

**Captain America, Watergate, and the Falcon: Rediscovering the American Dream?**

Michael Ahmed

**Introduction**

The comic book superhero Captain America, aka. Steve Rogers, made his first appearance in *Captain America Comics #1*, cover dated March 1941, published by Timely Comics, the predecessor to the Marvel Comics Group. Although America had not entered the war, Captain America's creators Jack Kirby and Joe Simon suggested to Martin Goodman, the publisher of Timely Comics, that their new superhero 'do battle with the Nazis', to which Goodman 'enthusiastically agreed' – the cover of the very first issue depicted the superhero punching Hitler on the jaw: 'Smashing Thru, Captain America came face to face with Hitler....' (Wright 2008: 76). At a time when popular superheroes like Superman and Batman were fighting aliens, outlandish super-villains or grotesque mobsters, Kirby and Simon were committed to showing Captain America's war time exploits. For example in their second issue, Captain America and Bucky, his superhero teenage sidekick, infiltrated a concentration camp in the Black Forest, and once again came face to face with Hitler. Subsequent issues with titles like 'Trapped in the Nazi Stronghold', 'Blitzkrieg in Berlin', and 'Tojo's Terror Masters' give a flavour of Captain America's crime fighting career at this time. Captain America was not only a potent comic book symbol of American armed forces ready to fight against fascism but more importantly, as Kirby later recalled, 'he symbolized the American Dream [...] Captain America was an outpouring of my own patriotism' (Wright 2008: 76).

This paper will primarily focus on comic book writer Steve Englehart's tenure on the comic book during the early 1970s, and in particular a storyline that reinterpreted the real-life Watergate scandal. Englehart's storyline culminated in an attempted coup of the American government, the realisation by many of

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the characters (and readers) that the American dream was broken, and finally, Captain America's renunciation of his superhero identity. This paper will argue that Captain America's renewed relationship with the American Dream and his often complex relationship with his African American partner, the Falcon, has largely been forgotten in the light of the superhero's recent interpretation on the big screen and modern storylines. Moreover, I argue that their relationship offers a commentary on the influence of the sixties counterculture and the contribution of African Americans which is often ignored within the comic book medium.

Captain America's adventures continued to be published following the end of the war - however, the popularity of the character began to diminish, and the book was cancelled in the early 1950s. Following the revival of American superhero comics in the early 1960s, a decision was made by Stan Lee, the editor at Marvel Comics, to revive the character. As a result, Captain America was reintroduced into the Marvel Universe in the superhero team-up comic book, *The Avengers* in 1964. The history of Captain America was later revised, following his resurrection, to explain what had happened to the character after World War II, and to explain his infrequent appearances in the Marvel Universe during the 1950s. According to this revision, following a fight with the Nazi super villain Baron Zemo in the final stages of the war, Captain America appeared to die in an explosion along with Bucky. However, in the ret-conned version Captain America's body was frozen in ice and he survived in a state of suspended animation. The death of Bucky remained part of the character's subsequent storylines until his resurrection as a super villain called the Winter Soldier almost forty years later. Following his discovery by the Avengers, almost twenty years after the war had ended, Captain America decided to reclaim his superhero identity as Captain America and continue his crime fighting career. Captain America's sporadic appearances during the

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1950s were later explained as other superheroes adopting the identity of Captain America.

Following the revival of the character, Captain America's new adventures rarely approached or commented on the differences between the superhero's now out-dated idealism and the changes in post-war American society and culture. The comic book, as plotted by Stan Lee, primarily increased the character's angst, along the lines of the same company's teenager superhero Spiderman, and emphasised Captain America's guilt over the death of his crime-fighting partner Bucky. In the mid-1960s, and to exploit the then current popularity of spy films and television shows, Captain America became closely associated with the espionage organisation S.H.I.E.L.D.<sup>1</sup> The threats to America now came from super secret, technology-based organisations like A.I.M. (Advanced Idea Mechanics) and Hydra; the comic book also featured the resurrection of Captain America's wartime enemy the Red Skull, who spent most of the 1960s planning a return of the Third Reich.

In 1972, Steve Englehart took over the writing of the comic, and introduced storylines that involved politics, society, culture and the influence of the media, as well as the role of Captain America within modern day America. Furthermore, Englehart allowed his portrayal of Captain America, as a representation of the ideals of the American Dream, to offer a more significant and complicated contrast to the ideals of the 1960s American counterculture. Although the comic books did not involve Captain America directly in the Vietnam War, other social issues were examined following the introduction of a black superhero, the Falcon. Captain America's absence from Vietnam was explained by Stan Lee:

we treat these characters sort of tongue-in-cheek and we get a lot of laughs out of them [...] I don't know if it's in good taste to

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take something as serious as the situation in Vietnam and put a character like Captain America [into it] ... we would have to start treating him differently and taking the whole thing more seriously, which we are not prepared to do' (Howe 2012: 4).

