ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: "THE EYE IS THE WINDOW FOR THE SOUL:" ESSAYS ON THE AMERICAN ANTI-COMIC BOOK MOVEMENT

Evan Roberts Ash, Doctor of Philosophy, 2025

Dissertation directed by: Dr. Saverio Giovacchini, Professor of History

For almost twenty years, from the advent of superhero comics in 1939 to the end of the 1950s, comic books were a profound cultural phenomenon in midcentury America. Millions of Americans read comics, child and adult alike, but comics retained a perception as a medium consumed primarily by children. A powerful anti-comic book movement arose to combat their influence because of perceived threats to the wellbeing and development of children, its members arguing at once for their regulation, restriction, and elimination. In modern historical memory, the movement often reduces to a "classical phase" that foregrounds only the sensationalist critiques of Dr. Fredric Wertham, a German-American psychiatrist, and the governmental investigation of comic books by the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency in 1954. Though Wertham was undoubtedly the most prominent critic of comic books and the hearings were the high-water mark of the anti-comics movement, this dissertation contends that reducing the entire movement to these two points obscures both the longer

antidemocratic origins of the midcentury “decency” movements and marginalizes other perspectives and critiques of the anti-comics movement that demonstrate that views of comics at midcentury were hardly monolithic.

This dissertation argues overall that the primary driver of the anti-comics movement was a deep-seated fear of images and iconocentric culture among a generation raised primarily on the written word -- Americans who feared that the epistemological shifts occurring in the production and consumption of culture would threaten their legitimacy as parents, teachers, ministers, and politicians. These shifts dovetailed with the ramped-up antidemocratic tendencies of the Cold War, whose logic came to define the actions of the movement during its later years. This study also argues that the anti-comics movement was a clear and important aspect of domestic Cold War culture. Through primary source investigations of organized right-wing Catholic censorship organizations, local-level civic decency groups, government documents and legal materials, the writings of public intellectuals, and nonprofit organizations, this study aims to present an expanded portrait of an often-misremembered period of repression in American history.

“THE EYE IS THE WINDOW FOR THE SOUL:” ESSAYS ON THE AMERICAN ANTI-COMIC BOOK MOVEMENT

by

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To my parents, Jeff Ash and Janet Roberts, for their unending love and support

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List of Abbreviations

ACMP	Association of Comics Magazine Publishers
CCA	Comics Code Authority
CMAA	Comics Magazine Association of America
COMBAT	Committee on Movies, Books, Audio, and Television
CSAA	Child Study Association of America
NCCM	National Council of Catholic Men
NCP	National Comics Publications
NIMLO	National Institute of Municipal Law Officers
NODL	National Organization for Decent Literature
NSWA	National Social Welfare Assembly

The historian searches not only for truth but for meaning. In that process the very words the historian uses become symbols themselves. Each age has its special words, its own vocabulary, its own set of meanings, its particular symbolic order. This is true of the world about which the historian writes; it is equally true of the world in which he writes. Turning facts into interpreted symbols, the final stage of the historian's craft, becomes the most difficult and the most intellectually dangerous.

–Warren Susman

Introduction: Fear of an Iconographic Century

In his collection of essays *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century*, the great cultural historian Warren Susman spoke of understanding twentieth century American history in terms of a series of crises of the middle class. While postwar America dealt with crises of consumption, race, and political repression, it was more abstractly dealing with a cultural crisis of an older world predicated on the centrality of the printed word fighting the rapid, and, to many, worrying ascendancy of images to a prominent place in American culture.[1] The older, genteel logocentric world of letters, self-denial, and character had to contend with a rapidly developing culture of iconocentrism, where images, particularly mass-produced ones, became the primary way that Americans interfaced with culture in their everyday lives. Images entertained, informed, educated, and acculturated Americans, and many became deeply wary of their power.[2]

Susman, whose approach to cultural history involved a fundamentally dialectic assumption that cultures were constantly in tension, borrowed a metaphor from poet Vachel Lindsay's 1915 work *The Art of the Moving Picture* to describe what he saw as the fundamental tension in twentieth century America.[3] To Susman, America was, as Lindsay described it, a "hieroglyphic civilization," defined by the visuality of the movies, of print advertisements, of

[1] Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), xx.
[2] For discussions of the centrality of the written word to Puritan childrearing see Steven Mintz, *Huck's Raft: A History of Childhood in America*, Philip Greven, *The Protestant Temperament*.
[3] "Thus the new knowledge of the world increasingly included knowledge about the techniques specifically developed to deal with the reality that all seemed so anxious to touch, to understand, to use. Vachel Lindsay's "hieroglyphic civilization" did not seem an impossible dream-or nightmare. After all, there were the cartoons and comics, increasingly visual advertising, and motion pictures. There were also great tabloids, newspapers like The Daily News in New York, which began in 1919 to make a heavy investment in photographs (often real, but sometimes artificially concocted), and the playful and sensational use of various kinds and sizes of prints."

cartoons and comics and the like.[4] Lindsay's primary visual fascination was, as the title of his work implies, with the movies. Susman, however, dated the emergence of this hieroglyphic civilization much earlier to the availability of low cost, mass-produced photographic prints that became available in the 1850s.[5] "Simply put," wrote Susman, "one of the fundamental conflicts of twentieth-century America is between two cultures–an older culture, often loosely labeled Puritan-republican, producer-capitalist culture, and a newly emerging culture of abundance."[6]

Though Susman does not explicitly reach this conclusion in any of the essays in *Culture as History*, it is clear that at a most reductive level, the Puritan-republican, producer-capitalist culture was fundamentally a culture of logocentrism, while the new culture of abundance was primarily defined by the centrality of images and visual culture and the changes in societal expectations that went along with the new culture. To the older culture, that societal expectation foregrounded the notion of "character," reliant on strict moral principles and self-denial, whereas the culture of abundance put a greater emphasis on "personality," or the ability to fit into groups and be liked and admired.[7] Anything that became a potential threat to that ability to fit into those groups was immediately regarded with intense scrutiny.

Susman was, of course, hardly the first historian to comment on the increasing prominence of images in American culture and ruminate on their effects. In his 1961 work *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, Daniel Boorstin identified what he called the "Graphic Revolution," or a rapid expansion in both the ability to produce up to the minute news and "man's ability to make, preserve, transmit and disseminate precise images."[8] Later cultural

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[4] Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture*, Updated paperback edition (Modern Library, 2000), 14. Lindsay's book is considered to be the first monograph of film criticism.
[5] Susman, *Culture as History*, xxiv.
[6] Ibid., xx.
[7] Ibid., xxii.
[8] Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, 25. anniv. ed (New York: Atheneum, 1987), [24-25].

critics like Neal Gabler and Neil Postman expanded on Boorstin's original thesis to discuss the effect of the Graphic Revolution on the collective consciousness of Americans. Indeed, Gabler argued that the more crucial factor that arose from Boorstin's revolution was not purely the quantity of images but the changes that it wrought on American society, while Postman took Boorstin's point further and argued that mass produced images would ultimately supplant the written word as the primary way that Americans understood their daily lives.[9] Image theorist W.J.T. Mitchell, too, spoke of and attempted to define a "pictorial turn" in American culture where images supplanted words as the dominant mode of expression.[10]

Iconocentrism, then, came to define the culture of abundance, existing in opposition to the older, puritan-Republican, producer-capitalist culture focused on the primacy of the written word. Visuality became irretrievably linked with the postwar focus on consumption, advertising, leisure, personality, and publicity. This was all anathema to a culture that had, as Susman wrote, "taken form under Bible and dictionary."[11] But where there are images, and controversial images at that, there must also be iconoclasts and iconophobes, those who feared what the intrusion of images into the daily lives and consumption habits of Americans might mean not only on a personal level, but also a societal one. The examination of these tensions, between those that sought to destroy or regulate images and their access and those that took a more liberal, measured view of iconocentrism, is a key aspect of my project.

One of the emergent features of the culture of abundance identified by Susman was its mediated character. Through advertising, magazines, newsreels, radio, television, and the

[9] Neal Gabler, *Life the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999) and Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, 20th anniversary ed (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).
[10] W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 5.
[11] Susman, *Culture As History*, 111.

movies, Americans became increasingly reliant on various forms of visual media to guide their consumption habits, and, indeed, their daily lives. In this increasingly mediated culture that defined the lives of Americans around midcentury, no medium had a grasp on the American imagination, nor represented "American hieroglyphics" quite like the comic book. Like jazz, comics were one of the few forms of culture with a strong claim on being an American original, rather than a European imitation. The apex of the popularity of comic books was short compared with other visual media like movies and television, but from the time that comics became widely produced and distributed in the mid-to-late 1930s until the early 1960s, when their audience began to move in the direction of the enthusiasts more common to today, comic books and opinions on their consumption were just as ubiquitous and as vociferously expressed, especially in 1940s and 1950s America.

Comic books were never more popular than in those decades, and never more criticized. The strong identification of comic books with consumers under the age of eighteen, and especially with young children, provided a layer of urgency to the supervision, regulation, and management of this new cultural touchstone, culminating in the famed American anti-comics movement of the 1940s and 1950s; which I examine in detail within this dissertation. Comics' defining characteristic was their iconocentric nature, which became a key element of the critique leveled against them that distinguished itself from generations-old moral critiques about reading improper literature.

While film and television remained the main way that Americans interfaced with the visual during the twentieth century, the special problem of the image presented in comic books stoked fear, panic, and hatred cutting across American society that surpassed, if briefly, any serious investigation and criticism of the movies. The reception and criticisms of comic books

followed a similar historical path, with pressure from Catholic organizations leading to a practice of self-censorship intended to stave off any threat of government-level regulation of their products. However, a key difference between the two is that print materials enjoyed favorable Supreme Court precedents that afforded them more protections than film, which lacked First Amendment protections between 1915, when the Supreme Court unanimously declared in *Mutual Film Corp v. Ohio* that the First Amendment did not apply to motion pictures, until 1952, when the Supreme Court overturned a New York state ban on showing "sacrilegious" movies in Joseph Burstyn, Inc. v. Wilson., also known as the *Miracle* decision.[12]

Comics benefitted from many court rulings that protected, ironically enough, the written word. The famous decision in United States v. One Book Called "Ulysses" (1933) held that James Joyce's famous work was not obscene, laying the legal groundwork for landmark changes in American obscenity law that would come at midcentury and have long-lasting effects on moral critiques of indecent literature. The *Ulysses* decision required more sophisticated consideration of all parts of a work, rather than excerpts, and used an average person as the metric for obscenity rather than one deemed too sensitive (say, a child).

More directly relevant to later critiques of comic books was the decision in *Winters v. New York* (1948), which held that a New York obscenity law used to convict a news dealer of selling publications "principally made up of criminal news, police reports or accounts of criminal deeds or pictures or stories of deeds of bloodshed, lust or crime" like the detective pulp magazines popular in the day was vague enough in its language to violate the First

[12] *Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio* (1915), 236 U.S. 230. Despite this ruling, state-level film censorship boards, which now sought to exercise prior restraint based on a narrower conception of "obscenity," continued to exist in Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Maryland, Kansas, New York, and Virginia. Only Maryland's film censorship board survived the 1960s, as the Supreme Court's subsequent and unanimous decision in *Freedman v. Maryland* (1965) decreed that state film boards had no power to ban films.

Amendment.[13] A further ruling in *Butler v. Michigan* (1957) declared a Michigan law banning the sale of "obscene" printed material "tending to the corruption of the morals of youth" vague enough to violate the due process clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, which effectively rendered moot the laws passed in many states that similarly banned the sale of indecent literature and comic books to minors.[14] Though the *Butler* ruling, detailed further in Chapter 3, effectively ended the anti-comics movement, the substantial redefining of American obscenity law the same year in *Roth v. United States* redirected much of the latent energy of the anti-comics movement to the emergent anti-pornography movement.

In spite of these rulings, the federal government investigated comic books in whole or substantial part in three separate Congressional investigations, first as part of Estes Kefauver's 1950 Special Committee to Investigate Crime in Interstate Commerce, for the second time in 1952 under Ezekiel Gathings' House Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials, and for the third time (and most famously) as part of the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency in 1954, when the televised testimony of noted psychiatrist and comics critic Fredric Wertham coupled with the well-meaning but ill-fated testimony of comics publisher Bill Gaines led to a groundswell of support for anti-comics activism and the creation of the Comics Code Authority later that year.[15]

Despite attempts by publishers and liberal voices at midcentury to convince the public otherwise, the stereotyped consumer of comic books became young children, and, predictably,

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[13] Quote from *Winters v. New York* (1948), 333 U.S. 507
[14] *Butler v. Michigan* (1957), 352 U.S. 380
[15] Gaines, head of Entertaining Comics (EC Comics), was a maverick publisher who experimented with more mature themes and stories and provided his artists and writers more freedom than was common in the "shop" style of the Golden Age of Comic Books. Many of his comics, especially his more graphic horror comics, drew the ire of both comics critics and larger companies like the predecessors to DC Comics and Marvel Comics. Gaines' testimony is infamous because many saw his defense at the 1954 comic book hearings of publishing horror comics as proof that the comics industry did not care about the potential for children to consume violent images. More on Gaines' testimony follows in Chapter 3.

comics then became a tantalizing scapegoat for the changes in childhood, children's consumption, and child development that formed in the years surrounding the Second World War. Because of their use in spinning sales figures, exact sales and subscriber counts of comic books from the period of their greatest prominence are notoriously hard to come by. However, one frequently cited study published in *Yank,* a weekly U.S. Army magazine, listed the average monthly circulation of comic books during the war at around 30 million. Fifty percent of Americans read comic books, the study claimed, while more than 80 percent of youth ages six to seventeen identified as regular comic readers.[16] Whatever the precise amounts of the American (and global) populace that consumed comic books, an irreducible truism remains that comics gripped the collective minds of all segments of the society in both the United States and abroad.

For my part, I aim to further examine the questions posed by Susman and the other above-mentioned historians regarding the increasingly visual character of print media in America and the reactions that ensued from its critics in the context of Cold War America by focusing on the debates around the growing popularity of comic books among middle-class American youth as my primary case study. I contend that the increasing turn to visuality within print media, especially print media consumed for entertainment, stoked new and increasingly apocalyptic criticisms of visuality, especially regarding its growing audience (real or perceived) among children. I also contend that the long-running trend of American antiradicalism dovetailed with these iconoclastic and iconophobic ideas and, indeed, made their mainstreaming possible, and that to understand the popularity of these ideas, one must first understand that the culturally-repressive tendencies we have come to associate with McCarthyism and the Cold War have deeper historical origins.

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[16] Cited in Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 57.

In writing about the Cold War, I locate much of the anti-comics movement within the dialectical tensions of the period, typified by some of the classic interpretations of the 1950s by historians like Richard Hofstadter and Arthur Schlesinger, as well as later Cold War revisionists like James Gilbert, Ellen Schrecker, and Larry Ceplair that held a far more critical appraisal of the period. One particular tension that I discovered invokes both the classic positions articulated by Hofstadter and Schlesinger in some of their most famous work, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* and *The Vital Center*, respectively.

From Hofstadter, I glean the dual insight of the power of the "paranoid style," which reflected itself mainly in the apocalyptic tones that many right-wing opponents of comics and other "indecent literature" took when offering criticisms and agitating for censorship, but also in his observation that a key aspect of the paranoid style is assuming the guise of the enemy.[17] This presents itself most clearly, I argue, in the latter two governmental investigations of comics covered in this manuscript, which essentially functioned as symbolic show trials with predetermined outcomes, famous hallmarks of the Stalinist regime that American politicians professed to hate during this period.[18]

From Schlesinger's *Vital Center*, I identify a mediating tendency present in the courts that balanced out the repressive fervor to censor that bubbled in the years after World War II. The courts, reasoned Schlesinger, committed to the enthronement of civil liberties (as long as one was not suspected of being a communist).[19] While I disagree with much, indeed most, of Schlesinger's myopic writing in *The Vital Center*, I remain convinced by his arguments about the

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[17] Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964).

[18] As David Park persuasively argued. David Park, "The Kefauver Comic Book Hearings As Show Trial: Decency, Authority, and the Dominated Expert," *Cultural Studies* 16, no. 2 (March 2002): 259–88, https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380110107580.

[19] Arthur M Schlesinger, *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).

utility of a free society, and the role of the courts therein. In his role of criticizing past civil liberties abuses in American history such as the Alien and Sedition Act, as well as the Palmer Raids during World War I, Schlesinger offers an explanation for the pattern of repression and response from the courts: "This has been the historical pattern: hysteria, repression and remorse. It is this experience which, crystallized by the Supreme Court, has issued in our principles of civil freedom."[20] This notion bears out frequently in the pages that follow, as in almost every case where a censorious notion confronted a court of law, they came down on the side of freedom of speech and due process, providing continuous frustrations to those who sought to see comic books tarred as obscene, banned from sale to minors, or removed from the mails.

James Gilbert's articulation of the midcentury moral panic over juvenile delinquency is also of importance for situating this study not just in its revisionist examining of the moral panic itself, which Gilbert argues resulted largely from a lack of historical awareness concerning the recurring nature of panics over mass media obstructing the relationship between parent and child.[21] The value of Gilbert's study to this one is providing a framework by which the present analysis of the ideas and motives behind the anti-comics movement serves as a means to investigate the wider cultural change presented originally by Warren Susman. Though one would not suspect it were they to take writers like Daniel Boorstin, Louis Hartz, and Arthur Schlesinger at their word, that the defining feature of midcentury life was the liberal consensus, Gilbert's framework allows us to probe more clearly at the deeper anxieties that underrode midcentury life especially where the development of children was concerned.[22]

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[20] Ibid., 196-197

[21] James B. Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 5.

[22] See generally Peter N. Stearns, *Anxious Parents: A History of Modern Child-Rearing in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2004).

All of the above leads me to one of my major historiographic interventions, disagreeing with David Hajdu, author of one of the most influential descriptions of the midcentury American anti-comic book movement, who claims that the anti-comics movement did not function as a subset of the Second Red Scare at midcentury.[23] It was quite the opposite. Driven by the repressive tendencies of antiradicalism coupled with the powerful energy of anticommunism, these midcentury iconoclasts used many of the same tactics and rhetoric against comic books that Joe McCarthy did against his ephemerous governmental communists, demonstrating powerfully the "chilling effect" on speech and expression common to the period. Some, both at the time of the events and more recently, even accused the comic iconoclasts of functioning like Stalinists themselves and believed that the famed 1954 hearings by the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency were little more than show trials with a predetermined outcome.[24] Indeed, it was the accelerating factor of Cold War culture that made the anti-comics movement as virulent as it was.

The second primary aim of my project, alongside my application of the principles of Susman, Boorstin, Mitchell, et al. to comic books. is to provide a broader and more complicated history of the American anti-comics movement. Too often does the movement suffer from a perception as a historical curiosity, an outlandish series of events in an outlandish time where people said outlandish things. This perception abounds, in part, due to the predominance of the sensationalist critiques of Fredric Wertham and the American politicians that drove the 1954 comic book hearings in the historiographic understanding. In this view, the movement

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[23] David Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America*, 1st ed (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 170.
[24] Covered in greater detail in the third chapter of this dissertation. See also David Park, "The Kefauver Comic Book Hearings As Show Trial: Decency, Authority, and the Dominated Expert," *Cultural Studies* 16, no. 2 (March 2002): 259–88, https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380110107580.

compresses to a neat chronology with clearly defined heroes and villains, indeed, it is something that Boorstin might have viewed as a real-life comic story. In the comic-book version of the anti-comics movement, it begins with the publication of Wertham's essay "The Comics…Very Funny!" in *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1948 and ends with the villains victorious at the 1954 hearings and the introduction a few months later of the Comics Code, which was, on paper at least, the "most severe" set of editorial principles of any mass medium at the time.[25]

The anti-comics movement provides us with an intriguing opportunity to turn an age-old, meaningless historical platitude on its head. For the anti-comics movement, it was not the victors who defined its place in the historical imagination, but the losers. Once the frontal lobes of comic readers developed appropriately, they saw Wertham and others as the real-life comic book villains that destroyed their beloved medium by advocating for the Comics Code.

Creators, notably the equally sensationalist and perpetually self-aggrandizing Bill Gaines, also contributed to this mythological understanding of the anti-comics movement through interviews given in the intervening decades where they pinned all the blame for the downturn of the comic book industry on bluenoses like Wertham and the politicians that undertook comic book hearings. Jules Feiffer, the cartoonist whose 1965 book *The Great Comic Book Heroes* was foundational for both the relaunch of superhero titles during the 1960s as well as the scholarly study of comics, was in many ways the prototypical Wertham-blamer.[26] Responding to Wertham's contention (reproduced as the epigraph to Feiffer's book) that no adults were sentimental about comic books, Feiffer declared that, in fact, the opposite was true:

> Men in their thirties and early forties wearing school ties and tweeds, teaching in universities, writing ad copy, writing for chic magazines, writing novels–who continue to

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[25] Quote from John Goldwater, president of *Archie Comics* and head of the Comics Magazine Association of America, the trade organization that developed the Comics Code. Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 112.
[26] Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men*, [457].

> be addicts, who save up old comic books, buy them, trade them, and will, many of them, pay up to fifty dollars for the first issues of *Superman* or *Batman*; who publish and mail to each other mimeographed 'fanzines'–strange little publications deifying what is looked back on as 'the golden age of comic books.' Ruined by Wertham. Ruined by growing up.[27]

And thus Wertham became metonymic for the anti-comic book movement. As a result of this incomplete narrative, writers and scholars often relegate the anti-comics movement to an episode in a longer narrative about simple moral panics that lack, as comics scholar Bart Beaty put it, a sense of the "intellectual discussions that have characterized American cultural discourse throughout history."[28] I hope that, in short, this manuscript helps to broaden those dimensions.

For many years there were no formal studies of the anti-comics movement and even to this day historians have not been particularly interested in the anti-comics debate. By the waning years of the movement, some graduate students penned theses on not just comics themselves, but also of their critics, showing that there was at least a rudimentary foundation of historical interest (though one thesis was for a communications M.A. and another a general senior thesis).[29] It was not until 1998, with the publication of Amy Kiste Nyberg's *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code*, that there was a thorough historical interpretation of the development of the Code that wrote against the "fan-historian" point of view privileging Wertham and EC Comics as the central figures in the debate. Nyberg's key historiographical contribution was the framing of the anti-comics movement as yet another chapter in an attempt by adults to control the children's culture. Despite the book's age, it remains one of the key presentations of the anti-comics movement from a scholarly, rather than purely fannish point of view, and it was from Nyberg's

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[27] Jules Feiffer, *The Great Comic Book Heroes* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1965), 141-142.
[28] Bart Beaty, *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture* (Oxford, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 7-8.
[29] See most notably John E. Twomey, "The Anti-Comic Book Crusade," unpublished master's thesis, University of Chicago, 1955 and William Johnson Jones, Jr., "Comic Books," unpublished senior thesis, Princeton University, 1957.

book that the original impetus for my study (begun in my master's thesis) arose in her discussion of the Cincinnati Committee for the Evaluation of Comic Books.[30]

Following Nyberg's book was an edited collection by John A. Lent called *Pulp Demons: International Dimensions of the Postwar Anti-Comics Campaign*.[31] Though the international perspectives put forth by Lent (an Asian comics scholar) and his collaborators are intriguing (the book contains British, Canadian, German, Asian, and Australian views), the narrative at play ultimately reinforces the "Only Wertham" approach to understanding the anti-comics movement (Lent says that the "easy answer" to why comics came under such scrutiny was Wertham and *Seduction)*, a notion not helped by the book's understanding of the anti-comics movement as a solely postwar phenomenon.

Another book that dealt in specifics was arts critic David Hajdu's *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic Book Scare and How it Changed America* in 2008.[32] Though the audience of Hajdu's book was popular rather than academic, and the narrative within is not particularly tidy (the book begins with an exploration of *The Yellow Kid*, the prototypical newspaper cartoon), it has the perspicuous advantage of interviews with dozens of former industry personnel and famous creators, indeed one of Hajdu's overarching themes in his book is displaying the very real power that the anti-comics movement had in forcing comics workers out of the industry. As noted earlier, I also disagree with Hajdu's contention that the anti-comics movement and the Cold War were not subsets of each other, in fact, the reality was quite the opposite.

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[30] Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code*, Studies in Popular Culture (Jackson [Miss.]: University Press of Mississippi, 1998). On some level, I reject Nyberg's dichotomy of "fan-historian," certainly I would call myself a fan of comic books, though not a wholly uncritical one. Dr. Nyberg graciously served as an external reader for my master's thesis.

[31] John A. Lent, ed., *Pulp Demons: International Dimensions of the Postwar Anti-Comics Campaign* (Madison [N.J.] :Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999).

[32] David Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008).

Outside of these monographs, the anti-comics movement typically reduces to either a sole chapter or an even shorter curiosity, and nearly all treat Wertham as the end-all of the movement. James Gilbert's *A Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s* (1986) treated Wertham far more even-handedly than had the fan-historian school, and Gilbert benefited from meetings with Wertham near the end of the doctor's life in the writing of that book. Gilbert's book was one of, if perhaps the first works of serious historical scholarship to take Wertham seriously as a critic of culture, even if Gilbert ultimately disagreed with the doctor's conclusions.[33]

Bradford Wright's *Comic Book Nation*, a significant influence on my research and writing, considers Wertham as part of a larger chapter on youth culture and the moral panics about juvenile delinquency after the end of World War II as well as in his chapter concerning the 1954 comic book hearings.[34] Wright avoids many of the pitfalls of discussing Wertham, relaying information about the doctor's earlier years and credentials, rather than simply treating him as a mossbacked crank. Wertham is the main character in a couple of sociological treatises that attack the notion of a moral panic in more depth, and merits only a few paragraphs worth of mention in Steven Mintz's otherwise comprehensive history of American childhood, *Huck's Raft*.[35] The list does truly go on and on.

The rules of the game, as it were, changed in 2012 when library science professor Carol Tilley published her article "Seducing The Innocent: Fredric Wertham and the Falsifications that Helped Condemn Comics," which provided ample documentary evidence that Wertham had

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[33] James B. Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).
[34] Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University. Press, 2003).
[35] For sociological books, see John Springhall, *Youth, Popular Culture and Moral Panics: Penny Gaffs to Gangsta-Rap, 1830-1996* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998) and Karen Sternheimer, *Pop Culture Panics: How Moral Crusaders Construct Meanings of Deviance and Delinquency* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

manipulated, overstated, and sometimes outright fabricated the conclusions on which he based *Seduction*.[36] To that point, scholarly access to Wertham's private papers was extremely limited and by extension there were few works able to understand Wertham through his own idiosyncrasies.[37] With Dr. Tilley's revelations, the teleology of Wertham was finally complete. Though Dr. Tilley made clear that her article put forth a nuanced interpretation of Wertham's imperfect work, that she was ultimately "conflicted" about Wertham and that he "had a genuine passion for children and their welfare," those who followed in Jules Feiffer's lead of Wertham-blaming now had clear, incontrovertible archival evidence of Wertham's malfeasance toward comic books.[38] The fans, at long last, were able to claim that the destruction of their cherished medium was based entirely on one man's misunderstood and misattributed studies. But this was not the case.

In an attempt to broaden the understanding of the anti-comics movement away from a Wertham-centric portrayal, I aim to present a clearer picture of the main participants in the debate and elucidate the intellectual dimensions of their critiques, stretching the typical framing far and wide as to better reflect the diverse perspectives, whether fundamentally reactionary and iconoclastic, genteel suspicion, or liberal acceptance. The responses to what became known, at least to one liberal group, as "the special problem of comic books" varied far and wide. To

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[36] Tilley, Carol L. "Seducing the Innocent: Fredric Wertham and the Falsifications That Helped Condemn Comics." Information & Culture 47, no. 4 (2012).

[37] Charles Hatfield, a noted comics scholar, said in an interview with *Washington City Paper* about the opening of Wertham's papers in 2010 that he had "…never heard or read a defense of [Wertham's] work until 1995, when I attended a conference panel in comics studies that happened to include Wertham scholar James Reibman [one of the few scholars allowed access to Wertham's papers prior to their opening]. To say that I was surprised to hear Reibman defend Wertham, and endorse some of the findings of Seduction, would be a pitiful understatement. I was shocked, frankly, and I remember discussing that panel with my wife and others afterward and trying to grapple with the possibility that there could be a reading of Wertham other than the comic fan's usual demonization." Mike Rhode, "A Comics Villain Revisited: What Will the Opening of Fredric Wertham's Papers Mean for Comic-Book Scholarship?" *Washington City Paper*, September 30, 2010.

[38] Tilley, "Seducing the Innocent," 407.

accomplish this, I present my reframing of the anti-comics movement as a series of interconnected essays that explore the themes laid out in this introduction, namely iconophobia, antiradicalism, consensus, and all their interrelated tensions. I also attempt, where possible, to foreground the symbolic role played by children as a special category of citizen requiring protection in a time when notions of childhood, the social value of children, and expectations of youth were changing rapidly.[39] These themes may be more pronounced in some chapters than others, but all work in service of a wider argument about comics and Cold War culture.

I follow this approach in part because of the lack of a clean chronological framework as it relates to the anti-comics movement. At its most succinct, the anti-comics movement ran from 1940, when *Chicago Daily News* columnist and children's author Sterling North penned an editorial titled "A National Disgrace," which quickly gained traction with comics critics across the country, to approximately 1957, when the Supreme Court in *Butler v. Michigan* declared that laws forbidding the sale of reading material on the basis that they might corrupt youth were unconstitutional.[40] The movement, as the historiography indicates, was at its most incendiary between 1948, when Fredric Wertham published his article "The Comics…Very Funny!" and 1954, with the publication of Wertham's famous anti-comic monograph *Seduction of the Innocent*, the hearings conducted by the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency that concerned the comics industry, and the subsequent adoption of the Comics Code overseen by the Comics Magazine Association of America, the main publisher trade group.

[39] See Viviana A. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), for a sophisticated argument that the widespread removal of children from laboring spheres lead to greater conceptions of their "sacralization" and necessity of protection.
[40] In her legal history of child-oriented censorship, Marjorie Heins declares *Butler* to be the moment that harm-to-minors died as a censorship rationale. Marjorie Heins, *Not in Front of the Children: "Indecency," Censorship, and the Innocence of Youth* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 61.

A historian must also follow their sources, and my sources have long indicated both earlier beginnings and later ends to the anti-comics movement than are commonly accepted. North's article debuted in 1940, sure, but there was a groundswell of censorious thought stemming from Catholic organizations since the mid-1930s that provided the climate for North to issue his denunciation. The Code debuted in 1954, sure, but the industry did not immediately collapse and some projects and groups that began in the late 1940s continued their work into the late 1960s and early 1970s. I do not claim that the case studies contained within are wholly representative of the movements and perspectives for which they serve to explain, as nothing is ever truly monolithic, but they are to me the most influential and noteworthy explainers for how different segments of society responded to the "special problem" of comic books and their consumption.

Not surprisingly, leading religious denominations – who long viewed themselves as the arbiters of American morality – were pivotal in decency campaigns. Catholics, especially, took on a leading role in organizing opposition to what they called "indecent literature," mirroring their earlier efforts to censor film, which had the blessing of the highest echelons of the Church thanks to the 1936 encyclical *Vigilanti cura.* American Catholics employed the services of a wide array of both clerical and parish organizations that took a stance against the content of comic books, chiefly the National Organization for Decent Literature (NODL). The NODL, founded by an episcopal committee of bishops in 1939, began its campaigns against what they perceived as dirty magazines, but quickly shifted to criticizing comic books and agitating for their censorship.

In the first chapter, I reappraise the role played by the NODL in laying the foundation for the intense, censorious backlash against comics of the 1940s and 1950s, highlighting its long

running tendencies towards anticommunism as an understudied motivator towards their pursuits. I argue that the early efforts of the NODL and other efforts undertaken by its head, the reactionary Indiana bishop John F. Noll, demonstrate how the development of "decency" as a sociopolitical paradigm was intimately linked to antiradicalism, iconophobia/iconoclasm, right-wing extremism, and antisemitism. The antisemitism at play in the criticism of comics was not as pronounced or blatant as that of Joseph Breen, the famed film censor, though, as with the movies, many of the key creators and publishers in the early years of the medium were Jewish.[41] Through the influence of Noll, American Catholics became some of the most virulent critics of comics and other "indecent literature," with some Catholic schools even participating in comic book burnings, which crept up occasionally during the high point of the American anti-comics movement.

Prominent Catholics like Noll enjoyed a close relationship with some of the most powerful opinion drivers of anti-comics sentiment, including Postmaster General Frank Walker, who colluded with Noll to illegally exercise his powers of censorship over non-obscene material, and Charles Murphy, the former juvenile judge tapped by the Comics Magazine Association of America to lead the Comics Code Authority, whose Catholic background was a source of pride for both. Monsignor Thomas J. Fitzgerald, a popular priest who served as the organization's Executive Secretary, helped give the NODL a grounding in his native Chicago, and served as a witness for both the Gathings Committee and the 1954 hearings on juvenile delinquency. Fitzgerald, a popular speaker to Catholic and lay organizations against the dangers of indecent

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[41] For an in-depth discussion of Breen's relationship to Jewish Hollywood that breaks somewhat with previous portrayals of Breen as virulent antisemite, see Thomas Doherty, *Hollywood's Censor: Joseph I. Breen and the Production Code Administration*, particularly the chapter "Our Semitic Brethren". Doherty's point, to me, veers a bit too close towards apologia (he notes that acidity and slur usage was common during the 1930s, and points to Breen's later activism on behalf of Jews during World War II), but is worth reading nonetheless.

literature, became the public face of the NODL following the death of Noll. The NODL's star faded after a major loss at the Supreme Court in the case of *Hannegan v. Esquire* in 1946, which ruled that the Postmaster General could not exercise his powers to remove non-obscene material from the mail. Despite that and other setbacks, as well as the death of Noll and the lack of any real influence on the later anti-comic book movement due to having an overbroad focus in their organizing, the NODL remained a formidable source of iconoclastic opinion at midcentury and a driving force for Catholic action against indecent literature.

Protestant congregations, too, were integral in campaigns of criticisms of comic books. In the second chapter, I detail the groundswell of local-level decency groups that proliferated after World War II and advance a theory as to their abundance, which mostly stems from the courts' failure to resolve the issue of indecent literature. This perspective illuminates that it was not just politicians and public intellectuals who debated the merits of comics, but everyday citizens with widely varying rationales for their approach to the problem of comic books. My primary case study in this chapter concerns a group founded in the earlier stages of the anti-comics movement, before any official governmental investigations of comics were even a forethought.

Founded by a Jesse Murrell, Methodist minister from Covington, Kentucky, the Committee on Evaluating Comic Books (later known as the Cincinnati Committee for the Evaluation of Comics) became the most reputable and sought-after source of comic book ratings and information for concerned citizens across the country until the creation of the Comics Code in 1954. Murrell's group comprised both religious and secular members from the community and used evaluation criteria developed by a University of Cincinnati psychology professor to rate comic books either No Objection, Some Objection, Objectionable, or Very Objectionable. The Cincinnati Committee greatly benefited from a partnership with Parents' Magazine, a widely

read postwar periodical, which exclusively published the committee's evaluations, along with brief articles by Murrell, from 1949 to 1957 (the committee ceased comprehensive evaluations in 1956).

My third chapter serves as a partial foil to the previous one and primarily concerns governmental investigations of comic books at both the local, state, and national levels. This chapter aims to broaden the narrow perception of governmental investigations of comic books during the height of the anti-comics movement, accounts of which normally discuss the famed Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency hearings of 1954 while minimizing the many other investigations, bans, and legal actions that occurred over the span of the anti-comics movement. This chapter, too, follows the narrative thread from the first chapter about the implementation of antiradical, anticommunist, and iconoclastic rhetoric in these investigations of comics by politicians on local, state, and national levels.

I argue that in many instances, politicians aimed for the same type of widespread censorship for which they so often criticized the Soviet Union, and that better understanding the motivations and actions of these politicians helps provide a clearer picture of the double standard of repression that was the norm in Cold War America. This chapter also details some lesser-known legal challenges to comic books such as tracking changes in judicial opinion on the First Amendment and free expression is an oft-ignored aspect of typical treatments of this time period. By providing these close readings of cases from city, county, state, and federal courts, readers will have a much clearer picture of how the courts responded to the ultimate aim of many an anti-comics crusader, which was regulatory legislation concerning comic books.

Public intellectuals and other experts were another key group in the comics debate. In my fourth chapter, I examine the views of liberal and radical public intellectuals as they concerned

comics. The apotheosis of the comic book arrived at a peculiar moment in American cultural history, as intellectuals began to question older ideas of cultural hierarchy inherited from the late 1800s. No longer, reasoned critics like Dwight Macdonald, could one blithely divide all culture into elite or "highbrow" and "lowbrow," or "folk," culture (with comics dwelling in the absolute basement of lowbrow), but rather the rationalized blandness of "middlebrow" culture appeared a threat to both. Important too, especially in light of the production and consumption process of comic books, was the increasing fear of "mass culture", opposed to the proletarianized "class culture" that defined the 1920s and 1930s. Critics like Leslie Fiedler and Robert Warshow also famously waded into the debate over comic books at a moment when intellectuals pondered if they served as recipes for instilling totalitarian ideas in children!

The rapid, paradigm-shifting changes brought on by the popularity of comic books kept these intellectuals rapt to the problem of comic books. These men, who retained many of the elitist preconceptions about mass culture, displayed widely disparate views about the effects of comics on not just the general development of the populace, but on the notion of literacy as a whole. Some saw comics as merely somatic distractions from the alienation of postwar capitalism, others saw them as dangerous threats to the literary imaginations of young readers, and a very select group of outsiders felt they had revolutionary possibilities as a way of understanding how working Americans viewed the world and their daily lives.

Because these intellectuals were so beholden to elitist, Manichaean views about mass culture, and because their anticommunist commitments caused them to regard any sort of mass culture as inherently dangerous, even the intellectuals who wrote seriously about comic books

were far from legitimists for the medium.[42] In the end, unlike with film, there were no intellectual legitimists to be found for the humble comic book. The savior for the medium would have to be found somewhere else. It was experts and liberal comic book optimists who kept hope for the medium alive, not the intellectuals.

In that vein, social scientists and social workers were another key set of experts who played a contributing role in the discourses over comic books. One name already mentioned, Fredric Wertham, has a tendency in both popular and academic renditions of the American anti-comic movement to overshadow his contemporaries due to his famed lightning rod-like sensationalism in his critiques as well as decades of notoriety from comic book fans designating him the scapegoat for what they perceived as the near-destruction of their cherished medium. To be sure, Wertham was the foremost critic of comic books during the period, due in part to the wide palatability of his critiques, and his refusal to cast his lot decisively with any established political group.[43]

On the other side of the debate, liberal social workers, child psychiatrists, and educational psychologists ("the experts") made up a core group of the earliest pro-comics advocates, with sympathetic journalists and writers joining in as well. While the experts typically qualified their positions by noting that comic book reading worked best when it supplemented other, more traditional children's literature and that there were comics published that were undoubtedly inappropriate for children to read, they took an almost uniformly optimistic and child-centered approach to promoting comics reading compared to the frequently apocalyptic worldview of

[42] Robert Warshow, a famed film and cultural critic who wrote of his son's relationship with comics, noted that even after a long and thoughtful treatise on them and an attack on the critiques of Wertham, he still wished that he could prevent his son from reading comics.
[43] See James Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage*. Gilbert, who met Wertham near the end of the latter's life on multiple occasions, believed that Wertham was sympathetic to, if not outright in favor of leftist political positions.

their opponents. Some of the most prominent pro-comics voices, such as children's literature specialist Josette Frank and child psychologist Lauretta Bender, served as editorial advisors to National Comics Publications, which led anti-comics activists to call them paid shills during the comic book hearings in 1954.

