.

The relationship of the superhero comic to the political identity of youth took on additional complexities during this period, as separate interest groups began to recognize the superhero as not just a form of adolescent political expression but a medium that was able to influence adolescent political values in turn. As historian Bradford W. Wright observes, many comic book creators in the early 1940s were not only young and liberal, but Jewish. The creators of Captain America, Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, belonged to this group, and producing a superhero that depicted the United States as “a repository of virtue and morality charged with extending justice and freedom to the oppressed” was not only congruent with mandates from the American government and the publishing companies, it was their taking of a political stand.²² Captain America’s first appearance within *Captain America Comics #1* preceded American involvement in the war by nearly a year and was released at a time when public sentiment toward possible involvement in the war was deeply divided. Yet its cover art depicted the superhero, clad in American iconography, punching Adolf Hitler squarely in the jaw.²³ Captain America’s aspirational embodiment of democratic values, liberalism, and humanism as part of a collective American identity helped make his creators’ case for intervention against Nazism in Europe. When Captain America took his stand against injustice abroad, he critiqued isolationism at home.²⁴ Of the comic book industry during the Lend-Lease period, Stan Lee aptly noted, “we were fighting Hitler before our government was fighting Hitler”—and Lee and his fellow writers did so with remarkable efficacy.²⁵

²² Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 35.

²³ Mike Milford, “Veiled Intervention: Anti-Semitism, Allegory, and Captain America,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 20, no. 4 (2017): 611-612.

²⁴ Sostaric, “American Wartime Propaganda”, 23.

²⁵ Milford, “Veiled Intervention”, 162.



Figure 1.0. *Captain America* socks it to Adolf Hitler on the cover of *Captain America* #1.

The Second World War demonstrated the exceptional sway that the superhero comic held with youth, and by 1942, the American government began to seek more explicit collaboration with comic book publishers. Government officials began to appear in the pages of *Captain America* comics: Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau Jr. asked children to support the war effort by purchasing war stamps, and the Commanding General of the United States Air Force implored pre-military age children to aid their country by remaining in school and training to be doctors, engineers, or scientists.²⁶ Fighting the war demanded a reorganization of American society, and the influence of comic books proved effective in bringing young people onside. It was during this period that youth as a consumer market for comic books, youth as a politicized identity, and youth as essential to government initiative first wholly converged. The conditions of the Second World War allowed for a fragile

²⁶ Sostaric, "American Wartime Propaganda", 26-27.

unanimity of interest and opinion between comic book creators, publishers, government initiative, and youth. The growth in the comic book industry during wartime and the exceptional performance of superheroes in aiding the war effort did, however, demonstrate the efficacy of superhero comics in both articulating and shaping the political identity of youth. Likewise, the conscious politicization of youth through comic books represented a tacit acknowledgement of youth's importance as a constituency.

In November of 1945, an article published in the US Army newspaper *Yank* took a retrospective look at the comic book industry—whose readership, according to the article, had grown by 1945 to represent 95% of all boys and 91% of all girls between the ages of six and eleven—and asked if comics could maintain their relevance in a new, postwar world in which “truth is beating the pants off fiction.”²⁷ The article's question proved relevant: almost immediately following the end of the Second World War, public interest in the superhero waned dramatically. By the end of 1946, superhero comic sales had dropped to a mere two-thirds of their wartime peak, and in 1949, the previously popular *Captain America Comics* ceased publication altogether.²⁸ The decline of the superhero in the immediate postwar period was an early indication of a greater shift in the American social context. Not only did the superhero struggle to identify relevant social commentary in an era that, on its surface, embodied the liberal vision that they had fought for, a rightward shift in public mood dampened the “crusading spirit” that had animated the superheroes of the 1930s and early 1940s and left the characters feeling “directionless and even irrelevant.”²⁹

The shift away from the superhero as a unique form of adolescent political expression coincided with dwindling comic book sales. Desperate to prevent an industry-wide recession, publishers turned from the superhero genre and began publishing more “adult” genres such as

²⁷ Sanderson Vanderbilt, “The Comics,” *Yank*, November 23, 1945: 8.

²⁸ Jones, *Men of Tomorrow*, 234 ; J Richard Stevens, *Captain America, Masculinity, and Violence: The Evolution of a National Icon* (Syracuse University Press, 2018): 40.

²⁹ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 59.

crime, romance, and horror.³⁰ The introduction of new genres successfully buoyed the industry's finances, but properly touched off a moral panic surrounding the medium that had been brewing since the late 1930s.³¹ These new genres struck at the currents of insecurity and fragility that underlay the confidence of postwar society; their themes of crime, horror, and desire were subversive and existed outside of the socially protective, "rigid and conformist" culture of the late 1940s and early 1950s.³² In particular, the popularity of crime comics coincided with growing fears regarding juvenile delinquency. Rates of juvenile delinquency had spiked during the period from 1941 to 1945, and appeared to coincide with the rise of a mass youth culture synonymous with comic books.³³ In the absence of a unifying enemy, the wartime consensus that had quelled social fears surrounding the comic book quickly dissolved, and by 1947, comic books had again become a focal point for adult anxieties surrounding youth identity.

In September of 1947, the death of twelve-year-old Billy Becker by hanging was blamed on comic books by his mother in an article published in the *New York Times*. Mrs. Becker suggested that her son's death had been the result of an attempt to re-enact a scene from one of his comics, and stated that while she had "burned every one [she] found", "Billy always found ways of hiding them."³⁴ The incident began something of a media trend. Exemplifying the threat of a mass youth identity, all manner of grisly affairs concerning youth were attributed to the influence of comic books. Incidents such as the murder of an elderly man by two school-aged boys—who were, supposedly, reenacting the plot of a comic book—in 1948 received massive media attention, and were headlined by statements that implored the reader to "Blame Comic Books as Boys 11, 13, Charged With Murder."³⁵

³⁰ Jean-Paul Gabilliet, Bart Beaty, and Nick Nguyen, *Of Comics and Men : A Cultural History of American Comic Books* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press Of Mississippi, 2013): 42.

³¹ Gabilliet, Beaty, Nguyen, *Of Comics and Men*, 42.

³² Johnson, *Super-History*, 78.

³³ Jeremy Dauber, *American Comics: A History* (New York, Ny: W. W. Norton & Company, 2022); 68.

³⁴ Unknown, "Comics' Blamed in Death," *New York Times*, September 15, 1947.

³⁵ Unknown, "Blame Comic Books as Boys 11, 13, Charged with Murder," *The Toronto Star*, November 23, 1948.

Adding to the growing hysteria, social commentators and critics again began to decry the influence of comic books on children; in his 1948 “The Case Against Comics,” author John Mason Brown opined that comic books were “the marijuana of the nursery... the horror of the house; the curse of the kids; and a threat to the future.”³⁶ Social scientists began to weigh-in on the comic book problem as well. Most notably, the works of psychiatrist Fredrick Wertham—whose anti-comic activism dated back to the early 1940s—appeared to lend scientific validation to growing perceptions of the comic book as a corrosive influence upon American youth. A symposium of psychologists led by Wertham associated the influence of comic books upon adolescent political identity with the medium’s malignant character—warning that all comic books contained the trappings of Nazism, and that Superman encouraged subversion by glorifying the “‘right’ of the individual to take...law into his own hands.”³⁷

If comic books were agents of moral corrosion, then, amid a Cold War ethos fearful of domestic destabilization and eager to safeguard the family-unit, there could be no overreaction to their influence. In the absence of federal legislation, municipalities began to crack down on comic books. In April of 1948, under orders from police commissioner Harry S. Toy, the city of Detroit banned all comics containing “objectionable material” from newstands, and over fifty municipalities followed suit.³⁸ It is notable that municipal bannings of comic books coincided with other high-profile efforts towards political censorship, as, that same year, the liberal magazine *The Nation* was banned from New York public school libraries.³⁹ Individuals also involved themselves in the crusade against comic books. In the small town of Spencer, West Virginia, the Parent Teacher Association at Spencer Elementary School incited a student-led effort to collect, condemn, and stage a ceremonial burning of

³⁶ John Mason Brown and Al Capp, “The Case against Comics,” *The Saturday Review*, March 1948; 30-31.

³⁷ Frederick Wertham, et Al “Proceedings of the Association for the Advancement of Psychotherapy: The Psychopathology of Comic Books,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 2, no. 3 (1948): 475.

³⁸ Dauber, *American Comics*, 69.

³⁹ David K. Berninghausen, “The Case of the Nation,” *The American Scholar* 19, no. 1 (1949): 44

comic books.⁴⁰ The incident was shocking, but not unique: across the United States, school officials led their students in protests against the malignant influence of comic books, and series such as *Superman*, *Batman*, and *Wonder Woman* found themselves frequent targets.⁴¹ The movement against comic books was, in effect, an attempt at “cultural containment” that sought to protect the homogeneity and stability of American culture against a younger generation afflicted with, and emboldened by, a form of mass media capable of both shaping and expressing their political identity.⁴² As historian David Hadju notes, the efforts to contain the influence of comic books were informed not only by fears “of what comic book readers might become, but of what they already were—that is, a generation of people developing their own interests and tastes, along with a determination to indulge them.”⁴³

Ironically, the attempts to control youth identity forced it into greater articulation. In response to an anti-comic article by Fredrick Wertham in *The Saturday Review of Literature*, fourteen-year-old David P. Wigransky authored a critical rejoinder. Wigransky’s letter, published in *The Saturday Review*, insisted not only that youth were more sophisticated in their opinions than adults gave them credit for but openly rebelled against the authority of an adult-driven culture: “the kids know what they want... It is time that society woke up to the fact that children are human beings with opinions of their own, instead of brainless robots to be ordered hither and yon without even so much as asking them their ideas about anything.”⁴⁴ The sustained financial prosperity of the comic book industry in spite of the anti-comic movement was itself testimony to Wigransky’s argument—young people voted with their wallets, and they did so against the wishes of the dominant culture. The anti-comic fervour of the late 1940s betrayed not only a social fear of a distinct youth identity, but the lines of an emergent generational divide—both of which centered, in part, on the comic book.

⁴⁰ Hajdu, *The Ten Cent Plague*, 91.

⁴¹ Hajdu, *The Ten Cent Plague*, 91.

⁴² Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 87-88.

⁴³ Hajdu, *The Ten Cent Plague*, 86.

⁴⁴ David P. Wigransky, “Letter to the Editor,” *The Saturday Review*, July 24, 1948; 20.

Unlike the responses to Wigransky's letter—which were authored by adults so skeptical that such an eloquent young man could be a comic book reader that *The Saturday Reviewer* investigated the authenticity of the letter—the comic books of the early 1950s responded to youth demands for serious media with a recognition of the Cold War.⁴⁵ One of the few remaining superhero series, the July 1950 issue of *Captain Marvel Adventures* featured Captain Marvel foiling the villainous Dr. Sivana's plot to replace the 'American Century' with the 'Sivana Century.' The end of the comic depicted a fictionalized Harry Truman appearing before the audience and imploring young readers to take seriously “the fate of America, of democracy, and of freedom,” as the future of the nation now rest in their hands.⁴⁶ Like they had done during the Second World War, comic books attempted to invest young readers in foreign policy agendas through a conscious politicization of youth culture. Unbeknownst to the publishing companies, however, youth culture had undergone a quiet metamorphosis since 1945. In 1953, Captain America returned as “Captain America... Commie Smasher,” only to be cancelled after three issues.⁴⁷ Likewise, in a 1954 survey of comic series favoured by youth, only one superhero series appeared among the titles named by children from second to sixth grade, while high-school students rejected the superhero altogether.⁴⁸

The failure of the superhero to resonate with youth during the early Cold War had to do with the nature of the conflict itself. Both the illusive, almost spectral nature of the communist threat and the reality of warfare in an atomic world made the intervention of the superhero appear unrealistic and ineffective.⁴⁹ The youth who had read the superhero comics of the Second World War now broadly rejected the rosy optimism with which superheroes

⁴⁵ Hajdu, *The Ten Cent Plague*, 88.

