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**Defending the American Identity:
Defense in the Marvel Cinematic Universe**

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Abstract

This thesis introduces the superhero genre as a medium through which national identity and political viewpoints are narrated. It analyzes the portrayal of defense strategy in *Iron Man* and *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*, both products from the Marvel Cinematic Universe, and integrates theories of American exceptionalism, nationalism, and Orientalism to break down the pre-existing values, fears, and stereotypes that have influenced the depiction of defense strategies. The thesis begins with an introduction on the relevance of superhero movies in reflecting and shaping American identity. It continues by defining the term ‘defense’. It will then provide an interpretation of the values that have constructed a common national identity. An analysis of *Iron Man* and *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* reveals how the portrayal of defense in the Marvel Cinematic Universe has been shaped by values, fears, and stereotypes present in American society during the time of its production, and how the portrayal of defense responds to the political and social climate.

Keywords: *Superhero genre, Marvel Cinematic Universe, film studies, Orientalism, American exceptionalism, defense strategies.*

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Introduction

Superheroes have become an established element of American culture. Many superhero movies have been made in the last few decades, and the genre has become a well-known phenomenon in Hollywood. Superhero stories are inflected by the time and culture in which they were produced, and their sociopolitical relevance is therefore a useful tool to gain insight into a particular period of American culture (Burke 4). Today's digital culture also allows the media to greatly influence cultural ideas and ideologies (Benshoff and Griffin 13). It is therefore relevant to study elements of visual media in the field of American Studies, since it provides insight into the cultural climate of the United States during the time the product was made. Originating in comic books, the superhero genre is an especially American invention. Jason Dittmer argues that superheroes are used as a medium through which national identity and geopolitical scripts are narrated (626). Superheroes have the political rhetoric to achieve Hollywood's goal. According to Costello and Worcester, superheroes mirror and comment on the ideas, movements, policies, and institutions within society (85). They always stand for something both explicitly and by implication and can be used as propagandistic icons of nationalism and patriotism as well as tools to critically comment on political issues. They can furthermore shape public opinion by providing inspiring images, narratives, and rhetoric (86). Liam Burke argues that a key convention of the superhero is justice, and many heroes act in gaps left by the state while still upholding the state's principles, consequently transmuting their acts into a perfect embodiment of law enforcement (6). This becomes more complicated, however, when the principles of the states are unclear, or the actions of powerful individuals are not harmonious with the hero's moral code (6). The way in which justice is served in the superhero films is visualized in the portrayal of the superhero's defense of the nation. The portrayal of these strategies is influenced by the time period in which the film was made. It is

therefore relevant to research underlying elements that have influenced this portrayal to gain insight into a particular period of American culture.

One of the most famous Superheroes are the ones from the Marvel comics. With the release of *Iron Man* in 2008, Marvel introduced the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), an American media franchise centered around a series of superhero films, television series, short films, digital series, and literature created by Marvel Studios based on the characters from the Marvel comics. The films and television series are all set in a shared universe, established by crossing over common plot elements, settings, and characters. Having grossed over \$26 billion at the box office (“Box Office History”), the MCU cannot be overlooked in Hollywood. This thesis will focus on two case studies from the MCU to answer the following research question: How does the Marvel Cinematic Universe portray American defense strategy and what kind of pre-existing values, stereotypes, and fears are evoked in this portrayal?

This thesis aims at analyzing, in the first place, the portrayal of American defense strategies in the MCU using two case studies. In this respect, I will start with the argument that the portrayal of defense strategies is influenced by a set of pre-existing values, fears, and stereotypes present in American society during the time the movie and television series were made. Secondly, I will aim at analyzing which pre-existing values, fears, and stereotypes are employed in the case studies and how these factors have contributed to the portrayal of defense. The first chapter of this thesis explains how different values have contributed to the meaning of the ‘American identity,’ whereafter it will argue that George W. Bush and Donald Trump have abused these values in their foreign policy. It will conclude with an interpretation of the definition of defense in America. The second chapter focuses on the 2008 movie *Iron Man*. I chose this movie because it has several clear implications to the War on Terror, and I argue that its portrayal of defense strategy acts as propaganda for military intervention in the war. The third chapter analyzes the Marvel Disney+ series *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* released

in 2021. I chose this series because since it was released recently it comments on today's society. I argue that this series responds to and provides criticism on Trump's immigration policies through its portrayal of defense. Moreover, both *Iron Man* and *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* respond to government policies that resulted in reduced freedom of movement in America, a value crucial to the American identity. Both projects, however, respond in a different way to these policies. Chapter two and three each begin with an introduction to the visual medium and a discussion of the manner in which it portrays defense. It will also discuss how the superheroes' symbolic importance contributes to the portrayal of defense. It will then provide a reading of the values, stereotypes and fears employed in the visual medium which will be used to argue why American defense strategy is portrayed the way it is.

