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Iron Man: America's Cold War Champion and Charm against the Communist Menace

Paul Fellman

World War II was a grand era for America's greatest superheroes and masked vigilantes who had traditionally kept the fantasy America of comic books safe from domestic trouble. Captain America and his sidekick, Bucky, combated the villainous Red Skull and his minions across the European battle zone while in the salty Atlantic Ocean Prince Namor crushed German U-boats like tin cans.^[1] Captain America's red, white, and blue costume was a symbol of hope and pride to America's youth and a source of entertainment to the G.I.'s who read his stories, but his popularity would not survive in the immediate postwar period. The conspicuous enemies on either side of America had been crushed and forced to surrender, and with their collective threat eliminated, there was little need for the Captain and his costumed colleagues.^[2] Many of the wartime comic book heroes found themselves unpopular and out of work in the postwar period, like once popular Hollywood actors. Comic book publishers in this period abandoned many of their once popular characters and alternatively pursued stories of criminals rooted in dark, chaotic worlds that mirrored the noir movement in Hollywood cinema.^[3] This shift proved problematic, however, for "as the nation mobilized for the war against communism, questions arose about the children who would one day wage it" and the perceived detrimental effects of youth-oriented forms of entertainment, such as comic books.^[4]

With the comic book industry under intense public scrutiny, necessary changes were made in order to appease detractors and opponents. From this shift in focus emerged America's most ardent patriot and Cold Warrior: made from the same material as the famous "curtain" which Stalin had erected across Eastern Europe, Iron Man was determined to protect Americans and defend the world from the threat of the "communist menace".^[5] Iron Man, alias Tony Stark, took this duty very seriously in the early 1960's and battled such nefarious communist villains as the Red Barbarian, the Crimson Dynamo, and the Mandarin. Even when Iron Man's enemy was Gargantus, a giant roboticized Neanderthal from outer space, the conflict reeked faintly of Cold War international politics. Iron Man made such a splash in the comic-book Cold War that in his seventh appearance in the series *Tales of Suspense*, Nikita Khrushchev personally arranged his destruction.^[6] However, there lies a deeper meaning beneath the clever witticisms of Iron Man and the inane ramblings of his Soviet counterparts. What "constitutes

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entertainment at a specific time may capture elusive aspects of a culture" and record them for posterity.^[7] The early comic book issues featuring Iron Man, for this reason, are incredibly valuable to historical research for the "elusive aspects" which they have captured. The fictitious *Tales of Suspense* series featuring Iron Man encapsulated an image of an arrogant and aggressive postwar America that, despite this, remained deeply suspicious and paranoid of both foreign agents and domestic dissidents.

After the dark and gritty crime stories of the 1950's, a "conservative social agenda marked Marvel's return to the realm of fantasy."^[8] Iron Man became the champion of Marvel Publisher's social agenda while as he fought communists across the globe. He smashed into the public sphere in March 1963, out of the jungles of Vietnam.^[9] From the beginning, aspects of the Cold War permeated Iron Man's stories. It was no coincidence that Lee and Lieber, Iron Man's creators, set his debut story in the steamy, communist-filled jungles of Vietnam. John F. Kennedy was President of the United States of America and his administration had escalated American stakes in Vietnam's Civil War. Iron Man provided an entertaining medium through which to address associated American insecurities.

Wong-Chu was the first enemy who Iron Man battled. Tony Stark, the man behind the iron mask, had long aided the U.S. government in its struggle against the communist menace. He was a brilliant scientist and weapons designer who enjoyed lucrative government contracts. He traveled to Vietnam to test a special mortar that he had developed and, while in the field, he was captured by Wong-Chu, the "Red guerilla tyrant".^[10] Wong-Chu was cast as the stereotypical Asian, with slanted eyes, a fu-Manchu, and glaring deficiencies in his English. There is reason to believe that Wong-Chu's character was an allusion to the nationalist leader Ho Chi Minh. He was the first of many communist villains to confront Iron Man and he set the standard of enemy intelligence very low. After his forces captured a village he gloated in the moonlight, "Hah! I have brought another village to its knees! Now for the wrestling match!"^[11] As the silly communist guerillas partook in wrestling matches the American army advanced through the jungle. Although the Americans were outnumbered, their confidence in Stark's, and thus American, technology proved well founded in the ensuing action. The American forces overwhelmed their communist enemies and shouted, "Just look at the Reds retreat! They never knew what hit them!"^[12] However, Tony Stark tripped over a booby trap and was captured by Wong-Chu's forces. This chain of events would not surprise a reader who was familiar with Vietcong guerilla techniques and this developed into a pattern in the Iron Man stories. From the jungles of Vietnam to the laboratories of Soviet Russia and the U.S, Americans could only be defeated by treachery and other insidious means. The contrast between the American and Vietnamese forces leaves little doubt that the writers consciously created this image. Their writing has revealed to posterity an America that was confident in its armed forces and very aware of its technological edge over the communists.

