

THE CAPTAIN AMERICA COMPLEX
JUNE 30, 1985

How many of you have read Captain America comic books? When I was a child on the farm, my idea of living it up was to take 25 cents, go into town to the ice cream shop which we called a confectionary, buy a strawberry soda for 15 cents and a comic book for 10 cents. One of my favorites was Captain America--innocent, righteous, free of any desire for self-seeking, invincible, omnipotent--who saved the innocent and defended the right. Captain America epitomizes a popular image America has had of itself.

We all act out images we have of ourselves. A child learns by acting out images, by pretending to be mother or father or a fireman. A mentally ill person acts out images that bear little resemblance to reality. Therefore, images need to be evaluated.

One of the images America has had of itself is Captain America and it is time to re-evaluate this image, for it is no longer serving us well. Robert Jewett in his book, The Captain America Complex, questions this image. "Misguided zeal will lead us to anarchy or totalitarianism at home and further megalomania abroad." This sermon is essentially a review of this fascinating book. It is especially interesting to me because I know the author. We became friends back in my seminary days. Since then Bob has been Professor of Religious Studies at Morningside College in Sioux City, Iowa, and is presently a New Testament Professor at my alma mater, Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois.

Bob is convinced that we need to change our image if we are to survive as a democracy. Democracy is a fragile system, and there are many forces, including the Captain America complex, threatening the continuance of our democracy.

There are two traditions in American history that are in tension with each other. These traditions were inherited from the Bible. Jewett calls these conflicting traditions zealous nationalism and prophetic realism.

Let's look first at zealous nationalism. This outlook sees world history as a battle between God and the enemies. Total victory is promised to the saints who are urged to keep themselves pure and undefiled while God annihilates their opponents who are stereotyped as bestial and irredeemable. The enemies are called beasts and the antichrist. The fearsome rider comes on a white horse, leading the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure. The Book of Revelation expresses the zealous nationalistic tradition.

Zealous nationalism has a strong following in our country. We idolize heroes such as Captain America. We love melodramas where the villain, dressed in black, forecloses on the mortgage of the beautiful maiden; but, is defeated by the hero, dressed in white, who rescues the heroine and, of course, wins her hand! Cowboy

movies climax with the cowboy, on his white horse, riding out of the hills to rescue the town from the black-dressed badman. We cherish these myths for they express much of what we believe about ourselves as a nation. We Americans like to look at ourselves as the Saviour, the Superhero, Captain America. A sermon preached during World War I sounded the trumpet:

It is God who has summoned us to this war. It is his war we are fighting...This conflict is indeed a crusade. The greatest in history-- the holiest. It is Christ, the King of Righteousness who calls us to grapple in deadly strife with this unholy and blasphemous power.

The Captain America image has considerable power in our country.

Let's look at some of the suppositions of the zealous nationalism tradition. First, there is a belief in a conspiracy with a clear distinction between the good guys and the bad guys. In the Book of Revelation the war is between God and the great conspirator, Satan. The goal is the annihilation, the ultimate destruction, of the conspirator. Americans have often seen conspirators at work. In the 1830s, the evil guys were the Roman Catholics. In the 1820s the conspirator was the Masons. In 1919, it was the Reds. In the 1950s it was the Communists again and Senator McCarthy was the white Saviour. Today there is considerable pressure on us to see a conspiracy at work, especially in the third world.

A second supposition of zealous nationalism is a firm belief in violence as the only method of salvation. We hear comments like, "What that kid needs is a taste of my belt," or "What those terrorists need is a nuclear bomb." Violence begets violence, and there is a close relationship between crusades and crimes of violence. Jewett makes an interesting comparison between our country's frontier experience and that of Canada. Canada relied on normal processes of law rather than crusades, vigilantes, and the military. The Canadian Mounted Police, organized in 1874 with a force of only 300 men, pacified the vast region from Manitoba to the Rocky Mountains. By impartial justice they eliminated the whiskey traffic to the Indians, livestock stealing, land seizures and major Indian conflicts. Contrast that history with the lawlessness of our frontier and the disastrous Indian wars. To rely on violence to preserve law actually breeds lawlessness.

A third supposition of zealous nationalism is an abhorrence of defeat and failure. To fail is crushingly humiliating for a zealous nationalist. But, is it realistic for a person to expect that he will never fail? Is it realistic to expect a nation always to be right, never to make a mistake, never to fail?

We need a new image and Jewett pleads for that tradition in our nation which reflects biblical prophetic realism, epitomized by Isaiah in the Old Testament and Jesus in the New.

Jesus rejected the apocalyptic tradition. Jesus rejected the nightmare notion of bringing in the kingdom of God through violence.

Jesus located evil not only in the enemy, not only in a conspiracy of a devil, but in the hearts of us all. Jesus located evil even in the hearts of the chosen people, even in the hearts of the good guys. Jesus saw not good guys and bad guys, but sinners. Jesus saw all of us in need of redemption. Jesus pictured the hated Samaritan as being more humane than good Jews. Jesus prophesied that a revolt against Rome would bring destruction of Jerusalem.

Jesus was a realist. He believed in coexistence, coexistence under law. Jesus told his followers to support Caesar. Jesus believed in conversion, not destruction. Jesus called hated tax collectors, sinful women, and zealots to be in his close circle. And, above all, Jesus subscribed righteousness only to God. Jesus acknowledged the transcendent justice of God and that before God's throne, all of us, even the good guys, are to be judged.

Acting out the image of prophetic realism, America would see itself not as Captain America, but as an Isaiah, a Jesus, an Abraham Lincoln, or a Mahatma Gandhi. In this image we recognize there is no perfect world or clear distinction between good guys and bad guys. In this image we seek to co-exist while at the same time, befriend the helpless, stand with the exploited against the exploiter, support the oppressed rather than the oppressor, committed to liberty and justice for all.

America has often acted out the prophet image, and has done much to promote justice and righteousness. We have helped the poor from Lend Lease and the Marshall Plan to the recent contributions to the African hungry. We have forgiven our enemies and helped rebuild their businesses into first-rate competitors. We have opened our doors and arms to refugees. This is America at our best.

Let us see ourselves not as Captain America, an invincible hero on a white horse leading the armies of heaven, for such an image is leading us to confrontation, to the brink of nuclear destruction. Let us see ourselves as a prophet like Jesus, committed to justice, with truth as a weapon, and love as the motive.

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