

## ***Values not Semantics: Captain America and Self-Reliance***

### ***To wartości, nie tylko słowa. Kapitan Ameryka a poleganie na sobie***

*Wojciech Lewandowski*

UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW

---

#### **Keywords**

Captain America, Self-Reliance, comic book, freedom, security

#### **Słowa kluczowe**

Kapitan Ameryka, poleganie na sobie, komiks, wolność, bezpieczeństwo

#### **Abstract**

The idea of Self-Reliance is an axiological component shaping the American democracy. A self-reliant individual is expected to look for the truth independently of social demands. Only such citizens are capable of reforming the society, provided that their efforts are a result of individual insight. Post 9/11 American popular culture provided a space for discourse on the future shape of the American democracy with its conflicting values of freedom and security. Superhuman Registration Act that divided the world of Marvel superheroes was a reflection of the real-life USA PATRIOT Act. It is the aim of this paper to evaluate whether Captain America's opposition to the new laws, as depicted in the *Civil War* comic book, was an act of Self-Reliance as advocated by Ralph Waldo Emerson.

#### **Abstrakt**

Idea polegania na sobie jest częścią systemu aksjologicznego kształtującego amerykańską demokrację. Polegająca na sobie jednostka powinna samodzielnie poszukiwać prawdy niezależnie od społecznych oczekiwań. Tylko taki obywatel jest w stanie zreformować społeczeństwo. Amerykańska kultura popularna

po wydarzeniach 11 września 2001 roku zapewniła przestrzeń do dyskusji o kształcie amerykańskiej demokracji w sytuacji konfliktu między fundamentalnymi wartościami wolności i bezpieczeństwa. Odbiciem przyjętego przez rząd Stanów Zjednoczonych PATRIOT Act jest Ustawa o Rejestracji Superbohaterów, która podzieliła świat superbohaterów uniwersum Marvela. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest zbadanie czy opór Kapitana Ameryki wobec nowego prawa, jak przedstawiono to w komiksie *Wojna domowa*, był aktem polegania na sobie opisanym przez Ralpa Waldo Emersona.

## Values not Semantics: Captain America and Self-Reliance

### Introduction

“To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, – that is genius” – Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in the opening paragraph of his famous essay *Self-Reliance*<sup>1</sup>. His words embrace the meaning of the idea of Self-Reliance that is deeply rooted in the axiological system of the American democracy. Dependence on one’s own inner judgement correlates with the American belief in the necessity of individual action that might result in the improvement of the society. Self-Reliance also demands individuals to reject morally unacceptable social values and act according to one’s belief and moral judgement.

The first decade of the twenty first century was overshadowed by the events of 9/11. American social and political discourse was founded of the compelling vision of protecting the United States against a possible terrorist attack in the future. Adoption of USA PATRIOT Act<sup>2</sup> that limited individual freedom and privacy opened discussions on the extent to which government is allowed to restrict those in the name of security. Such discourse also permeated popular culture and was reflected on the pages of comic books series *Captain America* as well as mini-series *Civil War*. Adoption of Superhuman Registration Act (SRA) regulating the actions of superheroes in the Marvel Universe mirrored the real-life discourse and forced superpowered beings to take sides. Against a common expectation the anti-registration movement was led by Captain America – a nationalistic superhero embodying the axiological and moral system of United States. Conflict over the controversial law caused turmoil in the fictional world of superheroes ultimately leading to the death of Steve Rogers, symbolizing a demise of certain vision of America.

It is the aim of this paper to evaluate whether Captain America’s reaction to the new laws on superhero’s registration, as depicted in the *Civil War* comic book by Mark Millar and Steve McNiven, was an act of Self-Reliance as advocated by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Captain America’s rejection of SRA was grounded in a belief in the American tradition, a love of individual free-

<sup>1</sup> R. W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance*, [in:] *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, ed. J. Porte, New York 1983, p. 259.

<sup>2</sup> Full title of that regulation was: *Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools to Restrict, Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001*.

dom and most of all a deep conviction of a strong moral code among the superpowered beings. Governmental control over their action was dangerous, as it made them vulnerable to political demands.

An in-depth qualitative analysis and interpretation of the comic book texts related to the *Civil War* event rooted in the British cultural studies approach will show to what extent the protagonist's actions fulfil the requirements of Self-Reliance<sup>3</sup>. Interpretation of *Civil War* will focus on the dominant political concepts related to the nature of freedom and security perceived as the key conflicting values in the democratic society. Such analysis will consist of three steps. First, the idea of Self-Reliance in its classical approach will be examined as well as its connection to political processes in a democratic society. Secondly, the ideological conflict presented in the *Civil War* event will be scrutinized. Finally, the actions of Captain America will be evaluated in the context of Self-Reliance concept seen as a moral basis for the political dissent.