⁴⁶ Brian Rouleau, *Empire's Nursery* (NYU Press, 2021); 188.

⁴⁷ Johnson, *Super-History*, 57.

⁴⁸ Paul A. Witty and Robert A. Sizemore, “Reading the Comics: A Summary of Studies and an Evaluation I,” *Elementary English* 31, no. 8 (December 1954): 505.

⁴⁹ Johnson, *Super-History*, 57.

sought to treat the current conflict, and turned instead to more realistic—and critical—appraisals. In the period from 1950 to 1954, Korean War comics provided the critical commentary no longer found in the superhero story. The comics were violent and depicted American soldiers facing their own neurosis amid mountainous, bleak terrain where communist enemies lay in wait to exploit their weaknesses.⁵⁰ While distinctly anticommunist, the popularity of series such as *Battlefield* displayed an ambivalence toward American foreign policy aims as well as a discontent with domestic culture.⁵¹ War comics were complemented by the continued relevance of the culturally subversive crime, romance, and horror comics—all of which ranked within the top five genres favoured by youth, undoubtedly due, in part, to the horror such genres evoked from parents.⁵² The viability of a postwar cultural narrative that claimed US victory in perpetuity seemed, by the early 1950s, increasingly uncertain; while such uncertainty frightened adults, its ability to capture the imagination of youth was well reflected within their comic books.⁵³ Comic books allowed young people to shape the national conversation surrounding foreign policy; their financial support uplifted salient narratives, and buried those that failed to resonate. Despite their changing dynamics, comic books remained an avenue for young voices in a politically prescriptive, adult-led culture.

The developments of the early 1950s boded ill for the comic book industry. Calls for censorship continued to mount and were emboldened by the reemergence of critical political commentary in comic books amid domestic paranoia. The stalemate in Korea emphasized fears regarding the impact of comic books on American youth: did a generation influenced by an ‘outside’ mass culture lack the moral strength to fight the Cold War? Were comic books brainwashing youth into complacency—or worse, delinquency—while the country fought an

⁵⁰ William W Savage, *Comic Books and America, 1945-1954* (Norman; London, 1990); 53-54.

⁵¹ Hank Chapman, “A Waste of Time!,” in *Battlefield #1* (Atlas Comics, 1952).

⁵² Witty, Sizemore, “Reading the Comics”, 506.

⁵³ Tom Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture : Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation* (Amherst: University Of Massachusetts Press, 2007); 6.

existential battle against aggressive global communism?⁵⁴ Frederick Wertham seemed to think so. In 1954, Wertham published the most influential work of the anti-comic movement in *Seduction of the Innocent*. Ostensibly a work of psychiatry, the book cited the influence of comic books as the explanation for the delinquent and morally unsatisfactory nature of American youth.⁵⁵ It not only accused comic book publishers of promoting sexual immorality to children—as Batman stories were “psychologically homosexual” and Wonder Woman was a “frightening figure for boys,” and an “undesirable ideal for girls”—but argued that the mere concept of the superhero groomed children for authoritarian influence.⁵⁶ To Wertham, the emergent, rebellious cultural voice of youth was, in sum, the fault of the comic book: “How can they respect the hard-working mother, father or teacher who is so pedestrian, trying to teach common rules of conduct...Psychologically Superman undermines the authority and the dignity of the ordinary man and woman in the minds of children.”⁵⁷

To all concerned with the character of the youth in the early 1950s, *Seduction of the Innocent* had something to offer—including to Senator Estes Kefauver’s Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, which once again held hearings to investigate the comic book industry’s connection to adolescent crime.⁵⁸ While Kefauver had conducted a similar investigation into the comic book industry in 1950 through his Special Committee to Investigate Crime in Interstate Commerce, the investigation had found little evidence to

⁵⁴ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 157.

⁵⁵ Much has been written regarding the veracity of *Seduction of the Innocent*. It has been generally accepted that *Seduction* was the product of poor psychiatry and its conclusions cannot be considered to be evidence based, however, scholarly understandings of the intent with which Wertham published the work have been subject to recent reinterpretation. For an orthodox view of *Seduction*, see Carol L. Tilley’s “Seducing the Innocent: Fredric Wertham and the Falsifications That Helped Condemn Comics,” *Information & Culture* 47, no. 4 (November 2012): 383–413. For revisionist scholarship, see Bart Beaty’s *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture* (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2005) and Dennis Doyle’s “‘We Didn’t Know You Were a Negro’: Fredric Wertham and the Ironies of Race, Comic Books, and Juvenile Delinquency in the 1950s,” *Journal of Social History* 52, no. 1 (April 12, 2017): 153–79. It is also notable that the mythology of the comic book medium as perpetuated by fans, industry insiders, and amateur historians has almost unanimously depicted Wertham as a comically villainous figure, and that his image in such a context warrants further scholarship.

⁵⁶ Frederick Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (London: Museum Press, 1954); 186, 34.

⁵⁷ Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, 98.

⁵⁸ Johnson, *Super-History*, 81.

indict comic books as the cause of juvenile delinquency.⁵⁹ By 1954, however, the momentum given to the anti-comic movement by the paranoid political culture of the early Cold War prescribed an investigation that was, in its essence, a show trial of the comic book industry.⁶⁰ The televised hearings heard testimony from several professionals regarding the comic book's ability to influence children toward indecency—the most notable of which being Wertham himself, who, in his response to Kefauver's likening of comic books to the morally corrosive Nazism, claimed that "Hitler was a beginner compared to the comic book industry."⁶¹ In the same New York courthouse where the trials of alleged Communist leaders and subversives had taken place, industry insiders such as William M. Gaines of EC Comics gave ineffective, if not detrimental, testimony to a panel of Senators already convinced of the industry's guilt.⁶² The charges levied against comic books during the hearings were numerous, and indicted the medium as responsible for a failing culture: comic books were "made to order" propaganda agencies for Communist cells, weakened youth respect for authority, and manufactured adolescents prone to adventurousness and violence.⁶³ The hearings concluded alongside the Army-McCarthy hearings in June of 1954; in closing, Senator Robert C. Hendrickson stated: "not even the Communist conspiracy could devise a more effective way to demoralize, disrupt, confuse, and destroy our future citizens than apathy on the part of adult Americans to the scourge known as juvenile delinquency."⁶⁴

Because US courts were largely unwilling to censor media themselves—in 1948, amid the first wave of anti-comic panic, the Supreme Court had found a piece of New York legislation banning the publication of crime comics to be unconstitutional—the Senate

⁵⁹ Hajdu, *The Ten Cent Plague*, 131.

⁶⁰ David Park, "The Kefauver Comic Book Hearings as Show Trial: Decency, Authority, and the Dominated Expert," *Cultural Studies* 16, no. 2 (March 2002): 261.

⁶¹ US Congress. Senate. Committee of the Judiciary of the United States Senate. *Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency*. 109th Congress., 2nd Session. April 21, 22, and June 4, 1954; 95.

⁶² Ronald D. Cohen, "The Delinquents: Censorship and Youth Culture in Recent U. S. History," *History of Education Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (1997): 259.

⁶³ US Congress, *Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency*, 60, 70.

⁶⁴ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 172.

recommended no official action as a result of the hearings.⁶⁵ Practically, however, the investigation created conditions in which there was no need for legislation; the widely publicized hearings constituted a PR disaster for the comic book industry and, facing boycotts from retailers as well as consumers, the most prominent publishers banded together to found the Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA) in September of 1954.⁶⁶ In hopes of staving off government censorship that publishers feared would result from continued scrutiny, the CMAA published a self-regulatory code for the comic book industry largely based on the film industry's Motion Picture Production Code from 1930 that would govern "the industry in both editorial and advising content."⁶⁷ The code was to be enforced by the Comics Code Authority (CCA) to whom comics would be submitted for review and, if up-to code, would be permitted a CCA stamp that indicated the comic was appropriate to be sold at newsstands.⁶⁸ The most restrictive self-regulatory initiative of its kind in the whole of the American context, the code pointedly responded to the charges levied against the industry during the hearing by enforcing "respect for parents, the moral code, and honourable behaviour" and preventing any depiction of "Government officials" that could "create disrespect for established authority."⁶⁹

The code, and the panic that had preceded it, were catastrophic for the comic book industry. Over the summer of 1954, fifteen of the forty-two comic book publishers went bankrupt, and the number of yearly releases from surviving companies steadily declined through the remainder of the decade.⁷⁰ Under the CMAA's regulatory influence, the comic book narratives that had facilitated the political expression of American youth were necessarily made into juvenile, superficial shadows of their former selves, if they were not

⁶⁵ Johnson, *Super-History*, 80.

⁶⁶ Gabilliet, Beaty, Nguyen, *Of Comics and Men*, 50.

⁶⁷ Williams, *The US Graphic Novel*, 56.

⁶⁸ Williams, *The US Graphic Novel*, 56.

⁶⁹ "The Comics Code of 1954," Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, October 26, 1954, <https://cblddf.org/the-comics-code-of-1954/>.

⁷⁰ Gabilliet, Beaty, Nguyen, *Of Comics and Men*, 52-57.

cancelled altogether. Though the comic books of the mid-1950s lost their audience to television, film, and music—all of which had begun to cater to the rebellious youth market that comic books could no longer represent—the influence of the code set the stage for the revival of the superhero in the early 1960s.

Chapter Two: The Marvel Age of Comics

For both the comic book industry and the United States as a whole, the early 1960s were a time of change. The election of John F. Kennedy emphasized youth as a defining quality of leadership at a time in which the stakes of the Cold War were escalating, and the opening of the “New Frontier” embodied the abstract Cold War ideals of democracy, progress, and freedom within imaginative initiatives such as America’s commitment to the space race and the creation of the Peace Corps.⁷¹ For Marvel Comics, one of the many publishers that had fallen on hard times in the mid-1950s, the optimism and anxieties that defined the climate of the early decade offered an opportunity for revitalization. In the early 1960s, Marvel Comics introduced a new sort of superhero. Unlike the superheroes familiar to parents of the baby-boom generation—whose social commentary offered simplistic, prescriptive answers to social problems—Marvel’s new heroes were tragic and complex; they faced real-life problems and offered no simple solutions; their powers did not result from birth or good fortune, but from nuclear accidents and near death experiences.⁷² Likewise, these new heroes existed in continuity with the real world; they often experienced events alongside their readers, and their world, while fantastical, was often not far removed from the reality of their readership. Series such as *The Fantastic Four* (1961), *The Incredible Hulk* (1962), and *The Amazing Spiderman* (1963) catered to the concerns of the youth inhabiting an atomic world unfamiliar to their parents, and inaugurated what one Marvel editorial—in characteristically hyperbolic fashion—termed “The Marvel Age of Comics.”⁷³

Among Marvel’s new generation of superheroes was Iron Man. Making his debut in the pages of *Tales of Suspense* #39 in December of 1962, Tony Stark appeared as a suave,

⁷¹ Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (New York: New York University Press, 2016.); 71.

⁷² Johnson, *Super-History*, 59.