The writers spoke vicariously through the characters in *Tales of Suspense*. "Death to the Evil Tyrant!" shouted innocent Professor Yinsen before he sacrificed his life in order to give Tony Stark enough time to

power-up the Iron Man outfit.^[13] Wong-Chu's response was predictably cold hearted and pragmatic, "End his miserable life! He is of no further use to me!"^[14] As the first communist villain to oppose Iron Man, the story's writers used Wong-Chu as the formative image of all subsequent communists depicted in Iron Man comics. His true motives remained a mystery throughout the story and instead the writers created the sense that Wong-Chu was simply mad and power hungry. There was no rhyme or reason to his actions, which were also void of sympathy for his victims. When he realized that he could not defeat Iron Man he fled frantically through his camp, yelling to himself, "Now to order the execution of all my prisoners".^[15] Iron Man stopped the madman by blowing him to pieces in his own ammunition depot before any prisoners were harmed.^[16] The precedent was set. Iron Man possessed no mercy for communists, Reds, and despots. His response was lethal and with that, Iron Man exploded into the comic-book Cold War.

Wong-Chu was a threat to America and democracies the world over. Although he appeared to be little more than a petty warlord in South East Asia, his despotic rule was one of the communist fifth columns that Sir Winston Churchill cautioned against in his "Sinews of Peace" speech. In this now-famous speech the famed orator warned that fifth columns around the world "work in complete unity and absolute obedience to the directions they receive from the communist center," which of course was Moscow.^[17] Churchill's speech was extremely influential in shaping the Western view of Soviet Russia after the Second World War had ended. Another influential piece of rhetoric in the postwar period was the Truman Doctrine, which was issued in 1947 in response to the Greek Civil War and which helped to shape the American policy of Containment. Almost twenty years later, the impact of Truman's and Churchill's words remained evident in the form not only of official government policy, but also in outlets of entertainment. Edward Brunner wrote in a review titled "Cold War Comics" that, "If the popularity of comic books once depended on their ability to intersect with their historical moment, we might now read them for what they say about, and how they help us judge, that other time".^[18] This intersection of historical moment and entertainment provides a framework to better understand the motivations behind the stories in comic books. Writers Stan Lee and Larry Lieber must have been influenced by the very famous words of Churchill and Truman and perhaps the story content of *Tales of Suspense* is evidence that they also agreed with the leaders' ideologies.

The Cold War undertones were a bit more subtle in Iron Man's second appearance.^[19] The writers of this issue did not inundate the episode with overt anti-communist propaganda; rather, they employed allegory and substituted alien invaders for the communist menace. These alien invaders had sent a giant robotic Neanderthal named Gargantus to Granville, U.S.A to brainwash the town population. This Neolithic tyrant ordered the townspeople to construct a wall around the entire perimeter of Granville and to then refuse entry and exit to anybody who tried. This issue was published in April of 1963 and the storyline can be directly connected to Cold War events of the previous two years. In 1961 the Soviets

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constructed the Berlin Wall.. Both Gargantus and the Soviets were "alien" powers that brainwashed people and utilized terror as an instrument of control. When Iron Man entered the town he expected to find the citizens relieved to see him. However, the townspeople attacked him and told him, "We can not answer you by order of Gargantus! If we disobey, we die!"^[20] Iron Man was also disturbed to find a statue of Gargantus erected in the town center in front of which the brainwashed inhabitants either knelt or lay prostrate.^[21] This resembled the Soviet cult of personality that had grown around Stalin. After Iron Man defeated Gargantus the true masterminds behind the town invasion were revealed to be tiny green aliens. They were forced to flee in ignominious defeat and their departing words were, "They're too clever for us to conquer!"^[22] After the reference to the Berlin Wall and the Soviet cult of personality, it is difficult to fancy that the alien invaders were no less than Lee and Bernstein's comic caricatures of real-world communists; the methods and intentions of the aliens closely resembled the Soviets. In this case, Lee and Bernstein took this opportunity to depict the Russians as tiny, green, impotent aliens.

