

Imagining Terrorists before Sept. 11: Marvel's GI Joe Comic Books, 1982-1994

By Christopher Norlund

Introduction

- 1 As an elementary school aged child of the 1980s, I used to rush home every weekday from school to catch the most recent episode of the animated series *GI Joe: A Real American Hero*. I watched the daily television show countless times as a child, and as a result, I can still sing the nostalgic nationalistic theme song today, plus I joined the US Navy to become a pilot – anecdotal evidence that child-directed commercialized propaganda does indeed work. Everything I needed to know about geography, world affairs, and US foreign policy was all included in this formulaic show...or so I was led to believe. I learned that the US Special Forces were prepared to intervene across the globe in every terrain and environment imaginable, violence was the preferred (and enjoyable) method to solve problems, and no other fighting force could ever match the strength and wit of the seemingly invincible US military. Watching the show as an adolescent, I had been willingly indoctrinated with all of these jingoistic values. The cartoon also taught me valuable thirty second moral lessons: I ought not start fires in the kitchen, jump my BMX bike over downed power lines, run atop a frozen pond to show my valor, or play at new home construction sites. (*Gee thanks, now I know...and knowing is half the battle. GI Joe!* This popular catch-phrase accompanied the public service announcements concluding each episode of the animated series.) The popularity of the GI Joe PSAs remains strong today, as they have recently reemerged on the Internet with new voice dubbings lampooning the original footage. In addition, the animated series has been released to DVD, and fan sites based on the action figures, comic books, and cartoons have spawned on the Internet. It is also rumored that a live action movie is in the works – presumably based on the characters from the 1980s, although the original incarnation of GI Joe first appeared in a different form in 1964. In the imaginations of many, GI Joe marches on.
- 2 During the same Cold War period, the GI Joe mythology also ran in pages of the Marvel Comics *GI Joe* series, which printed 155 issues from 1982-1994. Peripheral mini-series comic books, graphic novels, and a new (2001) Image Comics/Devil's Due series have all seen print, but this article focuses on the principal long-running comic book series itself. The comic books, although featuring the same characters, were dissimilar from the animated series; the comics contained more heavy-handed nationalistic tones and more mature story lines (death, revenge, torture, etc.) which would span over several issues/months. The subject of this article will be to examine the images of Cobra, the "ruthless, terrorist organization determined to rule the world," as imagined in the comic books and to consider how Cobra's portrayal served the narrative and thematic conventions of the series. These ideas are informed by both Edward Said's *Orientalism* and Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*; both of which are widely influential in the field of American Studies and have heavily influenced my own analytical prospective and methods. Said contends that the West has studied the East in a way that justifies imperialism and has overlooked or ignored the complexity of reality – the complexity that appears both the relationship between East and West (a.k.a. Oriental and Occident) and how the West defines itself and the East. Said also writes about dichotomies found in Western culture when placing itself in relation to the East, such as scientific v. religious thought and rational v. irrational thinking; it is these dichotomies and oppositional, inverse relationships that give the West a lens through which to view the East and a basis upon which the West can define itself. In conjunction with Said's work, Anderson writes about nationalism and modernity. He contends that the modern sense of nationhood grew out of earlier religious and dynastic communities. Before the advent of the modern nation, people identified or separated themselves either by religious belief or through dynastic, bloodline lineage. Anderson's work also explores how the modern nation is a product of print culture and mass culture. Both Anderson and Said offer important insights that aid in understanding the GI Joe comics, a modern mass print culture that feature storylines in tune with facets of the East/West relationship as defined by Said. Many of the ideas in this article owe a great debt to the work of the two aforementioned scholars, and I should note also that this brief discussion of some of their ideas in no way entirely captures the gravity or complexity of their work.
- 3 Cobra is the primary antagonist throughout the entire mythology of the GI Joe comics, appearing in nearly every issue. This recurring role of antagonist is a very different convention than other contemporary superhero comic book series. For example in a Batman comic, the Batman may face a different and independent villain each issue, since a variety of them reside in the seedy Gotham City (e.g. Joker, Penguin, Riddler, Catwoman, etc.). This monolithic villain or terrorist gives the GI Joe comics a sense of connection between past and present – enabling the narrative to seem eternal. After the events of September 11, 2001, it is relevant to consider how terrorists were imagined in popular culture before the attacks on the World Trade Center, Pentagon, and United Flight 93. Before the attacks, Americans had little firsthand experience with terrorism. However, the terrorist organization Cobra existed in popular culture and in the minds of GI Joe's comic book readers. In the world of comic books, GI Joe was "America's elite counter-terrorism strike force" two decades before Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden became household names. And