The Falcon's appearance in the comic book allowed the writers to deal directly with the social problems and issues of African Americans. Moreover, Captain America's relationship with the Falcon highlighted some of the problems the character had in trying to reconcile the ideals of the American Dream with the social realities of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In addition, racial problems were brought into focus by the Falcon's civilian identity as Sam Wilson, a social worker living in Harlem, and the difficulties Wilson had in resolving his African American identity alongside his partnership with the white Captain America.

### **Captain America and the American Dream**

As mentioned above, Jack Kirby intended Captain America to epitomise the values of the American Dream, as espoused, in the main, by writer and historian James Truslow Adams. According to Adams the American Dream is:

[T]hat dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. [...] It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (Adams 1931: 214-215)

An example of Adams's expression of the American Dream and how it has permeated into American culture and society can be found in a recent article by David Kamp. Following the 2008 financial crisis, Kamp argued that, 'as a people, we Americans are unique in having such a thing, a more or less Official National Dream' (Kamp 2009). Kamp was articulating one of the unique characteristics of Captain America as a combination of the defining features of the American Dream 'that include "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness"' – features which are intrinsically intertwined with some interpretations of American society and identity (ibid.). It could be argued that Kamp's articulation was an attempt to offer a generalized representation of what the American Dream might mean for some.

From 1941 until the cancellation of the comic in the early 1950s, Captain America embodied freedom, liberty and the forces of good, as defined by the American Dream. Peggy Carter, Captain America's wartime girlfriend, who was given a more prominent role in the comic following the superhero's resurrection in the 1960s, makes this clear to the superhero when she states that he is a:

symbol of the country that's given everything it has to light the torch of liberty throughout the world! For nearly two hundred years, the spirit of freedom has never been forgotten here...and for that reason, countless men and women, crushed under the brutal heel of totalitarianism, have been able to keep alive their dreams of liberation! [...] you symbolize all of it in you own way...and you're the only one who does! (Englehart, 1974c)

Captain America, according to Peggy Carter, is the living embodiment of everything that America stands for, a point other Marvel writers have tried to

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make in the character's appearance in other comics. For example, during an guest appearance in *Daredevil*, Captain America points out, 'I'm loyal to nothing, General...except the dream' (Miller, 1986). Nonetheless, Peggy's viewpoint had become increasingly anachronistic, as Dave Farr commenting on the comic's 200<sup>th</sup> Edition noted in the letter's page:

The saga ends, and Cap is once more the symbol of America. In the 60's, Cap was out of place, out of touch, searching for identity and meaning, In the 70's, Cap's social conscience was awakened [...] And now, in 1976, Cap once again stands for America, full of silly slogans of "200 years", stuck in the past when the future requires so much attention (Kirby, 1976b).

As mentioned earlier, Captain America's career following his revival, largely ignored the social problems of the 1960s, as well as the influence of the counterculture on American society. As a result, Captain America towards the end of the 1960s began to look outdated and out of touch with contemporary American society. It was only from 1969, after the introduction of the Falcon, that the comic book began to focus on the black experience in America. Although the Falcon was not the first black superhero – Marvel Comics had introduced the African superhero the Black Panther in July 1966 – the Falcon was the first African American superhero to appear regularly in a monthly title, produced by a major comic book company. Introduced in *Captain America* #117 September 1969, the Falcon eventually became the co-star and crime-fighting partner of Captain America in 1971, and the comic book was renamed *Captain America and the Falcon* #134. It is worth pointing out that a year earlier at DC Comics, Marvel's main comic book competitor, the problems of racism had appeared in *Green Lantern*. Starting from #76, the writer Dennis O'Neil teamed the cosmic superhero with the more down to earth Green Arrow, and began a long series of adventures across America where the

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superheroes encountered numerous examples of social injustice. This approach grounded the comic book in contemporary America, and attempted to bring a greater awareness to the readers of some of the problems of the country, as the Green Arrow pointed out to the Green Lantern:

And remember America. It's a good country... beautiful... fertile... and terribly sick! There are children dying, honest people cowering in fear, disillusioned kids ripping up campuses. On the streets of Memphis a good black man died... and in Los Angeles, a good white man fell. Some hideous moral cancer is rotting our very souls (O'Neil, 1970a).