## Self-Reliance

The idea of Self-Reliance is one of the crucial values necessary to understand the American democracy. Originated in the writings of a nineteenth century philosopher and man of letters Ralph Waldo Emerson, it reflects the value of intellectual independence from external sources. Self-Reliance is interpreted by scholars either as an expression of his retreat towards inner life and escaping any political engagement or as a specific form of political activism that can improve the quality of social and political discourse<sup>4</sup>. Emerson tried to discover a middle ground between his life of a solitary philosopher and his desire to engage in social and political activity. The idea of Self-Reliance represented this tension. For nineteenth century Americans it was also prerequisite to look for an American culture devoid of European influence that dominated in the early Republic<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Major texts analysed in this paper are: M. Millar (w.), S. McNiven (a.), *Civil War*, New York 2007 and E. Brubaker (w.), S. Epting, M. Perkins et al. (a.), *Captain America Omnibus*, Vol. 1, New York 2007, especially #22-25. As those comics are all unpaginated, I will provide only issue number (#) to locate each of the quotations.

<sup>4</sup> This dualism of perspective on political thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson found its expression in the essays collected in a volume *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, eds. A. M. Levine, D. S. Malachuk, Lexington 2011.

<sup>5</sup> More the about search for American intellectual and cultural independence in the context of Self-Reliance see: W. Lewandowski, *Wolność i samotność. Myśl społeczno-polityczna amerykańskiego transcendentalizmu*, Warszawa 2011, pp. 84-88. See also:

“I am ashamed – wrote Emerson – to think how easily we capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions”<sup>6</sup>. In the essay *Heroism* he also observed that “the little man takes the great hoax so innocently, works in it so headlong and believing, (...) made happy with a little gossip or a little praise, that the great soul cannot choose but laugh at such earnest nonsense”<sup>7</sup>. The American man of letters was critical about people’s disposition to accept others’ ideas rather than to look for their own ones. Individual conformism was detrimental to the condition of American society.

Instead the American philosopher advocated for individual search for moral as well as other values. “Whoso would be a man – claimed Emerson – must be a nonconformist. He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world”<sup>8</sup>. It is important to experience everything first-hand rather than imitate others. He was aware of challenges as others disapprove of an individual seeking their own independent way. He argued that “society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion”<sup>9</sup>. Self-reliant individual shatters arrangements by making others uncomfortable with his discontent with the social rules and traditions. Through insight and imagination one can challenge dead institutions and established traditions to look for truth and moral grounds.

Self-reliant existence is a difficult one as society wants to entrap an individual with a set of old laws. Emerson suggests that one should cast away the past and focus on the contemporary. “A foolish consistency – noted Emerson – is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. (...) Speak what you think now in hard words, and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said to-day”<sup>10</sup>. Individual progress demands constant questioning of *status quo* and constant truth-seeking. One must be prepared for criticism from the society, but still follow his quest for intellectual and moral independence.

---

R. W. Emerson, *The American Scholar*, [in:] *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, op. cit., pp. 51-72.

<sup>6</sup> R. W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance*, op. cit., p. 262.

<sup>7</sup> R. W. Emerson, *Heroism*, [in:] *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, op. cit., p. 375.

<sup>8</sup> R. W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance*, op. cit., p. 261.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 265.

Unshakable confidence in one's own intellectual search is an important feature of Self-Reliance. "Speak your latent conviction – suggested Emerson, – and it shall be the universal sense"<sup>11</sup>. Self-reliant person does not hesitate to speak independently, even at the price of misunderstanding. Emerson was aware that truly independent life is difficult, however, he was sure that is worth the risk. He wrote that, "it is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude."<sup>12</sup> Fullness of life is acquired by confronting oneself with the social reality. Solitary life is not Emerson's answer.

If we look at the idea of Self-Reliance as presented above, some questions might be rightfully posed. Is such an independent, self-reliant individual willing and able to cooperate with others in pursuing social goals? Is Emerson giving too much freedom to an individual? How does self-reliant individual fit a democratic project? In order to answer these questions, one needs to take into account that Self-Reliance was not a rejection of social life or an attempt to relativise moral norms. An individual as bounded by the laws inscribed in nature and a part of the Over-Soul is automatically connected with other human beings<sup>13</sup>. As for the participation in a democratic project Emerson was torn between the political ideals of Democrats and Whigs. Both parties accepted democracy as a social and political system, however, the first one perceived it as a system for the rule of the masses, the latter one as a more aristocracy-oriented order<sup>14</sup>. The issue of abolition of slavery moved Emerson to more Republican position.

