A Decade of Frustration: The Impact of the Atomic Bomb in American Media and Culture during the 1950s
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Historians assert that the use of the atomic bomb had a profound impact on American identity and popular culture. This project examines how the use of the atomic bomb created a dichotomy in American culture. Popular “low culture,” magazines and comic books, are used to examine the birth of a new youth culture during the early years of the Cold War, which in turn creates a new way that war stories were told. Comics and magazines were published during the 1950s that portrayed both cultures, the new culture of America’s youth, as well as the culture of the WWII generation. The dichotomy occurred as part of the culture wars, but also reflected the frustration that existed in America due to the Cold War. The two ways of telling a war story that are present in 1950s popular culture show that there was an emerging lack of consensus about the Cold War in American Culture.

When America became involved in World War II after the attack on Pearl Harbor, nearly the entire nation rallied behind the new war effort. World War II was the quintessential total war; every available resource was mustered to help defeat the enemy. The media and popular culture contributed by giving a face to an enemy who was oceans away. The image of the enemy that was given was one of unparalleled evil: Saboteurs, “filthy, brutish Japs,” and treacherous Nazis. The enemy was vile, a perfect embodiment of evil that America’s virtuous soldiers, both those abroad and those fighting on the home front, could fight and kill without remorse. WWII was one of the last conflicts in American cultural history in which an unambiguous and absolute “good versus evil” mentality was portrayed by popular culture and accepted by the masses. This “us versus other” mentality began when early colonists first stepped off the mayflower and first encountered “the savage.” This mindset contributed to the creation of lasting American icons such as Superman or Captain America; and ultimately this mentality was blown to
smithereens along with the innocence of American popular culture when the atomic bombs were dropped on two Japanese cites at the end of the war.¹

Postwar American media and popular culture still tried to tell the tale of war but the polarized war story of the past floundered in the intricate and ambiguous Cold War world; fascination and fear of the atomic bomb would take the place of the good old days when the good guys could kill the bad guys without having to worry about any moral consequences for their actions—or even that there was any chance of defeat. In the stories that were popular during World War II the hero handily defeats a clearly defined villain would not be able to flourish in the complexities of Cold War conflicts. This sort of story is exemplified by the cover of the first issue of Captain America where the title character is boldly and unabashedly punching Hitler in the face (Fig. 1). There is no doubt in any reader’s mind that Captain America’s actions are justified. In his study on American patriotism and pageantry, The Russians are Coming!, Richard Fried writes that,

Americans fondly remember World War II ad the last time of unity, shared burdens and a sense of civic commonality. Many leaders feared that something good ended on V-J Day, that harmful new trends were afoot in the land. They cited such lapses as intolerance, civic apathy, crime and juvenal delinquency, and whoring after strange doctrines.²

The disunity that Fried cites was exceedingly prevalent in how popular culture, specifically youth culture, depicted the Cold War, especially when compared to how war was portrayed during WWII in similar media. The disunity emerged because of the birth of a new youth culture, one that rejected the older generation’s way of thinking and

was more sensitive to the horrifying reality of the Cold War and as a result two separate ways of telling a war story would emerge.

Tom Engelhardt analyzes the fading of the traditional war story from American popular culture in his book, *The End of Victory Culture*. According to Engelhardt, the idea of the “war story” existed ever since the creation of an American identity, and was ingrained in the foundation of that identity. According to Engelhardt, the central aspect of the War Story, the defining feature of America’s Victory Culture, was the virtuous fight and inevitable victory over a faceless, barbaric, and numerically superior foe. The “victory culture” ideology justified killing Indians or other “barbarians” because the only situations where a white American would ever resort to violence against “inferior” peoples would if it were situations where the violence was absolutely required to defend home or country. The end of this ideology began when American brought its newfound weapons to bear on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a pair of attacks that were so brutal that no amount of imagination could justify their use as a reasonable means of self-defense.

When the United States entered the Korean War, the comic book industry, a medium that championed the war story throughout World War II, stepped in to contribute to the fight. Various attempts were made to portray the Korean War in the same way World War II had been portrayed. The enemy was shown as sub-human, and the hero—the American—was fighting in a perfectly righteous battle. Korean and Chinese bad guys were illustrated in a way that was nearly identical to the way that Japanese had been

4 *Ibid*, 4-5.
illustrated in World War II era comics (Figure 2). No attempt was made to adjust the ideology or culture of the new “yellow menace” for sake of accuracy; only the uniforms were changed.\textsuperscript{7} As in World War II, the comic industry sent its signature creation, superheroes, into the conflict. However, the success of these stories in the Cold War world was negligible when compared to similar stories from World War II. No lasting characters, such as World War II’s Captain America, were produced from these Korean War superhero comics.\textsuperscript{8} Marvel Comics created superheroes such as Black Cobra and Avenger specifically as anti-communist, Korean War heroes. Likewise, Jack Kirby and Joe Simon created a character called The Fighting American. However, all of these titles flopped and none created a lasting icon as had happened during World War II.\textsuperscript{9} While most people recognize Captain America, only the most die-hard comic-book nerds have heard of these Korean War superheroes.