To reinforce the point, the issue featured flashback appearances of Martin Luther King Jr., and Robert Kennedy, and highlighted the injustice of slum tenements and the black population of America. Other stories included a mountain messiah preparing for a race war, the exploitation of Native Americans, rampant consumerism, and drug addiction in which the Green Arrow discovers that his teenage partner Speedy has become a heroin addict.

O'Neil was one of a new generation of comic book writers who began working in comic books towards the end of the 1960s, and these writers brought with them a political and social awareness that they gradually began to incorporate into their work. At Marvel Comics, after Stan Lee began to become less involved with the production of the comic books in favour of a move to Hollywood and public speaking, writers such as Steve Gerber, Jim Starlin, Don McGregor, Marv Wolfman, and Steve Englehart brought with them a countercultural sensibility that embraced drugs, rock music, psychedelics,

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politics, and anti-establishment idealism. For example, Gerber approached political satire in *Howard the Duck* and existential head-switching and media manipulation in *The Defenders*; Starlin wrote about religious intolerance in *Warlock*, and questioned the nature of reality in a series of drug-influenced, psychedelic adventures in *Dr. Strange*; and McGregor in *Jungle Action* brought into the comic the African superhero Black Panther, in stories that dealt with masculinity, patriotism, politics in 'the only mainstream American comic book to feature an all-black cast' (Howe, 2012: 133).

Therefore, Englehart's work on Captain America should be viewed in the light of an increasing awareness by younger comic book writers, and an increase in a university-educated readership (Stan Lee's public speaking role at this point included a very popular tour of American universities), of the problems in American society that included the on-going war in Vietnam, the political assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X, and the ramifications of the Watergate scandal. Englehart's approach in Captain America was intended to specifically highlight social issues and the problems that he saw within American society. For example, one memorable storyline from this period introduced the Serpent Squad, a fictional representation of the real-life Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA).<sup>2</sup> The Serpent Squad had previously been depicted as a conventional team of super villains with names such as Viper, Eel, Cobra and Princess Python. However, under the leadership of Madame Viper, who kills Viper the Serpent Squad's original leader after freeing him from prison, they become a terrorist organisation intent on destroying capitalism. Madame Python's political creed, explicitly declared as a form of nihilism, is intended to spark a revolution and to bring down Western society. She eventually decides to die a martyr during a police siege, deliberately mirroring the actual death of several members of the SLA during a similar siege in May 1974 (Englehart 1975a).

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Steve Englehart took over the writing responsibilities of Captain America from #153, and the plots shifted from fighting super villains and spies towards an emphasis on realism and social problems. At this point, according to Englehart, *Captain America*, 'was being considered for cancellation when I got it, because it had no reason for existence. Stan Lee had written it for years, and it was clearly his least favourite book; the stories had become not only lackluster [*sic*] but repetitive' (Englehart, 'Captain America 1'). Unable to deal with the war in Vietnam, much to Englehart's dismay - 'here was this guy wearing a flag on his chest, and everybody was embarrassed' - his new stories involved the superheroes in plots about gang warfare within the black community, student unrest, drug culture, as well as highlighting the problems of racial tension, and the effects of urban deprivation and economic recession (Howe, 2012: 142).

Apart from these political storylines, Englehart also wanted to deal with the contradictions of Captain America's 1940s persona from the perspective of the 1970s, as he argued:

The problem across the board at Marvel was that this was the 70s - prime anti-war years - and here was a guy with a flag on his chest who was supposed to represent what most people distrusted. No one knew what to do with him.

Me, I had been honourably discharged from the Army two years earlier as a conscientious objector - but I was supposed to also be a writer. So I did something for the first time that marked everything I've written since. I said, 'Okay, *if* this guy existed, who would *he* be?' Not 'Who am I?', but 'Who is Captain America?' (Englehart, 'Captain America 1')

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Englehart began a long-running story arc about a media campaign to discredit Captain America by the bogus Committee to Regain America's Principles. However, the plan which was originally instigated by the super villain the Viper, rapidly spirals out of control (Englehart 1974a). The American people start to distrust Captain America, and, after fighting to clear his name, the superhero eventually uncovers a plot to take over the country by an organisation called the Secret Empire, led by the mysterious, hooded Number One. Englehart explicitly drew parallels between Number One's plans to corrupt American politics and the Watergate scandal. The story climaxes with Number One's suicide after he is chased into the Whitehouse by Captain America. Although there is no explicit association drawn between Number One and the then President Richard Nixon, Englehart seemed to want the reader to assume that Number One represented the disgraced President. The repercussions for the superhero are immense, and as a result, and after some soul-searching, Captain America decides to renounce his identity:

The government created me in 1941...created me to act as their agent in protecting our country...and over the years, I've done my best! I wasn't perfect...I did things I'm not proud of...but I always tried to serve my country well...and now I find that the government was serving itself. I just don't understand! I just don't understand! (Englehart 1974c).