Chapter Five concerns the above-mentioned experts and has as its central case study one of the most significant ventures undertaken by those with a more liberal view of the didactic potential of comic books. This project, The National Social Welfare Assembly Comics Project, was a partnership between National Comics Publications (the predecessor of today's DC Comics) and the National Social Welfare Assembly, a loose confederation of health and human welfare organizations. From 1949 until 1967, National editor Jack Schiff worked with a committee of social service organization heads at the NSWA to produce public service messages that ran in National's comic books. These collaborations, which ranged from simple "stay in school" messages, to racial tolerance to liberal internationalism, to anti-smoking stories, were subject to the approval of the heads of the NSWA's varied affiliate organizations, who reserved the right to criticize the editorial direction of National's titles. By the project's cessation in 1967 due to the retirement of Schiff and other changes in the comics industry, it published hundreds of comic PSAs to a largely positive reception (except, of course, for those on the government's side during the comic book hearings).

NSWA members inserted themselves into the debate over the effects of comic books on children during its most contentious years – and, along with NCP, successfully weathered the storm of comic book criticism brought on by Fredric Wertham and the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency. They proved that the comic medium could serve a socially constructive and didactic purpose, evidenced by the millions of reprints sent to schools and

community organizations and enthusiastic responses from teachers and other personnel that worked with youth. The NSWA, most importantly, recognized the power of the comic book, writing many times that it was the most significant form of printed media introduced to the world, and a uniquely American one at that. Though the liberal experts that sponsored the comic projects were hardly the first grouping of people to advocate for the didactic uses of mass culture (as many leftist and communist groups had in the 1930s), they provided an important legitimacy for comic books before the resurrection of the mainstream superhero comic in the mid-to-late 1960s.

Both sides of the anti-comics debate had two key groups in mind–parents and children. Midcentury America was a curious time for that relationship, as the general social expectation of the times still expected parents to guide the consumption habits of their children, particularly their younger children. But with the changes in peer culture after the end of World War II, children became increasingly visible (and increasingly targeted by advertisers) as consumers. These changes, coupled with the cheap price and ubiquity of comics, caused comics to become a hot-button issue for parents who, as Peter Stearns argued, were not just differently anxious during the 1950s, but *more* anxious.[44]

Why this profound anxiety abounded seemed at first to be contradictory. By midcentury, children were healthier, less likely to be orphans, and have better living conditions and education. While their fortunes improved on those fronts, children (at least in middle class families) were, whether their parents would implicitly admit it or not, economic burdens. Paradoxically, this tendency led parents to see children as increasingly frail, vulnerable, and easily corruptible. I am, of course, not ignorant of the fact that the views presented here and in

[44] See Peter N. Stearns, *Anxious Parents: A History of Modern Childrearing in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

this work on the anti-comics movement as a whole privilege the middle-class experience, and that children in poorer families had no choice but to contribute to their household economies. However, as Stearns also points out, and as has shown true in my research conducted out in the field, the middle-class perspective dominates because most of the literature, letters, and other archival evidence on these questions arose from middle and upper-class sources.[45]

What is clear, however, from both my archival research and secondary reading, is that there was, as Warren Susman surmised, a profound legitimation crisis occurring between the older, genteel, logocentric generations and the creatively destructive power of the new postwar culture of abundance with its immediacy, iconocentrism, and materialism.[46] The culture bred on bible and dictionary was losing its power as the primary interpreter of the mythology of the American success story, which to that point had been the Alger-esque recipe of self-denial, good character, and temperance. As Susman further wrote, the period of the mid-twentieth century in which the anti-comics movement emerged understood itself, even then, as living in an age of anxiety.[47] The previous generation was losing its legitimacy to interpret and propagate the myths of American history vis-à-vis success via hard work, self-denial, and sacrifice in the face of a culture that prioritized pleasure, self-fulfillment, and unchecked amounts of play and leisure.[48]

It was primarily in the mass cultural spread of visuality that the genteel classes saw a threat to their upbringing, ways of life, and ideological hold on the American monomyth. Echoing earlier sentiments from E.L. Godkin, publisher of *The Nation*, who decried earlier trends in chromolithography, the immediacy of which would lead to "every man [considering]

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[45] Stearns, *Anxious Parents*, 6-7.
[46] I borrow this term from Habermas as expressed in, *Legitimation Crisis* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1988). Habermas speaks of a particular application of his crisis theory to the "nature-like" development of cultural traditions, and it is this evocation that I follow most closely in this dissertation–images stopped the natural development of the written word. Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, 68-75.
[47] Susman, *Culture as History*, 284.
[48] Ibid., xxviii.

himself a Solon," so too did the genteels of bible and dictionary fear that the immediacy of advertising, newspaper comics, and, most dangerous of all, comic books, would lead to the masses passing up their God-given gift of literacy for the criminality, seductiveness, and gross escapism of the comics.

At its most basic, this study focuses on, in the words of art historian Norman Bryson, the cultural meaning of comic books, the intellectual dimensions of the comics debates, and a broadening of "the work performed by the image" to the comic book medium.[49] Though eternally perceived, thanks to the aforementioned dominance of the post-Comics Code narrative by disgruntled creators and fans, as a pulpy medium meant mostly for children, the perspectives within this dissertation demonstrate that the immense fear and heightened reactions to comics were not simply driven by a new midcentury focus on the wellbeing of children, but a more amorphous response to the wide availability of visuality to children *and* adults, the consequences of which were clearly dire.

Comics, so said the iconoclasts, would dull children's senses and damage their vision. They would serve as "blueprints for delinquency" and give their readers step-by-step instructions on being a criminal. They would, at the ultimate extension of their malevolent nature, serve the purpose of the communists by undermining the moral fiber of their readers, making them more susceptible to fifth column influences. Thus, it is not possible to fully understand the anti-comics movement without understanding the dialectical contradictions of Cold War America, and indeed the portrait of Cold War America is thus enriched by the addition of this strange moment too often treated as a historical curiosity. What follows is my attempt to reconcile these contradictions.

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[49] Norman Bryson, et al., *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretations* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), xvi.

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THE EYE IS THE
WINDOW FOR THE SOUL

A. C. C. M. DECENT LITERATURE COMMITTEE

READ DECENT
LITERATURE

A. C. C. M. DECENT LITERATURE COMMITTEE

Figure 1: Two placards by the Archdiocesan Council of Catholic Men to promote decent literature campaigns. Courtesy of the Catholic University of America.

Chapter 1: "We Protect Their Morals:" American Catholics and the Origins of "Decency," 1935–1946

Not one of the Comic magazines contains anything to further ideals, but contains much which glorifies crime and the pagan way of life.

—John F. Noll

Though far from the first group to criticize popular media in America for its alleged effects on youth, American Catholics were undoubtedly the most influential in terms of the sophisticated nature of their critique and their organizing capability. Lest this chapter be construed as some sort of outlandish antipapist conspiracy, I shall outline three general propositions that guide my analyses of what made *American* Catholics historically distinct from the Church at large in terms of advocating for censorship and laying the roots for the midcentury decency crusades.[50] First is the notion, advanced initially by Robert Orsi, that American Catholics developed a "distinctive culture of childhood" that guided both their educational and protective efforts toward them.[51] In the Catholic Church, and in America specifically, their teachers and supervising clergy elevated children to an even higher plateau of reverence, charging them with important, lifelong liturgical roles and expectations that they might educate their immigrant parents not just in Americanism, but in a specifically American interpretation of Catholicism.[52]

My second proposition is that mainstream American Catholicism, prior to the Second Vatican Council, was primarily defined by its right-wing character, a character ultimately endorsed and encouraged by the Holy See.[53] These right-wing tendencies, coupled with the

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[50] The Church's historical suppression of sexual expression has a lengthy historical precedent, vis-à-vis Girolamo Savonarola and his bonfires of the vanities as well as the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, the famed official censorship list of the Church.

[51] Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 82-84.

[52] Ibid.

[53] The Second Vatican Council of 1962-1965, or Vatican II, marked a turning point in the liberalization of the church, much to the chagrin of its traditionalists.

Church's predisposition towards censorship, greatly informed the decisions by prominent members of the American Catholic hierarchy to attack and organize against the alleged depredations of the film industry, followed by print literature and comic books. Analyzing how the antiradical politics of Noll and others fed into the censorious impulse of American Catholics also provides a much earlier articulation of the school of thought that would become most pronounced at midcentury in the guise of McCarthyism.

My final proposition is that the hierarchical and centralized nature of American Catholicism lent itself well to the collective behavior that clergy and parishioners used to agitate against what they saw as threats to the morals of their children. They were guided by a well-organized network of Catholic newspapers, news agencies, and media personalities who dictated the terms of engagement against "indecent literature" and provided not only rudimentary codes for evaluation, but also constant reminders of the apocalyptic importance of their actions.

To better contextualize these phenomena, I examine the National Organization for Decent Literature (NODL), one of the most prominent Catholic censorship organizations of twentieth century America and the central organization in the midcentury decency crusades. The NODL, a group dedicated to confronting and removing objectionable literature of places of business, spearheaded the church's organizing efforts around objectionable literature of all sorts, including magazines, pulp novels, and eventually comic books. The NODL relied on an approach common to interwar America, what art historian George Roeder called "infusing private lives with public purpose."[54] Though they courted the support of public figureheads such as J. Edgar Hoover and various Postmasters General, they relied largely on the groundwork of everyday Catholics who saw it as their public purpose to protect their children from foul visual and printed influences.

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[54] George H. Roeder, Jr. *The Censored War: American Visual Experience During World War II* (New Haven: Yale University Press. 1993), 6.

American Catholics were at the forefront of organized opposition to the new and most shocking forms of visual media of modern times, the motion picture and the comic book. The Catholic critique of images and text was ultimately not "redressed Comstockianism," as one intellectual later called it, but a sophisticated image-based critique that drew on older Catholic traditions regarding the innocence of childhood coupled with the reactionary antiradical politics of pre-Vatican II American Catholics. These critiques and the well-connected hierarchy behind them broke new ground in terms of national influence where Comstockianism had been largely local or regional.

Much has been written about Catholic efforts to censor film and how the eventual Comics Code took many of its cues from the production code, and the campaigns mounted to censor movies and comic books were not one-to-one reproductions of each other but shared important commonalities besides their Catholic origins. The results of both campaigns were similar—self-censorship supervised by a Catholic head to stave off government censorship. In the case of film, the Legion of Decency played an important role in the formation of the Motion Picture Production Code, otherwise known as the Hays Code. The Hays Code, enforced by the zealous Joseph Breen, saw movie studios self-censor to avoid problems with the spiderweb of local and state film censorship ordinances.

The Comics Code, too, was less outwardly Catholic, but boasted a sympathetic head (at least for its first few years) in Judge Charles F. Murphy, himself a Catholic. Later observers also noted that the Code seemed more concerned with the regulation of sexual imagery, rather than violence, another Catholic hallmark.[55] Many regulations on the sale of comics were ultimately

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[55] Jesse Murrell, the Methodist minister who started the Cincinnati Committee for the Evaluation of Comic Books, made this observation in his diary after taking a trip to New York and meeting with Murphy and other Comics Code Authority staff.

struck down by higher courts, but the same monumental shift in content that occurred in film also ultimately occurred in comics.

One of the key differences between the two campaigns was ultimately the legal context. The actions of the National Legion of Decency, a major Catholic film censorship organization, followed censorious practices at local and state levels that the federal government upheld and endorsed through the unanimous 1915 decision in *Mutual v. Ohio,* which decreed that the First Amendment did not apply to films because, in part, they were "…a business, pure and simple, originated and conducted for profit[.]"[56] In the case of print, however, new changes in obscenity jurisprudence and other contrary legal decisions frustrated similar efforts to control the spread of objectionable comic books and other magazines. The NODL was ultimately working in an improvisational atmosphere, as United States obscenity law had only somewhat crystallized four years earlier in 1934 with the ruling that James Joyce's *Ulysses* was not obscene, shifting the preferred test for obscenity from perceived effect on the most vulnerable members of society (in Victorian times, women, invalids, and most notably children) to an average adult.

Until the 1940s, Catholic groups clung to at least one aspect of the Comstockian tradition, imploring the Postmaster General to impound and revoke second class mailing privileges of those who sent objectionable materials through the official mails. To their delight, they typically found friendly and sympathetic replies to their letters from powerful figures that could lean on publishers.[57] Legal decisions frustrated this avenue, too, when the Supreme Court declared unanimously in its 1946 ruling in *Hannegan v. Esquire*, that the Postmaster General could not

[56] Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio, 236 U.S. 230

[57] Gary Gerstle identified this tendency as surrogacy, or the federal government using Constitutional powers to encroach on legislatively-forbidden terrain, as one of the three processes of improvisational state building that persisted in early-twentieth century America. See Gerstle, *Liberty and Coercion: The Paradox of American Government from the Founding to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 6, and also the chapter "Strategies of Liberal Rule."

exercise personal powers of censorship to remove non-obscene mail from circulation, bucking an implied and unchallenged trend of jurisprudence stretching back to the 1878 *Ex parte Jackson* decision, which the Postmaster General's office took as a sanction for removing morally insufficient material from the mails (the *Jackson* decision concerned interstate sale of lottery tickets). This setback led to the decency movement focusing its energy on localized campaigns of interested citizens to organize against movies and "indecent literature" and to employ their own resources to regulate, review, educate, and advocate for censorship of movies, magazines and comics.

The key figure in the NODL's success was its outspoken founder, Bishop John Francis Noll, the longtime bishop of Fort Wayne, Indiana. Noll, a deeply conservative and anticommunist clergyman, played a protracted role in the Church's efforts to control and influence discussion and debate about the sale and consumption of print media. Noll served the church in many ways, in 1912 he founded *Our Sunday Visitor*, an influential Catholic newspaper, was involved in the formation of the National Legion of Decency in 1935 and was also a founding member and the public face of the NODL. I begin with Bishop Noll's early years to underscore the point that his organization, the National Organization for Decent Literature, relied on the long-rooted guidance of strong personalities on a national level as well as on the grassroots actions of localized parishes and decency groups across the nation.

By the time of his confirmation in 1888 at the age of thirteen, Noll's official biography described him as "a militant soldier in the army of Christ."[58] The grandson of German immigrants and one of a whopping nineteen children, Noll relied on a steady job at a Fort Wayne goods store and involvement in the local Catholic church, urged on by his stepmother Mary (his

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[58] Richard Ginder, *With Ink and Crozier: A Biography of John Francis Noll* (Fort Wayne, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1953), 9-10.

mother, Anna Ford Noll, died when Noll was a toddler) to provide him the social and spiritual benefits that were hard to come by in such a large household.[59]

After a (potentially apocryphal) conversation with one of the parish priests, Noll prepared to enter St. Lawrence College, a preparatory seminary for high school-aged Catholic boys in Mount Calvary, Wisconsin. Life at the seminary was ascetic and repressive. Noll's biography describes waking in silence every morning at five-thirty and eating only bread and barley coffee before heading off to his classes. Daytime meals, too, were silent for the seminary boys, the only noise coming from a teacher reading from the lectern as the boys ate. The Capuchin brothers responsible for the operation of the school banned the presence of all secular print media and tightly regulated the boys' ability to leave the grounds. [60]

By his early thirties, Noll enjoyed renown as an intelligent speaker and writer with a bent for challenging the localized anti-Catholic sentiments common to the day and for writing short, personalized pamphlets dispensed to local parishes. When the Church called Noll to Huntington, Indiana in 1910, he hit a streak of luck when a local newspaper owner rented space at the parish to print a second newspaper, eventually realizing that his market was too small and offering to sell the printing press to Noll. Noll, who always paid keen attention to the power of the printed word, desired to challenge prominent socialist and anti-Catholic papers, both of which had their zenith in the first decades of the twentieth century. Ideals aside, Noll worked toward the development of a Catholic press at a national, rather than diocesan level, beginning the

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[59] Ibid.
[60] Ginder, *Ink and Crozier*, 13.

publication of *Our Sunday Visitor* in 1912 as a direct rebuttal to the famed anti-Catholic newspaper *The Menace*.[61]

The hierarchy of the church was well aware of the power of the mass media when Noll was already a parish priest, and issued warnings against the misuse of its power as early as 1929, when Pope Pius XI issued his encyclical *Divini illius magistri*, a sweeping moral tract on Christian education that encompassed the morality of youth, separation of church and state, and mass culture. Indeed, one of the claims in *Divini illius magistri* defined the Church's approach to its moral crusades and provides a partial explanation for why Catholics were the first to engage in widespread organizing around decency: "Again it is the inalienable right as well as the indispensable duty of the Church, to watch over the entire education of her children, in all institutions, public or private, not merely in regard to the religious instruction there given, but in regard to every other branch of learning and every regulation in so far as religion and morality are concerned."[62]

Believing, as the ancient poet Horace did, that youth were fundamentally "soft as wax to be moulded into vice," the encyclical also issued a condemnation of "impious and immoral books," the radio, and the cinema: "How often today must parents and educators bewail the corruption of youth brought about by the modern theater and the vile book!"[63] The American Catholic hierarchy, deeply conservative at this point in the twentieth century, took the words of

[61] Ginder, *Ink and Crozier*., 107-111. Ginder claims that a former *Appeal to Reason* editor began publishing *The Menace* after the suicide of original publisher Julius Wayland. No direct evidence links Wilbur Franklin Phelps, the founder of *Menace*, to the famed socialist newspaper. However, in *Strangers in the Land*, John Higham claims that Phelps "always prided himself on his progressive outlook" and that *The Menace* "wore a progressive air. . .[showing] a vague, guarded sympathy with the Socialists." Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, 180.
[62] Pius XI, *Divini illius magistri* (papal encyclical), December 31, 1929. https://vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_31121929_divini-illius-magistri.html
[63] Ibid.

Pius XI to heart and began organizing against the alleged depredations of mass culture vis-à-vis the movies.

Noll's first involvement in censorious organizations came in 1933 when John Joseph Cantwell, the Irish-born Archbishop of Los Angeles, gave a speech (ghostwritten by Joseph Breen, the famed film censor) at the national convention of the National Catholic Welfare Conference (NCWC) that decried the sordid state of the American film industry, heaping blame on Jewish movie studio executives: "Certain it is that these Jewish executives had any desire to keep the screen free from offensiveness they could do so."[64]

The executives were not Cantwell's (or Breen's) only target; the writers of movies, seventy-five per cent of whom, according to Cantwell, were pagans, also received special scorn: "These are men and women who care nothing for decency, good taste or refinement. Most of them are living lives of infidelity or worse, wherein there is to be found not a suggestion of respect for religion or spiritual values."[65] Cantwell ends on an apocalyptic note, foreshadowing future scare tactics from Catholic critics: "So great is the problem suggested by the wrong kind of talking picture that drastic efforts must be launched at once if we are to stave off national disaster.[66]

After Cantwell's address, the NCWC convened an Episcopal Committee on Motion Pictures with Cincinnati archbishop John T. McNicholas as chair, alongside Noll, Cantwell, and Hugh C. Boyle, Archbishop of Pittsburgh. These men organized the Legion of Decency, which oversaw script rewrites and provided an overall rating system. The Legion of Decency worked alongside the Production Code Administration on an administrative level and involved both

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[64] Joseph J. Cantwell, "Priests and the Motion Picture Industry," *American Ecclesiastical Review* 90 (Jan.-Jun. 1934), 143-144.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid., 146.

Catholic and non-Catholic groups to mobilize around and boycott films that the Legion officially condemned, much to the dismay of, as Noll's biographer noted, "hypersensitive liberals."[67]

The Legion benefitted from the issuance of *Vigilanti cura*, an encyclical that specifically attacked the cinema and offered formal papal sanction for the Legion's censorious actions, highlighting the special role that the American hierarchy was to play in the regulation of immoral media. Pointing back to his issuance of *Divini illius magistri*, which demonstrated for Catholics the inherent dangers and malleability of mass culture, Pius XI in *Vigilanti cura* spoke to the immense power and popularity of the cinema, called on all Catholics to support the Legion's efforts, and laid forth a plan to use the power of the cinema for moral good. Rather than excise the motion picture all together, the pontiff acknowledged its profound influence but decried its mass, rather than individual appeal, and its immediate satisfaction of one's needs that :

> [T]here does not exist today a means of influencing the masses more potent than the cinema. The reason for this is to be sought for in the very nature of the pictures projected upon the screen, in the popularity of motion picture plays, and in the circumstances which accompany them. The power of the motion picture consists in this, that it speaks by means of vivid and concrete imagery which the mind takes in with enjoyment and without fatigue. Even the crudest and most primitive minds which have neither the capacity nor the desire to make the efforts necessary for abstraction or deductive reasoning are captivated by the cinema. In place of the effort which reading or listening demands, there is the continued pleasure of a succession of concrete and, so to speak, living pictures.[68]

Thus, with the approval and command of the highest echelons of the church concerning the role of ordinary Catholics to play in the battle against immoral movies, the Catholic hierarchy in America was able to offer a representative program for not just organizing to oppose immoral films, but also a framework for their regulation and a sense of purpose in using the power of the

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[67] Ginder, *Ink and Crozier*, 253.
[68] Pius XI, *Vigilanti cura* (papal encyclical), June 29, 1936. https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_29061936_vigilanti-cura.html

mass media for their own ends. Pius XI called on bishops worldwide to emulate the success of the Legion of Decency, while holding their respective industries to high standards: "The motion picture should not simply be a means of diversion," wrote the pope, "a light relaxation to occupy an idle hour; with its magnificent power, it can and must be a bearer of light and positive guide to what is good."[69]

The critical, organizational, and regulatory frameworks established by the Legion of Decency and *Vigilanti cura* went on to significantly inform Noll's similar approaches to regulation and censorship of print media in his work with the NODL. Noll first broached the issue of magazine censorship in 1937, when a local drug store owner, a Mr. Dougherty, came to Noll for guidance. Dougherty had moral objections to some of the magazines provided to him by his distributor, who ostensibly told Dougherty that he would have to sell everything provided to him or sell nothing at all.[70] Noll then urged Dougherty and his local trade association to organize in support of a decency code. By the late 1930s, according to Noll's biographer,

> Even the most superficial examination of the problem showed a situation so appalling as almost to defy any attempt at a cleanup. The sheer bulk of the publications was formidable, the motive of the publishers was a complex of profit and ideology; the moral consciousness of the public in their regard had become quite blunt, the legal code was inadequate.[71]

Also in 1937, Noll began to express more candidly his radical views that censorship of media was a necessity to stave off the threat of communism. In a later letter to Rev. Francis X. Talbot, a fellow Catholic publisher and anticommunist (Talbot supported Francoist Spain on its

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[69] Ibid. Joseph Breen had a personal connection to Pius XI, having met the pontiff while deployed as a foreign news correspondent in Warsaw between the wars. "When I knew the Holy Father," boasted the braggadocious Breen, "he was simply Monsignor Ratti." Doherty, *Hollywood's Censor*, 17.

[70] Ginder, *Ink and Crozier*, 254. This is likely indicative of "tie-in sales" a common but controversial tactic of news wholesalers of the day where shopkeepers would be obligated to accept all periodicals from a given distributor or receive none. In an interview with Denis Kitchen, the noted underground comics publisher, he indicated from his personal experience collaborating with distributors that connections to organized crime were rampant in the distribution business.

[71] Ginder, *Ink and Crozier*, 255.

anticommunist credentials), Noll provided an early articulation by magazine writer and Hoover ally Frederick L. Collins of the right-wing theory of communist moral decay that came to define his worldview of controlling indecent literature and dealing with a world too open about sex:

> "Happily, Communism in America as a political factor is still negligible; but as a social and spiritual factor — as a destroyer of religion, ethic, idealism, and beauty — it is already Gargantuan. . .If there has been a wholesale breakdown of civilized conventions in sexual conduct among America[n] youth, the major responsibility can be laid squarely on the doorstep of Communism."[72]

It was clear early on from Noll's papers that in his eyes, the moral decay of youth was irretrievably linked with the danger of communism, which underscored his fervor in censoring these indecent publications.

As with Breen and the movies, antisemitism played a role in Noll's criticisms of purveyors of objectionable publications. Less venomous and far more discreet than Breen, Noll nonetheless employed similar antisemitic canards in his correspondence with other bishops but kept his harshest attacks on Jews within his own personal papers.[73] In the margins of an antisemitic screed attacking Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, Noll called him "the most dangerous man in the U.S.," in a pamphlet attacking Frances Perkins, he wrote at the top, "only a Red Russian Jew can work for Perkins," and in perhaps the most candidly antisemitic document in his collection of pamphlets from purported Nazi agent Robert Edward Edmondson, a Star of David titled "Roosevelt's Supreme Council," (reproduced below), Noll noted that "…[Rexford] Tugwell, [Henry] Wallace, La Guardia + John L. Lewis belong on this sheet."[74] Noll's

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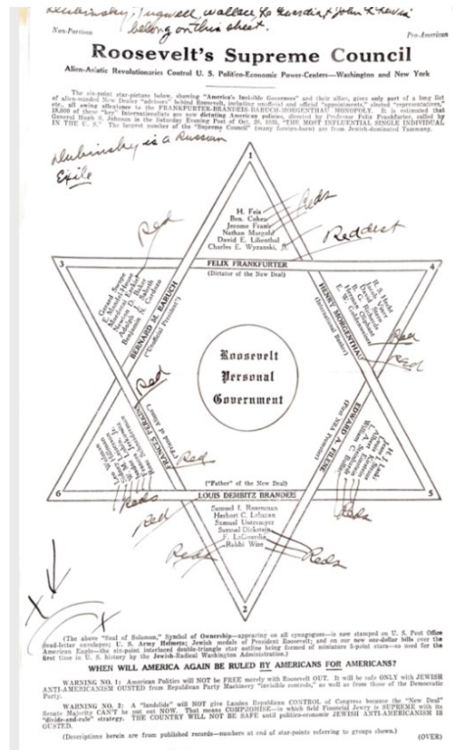
[72] Letter from John F. Noll to Francis X. Talbot, December 11, 1937.

[73] In a 1953 letter to a priest in Ohio, who presumably asked him if certain news distributors were Jewish, Noll indicated that he thought their names did not sound Jewish but noted "[I]t would be possible that they were started in business or financed by Jews." John F. Noll to R.F. Gorman, February 16, 1953. NODL General Correspondence, 1934-1955, CNOL 3/03-24. John Francis Noll Papers, NOL. University of Notre Dame Archives. Hereinafter UNDA. Noll's personal papers contained a large amount of far-right material attacking the Roosevelt administration.

[74] CNOL 13/8, UNDA.

antisemitism had apparently blinded him to the fact that Edmondson had already included La Guardia in the diagram. In one last attack on the Jews, Noll commented on one of Edmondson's antisemitic forgeries that claimed all Army helmets would be stamped with a "Star of Solomon," that the move was "Hebrew gall. No American can stand for this."[75]

Noll's antisemitism stemmed in part from his deeply reactionary politics. Unlike his friend Charles Coughlin, the famed "radio priest" and Roosevelt ally turned antisemitic radio demagogue, Noll was not a household name. Yet, he was very influential within diocesan circles, especially in the Midwest and especially after the downfall of Coughlin. Noll was antiradical to his core—he attacked right-wing nativists, socialist anti-Catholics, and labor unions in the main source of his influence, the daily Catholic newspaper *Our Sunday Visitor*, which he created in 1912 as a rebuke to popular anti-Catholic publications.



Non-Partisan — Pro-American

Roosevelt's Supreme Council

Alien-Asiatic Revolutionaries Control U. S. Politico-Economic Power-Centers—Washington and New York

The six-point star-picture below, showing "America's Invisible Governors" and their allies, gives only part of a long list of alien-minded New Dealer "advisors" behind Roosevelt, including unofficial and official "appointments," elected "representatives," etc., all owing allegiance to the FRANKFURTER-BRANDEIS-BARUCH-MORGENTHAU MONOPOLY. It is estimated that 18,000 of these "key" Internationalists are now dictating American policies, directed by Professor Felix Frankfurter, called by General Hugh S. Johnson in the Saturday Evening Post of Oct. 26, 1935, "THE MOST INFLUENTIAL SINGLE INDIVIDUAL IN THE U. S." The largest number of the "Supreme Council" (many foreign-born) are from Jewish-dominated Tammany.

H. Feis
Ben. Cohen
Jerome Frank
Nathan Margold
David E. Lilienthal
Charles E. Wyzanski, Jr.

FELIX FRANKFURTER
(Dictator of the New Deal)

BERNARD M. BARUCH

HENRY MORGENTHAU

Roosevelt Personal Government

EDWARD A. FILENE

("Father" of the New Deal)
LOUIS DEMBITZ BRANDEIS

Samuel I. Rosenman
Herbert C. Lehman
Samuel Untermyer
Samuel Dickstein
F. LaGuardia
Rabbi Wise

(The above "Seal of Solomon," Symbol of Ownership—appearing on all synagogues—is now stamped on U. S. Post Office dead-letter envelopes; U. S. Army Helmets; Jewish medals of President Roosevelt; and on our new one-dollar bills over the American Eagle—the six-point interlaced double-triangle star outline being formed of miniature 5-point stars—so used for the first time in U. S. history by the Jewish-Radical Washington Administration.)

WHEN WILL AMERICA AGAIN BE RULED BY AMERICANS FOR AMERICANS?

WARNING NO. 1: American Politics will NOT be FREE merely with Roosevelt OUT. It will be safe ONLY with JEWISH ANTI-AMERICANISM OUSTED from Republican Party Machinery "invisible controls," as well as from those of the Democratic Party.

WARNING NO. 2: A "landslide" will NOT give Landon Republican CONTROL of Congress because the "New Deal" Senate Majority CAN'T be put out NOW. That means COMPROMISE—in which field Financial Jewry is SUPREME with its "divide-and-rule" strategy. THE COUNTRY WILL NOT BE SAFE until politico-economic JEWISH ANTI-AMERICANISM IS OUSTED.

(Descriptions herein are from published records—numbers at end of star-points referring to groups shown.) (OVER)

Figure 2: Antisemitic pamphlet from Robert Edward Edmondson with Noll's handwritten comments.

[75] CNOL 13/8, UNDA.

As the twentieth century rolled on, Noll turned his gaze to the spectre of communism. Noll was an early proponent of the right-wing notion that communists and other unsavory elements sought to undermine American "moral law," which later grew to prominence during the Cold War proper, claiming that salacious literature and movies performed the work of communists by undermining the moral fiber of American society, especially youth, leaving them more open to tantalizing totalitarian ideologies.[76]

As a testament to his far-right credentials, Noll penned an article in Coughlin's *Social Justice* newspaper, calling for a united Catholic front to oppose communism in the United States. Noll lamented that so many resources and organizations in the United States in 1938 were demonstrating their opposition to fascism, and that they were not attuned to what he saw as the even greater danger of communism.[77] Whether it was intentional or not that the content immediately following Noll's editorial, a reprinting of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (the most famous antisemitic forgery of the twentieth century), is unknown.

Through the efforts of right-wing Catholics like Noll, attacks against indecent literature, comics, and movies became a recurring scapegoat for what they viewed as undesirable changes in the American populace. As a later Protestant minister observed, the American Catholic Church was decidedly more interested in regulating sex than violence, and the increasing prominence of iconocentrism added a more frightening dimension to the problems facing American youth. Sexy stories were one thing, but pornographic images possessed that extra level of fear because they left no room for interpretation.

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[76] Hutton, Leon. "Catholicity and Civility: John Francis Noll and the Origins of 'Our Sunday Visitor.'" U.S. Catholic Historian, vol. 15, no. 3, 1997, pp. 1–22. JSTOR, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25154590. 14.
[77] John F. Noll, "A Christian vs. Anti-Christian Front," *Social Justice*, August 8, 1938, 3-4.

Indeed, the NODL and others subscribed to the idea that crime, especially juvenile crime, was primarily a result of moral shortcomings. To that end, they cited approvingly a 1939 jeremiad by circus performer-turned-journalist Courtney Ryley Cooper, *Designs in Scarlet*, a horrifying account of how sex and degeneracy was driving the decay of American society.[78] The ostensible power of these sexy images bore out in Cooper's work, especially when he discussed what are assumed to be Tijuana bibles (short, cheap pornographic comic strips): "[I]n an entire circuit of America," wrote Cooper, "I failed to find a city where officers reported no such things

NATIONAL WEEKLY

Social Justice

Founded 1936 by Father Coughlin

Royal Oak, Michigan | August 8, 1938 | Subscription: Three Dollars Per Year | 10¢

BISHOP NOLL APPEALS FOR CHRISTIAN FRONT

THE BANKERS' REVOLUTION — Robert H. Hemphill

FROM THE TOWER — Father Coughlin

THE RICH MAN AND CHRISTIANITY — Rev. W. J. Randall

FIAT MONEY IN GUERNSEY — James P. Fitzgerald

THE SMALL PRODUCER — Hilaire Belloc

STORY OF THE BELGIAN CONGO — Ben Marcin

CHRISTIAN FRONT CONTEST

The Most Reverend John Francis Noll

BACK in 1912, when the anti-Catholic policy of "The Appeal to Reason" had reacted unfavorably upon the Socialist party, several staff members of the paper withdrew to found an outright anti-Catholic sheet, independent of party responsibility. Completely unrestrained in its fabrication of whole-cloth scandals, and distributed by night on the doorsteps of the nation, the success of "The Menace" attracted a score of imitators. Catholics of America seemed helpless to combat the scurrilous flood of vilification and untruth.

In the midst of this national nightmare, a red-headed parish priest in Huntington, Indiana, named Noll, single-handedly and alone took up the challenge. Reprinting some pages of "The Menace" at his own expense, the young priest sent them to the Bishops with an offer to undertake a counter-acting campaign of truth, providing the clergy would co-operate by aiding its circulation. That infant project grew, in 27 years, to become the popular National Catholic Action Weekly—"OUR SUNDAY VISITOR."

OUR SUNDAY VISITOR's campaign of truth-telling put to rout the whole brood of bigot scandal sheets. When their lingering remnants revived momentarily under Ku Klux Klan auspices, they found "Red" Noll still on the job to blast their night-riding white robed secrecy with equally effective publicity.

Advanced to the head of his diocese, the publisher-priest continued as a battling bishop. Earl Browder's insulting invitation to Catholics to join Communists in an "American Democratic Front" was certain to draw the fire of his pen. Bishop Noll's answer to the Red challenge is his appeal to Catholics to rally in a united Christian Front, published on Page 3 of today's issue of SOCIAL JUSTICE.

Figure 3: Noll on the front page of Coughlin's Social Justice newspaper.

[78] NODL Annual Report, 1939, Annual Report, 1939, Box: 199, Folder: 1. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) Executive Department/Office of the General Secretary (OGS) Records, 10-2. Catholic University of America Special Collections, Washington D. C. Hereinafter CUA-NODL.

as ‘cartoon books’ [a common euphemism for the books] around the schools, these ‘cartoons’ depicting widely known person, running about naked together, and indulging in every form of perversion known to Krafft-Ebing.”[79] Though ultimately unsuccessful in most regards, the apocalyptic decency crusades pushed by the American Catholic Church provided important rehearsals for the censorious Cold War culture that developed in the 1940s and 50s.

Noll first convened what would become the NODL in Chicago in 1938 and formally launched its regulatory criteria in 1939. The NODL initially functioned as an oversight body for hundreds of diocese-level campaigns.[80] The Organization’s principles included attacking “lascivious literature [with] lewd pictures,” as well as attacking the acquisition of profits derived from the sale of objectionable literature. Such protests were common to the midcentury decency movement and should not be construed as proto-socialist or anti-capitalist but rather a reflection of the moralizing tendencies of the free-enterprise ideology prevalent in America during the period.[81] Noll at least more than once attacked both capitalism and socialism in his writings, claiming that when “Communist-minded editors” were not destroying the morals of youth, they were otherwise only thinking of their profits. Ah, yes, communists and profits, that famous pair![82]

In the NODL’s view, literature and art fell under three classes. The first class were anatomical charts and books designed for scientific instruction, which the NODL saw as “not

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[79] Courtney Ryley Cooper, *Designs in Scarlet* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1938), 238-239.
[80] 1938 NODL Report, “Introduction”. Chicago, it seems, was a fitting place for the NODL to take shape as it was the site of the first Eucharistic congress of the Catholic Church on American soil, where hundreds of thousands of Catholics flocked to attend mass at Soldier Field (their prayers and the presence of the Holy Father did little to help *Hollywood’s Censor*, 37. the Chicago Bears’ fortunes). Breen, that ever present figure, served as publicity director for the Congress as well as an aide to eminent cardinal George Mundelein, and Thomas Doherty declared that the city, which possessed the country’s oldest censorship ordinance, was “home to an especially rock-headed crew of political hacks and activist cranks” in the anti-vice tendencies of the police as well as the inconsistent Chicago Board of Censors. Doherty,
[81] 1938 NODL Report, 7, Cadegan, “Guardians of Democracy or…”, 279-280.
[82] Quoted in Cadegan, “Guardians of Democracy or…”

only lawful but even commendable." This distinction indicated that their iconophobia was not absolute and that there was a clear sense of the "good image."[83] The second class of literature occupied the broadest scope, from "the purely scientific on the one hand to the borderline of the wholly pornographic on the other."[84] The NODL saw, as W.J.T. Mitchell helpfully noted, a "double consciousness" present in both the creators of the images they objected to, as well as the images themselves.[85] This reflected in the iconoclastic criticism that the NODL put forth of the images that they disapproved of and spoke about so harshly. The fundamentally conservative iconoclastic critique of the NODL held that many publishers of images that purported to be science and art were working hard to conceal their true nature, "wrapping themselves in the majestic robes of Science and Art. . .they talk glibly, unctuously, sanctimoniously, about the value of disseminating scientific knowledge and the sacred right of untrammeled art."[86] The purveyors of these images that were not obvious charlatans, they reasoned, were cunning, secretive, and duplicitous.

Deliberately vague when discussing their categories of objectionable print material, the NODL did not provide clear examples, but saw in virtually every printed medium a darker, hidden side. In its eyes, this duplicitous literature darkened the mind, enfeebled the will, and corrupted the heart.[87] The final category of literature and images were the most apocalyptic: "Wholly depraved and lascivious, and undoubtedly one of the deadliest plagues that ever threatened the moral life of a nation."[88] This brand of literature was especially deadly to the NODL because it ostensibly targeted youth, and the language used to describe the supposed

[83] 1938 NODL Report, 8.
[84] Ibid.
[85] W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 7-8.
[86] 1938 NODL report, 8-9.
[87] 1938 NODL report, 8-9.
[88] Ibid.

purveyors of it was identical to language the group later used to inflate the specter of communists in America: "[cloaked] in a cunning secrecy which makes detection exceedingly difficult."[89]

This brought to mind the spectre of shady, back-alley dealings and the anonymity gifted by the advent of mail-order publishing, which often obscured who was selling things to whom. This anonymity was a major reason that the main strategy of the early years of the NODL involved appeals to the Postmaster General to suspend material sold through the mails. Indeed, Noll closely collaborated with and apparently provided feedback on a Congressional bill sponsored by George W. Gillie, Fort Wayne's Republican House Representative, intended to force any mailable publications to list the name of the publisher and place of publication. "I am leaving the punishment for violation to your discretion," wrote Gillie, "it has been suggested that the maximum fine might be $10,000 and the maximum jail sentence one year."[90]

On the local level, the organization of the NODL's decency campaign was highly structured, and involved lay individuals, parishioners, and non-affiliated persons. Priests were to be appointed as Diocesan Directors, and in larger cities in which the NODL intended to split into districts, each district was to have a priest directing the efforts of the parish forces, as well as coordinating with extra-parochial organizations like Knights of Columbus and local legal figures.[91] The main criteria that the NODL used to declare a publication objectionable were as follows:

(a) Those which glorify crime and the criminal;
(b) Those which contents are largely "sexy";
(c) Those whose illustrations and pictures border on the indecent;
(d) Those which make a habit of carrying articles on "illicit love";
(e) Those which carry disreputable advertising.[92]

[89] Ibid.
[90] Letter from George W. Gillie to John F. Noll, March 21, 1939. UNDA.
[91] NODL 1938 Report, 12.
[92] NODL 1938 Report, 13.