In comic titles such as publisher Ziff Davis’s \textit{G.I. Joe}, regular soldiers were the heroes of the tale but the combat was illustrated and narrated in an absurdly glamorous style. In these stories “U.S. forces never lost and suffered minimal casualties, generally giving the impression that the Korean War was lots of fun.”\textsuperscript{10} Soldiers fought the enemy with a smile, and never truly had to worry about defeat (Fig. 3). Unfortunately, the nature of the Korean War prevented such a story to be believable. Although the beginning of the war proceeded as American’s expected, by 1953 when the ceasefire was signed American soldiers were bogged down in stalemate that seemed impossible to break. Some readers did not want to read a glorified war story when it was obvious that

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{7} \textit{Ibid}, 114.
\item \textsuperscript{8} \textit{Ibid}, 123.
\item \textsuperscript{9} \textit{Ibid}, 123.
\item \textsuperscript{10} Wright, \textit{Comic Book Nation}, 114.
\end{itemize}
the reality of the conflict was far from enjoyable. The nature of the Cold War prevented audiences from believing these one-dimensional conflicts where victory was assured.

Alongside these glamorous war stories and tales of superheroics, a new wave of war comics attempted to grab the market and take advantage of the discrepancy that existed between traditional war stories and what war was actually like. These stories featured the same American soldiers as their more idealistic counterparts, but portrayed a more realistic, much darker vision of the war in Korea. Often written by veterans, the common soldier featured in these narratives plodded through a terrifying enemy territory with no assurance of their own righteousness and certainly had no assurance of victory. The enemy was ambiguous; it had no inhuman mask to identify it. The difference between the American soldier and the Korean or Chinese soldier was simply a matter of uniform.11 Two titles that predominantly featured these stories were edited by Harvey Kurtzman, who would later also be editor for Mad, were Two-Fisted Tales, and Frontline Combat. Hajdu says that Kurtzman’s comics attacked traditional American ideals, the ideals that made fighting the Cold War a worthy cause.12 Kurtzman himself would later explain his intentions with these new-style war stories,

I avoided the usual glamorous stuff of the big, good-looking GI beating up the ugly little yellow man, I was reading the news of the Korean War along with everybody else. It struck me that war was not a very nice business, and the comic book companies dealing in the subject matter of war tended to make war glamorous. That offended me.13

11 Ibid, 115-117.
12 Hajdu, Ten-Cent Plague, 180.
Within these stories, the two opposing forces fought over some ideal unknown to the common foot soldier and American superiority, for the first time in the national self-image, was incapable of defeating the overwhelming number of enemies. Hajdu notes that Kurtzman’s war stories featured cynicism toward the American military and sensitivity to the impartial cruelty of war.”¹⁴ In a way, the frustration of the soldiers within comic books mirrored the frustration that plagued the real military. America was incapable of bringing its full force against its enemy; in the eyes of many, the conflict was a stalemate not because American troops weren’t good enough, but rather because those in charge would not grant them unrestricted military action.¹⁵

The only alternative to the stalemate, one that existed in reality as well as in the media portrayal, seemed to be to bring America’s nuclear arsenal into the fight.¹⁶ However, America could not keep its image of being the “good guy” if it began throwing nuclear weapons, but at the same time it seemed like it was impossible to win without them.¹⁷ If it came down to it and nuclear weapons were used, America would become the barbarian—that very same barbarian that we desperately wanted to be fighting and killing as we nearly had after bombing Japan. Once the Soviet Union successfully tested its own atomic weapons, the possibility of mutual destruction further increased the frustration of the situation.