To conduct this research, I have used several different theories from which I have analyzed the case studies. Firstly, the idea of American exceptionalism – a term defined by Donald E. Pease as “the lasting belief in America as the fulfillment of the national ideal to which other nations aspire” (7) – is needed to understand why George W. Bush made certain political decisions during the war. American exceptionalism is based on the belief that it is a collective American identity that makes America different from other countries. It argues that the United States is unique in its values, political system, and historical background. The term implies that the U.S. is destined to play an influential role on the world stage. Embedded within the term are the images and beliefs that have regulated the production, transmission, and maintenance of the understanding of what it means to be American. While the concept of American identity is fluid, the core values of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, as stated in the Constitution, are at the base of this American identity (8). American exceptionalism is relevant to the research question because it helps to understand the motivation behind defense strategy. The fantasy of American exceptionalism was used to authorize practices of government (11). The term is therefore relevant to comprehend American politics during the

time that the movie and television series were made, which has in turn influenced the portrayal of defense in the MCU.

Moreover, this thesis will make use of the theory of Orientalism, a term first introduced by Edward W. Said. Orientalism is a style of thought based upon the distinction made between “the Orient” and the “Occident,” where the latter is the Western self and the former the Eastern other (Said 2). Orientalism was initially a term coined to explain colonialism, arguing that colonialism was an all-round worldview that believed the West was superior to the East. The idea of Orientalism is based upon an ethnocentric myth, with the aim to elevate the Euro-American Self to a pure center. The idea of the Orient cannot be understood without their force, and Orientalism can therefore only be understood within its historical, political, and societal context (5). This theory is relevant for my research question because in Hollywood, the West, and the United States in particular, is portrayed as the world’s protector and savior. This idea justifies the Western countries’ intervention in other countries. Principles of humanity and civilization make these actions appear to be peaceful and “right” (Chahdi 21). Orientalism aids in understanding the portrayal of the villain as a cultural other in the hero’s shadow.

Nationalism will furthermore help analyze American values that have contributed to the portrayal of defense. Defined by Alison Mountz as “a sense of belonging to a group or community that shares a common identity, often but not always associated with a particular territory,” nationalism refers to the territorial expression of identity (277). Whereas American exceptionalism refers to the belief that it is a shared national identity that makes the United States different from other nations, nationalism explains how this shared national identity creates a sense of belonging among Americans. Mountz explains that national governments and leaders use the power of nationalism to consolidate power (282). Analysis of the portrayal of defense in the MCU will show how Hollywood on the one hand taps into Americans’ nationalist

feelings to generate support for government decisions, and how on the other hand it uses nationalist symbols to criticize government decisions.

The primary method I have used to conduct this research is film analysis. To gain insight in how to conduct a proper film analysis, I have consulted the book *Film Art* by David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Jeff Smith. The analyses will explain how elements such as the literary design, mise-en-scène and sound design work together in its portrayal of defense to convey a certain image of the United States to the audience. Moreover, I have consulted literary sources to construct accurate definitions of important terms and ideas that are relevant for analyzing the visual products, and to provide the necessary historical and societal background to answer my research question.

Chapter 1: The American Identity and Defining Defense

The Merriam-Webster dictionary provides five definitions of the noun “defense.” Firstly “the act or action of defending;” secondly “capability of resisting attack;” thirdly “means or method of defending or protecting oneself, one’s team, or another;” fourthly “a defending party or group;” and fifthly “the military and industrial aggregate that authorizes and supervises arms production” (“Defense”). Defense strategy is the approach a country takes in defending itself, including the means it uses to do so. This meaning, however, does not completely cover what defense means in America. This chapter aims to analyze how defense has been thought of in America since 9/11. It will set out to investigate what fears, stereotypes and values are present in American society and how these lead to a certain thinking about defense. Crucial to establish these factors is to first understand the meaning of America’s national identity. Campbell and Kean argue that the ‘American identity’ does not have a real and fixed meaning but is rather an idea created through a national narrative, meaning that a set of agreed principles, values and myths give Americans a communal sense of identity (3). The American identity is based on a

communal American ideology, referring to the foundational values of freedom, equality, and commitment to self-government under law (Gleason 484). Some sense of the differences between American culture and other cultures has come out of a need for national self-definition, and to define the American national identity one thus needs to search for ‘American exceptionalism’ (Campbell and Kean 3).

1.1. How Mobility Shaped the American Identity

Research into the history of American culture shows that the American identity has been shaped by mobility in the geographic as well as the socio-economic sphere. Historian Frederick Jackson Turner theorized that the strength of the American identity lay in its frontier. He argued that American social development continually had to begin over and over again with its westward expansion (2). This movement westward created new opportunities, and the constant interaction with Indigenous land shaped American character. Moving westward, the frontier moved further away from European influences and became more American (3). The frontier promoted the formation of an American nationality, mainly focused on freedom of the individual and democracy. Turner argued that mobility of the population promoted nationalism because of the constant intercourse with the nation, and that the expansive character of American life remained present even after the frontier had closed (9).

The first settlers believed it was destiny that had foreseen the United States to grow into a great and powerful country, giving Americans the moral obligation to expand westwards. In “The Great Nation of Futurity,” John L. O’Sullivan wrote (430):

“We must onward to the fulfilment of our mission – to the entire development of the principle of our organization – freedom of conscience, freedom of person, freedom of trade and business pursuits, universality of freedom and equality. This is our high

destiny, and in nature's eternal, inevitable decree of cause and effect we must accomplish it.”