Abolition of slavery was also the reason for the idea of Self-Reliance to become a source of social change. In his early writings Ralph Waldo Emerson was rather critical about the way abolitionist organisations were functioning, not believing that social change might be a result of institutional effort<sup>15</sup>. However, his enhanced knowledge of the Afro-American culture and tradi-

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, p. 259.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, p. 263.

<sup>13</sup> See: R. W. Emerson, *Nature*, [in:] *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, op. cit., pp. 5-50 and R. W. Emerson, *The Over-Soul*, [in:] *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, op. cit., pp. 383-400.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. A. I. Ladu, *Emerson: Whig or Democrat*, "The New England Quarterly" 1940, No. 3, pp. 423-427 and D. S. Malachuk, *Democracy*, [in:] *Ralph Waldo Emerson in Context*, ed. W. T. Mott, Cambridge 2013, pp. 118-126. See also: R. W. Emerson, *Politics*, [in:] *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, op. cit., pp. 557-571.

<sup>15</sup> See: R. W. Emerson, *New England Reformers*, [in:] *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, op. cit., pp. 589-609. For a discussion on influence of abolitionism on the shape and use of Self-Reliance, see: J. H. Read, *The Limits of Self-Reliance: Emerson, Slavery and Abolition*, [in:] *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, op. cit., pp. 152-184

tions<sup>16</sup> as well as the impact of pro-slavery legislation on North states forced Emerson to clearly declare himself and participate in anti-slavery action. His activism was restricted to lectures and essays, but he also financially supported John Brown, whose more militant opposition towards the so called “peculiar institution” was widely appreciated among American transcendentalists<sup>17</sup>. Key to that transformation was reconciliation between Self-Reliance understood as solitary withdrawal from society and political action. As Robinson Woodward-Burns notices that “the paradox of Emerson’s political thought is that to live authentically among others, one must retreat from others. (...) The Emersonian individual follows his intuitions into and out of politics”<sup>18</sup>. Contemplation is necessary to achieve Self-Reliance that might next be used in political action.

### Captain America: Nationalistic Superhero and the Civil War

Political discourses permeate popular culture texts contemporary to them. They express tendencies and fears creating additional platform for social debates. Pages of comic books, since the origins of the comics form as we know today, were full of socially and politically oriented content<sup>19</sup>. Superhero comics are a genre probably synonymous with American comics, providing a popular platform to transmit political messages<sup>20</sup>. Some of the superheroes became more than just comic book characters, but rather symbols of certain values, life philosophies or even countries.

One of aspects of a superhero narrative, according to Richard Reynolds, is directly connected to political sphere. “Although ultimately above the law, superheroes can be capable of considerable patriotism and moral loyalty to

---

and R. Woodward-Burns, *Solitude Before Society: Emerson on Self-Reliance, Abolitionism, and Moral Suasion*, “Polity” 2016, No. 1, pp. 29-54.

<sup>16</sup> W. Gromczyński, *Codzienność i absolut w filozofii Ralpa Waldo Emersona*, Łódź 1992, pp. 95-97.

<sup>17</sup> W. Lewandowski, *Wolność i samotność*, op. cit., pp. 162-169.

<sup>18</sup> R. Woodward-Burns, *Solitude Before Society*, op. cit., p. 54.

<sup>19</sup> On ideological and political aspects of comics, see for example: M. J. Skidmore, J. Skidmore, *More Than Mere Fantasy: Political Themes in Comic Books*, “The Journal of Popular Culture” 1983, No. 1; *Comics and Ideology*, eds. M. P. Allister, E. H. Sewell Jr., I. Gordon, New York 2001; or W. Lewandowski, *Od faszystowskiej dystopii do anarchistycznej utopii. Idee polityczne w powieści graficznej ‘V jak Vendetta’ Alana Moore’a i Davida Lloyd’a*, Toruń 2019.

<sup>20</sup> On social and political history of American comics, see: B. W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, Baltimore 2003.

the state, though not necessarily to the letter of its laws”<sup>21</sup>. Superheroes traditionally were sole crimefighters or masked vigilantes supporting law enforcement services. However, some of them were directly connected to nations, not particularly by their cooperation with governments, but as the embodiments of national axiological system. Captain America is one of such characters.

Other characteristics of a superhero are also important in order to understand the nature of a conflict presented in the *Civil War* limited series. Richard Reynolds points out that all superheroes have and protect their secret identity<sup>22</sup>. Possession of such is key to protecting the characters and their friends and loved ones from the revenge of their adversaries. Superheroes’ alter-egos usually differ significantly from their real persona, however, the theme of ‘the real face’ of the masked vigilantes returns constantly in graphic narratives<sup>23</sup>.