Thus did the NODL define their approach to censorship on iconoclastic grounds, laying the foundation for the midcentury critique of images that would become crucial with the rise of the anti-comics movement and later the anti-pornography movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Here again Prof. Mitchell is helpful. He noted in *What Do Pictures Want?* that there are two primary beliefs held by iconoclasts when they critique images. The first, relaying back to his earlier notion of the double consciousness of the image, was that images had a clear link to what they represented, moreso that action taken against an image represented in the minds of the iconoclasts action taken against the alleged greater social ill that the image stood for.[93] The other notion spoke to the pseudopersonal character of images in that it could both do harm and feel harm done to it. This reflects apocalyptic nature of the NODL's criticisms of both word and

Figure 4: A placard given to cooperating stores in league with the Detroit Civic Betterment Council, which supported the NODL's efforts. Image courtesy of University of Notre Dame Archives.

[93] Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want*, 127-132.

image and the effects they believed the unregulated image could have on both youth and the country as a whole.

Thus, it is no surprise that in the context of the greater societal tensions detailed so far, the NODL and other right-wing iconoclasts so frequently invoked metaphors of violence and war to buttress their claims of censorious righteousness. They aimed to accomplish these goals through their own deployment of citizen-soldiers in the fight against the seductive images. One of the key structures within each local NODL unit was a group of citizens known as the Vigilance Committee, tasked with making unannounced visits to newsdealers to ensure their cooperation and "sincerity," meaning that the Vigilance Committee kept an eye on the magazines changing from month to month, and making sure that the dealers were not selling any objectionable publications on the sly. In its own words, "This committee is an especially important one. The effectiveness and the ultimate success of the campaign depends on its zeal and conscientious effort."[94]

Despite the great lengths to which the organization went to solicit the approval various aspects of the community—schools, district attorneys, newspapers, et cetera—and base its appeal and success on community interest in moral welfare, the leaders of the NODL knew that the ultimate success of the campaign had to come from boots on the ground, as it were, making visits to newsdealers and druggists to ensure that their goods met with their personal moral approval. In Fort Wayne, the seat of Noll's bishopric, the local NODL (through various churches and parish organizations) undertook a survey of local drug stores to assess both their compliance with the prescribed moral standards and their willingness to join in any potential boycott. All told, the drive kept tabs on over ten drug stores, hotels, groceries, and other places that sold magazines.[95]

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[94] NODL 1938 Report, 13.
[95] Report of NODL Drive, Fort Wayne, IN, CNOL 8/03.

Yet the attitude of some of the dealers merited a closer watch put on them by the local Vigilance Committees. While the great majority obliged the NODL blacklist and indicated they would cooperate in removing indecent literature, some pushed back on not just the tactics of the visits, but of the proposed censorship of the NODL. One proprietor disputed several unnamed issues on the NODL's blacklist, claiming local professors came in and purchased some of the proscribed magazines. This proprietor, and others, indicated that they thought that youth of the 1940s were much better than their generation. "Wanted to argue about it," the men from St. Peter's church noted in their report.[96]

A different proprietor noted that he would cooperate but thought that each person should have the right to decide what they should read. In a nod to the original problem that forced the hand of the NODL, the same proprietor expressed his disapproval of the "block-booking" or "tie-in" system common to the distribution networks of the day, where booksellers would have to accept all titles from a given distributor, even ones that they would not have personally stocked, or lose their order. "Cussed block booking system," the men noted.[97] One final proprietor, however, must have proved to them that there was an issue to confront (even though he was the solitary standout of the ten-plus stores they visited). The men noted that the White Pharmacy had "[a]n exceptionally large magazine rack," well-stocked with the NODL's disapproved titles. The proprietor noted that he didn't expect any drugstore owner to stick with a prolonged boycott as it would hurt their sales figures, and in a parting shot to his visitors, remarked "Why not rap someone else, we don't publish them you know."[98]

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[96] Ibid.
[97] Report of NODL Drive, Fort Wayne, IN, CNOL 8/03.
[98] Ibid.

In short, the NODL relied on an undoubtedly censorious process to meet its goals of keeping the morals of the community intact. The NODL insisted frequently and self-righteously that they were not censorious because they lacked the authority to unilaterally remove objectionable publications from shelves, but censorship remains the most accurate way to describe both the policies of the organization and the behaviors of its supporters, certainly not least because several sympathetic cartoons reprinted in NODL materials showed the burning of objectionable material.[99]

Figure 5: A cartoon from the NODL's 1938 report that displays the attitudes they held towards indecent literature.

[99] Thomas F. O'Connor, "The National Organization for Decent Literature: A Phase in American Catholic Censorship," *Library Quarterly* 65, no. 4 (Oct., 1995), 387-9. "The period just before and after NODL came into existence was one of considerable social and economic change in the United States. The 1920s witnessed increased urbanization, technological change, and the development of a mass-production, mass-consumption society. These changes were accompanied by what traditionalists considered a decline in moral standards, which were portrayed in the fiction of Sinclair Lewis, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Thomas Wolfe, Ernest Hemingway and numerous other writers."

The NODL played a key role in reinforcing and deepening the culture of repression surrounding print culture at midcentury America, as it had a clear hierarchy responsible for sending instructions to more local affiliates, as well as a wide range of grassroots organizations that, if not directly affiliated with NODL prelates, were undoubtedly sympathetic. The NODL, at least in its higher echelons, was Catholic almost to the man (or woman) and relied heavily on intra-Catholic cooperation to achieve its aims, especially for the process of reviewing material for its Disapproved Publications list and the group's practice of local newsdealer visits.[100] Indeed, in the inaugural report of the NODL, they gave step-by-step instructions towards building a hierarchy that could accomplish these decency crusades, including, but not limited to, appointing a priest to direct each local movement, directing pastors to organize their parishes to interview newsdealers, enlisting the help of "extra-parochial associations" like the Knights of Columbus and the National Councils of Catholic Men and Women, and the development of a list of banned publications to be kept in-house and not shared with newspapers.[101]

In an article somewhat sympathetic to the work of the NODL, Una Cadegan insisted that "NODL members had to take further care not to threaten a boycott of the offending store, since laws prohibiting boycotts could also make the NODL vulnerable to legal action," something disproven by internal NODL reports, which included not only support for boycotts in the NODL's official writing, but also in dispatches from decency groups around the country who were not shy about threatening boycotts. A clean reading campaign in Dade County, Florida

[100] Una M. Cadegan, "Guardians of Democracy or Cultural Storm Troopers? American Catholics and the Control of Popular Media, 1934-1966." *Catholic Historical Review* 87, no. 2 (Apr., 2001): 252–282. Cadegan claims that "One of the most basic ways in which the NODL attempted to circumvent the suspicions of its critics was to minimize Catholic involvement in the group."
[101] 1938 NODL Report, 12-13.

headed by a Jesuit priest had members sign a pledge to "…boycott all publications, distributors, and vendors who pander to the public by the sale and display of vicious matter."[102]

In a pledge titled "Make America Clean: SWAT THE SMUT!" put forth by San Diego Diocesan Council of Catholic Women and the Holy Name Society confraternity, signees acknowledged that indecency insulted God, degraded men into brutes, wrecked morals and promoted crime, "[slurred] the memory of our mothers," pandered to morons and degenerates, and doomed America to decay, pledging to boycott "all merchants, advertisers and publishers who persist in filth traffic."[103] The NODL made sure to always stress the transnational dimensions of clean reading campaigns, and the update included in the 1938 from the Canadian Catholic Youth Union's National Crusade for Good Reading had campaigners pledge to boycott "publishers, distributors and vendors who pander to the public by the sale and display of vicious matter."[104]

Soon after the NODL began its campaigns against objectionable print literature sold at newsstands, they changed to target the emergent comic book medium, which exploded in popularity around the time of the organization's founding.[105] By 1940, in addition to opening up fronts of war against "the sale of contraceptive devices, the circulation of Birth Control [*sic*] information, the sale of lewd phonograph records. . .the unsupervised relations of boys and girls of high school age," the NODL explicitly began to target comic books, which they referred to as "so-called 'comics'," citing a study performed by the *Chicago Daily News* that revealed scores

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[102] 1938 NODL Report, 117.
[103] Ibid., 119.
[104] Ibid., 198.
[105] Most histories of comic books begin with the publication of *Action Comics* #1 in 1938 owing to the superhero-centric tradition of comics studies, but series like *Famous Funnies*, which published reprints of newspaper comics in a magazine format, and *New Fun Comics*, the first anthology series to contain original content, debuted in 1934 and 1935, respectively.

of "objectionable features" in comic books.[106] This focus on comic books as the favored reading material of youth coincided with an uptick in panics over juvenile delinquency. The story the NODL referred to was a short editorial that ran in the paper's May 3, 1940 edition, penned by their literary editor Sterling North, whose rustic rural upbringing in southern Wisconsin greatly colored his outlook on the world as a writer.[107]

Titled "A National Disgrace," North's editorial was succinct and damning, famously referring to comic books as "poisonous mushroom growths", "sex-horror serials", and "graphic insanity".[108] North claimed to have examined 108 "periodicals" on Chicago newsstands, declaring that 70 percent of them "were of a total nature no respectable newspaper would think of accepting."[109] He also levied criticisms that typified the critiques of both waves of the coming American anti-comics movement, that comics both dulled children's senses through their low-quality coloring and printing and interfered with their reading development (largely the claims of the movement's first wave of opponents) and that comics, if left unchecked, could lead to "a coming generation even more ferocious than the current one," pointing to fears of juvenile delinquency that dominated the 1940s.[110]

North also charged parents and teachers with "[breaking] the 'comic' magazine", and excoriated uninterested parents, teachers who "force stupid, dull twaddle down eager young throats", and immoral publishers of comics (guilty of a "cultural slaughter of the innocents") for

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[106] Francis P. Keough, introduction to NODL 1940 Report.

[107] North's most famous work was the 1963 children's book *Rascal*, later turned into the Disney movie of the same name.

[108] Sterling North, "A National Disgrace and a Challenge to American Parents," reprinted in *Childhood Education* 17, no. 1 (1940), 56. Most historians of comics point to North's editorial as the first widely circulated attack on comic magazines, rather than newspaper comic strips, which had a history of criticism stretching back to the early 1900s. See Bart Beaty, *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture*, 113, Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, 27, and Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code*, 3.

[109] Ibid.

[110] North, "A National Disgrace," 56.

leading to the present funny book crisis.[111] North's solution to the comic menace lay in the promotion of what he saw as proper literature, especially children's books. "Never before in the history of book publishing," wrote North, patting himself on the back, "have there been so many fine new books for children, or better edited children's magazines."[112]

"A National Disgrace" offered a definitive vision of an older generation deeply concerned with the centrality of images to a child's development, framed most clearly in North's proposed solution of classic children's literature to comic reading, with an assumption that parents were to be the main barrier to children's access to comics. This response became typical of conservative critics during the first wave of the anti-comics movement, while those on the other side of the debate, largely progressive educators, believed that comics could supplement other reading by children. North's editorial marked a clarion call for those opposed to comic books, and its continued reference in newspaper columns, magazine articles, and letters sent back and forth to NODL staffers spoke to the wide influence that North's critiques had among the older generation.

The NODL's 1940 report where North's column was excerpted was nothing short of apocalyptic. As Francis Keough alluded to in his introduction, the Episcopal Committee responsible for the creation and publication of the NODL's reports, presented a stark conservative vision of the declension of American morals since the early years of the twentieth century: divorce was rampant, schoolboys peddled birth control, lewd literature defied the postal laws and demoralized children, nudist colonies were everywhere, parents didn't supervise their children's dating, and communist Margaret Sanger–advocating birth control–was a danger to

[111] North, "A National Disgrace," 56.
[112] Ibid.

families everywhere.[113] The report also noted the involvement of college student groups at the University of Notre Dame and Niagara University in organizing against "lewd literature," illustrating that the movement against indecent literature was palatable to more than wizened church clergy.[114]

True to their claims, the 1940 report began to target comics more directly, reprinting a letter from the editor of *Famous Funnies*, one of the original comic magazines that dealt mostly in reprints of newspaper comics. "Our original purpose," wrote editor Harold Moore, "was to provide clean wholesome entertainment and instruction for youngsters through the comic format. . .[we] would be willing to cooperate in any and every way to see that the comic magazine field might be cleaned in accordance with [North's editorial]."[115] Also present in the report was a letter from a Detroit-based supporter of the NODL, describing the functioning of the city's Police Literature Bureau, a notorious and stringent body that kept indecent literature tightly controlled in the Motor City.[116]

From Noll's personal correspondence with comic publishers, it was clear that the disapproval lists published by the NODL were eliciting a reaction from consumers. In a September 5, 1941 letter to Noll from Robert Maxwell, the vice president of Superman-DC, Maxwell expressed his consternation at the inclusion of three of Superman-DC's flagship comics, *Superman, Action Comics,* and *Adventure Comics* on the NODL's banlists despite their

[113] NODL 1940 Report, iii-ix. Sanger was not a communist, but that did not stop the NODL from associating her Birth Control League offices with the communists.
[114] Ibid., 54-57.
[115] Ibid, 61.
[116] Detroit looms large in the study of public censorship due to its longstanding practice of coercive control of media. In the second flare-up of the anti-comics movement after World War II, Detroit would be one of the first to condemn comic books as communist propaganda. For a deeper and more interdisciplinary understanding of censorship in Detroit, see the work of Ben Strassfield. "Indecent Detroit: Regulating Race, Sex, and Adult Entertainment, 1950-1975" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2018) and "We Want To Be Neutral": The Right-Wing Extremist Politics of 1930s Detroit Police Movie Censorship, *Film History* 34, Number 2 (Summer 2022): 92-117.

rigorous in-house editorial code and advisory board comprised of child experts. “In view of this,” wrote Maxwell, “we cannot help but believe the inclusion of our magazines. . .was a mistake that has unfortunately caused us a great deal of embarrassment.”[117]

The NODL also counted among its allies New York City’s famous mayor Fiorello La Guardia, an Episcopalian son of a non-practicing Italian Catholic father and Jewish mother, after the mayor began a campaign against indecent literature in the summer of 1940. In La Guardia’s idiosyncratic way, he summoned magazine publishers to city hall and informed them that he was not seeking to invoke censorship, acquiescing that he did not have that power, but quipping “[Y]ou know the Mayor has the power of sewage disposal, and, if necessary, I will get rid of these dirty magazines of filth.”[118]

The main way that the NODL sought to restrict access to objectionable publications outside of community vigilance squads was through the surrogacy of the United States Postmaster General and the Post Office Department, which held the power to remove second-class mailing privileges for newspapers and magazines, thus destroying a publication’s ability to circulate. In the introduction to their 1942 report, the NODL claimed that the post office revoked second class mailing privileges to 41 publications and denied 22 applications for second class mailing status. The NODL also began in 1942 to enlist the services of the National Council of Catholic Men (NCCM) to help execute the NODL’s goals, which included collecting reports of individual NODL reviewers, compiling monthly lists of magazines that violated the NODL code, sending them to the Episcopal Committee on Obscene Literature, and negotiating with publishers.[119]

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[117] Letter from Robert Maxwell to John F. Noll, September 5, 1941, UNDA.
[118] NODL 1940 Report, 122-130.
[119] NODL 1942 Report, 13-20.

The involvement of the NCCM and consideration of the potential conflicts with the Sherman Antitrust Act meant that the NODL had to pivot away from the tacit embrace of boycotts from their earlier reports, writing "The National NODL has no occasion, in its restricted field, to engage in boycotting of any sort; nor does it sanction or encourage boycott."[120] One only need consult the group's first report issued in 1938 to know that claim is not true, but for the sake of deflecting latent anti-Catholic criticisms as well as becoming more mainstream, the NODL had no choice but to pivot away from its previous stances.

One stance the NODL continued, however, was its insistence that beyond pursuit of profit, purveyors of indecent literature had the darker goals of corrupting not just America's youth, but also those involved in the prosecution of World War II. In a chapter of the 1942 report titled "What Is Their Motive?," the Episcopal Committee on Indecent Literature wrote "There are individuals in the United States, and there are people belonging to organizations, well financed, who are bent on destroying the morals of youth," also insisting that girlie magazines sold to soldiers overseas and confession magazines read by women in defense plants were plots by fifth columnists.[121] The NODL also doubled down on its criticisms of liberal and leftist thought by reprinting an article written by Jesuit professor Clarence McAuliffe from the weekly magazine *America* that criticized the "Little Blue Books" published by Emanuel Haldeman-Julius, a Jewish socialist reformer from Kansas.[122]

The content of the "Little Blue Books" was not overtly radical, largely reprinting abridged versions of classic literature that was out of copyright, but some varied titles in the publishing company's catalogue of over one thousand titles broke with accepted moral views of

[120] Ibid., 18.
[121] Ibid., 52, 59-60.
[122] Ibid., 53-56. Also Clarence McAuliffe, S.J., "Haldeman-Julius' Blue Books Are Bigoted and Immoral", *America*, April 26, 1941, 63, 64 and "Anti-Catholicism in the Blue Books", *America*, March 21, 1942, 657-658.

the day, printing stories that depicted homosexual love and agnostic viewpoints (penned by famous defense attorney Clarence Darrow). What the church objected to most of all was the inclusion of anti-religious and anti-Catholic tracts penned by Joseph McCabe, a former Catholic priest from England who McAuliffe described as a "miserable apostate. . .whose every work fairly rankles with hatred for the Church and everything she teaches or does."[123] What McAuliffe found especially objectionable was a series of articles written by McCabe during World War II that criticized the Catholic Church's relationship with the regimes of Mussolini and Hitler, arguing that their inclusion in Haldeman-Julius Publishing's catalog produced "a source of disunion and dissention when national harmony is imperatively necessary."[124]

Though the NODL provided passing references to the comic book menace throughout their earlier years, ranging from indirect criticisms to the reprinting of Sterling North's famous editorial, in 1942 they began to devote large amounts of space in their annual report to anti-comics criticism beginning, comprising reprinted correspondence with comics publishers and opinion articles from various Catholic figures. A column titled "The Case Against The Comics", written by an anonymous nun from the religiously liberal Sisters of Loretto, underscored the widespread antipathy across the country for comic books: "There is scarcely a town whose citizens have not been acquainted with the case against the Comics."[125]

Summarizing the key points of Sterling North's editorial, the anonymous sister reiterated the main NODL criticism that "more than half the Comics published contain immoral presentations in picture and print," also referring to them as "poison to the soul."[126] Comics also endangered the future generations of American leadership, dulled children's senses, destroyed

[123] McAuliffe, "Blue Books are Bigoted", 63.
[124] Ibid., "Anti-Catholicism in the Blue Books", 657.
[125] NODL 1942 Report, 77.
[126] Ibid.

their ability to appreciate art, and undid the hard work of teachers everywhere.[127] "The 'Comics' are not comic," concluded the sister, using a favored quip of comics critics, "the 'Comics' are tragedy. Millions of children will be dwarfed in mind, seared in soul and vicious in vision because of their evil influence.[128]

She urged parents and teachers to take an active role in knowing what their children were reading, and to suggest palatable alternatives, stating the widely held belief that the reading material of a child at such a malleable age. Where the sister differs from critics like North and *Parents Magazine* publisher George Hecht, however, was her insistence that Catholics put out comics of their own, rather than exterminating the menace completely. She acquiesced to the clear love that children possessed for comic books, and despite the Sterling North-inspired criticisms that she summarized, accepted the power that Catholic images might have on youth.[129] This continued a trend that was common to the Catholic organizing, drawing from earlier papal guidance, Catholics were encouraged to reckon with the power of images and use them productively for their own educational purposes.

Also reprinted in the issue was some correspondence between Max Gaines of All-American Comics, who oversaw the creation of the original *Famous Funnies,* and Bishop Noll that relayed Gaines' concerns about the inclusion of *Sensation Comics* (Wonder Woman's debut series) on the NODL's List of Disapproved Publications.[130] Gaines appealed to Noll's

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[127] Ibid.
[128] Ibid.
[129] NODL 1942 Report, 78-80. This also shows in Pius XI's call in *Vigilanti cura* to use the power of film for Catholic positives: "Since then the cinema is in reality a sort of object lesson which, for good or for evil, teaches the majority of men more effectively than abstract reasoning, it must be elevated to conformity with the aims of a Christian conscience and saved from depraving and demoralizing effects." Film, like comics, was simply another way that Catholics could accomplish their central tenet of "materializing the sacred," again as Robert Orsi put it. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 73-74. With this in mind, it is no surprise that Catholic comics were by far the most prominent form of religious comic.
[130] NODL 1942 Report, 83-84.

sensibilities on the matter, noting that the company successfully persuaded the NODL in the past to remove certain Superman-DC magazines from the disapproved list, citing the company's illustrious Editorial Advisory Board which included reading specialists, professors of literature and education from prestigious universities, and other organizations such as the Boy Scout Foundation and the Catholic Youth Organization.[131] Noll's letter back to Gaines, in which he laid out the case for *Sensation Comics* to be on the Disapproved list, became one of the most famous tidbits of NODL activity to attract the attention of scholars. "Wonder Woman", wrote Noll, "is not sufficiently dressed nor are many of the characters with whom she deals. There is no reason why women who fall under her influence should be running around in bathing suits."[132] Here was, in Noll's eyes, the prototypical seductive image, not preaching violence or profanity, but simply a woman in a bathing suit, the unambiguousness of which was enough to threaten the waxy morality of youth.

By 1943, the NODL began to directly consider legal action from the office of the Postmaster General to be the main solution to the spread of indecent literature on a wide scale, referencing the removal of several men's magazines from the mails for their alleged obscene content.[133] The NODL received widespread condemnation from groups like the American Civil Liberties and public figures like Walter Winchell for their perceived collusion with Postmaster General Frank Walker, a fellow Catholic.[134] Controversial newspaper columnist Drew Pearson attacked the NODL as well in his "Washington Merry-Go-Round" column, reproducing a memo

[131] NODL 1942 Report, 83-84.
[132] Ibid., 85.
[133] According to a 2000 University of Virginia Law Review article, much of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century saw federal law that "allowed the Postmaster General essentially unbounded discretion to censor material sent through the mails."1873's Comstock Act was the main sanction for these censorious actions, with removal of "filthy materials" and other politically objectionable content coming in 1909 and 1917. These actions, coupled with the vague standards of the Comstock Act led to the widespread seizure of objectionable materials via the mails.
[134] NODL 1943 Report, 58-63.

alleged to have come from the Washington office of the NODL detailing their role in serving as "informal advisors" to Walker's office. Pearson's staff questioned Walker on the linkages, which his office "adamantly denied", but Pearson reproduced further correspondence from the NODL that inferred the existence of some degree of collusion.[135]

The 1943 report contains a reproduction of the letter Noll wrote to Pearson, in which Noll claimed "I can assure you, and I hope you will accept this assurance, that there is no collusion between the NODL and the United States Post Department."[136] According to Noll, Walker's moral standards were even stricter than the NODL's, but a fact remained from the memo leaked to Pearson that of eleven periodicals that had their second-class mailing status revoked by Frank Walker, the NODL previously included nine on their List of Disapproved Publications.[137] "Personally," wrote Noll, "I have refrained from approaching [Walker] lest he become embarrassed."[138]

However, Noll undoubtedly had a sympathetic ear in Walker, with Cadegan arguing that "[Noll] regularly alerted Walker to publications that in his opinion did not merit second-class mailing privileges, and Walker apparently usually agreed at least to investigate."[139] In fact, Noll had been in contact with the office of the Postmaster General since at least 1940, hoping to enroll them in the NODL's crusade against objectionable publications.[140]

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[135] Drew Pearson, *Washington Merry-Go-Round*, March 25, 1943.
[136] NODL 1943 Report, 62.
[137] Pearson, 3/25/43.
[138] Ibid.
[139] Una M. Cadegan, "Guardians of Democracy or Cultural Storm Troopers? American Catholics and the Control of Popular Media, 1934-1966." *Catholic Historical Review* 87, no. 2 (Apr., 2001): 252–282.
[140] Samantha Barbas, "The Esquire Case: A Lost Free Speech Landmark", *William and Mary Bill of Rights Journal* 27 (2018): 287-361. Barbas' article does well to help place the *Esquire* case back in the spotlight, believing as I do that it marks a significant turning point in the moral politics of America, though I disagree with Barbas' contention that it marked a large departure from the moral conservatism of the post-Depression era.

The idea of using the Postmaster General to control the moral content of print and visual media in America in this period came to a head with Walker's battle against famous men's magazine *Esquire*. The campaign in support of Walker, as well as the movement's eventual defeat at the hands of a unanimous Supreme Court decision, set the tone for the efforts of future decency groups to restrict access to objectionable publications. Walker, like many who followed him, avoided calling objectionable material obscene due to a difficult legal position set after the famous ruling in *United States v. One Book Called "Ulysses,"* which found James Joyce's famous novel not to be obscene in 1933, setting important precedents for later challenges to obscenity law such as *Roth v. United States*. Rather than the antiquated *Hicklin* test, which had a famously broad sanction of obscenity ("depraving and corrupting those whose minds are open to immoral influences"), courts were to now consider the work as a whole rather than selected parts (i.e. the masturbatory *Nausicaa* episode in *Ulysses*), consider the effect on an "average" member of a local community rather than someone considered to be overly sensitive, and also to apply contemporary community standards.[141]

The Postmaster General's legal team faced many challenges in the legal battle, first in the precedential challenges to declaring a publication legally obscene (they sought to simply declare it morally deficient), and second when they drastically underestimated the star legal power that a prestigious publication like *Esquire* was able to summon.[142] In Walker's view, *Esquire* did not comply with the fourth criterion used to assign second-class mailing status to publications, which rather vaguely noted a publication had to disseminate of "information of a public character."[143]

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[141] Marissa Anne Pagnattaro, "Carving A Literary Exception: The Obscenity Standard and 'Ulysses'," *Twentieth Century Literature* 47, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 217-240.
[142] Barbas, "The Esquire Case," 287.
[143] *Hannegan v. Esquire, Inc.,* 327 U.S. 148.

Walker felt that he retained the power to remove the second-class status of periodicals that were not obscene but that he felt were morally lacking:

> Writings and pictures may be indecent, vulgar, and risqué and still not be obscene in a technical sense. Such writings and pictures may be in that obscure and treacherous borderland zone where the average person hesitates to find them technically obscene, but still may see ample proof that they are morally improper, and not for the public welfare and the public good.[144]

Walker convened a hearing in October 1943, where his case quickly fell apart. His arguments hinged largely on the testimony of the elderly and members of the clergy, who claimed that *Esquire* was a threat to public morals. These witnesses later admitted under cross-examination from star lawyer Bruce Bromley that they had never read a single issue of the magazine, nor were they familiar with some of the magazine's most famous contributors, which included literary luminaries like Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald.[145] Witnesses for the defense included testimony from the secretary of Boston's famous Watch and Ward Society, itself one of the prominent moral reform organizations of the era.

The secretary testified that he saw nothing wrong with *Esquire*, and that America could use more of the humor that the magazine put forth.[146] When the prosecution changed their tone from attempting to declare the magazine obscene to simply say that it was morally deficient, the defense called in prominent social critic H.L. Mencken, who took so much joy in taking the prosecution to task for claiming that words such as "street-walker", "syphilis" and "prostitute" were obscene, as well as offering a lengthy treatise on how a euphemism for buttocks was a simple attempt at humor, that he refused to accept reimbursement for his car service, claiming

[144] *Hannegan v. Esquire*, 149.
[145] Barbas, "The Esquire Case," 287.
[146] Ibid., 326

that the hearings were so entertaining to him that he would have bought a ticket to attend were they available.[147]

The hearing concluded with the majority declaring that Walker did not have grounds to declare the magazine obscene. However, Walker refused to accept the decision and removed the magazine from circulation himself in 1943.[148] *Esquire* won an appeal to reverse the decision, and Walker appealed to the Supreme Court, but left office before the beginning of the case, leaving his successor's name attached to the record. In a unanimous decision written by the committed civil libertarian Justice William O. Douglas, the court rebuked Walker and suggested that the notion that the Postmaster General possessed the ability to censor was "abhorrent" to American traditions:

> Grave constitutional questions are immediately raised once it is said that the use of the mails is a privilege which may be extended or withheld on any grounds whatsoever. . .the power to determine whether a periodical (which is mailable) contains information of a public character, literature, or art does not include the further power to determine whether the contents meet some standard of the public good or welfare.[149]

The 1946 decision in *Hannegan v. Esquire* proved fatal to the NODL's plan of restricting objectionable publications through the Postmaster General's office and marked the beginning of a series of court decisions that seriously undermined the ability of states and municipalities to exercise prior restraint to control publications found objectionable for their violent or sexual content.[150] Thus, the NODL shifted its focus to its existing campaigns of reviewing and publicizing lists of objectionable literature. The late 1940s saw the resurgence of widespread anti-comics criticism, which made the earlier criticisms against comics pale in comparison.

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[147] Ibid., 328-329.
[148] Ibid., 327.
[149] *Hannegan v. Esquire*, 156-159
[150] *Winters v. New York* (1948) was another case in the same vein that drew on the *Esquire* decision, though *Winters* won out on First Amendment grounds. More on Winters follows in the next chapter.

In addition, the NODL served an important role in the governmental investigations of objectionable literature that occurred in the 1950s, and remained a visible, if somewhat ineffective presence on the national scene as the 1950s rolled onwards. With Noll's health declining, Monsignor Thomas Fitzgerald, a younger and less reactionary priest, stepped into the role of General Secretary for the NODL, continuing the mission of the NODL by serving as a government witness in the 1952 Gathings committee hearings and continuing to pen treatises on the perils of indecent literature.

The NODL was never quite the same after the death of Noll in 1956, and by the time of his death, anti-censorship movements were beginning to crystallize against the NODL, movements that would only be strengthened by court cases that further constrained censorship on the grounds of potential harm to minors. They sparred with the ACLU in 1955 and 1956 on the issue of comic book censorship and opposition to a wide-reaching censorship ordinance proposed in the NODL's home of Chicago. Their early critiques demonstrated the powerful reach of their organizing, but legal developments ultimately made their censorious tactics obsolete, though the right-wing undercurrent of Noll's thought made a palpable resurgence near the end of his life. The actions of the NODL spoke to the palatability of moralist critiques of mass culture – decent literature boards and other decency organizations and committees existed in just about any town. The decent literature movement came to a head in the 1950s amidst the flareups of the domestic Cold War, representing an illiberal and repressive attitude towards anything that could disrupt the precarious consensus needed to legitimate the emergent Cold War order in America. In the eyes of movement members, anything that had the potential to break this consensus faced the strictest scrutiny and suspicion. In the years following the end of World War II, nothing was as popular—nor as criticized—as comic books.

Chapter 2: The Anti-Comics Movement Rekindled: Local Anti-Comics Activism After World War II

"We are working against comics that would frighten little children, and cause them even to have bad dreams in their sleep."

– Jesse L. Murrell

The early 1940s flare-up of anti-comics sentiments stoked by Sterling North's editorial and the actions of groups like the National Organization for Decent Literature largely abated during World War II.[151] At the beginning of the war, the outrage garnered by anti-comics groups met with equal pushback from experts in the fields of education and child psychology. While these researchers largely acquiesced that reading only comic books was not the ideal way for children to develop their reading skills, they argued that the wide-ranging condemnations of comic books as detrimental to child development—beyond material very obviously not intended for young children—were inaccurate. Many of these arguments came in the form of formal, peer reviewed journal articles, but also in parenting magazines, which became extremely popular after World War II, making expert opinions accessible to readers outside of the academy.

By 1948, however, the furor against comic books rekindled, with opposition rising largely from community groups and civic organizations, rather than federated, hierarchical national organizations like the NODL. This sea change in the makeup of anti-comics and iconophobic activists resulted from several social, cultural, and legal factors. The clearest social factor is the well-documented groundswell of participation in civic organizations after the end of

[151] John E. Twomey, "The Citizens' Committee and Comic-Book Control: A Study of Extragovernmental Restraint", *Law and Contemporary Problems* 20, No. 4 (Autumn, 1955): 621-629. Twomey, a communications scholar who earned his master's degree in communication from the University of Chicago writing about the contemporary anti-comics movement, wrote that "the war years brought more urgent matters to the fore and the comic-book issue faded from public attention."

World War II. Political scientist Robert D. Putnam, in his famous book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, notes this trend, calling the two decades from 1945 to 1965 "one of the most vital periods of community involvement in American history."[152] More than ever, Americans, especially residents of the new suburbs, took a direct role in shaping the social lives of themselves and their children through participation in church groups, Parent-Teacher Associations, and decent literature organizations. These groups responded to developments on the national level but also, as we shall see, informed national debates through their own thoughts and efforts.

Approaching the anti-comics movement from the local level, I argue, helps to provide a more complete picture of why the anti-comics movement so strongly captured the mind of the nation in the postwar years by highlighting local, quotidian discussions of comics that complemented hegemonic intellectual and political discourses, and, often, disagreed with them. It also provides a countervailing and dialectical approach to analyzing the movement that underscores its broad appeal, showing that just as often as the movement worked in a national-local manner (as with the NODL), equally important was its functioning as a local-national movement, where ordinary citizens wound up informing the debates both nationally and internationally. A detailed examination of actions taken on the local level also demonstrates, contrary to typical portrayals of the anti-comics movement, that views on comics and iconocentric culture/mass culture broadly construed were not monolithic or immediately nationalized even among their harshest critics.

The rise in civic participation after the end of the war also made use of public forums in various magazines that proliferated in the postwar era. These magazines and the public

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[152] Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 48-66.

intellectuals that contributed to them played a key role in the development of the postwar debates over comic books through the publication, reprinting, and localized discourses over the content, sale, and regulation of comic books. Members of these civic organizations or "decency groups" frequently corresponded with prominent figures in the debate, which reinforced their belief in the importance of their participation and in the righteousness of their crusade. The writings of Fredric Wertham, the famed anti-comics crusader, became widely distributed in popular magazines and newspaper supplements like *Saturday Review of Literature*, *Ladies Home Journal*, and *This Week*. The wide distribution of Wertham's writings, in addition to his reputation as a noted psychiatrist with extensive experience in working with troubled children in New York City, made him a popular figure across the country as more communities began to speak out against comic books.

Wertham was hardly the only public intellectual to take a hardline stance against comic books after the end of World War II. Gershon Legman, a cultural critic better known for his later risqué studies into sexuality and profanity, articulated a starkly declensionist and iconophobic view of visual culture in his 1948 anti-censorship work *Love and Death:* "With only token recourse to the printed word, for more than a decade the radio, the talking movie, the picture-magazine and comic-book have served all the cultural and recreational needs of the generation of adults now upon us. For them, the printed word is on the way out."[153] Legman, who later fled Cold War pressures to Europe in 1953, believed that America's widespread repression of sexuality fed its love for violence and found it perverse that sex, a legal act, was so restricted while illegal violence was the basis of so much cultural business. Conducting research for his chapter in *Love and Death* on comics "at the local candy store," Legman eventually encountered

[153] Gershon Legman, *Love and Death: A Study in Censorship* (New York: Hacker, 1949), 27.

Wertham and received an invitation to be part of a symposium Wertham was preparing on the comics issue known as "The Psychopathology of Comic Books," where he spoke alongside Wertham and Wertham's clinical partner Hilde Mosse at the event, one of the first examinations of comics from a scholarly point of view.[154]

Other intellectuals were less unabashedly iconophobic than Legman. Leslie Fiedler, a prominent New York Intellectual who later wrote a defense of comic books at the height of their criticism, argued that Legman's critique assumed a single type of reader ("a unitary child") and that Legman took too Manichean a view to comics.[155] Despite their petty disagreements, intellectuals had a tremendous effect on the discourses against comic book reading at the local level, the primary arena for their debate, especially as they began to grapple with the emergence of mass culture and its effects on the American populace. I detail the intellectual debates over comic books at greater length in Chapter Four.

The final, and, I argue, most important reason for the shift in energy to the civic level was a continued pattern of legal setbacks to groups like the NODL and others who sought to solve the comic book menace by way of the courts and official censorship. The *Hannegan* decision put an end to anti-comics advocates' hopes that the Postmaster General would be able to remove comics from the mails (overlooking that most comics arrived at their points of sale by newspaper distributor networks, not the official mail system), and judges frequently overturned ordinances explicitly restricting the sale of comic books or other printed material depicting violence when anti-censorship advocates challenged them in court.[156]

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[154] Susan G. Davis, *Dirty Jokes and Bawdy Songs: The Uncensored Life of Gershon Legman* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 87-111.
[155] Davis, *Dirty Jokes and Bawdy Songs*, 110.
[156] One ordinance levied in Los Angeles County in mid-1948 took an explicitly anti-iconographic tone, outlawing "drawings or photographs depicting any detailed list of crimes." The ordinance was challenged in the case *People v.*

A key Supreme Court ruling that affected attempts to curtail the sales of violent printed matter was *Winters v. New York* in 1948. Argued over the course of the two preceding years, the *Winters* decision overturned the conviction of a newsdealer under a New York state law that forbade the possession and sale of printed matter "principally made up of news or stories of criminal deeds of bloodshed."[157] Winters appealed his conviction to the Court of Appeals of New York as well as to the New York Supreme Court, both of which upheld his conviction. The case then made its way to the U.S. Supreme Court, where, in a 6-3 decision, the court overturned Winters' conviction on the grounds that the New York state statute was vague and overbroad.

Writing for the majority, Justice Stanley Forman Reed argued "[W]e find the specification of publications, prohibited from distribution, too uncertain and indefinite to justify the conviction of this petitioner."[158] Like the ruling of the California Superior Court of Appeals in *People v. Dickey*, the Supreme Court justices worried that the law would potentially lead to convictions for distributors who published war stories. "It does not seem to us," wrote Reed, "that an honest distributor of publications could know when he might be held to have ignored such a prohibition. Collections of war horrors, otherwise unexceptionable, might well found to be 'massed' so as to become 'vehicles for inciting violent and depraved crimes.'"[159]

[Footnote 142 cont.] *Dickey*, where it was invalidated by a panel of judges who objected to the vague nature of the ordinance as well as what they saw as its excessive breadth. Judges in these cases often remarked that inclusion of historical acts of violence (the assassination of Abraham Lincoln was a frequent point) in comics and other children's books might run afoul of ordinances that so widely banned depictions of violence.

[157] *Winters v. New York* (1949), 333 U.S. 507. Ironically, one of the judicial legacies of Reed, considered a moderate of the Vinson and Warren Courts, was one of favoring federal restrictions on civil liberties, particularly in applying the 14th Amendment to the states. Though Reed also wrote the majority opinion in *Smith v. Allwright*, which banned race-based primary elections and joined the majority in *Sweatt v. Painter*, which overturned segregation in college admission practices, he nearly wrote a dissent in *Brown v. Board of Education* before joining the majority in the final decision.

[158] Ibid, 519.

[159] *Winters v. New York* (1948), 333 U.S. 520.