O'Sullivan spoke of 'Manifest Destiny' and argued that Americans were destined to spread their principles of democracy, freedom, and equality throughout the world. He argued that America was an exceptional nation because its revolutionary political system separated the nation from the past and connected it with the future (427). The idea of Manifest Destiny was merely a myth, because evidence proves that core values of democracy, freedom, and equality only applied to white European settlers. The myth, however, still prevails in the United States today, may it not be in exactly in the way it was originally defined. Bush's rhetoric regarding U.S. foreign policy during the War on Terror will show how.

Westward movement had implied progress, development, and opportunity, and had been ideologically linked to upward social mobility. James Truslow Adams spoke of an 'American dream' which was “that 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” (Adams qtd. in Campbell and Kean 11). America was believed to be a virgin land, free to be civilized and occupied by the pioneers. The allure of available land and natural resources drew people to the country, hoping to establish a better life for themselves (Leyda 12).

Modern progress in geographical mobility proved once more the value of mobility for American identity. The invention of the automobile at the turn of the 20th century allowed Americans to travel freely and further throughout the country. Allowing people to be independently mobile, cars symbolized modern American freedom and independence (Leyda 25).

Lastly, Crevecoeur argued that the geographical movement of immigrants is what made 'America' as we know it possible. He argued that rights in America belonged to the individual rather than to social and ethnic groups, and that the openness and mobility of American society

would encourage personal transformation. He argued that the liberating conditions of American life would allow immigrants to let go of their pasts and create themselves anew. Crevecoeur pointed out that American society was shaped by immigrants (Campbell and Kean 55). While Crevecoeur's idea of America as a nation of immigrants proved to be merely a myth, because of its exclusion of minority groups, it remained inherent to the idea of the American identity. The belief in an American dream encouraged immigrants to come to America where life would be better and offered more opportunities than their country of origin. Campbell and Kean in addition argue that America is a 'melting pot' of diverse cultures, and that the creation of an American identity has only been made possible because of immigrants (62).

The history of the geographical and socioeconomic movement of Americans shows that the American identity is constantly changing, but that values of freedom, democracy, equality, pursuit of happiness and independence lie at the core of the American identity. It is the historical development and these common values that proponents of American exceptionalism believe make the United States different from other nations.

1.2. Mobility Post-9/11: Bush and the War on Terror

After 9/11, however, mobility was curtailed by a number of restrictions as a result of security measures against terrorism. Orlando Patterson claims that 9/11 had a major negative influence on the nation's conception and experience of freedom, because Bush's strategy limited mobility through extra safety measures such as wiretapping and increased surveillance. David Hastings Dunn demonstrates that the Bush administration adopted multiple strategies in the War on Terror. From the beginning of the war, Bush had argued that terrorists and the governments that supported them were purely evil and aimed to destroy freedom (13). Utilizing the idea of Manifest Destiny, Bush used the implicit argument that God was on America's side and that unlimited global exportation of U.S. democracy and liberty was its destiny. Whereas Manifest

Destiny was originally focused on spreading freedom on American soil, Bush used the idea to justify military intervention on foreign soil. He said the nation was “chosen by God and commissioned by history to be a model to the world of justice” and that the United States thus had a moral obligation to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture (Cunningham 6). The Bush administration adopted a realist approach in their foreign policy. It identified states as the problem and regarded changing the state system as the preferred solution. Bush wanted to respond to the attacks as if they were acts of war against the nation and planned to respond with the full capacity of the U.S. national security establishment (Dunn 14). The implementation of this approach eventually led to the war in Afghanistan and the fall of the Taliban regime there. The mission was celebrated as a success by the Bush administration because of its strategic approach, despite criticism that the U.S. dispersed rather than destroyed the enemy (17).

After thoroughly assessing the terrorist threat, Bush believed he could counter terrorism by preemptively intervening in states that were regarded as potential threats. Bush asserted that Saddam Hussein was harboring weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and sent military forces to Iraq (21). To maintain American security, the Bush administration did not want to give its potential enemy the benefit of the doubt and justified invading Iraq on a number of unsubstantiated presumptions. The administration argued that it was the nature of Iraq’s regime to be hostile, and regime change in Iraq was therefore necessary to provide security (22). The lack of evidence of any WMD undermined the justification for war. After the fall of the regime, America failed to provide Iraqis with the security, civil amenities and order they once promised. Popularity for the mission had declined, and as a result, the military presence in Iraq drained America’s political, economic, and military resources (24). Moreover, the establishment of the Patriot Act expanded the security state and undermined many civil liberties, which resulted in many detentions, deportations and government searches of homes and businesses without

consent (Kennedy 190). Increased surveillance took away the freedoms of Americans, and the inability to provide substantial evidence that would support Bush's decision to go to war in Iraq resulted in decreased support for the war effort (Dunn 24). The second chapter will explain how *Iron Man* responds to these failures and how the movie promotes military intervention.