One of the features of superhero was, as it was mentioned above, patriotism and loyalty to the state. This gave birth to nationalistic superheroes that were supposed to embody the most cherished values of a represented nation<sup>24</sup>. The most famous nationalist superhero, Captain America, was created by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby. His first adventures were published in March 1941. Months before United States’ engagement in the Second World War the cover of the first issue of “Captain America” portrayed the eponymous character punching Adolf Hitler. Captain America became embodiment of American values or the expression of the American dream. Steve Rogers, a weak man turned into super-soldier through injection of a special serum visualized the dream of progress and control over nature. He was supposed to fight for freedom, justice and the American way of life.

Captain America as a nationalistic superhero has been a barometer of social and political change in the United States. Perceived as a government agent at the first glance Captain America was in fact able to act on his own accord, sometimes openly resisting the government or abandoning the mantle

<sup>21</sup> R. Reynolds, *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*, Jackson 1994, p. 16. Here only relevant parts of Reynolds’ analysis of superhero narrative are being discussed.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, p. 14-15, 16.

<sup>23</sup> T. Morris, *What’s Behind the Mask? The Secret of Secret Identities*, [in:] *Superheroes and Philosophy: Truth Justice, and the Socratic Way*, eds. T. Morris, M. Morris, Chicago and La Salle, Ill. 2005, pp. 250-265.

<sup>24</sup> The in-depth analysis of the phenomenon of nationalistic superheroes can be found here: J. Dittmer, *Captain America and the Nationalist Superhero: Metaphors, Narratives, and Geopolitics*, Philadelphia 2013. See also: W. Lewandowski, *SuperScots: Superheroes and Scottish Identity*, [in:] *Scottish Culture: Dialogue and Self-Expression*, eds. A. Korzeniowska, I. Szymańska, Warszawa 2016, pp. 380-388.



of Captain America. It happened when Captain America exposed a conspiracy possibly led by a president of the United States<sup>25</sup>. Nevertheless, he did not give up crimefighting, adopting the nickname of Nomad. On the pages of issue 117 of "Captain America" Falcon debuted, who was the first Afro-American superhero in the mainstream comics. After 9/11 readers expected this character to advise on how to recover from trauma<sup>26</sup>.

In the opening scenes of the *Civil War* limited series readers see a team of young superheroes called New Warriors who prepare themselves for apprehending a group of villains. Instead of focusing on their mission teenage heroes are more preoccupied with their good looking and the spectacle for the viewers. Their reckless behaviour as well as overestimation of their capabilities leads to a catastrophe that causes the death of more than 800 people<sup>27</sup>.

An aftermath of that event is the pressure on American government to impose some form of control over the actions of the superpowered. It leads to adoption of the Superhuman Registration Act that forces superheroes to reveal their secret identities and become in fact governmental employees<sup>28</sup>. Adoption of the new regulations is the reason of the divide within superheroes community. Pro-registration camp led by Iron Man (Tony Stark) advocates new law as prerequisite of social acceptance of superheroes presence in American life. The act is also supposed to ensure control on their action as well as provide necessary training for them. Anti-registration camp led by Captain America (Steve Rogers) objects to the new law as the violation of the tradition and a far-reaching restriction of freedom. Governmental control over superheroes makes them dependent on political whims of the ruling elite that might in turn influence their individual moral judgement.

Conflict escalates from the moment pro-registration forces start using excessive forces killing a member of the anti-registration camp. Iron Man and his comrades are willing to refer to more authoritarian style of imposing the controversial regulations and are even willing to accept a group of

<sup>25</sup> S. Engelhart, M. Friedrich (w.), S. Buscema (a.), *Captain America and the Falcon: Secret Empire*, New York 2005.

<sup>26</sup> On history of the character and its social and political contexts, see: Ch. Hayton, D. L. Albright., *O Captain! My Captain*, [in:] *Captain America and the Struggle of the Superhero*, ed. R. G. Weiner, Jefferson NC, London 2009, pp. 15-23 and J. Dittmer, *Captain America's Empire: Reflections on Identity, Popular Culture, and Post-9/11 Geopolitics*, "Annals of the Association of American Geographers" 2005, No. 3, pp. 626-643.

<sup>27</sup> M. Millar (w.), S. McNiven (a.), *Civil War*, op. cit., #1.