so when the 9/11 attacks did occur, I would argue they were recorded in popular culture in a way that was consistent with previous narratives (both fictional and historical) of American culture, such as the narrative of the GI Joe comics. Although the 9/11 attacks have their own unique position in history, Americans struggled to place them in a nationalistic narrative that would consistently fit with the "eternal narratives" of America. In a sense, this was like using a knife to slice a piece of a jigsaw puzzle in order to make it fit into the larger puzzle. An example of this would be the film *United 93* (2006), which tells a "historical" dramatic narrative where ordinary Americans rise up as heroes. Even though the first half of the film is generally accurate (the director filmed using many of the actual people involved on the ground), the second half is a fictional recreation of what might have happened on the plane. Many Americans, however, will probably accept this heroic story as fact because it can easily be placed in a larger context of American nationalism; in this example, America is already rewriting history to create a nationalistic story that will easily fit in the eternal American narrative. Even though the passengers of United 93 lost their lives that day, the film makes it seem like they heroically "won the battle" by thwarting the terrorists. Thus, American popular culture has transformed a story of tragedy into a story of heroism because it fits more neatly into the larger American narrative of victory and triumph. As Anderson points out, the development of nationalism creates a sense of an "eternal" nationhood. Although "America" and the notion of an "American" have only existed since 1776 (and even then people were either separatists or loyalists, not necessarily "Americans"), modern Americans think of their nation as eternal. The recurring appearance of Cobra in the GI Joe comics adds to the timeless narrative as the storylines feature a heroic US military consistently defeating a terrorist foe. So when narratives like GI Joe exist in popular culture, real world events such as the United 93 hijacking are remembered in ways that will remain consistent with what has been told before in the fictional pages of popular culture. In essence, *United 93* is an example of how fiction and reality have become blurred.

- 4 In an article related to the topic of comic books and villains, Jack G. Shaheen examines comic book images of Arabs (Shaheen 123). He identifies three representations of Arabs commonly appearing in comic books: the repulsive terrorist, the sinister sheikh, and the rapacious bandit. Of these, Shaheen argues that the "repulsive terrorist" is the favored and most frequent way of imagining Arabs, and further, this "gross imbalance in portrayal of an ethnic group" is due to the ignorance of the American public and the small population of Arabs residing domestically (Shaheen 123). Could the same argument be made of an "inaccurate portrayal" of terrorists as imagined in GI Joe comics? America is generally ignorant of international terrorism and presumably there is a very small or nonexistent population of terrorists living in the US. As previously mentioned, before September 11, America has had little experience with terrorism other than the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, which was carried out by a domestic assailant. Compared to a country such as Israel, Americans do not face regular terrorist attacks. After just one day of attacks, however, who can forget the images on the news featuring droves of Americans rushing to their local hardware store to purchase duct tape and other "necessary survival supplies" to protect themselves? Why the sudden onslaught of fear? How were terrorists imagined in popular culture before September 11, 2001? Does this image relate to the way terrorists are imagined today? This article alone cannot answer all of these questions nor is that the purpose of it; however, as academics attempt to gain an understanding of the cultural impact of 9/11 on America, it will certainly be pertinent to consider how terrorists were imagined both before and after the attacks. In the case of the GI Joe comics, this article will focus on the former rather than the latter.
- 5 American culture does seem to make some connection between terrorism and the East or Orient; thus for some Americans, terrorism takes on racial terms. According to a 2003 University of Maryland poll, the majority of Americans (73%) believe that the Islamic world shares terrorist network Al Qaeda's feelings towards America (PIPA). This belief is further advocated and perpetuated in the American classroom. In a 1991 article, Linda Fuller wrote a paper encouraging teachers to teach "international terrorism" in the classroom, and in her proposed activity, the terrorists are from the Middle East and hijack a Western airliner (Fuller 93). Fuller's proposed classroom activity certainly casts terrorism in racial terms. As Said contends, beliefs about the Orient are a constructed reality, so under the guise of "international terrorism," Fuller is perpetuating the view that the East is an irrational "Other" bent on destroying the West. Can Western images of terrorism be separated from the Oriental, or are the two imagined to be one and the same? As I will demonstrate in this article, images of Cobra in the GI Joe comics exhibit characteristics of Said's East/West analysis where Cobra takes on specific characteristics of an Oriental "Other."
- 6 This article hopes to contribute to what will foreseeably be a growing area of scholarship concerning portrayals of terrorism in popular culture. In an article about 9/11 and television, Lynn Spigel has argued that the television networks covered the 9/11 story in a way that made the experience similar to a "made for television" movie, easily digestible for Americans (Spigel 235). Essentially, the events of 9/11 were transformed from raw information into a dramatic storyline filled with heroes, villains, and victims. Spigel discusses how after 9/11, both men and women had lost loved ones in the World Trade Center, but the majority of the news stories which ran after 9/11 on the major networks and on programs like the Oprah Winfrey show focused on women as victims. Women who had lost their husbands and who were stranded with children in tow were a recurring image after the attacks. By contrast, men were portrayed as heroes. The immortalized image of the white firemen raising the American flag amidst the Trade Center rubble is now an iconic image in popular culture. Although there certainly were many women who lost their husbands, and many male firefighters who served that day; there were also men who lost their wives and female and ethnic minority firefighters who served. – The actual diversity of stories and heroes, however, did not fit neatly into network television's desire to create a made-for-television, nationalist narrative of 9/11. These purposely selected images created a nationalistic historical reality that shaped Americans' "collective memory" and "collective conscious" (these are key ideas from from Anderson's work on nationalism). Hence all Americans tend to remember 9/11 the same way because the news media repeated generally identical images. Anderson explains how mass media technology has made modern nationalism possible by spreading consciousness and memory throughout a wide range of peoples who live in communities separated by physical distance. Thus the person living in Los Angeles and the person living in Chicago shared the same viewing experience of the 9/11 images on news networks like CNN. Neither viewer knows the other, nor will they ever meet, and neither is in New York City to experience the event first hand, but each viewer shares in the identical national memory experience due to the technology of national media. These ideas fit in with the analysis of the GI Joe comics because of its national readership; the comics spread an eternal nationalistic/militaristic narrative of the US military. Furthermore, popular culture is powerful, though it, like news media, seems innocuous. Both news broadcasts and stories from the