1.3. Curtailed Mobility Under Trump

During his presidency, Donald Trump has consistently tried to debunk this myth of America as a nation of immigrants. Trump rejected immigrants and blamed them for causing unrest in the United States. In his research on Trump's rhetoric concerning America's role in the world, Jason A. Edwards maintains that when discussing the issue of foreign policy, Trump constructs it as in a state of chaos and disorder stemming from choices of previous administrations. Trump blamed globalist foreign policy as the primary cause of unfettered immigration. He used a rhetoric of fear to instill in society a belief that globalism endangered U.S. sovereignty and its status as an exceptional nation (181). Trump associated immigrants as a burden for the United States, blaming them for a rise in crime and accusing them of stealing jobs from U.S. citizens. Trump's rhetoric created the impression that immigrants brought nothing but destruction (185). Refugee policy moreover shows Trump's aversion to foreigners. In an article on U.S. refugee policy in the age of Trump, Daniel J. Beers argues that "the Trump administration has gone to great lengths to curb refugee arrivals in the United States and rewrite U.S. refugee policy" (1). Trump's foreign policy once more curtailed freedom of movement. The third chapter will show that *the Falcon and the Winter Soldier* provides criticism on Donald Trump through the portrayal of American values and nationalist symbols.

1.4. The Definition of Defense

American defense is, firstly, the protection of values inherent to the American identity and the means used to achieve this. Throughout history these values have been shown to be freedom, liberty, mobility, and democracy. The methods do not only include the employment of the military and industrial aggregate, but also the implementation of policies to keep perceived danger out of the country. Bush's strategy of pre-emption has, moreover, portrayed that in order to protect American values, the United States is willing to initiate attacks. This proves that defense in America is thus also a euphemism for offense.

Chapter 2: *Iron Man*: Orientalism in a Post-9/11 World

In 2008, Marvel released the first movie in the Marvel Cinematic Universe: *Iron Man*. Based on the character of the comic books of the same name, *Iron Man* centers around Tony Stark, CEO of the leading military defense contractor Stark Industries, who is forced to use his technological knowledge to build a powered suit of armor and turn into the superhero Iron Man after being taken hostage by terrorist organization the Ten Rings in Afghanistan. Before Stark became Iron Man, his company sold weaponry to the American government. He was an arms manufacturer and dealer specialized in WMD. The movie visualizes the war in Afghanistan, and the United States' response to a terrorist organization.

The plot of *Iron Man* was visibly impacted by the change in Hollywood culture after 9/11. Due to the failures in Iraq, the Bush administration had trouble justifying the increased military spending as well as the increased security measures that took away the freedoms of Americans. Pardy maintains that to win popular support for Bush's military decisions, Hollywood helped re-center the military as central to the identity of American exceptionalism (104). I argue that the portrayal of defense in *Iron Man* conveys the message that Americans need the military in order to protect them from terrorist threats, and that this helps gain support

for the military. The movie employs the fear of terrorism to emphasize the righteousness of the American military, as well as the idea that the military and its use of weapons are necessary in order to defeat terrorism and protect American values.

2.1. Arab Stereotypes in Iron Man

In Bush's January 2001 State of the Union address, he characterized terrorists as uncivilized, saying that "This is civilization's fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance, and freedom." Bush presented political differences and demands articulated by terrorists as manifestations of the otherness of terrorists. To justify American military intervention in the Middle East, Bush positioned the terrorists as uncivilized cultural others, and that it was the country's anti-democratic regimes that fueled terrorism (Dunn 13). *Iron Man* expresses the otherness of terrorists by placing the villain in the position of the other, influenced by a stereotype of the Arab as a Muslim terrorist that became popular after 9/11. According to Shaheen, the celluloid Arab is a cultural 'other.' Through Hollywood's distorted lenses, Arabs are portrayed as different from Americans and as a threat to Western civilization. These stereotypes remain deeply ingrained in American cinema. Arabs are portrayed as "brutal, heartless, uncivilized religious fanatics and money-mad cultural others bent on terrorizing civilized Westerners, especially Christians and Jews" (Shaheen 172). In the opening scene of *Iron Man*, the American Army is seen driving through a desert in Afghanistan with heavy military equipment. The scenery, accompanied by the yellow lighting, is in stark contrast with the bright and colorful images of the United States that are displayed later. The Afghan settlement merely consist of mud-colored houses with corrugated roofs, a vast difference with Tony Stark's luxurious mansion in Los Angeles. After an ambush in the desert, suit-clad Stark wakes up in a dark cave surrounded by members of the Ten Rings wearing earth-colored robes. The Arabs are unable to communicate with Tony due to a language-barrier. Whereas the

English-speaking Tony Stark is making jokes, the Arabs are angrily shouting incomprehensible words at him. The harsh contrast between Stark and the Arabs in terms of scenery, language, and fashion implements the stereotypical image of the Arab as a beastly and uncivilized person into the movie (*Iron Man*). Moreover, Tony Stark was kidnapped because the Ten Rings envied him for the weapons he possessed, arguing that “whoever holds the latest Stark weapons owns these lands” (*Iron Man*). Stark is forced to build the Ten Rings a missile, consequently perpetuating the stereotype of the Arab as the uncivilized other who does not possess the knowledge to build such advanced weaponry themselves.