<sup>28</sup> Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons *Watchmen* being the best-known example of such motif in superhero comics. See: A. Moore (w.), D. Gibbons (a.), *Watchmen*, New York 2008. See also: T. Spanakos, *Super-Vigilantes and the Keene Act*, [in:] *Watchmen and Philosophy: A Rorschach Test*, ed. M. D. White, Hoboken 2009, pp. 33-46.

super-villains to fight on their side. Conflict over SRA culminates in a final battle where both parties fight with fiercely for what they stand for. Overwhelmed by the sight of the fight, Captain America decides to give up and asks a policeman to arrest him as Steve Rogers.

Death of Captain America is the ultimate result of the events portrayed in *Civil War* limited series. In the issue 25 of “Captain America” the protagonist is assassinated on the staircase of a court where he was transported for testimony. The story entitled *The Death of a Dream* prompted questions about the meaning of that event. Among many theories were those stating that it was only a marketing trick and Captain America will return, as it had happened to Superman in the nineties<sup>29</sup>. However, the most interesting were the ones linking the death of the nationalistic superhero with the condition of post-9/11 American democracy that was moving away from the ideas of the Founding Fathers. The terrorist attack caused a shift in the American dream and the idea of individual freedom gave in to the necessity of perfect security<sup>30</sup>.

### Captain America: a Self-Reliant Superhero?

Terrorist attacks on US soil also resulted in more military oriented narratives in mainstream comics<sup>31</sup>. One of the series mentioned by Lewis is Mark Millar’s and Steve McNiven’s *Civil War*. “The Civil War series – as Matthew J. Costello notices – is a clear commentary on the USA Patriot Act and post 9/11 U.S. Government actions and includes variety of allegorical moments”<sup>32</sup>. Francisco Veloso and John Bateman argue that the *Civil War* narrative was to propagate a certain idea in the society, in that context USA PATRIOT Act. Authors described the way in which comic book story using that particular medium’s language was used to argue for certain social discourses<sup>33</sup>.

<sup>29</sup> See: G. G. Gustines, *Captain America Is Dead; National Hero Since 1941*, „The New York Times”, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/08/books/08capt.html> (accessed 24.08.2020).

<sup>30</sup> On the press reactions to the death of Captain America, see: J. Dittmer, *Captain America in the News: Changing Mediascapes and the Appropriation of a Superhero*, “Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics” 2012, No. 3, pp. 143-157.

<sup>31</sup> A. D. Lewis, *Graphic Responses: Comic Book Superheroes’ Militarism Post 9/11*, Emerging Popular Culture Corner, <https://www.americanpopularculture.com/archive/emerging/graphic.htm> (accessed 25.08.2020).

<sup>32</sup> M. J. Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis: Comic Books & the Unmasking of Cold War America*, New York, London 2009, pp. 234-235.

<sup>33</sup> F. Veloso, J. Bateman, *The Multimodal Construction of Acceptability: Marvel’s ‘Civil War’ Comic Books and the Patriot Act*, “Critical Discourse Studies” 2013, No. 4, 427-443.

SRA, as was mentioned above, divided superheroes community to two distinct groups: strong supporters of governmental control and its staunch opponents. Before assessing Captain America's actions as an embodiment of Self-Reliance, let us briefly look at the pro-registration arguments.

Superhuman Registration Act is seen by its main proponent, Iron Man as an act securing future of masked heroes. As they are in possession of dangerous abilities they need to be trained and controlled by the government, in that case S.H.I.E.L.D., law enforcement and espionage agency. The demands of national security are more important than individual freedom of superheroes. Explosion in Stamford as portrayed in *Civil War* resembles the 9/11 tragedy<sup>34</sup> and is framed to work as a starting point for the upcoming changes in the superheroes' world.

The will of the people is the major argument for the adoption of SRA. Decision of the majority is presented as the ultimate proof of the value of the new laws. Therefore, those in power expect all superheroes to accept the legislation as it is an expression of social sentiments. S.H.I.E.L.D. Commander Maria Hill expects Captain America, as the leading Avenger, to cooperate in capturing disobedient superheroes, however, he is reluctant to do so. He asks Maria Hill: "You're asking me to arrest people who risk their lives for this country every day of the week", to which she replies "No, I am asking you to obey the will of the American people, Captain". Captain America's reaction to such diktat is firm refusal: "Don't play *politics* with *me*, Hill. Super heroes need to stay *above* that stuff or Washington starts telling us who the *super-villains* are". To Hill, however, it is clear that "super-villains were the guys in masks who refused to obey the law"<sup>35</sup>.

Captain America's decision to stand against the law is based on the conviction that superheroes should stay away from direct political control as it may engage them in political games affecting their service to the ones that really need their support. He believes in a strong moral compass that guides masked heroes in their day-to-day actions. Giving up their secret identities, as the legislation requires, might endanger superheroes themselves, their loved ones as well as put political pressure on their actions. Captain America unambiguously takes side of freedom as the value that cannot be restricted by the needs of collective security. His individual insight suggests that the only reasonable solution is not to support the regulation and values on which it is built. Captain America has a courage to follow his instincts and beliefs even in the face of adversity, as a Self-Reliance demands from an individual.