⁷³ Stan Lee and R. Berns, *Journey into Mystery* #94 (Marvel Comics, 1964).

brilliant American arms manufacturer on a business trip to a US military laboratory hidden in the jungles of South Vietnam. Resembling Howard Hughes both physically and archetypically, the comic's narration describes Stark as "handsome, rich... constantly in the company of beautiful, adoring women," his identity is that of "both a sophisticate and a scientist! A millionaire bachelor, as much at home in a laboratory as in high society!"⁷⁴ The comic opens with Stark demonstrating his revolutionary transistor technology to a US army general, which he proclaims to be "capable of solving [the] problem in Vietnam."⁷⁵ The technology impresses the General, however, outside the compound Stark trips a booby-trap and is near fatally wounded with shrapnel embedded close to his heart. Shortly after, he is captured by the "red guerrilla tyrant" Wong Chu, who intends to force Stark to design weapons for his cause.⁷⁶ Stark refuses to betray his country. Instead, with the help of the elderly Professor Yinsen, he constructs a suit of iron that facilitates his escape and uses transistor technology to stabilise his heart. As such, and as the comic's title proclaims, "Iron Man is Born!": using his suit of iron, Stark clashes with Wong Chu and avenges Professor Yinsen's death. Unable to separate entirely from the metal suit, as its magnetised breastplate now keeps the shrapnel from reaching his heart, Stark assumes Iron Man as his *nom de guerre*, and declares that he will join the struggle against aggressive global communism as the United States' iron-clad defender.

Despite his creation at the hands of the same editorial team, Iron Man was strikingly, and almost awkwardly, distinct from his contemporaries. Unlike Spider-Man and the Hulk, Iron Man's "powers" were not the result of a nuclear accident, nor did they make him something more than human. While his genius constituted a superpower in itself, Tony Stark was a man who had been bound, by way of a fateful wartime injury, to an iron suit of his own

⁷⁴ Stan Lee, Larry Leiber, and Don Heck, "Iron Man Is Born!," in *Tales of Suspense* #39 (Marvel Comics, 1962); 3.

⁷⁵ Lee, Leiber, "Iron Man is Born", 3.

⁷⁶ Lee, Leiber, "Iron Man is Born", 3.

design. Moreover, though the likes of the Fantastic Four often found themselves facing communist enemies, Iron Man was a product of American involvement in Vietnam, and his appearances were almost entirely devoted to the combat of communists or his role as a military industrialist. From 1962 to 1968, Iron Man most frequently foiled the plots of Soviet-affiliated enemies such as the Crimson Dynamo, the Red Barbarian, the Mandarin, Titanium Man, and Nikita Khrushchev himself as “democracy’s greatest fighter.”⁷⁷ An iron-clad anti-communist in his superhero identity and a patriotic participant in the military-industrial complex in his civilian life, Iron Man, as Wright appropriately terms him, was “the most political of Marvel’s superheroes.”⁷⁸



Figure 2.0. Iron Man faces the Soviet supervillain Titanium Man in *Tales of Suspense* #69.

In his inaugural address, John F. Kennedy called upon a new generation of American citizens to “bear the burden of a long, twilight struggle” in their “role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger.”⁷⁹ Kennedy’s call to service and sacrifice in the struggle against global communism was not, in 1961, controversial—rather, the sense of urgency and activism that Kennedy’s rhetoric injected into the Cold War reflected a new, liberal consensus

⁷⁷ Stan Lee, Don Heck, and Vince Colletta, “If I Must Die, Let It Be with Honour,” in *Tales of Suspense* #69 (Marvel Comics, 1965).

⁷⁸ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*; 222.

⁷⁹ John F. Kennedy, “Inaugural Address” (Presidential Inauguration, January 20, 1961).

view that foreign affairs, rather than the domestic focus of the McCarthy era, had to be the primary vehicle through which the United States fought communist influence.⁸⁰ Perfectly embodied in the belligerent anticommunism of the Kennedy administration, the consensus view of the early decade prescribed that the United States embrace toughness, competition, and a militant masculinity in its foreign policy. Later changes to the political landscape recontextualise Iron Man's early narratives as particularly zealous examples of Cold War US militarism. In 1962, however, the Cold War narrative that Iron Man embodied represented nothing other than the mainstream political landscape. Until 1968, the worldview expressed in the Iron Man comics was, more or less, an encapsulation of the politics, mood, and aesthetics of the Kennedy era.

In line with the consensus of the early 1960s, the creative team responsible for Iron Man—Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, Larry Lieber, and Don Heck—were all, with the exception of Heck, veterans, as well as staunch liberals. For them, anticommunism was “part of their investment in global democracy,” and comments in several of Marvel's comics implied that the threat represented by global communism was perceived by the team as similar, if not equivalent, to the threat of Nazism in the early 1940s.⁸¹ In announcing that Marvel comics were sold all across Latin America, Lee—who handled most of the communication with readers and was ostensibly the face and creative director of the company through the 1960s and 1970s—proudly noted the exception of Cuba. “The bearded one has banned all comic books as subversive literature,” Lee quipped, adding that the ban was probably, “the nicest

⁸⁰ M J Heale, *American Anti-Communism: Combating the Enemy Within 1830-1970* (John Hopkins University Press, 1990); 197.

⁸¹ In the wake of Iron Man's cinematic success in the 2000s and 2010s, Lee stated on several occasions that he created Tony Stark to be an intentionally unlikeable character as a challenge to himself and his readership. In an extra from the *Iron Man* DVD, Lee claimed: “I think I gave myself a dare. It was the height of the Cold War; the readers, the young readers, if there was one thing they hated, it was war. It was the military.” Though an oft-repeated anecdote, Lee's twenty-first century recounting of Stark's creation misrepresents the timeline of the 1960s, and perhaps provides more genuine insight into contemporary sentiment regarding the Vietnam War than it does into the politics of Iron Man's creators. For the whole interview, see “The Invincible Iron Man” in *Iron Man*, DVD (Paramount Pictures, 2008).

complement we've had all year!"⁸² Similarly, when asked in 1978 to reflect upon the intensity of Marvel's anticommunist messaging through the 1960s, Lee pointed to the context of the times: "I had been conditioned," he explained. "During World War II, we were told we were the good guys, and the Nazis were the bad guys... when the word came down from D.C. that the commies are the bad guys, I just acted like one of Pavlov's dogs."⁸³ As such, Iron Man's embodiment of his creators' genuine anticommunism can perhaps be understood as the Cold War equivalent to Captain America's embodiment of his creators' anti-Nazism. The ideological drive behind the creation of either character prescribed that the comic model the promotion of liberal democratic values abroad for a young audience.

Unlike the creators of Captain America, whose work reacted to a lack of consensus regarding US foreign policy, the creators of Iron Man expressed the Cold War consensus at its height. For many adolescents in the early 1960s—particularly young men—the call to “ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country” defined what it meant to be an American, and created the sense of an idealistic US ‘mission’ inextricable from the nation’s struggle against global communism.⁸⁴ For Marvel editorial, asking what they could do for their country entailed the creation of a comic book that embodied the heroism of such a mission, and could promote its liberal values to its readership. Writing in 1975, Lee emphasized that Iron Man was the product of “a time when most of us genuinely felt... that the American military action against the Viet Cong was tantamount to St. George’s battle against the dragon.”⁸⁵ Iron Man may have mythologized the American involvement in Vietnam for young readers, but it did not introduce them to the conflict. In interviews conducted by historian Joel P. Rhodes, individuals who grew up in the early 1960s

⁸² Stan Lee, “Marvel Bullpen Bulletin,” in *Fantastic Four* #49 (Marvel Comics, 1966).

⁸³ Stan Lee and Jim Dawson, “Hello, Culture Lovers!” Stan Lee at James Madison University, *Comics Journal* #42, October 1978.

⁸⁴ Jacqueline E. Lawson, “‘Old Kids’: The Adolescent Experience in the Nonfiction Narratives of the Vietnam War,” in *Search and Clear: Critical Responses to Selected Literature and Films of the Vietnam Era* (Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1988); 28-29.

⁸⁵ Stan Lee, *Son of Origins of Marvel Comics* (Touchstone, 1975); 45.

characterized the Vietnam conflict as something they, as children, were perennially aware of.⁸⁶ Whether through television broadcasting, overhearing adult conversation, or dealing with the absence of a loved-one deployed abroad, Vietnam played a meaningful role in children's lives in the early 1960s, and Iron Man represented a conscious attempt to shape the conflict's narrative for young readers. It is worth noting that the circumstances surrounding US involvement in Vietnam changed dramatically over the course of the decade. At the time of Iron Man's debut, president of South Vietnam Ngo Dinh Diem had yet to be overthrown, and the Tonkin Gulf Resolution was over a year away. The series' narrative and treatment of the conflict, however, did not meaningfully adapt to a changing war. Through President Lyndon Johnson's escalation of the war in 1964, the beginning of the draft, and escalating public antipathy—until 1968, Iron Man remained stalwart in his embodiment and protection of 1962's Cold War consensus.

Yet Iron Man's superhero persona was not merely the product of an ideological agenda. The recurrent crises over Berlin and Cuba that defined the period from 1961 to 1963 threatened, on more than one occasion, to draw the United States into a nuclear conflict with the Soviet Union, and made clear the stakes of an escalating Cold War. In the wake of the Cuban Missile Crisis—which took place a mere month prior to Iron Man's first appearance in December of 1962—atomic anxiety abounded, and news media reflected a profound emphasis upon foreign affairs as “the most important problem” of the period.⁸⁷ Iron Man's promise to protect the United States from the physical threat of nuclear war represented by the Soviet Union—in whatever villainous form it took, and wherever in the world it appeared—provided a sense of catharsis for a generation who had grown up in the shadow of the atomic bomb.⁸⁸ More than characters such as the Hulk or Spider-Man, whose superhero

⁸⁶ Joel P Rhodes, *The Vietnam War in American Childhood* (Athens: The University Of Georgia Press, 2019).

⁸⁷ Tom W. Smith, “Trends: The Cuban Missile Crisis and US Public Opinion,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (2003): 265–93.

⁸⁸ Scott, *Younger Than That Now*, 13.

identities embodied the anxieties of the nuclear age, Iron Man exemplified the creative and technological prowess of the American man in the face of an atomic threat. Just as Captain America had served as both psychological bulwark and model for American intervention in Europe in 1941, the Iron Man of 1962 was equal parts reflective of his creators' politics and responsive to the existential fears of his readership.

Despite his embrace of the political mainstream, by the mid 1960s, Iron Man (alongside his fellow Marvel heroes) found himself at the centre of a growing counterculture among college-aged Americans. Published alongside articles facetiously relaying means of draft-dodging that had become popular among college-aged youth, the September 1966 issue of *Esquire* featured a write-up on the overwhelming popularity of Marvel comics on college campuses. With over fifty-thousand college students paying a dollar a month for a subscription to Marvel's fan club, *Esquire* inquired why college students felt such enthusiasm for Marvel's heroes.⁸⁹ One Ivy League student told the magazine, "we think of Marvel Comics like twentieth-century mythology," and another commented that he felt "a person has to be intelligent to read them."⁹⁰ Similarly, students felt that Marvel superheroes represented "the outcast against the institution," and that they were "not wit-less put-ons," but that they were "governed by emotions and ideals."⁹¹ The popularity of superheroes among college students represented a new demographic for superhero comics, and Marvel's sales doubled in-turn between 1962 and 1966.⁹² For college students in the mid-1960s, superhero comics had essentially become what the CMAA had been created, in part, to prevent: an agent of a rebellious youth political culture that—if it possessed few other unifying qualities by 1966—was distinctly anti-establishment.⁹³

⁸⁹ *Esquire*, "Now You're Smart Enough for Comic Books," September 1966 (Esquire Inc., 1966).

⁹⁰ *Esquire*, 1966

⁹¹ *Esquire*, 1966

⁹² Wright, *Comic Book Nation*; 223.

⁹³ Strikingly, the *Esquire* article claims that the popularity of Marvel Comics was so immense on college campuses that a lecture given by Stan Lee at Bard College drew a larger crowd than that of Dwight D. Eisenhower.