GI Joe comics seem to be telling their audience the "truth;" however the nationalistic storylines in both of these mediums are far from objective. The power that they hold is in the illusion of objectivity.

- 7 Another contemporary example of a terrorism narrative in popular culture immediately after the attacks on September 11 appeared on NBC. The NBC White House television drama, *The West Wing*, ran a PSA episode titled "Isaac and Ishmael." In the episode, high school students are trapped in the White House due to a bomb threat presumably initiated by an Al Qaeda-type operative. These students, who were on a formal White House tour, are then given a series of mini educational lectures from the fictional White House staff answering many questions that Americans were asking after the towers fell. "Why were we attacked? Who are these terrorists? Why do they hate America?" After discarding more complex answers, the drama provides reductionist answers to viewers: the terrorists hate "freedom and democracy," they irrationally want to "kill Americans," the terrorists' rationale for suicide bombing is "ridiculous." And as the show teaches its audience at the conclusion, the best way to fight the terrorists is through economic consumption – as if shopping at the local strip mall solves or alleviates the crisis of terrorism. This reductionist imagery of terrorism in popular culture was repeated for weeks after September 11. Through these terrorism narratives in popular culture, Americans were fed images that were consistent with the larger American nationalistic narrative. *The West Wing* writers were essentially taking the raw information from 9/11 and transforming it by giving its viewers a simplistic version of reality. These messages, combined with President Bush constantly telling Americans that the terrorists "hate freedom," create a simplistic yet ubiquitous nationalistic narrative. When Americans hear that terrorists "hate freedom" they immediately think, "We Americans love freedom." This simplistic version of the world is how 9/11 was represented in popular culture.
- 8 As Said contends in his work; the West defines itself by what it is not; in other words, the West will define the East or Other in order to provide itself with an image and meaning (e.g. freedom haters v. freedom lovers.) In an unpublished work, Dann Thomas surveys the portrayal of the Axis power during WWII in comic books from 1938-1945. Thomas concludes that during a prelude to war, popular culture (in this case, comic books) and "public opinion toward a potential foe gradually hardens as war is perceived to draw nearer" (Thomas). Robert MacDougall has also argued that popular culture is most salient when defining the enemy or "Other" (MacDougall 60). At the end of WWII and the beginning of the Cold War, a major shift occurred so that images of the enemy in popular culture had to switch from largely racial caricatures to images of a philosophical war. The public morphed its thinking from the US fighting a racial Yellow Peril of Imperial Japan into a philosophical Red Peril of Communist Russia. MacDougall argues that both Japan and Russia were the interchangeable "Other," provided that the "Other" was painted as diametrically opposed to the same thing: American freedom and democracy. I agree with MacDougall's ideas and further add that popular culture plays an important role in imagining an "enemy" because most Americans will never have any direct contact with the "enemy" itself or face him on the battlefield. Thomas also makes a valid point in regard to priming the American public to hate and loathe a particular enemy. Since American popular culture paints the "enemy" as being opposite of America and the American people themselves are not a particular race or ethnicity, the modern American enemy is portrayed as opposing America's system of values and beliefs. Thus modern terrorists are portrayed as "freedom haters," and this idea can be traced to the tradition of the Cold War era, the era in which the GI Joe comics were written.



[figure](#)

[1](#)

