

The Captain America within

Comic book hero a projection of our national identity

By MARK D. WHITE

As “Captain America: The First Avenger” continues its run this summer, moviegoers will thrill to the exploits of one of the original costumed superheroes, fighting the incomparable evil of the Nazis during World War II. Many have commented on the moral clarity of that war, compared with the conflicts we are in now, and just as many wonder where our country itself is headed in these times of intense political conflict within. While he’s just a comic book character, I think Captain America can help us see through our divisions to the unity beneath.

Those who aren’t familiar with his long comic book history may assume that Captain America is a simplistic, flag-waving jingoist, toeing the line of whichever party happens to be in control in Washington at any given time. But comic book fans know better: Captain America has stood up to the U.S. government on many occasions, most notably during a thinly veiled Watergate critique in the 1970s, and refusing to sacrifice his freedoms by registering as a superhero with the government in the first decade of the 21st century. He famously stays out of politics, despite calls to run for president at one point, because he wants to represent all Americans without casting his lot with one party or another.

Captain America offers an example to all of us by emphasizing principles over politics. Principles are timeless, the enduring ideals embedded in the foundational documents of our country, most important being the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. People may disagree about exactly what principles are contained in their words or how best to interpret or prioritize them, but few doubt their essential role in defining what America stands for. At its best, politics is grounded in principle, but all too often the principles get forgotten in favor of competing interests, which may be perfectly valid, of course, but which also cause us to lose sight of our shared values.

It is those shared values about which Captain America can serve as a reminder. Even though we may disagree on their precise interpretation, Americans agree on the importance of freedom, equality and justice. Even though we may disagree on how to balance them, all of us agree that we should show both care and re-



spect toward each other. And even though we may disagree on how far (and to whom) to extend them, we all agree that generosity and tolerance are part of what makes America great.

In addition to these social values, Captain America demonstrates the individual virtues by which we can all agree that we should live. Again, we may disagree on their relative importance or precisely how to practice them, but all Americans recognize the importance of honesty, courage, integrity, loyalty and humility — all of which Cap-

tain America has embodied over the past 70 years of stories. These are also the virtues that we associate with our armed forces and that we should demand from ourselves, each other and especially our elected leaders.

The most amazing thing about Captain America is that regardless of the varied political opinions of the writers who have chronicled his adventures over decades, he is consistently shown to exemplify these social values and individual virtues — the principles that unite us as Americans. Politics deals with how to

put these ideals into practice by balancing different interests within society and by its very nature, tends to divide more than unite. But we must not lose sight of the principles that we agree upon and that give our country great integrity consistent with its rich diversity.

Captain America does not deny the mistakes we have made throughout our short history nor does he make excuses for them to provide political cover for one party or another. Instead, he consistently rises above politics, eschewing partisan divisions to

symbolize the ideals that give America its unique identity: a country founded on and governed by enduring principles that all Americans can endorse and embrace.

Mark D. White is chairman of the Department of Political Science, Economics and Philosophy at the College of Staten Island and most recently contributed a chapter on Captain America to the e-book “Superheroes: The Best of Philosophy and Pop Culture” (Wiley, 2011).