Because of the decision's creation of a new precedent in New York state law and the fact that most comic book publishers during the 1940s and '50s had their headquarters there, *Winters* made it difficult for many years to pursue official state regulation of comic books. Louis A. Zurcher, in his sociological work *Citizens for Decency: Antipornography Crusades as Status Defense*, argues that the patterns of collective behavior (like those of anti-comics organizations) arose when institutional means could not remove a given strain to their community.[160] Comics were undoubtedly a strain on these communities, presenting the specter of juvenile delinquency, violence, and misled children. Since it seemed that anti-comics advocates could not rely on the Postmaster General, courts, or government to regulate these books, they took it upon themselves to solve the comics problem.

These groups possessed many different names, makeups, and viewpoints. Names ranged from the punchy COMBAT (Council on Movies, Books, Audio, and Television), a loose confederation of groups that operated within northeastern Wisconsin, to more generalized Citizens' Committees on Literature (in Newport, RI) and the ubiquitous Decent Literature Committees (as employed by the Confraternity of Christian Mothers in Milwaukee, WI). Others, like the group that comprises the primary case study for this chapter, held a specific focus to comic books. More established federated community organizations like the American Legion also supported anti-comics measures, but only on an incidental basis.

The zenith of local decency groups ran from approximately 1948 to 1957, bookended in the beginning by the increased prominence of anti-comics writings from Wertham and others coupled with the postwar moral panic over juvenile delinquency, and capped on the later end by the Supreme Court's 1957 ruling in *Butler v. Michigan* which declared a section of the Michigan

[160] Louis A. Zurcher and R. George Kirkpatrick, *Citizens for Decency: Antipornography Crusades as Status Defense* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976), 4.

State Penal code that forbade the sale of printed material "tending to the corruption of youth" to any customer unconstitutional.[161] The *Butler* ruling, along with the introduction of the Comics Code in 1954, which greatly sanitized the content of most comic books and pleased all but the most hardcore anti-comics crusaders, largely quelled the funnybook furor. These groups predicated their organizing around mitigating threats posed to children, and, by extension, the nuclear family, widely viewed as a stabilizing force in the new postwar order.

My primary case study is that of the Cincinnati Committee for the Evaluation of Comic Books (Cincinnati Committee), a civic group active from 1948 until 1979 with their main work occurring between 1948 and 1956, largely ceasing due to the adoption of the Comics Code.[162] Formed and led by Jesse L. Murrell, a Methodist minister from across the river in Covington, Kentucky, the group comprised a diverse selection of professionals from the Cincinnati metropolitan area with a vested interest in improving the welfare of children.[163] The group had a revolving committee through its early years, but its more consistent executive committee, formed in the mid-1950s, boasted parent-teacher association staff, *Cincinnati Enquirer* journalists, the head librarian of the then-Public Library of Cincinnati, academics including the chairs of the University of Cincinnati psychology department and the Xavier University English department, as well as staff from Cincinnati Public Schools, local lawyers, and a representative from the Hamilton County Pharmaceutical Society.

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[161] *Butler v. Michigan*, 352 U.S. 380. Alfred Butler was arrested for selling such book to a police officer in Detroit. In the unanimous decision written by Felix Frankfurter, he famously declared that such ordinances tended to "burn the house to roast the pig", noting that Michigan's Penal Law statute reduced proper reading material for adults to only that material fit for children. This chronology also follows the one observed by Robert Putman in *Bowling Alone*, where he notes a plateau in group membership in the late 1950s, a peak in the early 1960s, and a sustained decline by the end of that decade. Putman, *Bowling Alone*, 55.

[162] The group went by many slightly different names during their tenure, I use Committee for the Evaluation of Comic Books consistently in my writing.

[163] Elaine Tyler May's classic *Homeward Bound* contains a thoughtful explanation of why postwar Americans put more stock in experts than the experiences of their forebears. Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, 20th Anniversary rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 19-38.

The group's primary impact came from a partnership developed with *Parents Magazine*, one of the most widely read child development periodicals of the postwar era, and one that based its editorial content firmly in progressive views of child-rearing. This brought the work of the committee, previously contained to Southwest Ohio, to nationwide prominence. As the tenor of the debates over kids and comics slowly grew to a head over the course of the early 1950s, the Cincinnati Committee carved out a distinct place for themselves in the debate. Unlike the NODL, they were not an expressly religious organization, despite the predominance of Protestant members on the group's executive committee. They also did not engage in the censorious tactics employed by the NODL's Vigilance committees and boasted several times in letters that they actively opposed municipal censorship ordinances. Murrell later noted that the evaluation system employed by the Cincinnati Committee was far more concerned with violence than the Comics Code, which he saw as obsessed with regulating sex.

Their mission, reflected in the group's name, was to provide public evaluations of comic books so parents could better guide their consumption habits.[164] They also made a point to seek the cooperation of comic book publishers in improving the content of their books. Their reputation as a group of erudite professionals with expertly crafted evaluation criteria that sought actionable improvements to comic books rather than simple partisan moralizers made them widely popular, especially after their partnership with *Parents* began.

Unlike the NODL, which was adept at forming relationships with powerful governmental figures, no Cincinnati Committee members ever served as expert witnesses in governmental investigations of comic books, but the congressmen and counsel involved in those investigations frequently studied the Cincinnati Committee's work and used it as evidence in their hearings.

[164] On the expectation of families and especially mothers to help guide consumption see Gilbert, *Another Chance*, and Anne Marie Kordas, *The Politics of Childhood In Cold War America* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2013).

Using the Cincinnati Committee to explore the curious national-local dialectic in the American anti-comics movement not only gives a clearer view of how individual communities responded to the problem of images and comics, but also how the emergent Cold War played a protracted role in the cultural debates of the time that necessitated a consensus-driven, agreeable bloc of American consumers. To understand the circumstances that gave rise to the Cincinnati Committee, one must understand the role that Cincinnati played in developing a notable, if sometimes contradictory Midwestern conservatism.

Cincinnati in the postwar era was a politically peculiar place. It carried its history as a stronghold of abolitionism into the twentieth century, and Republicans enjoyed considerable dominance of city politics until the 1970s.[165] Cincinnati also epitomized the tendency of Midwestern politics identified by Eric Goldman to be populist and progressive yet suspicious of coastal elites and rather nativist.[166] Religion played a large role in the development of the cultural politics of the city, with dueling influences of Methodism, Presbyterianism, and Catholicism driving the city's public culture. John T. McNicholas, founder of the National Legion of Decency, was archbishop of Cincinnati from 1925 to 1950.

These influences, coupled with the revivalist camp tradition across the river in Kentucky, helped lay the ground for Cincinnati to become the testing ground for the conservative philosophies espoused by Robert A. Taft, one of Cincinnati's famous sons, which dominated the latter decades of the twentieth century. Taft, historically a non-interventionist and anti-New Dealer, typified the conservative "old guard" opposition to his electoral foe Thomas Dewey, who represented the more liberal, moderate Republicanism that came to define the 1950s.

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[165] Of the 24 mayors serving between 1900 and 1971, all but seven were Republicans. Democrats were elected to office in 1906, 1912, and 1948, and the city's independent progressive Charterite movement elected four mayors.
[166] Eric Frederick Goldman, *The Crucial Decade—And after: America, 1945-1960* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 127.

The Cincinnati Committee's work reflected this strange Midwestern political dialectic. The committee's use of experts and academic evaluation techniques spoke to a progressive belief in regulating and improving the content of comic books, though they were clearly wary of the power of images. This proved useful to them as it made their critiques palatable to a wide range of audiences including religious conservatives, educators, and antiviolence liberals. Like later critics, the idea of external sources of cultural power having an influence on impressionable minds had a powerful grasp on a generation, as James Gilbert noted, "concerned with brainwashing, propaganda, and un-American activities."[167]

The roots of the committee lay in Rev. Murrell's preparations for his sermon of May 2, 1948. From the late 1940s until 1969, the Methodist Church celebrated National Family Week on the first and second Sundays in May, with the first Sunday designated Children's Sunday.[168] Murrell's sermon, "Happy the Home," directly attacked comic books. During the speech, Murrell invoked verbatim the same iconophobic criticisms of comic books first levied eight years prior by Sterling North, calling them "graphic insanity" and referencing the same "superhuman heroics, voluptuous females in scanty attire and blazing machine guns" that North decried, also referencing Detroit's pattern of censoring objectionable comics.[169] Whether Murrell credited North's earlier article with his sentiments never entered the historical record, but regardless of whether or not the churchman cited his sources, his message quickly resonated with the Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky community.[170]

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[167] James B. Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 98.
[168] Administrative Records of the General Board of Discipleship, General Commission on Archives and History, United Methodist Church, Drew University
[169] "Pastor Blasts Comic Books", *Cincinnati Enquirer*, May 3, 1948, "'Comic' Books Blasted By Covington Churchman," *Cincinnati Times-Star*, May 3, 1948.
[170] In a later letter to Otto Larsen, a sociologist interested in mass hysteria and violence who later served on Lyndon Johnson's Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, Murrell claimed that an Enquirer reporter in the audience suggested an article be written on the speech and received Murrell's sermon notecards.

Fan mail for Murrell began to pour in from the surrounding areas in the days following newspaper articles and radio broadcasts concerning his speech. A letter from someone signed only "C.G." noted "I wonder where our Women's Club and Mother's Club are [*sic*], they must be in hiding. You know the funny books are very convenient for them, they buy them in 20 lots at a time so their children are contented and they can go places."[171] Nicholas Schneiders, a Catholic priest in nearby Erlanger, Kentucky, wrote to Murrell to express his support for the project:

> I was particularly impressed with your words as regards so-called 'comic' books, magazines that–as a rule–are far more calamitous than comical. Of course, we must distinguish – for there are 'comics' that have good influence, and those who have not can be made so. . . To me the solution is to be found in educating parents to realize the harm done – the vicious undermining of the morals of their children that must follow the avid reading of unsavory comic books. At the same time parents and teachers must build up an interest and desire for better reading material."[172]

This put Murrell in a curious place rhetorically. He based his sermon on the extreme iconophobia of Sterling North, who famously charged parents and teachers with "breaking the comic book", suggesting that reading classic literature and new children's literature (of which North was a writer) totally supplant comic reading. George Hecht, the publisher of the Cincinnati Committee's later partner *Parents' Magazine*, also shared North's view and declared in a 1941 interview with *The New York Times* that comics were "injurious to children's character" and that he would be happy if "all comics, including our own, were put out of business.'[173] Yet, Murrell clearly agreed with the more progressive approach to the comic book problem proposed by

[171] Letter from C.G. to Jesse Murrell, May 2, 1948. Box 3, Folder 1: Correspondence & Misc. Prior to 1950, Committee On Evaluating Comic Books collection, Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County Main Branch (hereinafter CECBC). Emphasis in original.

[172] Letter from Nicholas Schneiders to Jesse Murrell, May 5, 1948. Box 3, Folder 1: Correspondence & Misc Prior to 1950, CECBC.

[173] "Comics' Effects on Youth Scored," *New York Times,* November 6, 1941. Despite his protestations, Hecht oversaw a long line of educational comics, headlined by *True Comics*, that ran from 1941 to 1950.

Schneiders, dedicating a large part of the final three decades of his life to the Cincinnati Committee and the general improvement of comic books. He was not interested, as C.G. was, in taking the easy way out and blaming shillyshallying dilletante parents (mothers especially) for their lack of interest and attention to their children's consumption patterns.

Completing the spectrum of letters received by Murrell in the days after his sermon was one from Lora M. Walker, a concerned grandmother from Richmond, Indiana, about an hour and a half away from Cincinnati. A nurse and former civil service clerk partially disabled from an operation, Walker declared "God will bless and richly reward you for your effort [*sic*] in saving the moral [*sic*] of our children."[174] Walker distributed religious tracts in her spare time, and offered to do the same for Murrell if he sent along copies of his sermon. She also offered a starkly right-wing declensionist view of the postwar culture, claiming that "America was once a God-fearing nation. Now foreign nations call us decadent. We have a fight in Zionism and Communism also. Back to God and the church is our only hope."[175] Murrell declined to have Walker act on his behalf, citing cost concerns from his end, but noted that "…[l]ocal people I have seen here and there in greater Cincinnati have expressed appreciation for what was said. So it is evident that the people are greatly concerned about the moral welfare of our coming generation."[176]

According to a later report on the Committee's history by Murrell, the local Council of Churches then contacted him, imploring him to see "what, if anything, could be done about the

[174] Lora M. Walker to Jesse Murrell, May 3, 1948. CECBC.
[175] Ibid. Though there is no clear connection, Walker seems the most likely source of flyers in the committee files from the Protestant War Veterans Association, a fascist and antisemitic organization run by Edward James Smythe, one of the lesser-known American fascists put on trial under the Smith Act. A column from the liberal newspaper *PM* written in 1943 describes Smythe as a "tinhorn fascist" and "whisky-guzzling old reprobate." Tom O'Connor, "Edward James Smythe Tells All Between Drinks and a $2 Bite", *PM*, March 23, 1943.
[176] Jesse Murrell to Lora M Walker, May 6, 1948. CECBC.

bad comics."[177] He contacted the Cincinnati Public Library by mail on May 17th, seeking to book space for a group meeting for individuals and groups interested in cleaning up comic books. Murrell chose the library, rather than one of the many sympathetic religious organizations around the city, because he wished to reach the widest breadth of interested persons and not constrain it to a perception as a simple religious crusade.[178]

Organizations that Murrell sought to involve included the local branch of the Parent-Teacher Association, city recreation staff, professors from the University of Cincinnati and Xavier University, local women's clubs, the Boy and Girl Scouts, and groups that served Jewish and Catholic children.[179] The central branch informed him that there was no space available at their location, but there was room at the nearby Walnut Hills branch. Carl Vitz, the responding librarian, also said in a postscript that "the Library as an institution is also interested in reading problems including the influence of 'comics' and would appreciate an invitation."[180]

The group's first meeting on May 25th, 1948, attracted nineteen guests and seemed to have met Murrell's criteria for a broad organization. Parent-Teacher Associations, city governments, law offices, the Boy Scouts, the library, newsdealers, druggists, and other local churches all sent representatives or pledged their support previously. The group elected Murrell as the chair of the organization and Hildegarde Benner, chair of Juvenile Protection for the Cincinnati Parent-Teacher Association, to serve as secretary.[181] J. Louis Motz, a local news distributor, offered to provide tours of his warehouse so members of the committee could get a firsthand glance at the comic books distributed to local newsstands and drug stores, and Ernest

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[177] Jesse Murrell, A Brief Report: The Greater Cincinnati Committee on Evaluation of Comic Books (June, 1964), CECBC.
[178] Murrell to CPL
[179] Ibid.
[180] Vitz to Murrell, 5/18/48
[181] Minutes 5/25/48

Miller, an assistant librarian, proposed that a subcommittee be formed to evaluate comic book regulation campaigns in other cities.[182]

The smaller committee comprised Murrell, Miller, Leo J. Streck, head of Catholic schools in Covington, Kemper McComb, president of the local Council of Churches, and Charles Dibowski, a juvenile justice specialist also from Covington. The men convened a few days after the meeting, agreeing that inviting professors from the University of Cincinnati and Xavier University, as well as other sympathetic city officials, would help their overall goals.[183] Murrell later contacted UC's chair of sociology, who directed him to Arthur Bills, a member of the faculty in psychology who specialized in developing measurements. He also reached out to the president of Xavier University, who was busy in the interim but promised to find two suitable candidates for the committee.[184] The next meeting of the smaller committee, on June 22, added two new professors, H.B. Weaver, a psychologist from UC, and Charles Wheeler, an English professor from Xavier. The men agreed to continue work in the subcommittee until Weaver finished a list of suitable criteria for evaluating comic books, which took until October.[185]

Weaver's criteria was unwittingly but fundamentally a sophisticated image-based critique of comic books. Where other codes from both publishers and the NODL were mainly concerned with the editorial content of the comics, the criteria for the Cincinnati Committee made the construction of the visual within the comics a central part of their evaluations. Their criteria underscored the middle ground they occupied in the comics debate, reflecting their belief that the visual nature of comics was not inherently evil and could be reformed. The criteria Weaver eventually developed for evaluating comic books covered three main areas, Cultural, Moral, and

[182] Minutes 5/25/48
[183] Minutes of smaller committee, 5/27/48
[184] Minutes of smaller committee, 6/10/48
[185] Minutes of smaller committee, 6/22/48

Morbid Emotionality, which had four levels of rating: No Objection, Some Objection, Objectionable, and Very Objectionable, with comics rated No or Some Objection were acceptable for children to read.

The Cultural Area comprised both the aesthetic merits of the comic as well as its social and patriotic content. To receive a No Objection rating, a comic needed to have "pleasing art" and proper speech, and feature a story "that does not offend good taste from the viewpoint of art or mechanics."[186] Comics rated Some Objection had lower quality printing ("injurious to children's eyes"), poor grammar and slang, and "[undermined] in any way traditional American folkways."[187] Objectionable comics contained obscenity, profanity, treated divorce humorously, garnered sympathy for criminals, and contained "propaganda against traditional American institutions."[188]

In the Moral Area, comics rated No Objection necessitated "any situation that does not compromise good morals."[189] This criterion also considered the plot of the comic, the characters and their appearances ("wholesome" and "dressed properly for the situation"), and the presence of crime. Depictions of violations of the law were enough to merit a Some Objection rating under this category, even if the criminal was brought to justice and portrayed unsympathetically. Stories that depicted women as criminals, had "sexly [*sic*] implications," had indecently dressed characters, portrayed details or methods of crime, or featured incompetent police were considered Objectionable.[190]

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[186] Evaluation criteria
[187] Ibid.
[188] Ibid.
[189] Ibid.
[190] Ibid.

Last was the Morbid Emotionality category which mainly considered the effects of violent images on children. No Objection comics contained "any situation that does not arouse morbid emotionality in children," while implied deaths of heroes, realistic depictions of villainous deaths or strange creatures were enough to merit a Some Objection rating. Stories depicting kidnappings, bleeding characters, sadistic torture devices, animal violence and realistic depictions of corpses were Objectionable under the third criterion.[191] Weaver published a precaution at the bottom of the Committee's criteria, widely sold as a fundraising tool, claiming that the proffered criteria were simply guidelines for evaluation, rather than standards meant to be "applied literally and rigidly."[192] Weaver implored any potential reviewers to use the criteria "in the light of his best judgement regarding good taste, the intent and spirit of the story, and the context of the individual frames of the story."[193]

The Cincinnati Committee's was not alone in producing codes used to evaluate comic books, though the evaluation criteria developed by Weaver were the first developed by an academic. While the Committee worked in late June to figure out their next steps, the NODL was moving forward with an updated code of their own. William Smith, radio director for the National Council of Catholic Men, and Arthur Dougherty, the South Bend druggist who helped spark the NODL's formation ten years earlier, convened to produce a six-point code for determining whether or not to ban certain comics. The two men came up with a code that was, in essence, an updated version of the criteria for judging print magazines conceived by John Noll a decade earlier with extra provisions for visual materials.

[191] Ibid.
[192] Evaluation criteria
[193] Ibid.

In the NODL's 1948 report, they asserted that the South Bend code prompted the creation of a similar code by the Association of Comic Magazine Publishers (ACMP), one of the two main ways the comics industry attempted to shield itself from public criticism in the late 1940s (the other, investigated in a later chapter, was editorial committees consisting of notable individuals in various child-related fields).[194] The ACMP, which had George T. Delacorte of the influential Dell publishing company at its head, split the difference between the NODL code and the Cincinnati Committee's criteria.

The ACMP's code forbade sexy comics, proscribing female characters "no…more nude than in a bathing suit commonly worn in the U.S.A."[195] The ACMP also banned the portrayal of children as criminals and ensured no stories would undermine law enforcement and other established authority. Like the other two codes, divorce, vulgar language, and torture were also prohibited.[196] The Cincinnati Committee's criteria stand apart from these other contemporary measures because of their development and purpose. The NODL's code was developed by a priest and a drugstore owner, the ACMP's presumably by the organization's board. H.B. Weaver, one of the social scientists on the committee, specialized in the creation of measurements and developed a more meticulous system intended to offer expert feedback on comics, rather than the NODL's code, which served to incite bans, and the ACMP's code, ostensibly meant to serve a regulatory purpose (famously it did not).Thus, the Cincinnati Committee could claim a scholarly legitimacy to back up its critiques, where other groups relied on a religious or coercive backing for their critiques. The Cincinnati Committee's criteria also

[194] NODL 1948 Report, 23. "Only two days later the Association of Comics Magazine Publishers adopted a 'Comics Code', which seemed to be the result of independent action, but was actually provoked by the South Bend meeting, and the Code drafted at that meeting."
[195] Ibid, 24.
[196] Ibid.

stood apart from the other publisher's codes as it actively sought to flag and criticize stories perceived as anti-American.

The Committee put the criteria to work straightaway, publishing their first comprehensive evaluation in November 1948. The committee used a team of approximately fifty reviewers, with each story passing through two sets of eyes before its final score.[197] Out of 378 comics reviewed, the committee deemed just over half the comics (52.7% or 199 comics) acceptable for children to read, 105 having No Objection and 94 having Some Objection. The committee rated 122 comics, or 32.3% overall Objectionable, with a further 57 (15.1%) rated Very Objectionable.[198] No Objection comics largely comprised religious comics such as Treasure Chest, Picture Stories from the Bible, and Catholic Comics, teen comics like Archie Comics and Buzzy (National Comics' Archie competitor), "funny animal" comics most notably produced by Dell Publishing, and educational comics like Classics Illustrated and Real Fact Comics.[199] Action Comics, one of the flagship publications of National Comics Publications (NCP, later DC Comics) where Superman debuted, received a No Objection rating.

Comics rated Some Objection were, editorially, similar to the No Objection comics, though not as directly targeted at young children. Detective Comics, another NCP publication and the original home of Batman, received a Some Objection rating, as did True Comics, a project of *Parents*' magazine to produce educational comics. Young Love and Young Romance, two of the more prominent and sophisticated romance comics, also received Some Objection ratings along with, curiously enough, Donald Duck, Mickey Mouse, and Looney Tunes comics. The Objectionable category contained the most titles of the evaluation, with 122. This group

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[197] Meeting minutes, 10-6-48.
[198] 1948 evaluation pamphlet, CECBC.
[199] Ibid.

largely comprised crime comics like the famed Crime Does Not Pay and Crime and Punishment alongside western comics, more mature superhero stories such as Adventure Comics, Flash Comics, and Sub-Mariner Comics, romance comics, and, strangely enough, an issue of the long-running Dell anthology series Four Color containing an ostensibly crime-themed Bugs Bunny story, though no evaluation forms survive to explain why reviewers found Bugs Bunny objectionable.

The 57 titles listed Very Objectionable included more sordid titles like Slave Girl Comics and Jo-Jo Comics, both of which were "jungle comics", containing heavy doses of sex, violence, and racism.[200] Many of the titles on the Very Objectionable list did not survive past midcentury, but a few titles of note include the solo comic for Batman launched in 1940, as well as All Star Comics and Boy Commandos, two mainstream National Comics Publications series. Famous Funnies, widely considered the first modern comic book for its magazine-sized collection of newspaper comic reprints, also received a Very Objectionable rating. The findings of the Cincinnati Committee's evaluation reinforced their view that comics were not wholly bad for children to consume, but also that there were clear areas for improvement and some comics assuredly not intended for small children to read. The clarity with which the Cincinnati Committee approached their reviews (Murrell continually reminded his reviewers that their mindset should be books appropriate for young children and not teenagers) also helped distinguish themselves from other, more apocalyptic anti-comics critics of the time who decried all comics as irredeemably evil.

During 1949, the committee met infrequently to carry out smaller-scale evaluations of comic books that were not as widely publicized or distributed compared with their initial

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[200] Josette Frank, a children's reading expert identified jungle comics as "certainly not desirable for children's reading" in 1943 article for *Child Study*, a magazine published by the Child Study Association of America.

evaluation. Instead, Murrell worked toward garnering greater publicity for the group's work outside of the Cincinnati area, writing to several prominent magazines to pitch a story on the group's work. Magazine columns were one of the main drivers of public opinion during the postwar era, especially in terms of the anti-comics movement. Most family-oriented magazines featured writings from anti-comics advocates, notably Fredric Wertham's 1948 article "The Comics…Very Funny!" in *The Saturday Review of Literature*, widely considered the starting point of the second wave of anti-comics criticism.[201]

Murrell first wrote to *Woman's Day*, who turned him down because of their recent feature article by Sidonie Matsner Gruenberg, director of the Child Study Association of America, a major liberal voice in the comics debate. Gruenberg was a peculiar foil to famed anti-comics crusader Fredric Wertham. Like Wertham, Gruenberg was a European-born and educated Jewish immigrant who deepened the debates over the effects of culture on children. 14 years Wertham's senior, Gruenberg subscribed to a progressive vision of child rearing informed in part by the work of John Dewey, Freud, and Edward Thorndike and by the postwar era had a long record as a respected and sought-after liberal voice regarding children's consumption who wrote accessibly for a mass audience rather than esoteric specialists.[202]

[201] I postulate two distinct waves of the American anti-comics movement, the first lasting from 1940 to 1944, sparking from Sterling North's editorial and mostly concerning the effect of comics on child development, and the second, more famous wave, from 1948 to 1956, begun with Wertham's article and culminating in the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency and the Comics Code. After the war, juvenile delinquency became the main lens through which people criticized comics.

[202] William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 330. Thorndike's son Robert, also a respected educational psychologist, penned an early defense of comic books against charges that they destroyed children's vocabulary. Using his father's lists of common words, Thorndike demonstrated that even among a small sample size of four comics, they contained 1000 words beyond the 1000 most common words, and altogether accounted for 3000 new, more advanced words. Thorndike also noted that the comics he read, while containing slang, were mostly written at a fifth-to-sixth grade reading level. "It appears, then, that the 'comics', whatever their other vices or virtues, do provide a substantial amount of reading experience at about the level of difficulty appropriate for the upper elementary school or even junior high school child." Robert L. Thorndike, "Words and the Comics," Journal of Experimental Education 10, no. 2 (December 1941), 113. See also Ash, *Objectionable*, 17-18.

Gruenberg subscribed to a Lockean view of child development, believing that children's actions generally took on no "moral significance," but that they had inherent instincts that needed avenues to be channeled.[203] Gruenberg was critical of overprotective parents, arguing that their "arbitrary Puritanism" repressed the ways that children could express themselves through play, and that most criticism of children's leisure pursuits "suggests every desire and impulse of being Satanic."[204]

Gruenberg's article, "What About the Comics Books", published in September 1948, attempted to score a middle ground in the comics debate, presenting a summary of points both in praise and in criticism of comic books, all the while underscoring their otherwise innocuous nature. On the pro-comics side, Gruenberg reiterated the liberal idea that comic books were the contemporary equivalent of folklore, relieving children's tensions in the violent postwar world, that the good guys always won and the bad guys always lost, and that comics appealed to children who either disliked reading or lacked reading skill. Gruenberg also dismissed criticisms of comics' "vulgar" nature as a question of taste, saying that it was pointless to dispute any medium of communication based on taste alone.[205]

The criticisms she summarized were familiar: overly violent, filled with crime and gave children unrealistic expectations, destroyers of good taste, and a distraction from better literature.[206] Gruenberg's ultimate plea was for parents to realize that like the dime novels they read as children, comics were a comparatively new medium and needed time to develop and shed

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[203] Quoted in Leach, *Land of Desire*, 220. Locke believed that children were "blank slates," in opposition to earlier Calvinist beliefs that children (as all people) were inherently sinful and the emergent genteel mentality in the American colonies that children were precious and needed to be pampered. For a more detailed examination of early American views of children's nature, see Philip Greven, *The Protestant Temperament*, Mark I. West, *Children, Culture, and Controversy*, and Steven Mintz, *Huck's Raft: A History of Childhood in America.*
[204] Ibid.
[205] Sidonie Matsner Gruenberg, "What About The Comics Books", *Woman's Day*, September 1948, 44-45.
[206] Ibid.

their more objectionable tendencies. She reminded parents that they needed to accept that they could not control every facet of their children's lives, and that there was no shame in calling on experts. Finally, Gruenberg opposed explicit censorship of comics but called on parents to take a more active interest in what their children consumed.[207]

Gruenberg's point of view reflected well the reasoning behind the Cincinnati Committee's evaluations, showcasing their utility not as a list of comics to be banned, but rather a guide for parents to be able to take a more active role in dictating their children's consumption. Undeterred by the response from *Woman's Day*, Murrell also wrote to *Good Housekeeping*, who rejected him, saying there was "no possibility" of a story about the Committee, and also to *TIME*, who were more polite than *Good Housekeeping*, but thanked Murrell for sending the information about the Committee along, saying that they "had no definite plans for a story."[208] Murrell's break came in July, when he wrote to Clara Savage Littledale, the progressive managing editor of *Parents' Magazine*.

Founded by publisher George Hecht with support from the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Fund, *Parents'* became by the postwar era the most popular educational periodical in the country.[209] Hecht, like Littledale and Gruenberg (the latter of whom also served as an editor), held firmly progressive beliefs about children and child study yet was more cautious about comic books than some of his contemporaries, though his views evolved considerably since the interview he gave criticizing comic books to *The New York Times* in 1941.

Hecht, like the Cincinnati Committee, now rode a sort of middle ground, disagreeing that comics as a medium were inherently bad and opposing official censorship but also criticizing

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[207] Gruenberg, "What About…" 118.
[208] Ash, *Objectionable*, 39.
[209] Steven Schlossman, "Perils of Popularization: The Founding of Parents' Magazine", *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development* 50, no. 4/5 (1985): 66.

"certain eminent child psychologists" that said all comics were good (in Hecht's view). Hecht also believed that educators would eventually key into the potential of comics to reach mass audiences and use them in their instruction.[210] *Parents'* retained a curious dichotomy throughout the postwar era, seen by the experts driving it as too commercial, while at the same time clearly offering a wide-ranging platform for progressive intellectual ideas about the development of children and a place where experts could reach the masses in an unpretentious way.

In July 1949, Littledale wrote back to Murrell and indicated the magazine's interest in an article: "It seems to me that there is an excellent short article here for this magazine telling what Cincinnati is doing. There has been so much expression of opinion for and against comic books in general, but your effort is among the first that goes about an intelligent evaluation."[211] Littledale offered $50 for a completed article and noted that Murrell should address the article specifically to parents, and to stress the importance of other communities following Cincinnati's model. Murrell's article recounted his sermon and the formation of the Committee, reiterating their policy of cooperating with publishers and distributors to seek improvement of comics rather than censorship.[212]

Littledale wrote back a few months later to accept Murrell's article but requested that the Committee perform a new evaluation as their previous comprehensive one was, by Littledale's count, very outdated given the speed with which new comics arrived on newsstands.[213] Littledale

[210] Hecht came from a wealthy family interested in progressive causes, and his mother was a well-known advocate for education. He attended New York's Ethical Culture school, known for its practice of offering extensive financial aid to ensure a diverse student experience. Schlossman, "Perils," 67-70. Quote on Hecht's later views from *Town Meeting of the Air: What's Wrong With The Comics?* March 2, 1948.
[211] Clara Savage Littledale to Murrell, 7/12/1949, CECBC.
[212] Jesse L. Murrell, "Cincinnati Does Something About the Comic Books," unpublished draft in Box 4, Folder 1: Articles. CECBC. "Furthermore, [the committee] decided it would seek no [censoring] laws or ordinances. If the publishers chose to ignore the appeals to make better comics, the committee would try to persuade the public to be selective in buying them."
[213] Letter from Clara Savage Littledale to Jesse Murrell, October 6, 1949, Box 3, Folder 1: Correspondence prior to 1950. CECBC.

offered to send the comics overlooked by the committee at *Parents*' expense, and offered Murrell a tantalizing bit of encouragement to get the new evaluation done so *Parents'* could run the article: "The publication of this article in PARENTS' MAGAZINE, which has a circulation of more than 1,200,000 throughout the United States will, I am sure, bring the most favorable kind of attention to your Cincinnati group. It will get Cincinnati talked about all over the nation as the one community that did something constructive and intelligent about comic books."[214]

The partnership that the Committee formed with *Parents*' was the most important aspect of their success in reaching a wide audience around the country. What they lacked in the organizational arena compared with the National Organization for Decent Literature they found through their partnership with *Parents'* magazine. Though they shared a similar organizational makeup from a generational standpoint as well as their heading by religious figures, and the NODL was able to cultivate relationships with powerful governmental figures where the Cincinnati Committee lacked that strength, the Cincinnati Committee had a greater success in reaching the public through *Parents'*, whose progressive and expert-informed editorial focus aligned with the Committee's stated goals of expert-influenced comic book improvement and parental education rather than censorship and simple moralizing. Through *Parents'*, the Cincinnati Committee transcended the purely local schema of decency groups, offering their critiques to a nationwide audience, while retaining the perceived trustworthiness of a group of citizens concerned with things that would scare small children.

The actions of the Cincinnati Committee, as Littledale estimated, provided an impetus for other community groups to embark on a similar program of rating comic books. In their December 1949 issue, *Christian Century*, a major voice of liberal Protestantism, ran an article

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[214] Littledale to Murrell, 10/6/49.

detailing the efforts of citizens in St. Paul, Minnesota to improve comic books for sale in the city.[215] The unnamed St. Paul committee held more of an evident public mandate, as it formed at the behest of a city council member who owned a drug store. Like the Cincinnati Committee, the St. Paul organization comprised religious organizations, educators, news distributors, and academics (in the St. Paul committee's case, the head of sociology from nearby Macalester College). Rev. Alton M. Motter, the article's author, was a representative on the committee for the St. Paul Councils of Churches.

Rather than release a detailed, regimented list of comic book rankings, the St. Paul committee opted instead to publish a list of comics they called "Best Buys," eliminating the need to display comics that they found objectionable. The criteria that they employed in making these decisions was overall like most of the other rudimentary codes of the day but went further in a few places. The St. Paul code placed special emphasis on a comic needing to "Portray home life based on a stable and permanent marriage bond where all members through normal give-and-take relationships develop as useful members of society."[216] And, like the Cincinnati Committee, the St. Paul committee sought to promote Americanism in its "Best Buy" comic books. To earn that stamp, a comic needed to "Emphasize the principles of our democracy as set forth in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States."[217] Promoting Americanism in comic books became crucial as the Cold War ramped up into the late 1940s and early 1950s, a common right-wing critique of comic books was that they served as unwitting communist tools by subverting the morals of American youth.[218]

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[215] Alton M. Motter, "How To Improve the Comics," *Christian Century*, October 12, 1949, 1199-1200.
[216] Ibid.
[217] Ibid.
[218] This also ties back to earlier criticisms of comic books that claimed they were full of political propaganda. As David Hajdu wrote about Sterling North's article, "The charges of vulgarity, prurience, and an absorption with

In a December follow-up to Motter's article, the *Century* contrasted the results of St. Paul's campaign with Cincinnati's November evaluation. The publication qualified the differences between the two evaluations as a result of Cincinnati's addition of aesthetic quality into the overall review and the fact that the two committees likely reviewed different magazines of a series owing to St. Paul doing their work in April and the Cincinnati Committee's new evaluation releasing in November.[219] Both committees gave their full approval (a No Objection rating from Cincinnati) to 60 comic books, while St. Paul approved 40 comics listed by Cincinnati as Some Objection and 22 rated by Cincinnati as Objectionable. St. Paul found *Famous Funnies*, rated by the Cincinnati Committee as Very Objectionable, to be fine for children's consumption.[220]

Settled into its routine of acquiring comic books, soliciting reviews, and publishing evaluations, the outreach and publicity drive for the committee slowed somewhat during 1950 as they only met officially during the summer to plan their now-yearly evaluations and enjoyed respect for their work garnered by their partnership with parents. For their 1950 evaluation, the committee began the practice of using interchangeable grades for their reviews, an A was equivalent to No Objection, while D indicated a comic was Very Objectionable. The committee also retained a detailed genre breakdown of the 340 comics they reviewed, demonstrating their commitment to understanding the wide diversity of comic book stories and the different audiences to which they appealed.

[Footnote 218 cont.] violence returned, and North's supporting description of comic-book pages as filled with portrayals of superhuman derring-do, titillating women, gunfire, and vigilantism was not inaccurate, broadly speaking. The reference to "cheap political propaganda" is less well founded; early comic books were mostly apolitical, although, in their penchant for bestowing great powers upon the weak, they could have struck a conservative such as North as suspiciously left-leaning." David Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008).

[219] "What Comic Books Pass Muster?" *Christian Century*, December 28, 1949.

[220] Ibid.

The largest singular genre of comics rated by the committee in 1950 were crime comics, though the committee factored in western comics (usually a separate category) into the overall count. 99 of the 340 comics, or just over 29 per cent, were listed as crime, perhaps as a way of having a soundbite to garner attention. Without the westerns, grouped as "Lawlessness in the West" (nineteen of thirty-six objectionable), "Cowboy Life in the West" (three of nine objectionable), and "Strife with the American Indians in the West" (nine of sixteen objectionable), actual crime comics (listed by the committee as "crime with detectives or police trying to interfere" and "crime as such") only comprised 38 of the 99 comics listed overall as crime. "Crime as such" did, however, have the highest rate of objection, with twenty-two of the twenty-six titles marked with a C or D grade.[221]

Romance comics, which emerged fully around the time the committee began its evaluations, comprised the second-largest group of comics in the 1950 evaluation at fifty-eight comics, or seventeen per cent. The committee separated romance comics into two sub-categories, romance and love. Of romance, they wrote "Although the border between love and romance in comic books is vague it does exist to some extent. There is more of flirtation and pretense in romance, perhaps."[222] The committee identified more love comics than romance comics, though they scored similarly with reviewers, who found four of the twenty romance comics objectionable and seven of the thirty-eight love comics objectionable.

Children's comics, whether featuring actual children as the main characters (i.e. *The Katzenjammer Kids*) or funny animal comics were the next largest group with fifty-four books, or about sixteen per cent. Expectedly, the committee found none of these books objectionable but marked nine of them Some Objection. The committee again employed a curious categorical

[221] "The Categories into Which Comic Books Fall," 1950 evaluation, CECBC.
[222] Ibid.

structure here, separating "young people" comics into its own category. These comics, better understood as teen comics (including mainstays *Archie, Pep Comics,* and *Buzzy*), were still quite wholesome (only one of thirty-nine titles objectionable), and, according to the committee, editorially distinct from romance comics. Had the committee combined the teen comics with the children's comics instead, the kiddie comics would have far outpaced the titles explicitly dealing in crime stories, but it was important to maintain appearances!

Next were "adventure comics," better understood as superhero comics, (ten of twenty-four objectionable) and "tropical jungles," defined by the committee as possessing "a dashing girl dressed meagerly and adventuring among the beasts and reptiles of some tropical jungle," (eight of twelve objectionable).[223] New to this evaluation were "mystery" comics, better understood as horror and science fiction comics. This evaluation was the first in which Entertaining Comics' "New Trend" books appeared in the Cincinnati Committee's evaluations. These books, produced by industry maverick Bill Gaines, broke with established convention and had more mature stories and writing intended for older teenage audiences. Five of these series, *Weird Science*, *Weird Fantasy, The Vault of Horror, The Crypt of Terror* (later *Tales from the Crypt*), and *The Haunt of Fear* appeared in the committee's evaluation, and all but *Weird Science* received objectionable or very objectionable grades.

The committee also made special mention of comics featuring primarily Black characters (simply "Negros" [*sic*]), which in this case were mostly biographical comics about baseball stars Roy Campanella, Larry Doby, Don Newcombe, and Jackie Robinson, as well as *Negro Romance*, a short-lived romance comic published by Fawcett Publications. These all received grades of No Objection save for *Negro Romance*, which received a grade of Some Objection.