<sup>34</sup> M. Millar (w.), S. McNiven (a.), *Civil War*, op. cit., #1.

<sup>35</sup> Ibidem, #1, original emphasis.

Conflict of values presented in *Civil War* story puts Captain America in a very difficult position. As the embodiment of American values, he should support the will of the people, as resulting from a certain moral sentiment. However, Captain America chooses to stand for his own beliefs. He rejects an offer of amnesty<sup>36</sup>, because he is fighting in the name of an important value. He prefers to stick to the tradition of superheroes' secret identity which offers freedom rather than follow the new law. In that regard he seems to be quite far away from the Emersonian vision of Self-Reliance as more focused on here and now than on past. Iron Man perceives Captain America as someone out of his time: "Cap, please. I know you're angry. I know it's an enormous change from the way we've always worked, but we aren't in *nineteen forty-five* anymore. The public doesn't want masks and secret identities. They *want* to feel safe when we're around, and there's no other way to win back their *respect*"<sup>37</sup>. According to Iron Man, Captain America is not able to leave the past behind, losing the chance to work for the people he serves.

In the issue 22 of "Captain America" eponymous character confronts with Sharon Carter, S.H.I.E.L.D. agent, with whom he is romantically involved, about the conflict between two superhero camps. Captain America is convinced that superheroes' right to keep secret identities is fundamental to their actions and to their and their loved ones' security. "It's not the 1940s anymore Sharon. And it's *not* that easy. *My* identity is public, and what, and what does that *meant?*" – ask Steve Rogers. "People in my life – he adds – have been *targets*. Some have been *killed*. Just for *knowing me*. I couldn't live in a normal apartment, because it was *too dangerous* for my neighbours. I accept these things, not gladly, but I accept them, because *Captain America* is who I *am*... ...And I understand what comes with that. But not everyone is like me. Not everyone is willing to *risk* what I have... Should they be denied the *right* to make that choice?"<sup>38</sup> Secret identity is perceived here as an element that protects the whole society, not just a superhero and his loved ones. Even if only the government has access to their personal files, it is still too dangerous cause they might be sold or stolen.

He also disagrees with the intentions of SRA authors and the legitimacy of the act:

<sup>36</sup> Ibidem, #3.

<sup>37</sup> Ibidem, #3, original emphasis.

<sup>38</sup> E. Brubaker (w.), S. Epting, M. Perkins et. al. (a.), *Captain America Omnibus*, Vol. 1, New York 2007, #22, original emphasis. This issue is the first part of the three issues long story arc entitled *The Drums of War* which depicts the events parallel to the ones presented in the *Civil War* comic book.

**Sharon Carter:** And because it's *against the law*. And the rule of law is what this country is *founded* on.

**Captain America:** No... It was founded on *breaking* the law. Because the law was wrong.

**Sharon Carter:** That's *semantics* Steve, you know what I mean...

**Captain America:** It's *not* semantics, Sharon. It's the heart of this issue. The Registration Act is another step toward government control. And, while I love my country, I *don't* trust many politicians. Not when they're having their strings pulled by *corporate donors*. And not when they're willing to trade *freedom* for *security*.

**Sharon Carter:** Now you're going to quote *Ben Franklin* at me? Give me a break.

**Captain America:** How about *Thomas Paine*? "Those who expect to reap the *blessings* of freedom must undergo the fatigue of *supporting* it."

**Sharon Carter:** Okay, how about this one -- "To *argue* with a person who has renounced the use of *reason* is like giving medicine to the *dead*."

**Captain America:** I *haven't* given up reason, Sharon.

**Sharon Carter:** It sure looks that way, when you're fighting your own *friends* in the street.

**Captain America:** You think that isn't *killing* me?

**Sharon Carter:** I *know* it is. Which is why I'm *begging* you to stop all this. The Registration Act is *law*. If *Captain America* doesn't follow the law, *who does*?

**Captain America:** That's why I *can't*. The issue *isn't* black and white, and those are the only colours the law can see<sup>39</sup>.

This lengthy exchange of thoughts between the characters raises important issues concerning Captain America's Self-Reliance.

First of all, everyone is capable of judging whether laws are legitimised on legal, and what is more important, moral grounds. Captain America recalls the values of the American Revolution whose leaders accepted individual liberty, and more generally the rights of man, as their axiological system. He seems to share more liberal ideology believing in the honesty of an individual rather than the government "owned" by international corporations. Here Captain America does not seem to be a man out of time, as Iron Man perceives him, because his diagnose of globalized political power seems fresh.