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Similarly, movies from the 1980s Cold War era are time capsules of political culture. In the film *Russkies* (1987), the main characters are school children who have acquired all of their knowledge about Russia and its people from avidly reading comic books; their favorite comic book tells stories of "Sgt. Slammer" doing battle with the "evil Russian-commies." As the plot unfolds, the children must confront their patriotic and militaristic beliefs when they discover a stranded Russian sailor on coast of Florida. Like the Sgt. Slammer comic book in the movie *Russkies*, the GI Joe comic books grew out of the tradition of militaristic or conservative fantasies about the Vietnam War, and as an orphan and refugee from Vietnam, I have a personal stake in how Americans remember the war. In the mid-1980s, the iconic movie character Rambo asked, "Do we get to win this time?" in reference to the Vietnam War, where conservatives blame anti-war protestors, the media, liberals, and the government for the loss in Vietnam. Hollywood movies such as *Uncommon Valor* (1983), *Missing in Action* (1984), and *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), were among the leading Vietnam War fantasies where the main characters would return to Vietnam and rescue missing POWs. The primary premise of these movies is the assumption that if the Americans would have just killed more Vietnamese (as if 3 million dead were not enough), the war could have been "won." They also play upon the premise that withdrawing from Vietnam created a situation where fallen American soldiers had died in vain. As pictured in GI Joe Issue # 152 ([figure 1](#)) and in the aforementioned movies, the Vietnamese and the "enemy" are merely "faceless hordes" for the American characters to kill. These images have become so popular in American culture that the word "Rambo" is a part of the everyday American vernacular (it is also worth noting that my undergraduate students, who were born after the Rambo movies were made, know both Sylvester Stallone and the Rambo movies). In Issue 152, as the Joe kills one of the Vietnamese, he coldly says, "I broke his mother's heart." These provocative images of killing would never be found in the cartoon series, as most in my generation remember GI Joe, and are what make studying the comic book valuable for this analysis. The GI Joe comics are an extension of the Rambo myth which I would argue is the quintessential American military superhero. One could also make the case for John Wayne; however, John Wayne's characters never possessed the superhuman-like abilities (ninja stealth movement and concealment, mastery of martial arts, mastery of weapons, etc.) or superhuman strength and physique that Rambo exhibits. It is no coincidence, then, that Rambo and the GI Joe comics originated during the same Cold War era.

- 10 The remainder of this article addresses two overarching themes in GI Joe comics: imagining terrorists as religious zealots and

imagining terrorists as coerced killers. In both sections that follow, I will argue that Cobra's portrayal is designed to serve as an antithesis to GI Joe, demonstrating Said's idea of how the Eastern Oriental is an inverse/antithesis to the Western Occident. This oppositional relationship between antagonist and protagonist throughout the series is a narrative convention drawn to highlight nationalistic and militaristic themes. These themes make studying the GI Joe comic books an intriguing line of inquiry because they inspire the reader to enlist and join the military. This creation of a popular print culture mythology could not have been possible before the advent of the mass print press which, as Anderson argues, is essential to the creation of the modern sense of nationhood. Thus the study of the GI Joe comics is an exercise in understanding modern American nationalism and militarism and how the West, in this case, the United States, thinks of itself, the "Other," and the US role in international affairs.

Imagining Terrorists as Religious Zealots



[figure](#)
[2](#)



[figure](#)
[3](#)

11

Cobra is fundamentally the antithesis of GI Joe, and this contrast is a juxtaposition of the religious and the scientific. In the comics, Cobra is imagined as a religious faction with a cult fascination with serpents – the Judeo-Christian symbol for evil and Satan or The Devil. Following the serpent-loving theme, the organization itself as well as its mechanized vehicles have names that connote snakes (e.g. Hiss tanks, Fang helicopters, Viper hang gliders. See [figure 2](#)). Cobra Commander, the leader of the terrorist group, also uses dialogue which conjures snake metaphors emblematic of snakes. As he explains his goals to his son, "...I won't stop until my organization coils around the whole world like a giant ... Cobra!" (Issue 38). At a Cobra rally ([figure 3](#)), he refers to his followers as "brotherhood of the hooded serpent" and preaches spreading the organization's "coils to every corner of the earth" (Issue 7). Contrasting Cobra's machinery are GI Joe's scientifically labeled mechanized vehicles (APC – All Personnel Carriers, PAC/RAT – Programmed Assault Computer / Rapid All Terrain, etc.). In addition to scientifically named vehicles, throughout the series, military acronyms and military jargon are included in the dialogue with footnoted definitions to introduce military terminology to its readers (e.g. SOP – standard operating procedures, AWOL – absent without leave, VTOL – vertical takeoff and landing, etc). This military education indoctrinates readers with feelings of awe of the military and supplies them with the precise scientific language of the technologically advanced US military. This storytelling convention in the GI Joe comics emphasizes the military educational aspect of the series, fostering a fetish in its young readers for military/techno jargon and priming them for entry into the military. Joseph Witek corroborates the point by arguing that historically, war comics as a genre are "fascinated with technology to the point of fetishism" (Witek). I would add that this fascination with technology celebrates US military technological and scientific superiority over the religious "Other." In this case, GI Joe's mechanized vehicles are labeled with rational scientific acronyms, while Cobra names their mechanized vehicles based on an irrational religious perversion regarding snakes. Although both groups have the same types of vehicles (both have tanks, ships and planes), the GI Joe technology always seems a bit more rational and effective. This emphasizes the point that although various countries and organizations may have weapons like the US, their weapons will never equal those found in the US military. It is a subtle distinction that reinforces the notions of US military supremacy.