While the counterculture of the 1960s is often remembered synonymously with student activism and the emergence of the New Left, until 1968, it consisted of a nebulous set of attitudes toward the dominant culture and was embodied by a politically diverse group of youth.⁹⁴ Historian Damon R. Bach describes the youth counterculture of the mid-1960s as born of disillusion with the “conformity, consensus, and conservatism,” that had defined the culture of their childhoods; young people sought to create a new cultural cannon that was “completely different from...the ‘plastic society’” of their parents.⁹⁵ Though the fondness many college students held for Iron Man and his colleagues may appear slightly idiosyncratic with such an ethos, superhero comics were a natural rallying point for a movement that sought to reject the dominant, adult culture. The youth who comprised the college-aged demographic in the mid-1960s had been children in the 1950s. Many had witnessed the cultural phenomenon of McCarthyism, been subject to the fears surrounding juvenile delinquency, and had been the innocents that the anti-comic book movement claimed were being led to subversion and stupidity.⁹⁶ Moreover, these young people had represented the target age group for comic books in the 1950s, and many would have been old enough to remember and understand the establishment of the CMAA in 1954. Though the politics of Marvel’s superheroes were hardly rebellious, for the generation who grew up in the 1950s, reading comic books, relating to their protagonists, and treating them as serious literary entities on college campuses was in itself a countercultural act.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Damon R Bach, *The American Counterculture: A History of Hippies and Cultural Dissidents* (University Press Of Kansas, 2021), xi.

⁹⁵ Bach, *The American Counterculture*, 12.

⁹⁶ Bach, *The American Counterculture*, 12.

⁹⁷ For a further sense of how comic books fit-in to youth counterculture, see Steve Lerner, “Just Too Linear to Last,” *The New York Times*, February 16, 1969.

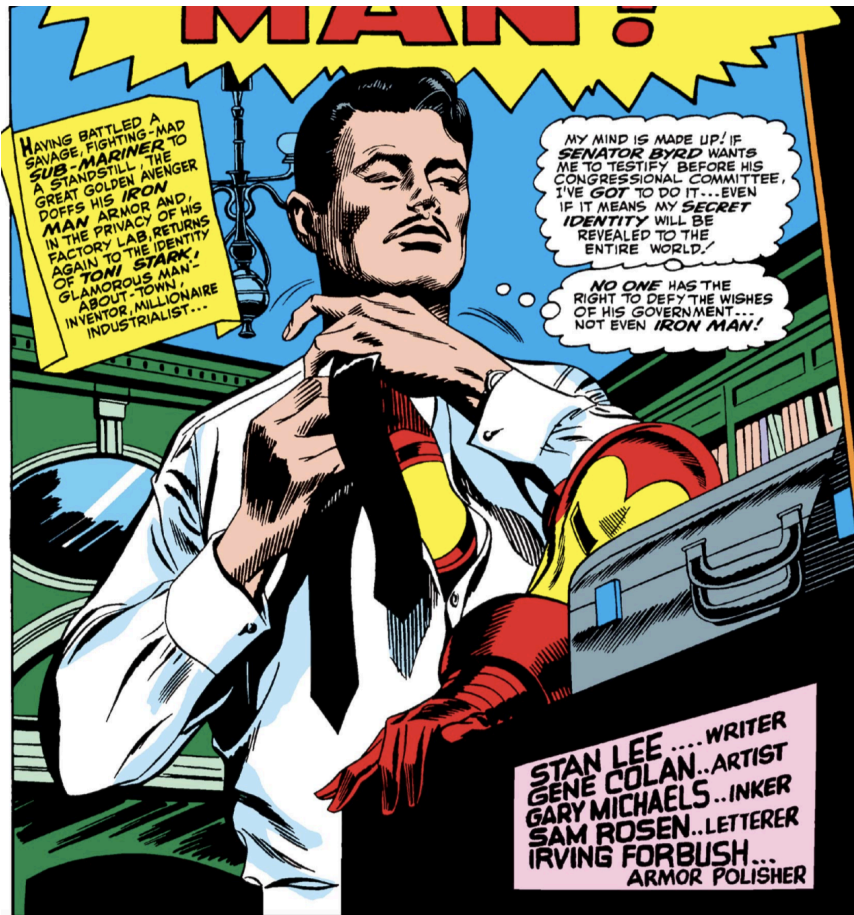


Figure 3.0. Tony Stark reacts to a congressional subpoena in *Tales of Suspense* #81.

Marvel Comics were not only a favourite of rebellious college students. Just as GIs during the Second World War had read Captain America comics while overseas, US soldiers in Vietnam readily accepted Iron Man. The nation's "first teen-age war," the average age of an American combatant in Vietnam was only 19.2 years. While vast demographic and experiential differences often separated the young people who served in Vietnam from college-students of the same age, an affection for and identification with Marvel Comics proved a commonality.⁹⁸ Letters from soldiers serving in Vietnam appeared frequently in the 'Letters to the Editors' section in all of Marvel's series, and almost all emphasized the importance of the comics' narrative to the soldier's experience. Writing in about Iron Man, one reader identified himself as "a soldier in Viet Nam familiar with weapons currently being

⁹⁸ Lawson, "Old Kids," 27.

used over here,” before correcting “the first mistake I have ever found in one of your mags” in which Iron Man attributed an incorrect caliber of gun to a Huey helicopter.⁹⁹ Other letters provided more harrowing insight into the importance of the comic book to the experience of young soldiers. *Amazing Spider-Man #50* featured a letter from Corporal Leonard R. St Claire that read:

Dear Stan and John,

I thought I had left comic books somewhere in my past, but once again, I find myself reading them. It would surprise [sic] (shock!) many people back in the states to learn that so many service men read them. Especially the Marvel Comics Group which is sold in every P.X. I've been in over here. And it always makes us mad to miss an issue! We don't have much time for reading here in VietNam although we usually are able to squeeze in enough time to read your Marvels. Spider-Man is, by far, my favorite, although all of your super-heroes are really something. We sure could use them over here, but I guess we'll just have to rely on our own "talents". It may be a coincidence, but we think of ourselves as “junior superheroes”. If you get a chance, send one over here to give us a hand! But, to be serious for a second, thanks a lot for providing a lot of us with some good action-packed reading material. We really enjoy your series. They, like letters from home, help take our minds out of Viet Nam for a while.¹⁰⁰

The following letter was printed three issues later in *Amazing Spider-Man #53*:

Dear Stan,

Since all of us in the headquarters section of India Company are Spider-Man fans, we regret to inform you that Corporal St. Clair, whose letter will be printed in SPIDER-MAN #50, was killed in action on 28 February, 1967. He was a squad leader in our 3rd Platoon when his patrol was ambushed southwest of Da Nang. Your comic SPIDER-MAN is the most sought after piece of literature and art work in this company. Keep up the good work; you're a real morale booster.¹⁰¹

For young people on college campuses, comic books represented a means of rebelling against establishment culture. For the soldiers who wrote in to Marvel editorial, the extent to which Marvel's heroes maintained and mythologized the Cold War consensus appeared to provide both a feeling of connection to domestic US culture, and a comforting means of

⁹⁹ Ronald Williams, ““Mails of Suspense,”” in *Tales of Suspense #97* (Marvel Comics, 1967).

¹⁰⁰ Leonard R. St Claire, “Spider's Web,” in *Amazing Spiderman #50* (Marvel Comics, 1967).

¹⁰¹ India Company, “Spider's Web,” in *Amazing Spider-Man 53* (Marvel Comics, 1967).

making-sense of the war they fought. For Marvel's part, the editors made a point of providing the soldiers who wrote in with free subscriptions to the respective comic. Despite Marvel's association with the Vietnam War and the youth experience of the Cold War more broadly, no significant mention of the draft appeared in Marvel's comics or in its editorial pages through most of the 1960s. In meeting with the realities of the idealistic global anticommunism that the publisher's superheroes had helped sell to its young audience, Marvel's comics doubled as a form of escapism from the conflict it had helped mythologize.

Yet of the mail sent in to Marvel's offices—including those sent from over 225 colleges across the United States—few contained serious criticism of Iron Man's politics.¹⁰² Rather, an overwhelming majority of letters praised Iron Man for his ardent anticommunism. With reference to Iron Man's face-off against his Soviet counterpart Titanium Man in a contest of national strength, one reader wrote that "Iron Man's battle with ol' Ivan," was one of the "greatest patriotic yarns ever spun."¹⁰³ Others complained that Iron Man was not doing enough to combat communism. Requests from readers to "let Iron Man be more concerned with the threat of communism instead of your ordinary costumed villains," as "today the main enemies of freedom are the communists and they are the ones who should be under constant attack," populated the 'Letters to the Editors' column through the mid-decade.¹⁰⁴ Such letters were written contemporaneously, and perhaps in reaction, to an anti-war movement that by 1966 was growing in popularity and salience among young people, but that had yet to represent as large a constituency as its media visibility implied. A *Newsweek* article published in 1966 concluded that children's literature depicting the American involvement in Vietnam were "having much the same kind of trouble holding reader support

¹⁰² *Esquire*, 1966

¹⁰³ Stan Lee, Gene Colan, and Frank Giacoia, "Death Duel for the Life of Happy Hogan!," in *Tales of Suspense* #86 (Marvel Comics, 1966).

¹⁰⁴ Stan Lee, Don Heck, and Mickey Demeo, "'If I Fall, a World Is Lost!,'" in *Tales of Suspense* #66 (Marvel Comics, 1965); Stan Lee, "Hoorah for the Conquering Hero!"

for the war that the Administration is having rallying support for the real war.”¹⁰⁵ For many of Iron Man’s readers, however, Stark’s Cold War narrative seemed to be a selling point, as postal data indicates that the number of *Tales of Suspense* copies in circulation rose steadily between 1965 and 1968.¹⁰⁶

The popularity of Iron Man among college aged youth sheds light upon an aspect of the youth culture of the mid-1960s that rejected dominant cultural values and conceived of itself as counterculture—or at least counter-establishment—without necessarily abandoning the foreign policy narrative of the Cold War consensus. Such a claim is supported by polling regarding young people’s support for the Vietnam War, as despite a cultural perception of youth dissent through the 1960s, outright opposition to the war among young people only began to represent a majority opinion in polls conducted after 1968.¹⁰⁷ The developments of the later decade complicate the claim that entrenched political moderates comprise the basis of Marvel’s readership; however, superhero comics did provide an avenue for cultural rebellion and subversion without necessitating a complete disavowal of Cold War consensus politics. Young people could imagine reading comic books on campus as a form of protest against a system of higher education that valued complacency and sought a top down definition of ‘culture’ that allowed room for students who did not align with the protest or alternative lifestyle movements.¹⁰⁸ As a somewhat countercultural phenomenon, comics shared much DNA with movements in music such as the Beatles during this period, as both created a unique, young cultural identity around consumer media that was, fundamentally,

¹⁰⁵ “Pop Goes the War,” *Newsweek*, September 12, 1966, quoted in Brian Rouleau, *Empire’s Nursery* (NYU Press, 2021).

¹⁰⁶ John Jackson Miller, “Comic Book Sales Figures for 1965,” Comichron.com, 2023, <https://www.comichron.com/yearlycomicssales/postaldata/1965.html#>.

¹⁰⁷ Hazel Erskine, “The Polls: Is War a Mistake?,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (1970): 134; Benjamin T. Harrison, “The Vietnam War — a Decade Later: Impact on American Values,” *Peace Research* 16, no. 2 (May 1984): 32.