In the 1970s, a growing number of radical groups working for Arab or Muslim causes became infamously known for bombings, kidnappings, and airplane hijackings. These developments introduced a new stereotype for Arab Americans, namely the Arab as a Muslim terrorist (Benshoff and Griffin 73). According to Shaheen, the vast majority of Arabs are Muslims, but only 12 percent of the world’s Muslims are Arab. Yet, moviemakers continue to portray Arabs and Muslims as the same group of people (174). In his rhetoric following the events of 9/11, President Bush painted Arabs as terrorists and Muslims as Arab terrorists. Bush also deemed the non-Western other as a common enemy. In a response to the “uncivilized” others, he vouched that the United States would overthrow the corrupt leaders of the nations and establish a foothold of civilization. Lee quotes Michal Hardt in his article, saying that “Bush might fancy himself as one of the “great noble imperialists, educating the savages and bringing civilization to the world” (6). Bush argued that terrorism could be eradicated by bringing freedom and democracy to the countries the terrorists resided in. He used ethnocentric language in which the nation is the referent by which the other, and thus the Arab, is measured (7). Benshoff and Griffin maintain that the 9/11 attacks were a validation of the terrorist stereotype that had been assigned to Arabs. Americans witnessed the destruction that a group of Muslim extremists caused, which ‘confirmed’ the accuracy of the terrorist stereotype (74). In roughly



Figure 1: Tony Stark is held hostage by the terrorist organization the Ten Rings (Iron Man 00:04:00).

the first hour of the film, *Iron Man* is dedicated to painting Arabs as villains, perpetuating the stereotype of Arabs as terrorists. While the Ten Rings' religious affiliation is not explicitly stated, a scene in which Tony is positioned in front of a camera with members of the Ten Rings behind him seems similar to ISIS beheading videos (figure 1). The scene suggests the Ten Rings' affiliation with Islam. Stark is surrounded by men holding guns, unrecognizable by the keffiyeh covering their faces. Not only does this highlight their anonymity, the keffiyeh also hints at their religion. Donica has argued that while a keffiyeh does not belong to a certain religion, it is often associated with the Arab identity, and therefore with Muslims (164). Moreover, the scene is solely lit by a single fluorescent tube, putting the spotlight on Tony Stark (see figure 1). This makes the members of the Ten Rings even more unrecognizable, and highlights Stark as the protagonist and possibly as the 'good' guy as well. While the dark in which the terrorists remain might hint at their evil intentions, the light highlights Tony as the hero with good intentions. The Ten Rings' goal is to take power over the entire world, using destructive means to do so. Adhering to the stereotype, the Ten Rings are heavily armed, violent, and show no mercy to innocent villagers (*Iron Man*).

2.2. American Exceptionalism and Values of Freedom and Justice

Bush's justification for war relied on the idea of American exceptionalism, which is the belief that American values are what makes America hold an exceptional place on the world stage.



Figure 2: U.S. military entering an Afghan settlement to test a missile (*Iron Man* 00:00:55).

Related is the idea of Manifest Destiny, which argues that Americans occupy a special place in the world and that they are destined to spread their ideals. Bush vouched to replace existing regimes in the Middle East with democratic regimes in order to eradicate terrorism and ensure security (Herring 587). In his rhetoric, he placed countries that did not fulfill the American ideal in the position of the other and argued America could save these countries from their decline by spreading freedom and democracy. It was this belief that he used to get Americans to support the war effort.

Iron Man employs the same values of American exceptionalism to justify the use of weapons. The American military is interested in buying a missile from Stark to eliminate the terrorists in Afghanistan. In the beginning of the movie, the U.S. army is seen barging into Afghan land with a convoy of Jeeps, acting like they own the land. The Jeeps appearing in a large number out of nowhere, accompanied by AC/DC's *Back in Black* playing loudly through the car speakers interrupts the image of the quiet desert. It seems to hint at how the United States is a disrupting force in Afghanistan and is coming to change the current state of affairs (figure 2). This portrayal not only sets the scene of the movie, it also immediately introduces the military's strategy to defend against terrorists. When introducing the missile, Stark says: "I prefer the weapon you only have to fire once. That's how dad did it, that's how America does it. And it has worked out pretty well so far. Find an excuse to let one of these off the chain, and I personally guarantee you the bad guys won't even want to come out of their caves" (*Iron Man* 00:15:00). The weapon is powerful enough to take down large areas of land, and the military hopes it is going to shock the terrorists enough so they will not try to attack again. The evil,

uncivilized nature of the terrorists makes it that negotiation is not possible, and the government's response with violence and weapons is therefore justified (*Iron Man*).

While having placed Arabs in the stereotype of the terrorist, Lee points out that in the first couple of months after 9/11, Bush made a clear distinction between the attacks on 9/11 and the Islam, saying that "the face of terror is not the true faith of Islam... Islam is peace" (Bush qtd. in Lee 8). He argued that all people, except terrorists, were predisposed to seek greater personal freedom (Lee 10). Bush associated everyday Arabs and Muslims with having American qualities, arguing that once restraints are removed, democracy can find roots across the Arab world. Assigning American values of freedom and justice to Arabs ties in with the idea of American exceptionalism where people of other nations strive to the American ideal (Lee 7). The previous paragraph argued how the Ten Rings are placed in the position of the other by stereotyping them as Muslim terrorists. The innocent civilians, however, are portrayed as victims of the oppressors in their own country.