[figure](#)
[4](#)

12

In Issue 5, the Joes can be seen cleaning the MOBAT (multi-ordinance battle tank) as one of the female Joes, Scarlett, looks on ([figure 4](#)). She comments, "I honestly don't understand the affection most men have for complicated machinery!" After she makes her disparaging comment, the other Joes go on to explain the technological wonders of the tank. Scarlett, along with the reader, is drawn to fantasize about operating such a vehicle. Throughout the series, the Joes have a cult fascination with military technology, whereas Cobra has a cult fascination with all things serpent. In Issue 5, for example, Cobra's password to gain access to Cobra Commander's throne room is "The mongoose, too, must die!" (The mongoose is an animal known for killing cobras.) The comics further underscore a celebration of American military efficiency and prowess in contrast to Cobra's maniacal excesses. In many comics, the Joes spend their free time in GI Joe HQ (a.k.a. "the Pit") repairing and cleaning their military vehicles and weapons, which are treated like prized possessions, in well lit, clean, and modern facilities. Contrasting this image, Cobra Commander spends his free time in dimly lit, cave-like rooms, fanatically plotting to kill GI Joe. Cobra Commander's favorite free time activity is taking shooting practice at wooden replicas of GI Joe characters while sitting upon his emperor's throne, which also suggests the sacred through its appearance (pictured in Issue 107). This contrast is overtly evident in the series when images of what each group is doing are placed in adjacent panels on the page, as shown in Figure 4.

13 In young adult literature, this celebration of military technology is quite profound. However, to Americans, American militarism is

invisible in the consciousness. Pei Minxin calls this the paradox of American nationalism (Minxin 30). This paradox has two parts: first, although the US is highly nationalistic, it does not see itself as such; and second, although the US is highly nationalistic, it does not recognize or appreciate the nationalism of other countries. This paradox is important when considering the role the GI Joe comics have in American culture. When watching any American news broadcast, such as a CNN or a Fox News, these broadcasts will feature images of Iranians marching through the streets garnishing rifles or North Koreans leading their own nationalistic parades featuring a pageantry of motorized missile tanks. The American viewer is led to think about how militaristic and "scary" Bush's "Axis of Evil" countries are, but in reverse, Americans do not question such overtly militaristic culture artifacts as the GI Joe comics, cultural ceremonies such as the Pledge of Allegiance or Navy F-14 flyovers before football games. Minxin's argument about the paradox of American nationalism is a valid observation, and analyzing artifacts such as the GI Joe comics goes a long way toward proving that American nationalism/militarism does indeed exist. The comics demonstrate a clear reverence for and celebration of US military technology, which is certainly an aspect of militarism. Americans may not march their weapons through the streets of New York City, but New York City-based Marvel Comics marches military weapons through the pages of its comic books and through the homes of thousands of young American readers. As Minxin argues, the contrast is that American nationalism resides in grassroots and private organizations (Marvel Comics is not state sponsored), whereas comparison countries such as North Korea and Iran display a state sponsored nationalism.



[figure](#)

[5](#)

14

Scenery throughout the series further depicts Cobra as a religious organization. In Issue 137, one of the Joes, Scarlett, infiltrates Cobra headquarters (a.k.a. Silent Castle) – designed architecturally to resemble a temple hidden in a Himalaya-like region – by feigning defection to Cobra. During an initiation ceremony, as pictured in [figure 5](#), Scarlett is seen walking among a wedding-like processional. Drums can be seen and "heard" in the background ("Boom! Boom! Boom!") as she makes her way to Cobra's spiritual leader, Cobra Commander. She holds a serpent in each hand, and in the subsequent panel, she swears, "eternal allegiance to Cobra" and "forswear[s] all prior loyalties." She then drinks detoxified cobra snake venom. This is one of many examples in which Cobra gatherings are made to appear sacred – through décor, ritual, and the ominous pagan leadership of Cobra Commander. However, the religious ceremony may not be entirely genuine as one disgruntled character comments during the ceremony, "Hrmp! None of us got this big of a deal when we joined up!" In the scene following the ceremony, Cobra Commander tells Scarlett, "... you know that all of this does not become final ... that is to say, your stock options don't become final until you fulfill your individual initial obligations!" He then informs her that she must assassinate one of the GI Joes to become a full-fledged member of Cobra. This contradistinction between a sacred public sphere and a secular private sphere demonstrate how Cobra Commander is essentially a religious charlatan who uses divine ceremony and sacred veneer to obtain his ulterior secular motives. This creation of a terrorist personality as a disingenuous religious figure suggests to the reader that no terrorist or religious leader is authentically devout, since they merely want to acquire power for self-serving needs. This is an inverse to the GI Joes, who are authentic in their American pride, system of beliefs, and dedication; the Joes, therefore, hold a strong secular nationalism whereas Cobras hold allegiance to a religious, cult-like organization. By portraying Cobra Commander as disingenuous, the comics encourage the reader to be more like the GI Joes, whose patriotism is genuine and whose dedication serves the state. In other words, the comics convince readers that if they ally themselves to the state, they can be a part of a truly authentic culture.