Captain America's cry that he does not understand how everything he has fought for on behalf of the government has become corrupted seems designed to mirror members of the American public's disbelief at the extent of Nixon's double-dealings and misdemeanours. Furthermore, Captain America's disillusionment with the political establishment is reflected in his new attitude towards heroes and super heroics. He points out to the Falcon, 'How can

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people trust “heroes” any more – and how can I blame them? Maybe hero-worship does as much harm as good’ (Englehart 1974c).

Captain America’s confusion paralleled the shock that reverberated throughout America society following the revelations of Watergate. As Captain America struggled to find a meaning behind his heroism, faith in the political system and the American Dream had suffered severe damage. For Captain America and the readers of the comic book, the values of freedom and liberty that underpinned the American Dream had been shown to be false by the very people that had been selected to uphold those values. If elected politicians had rejected the ideals of America, then what place did Captain America have in supporting those principles? Moreover, if the idealism that had kept Captain America’s relevance alive had disappeared then did this also mean that the American Dream was no longer relevant?

### **Watergate and the American Dream in Crisis: Captain America and the Nomad (The Man without a Country)**

The impact Watergate had on American society at this time should not be underestimated. In August 1974, Nixon was forced to resign following revelations of extraordinary political corruption carried out during his time in office. The Watergate scandal and Nixon’s resignation, as *Time* magazine argued, ‘may have been America’s most traumatic political experience of this century. Such a shock to the political system can affect the nation for years’ (Anonymous 1974a). The scandal included ‘the politicization of federal agencies, misuse of federal funds for private purposes, attempted bribery by milk producers, misprision of felony, subornation of perjury, [and] obstruction of justice’ (Anonymous 1974b)

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What began as a bungled break-in at the Democratic national headquarters, spiralled into a story of 'dirty tricks, political espionage, and financial misconduct [...] President Nixon had spied on his opponents, fiddled his taxes, used public money to improve his homes, abused the intelligence services for political gain, and smeared the reputations of good and honest men' (Sandbrook 2011, p.10). The impact on Englehart was profound:

I had asked myself 'Who is Captain America?', and had found an answer for the man. Thing was, America was moving from the overarching Vietnam War toward the specific crimes of Watergate. I was writing a man who believed in America's highest ideals at a time when America's President was a crook. I could not ignore that. And so, in the Marvel Universe, which so closely resembled our own, Cap [*sic*] followed a criminal conspiracy into the White House and saw the President commit suicide. And that was the end of Captain America... (Englehart, 'Captain America II')

In the same month of Nixon's resignation, Captain America's disenchantment with America's political classes resulted in the resignation of his superhero identity and a return to an ordinary life in his civilian identity as Steve Rogers (Englehart, 1974c). Following Captain America's resignation, the Falcon, 'the guy with second billing – the black guy – was the star of the show. [He] carried on without missing a beat', became the central focus of the comic book (Englehart, 'Captain America III').

Englehart's decision to end the career of Captain America was supported by many readers, who in letters to the comic, revealed their feelings towards the repercussions dealt by the Watergate scandal as well as media misuse of power and the failings of the American political system. In a letter published in

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*Captain America* #177, Lester Boutillier, pointed out that exposing the Committee to Regain America's Principles as a front for the Secret Empire was 'shudderin' [sic] in lite [sic] of the rite [sic] wing movement that's still enjoyin' [sic] a comeback even after the "Watergate" revelations' (Englehart, 1974d). In the same issue, Peter Cucich pointed out that 'had the American people timed their present crisis of confidence earlier, we wouldn't have a fugitive in the White House', and that Englehart had 'portrayed validly the susceptibility of the American people to demagoguery and mass media saturation. American people often have very little depth of thought in these matters. In this headline society people rarely look between the lines' (Englehart 1974d). Ralph Macchio, a prolific letter writer to comic books, commenting on the incongruities of Captain America in contemporary America, argued that 'if the concept of a "Captain" America has gone sour in 1974, if there seems to be as much tyranny within bureaucratic confines as there is on foreign shores, then it's time for that much needed reappraisal of Steve Roger's [life]' (Englehart 1974e).<sup>3</sup> Warren Bluhm's disenchantment with the political system was more forthright, 'for the symbol of America for the better part of thirty-odd years, the realization that the leaders of America are a group of (expletive deleted)'s is a bitter experience indeed' (Englehart 1974f).