¹⁰⁸ Bach, *The American Counterculture*, 42.

still created and shepherded by adults.¹⁰⁹ As such, comic books as a form of countercultural participation were largely separate from and in contrast to a participatory, activist, and sometimes radical element of youth political culture that had yet to reach its zenith by the mid-1960s. Their popularity likely represented the cultural dissent of young people who felt disillusioned with an adult-led culture, but for whom the liberal consensus had yet to shatter.¹¹⁰ An *Esquire* poll from 1965 provides a telling indication of the dissonant character of youth counterculture through the mid-1960s, as when asked to name their favourite revolutionary icons, college students ranked Spider-Man and the Hulk alongside Bob Dylan and Che Guevara.¹¹¹

The first indication of a crumbling consensus among Iron Man's readership came in the summer of 1967. *Tales of Suspense* #92 to #94 featured a storyline that saw Stark return to Vietnam to confront the mad, communist scientist Half-Face. When the Soviet superhero Titanium Man attacks Half-Face's home, Iron Man's valiant rescue of the village wins the heart and mind of Half-Face, as he declares the communist presence in Vietnam tyrannical and is thus redeemed from his villainy.¹¹² The storyline did not stand out among Iron Man's usual narratives—if anything, storylines that featured Iron Man redeeming a communist villain had become rote by 1967—but this time it prompted William Martin, a member of Marvel's fan club and student at Columbia University Graduate School, to author a letter condemning Marvel editorial for publishing “base propaganda.”¹¹³ “I am thoroughly disgusted with the present issue of Iron Man, and if this goes on, I will send you the ashes of my M.M.M.S card,” Martin wrote, threatening to burn his Marvel fan club (Merry Marvel

¹⁰⁹ Arthur Marwick, “The Cultural Revolution of the Long Sixties: Voices of Reaction, Protest, and Permeation,” *The International History Review* 27, no. 4 (December 2005): 792.

¹¹⁰ Norris R. Johnson William E. Feinberg, “Youth Protest in the 60s: An Introduction,” *Sociological Focus* 13, no. 3 (1980): 174.

¹¹¹ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*; 223.

¹¹² Stan Lee and Gene Colan, “The Tragedy and the Triumph!,” in *Tales of Suspense* #94 (Marvel Comics, 1967).

¹¹³ William Martin, “Mails of Suspense,” in *Tales of Suspense* #96 (Marvel Comics, 1967).

Marching Society, or M.M.M.S) membership card as one would a draft card before likening the issue to “Goebbel’s propaganda films.”¹¹⁴ Lee responded in characteristically flip fashion, dismissing the issue as inconsequential. “The republic still stands!” he declared. “The sun still shines! The gals are still wearing mini-skirts!” Yet the sentiment behind Martin’s letter was difficult to dismiss. In 1968, Iron Man’s popularity saw him graduate from the pages of *Tales of Suspense* to his own comic, *The Invincible Iron Man*. In the inaugural issue of Iron Man’s new series, the ‘Letters to the Editor’ section (now charmingly titled ‘Sock It to Shell-Head’) featured a letter from an incredulous reader, asking “what do you believe Tony Stark is? A sadistic hatemonger?... Anybody who turns out weapon[s] against which there can be no defense has got to be all bad.”¹¹⁵ Tellingly, Lee responded with a re-assertion of Stark’s righteousness and asked if anyone could really “blame Tony for trying to maintain the balance of power for the good guy’s side.”¹¹⁶ Therein lay the problem; despite Marvel’s insistence, by early 1968, the political landscape through which readers understood Iron Man had shifted, and no longer was it self-evident that Stark and the Cold War consensus he embodied represented, in effect, the “good guy’s side.”

Whatever countercultural credentials Marvel possessed were relatively short-lived. By 1968, countercultural participation had become increasingly associated with the ideas of the New Left, and took on a character generally uninclusive of mainstream liberalism.¹¹⁷ Highlighted by scholar Benjamin T. Harrison, events such as Martin Luther King Jr’s public disavowal of the Vietnam War in 1967 and the Tet Offensive’s revealing of the US government’s false claim to near victory in Vietnam called into question what, for those who had remained steadfast in their support of the Cold War consensus, a liberal identity meant in

¹¹⁴ Stan Lee, “Mails of Suspense”, *Tales of Suspense* #96

¹¹⁵ Chris Barth, “Sock It to Shell-Head,” in *The Invincible Iron Man #1* (Marvel Comics, 1968).

¹¹⁶ Stan Lee, “Sock It to Shell-Head,” in *The Invincible Iron Man #1*

¹¹⁷ Bach, *The American Counterculture*, xi

that seemed to reject democratic reform.¹¹⁸ The young people who had been inspired to “ask not” by the rhetoric of the Kennedy-era and its super-powered champions were now confronted with fundamental, inescapable questions as to the nature of the war in Vietnam and the establishment from which it had grown. Did the racism that undermined domestic US society also underlie the nation’s foreign policy? What good was American technological superiority and industrial strength if it only produced higher death tolls without bringing an end to the war in Vietnam? How could the social and economic cost of a foreign war be justified when the nation was domestically destitute and divided?

Disillusioned with the potential for liberal reform following the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr and Robert F. Kennedy, some young people answered these questions by shifting towards the New Left or other countercultural movements and adopting radically anti-establishment politics in a disavowal of the Cold War consensus.¹¹⁹ Others, however, disapproved of the war but remained hopeful that an adherence to liberalism would bring needed reform, while some reacted to what they perceived as a nation and war effort being thrown into chaos by leftist activism through a re-entrenchment in law and order, anticommunist politics—though Cold War ‘hawks’ represented the minority position on American campuses after 1968.¹²⁰ Whether they turned to the counterculture, embraced liberal reform, or sought a conservative push back to increasingly visible radicalism, the events of 1968 profoundly polarized the politics of youth.

By the summer of 1968, Lee concluded that readers had become too politically fragmented for Iron Man to continue promoting the liberal Cold War consensus. In July, the ‘Stan’s Soapbox’ column informed readers that Marvel now sought to avoid “editorializing

¹¹⁸ Harrison, “The Vietnam War,” 32.

¹¹⁹ Harrison, “The Vietnam War,” 32; Scott, *Younger Than That*, 75.

¹²⁰ Sandra Scanlon, *The Pro-War Movement: Domestic Support for the Vietnam War and the Making of Modern American Conservatism* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2013); 243.

about controversial issues.”¹²¹ While this was quickly walked back for most Marvel titles, the one series for which the mandate stuck was Iron Man. Ironically, the politicization of youth that Iron Man had, in part, been created to shepherd in 1962, by 1968 had helped to create a readership ‘too political’ to consume the series’ ideologically instructive narrative. The toning down of Iron Man’s Cold War narrative coincided with the end of Lee’s involvement with the series.¹²² The departure began an almost two year moratorium on political content in Iron Man. The series struggled to navigate a polarized and turbulent political landscape, and as its creative team found that Iron Man’s liberalism had been stripped of much of its salience with its readership, Tony Stark was transformed into an apolitical shell of his former self. It would take until 1970 for the Iron Man comics to broach contemporary political commentary again. While the series’ narrative found itself in a state of relative wilderness, interim cultural shifts set the stage for a reconfiguring of the comic book’s relationship to youth political expression in the 1970s.

¹²¹ Stan Lee, “Stan’s Soapbox,” in *Daredevil #44* (Marvel Comics, 1968).

¹²² Charles Henebry, “Socking It to Shell Head,” in *The Ages of Iron Man*, ed. Joseph R. Darwoski (McFarland & Company, 2015); 101.

Chapter Three: Tony Stark's War?

If student activist Jack Weinberg's famous quip "don't trust anyone over thirty" gave voice to the ethos of youth identity through the 1960s, "don't trust anyone under thirty" could have been a fitting rallying cry for the conservative backlash to youth identity that had grown to prevalence by the early 1970s. With marked similarity to the sensationalist fears of youth subversion that had characterized the 1950s, by 1970, fears of a "generation gap" between a radical, subversive under-thirty population and the adult establishment abounded in the media.¹²³ Politically diverse as young people were in actuality, the visibility of radical politics and protest movements had created a perception of 'youth' as a distinct yet fundamentally illegitimate political identity.¹²⁴ Despite the prevalence of conservative youth movements, the visible, left-wing youth radicalism in the 1960s had given rise to a popular perception that to be young was to be a left-wing radical, and to be an adult was to protect the establishment. Once again, a contest to define the political identity of 'youth' as an inherent and existential threat to an adult led culture was underway.

For the comic book industry, this provided a unique opportunity for reinvention following a decade that had culminated in the rejection of the consensus vision that their superheroes had embodied. The morally instructive narratives that had characterized superheroes through the 1960s gave way to a more adult, internal, and conversational tone able to treat the concerns of its readers seriously while holding the vital center and minimizing reader alienation. Ironically, it was intervention from the US government that encouraged the comic book industry's inward turn. In 1970, the US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare sent a letter to Lee requesting that Marvel Comics use its "clout" to

¹²³ Edgar Z Friedenberg, "The Generation Gap," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 382 (1969): 32.

¹²⁴ Scott, *Younger than That Now*, 72-82. Notably, while conservative youth movements existed contemporaneously and were an important part of youth political culture, they were not considered to be characteristically 'young' movements; news coverage of right-wing activist organizations such as the Young America's Foundation (YAF) was often enmeshed with 'adult' electoral news reporting.

spread an anti-drug message to its adolescent and college-aged audience. In turn, *The Amazing Spiderman #96-98* ran a storyline that depicted drug abuse, and failed to receive the CMAA's stamp of approval.¹²⁵ The storyline was distributed nonetheless, and prompted a limited liberalization of the comics code in early 1971 that allowed for comic books to depict government corruption, graphic violence, and drug abuse—so long as the guilty were brought to justice.¹²⁶ The amendment to the comics code came at an opportune time, as it allowed publishers to maintain their relevance with a divided youth audience by taking seriously the often anti-establishment issues that young people had become associated with, yet were not unanimously united behind. Through the early 1970s, acknowledging—and even catering to—the oft-unspoken political diversity of youth while remaining grounded in idealistic liberal values comprised the basic strategy of the comic book industry.

Iron Man proved especially well suited to the strategy. Since politics in the series' storylines had first been nixed in 1968, long-time readers had become dissatisfied with the comic's substitution of the "human interest and realism" which had "set [Marvel] on top" in favour of "one cheap two-syllable word: action."¹²⁷ Indeed, by 1970, Iron Man had begun to feel stale—interim storylines focused on largely faceless villains, Stark's heart condition, and the chronic loss of his love interests. The writers were met with seemingly little criticism of Stark's politics during this period, but praises from readers were increasingly replaced by articulations of fear that the 'Marvel Age of Comics' had ended prematurely, or that Stark had entered a period of aimlessness. Change was needed, but Marvel editorial appeared to remain somewhat apprehensive about re-introducing foreign policy and the war in Vietnam into the series' narrative. Instead, Iron Man broached his return to politics with an exploration

¹²⁵ Johnson, *Super-History*, 110.

¹²⁶ Lawrence Van Gelder, "A Comics Magazine Defies Code Ban on Drug Stories," *New York Times*, February 4, 1971.

¹²⁷ Nils Osmar, "Sock It to Shell-Head," in *Iron Man #6* (Marvel Comics, 1968).

of relevant domestic social issues that had not previously comprised part of the character's narrative.

In *Iron Man #25*, Stark travels to Meridian Island to visit one of Stark Industry's industrial projects and finds that the man who he left in charge of the project, Blane Ordway, had allowed the project to run out of control, pollute the waters around the island, and exhaust the area's natural resources. With help from Namour, Iron Man manages to contain the pollution, but the event awakens him to the damage his company could cause to the Earth. In a meeting full of industrial businessmen, Stark explains that Stark Industries had been engaged in projects that were "poisoning our air, destroying our oxygen-producing forests and waters" in an attempt to sell the group on seriously investing in environmental protection.¹²⁸ The profit driven industrialists do not share Stark's conviction and dismiss the concept of environmental responsibility as a "crackpot cause," quipping that Stark "shouldn't let the island business upset [him]... things'll work out!"¹²⁹ Released in the aftermath of the Santa Barbara oil spill in 1969, Iron Man's environmentalism was topical. It was also a comparatively 'safe' issue; the protection of the environment was a concern shared by both young activists and the political mainstream. Most notable, however, was Iron Man's placement of blame for the environmental crisis upon his fellow industrialists, as it appeared somewhat sympathetic to the association drawn by the New Left between capitalism, environmental destruction, and social decay.¹³⁰ The narrative also opened the door for further re-examination of Stark's role as industrialist: for the first time in the character's history, his profession was not itself representative of his heroism; rather, it characterized him as 'part of the problem'—even if only inadvertently.