Secondly, Captain America is accused of not following the voice of reason and rejecting rational arguments advocating the legislation. But from the point of view of Self-Reliance concept personal insight and empathising with others are more important than logical reasoning. Captain America experienced having his identity revealed that is why he is able to relate to others in the same situation and imagine their resulting emotions and thoughts. That is why in this context his rejection of SRA is an act of Self-Reliance.

<sup>39</sup> Ibidem, #22, original emphasis.

Finally, Captain America is saddened by the fact that he has to fight against his friends, however, values seem more important to him. In fact, he is also fighting for the ones that oppose him as they might suffer from the same restrictions that they are so eagerly supporting. Trading one value for another is not acceptable for him.

Over time the sides of the conflict are willing to accept less morally acceptable rule of engagement. Pro-registration side is willing to accept super-villains among them although only for a limited time<sup>40</sup>. Anti-registration group accepts the help of Punisher, a superhero ruthlessly killing criminals<sup>41</sup>. Government also imprisons disobeying superheroes in a Guantanamo style prison located in a Negative Zone<sup>42</sup>. However, the pro-registration campaign, as the one in real world for USA PATRIOT Act, tries to convince that only the ones who are against the regulation have something to be afraid of and that the regulation is not against innocent individuals. If they have good intentions, they should be afraid of nothing, even under imposed governmental surveillance.

Captain America, however, finally surrenders himself after seeing the results of the final battle between superheroes. “They’re *right*. We’re not fighting for *the people* anymore, Falcon... Look at us. We’re just *fighting*”<sup>43</sup>. This sudden change of thought contains slight suggestion that Captain America accepted the SRA. Michael J. Prince interprets the resolution of the story as a typical corporate publishers’ practice of not alienating readers from different sides of the political spectrum offering something to both sides and upholding *status quo*<sup>44</sup>. Corporate politics rather than Captain America’s re-definition of values is responsible for this clearly not self-reliant action.

Death of Captain America, as a direct result of his involvement in the events of Civil War, is to some extent proving his Self-Reliance. Steve Rogers was willing to publicly testify to defend his point of view. He was not afraid of hostile reaction of the mob waiting near the court house. Self-reliant being is prepared for such adversity and willing to confront the opponents. Captain America’s death prevented him from doing so, however it prompted discus-

<sup>40</sup> M. Millar (w.), S. McNiven (a.), *Civil War*, op. cit., #4.

<sup>41</sup> Ibidem, #5.

<sup>42</sup> Ibidem, #5.

<sup>43</sup> Ibidem, #7, original emphasis.

<sup>44</sup> M. J. Prince, ‘Whose Side are You on?’: *Negotiations Between Individual Liberty and Collective Responsibility in Millar and McNiven’s Marvel Civil War*, “Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics” 2015, No. 2. pp. 189-191.

sion about the meaning of this character in the world of marvel comics<sup>45</sup>, as well as in the real one.

## Conclusions

Adoption of the Superhuman Registration Act (as USA PATRIOT Act outside the comic book pages) was an impulse that heavily influenced the world of Marvel superheroes. The choice between freedom and collective security was never an easy one. High social support for the Act and government's efforts in implementing the regulations required real Self-Reliance on the part of an individual who decided to advocate or disobey the SRA.

Self-Reliance demands of an individual to think for themselves and to act according to their beliefs. Such an individual must be prepared for criticism. Taking into consideration Captain America's actions it might be concluded that he largely fulfils the requirements of Self-Reliance. He was able to oppose the laws that in his judgement were morally wrong and were to bring more harm than good. He faced his adversaries either in discussion or actual fight for what he believed was right. His surrender might be a proof that his Self-Reliance was shaken, however, events leading directly to his death show he was still willing to convince others.

Captain America's Self-Reliance differs significantly from Ralph Waldo Emerson's ideal. The latter thought of Self-Reliance as the way of balancing individual insight with the demands of the social and political life and activism. For Captain America Self-Reliance and political activism seems inseparable. He doesn't need to, as Emerson, withdraw from society to gain insight and knowledge necessary for political action. As a nationalist superhero he is constantly able to fight for the values he embodies, even if he has to fight against his own government and popular sentiments.

## Bibliography

*A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, eds. A. M. Levine, D. S. Malachuk, Lexington 2011.

Brubaker E. (w.), Epting S., Perkins M., Lark M., Leon J. P., Palmer T., Pulido J., Martin M., Weeks L., Gaudiano S., Hoberg R., Delperdang J. (a.), *Captain America Omnibus*, Vol. 1, New York 2007.