Nevertheless, not everyone agreed with Englehart's overtly political storyline. Peter J. Sinnott had hoped 'that the public would be spared the agonizing of Watergate in comic book form [but] was disappointed to see the magazine take such an obvious political role. Cap's superhero role has been perverted into a political role where Cap is merely the mouthpiece for a writer's political views' (Englehart, 1974e). However, the response to the Secret Empire storyline and Captain America's subsequent resignation was received positively by the majority of the comic book's readers, if a judgement can be made from the responses printed on the letters page over the following issues. Englehart was also writing *The Avengers* at this time and was

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therefore in a position to successfully write the character out of the mainstream Marvel Universe.<sup>4</sup>

Englehart's decision following the resignation of Captain America, and the prominent position given to the Falcon, should be viewed in the light of an escalation in America's racial problems during the early 1970s. It is worth pointing out that the writing staff, since Stan Lee's diminishing role in the day-to-day running of the company, had become increasingly autonomous, and writers like Englehart, Gerber, etc. were free to edit each other's comic books, a situation which the writers tended to ignore, as Sean Howe pointed out; 'each of them shared an understanding: you leave alone my stuff, and I'll leave alone yours' (Howe, 2012: 135). The owner of Marvel Comics, the American conglomerate Cadence Industries Corporation (formerly Perfect Film & Chemical Corporation), had no experience of the comic book publishing industry, and had obtained Marvel as a result of the company's purchase of Marvel's parent company, Magazine Management Company in 1968, and there was no direct line of communication between the management staff and Marvel's writers. This situation allowed writers like Englehart, Gerber, and Starlin to introduce concepts and storylines that would have been difficult to introduce earlier.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the progress made by the civil rights movement during the 1960s, segregation between white and black communities throughout America was still a problem. Therefore, Englehart's promotion of the Falcon as the main character of Captain America's comic book should be viewed in the context of increasing racial tension and violence within American society. The Falcon's position as an African American trying to reconcile his identity within what was often perceived as a society of two different cultures (echoing the rhetoric of blaxploitation movies of the 1970s, as well as organisations like the Nation of Islam), was emphasised by the Falcon's on-off girlfriend, Leila Taylor. Leila

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was introduced earlier by Gary Friedrich as a member of a black activist group known as the People's Militia. Leila, emphasising the Falcon's uneasy relationship with white America, points out, 'I can't shake the idea that there's some hope for you...that somehow I can make you come over to our side... the black side' (Friedrich, 1971b). However, after his refusal to join the militants, Leila states that the Falcon is a 'bigger Uncle Tom than ever' (Friedrich, 1971b). Friedrich had earlier ended the Falcon's partnership with Captain America, albeit briefly. 'I've split with Captain America', he informs Leila's ghetto neighbours, 'I want to devote myself to helping my own people' before eventually reconciling with his former partner in the next issue (Friedrich, 1971a). Under Englehart, Leila would continue to question the Falcon's association with Captain America, pointing out to the superhero, 'He don't need you, and you don't need nobody playing Great White Hunter. You'll end up bein' his native bearer Falcon!' (Englehart, 1973). Englehart complicated further the Falcon's uneasy relationship with white America when he showed the superhero training a new, younger, white Captain America, following Steve Roger's resignation. The Falcon, instead of joining the black struggle, attempts to find a way to reconcile both white and black America, a fight he fails to win following the brutal death of a new Captain America at the hands of the Red Skull. It is not clear whether this decision to aim for an integrationist black superhero rather than a radical one was made by Englehart or whether he was put under pressure by the company.

Marvel Comics' relationship with minority characters had always been uncertain and the introduction of the Falcon was an early attempt by the company to introduce characters with a minority appeal, and to stop the decline in comic book sales. Following the appearance of the Falcon, other black characters were introduced into the company's comic books. For example, the jive-talking ex-prisoner Luke Cage gained his freedom after agreeing to a medical experiment that increased his strength, and following

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guest spots in *The Amazing Spider-Man*, was given his own title; Jim Wilson returned as the sidekick of the Hulk; Marv Wolfman introduced the vampire hunter Blade in *Tomb of Dracula*; Brother Voodoo, a Haitian witch doctor appeared in *Strange Tales*, and even Marvel's line of western comics had its own black cowboy in *Reno Jones, Gunhawk*.