[223] "The Categories into Which Comic Books Fall"

The committee marked nine other comic books as "educational or propaganda," these mostly religious books all received grades of No Objection, even though two of them, *Blood is the Harvest* and *If The Devil Would Talk*, were lurid Catholic anticommunist propaganda comics. The final thirty-one comics were too varied for the committee to effectively categorize, just over nine per cent. Five of these varied comics were objectionable, and two very objectionable.

By 1952, the publicity afforded the committee by their partnership with *Parents' Magazine* continued the process of cementing the group as erudite and trustworthy evaluators of comic books. In the meantime, however, the committee experienced the other side of their newfound exposure with fierce criticism of their efforts from readers of *Parents' Magazine*. A prominent letter came from Albert and Helen Cree of Schenectady, New York, who had two major "immediately apparent" qualms with the Cincinnati Committee's evaluation methods. The Crees's first objection was that the committee's scope was too narrow, evaluating comic books individually instead of in general, and not looking at the greater picture of youthful reading habits. The Crees proposed that it was more important to assess how much time children spent reading comics, rather than demarcate the content of individual comics.[224]

The second objection raised by the Crees concerned the subjective nature of the Objectionable criteria: "No standard is proposed to determine what make a comic book objectionable and what does not."[225] The Crees referred to the committee's policy of rating most Western comics Objectionable due to the treatment of Native Americans, with which the Crees agreed, noting "[i]t is important that our children not think poorly of the first Americans. . .

[224] Letter from Albert and Helen Cree to Parents Magazine, November 6, 1952. Box 3, Folder 2: Correspondence, 1951-1952. CECBC.
[225] Ibid.

evidently their horses are less objectionable as *Silver* and *Trigger* received "A" (No Objection) classifications!"[226]

What the Crees worried about, however, was the influence of love and romance comics on young girls such as their three daughters. They noted that the Cincinnati Committee found 94.7 of the "Love-Romance" books evaluated to be acceptable for children to read, but wondered whether the amount of love comics, as well as the "ideas of love, courtship and marriage" that they preached were healthy for young girls who did not yet have substantive courtship experiences.

Later scholars echoed the Cree's worries, notably Bradford Wright, who offered that the overarching theme in the deluge of love comics during this time was to encourage girls to marry young and fulfill expectations of 1950s domesticity.[227] Pointing to the committee's rating of *Classics Illustrated*, as well as *Beany* (a comic adaptation of the children's puppet show *Time for Beany*) as Objectionable, the Crees cast doubt on the basis by which the Cincinnati Committee evaluated its comic books. "We believe," the Crees said to end their letter, "[*Parents' Magazine*] did not exercise good judgment in publishing this article, which is, not only incomplete and inconclusive, but is also very misleading."[228]

By the early 1950s, organized decent literature boards began to proliferate around the country, but as with the Cincinnati Committee, they were especially strong in the Midwest. One particularly well-documented collection of groups originated in Northeastern Wisconsin, forming a loose confederation of so-called "COMBAT" groups, which stood for Committee On Movies, Books, Audio, and Television. The progenitor of these groups originally formed in Green Bay in

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[226] Ibid.
[227] Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 130.
[228] Albert and Helen Cree to *Parents'*.

early 1953 and originally named themselves the "Committee for Better Radio, Films, Television, and Periodicals". Somewhat the inverse of the Cincinnati Committee, the Green Bay COMBAT group drew heavily on the large Green Bay area Catholic population to fill out its ranks, and also in the inverse of Cincinnati, a woman led the group.[229] The initial membership of the Green Bay COMBAT comprised chair Elizabeth Arvey, a member of the Green Bay Catholic Women's Club alongside one of her fellow Women's Club members, Rev. E.T. Phillips of nearby De Pere's First Congregational Church, R. D. Mulroy, a principal at a local Catholic boy's high school, and Vera McCracken, director of Green Bay's YWCA.[230]

Due in part to the hard work of Arvey, a past president of the Wisconsin Council of Catholic Women, COMBAT succeeded in garnering acclaim and support from regional and national Catholic organizations. Noll's paper, *Our Sunday Visitor*, gave them favorable press in 1955, which led to the group, in Arvey's words, receiving "inquiries" from around the country.[231] Despite the group being nominally interdenominational, its efforts and viewpoints were fundamentally Catholic. The group (despite protestations of not being a censor board) used the objectionable reading lists from the NODL to pressure newsstands to remove objectionable materials with the promise of an award placard and favorable mention in parish publications. Despite having movies in the organization name, COMBAT did not attempt to evaluate movies, using instead the ratings provided by the Legion of Decency.[232] The Green Bay chapter of COMBAT also enlisted the services of eighty-seven students from nearby St. Norbert College in order to perform their newsdealer visits. The organization also came late to the panic over

[229] For detailed citations on the Green Bay COMBAT group, see Evan R. Ash, "COMBAT on the Homefront: The Cold War Decency Crusade Strikes Green Bay", *Voyageur: The Northeast Wisconsin Historical Review* (Winter 2021).
[230] Committee for Better Films Meets Monday," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, February 25, 1953, 12.
[231] Elizabeth Arvey to Thomas J. Fitzgerald, March 5, 1956. CUA.
[232] Jack Fink, untitled COMBAT feature, *Our Sunday Visitor*, May 15, 1955.

comics, holding most of their anti-comics events and speakers in 1955 and 1956 after the introduction of the Comics Code.

The Green Bay chapter of COMBAT is the most well-documented between coverage in the local newspaper and the records of both Noll and the NODL, but it is clear that the group's message resounded with other Wisconsin communities of the period. The NODL papers contained the bylaws for a chapter of COMBAT in Wauwatosa, a suburb of Milwaukee, and the OSV spotlight indicated that the organization had chapters in the larger cities of Chippewa Falls, La Crosse, Manitowoc, Fond du Lac, and Appleton. Despite the self-important tone of COMBAT's periodicals, its influence, unlike that of the Cincinnati Committee, was largely limited to the local level. Like the NODL, from which it undoubtedly drew much of its inspiration and structure, the COMBAT groups had too broad of a focus to be truly effective toward the improvement of the medium and its main strengths were in dealer intimidation. Like the Cincinnati Committee, the groups (or at least the Green Bay chapter) continued to exist until the late 1960s and early 1970s, with COMBAT entertaining the turn in decency movements to organizing against pornography. The Cincinnati Committee declined to undertake such pursuits.

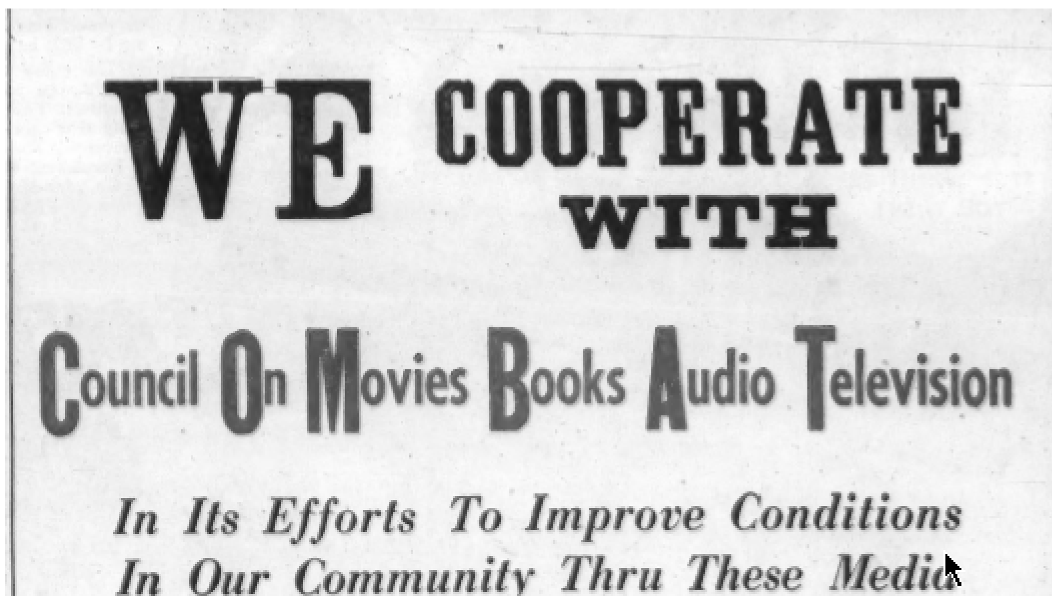

Figure 5: The "Award" given to cooperating news dealers by COMBAT with author's mouse cursor.

As the 1950s wore on, the Cincinnati Committee attempted to capitalize on their own favorable press by contacting influential voices in the anti-comics movement while weathering increasingly strong critiques of their own work. For 1953, the group met on February 6 for the first of its two yearly meetings, deciding to nod toward the Korean War effort, adding a new criterion to the Objectionable part of the Morbid Emotionality section that read "Stories or frames which tend to affect the war effort of our nation adversely."[233]

The committee also combined some old criteria into Morbid Emotionality's 4th Objectionable criteria, which now read "anything having a sadistic implication or suggesting use of black magic."[234] At this meeting, Murrell also read a letter from New York sociologist Harvey Zorbaugh, editor of *Educational Sociology* and a sponsor of serious pro-comics scholarship in his journal during 1944 and 1949. Zorbaugh wrote to the committee to encourage attendance at a "Workshop on the Cartoon Narrative" held at New York University.

Zorbaugh and his graduate students were interested in questions pertaining to emotional needs of children and how comic books fulfilled those needs, how comic books shaped children's worldviews, the effect of comic books on the ideals of children, whether or not violent content made children anxious or conditioned them to be criminals, whether or not comic books damaged children's reading abilities, and if they hampered the social skills of children in any way.[235] Murrell could not attend due to a previous engagement, and the committee elected to send Hildegard Benner, the committee's secretary, in his stead.

George Hecht, the publisher of *Parents'*, passed on a letter to Murrell in late November that constituted the fiercest criticism the committee would face in a piece of mail. According to

[233] Hildegarde Benner, Meeting minutes, February 6, 1953. Box 2, Folder 21: Minutes, 1948-1979. CECBC.
[234] Ibid.
[235] Letter from Harvey Zorbaugh to the Cincinnati Committee, February 16th, 1953. Box 1, Folder 6: 1953 evaluation. CECBC.

Hecht, the letter, which he had held onto since August, was addressed to their editorial advisor, Oscar Dystel, and penned by a man named Vernon Pope who worked as a publicist for National Comics Publications. Pope, who appeared to know Dystel outside of a professional scope, impressed that he did not think *Parents'* should continue to reprint the Cincinnati Committee's evaluations, questioning "the competence of this group to evaluate reading material for children," and wondering if they really were "trained to intelligently evaluate comics magazines."[236] Pope objected further to the lack of information regarding the committee's 84 reviewers, citing no description of their backgrounds, what training they underwent before evaluating comic books, or what they thought constituted good reading for children.

Another of Pope's criticisms, raised many times by this point, were the subjective nature of the criteria, namely the provisions against "unconventional behavior," arguing that some of America's most cherished figures could be criticized on those grounds. Pope also opposed the new criteria against "adversely affecting the war effort," and the criteria against "undermining American folkways." Cautious and critical of *Parents'* for readily accepting the Cincinnati Committee's views on patriotism and other social views, Pope pointed to what he saw as an inconsistency in the Cincinnati Committee's rating of *The Lone Ranger* as Objectionable while rating at the same time his companion Tonto's comic No Objection despite the books being "identical in concept and execution."[237] Pope also expressed his confusion over Objectionable ratings of *Action Comics, Buzzy, Lone Ranger, Famous Funnies,* and *Superboy*.

Emboldened by his committee's success, Murrell wrote to Fredric Wertham on December 11, hoping to create a partnership. Murrell complimented Wertham's work and spoke of the committee's formation, noting in a postscript the "extensive contact" with groups around the

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[236] Letter from Vernon Pope to Oscar Dystel, August 26th, 1953. Box 3, Folder 3: Correspondence, 1953.
[237] Pope to Dystel.

nation afforded the committee by *Parents'*.[238] Wertham replied that he had known of the committee and its work for some time. However, as Wertham would express in this letter and one more time in the future, he vehemently disagreed with Murrell and the Committee on a philosophical level. Wertham objected to the committee's range of classifications, saying that there was no such thing as a comic with some objection or no objection—according to Wertham, comics were "not only debased but definitely harmful."[239]

All these developments, coupled with the publication and rave reviews of Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*, his *magnum opus* against comic books, brought the issue to a head in April 1954 with hearings orchestrated by the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency set to specifically respond to comic books.[240] The hearings themselves took place on April 21, 22 and June 4, 1954 in New York City, chosen for its proximity to the comics industry. New Jersey senator Robert C. Hendrickson chaired the committee, which comprised Senator Thomas C. Hennings, Jr. of Missouri and Senator Estes Kefauver of Tennessee. Kefauver would wrest the chairman position of the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency after the 1954 midterm elections, when Democrats won a majority in the Senate. The committee's attorneys and executive director Richard Clendenen, of the United States Children's Bureau, rounded out the investigative team. Clendenen's inclusion was meaningful, as it signaled the government's trust of the evidence-based expert evaluations of comics, rather than the alarmist fearmongering by law enforcement, typified by J. Edgar Hoover.

The clearest indication of the Cincinnati Committee's influence came during the 1954 hearings as its materials were both used in preparatory research by the subcommittee as well as

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[238] Letter from Jesse Murrell to Fredric Wertham, December 11, 1953. Box 3, Folder 3: Correspondence, 1953.
[239] Letter from Fredric Wertham to Jesse Murrell, December 29, 1953. Box 118, Fredric Wertham Papers. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.
[240] A detailed examination of the 1954 hearings follows in Chapter 3.

directly referenced during the hearings themselves. In the research files for the Senate subcommittee, the author of a brief titled "The Rise of the Comics" cited the work of the Cincinnati Committee and some of Murrell's writing alongside other references to the development of comics to introduce the industry to senators who may have been unfamiliar with it.[241] The box also contained stacks of the committee's June/July 1953 evaluations, so that senators would be able to familiarize themselves with the rationale and changes in comics over the previous year. To introduce his sixth exhibit, Clendenen said "I also have an item from the Committee on Evaluation of Comic Books in Cincinnati, Ohio, which contains a rather detailed evaluation of comics presently upon their standards, these evaluations are related to a certain criteria which they have developed in relation to what they believe are the effects of these materials upon youngsters."[242]

The first bit of material presented by Clendenen was not one of the committee's direct evaluations, but a 1953 list of publishers, their comics, and the grades assigned to each book by the Cincinnati Committee. This list comprised 418 comic books from 106 publishers and used the Committee's replacement grades of A through D to indicate their levels of objection. However, in a different practice from their normal evaluations, the Cincinnati Committee listed the addresses of publishers in that document; a practice that Henry Schultz criticized them for years earlier, worrying that publication of addresses would lead to less tempered voices harassing comics publishers.

[241] "The Rise of the Comics," Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency records, box 211. National Archives.
[242] "Juvenile Delinquency (Comic Books)", Hearings before the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1954), 35. [Hereinafter Juvenile Delinquency Hearings]

Also included by Clendenen in his first round of Cincinnati Committee materials was the committee's 1953 evaluation, which utilized 84 reviewers to review 418 comic books. In addition to the objection levels, this evaluation listed the frequency of the comic's publication as either Monthly, Bimonthly, Quarterly, or One-shot. Of the 418 comics reviewed by the committee, 27% of the comics, mostly kids' comics and cartoons rated No Objection (including EC's Frontline Combat, previously Very Objectionable), 22% of the comics, the more tame love, war, and crime comics were rated Some Objection, 34% of the comics, namely the seedier western, crime, war and love titles were rated Objectionable, while the remaining 16%, largely horror, jungle, and crime comics (indeed there were no comics with "crime" in the name outside of VO), made the Very Objectionable designation. This evaluation also included a copy of the Cincinnati Committee's "Criteria for Evaluating Comic Books".

Clendenen's second piece of evidence was the Committee's original evaluation from 1949, which provided at that time the most comprehensive history of the group, alongside its first and largest evaluation. Despite Murrell embellishing some details (Jewish groups were only involved a little in the beginning and then not at all), the article effectively communicated the tenets of the Cincinnati Committee to its most important audience yet—the federal government. In the short article, Murrell made it clear that his group was not interested in censorship, nor did it believe in "wholesale condemnation" of comic books:

> Some comics tend to stimulate unwholesome sexual and social attitudes. Many comics show scenes and situations that tend to frighten children and to leave gruesome pictures in their minds, affecting them not only at the moment or soon after, but also creating more lasting phobias and fears. There is the danger that a child who likes the comics will spend all his time or too large a proportion of it in reading the comics and neglect good books; or read comics when he ought to be active and out of doors. While it is difficult to trace all the causes for juvenile bad conduct today, it is logical to believe that it may have been accentuated by the reading of some of the comic books.[243]

[243] Jesse Murrell, "Cincinnati Rates The Comic Books," reprinted from Parents' Magazine in Juvenile Delinquency Hearings, 45-47.

Despite some now-legendary theatrics from the hearings (involving Wertham and embattled publisher Bill Gaines), members of the Senate subcommittee ultimately concluded that they could not definitively say that comic books caused juvenile delinquency, which, they believed, stemmed from more varied sources. The effect from within the comics industry was drastically different. Like the Gathings committee, the comic books hearings brought forth a massive chilling effect, and the industry immediately sought out self-regulation, realized in the Comics Code of the newly-organized Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA), which led to a downturn in the fortunes of the Cincinnati Committee. Chaired by Charles F. Murphy, a New York judge known for his work with juvenile cases, the Comics Code, overseen by the Comics Code Authority (CCA), constituted the most stringent form of content regulation on any medium in American history. The Code's criteria as adopted in 1954 forced companies to all but erase any hints of violence and sex and mandated their stories to always feature the triumph of good over evil and to treat law and authority with respect.[244]

For much of 1954, critical mail continued to pour into the Cincinnati Committee's post office box. On August 2, 14-year old Michael Finkelstein of Saratoga Springs, NY wrote to the committee to inform them he did not think their ratings were fair. Finkelstein said that he read comics for relaxation, but he also read "good novels" as well. Finkelstein also admitted that some "books like murders" (understood to be crime comics) were objectionable, but specifically criticized the committee's criteria against "bleeding at the mouth and face" by way of saying "Movies for children show cowboys bleeding because of a wound or a fight." Finkelstein also infers that the committee took satiric magazines like Mad and Panic too seriously, and added that

[244] Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 112.

fairytales, too, had monsters in them and adults did not have their brains altered by Mother Goose or Brothers Grimm. The boy's letter ends with a prescient thought: "The whole of American youth are not as imature [sic] as you think."[245]

At their October 10th meeting, Murrell informed the committee of Judge Murphy's appointment, and Dr. Wheeler recommended that Murrell contact Murphy and the Comics Code in hopes of ascertaining a list of publishers subject to Code regulation and a copy of the criteria that the CCA intended to use. Wheeler also recommended the committee search for a lawyer to serve on the executive committee, which became his project for the subsequent weeks. Joan Bollenbacher, Dr. Weaver's replacement, asked that her affiliation with the Cincinnati Board of Education not be disclosed in future articles, as she was not serving at the board's request. Mrs. Bollenbacher also recommended that the committee take steps to incorporate itself in order to ease finances. Murrell and Miller agreed to solicit local groups for an endowment, while Mary Bradstreet, the treasurer, said she would seek aid from the Junior Chamber of Commerce.[246]

Later, on October 27, an embattled and enfeebled Bill Gaines penned a letter to the committee to propose a partnership. Gaines, who by this point was largely on his way out of the comics industry given his disastrous appearance at the Senate hearings (detailed further in the next chapter) acknowledged the boundary-pushing nature of his comics: "As you may know, we are the publishers of a number of comics magazines which have received strong criticism by your Committee."[247] According to Gaines, as a response to the criticisms levied against him, he

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[245] Michael Finkelstein to Jesse Murrell, August 2, 1954. Box 3, Folder 4: Correspondence, 1954. CECBC.
[246] Hildegard Benner, Meeting minutes, October 4, 1954, Box 2, Folder 21: Minutes, 1948-1979. CECBC.
[247] For greater context of Gaines' remarks, see Peter Kihss, "No Harm In Horror, Comics Issuer Says," New York Times, April 22, 1954. Quote from Bill Gaines to Jesse Murrell, October 27, 1954. Box 3, Folder 4: Correspondence, 1954. CECBC.

was pursuing a company editorial standard that "will adhere to the so-called code and then some," completely abandoning the horror comics he garnered controversy for.[248]

What Gaines proposed to the Cincinnati Committee, then, was a cooperative editorial endeavor:

> Your Committee and I have a common purpose. We want to provide good clean comics for the people who buy 'em and read 'em. I wonder therefore if your Committee would try an experiment with our magazines. We should like you to study our comics, and then, in addition to giving them your ratings, to tell us in specifics what you believe is wrong with them and what can be done to improve them from your standpoint. It isn't enough to know that something is partially objectionable because of "costume" unless we know what page and on what panel the offensive costume appears. And so forth.[249]

Murrell did not respond until November 9, but committee secretary Hildegarde Benner left a side note next to the sentence "what can be done to improve them" on Gaines' letter that displayed the committee's mindset towards Gaines and his EC Comics: "They should be burned!"[250] Murrell's letter offered a more conciliatory tone, telling Gaines that he "derived genuine pleasure" at Gaines' push to clean up comics, and that he was "even more pleased at your apparent zeal to produce good comic books, even though you say you have been pushed out of [the CMAA]."[251] Murrell offered to evaluate the books, but reminded Gaines that the group's primary focus was on children's comics, not the more adult fare Gaines published in the past: "We are working against comics that would frighten little children, and cause them even to have bad dreams in their sleep."[252]

However, at the group's meeting that same day, the committee apparently declined to partake in Gaines' idea, despite Murrell's support of the project. The group's search for a lawyer

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248 Ibid.
249 Gaines to Murrell.
250 Ibid.
251 Ibid.
252 Ibid.

also came to fruition during this meeting, as Mary Bradstreet introduced George Allen, who was to assist the committee in becoming incorporated. Allen would also serve briefly as the committee's president after Murrell's death until his own death in 1977. Joan Bollenbacher proposed a new procedure for evaluating comics, which involved a large-scale meeting at a central location rather than the individual mail-and-return system the committee used for the past number of years. Wheeler offered space at Xavier University, which the committee accepted.[253]

The committee, acting at the suggestion of Parents' Magazine, opted to delay the year's evaluation until Murrell returned from a trip to New York, where he met with Murphy and the staff of the CCA, but also with Gaines' staff as well as some higher-ups at Dell Comics. Meeting first with Gaines and some of his staff, Murrell listened to their story of founding and departing from the CMAA. According to Murrell, Gaines was "timid about meeting me all alone," and so Murrell spoke with Gaines and his business manager, Lyle Stuart. According to the EC staffers and Murrell's journal, the CMAA meeting Gaines called had "no orderly procedure. . .certainly no following Robert's Rules of Order. Four of the bigger corporations just took it over."[254] Murrell next went with Stuart to the office building of Judge Murphy, where he quickly understood the judge's personality: "He is all business there and orders his help around truly as a 'Czar' might."[255]

While observing the rating process, Murrell noted that "[the Comics Code] is even more strict than ours in the field of sex and romance, but more liberal than ours in the field of crime."[256] Murrell attributed that discrepancy to what he perceived as an overrepresentation of

[253] Hildegarde Benner, Meeting minutes, November 9, 1954. Box 2, Folder 21: Minutes, 1948-1979. CECBC.
[254] Jesse Murrell, "Report on my Trip to New York, December 8-9, 1954," undated. Box 3, Folder 4: Correspondence, 1954. CECBC.
[255] Ibid.
[256] Ibid.

Catholics in the CCA, and spoke of Murphy's authoritarian bent in desexualizing comments and his formation of hostile attitudes towards complaining artists. Murrell ended his first day in New York with a Waldorf dinner at the behest of Archie Comics president John Goldwater, whom Murrell called "quite a conversationalist." Goldwater was apparently pleased that all his Archie comics received A ratings, a feat no other publisher could brag of.[257]

The next day, Murrell met with George Hecht, founder and president of *Parents'* Magazine. Hecht introduced Murrell to the small amount of staff present, reiterated how grateful *Parents'* Magazine was for their partnership, and agreed to keep reproducing the Cincinnati Committee's evaluations while increasing the group's payment by $50. Murrell then met with George Delacorte, president of Dell Publishing, and several of his executive staff members. According to Murrell, "this was one of the most friendly and sympathetic groups I have ever talked with. It was evident that they think highly of us and I discovered that they have watched our rating every year and have tried desperately to measure up to our code."[258]

The Dell staffers expressed appreciation for the Committee's evaluation standards, calling it "stiff" but agreeing to the necessity of an editorial code. Dell, after all, did not join the CMAA as they felt that their in-house editorial code was stricter than the CMAA's, not to mention that they chiefly published Disney comics and other youngster-oriented comics. However, a positive material advantage garnered by Murrell from this meeting was a series of donations from Cincinnati publishing companies, called in as favors by Delacorte after he learned of the committee's non-profit nature. Said Murrell, "[the Dell executives] were amazed that we have been able to get people to do all this without pay."[259]

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[257] Ibid.
[258] Murrell trip report.
[259] Ibid.

The next month, Dell's Cincinnati representative visited the Committee and informed them of Dell's desire to have no comics fall below and A or B rating, drawing up a pre-publication agreement much like Gaines'. The committee again waffled on doing this preemptive reviewing, but decided to show more kindness to the wholesome Dell than they did to Bill Gaines and EC Comics, opting to delay a decision on the matter until Dell could outline a more specific policy.[260] The actions of Dell, as well as EC Comics, to solicit pre-publication ratings from the Cincinnati Committee served as a testament to the Committee's perception as an effective and respected form of comic book regulation. Since the Comics Code was designed for public viewing of comic books and parents understood the criteria of the seal, that Dell and EC saw the respectability and standards of the Cincinnati Committee as higher than the Comics Code speaks to the ultimate significance and national scope of the Cincinnati Committee.

Since the committee began the process of incorporating in 1955, Murrell laid out some ground rules for the group once its charter was complete: membership in the organization was to be limited to the current members of the Executive Committee, that group trustees were also to be considered Executive Committee members, that reviewers were not to be considered direct members, and that the group would only have three officers: a president, secretary, and treasurer. Continuing the committee's declension, the committee decided in April that they would only meet "when needed" rather than on a regular schedule, and Murrell informed the committee that he was looking to resign his position as chairman at the recommendation of his doctor. The group elected not to dismiss him entirely, but to reassign some of the more strenuous duties, which Benner noted as the conducting of reviews.[261]

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[260] Hildegard Benner, Meeting minutes, January 10, 1955. Box 2, Folder 21: Minutes, 1948-1979. CECBC.
[261] Ibid.

Later that year, owing to the committee's reassignment of Murrell's reviewing duties, the group decided in June to form a subcommittee consisting of Murrell, Bollenbacher, Wheeler, and Benner in order to find "a person qualified to conduct and coordinate the next review."[262] By September, the group had failed to come up with any candidates for the position of review coordinator, and delayed a decision until the next month's meeting. Benner noted at this meeting the recent passage of an Ohio law which criminalized the sale of crime comics to minors, punishable by a fine of up to $1000 or up to six months in jail. Interestingly, the bill allowed for the portrayal of violence, corrupt morals, or unusual cruelty in historical or religious contexts. Proposed in May by Cincinnati's Republican Ohio House Representative Gilbert Bettman, Jr., the bill extended the same provisions to the showing of violent movies to minors.

By November, the committee had still not found a suitable candidate to conduct a larger review but did complete a cursory spot check of 32 comics, finding 14 objectionable. At that month's meeting, Dr. Bills asked the committee to think about whether they saw themselves as an "action committee" or an "evaluating committee."[263] By their January 1956 meeting, Murrell relayed that a Mrs. Donald Crone, recommended to the committee by Wheeler, would take up the clerical duties related to the facilitation of the yearly review, opting to pay her a lump sum of $200.

In sum, 1956 saw the end of the bulk of the Cincinnati Committee's time making large contributions to the goal of regulating comics. Murrell wrote a congratulatory letter to his reviews noting the impact of both their work as well as the massive effect of the Comics Code in cleaning up comic books.[264] However, despite Murrell's assurance that their pursuits would

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[262] Hildegarde Benner, Meeting minutes, June 8, 1955, Box 2, Folder 21: Minutes, 1948-1979. CECBC.
[263] Hildegarde Benner, Meeting minutes, November 30, 1955, Box 2, Folder 21: Minutes, 1948-1979. CECBC.
[264] Jesse Murrell, Letter to Committee Reviewers, April 19, 1956. Box 3, Folder 6: Correspondence, 1956 CECBC

continue, they were essentially complete. At the committee's November 27th meeting that year, Wheeler proposed that in 1957 the committee opt to do a smaller "spot-check" rather than a general review. In March 1957, *Parents'* reached out to the committee for comprehensive article, but Murrell declined due to the committee's decision not to furnish a complete evaluation.

A month later, Ann Feeney, an editorial assistant at Parents' Magazine, reached out to Murrell to officially end the 9-year partnership between Parents' and the Cincinnati Committee:

> We have considered your last letter for several weeks now – and finally decided that the Committee on Evaluation of Comic Books has done such a good job – it's practically put itself out of work! Comics are certainly much better now than when the Committee was first created. Because of this and because we constantly have a battle for space in the magazine, we feel that we should by-pass the comics evaluation this year. We certainly appreciate the wonderful cooperation you and the Committee have given us and if we can do any service in the future, don't hesitate to let us know.[265]

Shortly after Feeney's letter arrived, the committee released a statement to announce officially the end of its comprehensive evaluations. In the words of the committee, they stopped because of a decline in reader interest and a general improvement in the editorial content of comic books. They relayed the results of their November-May 1956 spot check, which showed a 42% to 58% non-objectionable/objectionable rating.[266]

After greatly reducing their comics workload, the committee turned some of their attention to the campaign against "obscene (pornographic) magazines," hosting local judge John Keefe and Charles Keating, a fellow Cincinnatian and founder of Citizens for Decent Literature who attempted to enroll the committee in their pursuits.[267] The committee neglected to give an answer right away but rather chose to form a conference of groups interested in preventing

[265] Letter from Ann Feeney to Jesse Murrell, April 26, 1957. Box 3, Folder 7: Correspondence, 1957-1958
[266] "The Committee on Evaluation of Comic Books, Cincinnati, Reports" attachment on ibid.
[267] Keating, is, of course, better known for other work.

children from reading pornographic literature. In May of 1957, Mary Bradstreet retired as treasurer, and Hildegarde Benner took her place in the new role of secretary/treasurer.

After ceasing their evaluations in 1956, the committee met sparingly, often holding meetings at a dinner party or aboard lawyer George Allen's boat. When comic books were spot-checked and included in the minutes, there was no discussion of the specific content, nor any objections listed. The group released retrospective newsletters in 1961 and 1962 that compared the comic books of that time to those ten years earlier, but there is no indication that these circulated anywhere outside of the committee's mailing lists.

The gradual move to a direct-market system of selling comic books rather than a wholesale one also made acquiring the books harder for private bodies like the Cincinnati Committee. Spurred in part by the emergence of television as a medium for the entertainment of children but also economic woes, the direct-market system represented a way for companies to shift risk off themselves onto smaller, independent buyers, but also for fans to be able to consume comics with other aficionados. With the direct-market-influenced shift away from newsstand and drugstore comic availability, the famed Comics Code Authority Seal of Approval grew increasingly arbitrary alongside the development of candidly mature stories and "mature reader" imprints. The slow death of the Comics Code began in earnest.

Like the Comics Code, the Cincinnati Committee, too, slowly began to die. Though academic Arthur Bills died in 1966, his role was always minor and thus did not greatly impact the committee. However, the deaths of both Murrell, a driving force of the group for so long, as well as archivist and founding member Ernest Miller during 1972 proved too much for the group to recover from. 1974 saw the deaths of original treasurer Mary Bradstreet and academic Charles Wheeler, while George Allen, the group's lawyer and second president, died in 1977. The

following year, Benner, Bollenbacher, and the wives of Allen and Miller decided to shutter the group due to having a "fraction of its original members." At their final meeting the next May, the same four women opted to dispose of the group's assets by buying a signature brick in the Public Library's expansion in honor of Murrell and donating the remaining $591 to a scholarship fund. Then, as she had signed off on the minutes for the committee's very first meeting in 1948, Hildegarde Benner wrote "The meeting then adjourned, sine die."

The Cincinnati Committee, in one regard, was not unique. They were one of legion "decent literature" groups that abounded in the country between 1940 and 1960, found in nearly any community to guard children against the depredations of modern culture. Yet, in another, they are undoubtedly the most influential of these decency groups. They lacked the powerful political alliances of groups like the NODL but managed to stay clear of the legal entanglements that afflicted the organizing actions of the Catholic groups.

Their partnership with *Parents*' magazine represented a progressive embrace of their reform-minded critique, and the (mostly) widespread adoration for its critiques, as well as their acceptance by the government during the 1954 hearings pointed to its credibility. They also, against the tactics of others involved in the anti-comics movement, actively sought editorial cooperation from the comics that they sought to improve. Though the lack of distinct review sheets in their archival collections cuts out a great part of understanding their views on more specific comics and removes an explanation for why they marked some seemingly innocuous comics as objectionable, the overall palatability of their critique speaks for itself. They showed, ultimately, that ordinary citizens could and did exert their voices to great effect in the anti-comics debate and it was not just nationally-recognized experts and politicians that defined the terms and stakes of the anti-comics movement, reinforcing their progressive concern with the

regulation of violent content, rather than the apocalyptic concerns about sex that so many other participants in the debate showed.

Using the Cincinnati Committee as a case study also helps draw the start point of the anti-comics movement back further, showing that it was more than the actions of Wertham and the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency that defined the path of anti-comics criticism. As was true with many facets of these movements, they were rife with contradiction: morally conservative older people raised in a world of letters reacting to a world increasingly comprised of images. They approached comics with caution and candor, not slipping into the alarmist conspiratorial critiques that so many of their contemporaries levied but trusting in a progressive vision of moderation that allowed their critiques to advance farther than any contemporary group. They may have been put out of work by the Comics Code, but they did more work than perhaps any other group prior to the establishment of the comics code to generate a sophisticated critique of comics, and parents around the nation clearly applauded them for these efforts.

Chapter 3: Comics on Trial: State and Federal Investigations and Legal Challenges to Comics

The reading of crime "comics" stimulate sadistic and masochistic attitudes and interfere with the normal development of the normal development of sexual habits in children and produce abnormal sexual tendencies in adolescents.

—New York State Joint Legislative Committee to Study the Publication of Comics

Efforts by community organizations to organize around the problem of comic books were a large and important part of the controversy surrounding comics at midcentury but were by no means the only way that Americans interfaced with the problem of comic books. An equally important counterweight to local efforts to contain comic books were actions taken by state and federal officials to investigate and criticize comic books. The actions of these government officials and other people in positions of high power represented an unprecedented swing toward a reactionary view of culture, lacking only the formal state censorship boards that existed for motion pictures prior to the development of the Motion Picture Production Code and foreshadowing the repressive conservative cultural politics of the McCarthy era.

Though the prospects for official regulation of comic books were slimmer than those of the regulation of film (largely thanks to the *Winters v. New York* decision detailed in the previous chapter), regulation of comics was the ultimate aim of the anti-comics movement, and politicians subjected comic books to more organized and official scrutiny than films ever received because of concurrent fears about juvenile delinquency, the pressures of the emergent Cold War, and the fact that comics were ubiquitous and ubiquitously read by what they saw as the most impressionable segment of society–children. In this chapter, I present an expanded view of governmental and legal interventions against comic books. Most accounts of the anti-comics movement highlight only the hearings of the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile

Delinquency as the apotheosis of the anti-comics movement. By re-examining the 1954 hearings as well as exploring some of the earlier federal and state hearings as well as court cases concerning comic book regulation, a more complete picture of the debate, its state, and its actors emerges and unveils a peculiar dialectical tension in Cold War culture.

While the logic of Richard Hofstadter's "paranoid style" was evident in the political culture of anti-comics activists (and most pronounced in the 1952 Gathings Committee hearings) with the wide, amorphous, and apocalyptic moral threats they preached about, there was, especially in the legal realm, a concerted pushback against repressive legislation on numerous Constitutional grounds. But this too had a Cold War context. Mary Dudziak illustrates in *Cold War Civil Rights* that the United States was keenly aware of its global perception in the early years of the Cold War, and abided by ever-narrowing standards of acceptable discourse and the knowledge that those nefarious Russkies would pounce on any opportunity to highlight American hypocrisy.[268] Undoubtedly for a country that so proudly and pompously discerned itself from the Soviets on the merits of God-given free speech and expression, the proliferation of laws banning various types of literature might expose them as utter hypocrites.

Legal challenges, too, continued to play a significant role in shaping the direction and rhetoric of the anti-comics movement in these later years, though these cases play a much smaller role in the historical understanding than do the governmental investigations. Following in the tradition of the *Ulysses* case, as well as *Hannegan v. Esquire* and *Winters v. New York*, there were several cases during the 1950s that further constrained efforts to censor comic books

[268] Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 12.

and represented at least a partial corrective to the otherwise repressive tendencies expressed by government officials during these years.

The most crucial of these cases was *Butler v. Michigan* in 1957, which forbade the banning of literature on the grounds that it was harmful to minors. That case, I argue, marked the formal end of the anti-comics movement and provided a signpost for conservative forces to direct their energy to the anti-obscenity campaigns of the 1960s and 1970s.[269] In the subsequent years, the legal landscape shifted again with the decision in *Roth v. United States* in 1957, which provided a more narrow test for obscenity, still the only legal recourse to removing objectionable materials from circulation. Cases in 1958, 1959, and 1960, all at the state supreme court or appeals court level, continually struck down repressive anti-comics laws passed in the preceding years.

While these governmental investigations of comic books often yielded results that did not fully please anti-comics crusaders, they elevated criticisms of comic books to a national level and gave them the important rhetorical backing of the government. Estes Kefauver's original exploration into comics from his 1950 hearings on organized crime showed a professional consensus that there was not a demonstrable connection between comic book reading and juvenile delinquency, and an overwhelming feeling that banning comic books would have a negligible effect on controlling juvenile crimes. Ezekiel Gathings' 1952 hearings on objectionable printed material took a wider and more reactionary view of print culture, extended to more than just comics, and proposed far reaching, authoritarian solutions to indecent literature that members of Gathings' own committee harshly criticized. Even the famed Senate

[269] Zurcher and Kirkpatrick, et al. note 1968 as an approximate start for one of the decency movements they studied in what is likely the landmark sociological work of decency movements, *Citizens for Decency: Antipornography Crusades as Status Defense*. Zurcher and Kirkpatrick, *Citizens for Decency*, 39-47.

Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency hearings in 1954, which subjected comic books to the strictest scrutiny of any governmental investigation and had widely-covered, sensational testimony, eventually concluded that a correlation between comic reading and juvenile delinquency was impossible to state and that aggravating factors in juvenile delinquency were more varied, dealing a blow to the ultimate aims of the anti-comics movement and those who sought to see comics regulated on a national scale.