*Comics and Ideology*, eds. Allister M. P., Sewell Jr. E. H., Gordon I., New York 2001.

Costello M. J., *Secret Identity Crisis: Comic Books & the Unmasking of Cold War America*, New York, London 2009.

<sup>45</sup> See: J. Loeb (w.), J. Cassaday, D. Finch, E. McGuinness, J. Romita Jr., L. F. Yu (a.), *Fallen Son: The Death of Captain America*, New York 2007, especially #3 and #5.

- Dittmer J., *Captain America and the Nationalist Superhero: Metaphors, Narratives, and Geopolitics*, Philadelphia 2013.
- Dittmer J., *Captain America in the News: Changing Mediascapes and the Appropriation of a Superhero*, "Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics" 2012, No. 3.
- Dittmer J., *Captain America's Empire: Reflections on Identity, Popular Culture, and Post-9/11 Geopolitics*, "Annals of the Association of American Geographers" 2005, No. 3.
- Emerson R. W., *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, ed. J. Porte, New York 1983.
- Engelhart S., Friedrich M. (w.), Buscema S. (a.), *Captain America and the Falcon: Secret Empire*, New York 2005.
- Gromczyński W., *Emerson. Codziennosc i absolut w filozofii Ralpha Waldo Emersona*, Łódź 1992.
- Gustines G. G., *Captain America Is Dead; National Hero Since 1941*, „The New York Times”, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/08/books/08capt.html> (accessed 24.08.2020).
- Hayton Ch., Albright D. L., *O Captain! My Captain*, [in:] *Captain America and the Struggle of the Superhero*, ed. R. G. Weiner, Jefferson NC, London 2009.
- Ladu A. I., *Emerson: Whig or Democrat*, "The New England Quarterly" 1940, No. 3.
- Lewandowski W., *Od faszystowskiej dystopii do anarchistycznej utopii. Idee polityczne w powieści graficznej 'V jak Vendetta' Alana Moore'a i Davida Lloyd'a*, Toruń 2019.
- Lewandowski W., *SuperScots: Superheroes and Scottish Identity*, [in:] *Scottish Culture: Dialogue and Self-Expression*, eds. A. Korzeniowska, I. Szymańska, Warszawa 2016.
- Lewandowski W., *Wolność i samotność. Myśl społeczno-polityczna amerykańskiego transcendentalizmu*, Warszawa 2011.
- Lewis A. D., *Graphic Responses: Comic Book Superheroes' Militarism Post 9/11*, Emerging Popular Culture Corner, <https://www.americanpopularculture.com/archive/emerging/graphic.htm> (accessed 25.08.2020).
- Loeb J. (w.), Cassaday J., Finch D., McGuinness E., Romita Jr. J., Yu L. F. (a.), *Fallen Son: The Death of Captain America*, New York 2007.
- Malachuk D. S., *Democracy*, [in:] *Ralph Waldo Emerson in Context*, ed. W. T. Mott, Cambridge 2013.
- Millar M. (w.), McNiven S. (a.), *Civil War*, New York 2007.
- Moore A. (w.), Gibbons D. (a.), *Watchmen*, New York 2008.
- Morris T., *What's Behind the Mask? The Secret of Secret Identities*, [in:] *Superheroes and Philosophy: Truth Justice, and the Socratic Way*, eds. T. Morris, M. Morris, Chicago and La Salle, Ill. 2005.
- Prince M. J., 'Whose Side are You on?': *Negotiations Between Individual Liberty and Collective Responsibility in Millar and McNiven's Marvel Civil War*, "Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics" 2015, No. 2.
- Read J. H., *The Limits of Self-Reliance: Emerson, Slavery and Abolition*, [in:] *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, eds. A. M. Levine, D. S. Malachuk, Lexington 2011.



- Reynolds R., *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*, Jackson 1994.
- Skidmore M. J., Skidmore J., *More Than Mere Fantasy: Political Themes in Comic Books*, "The Journal of Popular Culture" 1983, No. 1.
- Spanakos T., *Super-Vigilantes and the Keene Act*, [in:] *Watchmen and Philosophy: A Rorschach Test*, ed. M. D. White, Hoboken 2009.
- Veloso F., Bateman J., *The Multimodal Construction of Acceptability: Marvel's 'Civil War' Comic Books and the Patriot Act*, "Critical Discourse Studies" 2013, No. 4.
- Woodward-Burns R., *Solitude Before Society: Emerson on Self-Reliance, Abolitionism, and Moral Suasion*, "Polity" 2016, No. 1.
- Wright B. W., *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, Baltimore 2003.