¹²⁸ Archie Goodwin, *Iron Man #25* (Marvel Comics, 1970).

¹²⁹ Goodwin, *Iron Man #25*

¹³⁰ Keith M. Woodhouse, "The Politics of Ecology: Environmentalism and Liberalism in the 1960s," *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 2, no. 2 (2008): 60.

In stark contrast with what was to come, readers expressed unanimous appreciation for Iron Man's championing ecological protection. "I have never seen Iron Man so violently espouse an issue before," wrote one reader. "You could not have chosen a more worthy cause than ecological protection."¹³¹ Another reader went so far as to suggest that a copy of *Iron Man #25* be sent to "various pollutant factories around the country. I'm willing to bet my collection of Marvel comics that what they say will be similar to the answers given by Tony Stark's audience in *Iron Man #25*... Until I can see the New York skyline from a high spot in Queens, Make Mine Marvel!"¹³² Most telling of Marvel's importance to their readers was a letter from Sandy Smith from Orlando, Florida, who wrote "this story struck home... near my home is a situation like the one described in the story...if the big corporations would have been willing to try and put a stop to the slow polluting, this might have been avoided. But, as in the case of Tony Stark, the businessmen would not listen."¹³³ The reaction from readers appeared to affirm the importance of politics to Iron Man's readers and gave Marvel editorial licence to continue dealing with social issues in the comic.

Iron Man #27 marked the series' first attempt at situating Stark in the middle of political commentary intended to be truly conversational. The issue introduced the character of Firebrand—a militant civil rights activist who sought to violently oppose the Iron Man Foundation's construction of a new community center. Wearing a suit bearing the "black power salute" and proclaiming that "the only way to get anything from the Man is to take it," Firebrand resists Stark's construction project out of a distrust backed by community support—his suspicion is well founded, as indeed, the community center was a ploy to enrich a City Councillor—as a crowd yells to "stop the fascist!" while Iron Man attempts to prevent Firebrand from accidentally setting the neighbourhood ablaze.¹³⁴ Despite Firebrand's conflict

¹³¹ Patrick Rosenkranz, "'Sock It to Shell-Head,'" in *Iron Man #29* (Marvel Comics, 1970).

¹³² Kevin T. Dawson, "Sock It to Shell-Head," in *Iron Man #25* (Marvel Comics, 1970).

¹³³ Sandy Smith, "Sock It to Shell-Head," in *Iron Man #30* (Marvel Comics, 1970).

¹³⁴ Archie Goodwin, *Iron Man #27* (Marvel Comics, 1970).

with Iron Man, the narrative does not characterize him as a villain. Reflecting shifts within the Civil Rights Movement that had occurred following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr in 1968, Firebrand explains his motivation as such:

I'm just an all-American boy, Iron Man! One of the wide-eyed innocents who started out to 'make this nation a better place!' I sat-in for Civil Rights, marched for peace, and demonstrated on campus...and got chased by vicious dogs, spat on by bigots, beat on by 'patriots,' and blinded by mace until I finally caught on... this country doesn't want to be changed! The only way to build anything decent is to tear-down what's here and start over!¹³⁵

Iron Man comes away from the interaction with his faith in liberalism shaken and wonders aloud what systemic failures led to someone like Firebrand needing to exist at all.



Figure 4.0. The introduction of Firebrand in *Iron Man* #27.

Despite its subject matter, the issue avoided taking any strong stance on the character of Firebrand. Rather, as suggested by scholar Charles Hendry, *Iron Man* #27 was largely a reaction to a common fear in white liberal circles that there was little love left for a liberal

¹³⁵ Goodwin, *Iron Man* #27

alternative to radicalism or conservatism.¹³⁶ Iron Man's quiet concern with the social conditions that led to Firebrand's radicalism was emblematic of the character's insistence upon holding the vital center, even if his faith in the liberal establishment had been shaken. Notably, while the introduction of Firebrand associated the issue of race relations with Stark, the series made no real attempt to diversify its cast. Even relative to Marvel's other series—in which black heroes were still relatively sparse—*Iron Man* lagged behind in positive representation of people of colour, and had only recently introduced a temporary black protagonist and friend of Stark named Eddie March.¹³⁷ Rather, *Iron Man*'s treatment of race reflected the series' nature as a piece of Cold War commentary.¹³⁸ In keeping with visuals common to the comics of the Second World War, communist villains such as the Mandarin and Wong-Chu were depicted as negative Asian stereotypes as a means of communicating their villainy to the reader.¹³⁹ Likewise, Iron Man's Soviet foes were racialized along similar lines. Unlike Marvel's other comics, until 1970, the Civil Rights Movement or any meaningful acknowledgement of race as a social issue had been notably absent from the pages of *Iron Man*.

Reader reception placed Stark in the midst of a larger conversation regarding the validity of radical dissent often associated with the politics of the “generation gap.” Through the lens of the generation gap, sympathy for and identification with radicalism was overwhelmingly associated with a youth identity, while adults almost necessarily opposed radical demonstration as fundamentally disruptive.¹⁴⁰ The letters sent in to *Iron Man*, however, outline the existence of a greater variety of opinion among young people. Published

¹³⁶ Charles Henebry, “Socking It to Shell Head,” in *The Ages of Iron Man*, ed. Joseph R. Darwoski (McFarland & Company, 2015), 104.

¹³⁷ Julian C. Chambliss, “War Machine: Blackness, Power, and Identity in Iron Man,” in *The Ages of Iron Man*, ed. Joseph J. Darwoski (McFarland & Company, 2015), 150.

¹³⁸ Chambliss, “War Machine,” 149

¹³⁹ Paul Hirsch, “‘This Is Our Enemy’: The Writers’ War Board and Representations of Race in Comic Books, 1942–1945,” *Pacific Historical Review* 83, no. 3 (November 2012): 452.

¹⁴⁰ Seth E. Blumenthal, “Children of the ‘Silent Majority’: Richard Nixon’s Young Voters for the President, 1972,” *Journal of Policy History* 27, no. 2 (March 2, 2015): 338.

side by side and seemingly in dialogue with each other, letters from Andy Feeny of Detroit, Michigan and Ralph Hensley of Cincinnati, Ohio exemplify the political diversity displayed by Iron Man's readership. "In one way, Firebrand is 'right on'—and nobody illustrates his point better than Tony Stark," writes Feeny as he chastises Stark for wondering how someone like Firebrand came into existence, "stop wondering, Tony—your own munitions factory is the one place that comes to mind... while Firebrand was marching, trying to bring about a more peaceful world, Stark Industries was probably building weapons for Vietnam, where we 'destroyed a city in order to save it.'"¹⁴¹ Published below Feeny's, Hensley's letter espoused the opposite, writing "as far as I'm concerned, [Firebrand] is indeed a villain. The law was made for all people to obey, but the rioters, regardless of their reasons, were breaking the law... although the people had justified reasons, rioting was not the justified way, and eventually they wised-up to Firebrand's warped reasoning."¹⁴² Published a few issues later, a third letter from J.J. Friel of Lansing, Michigan expressed great affinity for and identification with Firebrand, writing that militant radicals represent "intensely moral people... who have only with great regret concluded that violent revolution is necessary... I just hope you believe what Iron Man says in the last two panels—that Firebrand had to come into existence."¹⁴³ Regardless of their disagreement, all three authors signed their letters with an expression of affection for both Marvel and Iron Man.¹⁴⁴

Much can be gleaned from reader letters regarding Firebrand, not the least of which being the complexity of youth experience through a period of political upheaval. The letters from Friel, Hensley, and Feeny all narrate a sort of social transformation characterized by historian Seth Blumenthal as a political realignment of large swaths of youth opinion that

¹⁴¹ Andy Feeny, "Sock It to Shell-Head," in *Iron Man #31* (Marvel Comics, 1970).

¹⁴² Ralph Hensley, "Sock it to Shell-Head" in *Iron Man #31* (Marvel Comics, 1970)

¹⁴³ J.J. Friel, "Sock It to Shell-Head," in *Iron Man #33* (Marvel Comics, 1970).

¹⁴⁴ According to another letter from a reader, a copy of what was likely either *Iron Man #25* or *Iron Man #27* was gifted to Florida Governor Claud Kirk by one of his daughters. The claim is somewhat ambiguous as it cannot be independently verified, but at minimum, the letter highlights the political lens through which the series was interpreted.

resulted from the events of the late 1960s; for many, previous ideological allegiances to the Democratic party detached during this period, and some—like the more radical Friel and the more conservative Hensley—either adopted an independent political identity, or defected to the ‘law and order’ politics of the “silent majority.”¹⁴⁵ Whereas the Iron Man of the 1960s had fielded letters readers aligned with his anti-communism, the explosion of discordant reader opinion reflected larger shifts and fractures in youth political culture in the early 1970s. Ironically, far from being united under a banner of revolutionary dissent as many in the political mainstream had feared, Richard Nixon’s 1972 presidential campaign won a majority of the under-thirty vote.¹⁴⁶ While leftist youth radicalism was a visible preoccupation of establishment politicians, by the end of 1970, many young people were shifting to the right. The treatment of Firebrand proves a particularly salient means of tracing this shift, as it was, in part, anxieties surrounding black radicalism among white voters that informed the flight toward Nixon’s ‘domestic detente’ agenda in 1972.¹⁴⁷

Readers praised Iron Man’s return to political commentary. “Lately, it seems to me that Marvel seems to be really telling it like it is,” wrote one reader, “I am 19 and I am becoming concerned with whether or not I will have a world in which to bring up my children. So, keep socking it to them and you won't lose this fan.”¹⁴⁸ Yet the issue of Vietnam and Stark’s endorsement of the conflict represented a sizable elephant in the room. Marvel attempted to manage this tacitly, as both of Stark’s encounters with domestic unrest and environmentalism had reoriented Stark’s wealth—and with it, the character of Stark Industries—away from an association with munitions manufacturing. While Marvel’s attempt to recharacterize Stark as a socially involved, domestic hero had been valiant, the core of his character remained global anti-communism, the military-industrial complex, and the war in

¹⁴⁵ Seth Blumenthal, *Children of the Silent Majority: Young Voters and the Rise of the Republican Party, 1968-1980* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press Of Kansas, 2018), 6.

¹⁴⁶ Blumenthal, “Children of the ‘Silent Majority,’” 338.

¹⁴⁷ Blumenthal, *Children of the Silent Majority*, 5.

¹⁴⁸ Paul de Pastine, “Sock It to Shell-Head,” in *Iron Man #33* (Marvel Comics, 1970).

Vietnam. As anti-war sentiment reached the height of its popularity following the expansion of American involvement into Cambodia and the killing of student protestors on the campuses of Kent State University and Jackson State College, many readers were not ready to let Stark, or Marvel, ignore what Iron Man symbolized.

By late 1970, readers had begun to flood ‘Sock it to Shell-Head’ with concern that, without a “pretty big restructuring of his life,” Tony Stark could be “classified as an enemy of the people.”¹⁴⁹ While domestic support for involvement in Vietnam had been dropping somewhat consistently since 1968, only in the summer of 1970 did polling show that a majority of American popular opinion had turned decisively against the war.¹⁵⁰ Such a shift in both the sentiments of Iron Man’s readership and approval of the war came in the wake of the killing of student anti-war protestors in May of 1970. Despite the absence of a linkage between the violence against student protestors and the change in popular opinion, Iron Man’s readers and their subsequent impact upon Tony Stark’s development narrate the profound impact that such violence had upon young people who were associated with a ‘youth’ identity.¹⁵¹ Between 1970 and 1973, Iron Man’s readers, and subsequently his narratives, conflated a navigation of the adult/youth divide and domestic, anti-democratic violence with a re-evaluation of the series’ Cold War narrative.