Critics of comics began to push harder for regulation of comic books after the end of World War II with the spreading of the writings and speeches of Wertham and others. According to a summary article by Henry Schultz, an attorney who served as chair of New York City's Board of Higher Education and as the executive director of the Association of Comics Magazine Publishers, a predecessor to the organization that eventually created the Comics Code, the widespread panic over comic books after the war led to fears of governmental censorship. By the close of the 1949 legislative sessions, sixteen states produced thirty-two bills or resolutions targeting comic books. Twenty-seven of these died in committee, while the remaining bills gained at least some traction in their respective legislatures, but none became law. New York came the closest to passing legislation, perhaps because it was the center of the comic book industry, but governor Thomas Dewey ultimately vetoed it, believing that the *Winters* case rendered the proposed bill void: "The bill before me makes little change in the language already held invalid by the highest court in the land."[270]

The twin spectres of crime and juvenile delinquency loomed large in the minds of Americans in the early 1950s. The outcry against comic books coincided with a larger public

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[270] Henry E. Schultz, "Censorship and Self-Regulation," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 23, no. 4 (Dec., 1949): 215-224.

push for the government to investigate and officially recognize the presence of organized crime in America (J. Edgar Hoover famously refused to confirm the existence of organized crime until the mass arrest of mob figures at the Apalachin summit in 1957).[271] Estes Kefauver's famed hearings into organized crime's influence on interstate commerce helped shine a light on the secretive practices of organized crime and was the first governmental body to suggest an expansion of civil law to fight said organizations.

The sweating and anxious hands of mobster Frank Costello, adamantly denying his Mafia connections (he refused to allow his face to be filmed) became etched in the public consciousness, but the committee's wading into the comics debate is less well-remembered, despite providing one of the most important early governmental connections of comics to crime. In the report on his sidebar investigation into crime comics, Kefauver noted in the beginning that "any over-all study of crime in present-day America would be incomplete if it did not include adequate consideration of the problem of juvenile delinquency," a pronouncement that set the tone for the years of criticism to follow. No longer were the comics solely criticized on their aesthetic and intellectual merits, there was now a darker fear that they would actively corrupt children into becoming sex perverts and criminals, and if that were to happen, the country would be lost.[272]

As many critics, then and now, noted, the notion of mass media leading youth astray, "[standing] between parent and child" as James Gilbert put it in his work on the postwar crisis of

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[271] Depicted more or less accurately in the middling 1999 mob comedy *Analyze This!*

[272] Special Committee to Investigate Crime in Organized Commerce, "Juvenile Delinquency: A Compilation of Information and Suggestions Submitted To The Special Senate Committee To Investigate Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce Relative to the Incidence of Juvenile Delinquency in the United States and the Possible Influence of So-Called Crime Comic Books During the 5-Year Period 1945 to 1950" (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1950), iii. Hereinafter Kefauver Committee report.

juvenile delinquency—was nothing new.[273] Panics over the development of distinct youth cultures spurred on by advances in print media date back to the Puritan beginnings of the country, and even then, sparked fears about moral decline in the nation's youth.[274] Environmental explanations for juvenile delinquency became solidified around the years of the Civil War, blaming parental defects and urban ills for making children into delinquents, a school of thought that carried well into the twentieth century.[275] Critics like Sterling North, too, recycled criticisms levied by librarians in the late nineteenth century that children needed their reading habits directed towards nonfiction and literature.

So, then, as James Gilbert noted, this resistance to mass culture ostensibly standing between parent and child during the 1950s was both old and new.[276] It was old in the sense of using print culture as a scapegoat for criticizing undesirable changes in children and youth culture, but was new with regard to the fears surrounding an increasingly iconocentric culture, which conservative critics quickly blamed for causing juvenile delinquency. In order to gain a more complete picture of how widespread this alleged crime wave of delinquency was, Kefauver actively sought the opinions of public officials, comic book publishers, and child guidance experts in his investigation of comic books contributing to crime via juvenile delinquency, using their responses as evidence in his hearings.

His survey to public officials asked seven questions:

1. Has juvenile delinquency increased in the years 1945 to 1950? If you can support this with specific statistics, please do so.

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[273] Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage*, 4.
[274] Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 28-29.
[275] Heins reminds us in *Not In Front Of The Children* that the moral concern for children, and indeed American laws geared to protect them from indecent influences, were a creation of the late 1800s. Heins, *Not In Front of the Children*, 8.
[276] Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage,* 4.

2. To what do you attribute this increase if you have stated that there was an increase?

3. Was there an increase in juvenile delinquency after World War I?

4. In recent years have juveniles tended to commit more violent crimes, such as assault, rape, murder, and gang activities?

5. Do you believe that there is any relationship between reading crime comic books and juvenile delinquency?

6. Please specifically give statistics, and, if possible, state specific cases of juvenile crime which you believe can be traced to reading crime comic books.

7. Do you believe that juvenile delinquency would decrease if crime comic books were not readily available to children?

Kefauver sent similar letters to publishers of comic books, seeking demographic information of comic book readers, sales figures, whether publishers believed that there was a relationship between comic book reading and juvenile delinquency, and whether they hired outside experts as consultants. Most of the public figures that Kefauver solicited information from were professionals involved with the juvenile justice system across the country, providing an important sense of geographical diversity and ensuring diversity in opinion.

The eventual results, however, did not please those looking to censor comic books as an easy solution to juvenile delinquency. Conservative voices like J. Edgar Hoover spoke out in the replies to Kefauver's letter, claiming that a "lack of moral responsibility" among youth drove juvenile delinquency, but even the arch-G-Man himself said that it was "doubtful" that juvenile delinquency would decrease if crime comics were banned.[277] Most professionals spoke in less apocalyptic terms than Hoover did. The data that they provided regarding increases in juvenile

[277] Kefauver committee report, 6-7.

crime did not match the tenor of the moral panic; indeed, many localities saw declines in juvenile crime after the end of the war. The experts cited in Kefauver's report also downplayed linkages between comic book reading and juvenile delinquency, stressing in nearly every case that environmental factors were singularly more important than anything that a child consumed.

Many failed to provide any specific accounts of crimes tied to comic books, and if they did, it was minor anecdotal evidence. Many of the experts agreed that comics necessitated some form of regulation, and that violent comic books could have a potentially negative effect on an already disturbed youth. Despite those beliefs, virtually all experts rejected *prima facie* the idea that comic books could be corrupting influences on the average, well-adjusted child, also rejecting the notion that juvenile delinquency would decrease in any meaningful way were comic books censored.

The comic book publishers solicited by Kefauver, too, defended their products against the criticisms often levied at them. Several of the notable publishing companies of the day sent responses to Kefauver's letter, including Marvel Comics, Harvey Comics, National Comics Publications (later DC Comics), Fawcett Publications, and Lev Gleason Publications. Kefauver's report also included replies from the Association of Comics Magazine Publishers, an early trade group that attempted to fight back against comics criticism, and Milton Caniff, creator of the renowned newspaper comic strip *Terry and The Pirates.*

Of the listed publishers, Lev Gleason's company was perhaps the company most under fire, as *Crime Does Not Pay* and *Crime and Punishment* were the most visible, notorious, longest-running, and widely read crime comics of the day. *Crime Does Not Pay* had been around five years longer than its competitors from Marvel (*Official True Crime Cases*) and National Comics (*Gang Busters*), which were largely inoffensive. Ace Magazines, publishers of the more

lurid *Crime Must Pay The Penalty!* and Prize Comics, creators of *Justice Traps the Guilty!* did not appear in Kefauver's report. According to Gleason's own figures, his two leading crime (or "anticrime" in Gleason's words) series combined in 1949 for over fourteen million tracked sales and likely many more readers, as Gleason continually inferred that a common practice of comic book reading was to pass the books around to one's friends once one finished reading it.

In his reply, Gleason refuted claims by anti-comics activists that his books were primarily sold to children, citing a survey that identified more than half the readers of *Crime Does Not Pay* as over twenty-one years old.[278] Many of the publishers sent copies of addresses they prepared for the state level investigations of comics, particularly Marvel and National Comics, whose prepared statements had expert testimony that attested to the visual nature of comics being the primary determinant of their wide adoration. These experts also attested that children were ultimately the best censors, as they would ostensibly avoid material that did not suit their needs for creative release.

Caniff, a respected cartoonist and defender of comic books, also downplayed linkages between comic book reading and juvenile delinquency, saying that comics were simply the latest scapegoat for undesirable changes in youth: "In my childhood, it was Tom Mix and William S. Hart movies which were leading us kids to damnation. No doubt Hopalong Cassidy will be blamed for many youthful escapades in the present era."[279] Caniff also foreshadowed arguments eventually used in *Butler v. Michigan*, the Supreme Court decision that marked the end of midcentury decency crusades: "There are badly written books, but we do not say books will not be denied to the public, juvenile or adult, because we are critical of the contents of a few. Neither

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[278] Kefauver committee report, 135-137.
[279] Ibid., 132.

can we condemn comic books and attempt to censor the medium because of a lack of quality in some publications."[280]

Most of the child guidance experts contacted by Kefauver also expressed doubts about the claims his committee investigated. A notable holdout was Hilde Mosse, a colleague of Fredric Wertham's and fellow immigrant from Germany. Like Wertham, Mosse served as a psychiatrist and educator in New York City and worked alongside Wertham at their benefit practice, the Lafargue Clinic. Mosse shared, but was perhaps less extreme in, the anti-comics views of her colleague. Mosse attested to a rise in juvenile crimes, especially violent ones, citing crime comic books in general as introducing children to violence and teaching them street slang. "Children's fantasies have been filled with crime stories, and they are therefore apt to act in an antisocial way."[281]

Other responses from Kefauver's selected experts that generally came down in favor of censoring comic books were from Charles S. Rhyne, general counsel for the National Institute of Municipal Law Officers (NIMLO), an advocacy organization for attorneys involved in municipal affairs. Rhyne penned a report for NIMLO that addressed efforts to regulate sales of comics on the city level, though he noted that the process was "fraught with constitutional and practical difficulties."[282] Through his report, it was clear Rhyne favored restrictions on comic books, but he otherwise did not say anything to that effect in response to Kefauver's letter. Arthur Freund, a lawyer who chaired the American Bar Association's criminal law section, was not able to

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[280] Kefauver committee report, 132. The Supreme Court used similar logic, including Felix Frankfurter's famous "burn the house to roast the pig" quip, to strike down a Michigan law that criminalized the sale of materials potentially harmful to youth.
[281] Ibid., 180.
[282] Ibid., 198.

respond to Kefauver's questions but replied with his personal view that self-censorship of media was inadequate and required greater action on the part of the government.[283]

The remaining academics contacted by Kefauver were a veritable who's who of notable public defenders of comics: Harvey Zorbaugh, a sociologist at New York University who was one of the first academics to take seriously and dedicate time and research to studying interest in comic books from both children and adults, Lauretta Bender, another New York psychiatrist who authored an influential article relating to children and their comic book reading habits, and Josette Frank, a children's reading specialist for the Child Study Association of America who became one of the leading defenders of children's reading of comics. Of the comics expert personalities called by Kefauver, only Bender went on to give further testimony at the 1954 Congressional investigations of comic books, which Kefauver also took part in.

Though midcentury America took much stock in the opinions of experts, governmental investigations of comic books mostly sought to portray these experts as paid shills for the comic book industry, evidenced by Kefauver's questions regarding any paid work done in an advisory capacity for comic book companies. Zorbaugh's connections were perhaps the most innocuous– he advised the newsstand comics division of the largely unobjectionable Fawcett Publications from 1942 to 1945, and presently served as a research consultant for Puck, a newspaper comic supplement.

At Fawcett, Zorbaugh worked alongside Sidonie Gruenberg of the Child Study Association of America and Ernest Osborne, another pro-comics psychologist from Teachers College at Columbia University, who also served as the vice president of the CSAA. Zorbaugh

[283] Kefauver committee report, 181.

remarked that the decision to sign on as editorial advisors was not an uncritical one, as they felt that there was much to do from the inside to improve the content of comics. Alas, noted Zorbaugh, "I must say we had very little influence."[284] Osborne furthered the point by saying that he never felt that any major changes to the stories were necessary.

It did not become clear at this early juncture, but the advisory work performed by Frank and Bender led to significant controversy in later years. Frank and Bender both served as editorial advisors for National Comics Publications, one of the most prominent publishers of comic books at midcentury. Frank began her service in 1941, Bender joined the advisory team in 1944. In an advance rebuke to Kefauver and other critics of her service at NCP, Bender noted that both New York University, where she taught, and the New York Academy of Medicine had prior knowledge and approved of her activities, and that she demonstrated an interest in analyzing children and comics years before her service began.[285] Frank, far from an uncritical advocate for comic books, noted in her letter to Kefauver a point she made repeatedly in various places—that just as there were good comics, there were undoubtedly bad comics that necessitated cleanup: "I must add that I neither relish or condone some of the excesses to which certain comics have resorted–in the newspapers as well as in the magazines. Excesses of horror and bad taste are never suitable for young readers."[286]

The Kefauver report showed a key shift in the national character of the anti-comics debate, marking the first time the federal government paid notice to the swirling controversies

[284] Kefauver committee report, 192.
[285] In the 2005 work *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture* by Canadian communications scholar Bart Beaty, a markedly sympathetic re-appraisal of Wertham's critiques, Beaty argues that the later hearings in 1954 on comic books "discredited" many of these experts because their organizations failed to disclose that they did paid work for the comic book industry, though their work was in fact public record for many years.
[286] Kefavuer committee report, 186.

over juvenile delinquency and comic books that portrayed crime. What Kefauver found did not match the rabid panics and sensationalized juvenile crime waves that Hoover and others spoke of. Most of the public officials he contacted reported not only localized drops in juvenile crime, but also expressed doubt in the simplistic theory that reading about crimes would turn children into criminals and that restricting access to comic books would have any meaningful impact on juvenile crime. Another key point made by Kefauver's solicited experts was a general consensus that the comic's visual nature was the primary determinant of its palatability to children, showcasing the immense discursive power of the image as it related to children and images of juvenile delinquency. Though Kefauver's committee released its report to little fanfare due to the conclusions (or lack thereof) reached after his efforts, the report provided an important rehearsal for the later hearings on comic books in 1954 which had long-lasting ramifications for the industry and the way consumers interacted with their products.

While the machine of the federal government rolled on, New York State explored the problem of the comics within its own government. As most, if not all major publishers had their headquarters and manufacturing facilities within the state and especially New York City, their Joint Legislative Committee to Study the Publication of Comics became a key venue for debates over the regulation of comics. The committee, the first of its type in a state government, formed as part of a resolution entered into the New York State Legislature in March 1949 with Long Island Assemblyman Joseph F. Carlino serving as chair.[287]

The five-man committee, which published reports until 1955, consisted of three Republicans and two Democrats and met over the course of 1949 and 1950 in Albany and New

[287] In a master's thesis from the 1980s, Steven E. Mitchell notes that Massachusetts attempted to form a similar committee around the same time but that changes in the legislature doomed it to failure. Steven E. Mitchell, "Evil Harvest: Investigating the Comic Book", unpublished M.A. thesis, Arkansas State University, January 1982, 69.

York City to prepare their findings. The men worked in the challenging context following the *Winters* decision in 1949, as Governor Thomas Dewey recently vetoed a law proposed by senator Benjamin F. Feinberg (who later authored a controversial law purging public school employees with leftist sympathies) that banned depictions of "sordid bloodshed, lust, or heinous acts."[288] The first report of the committee essentially acquiesced to this difficult situation, claiming at the same time that they lacked data to determine whether "legislative remedies" were the ultimate answer to the question of comics inciting juvenile delinquency, and noted that they would not be able to prepare an adequate report with so little time remaining in the current legislative session.[289]

The committee's 1951 report was the first comprehensive document produced by the group. The new report presented a series of findings, a brief history of the comic book and arguments over whether or not they contributed to juvenile delinquency, and a summation of the publishing scene for comic books. Most sensationally, perhaps, the report contained almost 60 pages of excerpted comic panels–some individual panels, some multiple runs of pages–to demonstrate the purported filth that unscrupulous publishers injected directly into the eyes of impressionable youth: one section dealt in "brutality, violence and crime", the second fulfilled the "blueprints for delinquency" criticism often levied at comics, that they gave detailed instruction on how to commit crimes, and a third section detailed "sexually suggestive cartoons and in some instances semi hidden pornography."[290]

[288] Quoted in Mitchell, "Evil Harvest", 66.
[289] Interim Report of the New York State Joint Legislative Committee to Study the Publication of Comics (Albany, Williams Press, 1950), 11-12.
[290] Report of the New York State Joint Legislative Committee to Study the Publication of Comics (Albany, Williams Press, 1951), 19. Hereinafter 1951 NYS report.

As evidence of this “brutality, violence and crime” present in children’s comic books, the committee opened the first appendix section with a photo of a comic rack provided to them by Fredric Wertham (taken near Wertham’s vacation spot in Maine and in all likelihood staged) with the words “Your favorite comics – read em’ for fun!” emblazoned on the top and bottom.[291] The contents of the rack appeared a bit more lurid with the words CRIME and GUNS on covers all over the rack, also including titles like “All True Crime”, “MURDER Incorporated” as well as LAWBREAKERS and CRIMINALS. Surely a collection of blueprints for delinquency! A closer look reveals a more complicated picture.

Figure 6: The comics rack cited by the New York State committee in their 1951 report.

While there were undoubtedly adult crime titles on the selected rack, like the garish Murder, Incorporated by Fox Publications and True Crime Comics by Magazine Village, the

[291] Thanks to Dr. Carol Tilley for the update on this point.

latter of which contained the famous "needle in the eye" panel (reproduced below) often referenced by opponents of comic books, some of the sinister-sounding titles, such as Guns Against Gangsters and Desperado, were little more than grab bag collections of detective stories that, while containing depictions of crime and criminals, were certainly not as gratuitous or adult as some of the other titles and contained other, more kid-friendly stories.[292]

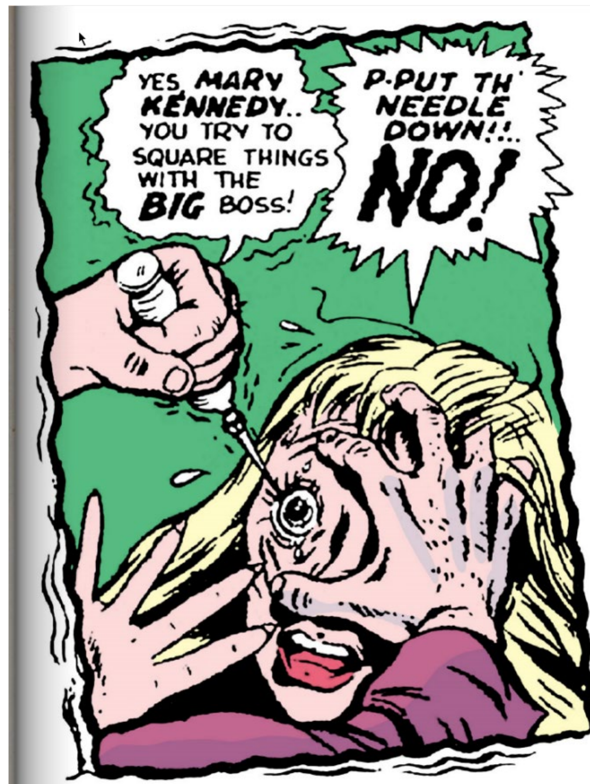

Figure 7: Comic panel from "Murder, Morphine and Me," by Jack Cole in True Crime Comics #2. This image is likely the most reproduced crime comic panel both during the anti-comics movement and today. Public domain image from the Digital Comic Museum.

Several comics distributed by Timely Comics (later Marvel Comics) under different brands also appeared on the rack (Human Torch, Lawbreakers Always Lose, All-True Crime Stories), and Timely dared not risk their massive market share by publishing objectionable

[292] Some of the more adult books also had advertisements clearly geared towards adults, rather than teenagers or children.

comics. Further, many of the series in the rack ceased publication by the time of the report, pointing to the precarity and unpredictability of the comic book market.[293]

The Committee made several key claims, some that were reiterations of complaints thus far in the movement while others presaged future developments in the coming years. One of their main points was that the industry lacked "an effective industry-wide code or rule of standards," referencing the self-censorship put in place for movies by the Hays Code.[294] "The leading publishers," wrote the committee, "take the position that their publications are wholesome and inoffensive. They therefore refuse to participate in any program of betterment and they thus render efforts at self-regulation ineffective."[295] Some in the industry surely tried to make a wider effort, evidenced by the oft-lamented Association of Comics Magazine Publishers (ACMP).

Formed in 1948 to respond to the resurgence of anti-comics criticism, the ACMP embodied all that the committee took issue with—it did not include the largest (or most objectionable) publishers, who either blew off the ACMP completely, as in the case of Harvey and Fox (two of the most prominent dealers of bloodshed), believed that their in-house editorial control was sufficient, as in the case of National Comics Publications, MLJ Comics (later Archie Comics), and Timely, or published comics exclusively targeted at young children like Fawcett and Gilberton. Lev Gleason Publications was the most prominent member of the ACMP, perhaps

[293] Murder, Incorporated temporarily ceased publication in December 1949 and began a new series in June 1950 that only published three issues between then and August 1951. Lawbreakers Always Lose, Target Comics, Guns Against Gangsters, Desperado, True Crime Comics, Pay-Off, Criminals On The Run, and Complete Mystery all ceased publication in 1949. Only Crime Does Not Pay, Wanted Comics, and All-True Crime published into the 1950s. Vernon Pope, the head of public relations for National Comics Publications, would later remark that anti-comics activists would frequently present older, out of print publications as if they were current offerings.
[294] 1951 NYS report, 16.
[295] Ibid.

of no coincidence as their flagship publication, *Crime Does Not Pay*, was one of the main targets of anti-comics protests.

Despite the earnestness of executive director Henry Schultz, a lawyer and president of the Queens College board, in combating the negative perceptions of comic books, the mission of the ACMP went unfulfilled. From the start, its guidelines were just that—guidelines. There was no plan in place for stopping comics that failed their inspection, and they quickly abandoned their plans to review pages prior to publication yet still put their seal on participating comic books (it lacked a consistent size or place on covers). Anti-comics advocates delighted in pointing out this thinly disguised pay-for-play in later years. Despite the public failings of the ACMP, it did something to push back against the oft-advanced notion that publishers cared about profit first and foremost, and, as David Hajdu notes, the first organization to self-censor film failed as well.[296]

Some of the other arguments employed by the committee presaged both future developments in the anti-comics debate as well as the emergent cultural Cold War. The denigration of liberal experts by the largely conservative committee served as a key part of this. Initially describing them as “so-called ‘educators’ and experts”, the fuller text disparages them further:

> The apologists for the comic book industry, who include a number of well-paid so-called “sociologists”, “child guidance experts” “psychiatrists” and “educators”, argue that comic for the most part merely portray everyday life stories and that therefore children should not be sheltered or protected against reality. They readily concede the vividness and power of attraction to children of comic publications but assert that a normal, healthy child living in wholesome surroundings and environment will naturally adopt the moral

[296] Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague,* [124-125].

> theme recited in the publication and will reject and condemn the brutality, wrongdoing or other anti-social behavior of the comic book characters.[297]

To the committee, which also cast aspersions on the philosophy of progressive education espoused by many in and around Columbia University, liberal comics experts were nothing but paid shills, regardless of their long and detailed scholarly publication history concerning comics, as in the case of Zorbaugh and Bender, or the openness of Josette Frank in criticizing the violent content of comics and being clear that some were certainly not meant for children's consumption. Critics repeated and deepened these accusations as the anti-comics movement rolled on, seeking to portray the purveyors of comics as shiftless profiteers with an army of uncritical shills ready to insist that children were simple enough to recognize that no matter how violent a comic was that crime did, in fact, not pay. The committee explicitly embraced the idea of "protecting" children from comic books, which they believed could have a 1:1 effect on even well-adjusted children, causing them to "develop unwholesome thinking, ideas and activities from the drama portrayed in comics."[298]

They also spoke to the Cold War concern about unwholesome comics undermining the morals of youth, an idea eventually connected with fears of communism: "The comic book critic further contends that the objectionable book, even though it may not be a contributing factor to some anti-social act or incident, has a general tendency of breaking down the moral fiber of young readers and creates in his mind a willingness to accept some of the startling behavior recited in comics as examples of normal, every-day modern living."[299] Moving forward, the committee issued recommendations aimed at the industry itself, government, and local

[297] 1951 NYS report, 18.
[298] 1951 NYS report, 18.
[299] Ibid.

organizations. Committee members called for large publishers to establish an independent system of regulation, for police and district attorneys to take stronger censorious action against objectionable comics, and for everyday citizens to support the actions of voluntary community review groups like the Cincinnati Committee. The New York State committee's first report spoke to the reciprocal effect of anti-comics criticism between the national and local levels and presaged important developments in the years to come in the debate. Since nearly all major publishers had their headquarters in the State of New York, the actions of the committee were that much more influential in the grand scheme of things.

The next major governmental investigation of comics cam as part of the House Select Subcommittee on Current Pornographic Materials, otherwise known as the Gathings Committee from its chair, conservative Arkansas Democrat Ezekiel Gathings. Where Kefauver's investigation was an earnest branching off from his influential hearings on organized crime that sought and detailed the feedback of experts, Gathings' investigation was an ideologically-charged circus that fractured the committee so strongly that two members issued a separate minority report disagreeing with the conclusions of the remainder of the committee, whose recommendations amounted to strict federal censorship of literature deemed obscene.[300] Gathings originally proposed the committee in June 1951, and it formed the following May with plans for hearings to occur in early December 1952. The Gathings Committee's primary target

[300] "Report of the Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials", (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1952). [Hereinafter Gathings committee report] Paula Rabinowitz, author of *American Pulp: How Paperbacks Brought Modernism to Main Street*, wrote "Testimony in the hearings often verged on political theatre and parody[.]" Paula Rabinowitz, *American Pulp: How Paperbacks Bought Modernism to Main Street* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 241.

was pulp novels, especially ones containing homosexual love stories, but comics and other magazines received due scorn from the panel.[301]

The Gathings Committee found no positives about comic books, taking a wholly reactionary stance: "Only a small percentage of so-called 'comic books' deal with comedy or mirthful subjects. The great majority are about crime, violence, horror, romance, supermen, mystery, adventure, and the ubiquitous 'Westerns'. They do not teach children to think straight. They glorify crime, make a mockery of democratic living and respect for law and order. They make lawlessness attractive and ridicule decency and honesty."[302]

The testimony and reports of the Gathings Committee also reflected the ramping up of domestic Cold War culture since the beginning of the 1950s. John B. Keenan, director of Public Safety for Newark, NJ, submitted a brief to the committee, reflecting the increasing belief that indecent literature was an existential threat to the morals of the nation: "If Communists are not behind this drive to flood the nation with obscenity to weaken the moral fiber of our youth and debauch our adults, then it is only because greedy businessmen are carrying the ball for them."[303]

The National Organization for Decent Literature re-entered the public eye during the Gathings Committee hearings, sending their figurehead for the 1950s, Msgr. Thomas J. Fitzgerald, to testify before the committee. Fitzgerald, who became the NODL's primary

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[301] Ibid., 265. The committee introduced several books, including *Women's Barracks*, considered an influential lesbian pulp novel, noting that they "extol by their approbatory language accounts of homosexuality, lesbianism, and other sexual aberrations." Quoted in Rabinowitz, ibid. Background information on committee from Jim Stallings, "The Gathings Committee, Censorship, Society, and Paperback Literature in the 1950s", unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Arkansas at Little Rock (2014), 2-3.

[302] Gathings committee report, 26. Later research, of course, disproves this as child friendly comics were always the bestselling comics.

[303] One of the major sea changes was the issuance of NSC 68 in 1951, a top secret memo presented to President Truman that called for a drastic increase in the country's military capacity and a much more direct attack on communism both domestically and abroad. Quote from Gathings committee report, 366.

decisionmaker and liaison to politicians following John F. Noll's decline in health and later death in 1956, was a younger and more cosmopolitan face of the organization than Noll. Though less reactionary than Noll, Fitzgerald still towed the NODL line on objectionable literature and served as the lead organizer for the NODL's publication reviewers, despite coming to the committee as a representative of the National Council of Catholic Men, a partner organization to the NODL.

"The damage caused by this evil to the souls of our children and our young men and women is of eternal proportions," claimed Fitzgerald in his testimony. The main thrust of his prepared statement delivered before the committee was a rehash of the legislative strategy of the NODL for the last decade–calling for stricter federal laws against selling objectionable books across state lines and empowering the Post Office to impound obscene mail. Fitzgerald, like the New York committee, called on the Gathings committee to involve local groups in their work. "I have spoken to a number of these organizations at the local level," noted Fitzgerald, "and have found that in every case they object as strenuously as we do. In other words, we don't feel that this is a Catholic movement; we feel that it is a movement that all right thinking Americans are interested in."[304]

The committee also accused contemporary war comics of undermining the Korean War effort, advocating for pacifism and, in their eyes, acting as part of a communist plot.[305] The Cincinnati Committee detailed in the last chapter made similar criticisms, one of the few times they explicitly embraced anticommunism, reporting what they perceived as a subversive comic

[304] Gathings committee testimony, 77.

[305] Referring to the Navy banning "the entire output of one such promoter [publisher]. . .because some of the contents were deemed contrary to the best interests of our country", the committee declared that "their objectionable features might be the work of a genuine pacifist organization, but they were much more likely the subversive efforts of Communists." Gathings committee report, 29.

to the FBI. Neither committee ever explicitly named the comics they deemed subversive, but they likely referred to *Frontline Combat* and *Two-Fisted Tales*, products of EC Comics designed by World War II veteran Harvey Kurtzman (creator of the famous *MAD Magazine*), whose war experiences informed the editorial content of his comics. Though Kurtzman certainly did not create communist propaganda, his comics generally depicted the brutality and futility of war which, in an era of increasing brinksmanship with communism, was not acceptable to most Americans, certainly least of all the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The upper echelons of Army intelligence reported to the FBI that since December 1951, various commands had sent in various comic books that they deemed to be injurious to the morale of soldiers. In April 1952, a few months before the beginning of the Gathings hearings, the FBI opened their investigation into EC, Gaines, and Kurtzman. The initial FBI report indicated that:

> G-2 [Army intelligence] has advised that a review of the contents of these comic books reveals that some of the material is detrimental to the morale of combat soldiers and emphasizes the horrors, hardships, and futility of war. These comic books portray the seemingly needless sacrifices due to blunders on the part of officers and demonstrate the lack of protection to the United States forces against the trickery of the enemy. G-2 considers these publications subversive because they tend to discredit the army and undermine troop morale by presenting a picture of the inevitability of personal disaster in combat.[306]

The report explicitly identified Gaines and Kurtzman as the creative forces behind the comics and singled out both *Frontline Combat* and *Two-Fisted Tales* as the offending books, and directed the agents receiving the memo to uncover as much as they could about Gaines, Kurtzman, and the company for the eventual purpose of making a case with the Department of Justice about punishing the men under the Sedition Acts. The New York bureau reached out to its network of confidential informants, and, likely to their chagrin, discovered that neither Gaines

[306] FBI memo on alleged subversive comics, April 29, 1952.

nor Kurtzman had any communist ties.[307] The Department of Justice eventually advised the FBI that there was not clear enough intent on the part of Gaines and Kurtzman to violate the Sedition Act and discouraged the Bureau from pursuing the men further.[308]

At the conclusion of the Gathings committee's work, members put forth three recommendations. The first of these was a recommendation that Congress make the interstate transport of "books and pamphlets of an obscene, lewd, lascivious, or filthy character" a federal offense. The second recommendation was a tried-and-true tactic of moralist conservatives– explicitly authorizing the Postmaster General to impound mail addressed to sellers of the above-mentioned material.[309] The Gathings committee also sought an exemption for the Post Office Department from the 1946 Administrative Procedure Act, which would have allowed the Postmaster General to operate away from public eyes and render it immune to judicial restraint. The third recommendation simply implored magazine publishers to take notice of the controversy around indecent literature and work themselves to improve their editorial content before the government stepped in.[310]

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[307] FBI memo on Bill Gaines, August 28, 1952. "Confidential Informants familiar with Communist activity in NYC advised subjects are unknown to them."

[308] FBI memo on EC Comics investigation, December 30, 1953. This was, however, not Kurtzman's last brush with the FBI, in 1967 the Bureau again investigated Kurtzman for a *Little Annie Fanny* strip he developed for *Playboy* that lampooned J. Edgar Hoover but eventually decided not to pursue any action "[i]n view of the known hostility and well-established low character of this publication, there would appear to be no advantage to the Bureau in protesting the 'Little Annie Fanny' column in 'Playboy' magazine, any acknowledgement from the Bureau merely conveying an air of dignity which is completely nonexistent with this publication." FBI memo on Little Annie Fanny, April 24. 1967.

[309] The deputizing of the Postmaster General to control the mails had precedent in the actions of the department during World War I under the auspices of the Espionage Act. Largely enforced by Albert Burleson, a Woodrow Wilson loyalist, the Act was largely, though not entirely, used to suppress "small socialist, labor, and foreign-language papers." See Christopher Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants You: World War I and the Making of the Modern American Citizen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), especially Chapter 5, "Responsible Speech: Rights in a Culture of Obligation."

[310] Gathings committee report, 116-120.

Reacting to what they saw as an uninformed approach to complex questions and an alarming expansion of censorial government powers, representatives Emanuel Celler and Francis E. Walter issued a dissenting minority report. Celler and Francis were, without doubt, a curious pair to respond in the matter they did, as Celler was a Jewish New York City Democrat with a long record of supporting civil rights (except, notably, the Equal Rights Amendment) and Walter a fiercely anticommunist Pennsylvania legislator with connections to the shadowy far-right Pioneer Fund who sponsored 1952's repressive McCarran-Walter Act and later headed the House Un-American Activities Committee.[311]

Celler and Walter reacted particularly negatively to the proposed expansion of Postmaster General power as well as the proposed exclusion of the Post Office Department from the Administrative Procedure Act, believing that standing committees of Congress were more appropriate to discuss these specific proposals:

> The Administrative Procedure Act was designed to assure all persons aggrieved by administrative rulings a fair and comprehensive hearing; the power to impound the mails may be fraught with objections not immediately apparent. . .[w]e take vigorous exception however to the general approach to the complex nature of the subject under investigation adopted by the committee."[312]

The men also criticized the committee for basing their recommendations on incomplete and narrow readings of various books, thereby failing to meet standards of strict scrutiny set

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[311] The McCarran-Walter Act, passed over Harry Truman's veto, continued the restrictive and discriminatory immigration quotas set forth by the 1924 Johnson-Reed act and both allowed for the deportation of aliens with leftist political views and prevented them from becoming citizens. Still in effect but modified by newer immigration laws in the 1960s and 1990s, the McCarran-Walter Act allowed Asian immigrants to become naturalized citizens for the first time. In another strange twist for their report, McCarran and Walter's act was the conservative alternative to a more liberal law proposed by Celler and fellow New York Democrat Herbert Lehman.

[312] Gathings committee report, 121.

forth in *United States v. One Book Called Ulysses*.[313] Quoting from the earlier *Hannegan* decision, the men criticized the notion that government officials should be able to prescribe standards for literature (which took on a new meaning in the contemporary Cold War context), saying that the committee "has made a sweeping indictment of current day literature" based on out-of-context quotations and excerpts of selected novels.[314]

The conclusions of the Gathings committee never amounted to further legislation, but the feelings stirred by the committee's investigation reflected the increasingly repressive social climate of 1950s America, especially with the chilling effect of a governmental investigation into paperback books. Kenneth Davis, in *Two-Bit Culture: The Paperbacking of America*, notes that drives to rid shelves of objectionable publications happened across the country with Catholic groups typically at the helm.[315] Davis also connected these drives to the nascent red purges occurring throughout the country, noting a Texas law requiring authors to declare they were not communists nor members of any other subversive organizations.[316]

The actions of the Gathings committee, as well as the furious dissents issued by its members make it perhaps the most evident example of the contradictions present in Cold War culture, the most blatant embrace of the school of thought that Richard Hofstadter later deemed the "paranoid style" of right-wing thought. In short, "the existence of a vast, insidious, preternaturally effective international conspiratorial network designed to perpetrate acts of the

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[313] Citing a part of the transcript not included in the official printed version, the men noted that a committee member, asked by a witness if they read the book they were criticizing, said "I have looked at the inserts that we have been given. I do not care to read any more, that is quite enough." Gathings committee report, 123.
[314] Ibid., 125.
[315] Kenneth C. Davis, *Two-Bit Culture: The Paperbacking of America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 236-238. Davis' chapter 8, on censorship, is comprehensive despite erroneously listing Carroll Kearns as one of the minority report signatories.
[316] Ibid., 237-238.

most fiendish character."[317] Gathings did not predicate his testimonies on the opinions of experts, as had Kefauver, but rather doddering critics that had not even read what they were to criticize, showing that there was no lesson learned from the *Hannegan* case. This paranoid ethos of subversion, as we shall see, was promptly stamped out in the 1954 comic book hearings. The fact, however, that Walter, right-wing legislator that he was, reacted so harshly to the proposed expansion of governmental power showed that the anticommunist telos was not absolute.

Back in New York, the New York Joint Legislative committee became frustrated with the inaction of comic book publishers to follow the recommendations laid out in their 1951 report regarding voluntary self-policing of objectionable comics. "We have extended to the industry, more than reasonable opportunity to correct the abuses which unquestionably exist," wrote the committee. "Nothing has been accomplished of a constructive nature toward industry-wide effective self-regulation, except that proposals for further delay have been advanced."[318] Citing legal developments in England, as well as in Canada, France, and Italy, as well as a need for the committee to intervene in the comics business to "prevent further interference from this source with the ethical, moral, and spiritual development of our young people," the committee railed against comic book publishers for ostensibly ignoring the impressionability of children in their collected testimony, likening the mainstream publishers to ostriches with their heads in the sand, collecting money for their products while ignoring the objectionable output of other, smaller publishers.

[317] Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), 14.
[318] 1952 Report, New York State Joint Committee to Study the Publication of Comics [hereinafter 1952 NYS Report], 12.

The committee also used language similar to the court in *Mutual v. Ohio* in a section assessing whether laws regulating comic books were congruent with the First Amendment, arguing that comics served no useful pedagogical or informational purpose, and like immoral plays or movies, did not benefit from the same protections (despite the *Winters* ruling):

> Fundamentally, comic books are a form of entertainment. They do not nor are they calculated to report current news. For the most part, they relate to fictional stories which ofttimes are feeble excuses for the display of cartoons of brutality, lust, horror, and immorality. To classify them as a part of the protected press of our country is to strain that which our constitutional draftsmen clearly, unmistakably intended when they wrote into our basic law the fundamental guarantee of freedom of speech. Freedom of the press does not protect an immoral or licentious stage play or motion picture. It likewise affords no protection to a book containing the same condemned purpose or theme.[319]

The proposed changes of the committee represented a large step forward by a state body towards official censorship of comics. The committee proposed to reform the state Department of Education to include a regulatory board focused on comic books overseen by a single individual.[320] Under the proposed law, publishers of comic books would be required to apply to the director of the Department of Education's Comic Book Division, who would then examine every submitted comic book for its moral content. Permits, which would cost publishers $3 to even apply for, were to be required not just for sale, but also for distribution. Publishers, distributors, and retailers were subject to misdemeanor convictions if they failed to comply with the permitting regulations.