In the June 1963 issue of *Tales of Suspense* Iron Man was once again officially fighting the forces of communism.^[23] The issue opened with a nighttime scene at an East Coast dock. Suddenly there were voices in the night, "Well, comrade, we did it! We not only learned about America's newest Atom bomb, but we stole the bomb itself!" The speaker's comrade responded, "Yes, Grigori! We will receive the thanks of the Red Barbarian himself for this piece of espionage!"^[24] Iron Man, bursting from a crate, announced to the thieves, "The F.B.I. wanted to catch you spies Red-handed".^[25] He quickly outwitted and dispatched the criminals. An F.B.I. agent then arrived to congratulate Iron Man because, thanks to his cleverness, "another commie spy ring had been rounded up"^[26] This is an excellent indicator of America's underlying fear that foreign agents were actively engaged in spy networks that aimed to steal vital U.S. technology. It is important to remember that the Rosenbergs had been executed just one decade prior to the publication of this issue. American fear of espionage was thus founded in actual historical events, but this issue demonstrated that this fear was slow to fade and still existed in 1963. This same issue also portrayed Americans as confident and slightly arrogant yet still paranoid due to a perceived constant threat to domestic security. The message basically was "Readers beware, the Reds are everywhere and they want to destroy America!" Thank goodness for Iron Man.

Although Iron Man had disrupted the communist spy ring and apprehended its members he knew that his job was far from finished. He told the F.B.I. agents, "I'm sure the Red Barbarian must be planning new mischief".^[27] In keeping with Churchill's speech, it was assumed that all fifth columns were under the direct control by the center of communist power. The Red Barbarian was a "top Red general noted for his brutality" and he controlled a "vast commie spy network". His headquarters were located "somewhere behind the Iron Curtain" in a "Red satellite country".^[28] The Red General's spy network was organized for the sole purpose of stealing American technology--specifically weapons technology. Marvel Publishers had by this point made one theme very clear in the Iron Man series: that the communists could not

surpass American weapons technology on their own merit. The "Reds" could only wish to catch up to America, and to do so required espionage and sabotage. Communists, in the comic-book Cold War, were obviously inferior to their democratic counterparts.

After Iron Man foiled the communists' attempt to steal America's atomic bomb, the Red General ordered his spy network to steal the plans to Tony Stark's newest weapon--a disintegrator ray.^[29] This weapon, spawned from the pages of fantastic science fiction stories, revealed another deep layer of Atomic America. This was an America that fantasized over weapons that could literally make the communists disappear. This exceeded the World War II comic book stories that depicted Captain America punching Hitler in the face. A new level of violence had emerged in the Atomic Age and it was lethal. Tony Stark, businessman and iron clad communist killer combined, was the perfect superhero for the new America.

Iron Man's first communist opponent, Wong-Chu, set the standard of enemy intelligence and humanity at a low standard. His immediate successor, the Red Barbarian, was made from a similar fabric, although slightly different. It would be incorrect to say that the writers of *Tales of Suspense* respected Russian communists more than Asian communists. However, there is a distinct difference in the complexity of their agendas. Wong-Chu spent his time capturing rural Vietnamese villages and then wrestling the inhabitants for sport. The Red Barbarian was more cosmopolitan in his scheming. He organized vast spy networks aimed at stealing American technology. His aim was set higher than his Asian counterpart's. This can be viewed as a demonstration of America's belief that the Russian Reds were far more dangerous than the Asians; this makes perfect sense when the context of the time is considered. The Vietnam War was smoking, yes, but not quite the inferno into which it would later evolve. The Russians, on the other hand, had only recently backed down from installing nuclear missiles in Cuba; they remained the greatest threat to American security in 1963.