[figure](#)

[6](#)

15

The GI Joe comics are also a forum in which the reader can negotiate the meaning of his or her American patriotism and citizenship. In Issue 100, Cobra invades the small town of Millville ([figure 6](#)). In a religious cult scheme, Cobra plans to dupe local citizens into turning their lives and life savings over to Cobra. During Cobra Commander's rally, a Vietnam veteran shouts back: "Cobra is a terrorist organization! I'm a veteran and I'm telling you that Cobra stands for everything that American soldiers have shed their blood to stop for two hundred years!" Cobra Commander responds, "This low-life is telling you I'm un-American? I'm American as apple pie and motherhood! I believe in free enterprise, that's the American Way [Amway]." In this scene, and in many scenes of the comics, phrases like "American Way" and the meanings of citizenship are debated amongst characters. The GI Joe comics differ significantly from other superhero comics because of these perpetual themes of nationalism and patriotism. By contrast, for example, the X-Men comic books use themes revolving around coming of age, isolation through being different, and the responsibilities of power. The Spiderman comics include themes of power and responsibility, love relationships, and the tension between superhero and personal life. Missing from the GI Joe comics, but prevalent throughout superhero comics, is the theme of carrying out a secret second life and battling a dual identity complex; the Joes have no identity problems because they are devoted patriots to America. As the comics imply to the reader, this devotion to the state removes any personal complexities (i.e. "problems" or "weaknesses") the Joes would otherwise have. The GI Joe comics are, therefore, quite different from other comics in what they inspire the reader to negotiate and contemplate.

16 Throughout the series, there are brief cameos of fictional retired military veterans discussing historical events in US military history (D-Day, Pearl Harbor, etc.) These small, subtle injections have little to do with the plot, but set the militaristic and nationalistic tone

for the series. Portraying Cobra Commander like a religious TV evangelist crossed with a Ponzi schemer (NBC Dateline ran a special news report on the Amway pyramid scheme; an Amway rally in many ways resembled a Christian evangelical spiritual revival rally or in the case of this article, a Cobra rally) gives the comics a foil which the GI Joes can contrast with their ethical superiority. Note that the GI Joes are part of a timeless and authentic organization, the US military, which the reader can join to fight the decidedly "un-American" organizations around the world and join the battle that has been raging for "two hundred years." This notion that America has fought each war for the same purpose, "freedom and democracy," overlooks the true nature and disparate reasons for each war involving America; instead, nationalistic narratives are provided to give America an eternal identity. Thus, the GI Joe comics continue to feed into this militaristic juggernaut.



[figure](#)

[7](#)

17

How can GI Joe defeat Cobra, which seemingly has an unlimited bankroll and an unlimited horde of dedicated followers? In Issue 8, Cobra makes an assault on Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral ([figure 7](#)). GI Joe defends the space center, and emerges victorious in an epic ocean battle; a victory echoed in practically every other issue. However, when the Joes offer to take Cobra foot soldiers as prisoner, the Cobra soldiers refuse. Aboard an ill-fated ship, a religiously fanatical soldier states, "We serve Cobra Commander to the end! We have failed and will stay to meet our fate." In the next panel, Cobra soldiers commit suicide while others await their certain death aboard the exploding, sinking ship. One of the Joes comments on the Cobra suicide, "What they got is mindless obedience." Although Cobra's henchmen have this "mindless obedience" to the point of martyrdom, their leading officers, headed by Cobra Commander, always find a cowardly way to escape during a battle, while using their underlings as cannon fodder. Cobra Commander's leadership style is paradoxical; he is able to convince his followers to give their lives in service of causes for which he himself is not willing to sacrifice his own life. Although Cobra Commander is the religious and spiritual leader of his group, he himself never becomes a martyr and he himself is not genuine to his beliefs. In the series, the drones of Cobra are more authentic than the leadership, whereas the Joes are authentic throughout – a rational, authentic culture that the reader grows to trust.

Imagining Terrorists as Coerced Killers



[figure](#)

[8](#)

18

Cobra is frequently portrayed in the series as exhibiting disregard for civilian lives. In Issue 1, there is a scene borrowed directly from John Wayne's 1968 classic nationalistic propaganda Vietnam War film, *The Green Berets*. In the scene ([figure 8](#)), the Joes discover a fishing village, similar to the South Vietnamese fishing village shown in the aforementioned film, in which Cobra has killed all of the civilians. The Joes exclaim, "Cobra wiped out the entire village. Women and kids ... everybody." In the pages of the comics and in the companion scene of *The Green Berets*, after discovering the carnage left by the enemy, the protagonists then provide an exposition of "Why we fight" as if they were speaking directly to the audience. One of the Joes, Breaker, suggests burying the dead civilians; the squad leader, Stalker, claims there is no time for such an act because the mission is more important. This is a contradiction as the soldiers claim to be fighting for the civilians, but the Joes ultimately decide that fighting the enemy is more important than actually helping the civilians – in this case, burying the dead. The reason for showing the brutality and savageness of the enemy in popular culture is to garner support for American militarism; however, the mission is never really about helping civilians as much as it about wiping out the brutal enemy. The US military is validated when there is a vicious and ruthless enemy to thwart, and the reader is reassured that when the enemy attacks, the US military will be ready. Thus, the audience is more sympathetic to military spending and militaristic policy.