The polarized reaction to the National Guard's killing of four student protestors on Ohio’s Kent State University campus represented the zenith—or the nadir—of “generation gap” politics. Drawing from interviews with students involved in the incident, author James A. Michener characterizes the reaction of many adults to the shooting as having been remarkably unsympathetic to the protestors. Few students escaped “a harsh confrontation with public opinion,” as they recalled that many adults—a “depressing amount” of whom

¹⁴⁹ J.J. Friel, “Sock It to Shell-Head,” in *Iron Man #33*

¹⁵⁰ Lydia Saad, “Gallup Vault: Hawks vs. Doves on Vietnam,” Gallup, May 24, 2016, <https://news.gallup.com/vault/191828/gallup-vault-hawks-doves-vietnam.aspx>.

¹⁵¹ Joseph A. Fry, “Unpopular Messengers: Student Opposition to the Vietnam War,” in *The War That Never Ends: New Perspectives on the Vietnam War*, ed. David L. Anderson (University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 236.

being the parents of the protesting students—felt sincerely that it may have “been better for the country if [they] had all been mowed down.”¹⁵² Though such sentiments were not reflective of the nuances of public opinion regarding Kent State, the way in which the incident was perceived in its aftermath emphasized the volatility of domestic political division.¹⁵³ Though concern with the production of weaponry and the military industry had been well represented within the anti-war movement through the 1960s—particularly regarding the brutality of chemical weapons such as Napalm and Agent Orange—the use of violence against students was emblematic of the extent to which a sense of violence and militarism had bled from the war in Vietnam into domestic US society.

The impression that the Vietnam War had come “home” complicated Marvel’s attempt to reframe Stark as a socially conscious superhero absent an acknowledgement of his role as a military industrialist. Indeed, as one *Iron Man* reader contended and many more agreed, “if Tony Stark really feels the social concern he seems to feel, he should get out of the ‘defense’ business.”¹⁵⁴ Through much of 1970 and 1971, Stark’s narrative entered a period of soul searching and personal insecurity against a backdrop of reader debate regarding what the future of the character could look like—if he was to have a future at all. Despite the series’ continued avoidance of the subject, incredulous readers inquired, “when are you going to admit that Tony Stark produces devices to kill people?” or, in the words of one reader, “IS TONY STARK... A PIG?[sic]”¹⁵⁵ While some felt that Stark had already expressed far too much sympathy for dissidents—one even asked if readers should ally themselves with “the marchers who shout peace but blow up a police station or ROTC building to prove it”—the most outspoken letters were from readers who felt that Stark could no longer maintain both

¹⁵² James A. Michener, *Kent State: What Happened and Why* (New York: Random House, 1971), 276.

¹⁵³ In a Gallup poll conducted in the immediate aftermath of the shooting, 58% of respondents blamed the college students for the incident, while only 11% blamed the National Guard.

¹⁵⁴ Andy Feeny, “Sock It to Shell-Head,” in *Iron Man #31*

¹⁵⁵ Paul Standford, “Sock It to Shell-Head,” in *Iron Man #38* (Marvel Comics, 1971).

the identities of a hero and a military industrialist.¹⁵⁶ Testimony to the extent of the debate, a sentiment took hold among some long time readers that Tony Stark was simply too much of a relic from the days when superheroes “fought commies” and that, with his occupation as a military-industrialist being too central to his character to change, the best course correction Marvel could enact would be to kill him.¹⁵⁷ In turn, others advocated for Stark’s death out of what they articulated as a humane impulse; one reader wrote they felt it would be a kinder fate than the “guilt-ridden, self-abasing, self-flagulating” “depths of mental degradation” that Iron Man had been brought to.¹⁵⁸

By the end of 1971, Marvel editorial had decided upon a new direction for Tony Stark. Beginning in *Iron Man #41*, Stark underwent a slow disavowal of the political establishment largely by making clear his identification with—or at least sympathies for—the politics of ‘youth.’ Made possible by the revisions to the comics code that had taken place earlier in the year, *Iron Man #42* depicted an encounter between Iron Man and a US Senator in which the Senator accuses Iron Man of belonging to “a breed of people in this country today who like to make their own law-- people who want to destroy the government that made America great.” Righteously indignant, Iron Man retorts, “I thought the people were what made this country great.”¹⁵⁹ Soon after in *Iron Man #45*, during an attempted corporate coup of Stark Industries by the company’s war mongering shareholders, a group of students protesting outside the factory were fired upon by a character named the Guardsman—who, during this period, was Stark’s closest friend—wielding weaponry that had been personally created for him by Stark. Amid cries of “he’s not breathing!” and “it’s another Kent State!”, Iron Man arrives on the scene and attempts to manage the confrontation.¹⁶⁰ Disarmed when a

¹⁵⁶ Jim Griffin, “Sock It to Shell-Head,” in *Iron Man #36* (Marvel Comics, 1971). Also notable is that most readers who disagreed with the increasingly socially liberal ethos of Iron Man wrote in to express a vague displeasure and disillusionment with the state of the series, or to ask that politics be kept out of it entirely.

¹⁵⁷ David Copson, “Sock It to Shell-Head,” in *Iron Man #47* (Marvel Comics, 1972).

¹⁵⁸ Bettina C. Helms, “Sock It to Shell-Head,” in *Iron Man #42* (Marvel Comics, 1971).

¹⁵⁹ Gerry Conway, *Iron Man #42* (Marvel Comics, 1971).

¹⁶⁰ Gary Friedrich, *Iron Man #45* (Marvel Comics, 1971).

student shouts that violence and protest are the only ways “we can make your generation hear us” and faced with the Guardsman's refusal to back down, Stark is forced to kill his friend in order to protect the students.¹⁶¹ The violence on US soil which Stark’s weapons had facilitated is treated by the comic as the moral amalgamation of his Cold War effort: the weapons which had been intended for use against the nation’s enemies had been turned upon those who Stark had sworn to protect. Grief stricken and wrought with guilt over the realization of his responsibility for what the nation had become, Stark asks aloud “must there be an Iron Man?”¹⁶² The storyline culminates in the shuttering of Stark Industries as a munitions manufacturing company, as Stark promises to invest only in “peaceful” technologies and goes forward as “a soldier in the battle for human rights [and] human dignity.”¹⁶³

Stopping just short of an outright condemnation of the Vietnam War, Iron Man’s repentant turn away from munitions manufacturing inaugurated the end of an era. The moral authority that Iron Man had represented and modeled for readers throughout the 1960s had been challenged and ultimately defeated by the readers themselves. A far cry from the early 1960s, among the series’ readership there was no longer any consensus view of the American identity for Iron Man to uphold. In recontextualizing his liberalism as existing not in conjunction with, but in measured opposition to, the political establishment as of 1972, and by emphasising Stark’s sense of horror regarding what the nation had become, *Iron Man* attempted to strike one of the few unifying sentiments that remained among young people: grief. For almost a decade, young people had shouldered the weight of domestic and foreign conflict. The rhetoric of youth had animated an anti-communist foreign policy that saw young

¹⁶¹ Gary Friedrich, *Iron Man #46* (Marvel Comics, 1972).

¹⁶² Roy Thomas, *Iron Man #47* (Marvel Comics, 1972).

¹⁶³ Roy Thomas, *Iron Man #50* (Marvel Comics, 1972). Notably, Tony’s newfound affinity for peace and “human dignity” was a direct reference to Richard Hawkins published in *Iron Man #37*, in which he responded to Andy Feeny’s letter and agreed that Tony Stark should give up being a “merchant of death,” and promote “human dignity.”

people bear the brunt of the draft, or become foot soldiers for domestic social change while the very identity of being “young” became a scapegoat for the failure of the American effort.¹⁶⁴ Regardless of whether a young person had been a part of the protest movements, reacted against them, or done nothing at all, by 1972, the past decade had come to represent a long and traumatic adolescence. While couched in liberal language, the basic proposition behind Iron Man’s rejection of the Cold War consensus was broad in its appeal: the violence and upheaval of the past decade had broken something in the nation, and there were few Cold War illusions left to maintain.



Figure 5.0. Iron Man is confronted by young protesters in Iron Man #45.

¹⁶⁴ Jacqueline E. Lawson, ““Old Kids,”” 28.

For some, Iron Man's disavowal of the political establishment went too far. "Iron Man is a sad parody of the character you intended at his inception," opined one reader, while another complained that Stark had "become a weakling who grovels at the baddie's feet."¹⁶⁵ For the most part, however, Iron Man's new direction was met with non-engagement from its readership. Ironically, while Stark's measured rejection of the Cold War consensus represented a reassertion of reader control over the long contested political narrative of comic books, there appeared to be few left who cared. Comic book sales throughout the industry had dropped dramatically by the mid-1970s, and *Iron Man's* previously overflowing letters section was often reduced to a single page, not entirely full of text.¹⁶⁶ The sense of malaise and aimlessness that had overtaken the comic book industry in the post-Vietnam period was part of a larger phenomenon of youth disengagement from political life. Much like the domestic divisions brought about by the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal and Gerald Ford's subsequent pardoning of Richard Nixon only further soured many young people on the political establishment.¹⁶⁷ Rather than the outward facing activist impulse that had animated the political engagement of previous decades, young people turned inwards in the 1970s. This realignment of sentiment, perhaps for the first time since 1945, cast out the comic book heroes who had fought for a better, more "just" world. Through the remainder of the decade, superhero comics found that not only had their political commentary lost much of its audience, but that a fundamental sense of social optimism no longer animated its readers.¹⁶⁸

Even with the unfortunate state of the industry through the 1970s, *Iron Man* floundered more than most. Following the character's reformation in 1972, Stark struggled to find a heroic identity able to resonate with young audiences. He had pledged that he would

¹⁶⁵ Jeses Clough, "'Sock It to Shell-Head,'" in *Iron Man #51* (Marvel Comics, 1972); Joey Cavaleri, "'Sock It to Shell-Head,'" in *Iron Man #54* (Marvel Comics, 1972).

¹⁶⁶ John M. Vohlidka, "Countdown to #100 Escapist Heroism and the Challenges of Modernity in the Late 1970s," in *The Ages of Iron Man*, ed. Joseph R. Darwoski (McFarland & Company, 2015), 119.

¹⁶⁷ Seth Blumenthal, *Children of the Silent Majority*, 357.

¹⁶⁸ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 245.

become a soldier in the battle for “human dignity,” but what, in actuality, could that look like? How would Iron Man be able to fight any battle if his weaponry only recalled the violence of Vietnam, and his heroism lacked an identity outside of global anti-communism? Storylines through the mid-decade saw Stark attempt to engage in vague political commentary while distancing himself from reality. Unlike Captain America, whose reaction to Watergate and the post-Vietnam period entailed direct conflict with Richard Nixon himself and the temporary abandonment of the ‘Captain America’ mantle, Iron Man’s primary nemesis was an other dimensional version of then-President Gerald Ford named King Jerald.¹⁶⁹ The storyline was bizarre, and only significant for its clear communication of the distance from reality with which Marvel felt Stark’s heroism had to operate at. Heroes such as Captain America—whose identity had not been born from the politics of the Cold War—could more easily confront political commentary, while Iron Man had yet to identify a form of heroism that allowed him to move past his association with the Vietnam War. In a sense, *Iron Man*’s aimlessness and absurdity resonated with the mood of the period. Amid a decade characterized by its redefinition of the Cold War status-quo through Watergate, the Church Committee revelations, the opening of relations with China, detente with the Soviet Union, and the spread of terrorism, Iron Man’s feeling of disorientation in a post-consensus US mirrored a lack of a national direction more broadly.¹⁷⁰

If Tony Stark’s heroism was not well suited to the 1970s, his personal character, ironically, was. Contrary to popular perception, Stark was not portrayed as a wartime combatant prior to 1975. Rather, his role had been that of a distinctly civilian industrialist who had remained relatively removed from a traditional combat experience.¹⁷¹ Following the

¹⁶⁹ Mike Friedrich, *Iron Man #80* (Marvel Comics, 1975).