The inability for America to bring its full nuclear capacity down on its enemies, when doing so had the potential to quickly end a long and frustrating conflict, started off half of a century in which American mass culture became obsessed with the bomb and

¹⁴ Ibid, 196.
¹⁵ Ibid, 120.
¹⁶ Engelhardt, The End of Victory Culture, 64.
¹⁷ Ibid, 10.
atomic war. Some comics from the 1950s, such as *Atomic War!*, toyed with the idea of applying nuclear weapons to modern warfare. The stated purpose of these comics was to show “the utter devastation that another war will bring to all, the just as well as the unjust.”\(^{18}\) In reality, however, the stories presented atomic warfare as a plausible method of attaining victory.\(^{19}\) The December 1952 issue of Atomic War shows a fighter plane that is engaged with a communist submarine, and is about to use “atomic rockets” so that the sub cannot get away (Fig. 4). Despite the noble intentions of these comics, the imagery is only a reminder of the frustration that the nation was feeling in relation to the Korean War, and well as the greater culture of Cold War America.

By the end of the 1950s, it was the threat of nuclear destruction, as much as the faceless, unbeatable communism that threatened the minds of young Americans. Alice L. George, writing about the threat of nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis, says that “young people understood nuclear war’s grotesque potential for destruction…” and had to live “with the possibility that adults might eliminate their chance to grow up…”\(^{20}\) According to sociologist Maria Winn, 60% of children reported nightmares involving nuclear destruction.\(^{21}\) Letters to president Kennedy provide evidence that that possibility for nuclear war was on the mind of youngsters in the 1950s.\(^{22}\)

The older generation, parents, teachers, critics, and politicians, were trying to hold onto the old American ideal. The 1950s were a difficult period for comic books because there was a significant backlash against the content of many new comics that some

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\(^{18}\) Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 121.  
\(^{19}\) Ibid.  
\(^{21}\) Ibid, 139.  
\(^{22}\) Ibid.
people believed to be increasing juvenile delinquency. This backlash was really part of the culture wars, a movement parallel to the advent of rock n’ roll and the creation for the first time of a unique youth culture. Young people were looking for stories and themes that did not talk down to them and did not shirk away from the realities of the world. The older generation was still beholden to tradition, a tradition that included classic American victory culture. This meant that throughout the Cold War, two ways of telling war stories would exist. The idealistic, glorified stories had the least amount of trouble getting past parents and censures, but did not sell terribly well to the young target audience. The best selling stories were the ones that took a more realistic, albeit grim, stance to the Korean conflict and Cold War issues.23

It was almost a coincidence that this division of youth media occurred when it did. The reality is that the disagreement over the message of these publications was an aspect of the “culture wars”, of which rock n’ roll culture was only one aspect. The youth of America were longing for their own cultural experience and regardless of whether they found what they were looking for in music or in comics it scared the past generations. Because of the timing of this phenomenon, popular conceptions of the Cold War became one of the battles that was fought between the old and the new generations. America’s adults were trying to force the youth to adhere to the culture that they grew up with, but which had been outdated since the end of WWII.

In The Ten-Cent Plague, David Hajdu explains how the older generation saw comics as perhaps the biggest threat to American Culture after communism. They feared

23 Wright, Comic Book Nation, 133-134.
the new interests and values of the young.\textsuperscript{24} Although McCarthy himself never attacked comics as he did other media, it is interesting to note that as a frenzy of anti-communist sentiment was being stirred up by the Wisconsin senator, a parallel frenzy was occurring over comics.\textsuperscript{25}

While adults were most concerned with the gore, violence, and depravity that was being portrayed in comic books, the youth of America were drawn to them because they were not talked down to in most cases within the pages of a comic. Hajdu notes, “[comics] spoke with special cogency to young people who felt like outsiders in a world geared for and run by adults.”\textsuperscript{26} In an article published in the New Statesman, Nathan Abrams explained Mad’s use of political commentary. Abrams summarizes that, “turning its zany gaze on every aspect of American life in the 1950s and 1960s, Mad fulfilled a pivotal role, giving teenagers a political education over their breakfast cornflakes.”\textsuperscript{27}

With the creation of the comics code, comic book publishers were forced to adapt their content accordingly. If they did so their sales plummeted as their new, censored, content did not appeal to their young market, and if they didn’t then they would be shut down. Bill Gaines, the prolific publisher of EC Comics lost nearly all the titles he once owned; the only title he managed to save was \textit{Mad}, and only because he managed to change its format to be considered a magazine rather than a comic, thereby side-stepping

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Ibid}, 5.
\textsuperscript{27} Nathan Abrams, “It’s a mad world,” \textit{New Statesman} (February 2000): 50.
the code. At that point, Gaines saw *Mad* as “an act of cultural retribution” for the damage that had been done to him and the comic book industry as a whole. After the switch in format, Gaines invited the magazine’s editor, Harvey Kurtzman, to expand the satire of the magazine to include American culture as a whole. Before that the magazine had focused almost entirely on mocking the comic industry itself, only occasionally sliding in criticism of comics’ critics or American society in general.