Whilst the Falcon was trying to find a way to bring harmony to black and white America, Captain America was trying to understand his continuing relevance, as a representation of the American Dream. The Watergate scandal, Nixon's resignation, as well as increasing public opposition towards American armed forces in Vietnam, and increasing racial tension, all contributed to a sense of crisis within American society, as well as a lack of trust in the political process. Nixon's corruption of high office was reflected in the final speech of Number One immediately before his suicide, as he explained to Captain America, 'High political office didn't satisfy me! My power was still too constrained by legalities! I gambled on a coup to gain me the power I craved...and it appears that my gamble has failed!' (Englehart 1974b). The parallels between Number One's political ambitions and Nixon's corrupted aspirations are quite explicit.

In issue 175, following the suicide of Number One, Englehart wrote of Captain America, 'This man trusted the country of his birth...he saw its flaws...but trusted in its basic framework...its stated goals...its long-term virtue. This man now is crushed inside. Like millions of other Americans, each in his own way, he has seen his trust mocked!' (Englehart 1974b). Captain America's shattered belief in American idealism and betrayal of the political system was echoed by the disappointment many Americans felt following Watergate, as the historian Dominic Sandbrook has pointed out, 'for many people, the president's misdemeanours had been part of a wider culture of deceit and corruption' (2011: 10).

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Englehart, at this stage of Captain America's career, shows the superhero believing that the country he had fought for during the Second World War had appeared to have significantly lost its way. Englehart allowed Steve Rogers to adopt a new superhero identity, the Nomad the man without a country, which can be viewed as a critique of the current American political system in both the real and comic book world (Englehart 1974f). The Nomad represented Rogers' belief that to fight for a country he no longer understood or believed in symbolised a break with the traditions of the past and the American Dream. The problem with Captain America, as he explained to his ex-lover Peggy Carter, was that he no longer represented a unified identity of American values and idealism:

America is not the single entity you're talking about. It's changed since I took my name. There was a time ago, yes, when the country faced a clearly hideous aggressor, and her people stood united against it! But now, nothing's that simple. Americans have many goals...some of them quite contrary to others! In the land of the free, each of us is able to do what he wants to do...think what he wants to think. That's as it should be...but it makes for a great many different versions of what America is. So when people the world over look at me...which America am I supposed to symbolize? (Englehart 1974c).

Although modern American society had experienced different cultures built upon the steady influx of western colonialist expansion and immigration, according to Captain America, the aspirations and ambitions of that society had fragmented. The ideals of the American Dream, which had previously supposedly bound Americans together, had gradually dissipated until it was unclear to many what that dream represented. The tenuous foundations underpinning the American Dream had been exposed by Captain America's

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naivety and rendered meaningless by political corruption. As Captain America explains to the Falcon, 'the people who had custody of the American Dream had abused it and us! There was no way I could keep calling myself "Captain America" because the others who acted in America's name were every bit as bad as the Red Skull' (Englehart 1975b). The Nomad represents the individual spirit of the American Dream, paradoxically a dream that does not represent a country but a set of ideals and values. In order for Captain America to reclaim his superhero identity, a redefinition of the American Dream was also required.

### **Rediscovering the American Dream, and the Return of Captain America**

The problems faced by Captain America offer some parallels to contemporary American society. When Kamp argued that 'What needs to change is our expectation of what the dream promises—and our understanding of what that vague and promiscuously used term, "the American Dream," is really supposed to mean', he was referring to the crisis following the economic problems of 2008 onwards (Kamp, 2009). Nevertheless, redefining the American Dream was a dilemma faced earlier by Steve Rogers before he could once again adopt the identity of Captain America. Captain America's perception that the American Dream had not disappeared but needed a contemporary reinterpretation, demonstrates how little has changed within American social and political discourse, arguably indicating that in moments of crisis one response within American public discourse is to question the American Dream.

Although Steve Rogers, in his new identity as the Nomad, finds some small success as a superhero by ending the maniacal plans of Madame Viper, it is only after the death of Roscoe, a young boy who has adopted Captain

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America's identity, that Rogers finds a reason to renounce his Nomad alter-ego and re-adopt his Captain America persona. Roscoe's death, following a brutal beating and crucifixion by the Red Skull, causes Rogers to reflect on the reasons why he became Captain America as well as what that identity means to America and the American Dream. Rogers is forced to realise that his previous values were out-dated and based on a view of America that had changed during the post-war years. As he later argues, 'From the moment I returned to life in 1964, at the beginning of the Viet Nam war, I felt out of my time...But it took Number One to make me see just how wrong things had gone while I'd been away!' (Englehart 1975b).