19 Another plot convention throughout the series is the use of the "naïve pacifist" in conversion stories; these conversion stories appear throughout the series both as primary plots and subplots. Lary May, in his book, *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way* identified "conversion narratives" in 1940s Hollywood to garner support for allegiance to the state and "savior institutions" (May). In the Cold War's GI Joe comic books, we see a continuation of the "conversion narrative" as May would term it. In Issue 1, one of the Joes, Hawk, tells another, Short-Fuse, why they should protect someone who does not endorse the GI Joe effort: "We each took an oath to defend the constitution of the United States. That constitution grants the right of every citizen to disagree with the government." He goes on to tell Short-Fuse how it is the mission of GI Joe to protect US citizens, even if they do not endorse GI Joe's purpose as a "savior institution." In Issue 9, two Joes, Scarlett and Clutch are commissioned to protect a US State Department diplomat. The diplomat does not endorse the Joes or their mission and tells Scarlett he does not want the military escort: "I do not need your protection and I'm not about to give up what's left of my vacation! I take my orders from the State Department, not the military – and frankly I'm not convinced this 'Cobra' is after me or even that they exist." When the diplomat finishes his tirade, Cobra attempts to assassinate him. As Scarlett and the diplomat evade Cobra gunfire and run towards a getaway car, Scarlett asks, "Convinced?" The diplomat responds, "Convinced. Get me out of here." This "naïve pacifist" conversion story is a plot device in which a character denies the need for GI Joe, but then is later confronted with the threat of kidnapping or assassination by Cobra operatives. The formerly "naïve pacifist" is then converted to the opinion that GI Joe is a necessary part of

the government and a necessary part of the military. These conversion stories show the reader that "unappreciative Americans" do exist in the country; however, they must be protected. There is a sense of resentment that the Joes express and transfer to the reader; however by the end of the narrative, the "naïve pacifist" loses their naïvete when threatened by Cobra. In this narrative convention, Cobra is used as a catalyst to convert the once naïve Americans into militaristic believers. The reader and the once naïve pacifist is thankful and hopeful that GI Joe, a "savior institution," is adequately funded and supported by the government.

- 20 The GI Joes are imagined as selfless volunteers devoted to the US military; in contrast Cobra soldiers are imagined as duped or coerced to join Cobra. In Issue 4, the Joes infiltrate a Cobra training camp located somewhere in rural small town America. The training camp not only trains men to join the ranks of Cobra, but also houses the inductees' families. One of the Joes, Grunt, comments on the situation, "Some of the new [Cobra] recruits brought their wives and kids with them!" The other Joe, Hawk, responds, "When you have power over a man's family, you have power over the man." Another example of this coercion theme appears in Issue 20; one of the Joes, Clutch, discovers that an old high school friend, Billy, is in cahoots with Cobra. Clutch discovers this when Billy hits him from behind with a wrench while Clutch is fighting Cobra henchmen. Clutch wakes up to find himself tied up and confronts Billy: "If it isn't my favorite backstabber. How come you aren't home polishing your brass knuckles?" Billy responds, "Cobra's holding my family. I couldn't take the chance of anything happening to them." This theme emphasizes the idea that if one opposes GI Joe, then they must be coerced – either their family is endangered, or they have been misled by Cobra Commander's pretense as a false prophet. Imagining terrorists as coerced killers fails to grapple with the authentic reasons why real world terrorists oppose the US or why they continue to fight. It inculcates readers with the notion that anyone opposing the US is either a fool or has no agency in the matter; this is a powerful idea as many Americans believe in American exceptionalism. This contrast of the volunteer opposed to the duped also underlines the differences in culture between the GI Joes and Cobra. The Joes' all volunteer force and authentic culture oppose Cobra's all duped force and inauthentic culture.



[figure](#)

[9](#)

21

Reinforcing the authenticity of the US military, American soldiers are also memorialized in the series. In American popular culture when an American soldier dies, it is considered an honor and a noble sacrifice worthy of remembrance. However, oddly enough, Americans do not think of this act as martyrdom. In Issue 22, at a memorial service for General Flagg, a fallen GI Joe commander, Cobra launches an attack. During the firefight, one of the Joes grabs the American flag from the General's coffin in a show of staunch patriotism, exclaiming, "He's [Cobra] not shooting holes in my flag." In Issue 145, two Joes visit Arlington cemetery to honor America's war dead and to discuss their obligated duties to the state ([figure 9](#)). In the closing panel, one Joe states, "We remember our own," as they both look across a military cemetery in the sunset. This romanticized image of death recalls an allegorical cowboy riding off into the sunset as sorrowful onlookers wave their last goodbyes.

- 22 Americans memorialize their war dead. Holidays such as May Day, Veterans Day, V-E Day, Memorial Day, and V-J Day (which is only celebrated in Rhode Island) are times when Americans officially honor and remember the American soldiers who were killed in military service. It is a reflection of militaristic culture that America has not only one, but multiple holidays celebrating its military. Americans, however, often do not see themselves as militaristic. These holidays are important culturally and politically because if a nation does not convince its people that it is honorable to die for one's country, then conducting wars on foreign soil become rather difficult. These memorials in popular culture such as GI Joe comics are important to building this militaristic system of beliefs.