The character of the Red Barbarian served more than to elucidate the American view that Russia was her greatest threat. He was a version of how Americans imagined Soviet leaders. There is one frame in the story that was drawn from a point of view over the shoulders of the Red Barbarian. His one hand was pointed at his officers as if he were Stalin delivering a speech while his other hand clasped a giant hambone.^[30] The artist had reversed a popular image of fascists and other dictators to lampoon Soviet leaders. His character was also a critique of the perceived harsh disciplinarians in charge of Russia. Like Wong-Chu, they were completely illogical. The Red Barbarian knocked one of his officers out after being informed that it would be nearly impossible to steal Tony Stark's disintegrator technology. When his fellow officer persisted, the Red Barbarian flew into a rage and demanded that the technology be taken no matter the cost. He also accused the second officer of being an "apologist." The Red Barbarian then yelled, "I've a good mind to have you shot, you blundering incompetent!"^[31] His rule of terror was reminiscent of, and most likely shaped by, Stalin's own reign of terror. As if the scene could not be any more ridiculous, Nikita Khrushchev walked into the room. It was soon revealed that he was actually the

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Soviet superspy known as the Actor, but while he was still in the Khrushchev disguise he greeted the Red Barbarian with, "You are well named, Red Barbarian! I have flown a thousand miles to visit you, and what do I find? You are in a drunken rage, about to execute your own staff."[\[32\]](#) The Red Barbarian was filled with fear and refused to believe his eyes. The Actor replied, "Who then should visit you...Stalin's ghost?"[\[33\]](#) This dialogue is sharp and in hindsight even more appropriate than when it was written. The world now knows that in 1956 Khrushchev had denounced Stalin at the 20th Party Congress in his secret speech. It is only fitting, then, that it was Khrushchev who also denounced the Red Barbarian.

The forty-sixth issue, *Tales of Suspense* perhaps most clearly demonstrated the penchant of Marvel writers to include Cold War politics and international affairs in their stories. It pertained directly to the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962.[\[34\]](#) The two main Soviet characters were Nikita Khrushchev and the mad scientist Dr. Vanko, who was also known as the Crimson Dynamo. The narrator introduced Khrushchev with, "Can you recognize the pudgy, scowling figure entering a strange laboratory just outside Moscow? If you don't, then you know nothing about the Cold War! For the stocky fellow is the 'Mr. Big' of the Iron Curtain!"[\[35\]](#) This issue was released almost exactly one year after the Cuban Missile Crisis, which meant that even the youthful comic book audience would recognize and feel some form of emotion towards Khrushchev's character. The narrator basically chided any reader who "knew nothing about the Cold War!" When confronted by a replica of Iron Man, Khrushchev became frantic and fled into a corner with his rump in the air behind him. Whereas the Red Barbarian was depicted eating a ham, Khrushchev actually was one. As he ran from the false Iron Man he shouted, "By Lenin's beard!"[\[36\]](#) Like Wong-Chu and the Red Barbarian, he was displayed as completely irrational and paranoid.

This issue also depicted the American view that the Soviets could only win the Cold War through treachery and sedition. Khrushchev, by this issue, had become very aware of the threat that Iron Man posed to the Soviets. It spoke volumes that he personally planned the destruction of America's greatest champion. His own version of Iron Man was the Crimson Dynamo, who possessed the ability to control electricity and was sent by Khrushchev to disrupt Stark Enterprises. The Crimson Dynamo recognized Stark's centrality to the U.S. arms race. "Without him," said the Crimson Dynamo, "the American defense effort would be far weaker!"[\[37\]](#)

Instead of attacking the U.S. military in open conflict, the Crimson Dynamo traveled to the U.S. and began to sabotage each and every one of Tony Stark's plants. In addition to his agenda, he also hoped to lure Iron Man into combat and destroy him. Once again, Russia was unable, in the writers' imaginations, to legitimately compete with America and thus resorted to sabotage; this was also symptomatic of the times. The Cuban Missile Crisis, although extremely frightening to Americans, proved to them that the U.S. was mightier than her communist counterpart when Khrushchev backed down. Iron Man solved the problem of the Crimson Dynamo in a very clever manner. He carried the Soviet spark plug out over Flushing Bay. He threatened to drop the Dynamo into the water despite the lethal consequences this

would have on them both. When the Dynamo called him mad, Iron Man reasoned, "Who cares, as long as I make sure you never menace us again? Since we can not defeat one another, we'll both pay the price for failure".^[38] The threat of mutual destruction was familiar to any American at the time since the world had narrowly avoided it in the Cuban Missile Crisis. This episode is the closest intersection of historical moment and entertainment of any of the four comic books discussed. The Crimson Dynamo, like the historical Khrushchev, conceded to the U.S. but in one step further he also defected. Iron Man opened the Dynamo's eyes to the fact that all communists were treacherous. The Dynamo could only agree that the Soviet system was "savage and double-dealing".^[39]