After Tony Stark escapes from his captivity in Afghanistan, he experiences first-hand how his weapons are used. Having seen the damage his weapons can do in the wrong hands, he announces that his company will stop manufacturing weapons. While this seems like an act of rebellion against the American military and it could be argued that it criticizes Bush's use of military action in Afghanistan, Tony Stark actually moves on to build the most powerful weapon yet, the Iron Man armor. He moreover still keeps close ties with the American army. Stark realizes the Ten Rings are still a danger to the world because they possess Stark Industries weaponry and should be stopped. The idea of American exceptionalism which presumes that American values of freedom and equality are core values that every other nation should have access to comes, and intervention in other nations is therefore justified to spread these values, motivates Stark's response. He realizes that he has the ability to stop the terrorists and free the innocent Afghan civilians. On a mission to defend the world, Stark builds an improved version



Figure 3: Iron Man is coming to save Afghan civilians from the Ten Rings (*Iron Man* 01:17:40).

of his Iron Man suit to stop the villains himself. Donning the new armor, Stark flies to Afghanistan. The advanced weapons system included in Stark's improved suit allows him to identify and take out the terrorists only, leaving innocent civilians unharmed. Tony thus carries on with the mission of liberating the Afghan civilians, and his superior armor allows him to be the American savior who frees the oppressed people from the Ten Rings. He demonstrates how the U.S. military only uses weapons for the seemingly 'right' reasons, and the idea of Manifest Destiny that Americans have a duty to spread freedom and justice throughout the world is confirmed by Tony Stark's actions. He uses his weapons to save innocent civilians from falling into the hands of their oppressor. The visuals and sounds in this scene highlight how Stark is the savior of the helpless civilians. When Stark is on his way to Afghanistan, the absence of music implies the seriousness of the matter. It is not until after Stark kills the terrorists that a heroic theme indicates his victory. Shots of Iron Man from a low camera angle highlight his grand heroic actions even more. Moreover, Iron Man is the only element in the scene that bears any color. In a grey and brown destroyed Afghan town, Iron Man pops out with his red and gold armor, perpetuating the image of Iron Man a savior further (figure 3) (*Iron Man*).

2.3. *The Portrayal of Defense in Iron Man*

Orientalism and American exceptionalism go hand in hand in the portrayal of defense strategy in *Iron Man*. *Iron Man* is a product of post-9/11 Hollywood culture, which is made clear in the similarities between Bush's rhetoric in the War on Terrorism and defense strategy in the movie.

Tony Stark's actions originate in the belief that America has a duty to spread freedom and democracy throughout the world to ensure security. Tony Stark shows that by cherishing American values and having the right tools this can be achieved. The movie moreover justifies military intervention in the Middle East in its portrayal of the terrorist. The villains of the movie are Arab others who are portrayed as stereotypical Muslim terrorists. It is this stereotype that allows the film to position them as a purely evil force that should be stopped by any means necessary, even if that means using heavy weaponry. Released in a time where people were critical of Bush's decisions regarding the military, *Iron Man* helps shift public opinion by using the fear of terrorism as well as American values of freedom and democracy to show that only American military intervention can save innocent people from oppressive forces.

Chapter 3: *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*: Criticizing Trump's America

In 2021, Marvel Studios released the miniseries *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* on the streaming platform Disney+. The villain of this series is a completely different one than in *Iron Man*, and the line between good and bad is not so obvious. Romagnoli and Pagnucci argue that superheroes are personifications of society's morals, and that they embody American culture's dichotomy of good and evil (8). While superheroes are not perfect and usually have a character flaw, superheroes always defeat the villain in the end. Despite their flaw, they are therefore representations of society's morals. The cause of the 'villain' in *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* is a morally dubious one, and the series uses this to ask questions of whether using force to defend the nation is always justified.

The series focuses on Sam Wilson, the "Falcon," and Bucky Barnes, the "Winter Soldier," and is essentially a story of Captain America's legacy. After his death, Steve Rogers – the original Captain America – had trusted his friend Sam Wilson to take over the role of Captain America. Wilson, however, thought he could not fulfill Rogers' legacy and donated

Captain America's shield. The shield was eventually taken by the United States Department of Defense and given to John Walker. On behalf of the U.S. government and the Global Repatriation Council (GRC) Walker was unveiled to the public as the "New Captain America", one who "embodies America's greatest values" (*The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* episode 1).

The political climate of the United States had drastically changed in the years before this series was released. In 2021, the United States had recently endured four years of Donald Trump's presidency. This chapter will explain the effect the presidency had on the portrayal of defense in *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*. It will moreover argue that it employs Trump's rhetoric of fear surrounding refugees and immigrants and uses nationalist symbols and core American values to criticize Trump's foreign policy.