It did not take long for *Mad* to weigh in on the Cold War. In issue 28, the second since the switch in formats, the cover proclaimed “Spring Issue: with enjoyable article on guided missiles and how they can blow up the earth.” The article itself describes how both the United States and the Soviet Union had assembled teams of “brains” to invent and perfect a “Missle X.” The magazine goes on to justify why the space was being used on such a morbid topic:

> We are going to here show you things to come. Yes—they will frighten you. But because we believe in informing the public, and education the public, we are printing this article. But mainly because we believe in frightening the public, we are printing this article. You sell more magazines that way.

Underneath this introduction, illustrations show the radius of destruction from various atomic weapons. The “conventional bomb” encompasses all of Manhattan, the “guided missile” covers all of Texas, and the “ultimate weapon” is scaled back so far as to encompass all the earth, to moon, and nearly reaching mars in the extent of its

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29 Qt. in Hajdu, *Ten-Cent Plague*, 324.
30 Hajdu, *Ten-Cent Plague*, 323.
32 Ibid, 9.
33 Ibid.
A few pages later, the “plan for battle” in the event of a nuclear war is explained. The images show nukes being exchanged between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., taking chunks out of the globe as “retaliation,” until all that remains of the earth are two fragments floating in space still “retaliating.”

This issue addresses the very real reality of Mutually Assured Destruction, and despite the ridiculous humor fairly intelligently deals with it in a manner that does justice to the horror of the concept. However, unlike any similar article in an “adult” magazines, Mad does not negate America’s contribution to any future nuclear war. In addition, the introduction manages to elegantly make fun of the fear-mongering that ran rampant in regards to communism and nuclear war. Hajdu believes that “[Mad] provoked young people to worry about a great deal about grown-up matters such as the Cold War…”

Those people who opposed the burgeoning youth culture of course had a different view entirely. James Ford, wrote in the late ‘60s that, “[Mad’s] pictorial humor runs to the crude and sadistic which no mature adult can stomach.” As a magazine, Mad was forced to compete with such long-time titles as the Girl and Boy Scouts’ American Girl and Boys’ Life. Ford held these titles in much higher esteem, saying, “the scouting magazines stress character building and youthful citizenship. However, Ford was also forced to admit that most junior high and high school aged boys surveyed considered teens magazines aside from Mad to be “trash.”

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34 Ibid.
36 Hajdu, Ten-Cent Plague, 325.
38 Ibid, 37.
The consensus that had existed throughout World War II was a fleeting memory, damaged by a fear of atomic annihilation and a brand new generation that was very aware it could be the last. Nonetheless, Cold War historian Scott Lucas claims that the Cold War, like World War II, was a total war. He asserted, “The battle against Soviet Communism was not the exclusive domain, as most historians portray, of politicians, diplomats, and generals. It was waged at the front by covert operators and, more significantly, by private groups working with them.”39 However unconditional the fight against communism was, its battles were fought secretly or via proxy wars such as Korea. Because of this, the consensus in media that existed during World War II, proudly affirming America’s certain victory, did not exist in the Cold War era.

The tastes and expectations of young audiences had changed—matured perhaps—since the revelation of the atomic bomb. The idealistic war no longer existed in real life and slowly began to fade from the American imagination. Fried explains the effect of the generation gap on Cold War patriotism, he says,

A changing culture also figured heavily in the decline of Cold-War pageantry. Mid-fifties America was home to rock and roll—a sort of stand in for an attendant mingling of racial and ethnic culture—plus action painting, new styles of dress, greater informality, changing attitudes towards sexual, an explosion of gaudy visuality, and rising gratification through consumption. Boundaries were being crossed or disappearing. Technological advances like TV, portable radios, and LP and 45 rpm records hastened that culture’s spread. In comparison, much of the cold-war pageantry was old-fashioned and earth-bound.40

What Fried fails to include in his impressive summary of the new youth culture’s effects on the Cold War the role of graphic media like comics or magazines. Because the

content of these publications often deals specifically with war in general, more often than not the Cold War itself, it is easy to see the new worldview of America’s next generation. No matter how hard publishers and parents tried, youth would not swallow a story that assured victory over a clearly defined opponent as the possibility of complete victory in real life became more and more ephemeral and the enemy became more and more indistinct.