The Crimson Dynamo had caused more injury to Tony Stark than the obvious material damages. When the Dynamo was at the pinnacle of his rampage he had managed to destroy or damage nearly all of Stark's munitions factories. This threat was felt not only by the military, who threatened to revoke Stark's contracts, but also by Washington politicians. They met in committees where wild accusations were made against Tony Stark. The general thought of the group was that, "If Stark is a communist agent, look at the sweet spot he's in! First he grabs up dozens of government contracts! This makes the U.S. heavily dependent on his industrial empire for strategic weapons and research! Then he wrecks his own plants! Result? No deliveries! Wasted research and experiments! We fall behind the communists..."^[40] In their paranoid Cold War state of mind, the politicians saw enemies all around them, just as it occurred during the McCarthy era. However, the roots of their ideology can be traced back to President Eisenhower's farewell address to the nation in 1961. He cautioned America that, "In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military industrial complex".^[41] This speech had occurred less than two years before this issue was published. The fear of the politicians in the comic book revealed that Americans, while confident and proud of their military superiority, feared its potential threat to democracy.

Iron Man repeatedly saved America from the communist menace during the early 1960's. He was an iron warrior who stood up against the Iron Curtain in a Cold War world. His mouth was as irksome to communists as his weapons were. After peeling the roof off of a Soviet made automobile he teased his enemy that, "Say! They don't build'em so strong behind the Iron Curtain, do they?"^[42] Another favorite response to the questions of his enemies was, "Does Kennedy tell Khrushchev?"^[43] Yet there existed more beneath the façade of super-heroics and clever banter in the Iron Man comic books. The stories, images, and dialogue of the series revealed an America that was proud of her military and confident of her moral superiority. Nonetheless, America's lonely position at the top made her citizens just as nervous, paranoid, and violent as they often imagined the Soviets to be. This America, captured in the pages of youth entertainment, was a deeply disturbed society that tried its best to hide any problems with a puff of the chest or a self-congratulatory pat on the back.

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[1] Bradford Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 40.

[2] *Ibid.*, 55.

[3] Robert Genter, "'With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility': Cold War Culture and the Birth of Marvel Comics." *Journal of Popular Culture* 40, no. 6 (2007). <http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com>.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Stan Lee and Robert Bernstein, *Tales of Suspense* no. 40 (April 1963): 2. <http://www.marvel.com/digitalcomics/>.; Genter (2007).

[6] Stan Lee and Robert Bernstein, *Tales of Suspense* no. 46 (October 1963).

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[7] Edward Brunner, review of *Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic Book Scare and how it Changed America*, by David Hadju, *Michigan Quarterly Review* 48 no. 1 (Winter 2009). <http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com>.

[8] Genter.

[9] Stan Lee and Larry Lieber, *Tales of Suspense* no. 39 (March 1963).

<http://www.marvel.com/digitalcomics/>.

[10] *Ibid.*, 3.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] *Ibid.*, 4.

[13] *Ibid.*, 7.

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] *Ibid.*, 12.

[16] *Ibid.*, 13.

[17] Sir Winston Churchill, "Sinews of Peace", March 5, 1946.

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[18] Brunner.

[19] Lee and Bernstein, (April 1963).

[20] *Ibid.*, 8.

[21] *Ibid.*, 9.

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[\[22\]](#) Ibid.

[\[23\]](#) Lee and Bernstein, *Tales of Suspense* no. 42 (June 1963). <http://www.marvel.com/digitalcomics/>.

[\[24\]](#) Ibid., 2.

[\[25\]](#) Ibid.

[\[26\]](#) Ibid., 3.

[\[27\]](#) Ibid.

[\[28\]](#) Ibid., 3-4.

[\[29\]](#) Ibid., 5.

[\[30\]](#) Lee and Bernstein (June 1963), 5.

[\[31\]](#) Ibid., 5-6.

[\[32\]](#) Ibid., 6.

[\[33\]](#) Ibid.

[\[34\]](#) Genter.

[\[35\]](#) Lee and Bernstein (October 1963), 2.

[\[36\]](#) Ibid., 3.

[\[37\]](#) Genter.

[\[38\]](#) Lee and Bernstein (October 1963), 9; Genter.

[\[39\]](#) Lee and Bernstein (October 1963), 13.

[\[40\]](#) Ibid., 8.

[41] President Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Farewell Address to the Nation" January 17, 1961.
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[42] Lee and Bernstein (June 1963), 11.

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