3.1. The Legacy of Captain America

John Walker is tasked to step into Steve Rogers' footsteps and become Captain America. Captain America's appearance, consisting of a suit and a shield both bedecked with the red, white, and blue stars and stripes of the American flag, makes Captain America a nationalist symbol. Jason Dittmer maintains that Captain America is an explicitly American superhero, establishing him as a representative of the idealized nation as well a defender of the American identity (627). According to Kimmelmeier and Winter, the American flag is important to maintain and reproduce American identity because it reminds Americans what the U.S. stands for (860). It moreover reproduces the belief of America as an exceptional nation and increases patriotic sentiment. Patriotic symbols such as the flag in turn increase nationalist feelings (872). Captain America's vibranium shield is extremely resilient and able to resist anything that is thrown at it. The shield symbolizes America's resilience, and its carrier as the protector of American values. Steve Rogers was a real patriot who was dedicated to protecting his country, and was willing to fight for justice no matter the costs. Rogers was moreover loyal, selfless,

brave, and protective, and he believed in doing the right thing (*Captain America: The First Avenger*). Donning the same suit and shield, the new Captain America is thus expected to possess these character traits as well, and to always be willing to protect American values of freedom, democracy, equality, and justice.

3.2. Donald Trump's Immigration Policy

Whereas the villain in *Iron Man* was a terrorist organization and was portrayed as purely evil, the villains of *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* are revolutionaries who rebel against American foreign policy. Five years after Thanos' snap that wiped out half of the universe in *Avengers: Infinity War*, the Blip has resurrected the victims. Consequently, people who had come to the United States during those five years were forced out of the homes they had lived in. For five years, the world did not have borders. The people who built lives on American soil were therefore not officially refugees or immigrants, but are labeled as refugees by the government. When the Global Repatriation Council reveals its plans to deport the immigrants back to their country of origin, the anti-nationalist organization the Flag Smashers, led by Karli Morgenthau, is formed to prevent the deportation of the refugees. The movement quickly becomes radical and extreme in its plan to do so (*The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*). John Walker is tasked by the GRC and the U.S. government to find and arrest the members of the Flag Smashers.

The GRC follows a strategy similar to Donald Trump's immigration and refugee policies. In chapter one, I discussed how mobility is inherent to the American identity, and how Trump disregarded this value in his foreign policy regarding refugees. Trump has vilified refugees as a threat to national security, and he has brought the refugee resettlement program of the United States to a near standstill (Beers 1). Furthermore, he has activated a set of false stereotypes based on racist and xenophobic tropes regarding the reputation of refugees to stir

up fear and suspicion of refugees as “foreign invaders” (Beers 8). It is this stereotype that motivates Walker to classify the Flag Smashers as “dangerous criminals” (*The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*).

In the first three episodes of the series, however, the illegal actions that make the Flag Smashers ‘dangerous’ solely consist of raiding stacked GRC depots for food and medicine (*The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*). It illustrates the struggles that the refugees have been put through by the government and provides an explanation for their anger. While the government is shown to have plenty of resources at their disposal, people in refugee camps struggle to obtain basic needs to live. Moreover, the Flag Smashers have lived in the United States for five years and are now suddenly being deported (*The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*). This strategy of deportation strongly resembles Trump’s immigrant policies. In 2019, for example, Trump attempted to end the DACA program for young, undocumented immigrants. The program allowed nearly 650,000 young, undocumented immigrants to live and work in the U.S. without fear of deportation (Wolf). While the Supreme Court blocked Trump’s plan, it did display the President’s determination to reduce the number of undocumented immigrants in the United States. Trump’s reasoning behind the deportation of immigrants was the unsubstantiated claim that immigrants caused a rise in crime and stole jobs from Americans (Edwards 185). A scene of a television advertisement for the GRC hints at the immorality of treating refugees and undocumented immigrants as criminals. The ad promotes the GRC’s goals of giving resurrected citizens their lives back. Illustrated is an ideal image of the United States, with visuals of happy families and beautiful views of New York City, accompanied by the message that the GRC will



Figure 4: Television advertisement for the GRC (*The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* episode 3, 00:02:15)

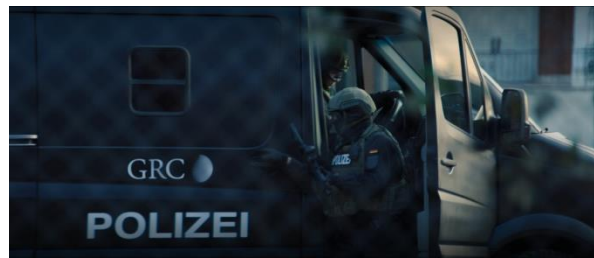


Figure 5: The GRC arriving in Munich with John Walker in search of Karli Morgenthau (*The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* episode 3, 00:02:25).

help victims back to their homes and jobs. This imagery is accompanied by a calm and peaceful piano melody. The ad ends with the GRC's slogan of "reset, restore, rebuild" (figure 4) (*The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*), which shows resemblance to Trump's "Make America Great Again", because it both implies restoring something that once was but is not anymore. The scene then, however, shifts from this utopian image to a visual of GRC police officers with guns storming out of a black van to capture Morgenthau (figure 5). The contradiction between the two scenes suggests that the United States is solely interested in the lives of American citizens and is willing to kill a person who disagrees with government decisions. It moreover contradicts the idea of the American dream, which is the belief that the United States is a place of endless opportunity for each (Campbell and Kean 11). The Flag Smashers are not given the same opportunities as American citizens because of their lack of citizenship. Through these contradictory images, the series comments on Trump's anti-refugee and immigration policies and shows that deportation violates the notion that the United States was built on principles of freedom and equality.