The recommendation of the committee, sponsored by Feinberg and FitzPatrick, passed the senate overwhelmingly but died in committee when it reached the state assembly.[321] Due to the centralization of the comic book industry in New York State, the proposed regulations would

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[319] 1952 NYS report, 13-17.
[320] Ibid., 20.
[321] Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 43.

have presented serious logistical and financial challenges to the industry. Despite protestations to the contrary in the early years of the Cold War about America as a beacon of freedom and democracy, politicians were willing to subject cultural facets that they felt lacked moral standards to scrutiny which resembled the government censorship most often used as a rhetorical counterweight against the Soviet Union. Again, Hofstadter is useful to us here, as one of his other central claims in the "Paranoid Style" essay is that the "fundamental paradox of the paranoid style is the imitation of the enemy."[322] Though, as we shall see, not all documenters of the anti-comics panic thought these comparisons were warranted.

In his 2008 book *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comics Scare and How It Changed America*, David Hajdu writes that "[t]he controversy over comic books was neither a subset of the Red Scare nor a direct parallel to it[.]"[323] Indeed, many facets of the anti-comics movement trace back to earlier Catholic antiradicalism and moral anticommunism. A *direct* parallel? Perhaps not. But the tendencies toward governmental investigation, however, all focused on all things un-American, and rampant suspicions of dual loyalty make a strong case for the anti-comics movement as a subset of the Second Red Scare. As cartoonist Howard Post recalled about the anti-comics movement in the context of McCarthyism in 1953, "It started to be, if you said you were a comic-book artist, people would look at you funny and move away, as if you said you were a Communist."[324] Communists these creators were not (though Lev Gleason was undoubtedly a fellow traveler), but the Red Scare would revisit the comics scare at its peak in 1954.

[322] Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style*, 32.
[323] Hajdu, *Ten-Cent Plague*, 170.
[324] Ibid.

The beleaguered comic book industry endured twin shocks during 1953 and 1954. The first of these was the formation of the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, which began as a response to the moral panic over alleged increases in teen and gang crimes, the second the publication of Fredric Wertham's notorious *Seduction of the Innocent*, a 400-page summation of Wertham's criticisms of comics, that became, as many scholars call it, the "bible" of the American anti-comics movement. Most accounts of the anti-comics movement address only these two events, which occurred within days of each other (*Seduction* was published April 19, 1954, and the hearings on comic books began on April 21).

The bad press resulting from the hearings and the widespread adoration of Wertham's book were, however, the two main catalysts for the creation of the Comics Code in September 1954. The industry came under further fire in 1955 from James FitzPatrick, a member of the New York State Joint Legislative Committee to Investigate Comics, who introduced a far stricter bill that functionally outlawed all but the most inoffensive children's comics, this time reaching the governor's office and becoming law. Until the 1957 decision in *Butler v. Michigan*, which took much of the steam out of movements to ban sales of comics to youth, many states followed suit with New York.[325]

While debates about comics raged on in state legislatures, the national public mood over comic books soon became inflamed due to the publication of Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*. Designed to appeal to a lay audience, Wertham's book was immensely popular among the general public and immensely worrisome to those in the comic book industry. The book laid

[325] In a report for the California legislature, staffer Edward Feder noted in 1955 that eighteen states were either investigating comics or considering regulatory measures relating to comics with a further four states anticipating that they would tackle the matter in the 1955 legislative sessions. Edward Feder, "Comic Book Regulation," *California Bureau of Public Administration Legislative Problems*, no. 2 (February 1955), 23.

the foundation for Wertham's historical reputation as Public Enemy Number One for the comic book, while his testimony in the senate hearings on comic books effectively poured the concrete into that foundation. Because of *Seduction*'s singular impact and his later testimony, Wertham became scapegoated in many ways for the subsequent downturn and transformation of the comic book industry.[326]

Though the book was intended for a lay audience, it had a key defender in eminent sociologist C. Wright Mills, who wrote a glowing review of the book for the *New York Times*. "All parents should be grateful to Dr. Fredric Wertham," wrote Mills, "for having written *Seduction of the Innocent*. Most parents have not read the comic books that many of their children, because of guilt and anxiety, often conceal from them."[327] Modern scholars have had more mixed reaction to *Seduction*, especially since the publication of a 2011 article in *Information & Culture* by University of Illinois library science professor Carol Tilley that provided evidence concerning Wertham's tendency to manipulate data from his psychiatric research to support his rhetorical conclusions in *Seduction*.[328] Amy Nyberg noted that the book "…was not intended to be a scholarly presentation of [Wertham's] ideas. He used his book as a

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[326] Bart Beaty's *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture* is a helpful book in that it emphasizes aspects of Wertham's mass culture critiques lost in the one-dimensional view of him as a comics-destroying villain at the expense of being rather pedantic and uncritically apologetic for the good doctor. One particularly revealing moment takes place in the conclusion of the book when Beaty, who delights in pointing out what he sees as other authors' incorrect arguments, decisively states that "The parody of Wertham's argument—comic books cause juvenile delinquency—has been substituted for the actual argument in the minds of comic book fans and even in some textbooks dealing with popular culture," when in chapter six of *Seduction*, a chapter subtitled "The Contribution of Crime Comic Books to Juvenile Delinquency," Wertham himself writes "Our researches have proved that there is a significant correlation between crime-comics reading and the more serious forms of juvenile delinquency." Beaty, *Critique of Mass Culture,* 198 and Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (Rinehart and Company, 1954), 164. Better known than read, indeed!

[327] C. Wright Mills, "Nothing To Laugh At (Review, *Seduction of the Innocent*), *New York Times*, April 25, 1954.

[328] Carol L. Tilley, "Seducing the Innocent: Fredric Wertham and the Falsifications that Helped Condemn Comics," *Information & Culture* 47, No. 4 (2012): 383-413.

vehicle to make his case against comics in hopes that he could once again mobilize public opinion in support of his proposed ban on the sale of comic books to children."[329]

Children's Bureau staffer Richard Clendenen served as the executive director of the subcommittee and performed most of its background research, drawing on his expertise in juvenile delinquency that he used in his work at the Children's Bureau as head of its delinquency division.[330] Senator Robert Hendrickson of New Jersey, who headed the committee until the Democratic Party retook control of Congress, issued an opening statement that reassured listeners that they were only seeking comment on crime and horror comics, as "authorities agree that the majority of comic books are harmless as soda pop."[331] Hendrickson and his eventual successor, Democratic Senator Estes Kefauver, made sure to frame the controversy in terms of juvenile delinquency and rising crime, rather than challenges to the First Amendment and censorship.

The testimony of Clendenen, one of the key witnesses, consisted mainly of lengthy republications of scholarly work that he encountered while performing his background research. He began, however, with a slide deck presentation of objectionable crime stories, most notably "Frisco Mary" from the Ace Magazines book *Crime Must Pay the Penalty!* Amy Nyberg notes that "Frisco Mary" was typical of a story found objectionable by comics critics (even though Clendenen showed the unrelated cover and a random panel from within), because Mary was remorselessly violent, her victims innocent and stupid, giant piles of money abounded, the police were portrayed and equally violent and incompetent, helping Mary to her off-panel comeuppance

[329] Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 93.
[330] Clendenen previously served as a probation officer in juvenile court officer. Ibid., 55.
[331] Hearings before the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, April 21, 22, and June 4, 1954 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1954), 1. Hereinafter 1954 hearings testimony.

in the gas chamber.[332] Clendenen also highlighted the scholarly consensus that comic books were likely to have a larger effect on emotionally disturbed children, who they felt were the largest consumers of comics. “As a matter of fact,” noted Clendenen, “many experts feel that excessive reading of materials of this kind in itself is symptomatic of some emotional maladjustment in a youngster.”[333]

An exchange that followed with Senator Thomas Hennings, a liberal Democrat from Missouri, proved illuminating with regards to the iconophobic roots of the investigation. Senator Hennings inquired of Clendenen what substantive differences existed between the stories criticized by the committee and those of Edgar Allan Poe and Sherlock Holmes. In those stories, noted Hennings, “there was the modus operandi for certainly many crimes.”[334] Clendenen responded by comparing comics, as was often done, with dime novels: [Comics] are really much more lurid material. Then, it would seem to me, of course, that the pictorial presentation and all of the vivid colors and so on represent something that is different.”[335] Hennings also held Clendenen to account on his point that comics posed a larger problem because they were available readily and cheaply, arguing that dime novels were exactly the same way.[336]

Herbert Beaser, the counsel for the committee, then inquired of Clendenen whether he believed, as some right-wing critics of comics did, that comics were subversive. “If by that,” replied Clendenen, “you mean a deliberate and planned effort to use the crime comics as a medium through which you are going to subvert the minds and morals of youngsters, my answer

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332 Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 57.
333 1954 hearings testimony, 53.
334 Ibid.
335 Ibid., 54.
336 Ibid.

would be no."[337] Clendenen did, however, make reference to two exhibits, one a reprinted news digest from the ACMP containing a section named "Comic Magazines Attacked As Communistic," which had a column from the *Rapid City Journal* of Rapid City, SD that told of a local Air Force captain who declared that "all local newsstands are carrying communistic literature," making reference to the presentation of police and federal agents in comic books. Also referenced was an editorial from the *Orlando Sentinel* that pilloried comics and, with no morsel of veracity whatsoever, declared that comics were "made to order" as "propaganda machines for Communist cells[.]"[338]

Figure 8: Anticommunist and anti-comic book cartoon from the Orlando Sentinel.

Clendenen further reiterated to Hennings that he believed that profit was the chief motive of comic book publishers, and that his investigation found no subversive efforts by comic book publishers. He also referenced something that became infamous among comic book historians in

[337] 1954 hearings testimony, 58.
[338] "Problems Comic Books Produce," *Orlando Sentinel*, Feb. 23, 1954.

Bill Gaines' "Are You A Red Dupe?" in-house ad. Gaines provided the page to Clendenen in the course of his investigation, with Clendenen noting "[Gaines] thought we would be interested in the items and he gave it to us."[339] "Are You A Red Dupe?" later ran as an article in several EC Comics titles, and used quotes from both the *Daily Worker* and Fredric Wertham alongside a MAD Magazine-style tale of a poor Russian who printed comics and had his press smashed by overzealous government agents. As the committee made clear to themselves, one of the prominent lines on the ad, in bold italic black, was "The group most anxious to destroy comics are the communists!"[340]

Gaines' glib ploy certainly did not win him any favors with the committee, especially with prominent member Estes Kefauver facing unscrupulous McCarthyist jabs from his senatorial primary opponent.[341] The *Hartford Courant*, source of some of the most vicious anti-comics editorials in the nation, had harsh words for Gaines even before the hearings began:

> There have been many stupid and silly red herrings in recent years but this attempt to justify profits from pornography by labeling opposition as 'Communist' takes the cake. Or perhaps it is not just ordinary stupidity. It may be the kind that grows from arrogance. These peddlers have acted on the theory that the American people are a bunch of stupid oafs—and by our apathy we have confirmed that judgement. But the jig is up now for the panderers of dirty comic books, and this Red scare is a frantic rear-guard action from a discredited and soon-to-be-deactivated phase of publishing. Their end is in sight, and they know it."[342]

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[339] 1954 hearings testimony, 59.

[340] Reprinted in ibid. I have been continually unable to verify the provenance of the *Daily Worker* quote featured in Gaines' ad, as the Daily Worker in question (assumed to be the primary New York edition of the paper) contains no mention of comic books.

[341] Joseph Bruce Gorman, *Kefauver: A Political Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 176. Quoted in Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 75. Kefauver, a notable holdout on the Southern Manifesto, frequently faced challenges organized by segregationist party members and businessmen. His opponent's strategy did not pay off, however, as Kefauver won in the primary with nearly 70% of the vote and won re-election by the same margin. Nyberg claims Kefauver reacted "very negatively" to being accused but this is not supported by the testimony record.

[342] "Are You A Red Dupe?" *Hartford Courant*, Tuesday, March 30, 1954.

After a lunch break, Wertham was the first witness of the afternoon session. Something often lost in typical accounts of the 1954 hearings was the contentious background between Wertham and some committee members, notably Kefauver. Wertham believed that Kefauver, in his earlier investigation of comics as part of his organized crime hearings, failed to properly inform himself about comic books. (I cannot hazard a guess towards what being properly informed may have looked like to Wertham). Wertham further called the televised organized crime hearings "the greatest advertisement the crime comic book industry has had to date.[343]

Despite the sparks between Wertham and Kefauver, he received a mostly cordial treatment from the committee; as Amy Nyberg notes, most questions posed to Wertham were clarifying, rather than challenging questions.[344] Wertham mostly read from a lengthy prepared statement illustrating his long list of credentials and experience with maladjusted children. Several pages into his statement, Wertham offered a qualifier that set him apart from the truly radical anti-comics activists and lined him more up with the professional consensus about comic book reading: "Now, I don't say, and never have said, and I don't believe it, that the comic-book factor alone makes a child do anything. You see, the comic-book factor only works because there are many, many, other factors in our environment, not necessarily the homelife, not necessarily the much-blamed mother, the newspaper headlines where everybody accused the other one of being a liar or a thief.[345] Wertham certainly encountered some cognitive dissonance on this point, as he claimed in previous letters to the Cincinnati Committee that all comics were "debased and definitely harmful."

[343] Wertham, *Seduction*, 346. Quote from Beaty, *Wertham*, 156.
[344] Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 60.
[345] 1954 hearings testimony, 87.

One of the most prominent and controversial statements Wertham made in the course of his testimony was his claim that "Hitler was a beginner compared to the comic-book industry" in terms of spreading race-hatred. "They teach them race hatred at the age of 4 before they can read," remarked Wertham in response to a setup handed to him by Kefauver, who likened crime comics' presentation of almost-perfect crimes to "what we heard about during the last war of Hitler's theory of telling the story over and over again[.][346] Wertham then referred to a comic story containing several instances of racial slurs against Puerto Ricans leading to the beating death of a young girl.

As Bill Gaines would quickly note, taking the stand after Wertham, the story that Wertham referred to was "The Whipping," from the EC comic series *Shock Suspenstories,* a story in Gaines' eyes clearly written to show racism as evil. "This is one of a series of stories designed to show the evils of race prejudice and mob violence. . .[t]his is one of the most brilliantly written stories that I have ever had the pleasure to publish."[347] Comic book critics taking panels and stories out of context to prove a point was nothing new, but Wertham's misrepresentation of the story as a vessel for preaching race hatred was significant, especially for a man who claimed to be such an expert on comics. Whether Wertham deliberately misrepresented the story is academic, but he clearly misread it: "The social message about the evils of racism is conveyed by the omniscient narrator through the use of captions. But if a reader skips the captions and skims the dialogue, a much different story is told, where the racism seemingly is justified[.]"[348] Likewise, as was common, Wertham exaggerated the *visually depicted* violence of the story, where most of it was described in the captions.[349] This points, in

[346] 1954 hearings testimony, 95.
[347] Quoted in Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 64.
[348] Nyberg, *Seal of Approval,* 64.
[349] Ibid.

some way, to the epistemological crisis posed by the visuality of comics in that intellectuals raised in the world of print could not reckon with images.

The testimony of Gaines was a foil to Wertham's in many ways. Gaines, irritated about many things, especially Wertham's deliberate misreading of his story, was already in an aggravated mood, and the committee reflected this in their questioning of him. Gaines began by citing his credentials as an educator, and noting that his father Max, from whom he inherited the company, was one of the progenitors of comic book publishing in America. Max Gaines, who died in a boating accident in 1947, helped advise the production of *Famous Funnies*, considered the first true comic book, and co-founded All-American Publications, which debuted famous superheroes like Wonder Woman, Green Lantern, and the Flash. All-American later became one of the companies that merged to form the successor to modern day DC Comics. Bill Gaines cited his father's earlier ventures at EC (then called Educational Comics), *Picture Stories from the Bible*, as proof of his father's belief in the didactic potential of the comics as a visual medium.[350]

Gaines never backed down from acknowledging that he published controversial comic books, believing that the critiques of his books were grounded in matters of taste, not juvenile delinquency: "It would be just as difficult to explain the harmless thrill of a horror story to a Dr. Wertham as it would be to explain the sublimity of love to a frigid old maid," retorted Gaines.[351] He further criticized the furor over comic books and children by pointing back to the *Ulysses* decision from several decades earlier, noting that the law should only be concerned with "normal" people, and relaying news headlines collected from major newspapers that provided graphic descriptions of crime.

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[350] 1954 hearings testimony, 98.
[351] Ibid.

Unfortunately, whatever goodwill Gaines tried to engender with the committee went out the proverbial window with the now-infamous exchange between Gaines and Kefauver about the ghastly covers of *Crime Suspenstories* #22 and 23 (reproduced below). After jousting with assistant counsel Beaser about the limits of what Gaines would publish (he indicated "only within the bounds of good taste," understood to be Bill Gaines' good taste), Kefauver held up a copy of *Crime Suspenstories* #22 and said "Here is your May 22 issue. This seems to be a man with a bloody ax holding a woman's head up which has been severed from her body. Do you think that is in good taste?"[352] "Yes, sir; I do," Gaines shot back, "for the cover of a horror comic. A cover in bad taste, for example, might be defined as holding the head a little higher so that the neck could be seen dripping blood from it and moving the body over a little further so that the neck of the body could be seen to be bloody."[353]

Gaines' exchange with Kefauver took up most of a front page *New York Times* column published the following day, indeed, the lengthy testimony of Fredric Wertham only merited a paragraph deeper in the paper. Gaines, long a maverick and thorn in the side of corporate comic book publishers, certainly won no friends from his brash testimony. Industry legend Joe Simon (co-creator of Captain America) recalled watching the hearings and, after Gaines' outburst at Kefauver, remarking "Stupid, stupid, stupid!"[354] While many commentators recall Gaines' testimony and the public reaction to it as the pivotal spark towards the creation of the Comics Code, the sensational nature of his testimony and the massive changes in the industry overshadowed the material and fiduciary realities of the period. As Jean-Paul Gabilliet wrote in his cultural history of comic books, *Of Comics and Men,* "[I]t is true that EC comic books did

[352] 1954 hearings testimony, 103.
[353] Ibid.
[354] Quoted in Hajdu, *Ten-Cent Plague*, [269].

stand out from their competitors' output by their graphic and (at times) literary qualities, they never threatened the crushing commercial domination of funny animals and teen comics. William Gaines and EC were simply metonymic of their times: they have been wrongfully cast as the protagonists of the process that brought a segment of the industry to their downfall in the eyes of the American public."[355]

The committee's first witness on the second day of the hearings was Gunnar Dybwad, director of the Child Study Association of America, a liberal child development think tank that employed Sidonie Matsner Gruenberg and Josette Frank, two prominent activists that encouraged a more nuanced view of children's comic reading. Dybwad pointed to the CSAA's long history of providing guidance to parents with regard to comic books beginning in 1937 with the publication of the first edition of Josette Frank's *What Books for Children*, which discussed newspaper comic strips. Dybwad then made mention of Frank serving as an editorial assistant for National Comics Publications, and, perhaps in a reading of the room, distanced himself from Frank by noting that she was "only part time" on the CSAA staff.[356] Dybwad went on to criticize the violent turn in comics, while noting that the CSAA routinely identified bad comics in their studies, fighting back against Kefauver's accusations that comic book publishers purposely quoted old CSAA reports that were favorable of comic books to deflect criticism.

Dybwad did, however, make an interesting comment on the class-centric nature of comics' perceived consumption: "I am aware not only from New York, but from the Middle West that there are certain stores which feature these and that those certain stores are usually found in areas which are already depressed and typical of many other socially inappropriate matters as the

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[355]Jean-Paul Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books*, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013).
[356] 1954 hearings testimony, 120.

third and fourth grade saloons and all other establishments which go with vice and crime."[357] Dybwad, who formerly worked in boys' reformatories across the nation, disputed hard clinical evidence for comics causing delinquency and directly causing crimes, but noted that in his previous occupations, comics were "part and parcel of the life of a child delinquent."[358]

Dybwad's testimony went more or less smoothly until Kefauver began to interrogate Dybwad over his staff's linkages to the comic book industry, in particular Josette Frank. "Now, it is strange to me how, if you are giving out directions to parents, how frankly your associate is taking the part of the comic book industry. Why do you not say here that Josette Frank, in addition to being with the Child Study Association is also the consultant. . .on the editorial advisory board of [National Comics Publications] and is paid by the comic book industry?"[359] Dybwad tried in vain to deflect Kefauver's argument by saying it was unfair for Kefauver to say that Frank was paid by the whole industry, rather than one company: "When I work for the Schlitz Brewing Co., I don't work for the beverage industry. I work for one particular company and I may have my good reasons why I work for Schlitz and not for Ballantine."[360]

Kefauver's rhetorical damage was done, and writers since have argued exactly how much Frank's work discredited her writing for the CSAA, but the fact remains that NCP, where Frank worked for years, was one of the largest and most reputable publishers of non-objectionable comics, not one of the beleaguered, smaller, adult publishers under fire from the committee.[361] After this revelation, Kefauver became increasingly combative and underhanded

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[357] 1954 hearings testimony, 120.
[358] Ibid., 127
[359] Ibid., 131.
[360] Ibid.
[361] Of this, Amy Nyberg writes "National published none of the material under attack by the critics. It was the oldest comic book publisher in the country and one of the largest. . .while National may have used their experts in an

with Dybwad. Kefauver claimed that Sidonie Matsner Gruenberg, who by that point was no longer employed with the CSAA, wrote an article "very, very, favorable" to comic books while minimizing crime and horror comics, to which Dybwad strenuously objected. "Mrs. Gruenberg speaks here," quoting from the *Woman's Day* article in question, "'many of these abominable and irresponsible creations bluntly exploit crime, violence, brutality, and sexy stuff.'"[362] Kefauver asserted that Gruenberg's article was of no use since she did not specifically condemn crime comics and actively opposed censorship, never minding that Gruenberg's article was, by that time, six years old and referenced a wholly different comic book market.[363] Regardless, Kefauver remarked "while I do not question the personal integrity of the witness, the opinion of the Child Study Association in the comic book field will have little weight with me."[364]

Following this exchange, Senator Hendrickson, the chair, requested that the committee furnish a complete list of its membership, to the complete shock of Dybwad. Senator Hennings inquired about the organization's funding sources, which led to Dybwad firing back that they received contributions from reputable book publishers in part to help fund the CSAA. This backfired for Dybwad somewhat, as Hennings sensed the opportunity to strike and imply that publishers of objectionable comics were funneling money to the CSAA. After growing increasingly frustrated with Hennings, Dybwad shot back "To the best of my knowledge, no

[Footnote 361 cont.] attempt to defend the type of comics they published and distance themselves from the publishers of crime and horror comics, it is doubtful that National had any interest in defending publication of crime and horror comics." Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 76. For a more critical assessment of Frank's editorial service, see Beaty, *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture.*

[362] 1954 hearings testimony, 132.

[363] Gabilliet notes that crime comics were "marginal" until 1947, and, ignoring seminal precursors, Gaines' controversial horror line did not release until 1950. Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men*, 62.

[364] 1954 hearings testimony, 133.

relative of any one of these publishers, no friend, associate in any way, has. . .contributed in any way, shape, or fashion to the Child Study Association of America..”[365]

Hennings then changed course, and in keeping with the Cold War-esque turn of the proceedings, asked if Dybwad thought that unscrupulous organizations were using the CSAA as a front organization. “No more than fronts for Viking, Harpers, Whitman, Doubleday,” Dybwad fired back.[366] At this point, Kefauver took back over and began grilling Dybwad again over Josette Frank’s involvement with NCP. At this point, Dybwad offered the same defense Amy Nyberg did years later: “The particular comic book publisher for whom our staff associate is adviser, and is one of the largest publishers of comic books, does not particularly, by his products, play a role here in this committee.”[367] Dybwad doubled down on his critiques, highlighting the only NCP titles that one could possibly consider objectionable, their comic adaptations of *Gang Busters* and *Mr. District Attorney,* popular radio shows of the day, and arguing that there was no possible way the committee could claim that those NCP titles were on the same level as the more adult material that was more widely criticized.

Dybwad also mentioned the fact that neither the CSAA nor NCP ever attempted to hide that they employed educational consultants, fighting back against the perception that the committee and Wertham tried to inculcate that they were wholly uncritical outright shills for comic book companies. As earlier, this did little to assuage the perception of organizations like the CSAA as paid shills for the comic book industry, and while Dybwad adamantly defended the work done by his staff, which was public record for years and performed on behalf of an upstanding major publisher of comics, he could not escape the tightening Cold War parameters

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[365] 1954 hearings testimony, 135.
[366] Ibid.
[367] Ibid., 137

of his Congressional interrogation – they saw the CSAA as little more than a front for unscrupulous publishers, regardless of anything Dybwad was able to present.

One of the subsequent experts interviewed by the committee also did little to sway the committee's perception of comics. Dr. Lauretta Bender, one of the first psychiatrists to write academically about the effects of comics on children, spoke to the committee at length about her belief that children were sophisticated consumers of comics and would reject comics that did not interest them, working against the "hypodermic needle" theory of media absorption common to the period.[368] Bender went on to claim that horror and crime comics in her own words, "unspeakably silly," and that children laughed at them, and this was the claim for which Bender became most remembered by later observers.[369]

However, Bender made key claims that spoke against the strategy used by the committee to suggest that young children would identify with killer children in comics. Bender stonewalled questioning from Beaser, one of the committee's lawyers, who kept insisting that children would see themselves in these violent comics, saying as a rejoinder that children were not as adversely affected by comics because they could simply just put them down if the stories bothered them.[370] Indeed, Bender claimed, Disney movies were much more upsetting to children! "I have children brought to me in terrible panics," stated Bender, "and interestingly enough most often [over] the Walt Disney movies which do depict very disturbing mother figures. The mothers are always killed or sent to the insane asylums in Walt Disney movies. They are among my experience,

[368] 1954 hearings testimony, 152.
[369] Beaty, *Fredric Wertham*, 159-160 by way of Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 75.
[370] Ibid., 153.

except for Frankenstein, the worst movies in the world for children who have had a problem of the loss of a parent."[371]

Another aspect of Bender's testimony not mentioned by modern accounts of the hearings is how she performed her work as an editorial assistant for NCP, which entailed bringing copies of comic books she was reviewing to her hospital wards and actively seeking the comment of children, teachers, and other psychiatrists. Hendrickson then asked Bender about a typical editorial problem on which the advisory board would be asked for its advice. Bender relayed a story about NCP consulting her on the production of an official Superman costume for children, which the company ostensibly held off on producing for fear that children would imitate Superman and hurt themselves jumping off of things. Stemming from this, Bender concluded (and never tried to hide) that comics undoubtedly held influence over children, but when Hendrickson inquired of Bender what influence she felt comics like *Crime Suspenstories* would hold over children, she answered,

> [*Crime Suspenstories*] would have nowhere near [*sic*]. Superman represents an instinctive problem that we are all born and grown up with, that we can fly — after all, we can fly now; we couldn't before—and that we can carry on all kinds of scientific investigations, that we can stop crime, which Superman does, and that we can have a good influence on the world, and that we can be protected by the powerful influences in the world which may be our own parents, or may be the authorities, or what not.[372]

Bender concluded that Superman was undoubtedly a good influence on children because he always triumphed on the side of justice. A kind of comic that was not a good influence on children, in Bender's opinion, were the ostensibly wholesome and educational comics produced by *Parents Magazine*. "They were really very bad," noted Bender, who objected to the historical

[371] 1954 hearings testimony, 153.
[372] Ibid., 158.

violence depicted in *True Comics* (Bender used the examples of a World War II naval battle and a colonial conflict with Native Americans). The committee, realizing this sounded strange, asked her to clarify since there were plenty of violent comics displayed previously in the hearings. Bender noted that her primary objection to the comics themselves came from the fact that they were produced by *Parents*, thus putting the stamp of child experts on depictions of violence.

Bender's testimony was, in truth, not as discredited nor as head-scratching as more modern accounts of the hearings made it out to be. While she certainly made some odd statements regarding horror comics and the way that children responded to them, the whole of Dr. Bender's testimony tells a very different story, one that both questioned the suitability of more "wholesome" comics and stories for children and displayed that her editorial work for NCP was more than simple uncritical shilling. All in all, the "pro-comics" experts called to testify before the committee gave sophisticated defenses of comic books in the face of governmental investigations that were, in essence, show trials.[373] Perhaps, in truth, Bill Gaines was not far off when he accused the committee via his *Are You A Red Dupe?* ad of using tactics commonly attributed to censors in the Soviet Union.

In March 1955, after the conclusion of the hearings, the committee issued a comprehensive interim report that discussed the hearings and provided a concise summary of the ultimate opinions of the committee. The report continued to frame the comics crisis in terms of controlling juvenile delinquency: "The child today in the process of growing up is constantly exposed to sights and sounds of a kind and quality undreamed of in previous generations. As

[373] For more on this point, see Park, "Decency, Authority, and the Dominated Expert."

these sights and sounds can be a powerful force for good, so too can they be a powerful counterpoise working evil."[374]

While the committee believed that the content of comics needed to improve in general, it stopped short of saying that comics definitely contributed to delinquency, noting "substantial, though not unanimous" agreement among professionals regarding the question. Instead, the subcommittee reiterated the need for educational and social welfare agencies to research the special problem of comic books more deeply, and reaffirmed their support for industry self-regulation, which many government officials previously called for.[375]

After the conclusion of the governmental hearings and the introduction of the Comics Code, the industry began a downturn. Many smaller publishers did go under, and those that remained (the largest and most corporate) were compelled by the Code to produce comics that had safe, inoffensive, child-friendly stories. There were economic, political, and legal factors that led to the downturn of the comic book market and thus the American anti-comics movement, but one of the most immediate causes was a piece of legislation sponsored by James FitzPatrick, a member of the New York State commission on comics who also testified at the 1954 hearings.

FitzPatrick previously proposed bills intended to tightly regulate both the content and salability of comics long before the moral panic over comic books hit its high in 1954. But both bills died at the pen of New York governor Thomas Dewey, a notable defender of free speech who believed that the proposed legislation would not hold up if challenged in court due to the

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[374] "Comic Books and Juvenile Delinquency. Interim Report Pursuant to S. Res. 89, 83d Cong., 1st Sess., and S. 190, 83d Cong., 2d Sess., a Part of the Investigation of Juvenile Delinquency in the United States" (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1955), 2. Hereinafter 1955 Interim Report.
[375] 1955 Interim Report, 32-33.

Winters v. New York decision in 1948.[376] However, his new legislation, introduced during the administration of Democratic governor W. Averell Harriman, finally passed into law.

FitzPatrick, under the auspices of the Joint Legislative Committee on Comic Books, sponsored four bills, two of which Harriman signed into law while vetoing the others. The main bill, known in later sources as the FitzPatrick Act, made publishing or selling "any book, pamphlet or magazine consisting of narrative material in pictorial form" containing the words "crime," "sex," "horror," and "terror" and containing "pictures or accounts" of the previously mentioned terms a misdemeanor crime, and also criminalized the sale of said books to minors.[377] FitzPatrick's second bill codified that possessing six or more copies of a given comic constituted intent to sell them. The bills vetoed by Harriman would have given peace officers the power to search stores suspected of selling comics and seize any offending articles and would have required publications to list the name of their publisher in every issue (it is unclear if this meant the person or the organization). The *New York Times* article describing Harriman's legislative action noted "constitutional concerns" as the primary motivator for his two vetoes.[378]

The twin strikes of the FitzPatrick Act and the Comics Code had undeniable effects on the comics industry. However, as Jean-Paul Gabilliet reminds us, their consequences were not as monolithic as many popular/fan accounts of the late 1950s downturn in the comics market imply. To be sure, the editorial standards set forth by the Code prescribed comic book content that fit the conservative, consensus-oriented mood of the Eisenhower years. The Code, by its own admission, also pigeonholed the perception of comics into fare solely for children, a notion that would be maintained officially until the ultimate demise of the Code in 2011, and informally

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[376] Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men,* [88].
[377] Leo Egan, "668 out of 975 Bills Signed by Harriman," *New York Times,* May 3, 1955, 1.
[378] Ibid.

until the re-introduction of horror comics (which eventually moved to a magazine format to circumvent the Code) and the rise of underground comix toward the end of the 1960s.[379]

The FitzPatrick Act and the Code assuredly succeeded in their goal of cleaning up objectionable comics. Small and medium-sized publishers felt the brunt of the tightened market, while it was mostly business as usual at the larger firms like NCP and Marvel, who had their strict in-house codes, and at Dell, who never joined the CMAA because their management felt their comics were squeaky clean and did not want the guilt-by-association. With a few notable exceptions, however, the smaller publishers closed their doors in short order. Ace Magazines, who had several offending crime magazines presented during the hearings, Lev Gleason Publications, the progenitor of crime comics, and EC, who produced a flaccid and unsuccessful line of educational comics after the demise of their more mature series, all closed shop in 1956 with some other minor outfits following in 1958.[380] As Gabilliet further points out, the comic book market was already in a decline (traced by number of annual publications) from its peak in 1952 long before the publication of *Seduction* and the hearings themselves.[381]

Changes in the distribution system of comics also played a role in the contraction of the market after the comic book hearings. There was widespread negative reaction to the practices of wholesalers and distributors, particularly the notion of tie-in sales, where newsstand and drugstore owners were obligated to receive and sell items that they might otherwise choose not to carry in order to gain access to other titles that they wished to sell. Multiple news dealers that

[379] The final revision/update of the Code in 1989 still spoke in terms of providing quality reading material for children and safe parentally-supervised consumption. "While the comic book industry has changed over the intervening three decades, as has almost every other facet of American life, the publisher members of the CMAA remain committed to providing decent and wholesome comic books for children. This new updated version of the Comics Code is a reaffirmation of that commitment."
[380] Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men*, [158].
[381] Ibid., 164-168.

testified across the hearings that dotted the early 1950s expressed their displeasure with these arrangements, as they felt that they were being strong armed into carrying objectionable titles for fear of not having material that their regular customers sought out. The sudden demise in 1957 of American News Company, which distributed nearly all comics save those of NCP (who had their own distribution company), further complicated matters.[382]

Not all, however, were pleased by the progress made in cleaning up objectionable comics, notably their ever-present foe, Fredric Wertham. The staff of *The Saturday Review* (formerly *The Saturday Review of Literature*), where Wertham first published the attack on comic books that won him wide renown in 1948, reached out to him again in 1955 to have him survey the comics landscape after the Comics Code.[383] Perhaps predictably, Wertham did not have a charitable view. Recalling his previous distaste with the Kefauver Commission on Organized Crime, which he accused of "whitewashing" the crime comic book industry, Wertham lamented that the recently completed hearings by the Hendrickson Committee seemingly recognized the dangers of comic books, but did not go far enough to suggest any remedying legislation. "It would seem," mused Wertham, "that Senators are more informed about subversion than perversion."[384]

Wertham further elaborated his three main objections to the continued dominance of comics, which he continued to refer to as crime comics regardless of the content. The first reason was old news by that point—the massive circulation numbers of comic books. These were still

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[382] See Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men*, Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*. The abrupt 1957 demise of American News Company has long been of interest to historians and never completely understood. The company weathered an antitrust suit brought in 1952 as well as the shocks of some major magazines going under as well as major publishing companies (notably Dell Publishing) finding their own distributors.
[383] Fredric Wertham, "It's Still Murder: What Parents Don't Know About Comic Books," *Saturday Review*, April 9, 1955.
[384] Ibid., 11.

high, but far removed from their peak in 1952. The second relied on the perception of comic book readership being, as Leslie Fiedler put it, " a unitary child." Here, Wertham claimed that "violence, cruelty, sadism, crime, beating, promiscuity, sexual perversion, race hatred," etc. pervaded literature that was specifically aimed at children.[385] Most offensive to Wertham, however, was the damage that he felt comics did to the reading ability of children. "Children do not think of reading a comic book as they might 'read a book.' They 'look at' a comic. They become picture-gazers, because they can get the main points of the stories from the pictures alone, without bothering to read the words.[386] This last point, of course, was a curious one for Wertham to make, given his own misreading of "The Whipping" at the comic book hearings the previous year. The remainder of Wertham's article was a diatribe against the Code itself, taking it to account for what he saw as lapses in its coverage.

While Wertham often offered sensationalized accounts of specific parts of comic stories that he felt violated the spirit and letter of the code, he rarely in this new article mentioned specific comics, only providing two panels, one from Premier's *Mysterious Stories* where what he is objecting to is not clear (a naked Statue of Liberty, perhaps?) and a panel from Avon's *Wild Bill Hickok* where a villain slaps a woman.[387] Wertham was far from a reasoned judge of such matters of violence–from his own papers (including comments on the first appearance of Black Panther), it was clear that he objected to even the slightest portrayals of violence in comic books.

From 1954 to 1957, the anti-comics activists had their day in the sun. Two of the biggest offenders (in their eyes) closed their doors in 1956, the Code was largely doing its job, and most besides Wertham were placated by what the various governmental subcommittees frequently

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[385] Wertham, "It's Still Murder," 12.
[386] Ibid.
[387] Ibid.

called for—a functional system of self-regulation for the industry. This self-regulation dovetailed with widespread bans on the sale of comics specifically or "indecent literature" more broadly to minors. By 1955, eighteen states had laws on the books preventing these types of sales.[388] For a time, it seemed like the future Wertham and the NODL long campaigned for might come to pass. But it was not to be. Murphy, it turned out, was not content with the level of authority granted to him by the CMAA and did not have his initial contract at the Comics Code Authority renewed. Like the NODL before them, the anti-comics idealogues of the late 1950s began to suffer a series of defeats in court that began to signal a new direction towards the culture wars of the 1960s.

The initial, and most crucial, of these cases was *Butler v. Michigan*, argued before the Supreme Court in 1957. *Butler v. Michigan*, as late as 2012, has been described as "a key free speech victory. . .[creating] a pivotal principle in First Amendment jurisprudence—that the government cannot, in the name of shielding minors from supposedly objectionable content and thereby reduce the scope of speech available to consenting adults."[389] *Butler*, like the *Ulysses* case several decades before, was a test case. Alfred Butler, the bookseller in question, was in reality the district manager for Pocket Books, a major mass-market publisher. To test Detroit's famously restrictive censorship ordinances, Butler purposely sold a police officer a copy of *The Devil Rides Outside*, a book described by a contemporary *Time* article as "an earnest, if second-rate novel about the sexual torments of a young man trying to attain monkish chastity."[390] Butler was then arrested and fined $100 for selling the book, then had his conviction upheld and motion

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[388] Edward L. Feder, "Comic Book Regulation," *Legislative Problems, California Bureau of Public Administration*, no. 2 (1955): 18.
[389] Clay Calvert, "Of Burning Houses and Roasting Pigs: Why Butler v. Michigan Remains a Key Free Speech Victory More than a Half-Century Later," *Federal Communications Law Journal* 64, no. 2 (March 1, 2012), https://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/fclj/vol64/iss2/2: 251.
[390] Ibid., 253-254. *Time* article quoted in ibid.

to dismiss the case denied by a trial judge based on the offending language of the book, and the Michigan Supreme Court subsequently denied Butler an appeal.

The Supreme Court quickly overturned the conviction and declared the Michigan law unconstitutional. In a unanimous decision penned by Justice Felix Frankfurter, the Court declared the Michigan law invalid not on First Amendment grounds, as was in the case of *Winters v. New York* (where Frankfurter dissented), but on Fourth Amendment grounds under the Due Process clause, arguing that the Michigan law "[reduces] the adult population of Michigan to reading only what is fit for children," thereby removing the freedom of adults to choose what they wished to read. Frankfurter famously quipped in this case that banning books for adults to protect the innocence of children was to "burn the house to roast the pig."[391]

In his article for *Federal Communications Law Journal*, Clay Calvert surmised that the precedential roots of Frankfurter's famous line lay in an obscure case from the Southern District of New York from 1913 named United States v. Kennerly, where a bookdealer was seeking to have his prosecution for sending an obscene book through the mails thrown out of court. Though Judge Learned Hand (who, ironically, helped *Ulysses* escape its obscene designation twenty years later) overruled Kennerley's demurral request due to the Hicklin test remaining the benchmark in American obscenity jurisprudence, he presaged the future downfall of obscenity defenses invoked to stifle creative thought:

> I question whether in the end men will regard that as obscene which is honestly relevant to the adequate expression of innocent ideas, and whether they will not believe that truth and beauty are too precious to society at large to be mutilated in the interests of those most likely to pervert them to base uses. Indeed, it seems hardly likely that we are even

[391] Butler v. State of Mich., 352 U.S. 383 (1957). Also *Id.* at 384. Justice Hugo Black concurred in the result, and Frankfurter's sole reference to Winters v. New York was to suggest that the Michigan statute could not be declared unconstitutional on the same grounds, as the New York statute pertained more directly to the regulation of violent content, which Frankfurter felt the state was within their rights to control, hence his dissent in the Winters case.