Despite a divergence in how the war story was told, it was a nigh-undisputed fact that communism was an evil ideology that must be stopped. The sheer popularity of McCarthy-esque witch-hunt thinking certainly exemplifies this. The Christian Anti-Communism Crusade, a fundamentalist, conservative evangelical Christian organization piggybacked off of McCarthy’s popularity to strengthen its own ranks.\(^{41}\) At the same time, evangelical personalities rose against the threat of internal communism. Bishop Fulton J. Sheen got a prime time television show, which he frequently used as a platform against communism.\(^{42}\) Sheen saw communism as a satanic religion, deadly in it is capacity to attract devotion.\(^{43}\) Even if most people did not believe communism was the creation of the devil—though many did, his show reached millions of people—there was nonetheless nearly complete agreement amongst Americans that communism was a threat.\(^{44}\)

\(^{43}\) *Ibid.*, 212.
\(^{44}\) *Ibid.*, 218.
Another Bishop, John Francis Noll, not only was firmly opposed to communism of any sort, he also believed that comic books were a communist plot that aimed to corrupt and recruit America’s youth.\textsuperscript{45} Noll organized the National Organization for Decent Literature, which released annual blacklists of comics that the organization would encourage communism or juvenile delinquency. The organization encouraged other Bishops to declare that reading the blacklisted comics a mortal sin.\textsuperscript{46} Despite the disdain the Catholic Church showed for the comic book industry, it was the content, not the medium itself that was reviled. Throughout the ‘40s and ‘50s, the church supported a great deal of comic publications that encouraged Christian ideals in titles such as *Stories from the Bible*, which appropriately contained stories from the bible.\textsuperscript{47}

Publications supported by the church tried to revive the good old days by portraying specific communist leaders to give the enemy a face, such as Mao Tse-Tung on 1951 Children’s Crusade Against Communism bubble gum cards. The caricatures were made to be as Hitler-like as possible, but America was unable to fight them in the way wanted to—with victory at any cost. Mao’s “biography” on the back of the card labeled him a “Warmaker,” and “leader of the Chinese reds,” who must be stopped from “Shedding the blood of innocent people.” Mao’s portrait on the card was tinted slightly green, giving him an ill, even maniacal look. Behind him, a screaming ape is poised with a bloodstained machete lifted ready to shed more blood (Fig. 3).\textsuperscript{48} When given the chance to fight this despicable foe, those “Chinese Reds,” in Korea, U.S. forces were

\textsuperscript{45} Hajdu, *Ten-Cent Plague*, 75-76.
\textsuperscript{46} *Ibid*, 76.
\textsuperscript{47} *Ibid*, 72.
unable to beat them and unable to bring their nuclear arms into the conflict without becoming the “bad guy” at best, or at worst, and more likely, provoking a nuclear war with the U.S.S.R. in the process.

The 1950s brought many changes to America, not the least which were the cold war and the emergence of a unique and rebellious youth culture. The two cultural forces met within the pages of American popular literature, comics and magazines. The threat of complete nuclear destruction played a big role in the rejection of traditional American culture by the youth of the 1950s and comics became the prime medium for their new culture the develop. And yet, throughout the decade, supporters of traditional American war culture tried to bring back the good old days of World War II.

Throughout the Cold War, America, in the media, in politics, and in the hearts and minds of the people, maintained a fear and hatred of the communist forces that threatened American Democracy. The extent of anti-communist fervor made it even more frustrating for America to be unable to handily defeat the enemy. On top of that, waging war on an idea, such as communism, has the disadvantage of lacking a clear opponent to fight. Sure, the Soviet Union was out there, but America couldn’t fight the Soviets directly without risking global annihilation. Even when fighting communists in Korea, it was not the enemy that we wanted to be fighting, and to add insult to injury, we were incapable of winning decisively. Being unable to attack and defeat the real enemy without unleashing the mutual destruction of nuclear war created a frustrating situation for American culture—a culture that was accustomed to being able portray its own righteous victory at any cost. As a result of this frustration, the war stories written for children and young adults changed from those that ensured victory to a much more realistic tale where the
enemy seemed impossible to defeat without destroying everything that was being fought for in the first place. The World War II generation, those people in charge, would try to fight the Cold War as if it were World War II, however, the change that occurred in America’s war story—a change intrinsically linked to a brand new youth culture—would prevent the powers that be from acquiring the one resource they wanted to muster more than any other: the full support of the masses.
Figure 1. The Traditional War Story of American Victory Culture (Captain America #1, March 1942)
Figure 2: Depiction of Asian Soldiers in the Korean Conflict (Battle Stories Comic, date unknown)
Figure 3. The Korean War was Good Fun! (G.I. Joe #23, March 1953)
Figure 4. Mao as a Villain and Beast (Children's Crusade Against Communism Bubble Gum Trading Card #47).
Figure 51. Depiction of “Practical” Use of Atomic Weapons, (Atomic War! December 1952)
Bibliography