Furthermore, Rogers not only blames the failure of the political establishment but also his inability to shift with the demands of modern American society:

I'm a failure! I thought I knew who the good guys and the bad guys were! I thought, as usual, that these things weren't complex as they are...and I couldn't understand how the good guys could put their faith in a man so bad! But my naiveté is my problem...not America's! The country didn't let me down...I let her down, by not being all that I could be! If I'd paid more attention to the way American reality differed from the American Dream...if I hadn't gone around thinking the things I believed in were thirty years out of date...then I might have uncovered Number One, and stopped him, before it was too late!  
(Englehart 1975b)

Although failing to understand how the American people could be duped by Number One and the Secret Empire, and by association, society's acceptance of Nixon before Watergate, Rogers admits that it was Captain America's unwillingness to accept that America had

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changed without him. Following this realisation, Rogers understands that his intransigence and short-sightedness had been responsible for the media campaign against him, the rise of the Secret Empire, and the suicide of Number One. Captain America's dilemma was to find a way to accept this new reality, and to find a way to adjust the ideals of the American Dream to the changes in American society – in the same way that the American people would have to recognise and accept the changes within American society following the end of the Second World War.

The Falcon's earlier argument that 'People will always want good heroes, man! Give them Captain America!', although initially rejected by Captain America, is later used by Steve Rogers to justify his return (Englehart 1974c). After finding Roscoe's body, Rogers declares, 'there has to be somebody who'll fight for the dream, against any foe...somebody who'll do the job I started...right! [...] The man Nomad is won't die, Falc [*sic*]! Everything he's learned will live on...only now, once again, it'll be as Captain America!' (Englehart 1975b). His decision to reject the Nomad superhero identity (a man who fights for no country) and re-assume the role of Captain America is validated by the realisation that he was wrong to believe that fighting for the American Dream was no longer necessary.

Steve Rogers states that Captain America was initially created to protect the American Dream against the Nazi's on behalf of the American government, but now he understands that he has to fight to protect the American Dream, not only from the fascist threats of the Red Skull or nihilist terror organisations like the Serpent Squad, but also crucially from the American government. Whereas in the past the government had been elected as representatives of the people and guardians of the American Dream, Nixon and Watergate, the Secret Empire and Number One, had demonstrated to Captain America that

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the political system was corrupt and could no longer be trusted to support those ideals. In later interpretations, Captain America becomes the embodiment of freedom, liberty, and the superhero other superheroes aspire to be. In *The Avengers*, after Englehart's resignation from Marvel, Captain America is voted in as the permanent chairperson of the group following the resignation of Iron Man. Gradually Captain America's reinvention by various writers emphasized the character's incorruptibility, loyalty to his country, and the spirit of individualism. Whereas other Marvel superheroes throughout the 1980s and 1990s experienced endless angst and inner torment, for example, Daredevil's former girlfriend Karen Page becomes a heroin-addicted porn star and sells his secret identity; Peter Parker (Spider-Man) briefly believed he was a clone of the real Parker; and Tony Stark, the civilian identity of Iron Man, became an alcoholic, lost his company, and was replaced by his friend Jim Rhodes; Captain America's gradual rehabilitation during the same period had the character running for President of the United States in 1980, and eventually returning to work for the government agency S.H.I.E.L.D.

It could be argued that Captain America reflected the increasing conservatism of the Marvel Comics Group throughout the this period, as the company, following the filing at the end of 1996 of Chapter 11 protection to avoid bankruptcy, began to concentrate on cross-over merchandising such as trading cards, toys, television shows, and films. In spite of the storylines referred to above, the status quo always returned to the Marvel Universe – Daredevil faked his own death and got back his secret identity, Peter Parker was not a clone, and Iron Man became regained his fortune and stayed away from the booze. Captain America's consistency, and honest and wholesome belief in American freedom and liberty is emphasized in the comic books, and is also a feature of the character in the recent film versions, *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Joe Johnston, 2011) as well as *Marvel's The Avengers Assemble* (Joss Whedon, aka. *Avengers Assemble*, 2012). I would argue that

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Captain America's role as the guardian of American values is a safer marketing proposition for Marvel Comics than Englehart's politically aware, anti-establishment, interpretation.