¹⁷⁰ Thomas Borstelmann, “Crosscurrents of Crisis,” in *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality*, ed. Thomas Borstelmann (Princeton University Press, 2011), 34.

¹⁷¹ For an alternative reading of Iron Man’s symbolic representation of a Vietnam veteran, see Craig This, “Tony Stark: Disabled Vietnam Veteran?,” in *The Ages of Iron Man*, ed. Joseph J. Darwoski (McFarland & Company, 2015).

withdrawal of American troops in 1973, however, Stark increasingly took on a characterization that confronted his involvement with the conflict by colouring him as a combatant. *Iron Man #60* depicts an exchange between Stark and a nurse in which the nurse, almost unprompted, informs Stark with blatant disgust that “no amount of publicized ‘re-ordered priorities’ will wash away the Asian blood your weapons shed.”¹⁷² The encounter leaves a repentant, but uncertain, Stark wondering if his legacy was “to be constantly criticized for doing what at the time I believed right?”¹⁷³

The series’ most direct confrontation of Tony Stark’s role in the Vietnam War came in *Iron Man #78*. The issue is framed through Stark’s internal monologue; looking in the mirror and finding Iron Man staring back at him, he reflects,

And what about you, Tony Stark? Once you were do or die for America and mom’s apple pie!...As Iron Man you beat the commies for democracy without ever questioning just whose democracy you were serving . . . or just what those you served intended to do with the world once you’d saved it for them. Vietnam raised all those questions . . . like: what right had we to be there in the first place?¹⁷⁴

The story then flashes back to Vietnam. Iron Man had intended to deliver one of Stark Industry’s new weapons—a satellite guided laser able to lock on to the body heat of large masses of troops—to the military, but witnesses the squad of American troops die in a surprise attack. Blinded by his rage, Iron Man almost kills a young Vietnamese boy before seeing that the boy was, in fact, blind. Attempting to bring the child home, Iron Man finds that his heat seeking laser had killed everyone in the boy’s village. The issue concludes with Iron Man’s creation of a mass grave for the villagers, the epitaph inscribed on top of which reading only “WHY?”¹⁷⁵ Set in 1969, the flashback to Vietnam was vaguely analogous to the My Lai massacre, and represented the series’ first direct condemnation of the Vietnam War. Published in June of 1975, mere months following the fall of Saigon, the narrative was

¹⁷² Mike Friedrich, *Iron Man #60* (Marvel Comics, 1973).

¹⁷³ Friedrich, *Iron Man #60*

¹⁷⁴ Bill Mantlo, *Iron Man #78* (Marvel Comics, 1975).

¹⁷⁵ Mantlo, *Iron Man #78*.

certainly topical. With distance from the domestic upheaval of the early 1970s, *Iron Man* could deal with the nature of the conflict as a theatre of atrocity. Far from justifying US involvement or attempting to present the conflict with any meaningful moral narrative or conclusion, *Iron Man* simply asked, “what these people died for.”¹⁷⁶ The issue did much to contextualize Stark’s alienation from a coherent sense of national or heroic identity that had permeated *Iron Man* after 1972, and somewhat self consciously reflected upon the character’s role in mythologizing the conflict. Eloquently put by scholar Jacqueline E. Lawson, the experience of Vietnam was hostile to mythologies akin to the one put forth by the Iron Man of the 1960s; not only did Vietnam teach that “‘John Wayne’ does die, and when he dies, he cries out for his mother”—but the brutal, endless uncertainty of the conflict made it difficult to maintain a sense of what exactly he had died, or killed, for.¹⁷⁷

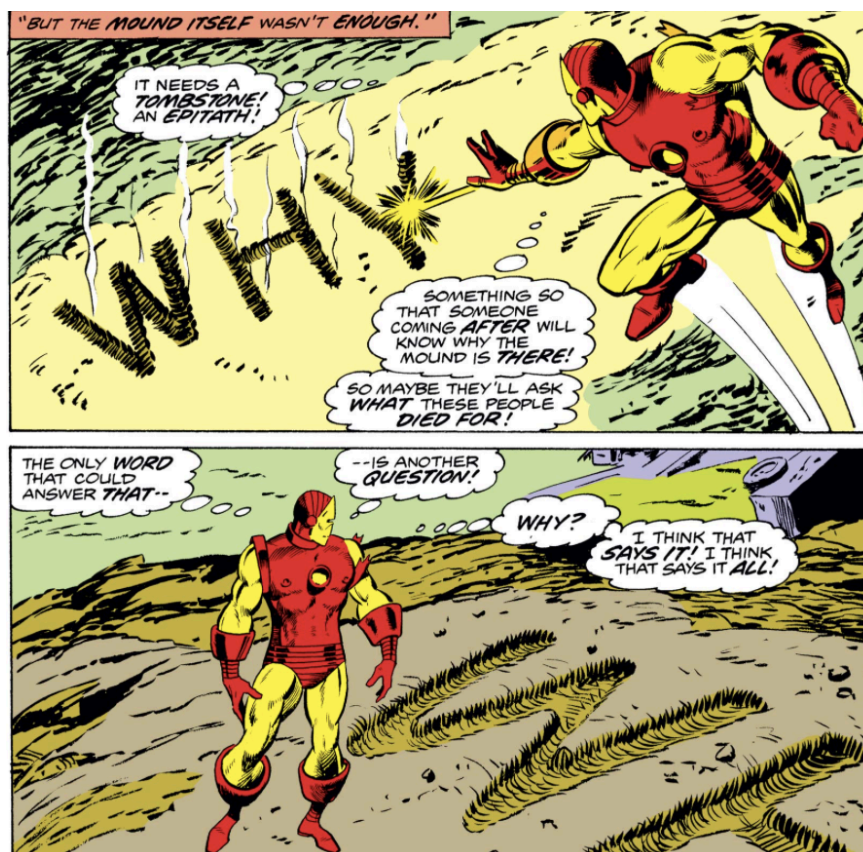


Figure 5.0. Iron Man inscribes the mass grave of the dead villagers in *Iron Man* #78.

¹⁷⁶ Mantlo, *Iron Man* #78.

¹⁷⁷ Jacqueline E. Lawson, “‘Old Kids,’” 32.

A story that, in 1971, would have been unthinkable in its candor and willing condemnation of the Vietnam War garnered little reader response in 1975. As rapidly as political polarization had burst onto the pages of ‘Sock It to Shell-Head,’ it was gone. Once the subject of contested conceptions of national and political identity, the character of Iron Man was left almost entirely unharassed by the constituencies he had represented for over a decade—and it certainly wasn’t because he embodied any sort of consensus able to ‘clear the board’ regarding his involvement in Vietnam. Paradoxically, as the guilt and trauma from Stark’s involvement in the conflict became a permanent, central part of his character in the 1970s and informed his descent into alcoholism by 1979, the very readers who would have been most interested in shaping such a storyline in accordance with their personal worldview were nowhere to be found.

Indeed, part of what had been responsible for such a change was the aforementioned desire to turn inward, and to ‘close the door’ on Vietnam that had taken hold through the 1970s.¹⁷⁸ Political disaffection and a fundamental lack of trust or faith in institutions remained an animating part of youth political identity, but absent the Vietnam War and a sense of hope for social change, many simply disengaged from visible participation in political life.¹⁷⁹ Looking at superhero comics as a form of youth political engagement and activism, however, may betray the occurrence of a more fundamental shift that took place in the early 1970s. The ratification of the Twenty-Sixth Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1971 lowered the voting age to eighteen from twenty-one, and enfranchised a large part of the older youth constituency. The amendment extended formal political representation to the young people who had been among the most directly impacted by the political discourses of the 1960s, and perhaps indirectly, removed their need to seek or contest the indirect political

¹⁷⁸ Thomas Borstelmann, “Crosscurrents of Crisis,” 27

¹⁷⁹ Stephen Tuck, “Introduction: Reconsidering the 1970s — the 1960s to a Disco Beat?,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 43, no. 4 (October 2008): 617.

representation offered by the Iron Man comics. With an inward shifting culture, a desire to close the door on Vietnam, and perhaps a reduced utility as a forum for political discourse, Iron Man's importance as a political figure diminished through the late 1970s.

Conclusion

“Indeed, because childhood has been rendered ‘apolitical’—or beyond politics—the political world is understood to be an adult world, even though youthful voices and images regularly advance or challenge various political agendas, and policy decisions bear heavily on young Americans.”

- Susan Eckelmann Berghel, Sara Fieldston, Paul M. Renfro, *Growing Up American*¹⁸⁰

Iron Man would never again reach the same height of political relevance among young people. Through the 1980s, Marvel sought to distance Iron Man from the conflict that had characterized the first two decades of his existence. As Tony Stark’s post-Vietnam malaise gave way to a somewhat reconstituted sense of heroism, the Vietnam War was slowly replaced inside of Marvel’s comics with the fictional Siancong War. No longer did Iron Man’s origin harken back to the Cold War consensus from which his character had been born, as his narrative shifted away from the alignment with the real world that had made him such a powerful political figure for his readership. The Iron Man of the 1980s continued to address issues of environmentalism, disability, and addiction, but abandoned the Cold War commentary and concern with foreign policy that had defined his character through the 1960s and into the 1970s. Despite continuing to play a role in shaping his audiences’ sense of national narrative and identity, much of the direct and urgent political debate that had defined the relationship between Iron Man and his readership seemed to become a relic of an era in which the politics of youth had directly animated broader cultural division within the United States.¹⁸¹

The function of Iron Man can thus be understood as having been a nexus at which youth culture and politics could meet, interact with, and enact change upon ‘adult’ politics.

¹⁸⁰ Susan Eckelmann Berghel, Sara Fieldston, and Paul M. Renfro, *Growing up American: Youth and Politics since 1945* (University of Georgia Press, 2019), 2.

¹⁸¹ It would take until the Civil War storyline in 2006 for his character to be at the center of political controversy again, but this controversy was largely among comic book fans, not a larger youth constituency.

At the behest of his creators, the Iron Man of the early 1960s espoused the virtues of global anticommunism and meaningfully shaped the narrative of the Vietnam War, and the US Cold War effort more broadly, for his young readership. Through the slow dissolution of the Cold War foreign policy consensus in the mid to late 1960s, the character remained an icon of US consensus culture and stalwart global anticommunist, even as large parts of his readership fell out of step with his politics. It is striking, then, that Iron Man's relevance to youth did not end, or even decline, there. Rather, young people from across the political spectrum treated Iron Man as a form of indirect, proxy political representation. The debates that enlivened the pages of 'Sock It to Shell-Head' through the late 1960s and into the early 1970s animate the extent to which the series' readers cared that Iron Man represent, or at least align, with their personal politics. For the young people involved, the direction that Iron Man would take in either disavowing, or maintaining, the politics of the Cold War consensus that had led the nation to war in Vietnam took on a significance that extended beyond mere investment in the character's narrative. By having a shaping impact on Iron Man and the politics that he espoused, youth could create their own political representation.

Iron Man's symbolic significance thus extends beyond his status as a comic book hero. The contest that surrounded Iron Man and the character of his heroism was one that directly pertained to his reader's political identity, as both the series and its readership struggled to define what it meant to be a morally exemplary American superhero during a period of political division and conflict. Through the dialogue between the series' readership and the comic, Iron Man became a forum in which youth attempted to define and seek representation of their political identity as one worthy of redefining US heroism in a post-consensus culture.

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