3.3. Morality and the American Identity

Through the symbolic appearance of John Walker as Captain America, the series conveys that Trump's policies are harmful and immoral. This is further displayed after John Walker kills a Flag Smasher using the shield, and the audience is confronted with a shocking image of Walker



Figure 4: John Walker holding the shield covered in blood (*The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* episode 4, 00:46:00)

standing in the middle of a crowd, carrying a shield covered in blood (figure 6). The low angle shot of the scene poses Walker as threatening. The shield that originally symbolizes protection and defense against harmful outside forces is instead used as an offensive weapon to kill a man. It not only portrays that carrying the shield implicitly means possessing the values that the shield stands for, it also portrays that using violence is a disproportionate and harmful response.

As opposed to John Walker and the U.S. government, Sam Wilson sympathizes with the Flag Smashers. While he condemns the crimes committed by the Flag Smashers, Wilson reasons that “for five years, people have been welcomed into countries that have kept them out using barbwire” (*The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* episode 4), referencing Trump’s infamous border wall (Edwards 186). Understanding the Flag Smashers’ anger, Wilson goes against the law to find Morgenthau before the government finds her. Whereas Tony Stark in *Iron Man* worked with the government to defeat the terrorists, Wilson actively works against the government. John Walker believes the Flag Smashers can only be stopped using force, Wilson, on the other hand, believes he can convince the Flag Smashers put an end to the violence by talking to them. Through the portrayal of the Flag Smashers, the series suggests that it is the unjust and unequal treatment of people by the government that causes violence and crime, because the government refuses to provide them with equal opportunities.

The series concludes with Sam Wilson taking over as Captain America, declaring that “the only power I have is the belief that we can do better” (*The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* episode 6). Like Steve Rogers, Wilson has strong morals and believes that every human being

deserves to be treated equally. He believes in the American dream that the United States was a country created for all and suggests a different solution than deportation. The nationalist appearance of Captain America implies that he embodies the ideal American nation. Under Walker, this nation only belonged to people with American citizenship. Wilson, however, believes everyone, no matter their descent, can be adopted into the American nation.

3.4. Defense Strategy in The Falcon and the Winter Soldier

In its portrayal of the defense strategy of the U.S. government, *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* employs the fear of refugees and immigrants that Trump instilled in his rhetoric regarding immigration. Through this portrayal, the series seems to criticize Trump's foreign policy, because it shows that it is unjust and harmful to the safety and freedom of the people that are affected by these policies. Sam Wilson's strategy to defend the nation against the attacks from the Flag Smashers is to provide the members with the required resources to be able to live comfortably, to discourage them to resort to violence. Wilson believes in the protection of human rights, and in giving every person the opportunity to create a life in the United States, which is in line with the idea of the American dream.

Conclusion

Defense strategy in the Marvel Cinematic Universe is influenced by American core values of freedom, equality, justice, and democracy, inherent to the American identity. The portrayal of defense moreover employs stereotypes and fears present in society at the time of production. Since superheroes inherently believe in the value of justice, the way they defend the nation is depicted to be ethical. *Iron Man* uses the moral nature of the superhero to reinforce the belief that decisions of the U.S. government regarding military intervention during the War on Terror was righteous. This is visualized in the movie by using the stereotype of the Muslim terrorist

presented in society in the ongoing War on Terror, and through the portrayal of terrorists as an Arab other, a similar stereotype is conveyed to justify the use of heavy weaponry in defense strategy. It moreover employs the idea of American exceptionalism that positions the United States as an exceptional nation, and its values as an ideal that the rest of the world should strive for. American military intervention in non-democratic countries is portrayed to be ethical because it is motivated by the incentive to spread freedom, and freedom is a value that one can hardly disagree with. In *the Falcon and the Winter Soldier*, on the other hand, the moral nature of superhero Sam Wilson and the failures of the antihero John Walker are used to criticize government foreign policy. The depiction of government defense strategy against anarchistic undocumented immigrants through president Trump's stereotypical lens criticizes government policies for disregarding core values of freedom and equality. The superhero comments with how issues should be handled, adhering to American values. The nature of the villains as well as the moral values of the superheroes allow the Marvel Cinematic Universe to criticize as well as propagandize political response to social issues through its portrayal of the hero's defense strategy against the villain. This thesis has shown that the portrayal of defense in the MCU changes depending on the cultural, social, economic, and political environment in which the movie or television series was made, and is moreover influenced by the political opinions of the creators. Further research into future MCU projects could therefore provide new insights into American culture during a certain time period. Since the MCU only attracts a certain audience, and movies are made to be interesting to the audience targeted, further research into different film genres could moreover gain different insights in how Hollywood uses defense to comment on social developments.

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