The Falcon's problems with the black community in Harlem dissipated following Captain America's identity crisis. Leila and the other black residents accepted both Captain America and the Falcon as partners, arguably recognizing that it is the political and media elite that represent a common enemy. Following a major reshuffle within Marvel's management team Englehart was removed from the book and Jack Kirby took over in January 1976. Kirby notably ignored Englehart's interpretation of both Captain America and the Falcon, and, to coincide with America's bicentennial anniversary, concocted a storyline that involved the superheroes foiling a plot by anti-American conspirators to destroy America. In a reversal of Englehart's anti-establishment sentiments, Captain America is shown fighting on behalf of the American government, and is helped by government agencies such as the Secret Service and the army. Kirby's story culminated in a special bicentennial issue, patriotically titled, 'Dawn's Early Light', and ended with a final panel depicting Captain America standing to attention as the American flag is raised by military forces in the background, he declares to the Falcon, 'There's no doubt, now, Falcon! "The Nation Stands!"' (Kirby 1976a). Under Kirby's authorship the social, racial and political problems that defined many of Englehart's stories disappeared. Following #200, Captain America's next adventure led to a re-enactment of the battle at the Alamo on an alien planet, helped in this case by a modern day cowboy, Texas Jack Muldoon. The Falcon's role gradually diminished and the character was quietly dropped, and the comic book reverted back to its original title, *Captain America*. Although Kirby's Captain America was closer to his original 1940s version, other writers followed his interpretation. Captain America could remain critical of the American government but never America or question the American Dream.

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Captain America's distrust towards the American political system briefly resurfaced in 1987 when, after being summoned to the Pentagon, he was told that he must become part of the U.S. Government. In reply, Captain America handed in his uniform and shield (Gruenwald 1987a). Captain America's identity was given to John Walker, an ex-soldier with an explosive temper, and Steve Rogers adopted the identity of The Captain (Gruenwald 1987b). Forty years later, following the introduction in the Marvel Universe of the Superhero Registration Act in 2006, the superhero found himself on the opposite side of the American Government. Captain America's refusal to sign up to the act, which would mean revealing his secret identity, resulted in the classification of the character as a terrorist because he viewed the Act as an infringement of his civil liberties. The superhero found other colleagues who supported his views and created an underground team of superheroes known as the New Avengers. This decision ultimately resulted in a civil war between two factions of superheroes, those who supported the Act, led by Captain America's former teammate Iron Man (a figure associated with technological warfare and Neo-liberal capitalism), and those against, a war that eventually ended with the (presumed) death of Captain America.

Englehart's tenure on Captain America and the emphasis he placed on the Falcon as an African American represented an important (if inevitably limited) step in the recognition of black characters in mainstream comic books. This came at a time of political crisis and social upheaval, and offered a commentary on the contemporary state of the American Dream and what it might mean to society as viewed by the impact on the characters in the comic book. Captain America, originally conceived as a symbol of the American Dream, at first rejected and then reinterpreted this Dream with the help of his black partner the Falcon (before being reincorporated into his more traditional role by a subsequent change of writer). The message, it would seem, was that

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by standing together white and black America could uphold the ideals of the American Dream, a message that was notably absent from the later Civil War storyline. The war only came to an end after the arrest of Captain America, but not before the death of one of the few other African American superheroes Goliath, who in his civilian identity as scientist Bill Foster made his comic book appearance several years before the Falcon in 1966 in *The Avengers* #32. Englehart's message of hope and reconciliation brought together by racial harmony and a reconfiguration of the American Dream, a message lacking from the Civil War storyline, was arguably more indicative of the countercultural values of the late 1960s which perhaps no longer have any relevant currency within contemporary America as perceived by the comic book writers of today.

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1" S.H.I.E.L.D originally stood for Supreme Headquarters, International Espionage, Law-Enforcement Division; the acronym was later changed to Strategic Hazard Intervention Espionage Logistics Directorate in 1991.

2" The Symbionese Liberation Army was an American left-wing revolutionary group active between 1973 and 1975. The group committed several acts of violence, including bank robberies, murders, and infamously, the kidnapping of the media heiress Patty Hearst.

3 Ralph Macchio began working for Marvel comics in 1978 as the assistant to Rick Marschall who was the editor of the company's line of magazines. Macchio became a full-time editor during Jim Shooter's controversial period as Editor in Chief for the company, where he was editor on titles such as *Master of Kung Fu*, *Daredevil*, *Thor*, and *Captain America*. Macchio's writing credits include *Marvel Two-in-One*, *Thor*, and *The Avengers*.

4 Englehart's time on *The Avengers* led to the introduction (and reinvention) of the former X-Man, the Beast, who the writer viewed as 'a young, intellectual guy who'd gotten hip', and Mantis who Englehart intended as 'a hooker who would join the Avengers and cause dissension amongst all the male members by coming on to each of them in turn' (Schutz 1982: 26-27).

5 A notable exception is *The Amazing Spiderman* Vol. 1, No. 96-98 which was published by the company in 1971, and was written by Stan Lee. The story featured Peter Parker (Spiderman's civilian identity) finding his best friend Harry Osborn taking drugs.