[figure](#)

[10](#)

23

The final issue of the comic book inspires a course of action and volunteerism with the reader. In issue 155, a young man around the age of a typical GI Joe comic book reader contemplates joining the military; his father, though, is against this decision ([figure 10](#)). The young man writes a letter to one of the Joes, Snake Eyes, to ask for advice; the young man ends the letter asking:

"What is wrong with aspiring to that sense of honor? What's wrong with wanting a higher glory than personal wealth? What's wrong with seeking adventure in the defense of democratic ideals?"

Snake Eyes writes a lengthy letter describing his experiences in the military as the comic book issue summarizes this soldier's entire career. Snake Eyes concludes,

"I had the privilege and honor of serving with men and women I could depend on literally. I have had comrades lay down their lives for me, and I would have gladly laid down mine for them. How many other occupations engender such camaraderie? But then – this 'Bearing of arms in defense of the constitution of the United States of America' is not really a profession per se...it is a trust."

- 24 The final issue of GI Joe ends with the young man stating that he has to keep thinking about whether or not to enlist. The implication is that the reader is to contemplate enlisting along with the young man; the father gives his son a hug and says, "You

just think about it as long as you want." The last panel shows a deserted military base with a sign reading "Deactivated. United States Military Base." The comic book gives the reader a chance to complete the story; a chance for the reader to prove he is not like Cobra, not a coward, not coerced, and not a fool.

Conclusion

- 25 The GI Joe comics are very different from other modern comic books because of their somewhat unorthodox narrative conventions and themes. Often superhero comics are marketed to a target audience of teen and twenty-something males. This audience is typically rebellious (or at least fantasizes about being rebellious), and thus rebel superheroes such as Marvel Comics' Wolverine or The Punisher are immensely popular – as is evident in the Hollywood productions based on these characters. Superhero characters such as Batman or Spiderman are essentially vigilantes who work outside of the law enforcement establishment because the establishment cannot adequately handle its job. Inherently, most superhero comics are anti-establishment because for the superhero to have a place in society, the establishment authorities in the narrative must either be incompetent or lack the necessary skill sets that the superhero can provide. The GI Joe comics however present characters that are employed by the government (the establishment) and are enlisted in the military – a strict authoritarian culture. And although those who join the military are giving up a piece of their individual freedom and safety, the GI Joe comic books portray this as an authentic culture with a chance to live a noble and exciting lifestyle.
- 26 How many times have the police authorities tried to arrest or apprehend Batman or Spiderman? And each repeatedly evades capture and disappears into the night in order to continue his vigilante and illegal activities. By contrast with contemporary superhero comics, GI Joe comics instill a sense of patriotism and duty to their readers. By portraying Cobra as disingenuous, disloyal, cowardly, and inauthentic, the reader is then predisposed to identify more with the authentic and establishment-tied GI Joe. Moreover, by portraying Cobra as religious and GI Joe as irreligious, readers are inculcated into the belief that establishment, nation-state allegiance holds precedence over inherently anti-state spiritual or religious beliefs – though one could certainly argue that the Catholic Church is an establishment, loyalty to the Catholic Church inherently divides loyalty to the state. As suggested by the portrayal of Cobra Commander, following a religious leader will eventually result in betrayal by a false prophet – Cobra Commander was never authentic in his beliefs from the outset, but expects his followers to be. The GI Joe comics glorify the military by claiming that through it, true friendships can be made and patriotic duties to America can be fulfilled. And thus, the purpose of imagining terrorists in the GI Joe comics is to act as a military recruiting tool for its young male readership. None of the GI Joes are born with superpowers, bitten by a radioactive spider, or born on the planet Krypton; they are portrayed as an ethnically and racially diverse group with whom the reader can aspire to "Be all you can be."

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gi joe cover marvel number one | GI Joe Special Missions (1986) comic books. Marvel Comics Superheroes War Comics Marvel Comic Books Make A Comic Book Gi Joe Cobra Retro Futuristic Star Wars Toys Classic Comics Comic Book Covers. G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero Vol 1 105. G.I. Joe A Real American Hero (1982-1994) Marvel Comics. GI Joe has been the title of comic strips and comic books in every decade since 1942. G.I. Joe Comics, G.I. Joe Image Comic Books, Marvel G.I. Joe. Limited series, specials. Vintage Marvel. GI JOE - Other Collectibles. Trading Cards. T-shirts. Other Action Figures. Marvel Universe 4". Other 4" Action Figures / Vehicles. Collector Supplies. We have a gigantic back issue selection of GI JOE comic books featuring hundreds of stories from the classic GI JOE 3 3/4" mythos that collectors and fans have come to love since 1982. From publishers such as Marvel, Image, Devil's Due, and IDW. 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 Next >>. GI JOE comic IDW vol. 2 issue #17. G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero is a comic book that was published by Marvel Comics from 1982 to 1994. Based on Hasbro, Inc.'s G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero line of military-themed toys, the series has been credited for making G.I. Joe into a pop-culture phenomenon. G.I. Joe was also the first comic book to be advertised on television, in what has been called a "historically crucial moment in media convergence".