> to-day so lukewarm in our interest in letters or serious discussion as to be content to reduce our treatment of sex to the standard of a child's library in the supposed interest of a salacious few, or that shame will for long prevent us from adequate portrayal of some of the most serious and beautiful sides of human nature.[392]

While, like the Winters case, the animus for Butler v. Michigan did not arise specifically from prosecutions stemming from the sale of comic books, the precedent set by the Supreme Court had an immediate effect on attempts to overturn bans on comic books in the years following the decision. While challenges to comic book bans never reached the Supreme Court, two subsequent challenges reached the supreme courts of their respective states, with a further case decided in an appeals court. These three cases were *Adams v. Hinkle* (1958) in Washington state, *Katzev v. Los Angeles County* (1959), and *Police Commissioner of Baltimore v. Siegel Enterprises, Inc.* (1960). The Adams case arose when Van Hinkle, the head of children and youth services for Washington's correctional system, appealed an injunction that prevented him from enforcing a draconian comic book ban passed by the Washington legislature in 1955.[393]

The primary elements of the Washington law that the court found objectionable beyond its obvious constraint on the ability of adults to read what they saw fit were the pre-sale restrictions placed on retailers by the state law. Retailers were required to possess a license specifically to sell comic books with stiff penalties for unlicensed comics retailers. The law also included a unique section that created a presumption in the courts "…that all comic books will appeal to minors, and such presumption cannot be overcome by statements that they were not intended for minors."[394] Hinkle appealed to recent Washington state precedent that the office issuing the injunction did not properly meet the burden of proof in trying to declare it

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[392] *U.S. v. Kennerly,* 209 F. 120 (1913). Also *Id.* at 141.
[393] *Adams v. Hinkle,* 51 Wash.2d 765 (1958).
[394] *Id.* at 767.

unconstitutional, and that statutes should be presumed constitutional to begin with, but the court denied his reasoning because they interpreted the question as an issue of civil rights rather than in-state commerce, thus falling under the purview of the freedom of speech guarantees in both the state and federal Constitutions.[395]

Simply put, there was little in the Washington state law under review that had a chance of standing up to constitutional scrutiny between the prior restraint issued on comic book sellers, the vague and indefinite nature of the statute and the unequal treatment of adult readers. The court made reference to the recent decision in Joseph Burstyn, Inc. v. Wilson, which ended formal film censorship and marked a downturn in efforts to censor film, as well as Near v. Minnesota, a landmark decision from the 1920s that ruled nearly all types of prior restraint on publications (save for obscenity, war preparations, and incitements to acts of violence) unconstitutional.[396] The court further criticized the legislature for declaring that "crime comic books" contributed to both juvenile delinquency and crime while failing to specifically mention comic books "anywhere in the act," or properly define what constituted a comic book.[397] The decision in *Adams v. Hinkle*, which directly referenced the Butler decision multiple times, reflected the continued legal challenges that anti-comics crusaders continued to face even after the advent of the code.

The next major case to overturn a widespread comic book ban was *Katzev v. Los Angeles* County in 1959. The California Supreme Court heard the case on appeal, as Katzev had previously tried to have County Ordinance 6633, a wide-ranging Los Angeles County ordinance

[395] *Gruen v. State Tax Commission*, 35 Wash. 2d. 1 (1948). Also *Adams* at 848. Washington's freedom of speech guarantee states that "Every person may freely speak, write and publish on all subjects, being responsible for the abuse of that right." West's Revised Code of Washington Annotated, Article 1, Section 5.
[396] *Adams v. Hinkle* at 769.
[397] *Id.* at 773.

that banned the sale of crime comic books to minors, overturned on Constitutional grounds. The trial court in the previous case, drawing upon expert testimony from Hilde Mosse, Fredric Wertham's partner, as well as Wertham's own publication, concluded that the apparent threat from crime comic books was a suitable manifestation of the "clear and present danger" notion required to justify a free speech constraint.[398] The California Supreme Court disagreed, pointing out that the language in the ordinance was, again, so vague and indefinite that it functionally outlawed even cartoon violence:

> The ordinance does not require that the drawings be lewd or depict brutality, sadism, gore or horror; nor does the ordinance limit its application to accounts of crime which glorify the crime or the criminal, make crime attractive or depict in detail the manner in which crimes are committed. The ordinance brings within its scope such publications as New Funnies (town attacked by bandits in Woody Woodpecker story); Bugs Bunny (Bugs steals diamonds); and Classic Comics (Treasure Island). Conversely, it is quite obvious that many crime, horror, or sex comic books containing the features most objectionable may continue unaffected by the ordinance because they are not fictional or do not contain accounts of the enumerated crimes.[399]

The California Supreme Court further rejected the testimony offered by Mosse and accepted by the appeals court, declaring that "[t]he record in the present case fails to disclose a close, causal connection between the substantive evil juvenile delinquency and the circulation of crime comic books in general."[400] A curious recurring theme that appeared between the *Adams* decision and *Katzev v. Los Angeles* was the official recognition that newspaper comic strips and comic books were wholly different media, as both decisions commented on the separate requirements levied on comic book dealers and newspaper dealers representing a lack of due process and equal treatment under law. Modern accounts of the midcentury outrage over comic

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[398] Katzev v. County of Los Angeles, 336 P.2d 6 (1959). Not to be confused with the appeal case, Katzev v. Los Angeles County.
[399] Katzev v. Los Angeles County, 52 Cal.2d 360 (1959) Also *Id.* at 368.
[400] *Id.* at 315.

books that primarily assert that the anti-comic critiques were overblown gloss over cases like Katzev and Adams, which demonstrate that there was a receptive environment in Cold War America to brutally repressive restrictions on anything that could have any potential of upsetting the delicacy of the Cold War consensus. As was clear in *Katzev*, people in power took stock in the misleading science of Wertham and Mosse, with perhaps unintended consequences.

The final major challenge that arose to comic book bans came in 1960 with *Police Commissioner of Baltimore City v. Siegel Enterprises, Inc.* This case, which only reached the Maryland Court of Appeals, arose when the Baltimore City Police appealed an injunction enjoining them from enforcing the Crime Comic Book Act of Maryland against Siegel Enterprises, a conglomerate of newsdealers operating in Baltimore.[401] The original challenge to the law stated that the Crime Comic Book Act violated the First and Fourteenth Amendment rights of the newsdealers, while the Baltimore Police Department on appeal claimed that they were performing a reasonable exercise of police power to prevent juveniles from consuming obscene material and preventing juvenile delinquency.[402]

There was little that was new in the decision, which upheld the injunction levied on the Baltimore Police Department. The appeals court unanimously agreed that the proposed action, even in light of the changing United States obscenity jurisprudence following the 1957 *Roth v. United States* decision, deprived the newsdealers of their rights to free speech and due process.[403] The *Baltimore* case drew on all of the previous court actions of the recent years, whether they explicitly concerned comic books (like *Adams* and *Katzev*), or they more generally struck down

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[401] Police Commissioner of Baltimore City v. Siegel Enterprises, Inc., 223 Md. 110 (1960).
[402] *Id.* at 118-119.
[403] *Id. at* 134. The *Roth* decision changed the official test for obscenity to rely on contemporary community standards, and also called into question whether a work in question undoubtedly appealed to prurient interests and lacked any redeeming social importance (lampooned to great effect, of course, in the Tom Lehrer song "Smut").

prior restraint exercised on the sale of publications in general or to minors as in the *Winters* and *Butler* cases. The *Baltimore* case represented the final major legal decision concerning official bans of comic book sales, marking the change in tone both in the legal landscape of the late 1950s and early 1960s, but also of the energy of moral crusaders, who left comic books behind and instead devoted their energy to the emergent antiporn and anti-obscenity movements that marked the 1960s.

All in all, during the course of the 1950s, comics fell victim to the repressive social and political climate that dominated the era. Even though most comics sold during this era were the largely inoffensive ones published by National Comics Publications, Atlas Comics and the like, the small number of more mature comics drew the ire of lawmakers across the nation. On the surface, the reasons for the moral panic seemed apparent and closed to debate — people didn't want their children potentially exposed to violent imagery that would stunt their development and affect their ability to fit within the new postwar order. But, on a deeper level, the repressive Cold War apparatus was at play. More than threats to children, comics, especially crime, war, and certain romance comics, were threats to the ideal of consensus that legitimated the postwar social order. Lawmakers across the country wasted no time in preparing repressive, constitutionally dubious comic book bans that placated critics and gave the impression that the government was responsive to these concerns.

However, as David Park and others persuasively argued, the repeated governmental investigations of comic books, particularly the Gathings and Hendrickson committees, were less about actual fact-finding and improvement of printed material than they were symbolic, farcical show trials, as Park notes, "their primary task was to create an *image* of effectiveness for the

public."[404] Though these committees mostly stopped short of calling the experts involved communists, they employed familiar anticommunist tactics, language, and rhetoric, such as insinuations of dual loyalty, moral undermining, and acting as front organizations to discredit and cast doubt on those who testified and argued for a more nuanced view of the apparent comic book problem.

While these investigations undoubtedly captured the attention of midcentury America, their net results had little to show to match the tenor of the outcry against comic books. Estes Kefauver's initial investigation of comics as part of his organized crime hearings demonstrated a professional consensus very much at odds with the fearmongering of prominent law enforcement figures like J. Edgar Hoover and James V. Bennett, head of the Bureau of Prisons. Two years later, Ezekiel Gathings' conclusions were laughed out of the hearing chamber by some of his own committee members because they were so patently unconstitutional. Even the Hendrickson hearings, the examination of comic books that has lingered the longest and most powerfully in the historical imagination, could not come to a clear conclusion about comics and juvenile delinquency.

Like the radio industry before them, the symbolic act of the government compelling industry figures, experts, and educators to come before Congress was a sign that the larger publishing houses needed to band together to rein in the cheap imitators.[405] However, of the twenty-two witnesses called during the Hendrickson hearings, few were directly involved with

[404] Park, "Decency, Authority, and the Dominated Expert": 261. See also Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*.
[405] Ibid., 260 and Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 429-33.

comics publishing.[406] Gaines, who infamously volunteered his presence at the hearings, left a misleading legacy both to the public who reacted to the hearings, as well as fans and historians in the decades since who failed to note the discrepancies between EC's material sales impact during the 1950s and its much larger cultural impact. The Comics Code and the negative publicity generated by all of the government hearings, but especially the ones in 1954, led to a massive swing in public opinion against comics, and long-lasting effects on the comics industry.

However, as with the case of the NODL during the 1930s and 1940s, these anti-comics efforts found themselves stymied at nearly every turn by courts at all judicial levels across the country. Beginning with the *Butler* ruling, courts began to take notice of how lawmakers singled out and scapegoated comic book publishers and distributors, depriving them of equal rights and due process, while also depriving adults the freedom to read what they wished. Comic books, strange as it might seem, were another front on which the frustrating, repressive elements of Cold War culture, and the creative, seductive, liberating potential of mass culture fought their battles and they were not exempt from the scrutiny of the government. Comic books, and the reactions to them from both the ordinary public and government subcommittees were part and parcel of Cold War culture, shown not just by the paranoiac claims that they would turn children into criminals, or worse, communists, but also by the mediating influence of the courts, who routinely rejected challenges to comics on the virtue of due process or freedom of speech. This, foundationally, was the dialectic of Cold War culture, a struggle between the creative and frustrating elements in American society, and it all played out in the pages of comic books.

[406] The closest witnesses to the comics industry besides Gaines were Walt Kelly, who worked for Dell Comics and was better known as a newspaper cartoonist, Milton Caniff, also a famous cartoonist, and management staff of Dell Publications, which published trade paperbacks in addition to comics.

Chapter 4: On Infantilized Adults and Roller-Skating Horses: Comics and Intellectuals at Midcentury

Peter Pan might be a better symbol of America than Uncle Sam.

—Dwight Macdonald, A Theory of Mass Culture

The apotheosis of the comic book's popularity and the height of the anti-comics movement occurred at a fateful time in American cultural and intellectual history. There was not only a raging conflict between genteel logocentric culture and consumerist iconocentric culture, which the debate over comic books exemplified, but also a more aggregate conflict: that of mass culture and the perceived consequences of its consumption. The perceived threat of mass culture to the values of art resounded across the political spectrum of intellectual thought at the time. From the right there were fears of moral turpitude, from the Frankfurt School intellectuals who made the transatlantic journey, there was an increasing uneasiness with the increasing commodification of culture, and there were myriad fears from liberal American-born intellectuals who feared the rejection of literacy, the terror of the middle class, and a populace rendered subservient by mass culture. In this chapter, I contend that comics, as an eminently visual and commodified form, ultimately pushed to the fore a recurring conflict in American history over the consequences of consuming visual mass culture with the added stresses and limits of Cold War discourse.

By way of Irving Howe and Daniel Bell, Richard Pells persuasively argues in *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age* that many of these intellectuals, who were by the mid-1950s ex (if not anti)-communists, substituted criticisms of mass culture for criticisms of bourgeois society. "By castigating the media," wrote Pells, "writers might demonstrate their dislike for the quality

of American life without having to challenge the nation's political or economic institutions as well."[407]

In many ways, the postwar intellectual conflicts over mass culture were a continuation of a recurring debate within American society over the cultural fallout of mass-reproduced images. E.L. Godkin, the founding editor of *The Nation*, was one of the first modern intellectuals to balk at a culture rapidly becoming iconocentric, driven by the proliferation of mass-produced images (chromolithography). In his 1875 essay "Chromo-Civilization," which discussed the recent fallout of notable abolitionist and Godkin's close friend Henry Ward Beecher's well-publicized adultery trial, Godkin both defended the virtues of vernacular gentility and issued a warning against a culture that centered its learning on iconocentric media.[408]

As Susman suggested, Godkin's critique, detailed further below, reflected the notion of someone in a social class with a monopoly on the interpretation of historical myth striking out at the epistemological challenge that images presented to his social standing. After all, who can interpret the myths of history when chromo-civilization exists? Godkin never drew an explicit connection between the emergent market of chromolithography and the title of his article (in fact, he never uses the term in the body), but his idea of a culture of images begetting a society of falsely-cultured morons might be best understood in this passage from the piece:

> If all this be true, the mischievous effects of the pseudo-culture of which we have spoken above may be readily estimated. A society of ignoramuses who know they are ignoramuses might lead a tolerably happy and useful existence, but a society of ignoramuses each of whom thinks he is a Solon would be an approach to Bedlam let loose, and something analogous to this may really be seen to-day in some parts of this

[407] Richard H. Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 218.
[408] E.L. Godkin, "Chromo-Civilization," in *Reflections and Comments, 1865-1895* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1895).

country.[409]

Interpreting, analyzing, and reckoning with the power of images, then, became a key battle for intellectuals in the early years of the twentieth century. Some intellectuals were able to develop sophisticated critiques of the image, granting it legitimacy as a cultural form while holding dire predictions for the intellectual effects of image consumption by large segments of the population, while others (like Wertham), failed to understand the conventions, creation, and popularity of images.

Other well-to-do writers at the turn of the century also grumbled about the increasing turn to images in print. In "A Growl for the Unpicturesque," an anonymous contributor to *The Atlantic Monthly* bemoaned the proliferation of pictorial newspaper supplements, fearing that pictures would supplant words as America's primary didactic medium: "But the fact is that, in the great school which all humanity attends perforce, the new art is already the mistress, and its lessons necessarily sink into the grain of human nature far more deeply than the education vouchsafed by the schools of art and letters."[410] To the upper-class readers of the *Atlantic*, the notion that the seductive immediacy and clarity of images might replace the self-denying and laborious process by which one accultured themselves to the written word, was catastrophic.

The critique that followed a month later by poet Ralph Bergengren was perhaps the first mainstream critique of the comic (strip) medium, titled "The Humor of the Colored Supplement."[411] In his column, Bergengren expressed his distaste with the raucous, bawdy,

[409] Ibid. For extended and excellent coverage of the contemporary chromo-debate, see Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow,* especially the extended essay "The Sacralization of Culture," for later treatments, see Gabler, *Life the Movie*. Some of the aspects of gentility defended by Godkin include manners, self-improvement and discipline through logocentric acquisition, ability to make judgements of taste based on aristocratic models, and standards for excluding vulgarites from class society. For more on Godkin and gentility, see Stankewicz, "Chromo-Civilization and the Genteel Tradition," as well as Bushman, *The Refinement of America.*

[410] "A Growl for the Unpictureque," *Atlantic Monthly* 98, July 1906, 312-13.

[411] Ralph Bergengren, "The Humor of the Colored Supplement, *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1906, 269-73.

immigrant-inspired humor of the comic strips of the day ("somebody is always hitting somebody else with a club," he observed).[412] Like future critics of comics, Bergengren was not dismissive wholesale of the medium, reserving special praise for Windsor McCay's groundbreaking *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (noting that McCay possessed "genuine pantomimic humor, charming draughtsmanship, and an excellent decorative sense of color") but he did foreshadow the conservative moralist critics of comics at midcentury by declaring that "there seems to be every reason why the average editor of the weekly comic supplement should be given a course in art, literature, common sense, and Christianity."[413]

These critiques from the intellectuals of late nineteenth century America and the turn of the twentieth are, in many ways, just another subset of the Victorian moralizing against those that did not meet their standards of how someone should culture themselves (or himself, given the expectations of Victorian spheres). These critics shared, as Godkin noted, a general sense that "…the man of culture is the man who has formed his ideals through labor and self-denial."[414] The notion that any average schmuck could have instant gratification and access to vivid imagery and all its accoutrements, was anathema to these elite men. They believed, in the genteel tradition that would spiral to new heights with the emergent advertising and public relations boom of the early twentieth century, that the unwashed masses were inherently irrational and needed to have control exerted over them.[415] Acting to restrict the flow of untampered and seductive images and issuing jeremiads on their vices, then, became the primary doctrine that

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[412] Ibid.
[413] Ibid.
[414] Godkin, "Chromo-Civilization," 202
[415] Bushman, quoted in Stankiewicz, 105. Lists a tenet of vernacular gentility as "standards for excluding vulgar persons from genteel society that confirmed emerging class diversions and affirmed the genteel person's sense of superiority." Stuart Ewen also writes of an emerging dichotomy of an irrational "crowd" versus a "public" that could be reasoned with." Stuart Ewen, *PR! A Social History of Spin*, 1st ed (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 72-73.

these Victorian defenders of a genteel high culture employed in their war against the depredations of what would come to be known as mass culture.

But what of it? Why did the spectre of an iconocentric culture captivate these genteel nineteenth century intellectuals just as intensely as it captivated and stirred the intellectuals of Cold War America? Walter Benjamin reminds us in his most famous work that "[i]n principle a work of art has always been reproducible. . .Mechanical reproduction of a work of art, however, represents something new."[416] In a broader sense, while Godkin and his contemporaries feared that proliferation of chromolithography might lead to a nation of ignorant boobs, the intellectuals of Cold War America faced a chromo-civilization of their own in the form of mass culture that had far greater consequences given the tumultuous global political situations of the 1930s and 1940s. Adorno and Horkheimer, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, took this argument to its natural end when they criticized the increasing commodification of culture, especially of art: "That character is not new: it is the fact that art now dutifully admits to being a commodity, abjures its autonomy and proudly takes its place among consumer goods, that has the charm of novelty."[417]

Comic books epitomized the principles of mechanical reproduction on both a physical and theoretical level–the books themselves, garishly four-colored and printed on lousy, bottom dollar pulp veritably flew off the presses to the far reaches of the country *en masse*. So too was their creation, at least in their earliest years, subject to the same Fordist logic of the assembly line, with artists sweltering in "shops," watched over by authoritarian editors, compelled to follow a rationalized "shop style" with little labor protections or claim to profit from the fruits of

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[416] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Marxist Internet Archive*. https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm.
[417] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 127.

their labor until the latter decades of the twentieth century.[418] Naturally, the world in which Godkin presented his jeremiad against chromolithography looked much different from the world in which Dwight Macdonald, Clement Greenberg, and Robert Warshow among others issued their own critiques of the mass culture of the day. But both sets of intellectuals were keenly aware that a cultural shift was occurring at their very moment, and both of these cultural shifts concerned the mass availability of images.

Comics presented a curious obstacle for polemicists like Dwight Macdonald, Robert Warshow, and Delmore Schwartz because of the atomized nature of their production. These men, well versed in picking fights with established literary figures in the columns of magazines like *Partisan Review* and *Commentary*, could find no such sparring opponents for the comic medium—the actual producers of the comics, save for the ahead-of-its time EC Comics, were largely anonymous to them—and that was how the publishers and editors liked it.[419] There is also, I must admit, a problematic tendency undergirding the use of these intellectuals in a manuscript dedicated to excavating new intellectual perspectives on comics criticism, namely the fact that so few of them commented on specific comics, rather than the medium (or the even larger abstraction of mass culture) as a whole.[420]

Some of these intellectuals, mostly those with the strongest associations to Trotskyism, such as Clement Greenberg, Dwight Macdonald, and Irving Howe, believed that the wide availability of mass culture rendered the American populace subservient and uncritical of the operation of the country, while others maintained that would inculcate a sense of infantilization

[418] See Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men*, particularly Chapters 10 and 11.
[419] See Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men,* specifically Part 2.
[420] Pells, *The Liberal Mind*, 230.

in the irrational masses and leave them unable to cope with the hard realities of Cold War America and instead retreat to the safe havens of mass culture.

Not all were pessimistic, some believed in a more rational critique of images and mass culture like Gilbert Seldes, Leslie Fiedler, and Robert Warshow, while outsiders like C.L.R. James presaged the development of modern cultural and literary studies by arguing that mass culture was the most sophisticated way to learn how everyday Americans viewed their world. All of these intellectuals shared a deep, if sometimes reluctant reverence for the power of mass culture, and their perspectives make for a much richer understanding of how intellectuals dealt with contemporary issues of cultural importance. ramifications of their consumption. While they generally shared a sense of awe regarding the ubiquity and iconocentric power of comics, few of them were looking to serve as legitimists for the specific medium of comic books. Whether it was a question of taste, class, literary value, or social value, these men did not seek to lift comics up from their low place on the cultural hierarchy save for C.L.R. James, who remarked in his unfinished *American Civilization* that comics and other forms of mass culture were the best sources of historical evidence for the worldview of twentieth century America.

The Cold War years were a transitory period in the intellectual perception of comics, and in the intellectual perception of images more broadly. Comics were one of the most apparent manifestations of mass culture, devoured by the irrational crowd and roundly criticized by the sophisticated public. They arrived in force on the American scene as the social fabric was shifting from the New Deal-inspired class culture of the 1930s to the consumer-focused culture of the 1940s and 1950s. These developments kept the rapt attention of intellectuals at midcentury and aroused their fears about the nature of mass culture, modernity, and postwar capitalism.

Dwight Macdonald, one of the most prominent (and pessimistic) observers of mass culture, spoke clearly about its immense power:

> Like nineteenth-century capitalism, Mass Culture is a dynamic, revolutionary force, breaking down the old barriers of class, tradition, taste, and dissolving all cultural distinctions. It mixes and scrambles everything together, producing what might be called homogenized culture, after another American achievement, the homogenization process that distributes the globules of cream evenly throughout the milk instead of allowing them to float separately on top. It thus destroys all values, since value judgments imply discriminations. Mass Culture is very, very democratic: it absolutely refuses to discriminate against, or between, anything or anybody. All is grist to its mill, and all comes out finely ground indeed.[421]

These thinkers also generally shared a flexibly Manichaean point of view about high culture, believing that there was a distinct high culture that required protection from its dialectical opposite in mass culture. Though they were snobs for modernist art, they were not supremacists, as several of them, notably radical art critic Clement Greenberg, one of the first New York Intellectuals to identify their favored binary of culture in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," held that folk art was as equally respectable of a cultural output as was traditional "high culture."[422]

The rapid changes in the fabric of American society, reasoned Greenberg, meant that the producers of culture became increasingly separated from their consumers, and that an artist could no longer "estimate the response of his audience to the symbol and references with which he works."[423] These developments were intimately connected, Greenberg implied, with the existence of Soviet communism. The presence of communism, existing in dialectical opposition to the bourgeois social order, demonstrated that modern American society was "not an eternal,

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[421] Macdonald, Dwight. "A Theory of Mass Culture." *Diogenes* 3, no. 1 (Summer 1953): 1–17.

[422] Greenberg opened his essay by declaring "One and the same civilization produces simultaneously two such different things as a poem by T.S. Eliot and a Tin Pan Alley song, or a painting by Braque and a *Saturday Evening Post* cover." Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review* 6, Fall 1939: 34-49. Reprinted in Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 1-21. Citations refer to the 1961 printing.

[423] Ibid., 3-4.

“natural” condition of life, but simply the latest term in a succession of social orders.”[424] This ontological nervousness gave rise to a sophisticated avant-garde culture, one that challenged the genteel notions of culture common to the early twentieth century (termed “Alexandrianism” by Greenberg), but keeping in the fundamentally dialectical tradition of culture observed by these intellectuals, naturally formed an opposite, contradictory culture. In this case, this oppositional culture was the culture of “kitsch,” and it is there that comics re-enter the story.

The notion of kitsch as proposed by Greenberg was largely and notably iconocentric (the first elements of kitsch he mentions are “popular, commercial art and literature. . .magazine covers, illustrations, ads), making special mention of comics. Greenberg, as future critics did, also observed that kitsch was a largely urban phenomenon of both Western Europe and America. One of the strongest challenges to genteel culture came from these images, which inculcated a form of “universal literacy,” removing the prestige of those reared on a logocentric tradition as basic literacy “was no longer the exclusive concomitant of refined tastes.”[425] Kitsch, by its nature, came into being by imitating high culture. The poetry of T.S. Eliot became the slicks and gangster pulps. The paintings of Picasso became *Crime Does Not Pay*. In a foreshadowing of the negative dialectical relationship between mass culture and high culture, Greenberg observed that kitsch “[used] for raw material the debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture,” or, as Alan Wald keenly observed “…avant garde literature drove society forward and evaded exploitation as propaganda while *kitsch* (mass culture) was easily manipulated.”[426]

[424] Ibid., 4.
[425] Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 10.
[426] Alan M. Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to The 1980s*, 2nd ed, 30th anniv. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 207. Greenberg quote from *Avant-Garde and Kitsch,* 10.

Again, we can relate Greenberg's criticisms of kitsch to the production methods used to create comics to illustrate how they were the ultimate manifestation of this debased culture in the eyes of intellectuals. Greenberg declared that kitsch was "mechanical" and formulaic, and the early production and storylines of early comics, created in a house style and with the same general plots, align with this critical view. As the market changed from superheroes to crime and westerns, it reflected another adage of Greenberg's, that kitsch "changes according to style, but remains always the same."[427]

Yet Greenberg would push back on the notion that conditioning, whether deliberately imposed by the educational system or fomented by capitalist cultural apparatuses, explained why the masses so enjoyed kitsch**.** Immediacy explained best the potency of kitsch and the emergent mass culture**.** Through their quickly-packaged art and storylines, comics gave an immediate satisfaction to their readers, inviting them to finish a story quickly, perhaps looking longer at the images than the text of the story.[428] In the years to come within this circle of leftist academics, Greenberg would be remembered less for his ideas about avant-gardism as an alternative high culture to the dominant "formal" or "genuine culture" of the day, but his initial presentation of "kitsch," largely iconocentric, mechanized, debasing, and profit-driven, became widely influential to his colleagues who expounded on these issues in the coming years.

The pressures of the Cold War and the predominance of anti-Stalinist intellectuals looms large in the debates over mass culture that arose at midcentury, and indeed that conflict shaped all parameters of the way that intellectuals engaged their world, and, by virtue of their position and role in society, how their ideas and critiques became hegemonic. Andrew Ross, in *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture*, reminds us of one of the other key differences that

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[427] Ibid.
[428] Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," 14-15.

set these new intellectuals aside from the older genteel critics of chromolithography: "Cold War culture. . .was crucially organized around the interplay between what was foreign, and outside, and what was domestic, and inside."[429] Containing the foreign, irrational impulses of mass culture became a continued rallying cry for these radical intellectuals.

This impulse of containment helps explain why comics were so controversial in the Cold War years. In the eyes of critics, comics were a foreign, corrupting influence on the domestic space by way of their identified primary consumers, children.[430] In many ways, comics fell victim to the same undemocratic currents that fueled McCarthyism. But why was this? By the late 1940s, America was in the midst of Henry Luce's "American Century," still in the throes of the Fordist dream, which the postwar economic miracle made possible. Conspicuous consumption was the watchword of the day, and the sophisticated corporate-dominated capitalist apparatus that emerged in the postwar era organized itself around that paradigm.[431]

One reason for this change was a shift in the way that Americans consumed popular culture narratives. In David Riesman's landmark sociological analysis *The Lonely Crowd*, he identified a shift away from the more traditional producerist Horatio Alger narratives, where economic and social advancement came, in Riesman's words, with "the virtues of thrift, hard work, and so on."[432] By midcentury, these narratives changed to ones typified by Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People.* Americans were no longer as concerned with their social mobility but were deeply more anxious about fitting in.[433] With the combined abandonment of the genteel tradition of social and cultural mobilization as well as the increasing

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[429] Ibid.
[430] I do not mean foreign in the national context, rather something that parents saw as invading their domestic spheres.
[431] Ross, *No Respect*.
[432] David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, and Reuel Denney, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*, Abridged and revised edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 149.
[433] Ibid.

corporate organization of American economic life, children and young adults no longer required training for introspection, self-denial and adaptation to producerist roles as in decades past. Rather, they needed to be adaptable, other-directed, malleable, and able to adapt to whatever situation and role necessary for their success, whether this was fitting into the corporate boardroom or keeping up with the Joneses, as it were.[434]

Comics, then, should have been the golden example of postwar Fordist consumerism—mass produced, mass consumed, rationalized in their assembly line production. What changed? What caused comics during these intervening years to be, if not outright reviled by hegemonic sections of the population, viewed with significant amounts of distrust? Beyond the changes in popular narrative consumption identified by Riesman and Ross, there were larger changes in the didactic uses of culture for society at large.

The genteel view persisted until the 1920s, when, after newspaper comic strips gained wider traction among mainstream audiences, intellectuals began to more critically appraise some of the most popular series. Gilbert Seldes became the most well-known public intellectual to take a positive view of comic strips in his 1924 book *The Seven Lively Arts*, where he discussed the merits of George Herriman's *Krazy Kat*, a comic strip that captured the minds of intellectuals in the twenties, at midcentury, and still today.[435] "Krazy Kat, the daily comic strip of George Herriman, is, to me, the most amusing and fantastic and satisfactory work of art produced in America to-day. With those who hold that a comic strip cannot be a work of art I shall not

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[434] Ross, *No Respect*, also Neal Gabler, *Life the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality*, 1. ed (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), [13]. "And at the most personal level, it is a society in which individuals have learned to prize social skills that permit them, like actors, to assume whatever role the occasion demands and to "perform" their lives rather than just live them."

[435] The Small Press Expo, a convention catering to independent and alternative cartoonists in Washington, D.C., distributes Ignatz Awards in the form of a brick (hurled by the trickster mouse of the same name at the titular Krazy Kat).

traffic."[436] Of the intellectuals mentioned in this chapter, Seldes is perhaps the one whose political views remained the most similar in the intervening decades, though his views on mass communication changed significantly by the 1950s.[437]

Krazy Kat remained influential in the minds of intellectuals in the intervening decades; indeed, it seemed to be the only strip that these men regarded with even the most restrained amount of approval. In one of his earliest writings for the *Partisan Review/Commentary* duopoly, Robert Warshow, who later rose to great renown as a film critic and early pop culture critic, reviewed a collected edition of Krazy Kat published in 1946 after the death of Herriman. Warshow opened his review by demonstrating the Manichaean view of culture that was typical of his intellectual cadre: "On the underside of our society, there are those who have no real stake in respectable culture. . .these are readers of pulp magazines and comic books, potential book-burners[.][438]

Warshow retained a measured fascination (no doubt because he had not fully embraced the anticommunist cause) for what he described as this *Lumpen* culture, arguing that it provided "a certain purity and freshness" that would have been stifled in more respectable art.[439] In *Krazy Kat*, this manifested itself in what Warshow described as "a complete disregard for the standards of respectable art."[440] Warshow wrote of the strip's immediacy as its primary strength, in a world

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[436] Gilbert Seldes, "The Krazy Kat That Walks By Himself," excerpt from *The Seven Lively Arts* in Heer and Worcester, *Arguing Comics*, 22.
[437] Seldes continued to recognize the importance of audience reception to mass culture. Pells, *The Liberal Mind*, 219. In the first essay of Rosenberg and White's *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, the first large collection of scholarly essays on mass culture, Rosenberg identifies Seldes as emblematic of the liberal approach to mass culture (alongside David Riesman and Max Lerner) in opposition to Macdonald, Howe, and Greenberg, who they term as radicals "repelled by what they commonly regard as vulgar and exploitative." Bernard Rosenberg, "Mass Culture in America," in *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (New York: Free Press, 1957), 3.
[438] Robert Warshow, "Woofed with Dreams," in *The Immediate Experience*, 20.
[439] Ibid.
[440] Ibid.

where everything was always in flux (referring to Herriman's constant and anarchic scene changes), the strip was not designed for continued engagement, but a momentary distraction in the lives of its *lumpen* readers. "While the intellectuals had to 'discover' Krazy Kat," wrote Warshow, "the comic-strip audience just read it."[441]

Indeed, reasoned Warshow, there was no point in reading social commentary onto the antics of Krazy, Ignatz Mouse, and Offissa Pup. The strip was so disconnected from reality, having no beginning nor end, simply an "eternal middle," that it was ultimately not worth engaging as a serious cultural product. He acquiesced to the opinions of other intellectuals like Seldes that it was undoubtedly the finest work produced by the comic strip medium, but remained of the opinion that because the strip was largely a production of the *lumpen* cultural impulse that, as Macdonald observed, acted to break down all barriers between classes and even the distinctions between art and real life.[442] Warshow's early critique was emblematic of other intellectuals of the time in terms of its Manichean point of view, though its usefulness in serving as a barometer for the views of his contemporaries is somewhat limited as he primarily discusses the comic *strip*, a medium distinct from the comic book, where the liminal nature of the strip contrasted with the clearly-set story arcs present in comic books.

Another intellectual who clung to this distractive point of view about mass culture was Irving Howe. Howe, one of the more open leftists of the intellectuals discussed in this chapter, built on the critiques of Greenberg and Dwight Macdonald in his article "Notes on Mass Culture." Howe's key analytical point, echoing Greenberg, was that mass culture was largely an urban phenomenon. However, Howe connected his critique more with orthodox Marxism, insisting that mass culture was organized to provide relief during worker's leisure time by

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[441] Ibid.
[442] Warshow, "Woofed with Dreams," 23.

distracting them from their alienation at the hands of industrial society.[443] In Howe's eyes, mass culture was undoubtedly a distraction, a sedative against industrial alienation, the idea that mass culture constructed worlds of fantasy was "nonsense," rather it was intimately tied with the common, daily experiences of its consumers in order to give them escapism, but make their return to work bearable by not disturbing their routines.[444]

Howe, like Warshow and the others, believed that it was completely impossible to reconcile legitimate art with mass culture. For Howe, art "[demanded] effort" in its consumption to reach a higher level of understanding and enjoyment on a conscious level, where mass culture was designed to placate and not disturb the unconscious forces that would remind workers of their constant alienation within industrial society. Mass culture itself, reasoned Howe, also retained key parts of this dichotomy, possessing a surface consciousness as well as a suppressed unconscious. Presaging the publication of Dorfman and Mattelart's anticolonialist magnum opus *How To Read Donald Duck* by a few decades, Howe used a mouse-eared metaphor to illustrate his point:

> On the surface the Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse cartoons seem merely pleasant little fictions, but they are actually overladen with the most competitive, aggressive and sadistic themes. Often on the verge of hysteria, Donald Duck is a frustrated little monster who has something of the SS man in him and whom we, also having something of the SS man in us, naturally find quite charming. . .[445]

Though his analysis was undoubtedly not as sophisticated as the positions that Dorfman and Mattelart put forth in 1971, Howe was not alone in suggesting that even the most outwardly

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[443] Irving Howe, "Notes on Mass Culture," *Politics,* vol. 5 (Spring 1948). Excerpted in Heer and Worcester, *Arguing Comics*, 43.
[444] Ibid., 44-45.
[445] Ibid., 47. Whether Howe is making a sly reference to the Academy Award-winning Disney short *Der Fuehrer's Face*, which starred poor Donald as a reluctant Nazi (in reality he was just having a bad dream), is unknown. Because of Donald's fascistic dalliance, Disney exercised their characteristic iron-fisted control over the short's distribution, it was not widely released until 2004, 61 years after its original broadcast. Perhaps they thought that media literacy was just as poor then as now.

wholesome comics, cartoons, and stories had undesirable subconscious messages, bringing to mind the comments about Disney movies that Lauretta Bender made during the 1954 juvenile delinquency hearings. Howe also believed, as later critics of Disney comics would, that comics, more than any other medium, infantilized adults by erasing any sort of barriers or distinctions between childhood and adulthood.[446] In this specific instance, Howe, as most intellectuals at the time did, referred solely to newspaper comic strips—*The Yellow Kid, Little Orphan Annie, The Katzenjammer Kids*—as an example of adult readers reliving the simpler ways of childhood. By way of his compatriot Dwight Macdonald, however, Howe notes (somewhat indirectly) that while comic strips epitomized the phenomena of adult infantilization and the eternal child, comic books, especially the newly violent ones that proliferated after the end of World War II, caused children to mentally enter adulthood far earlier than before.[447]

The question of infantilized adults and grown-up children was one that preoccupied intellectuals even before they paid greater attention to comics after the end of World War II. Macdonald, the progenitor of most serious popular/mass culture critiques of the period, expanded on his earlier article in *Politics*, "A Theory of Popular Culture," by way of a second *Politics* editorial titled "Adultized Children v. Infantile Adults."[448] Here, Macdonald addressed the recurring concern that the widespread adoption of popular culture lead to an infantile regression of adults unable to cope with the rapidly-changing industrial society of the war years.[449]

Gilbert Seldes, the original legitimist for Krazy Kat, developed his own sophisticated critique of comic books, displaying his continued engagement with the medium and, against Warshow, analyzing the wider societal ramifications of their consumption. Where Warshow saw

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[446] Howe, "Notes on Mass Culture," 48.
[447] Ibid.
[448] *Politics*, April 1945, 112-115.
[449] Macdonald, "Adultized Children," 112.

Krazy Kat as a mere bit of *lumpenproletariat* fun, Seldes issued more dire warnings about what might result from the unmitigated consumption of comic books. A good Cold War liberal, Seldes was less interested in the elitist discourses of the New York Intellectuals, but, like other liberals of the period, was very concerned about the effects of unregulated mass media consumption by the public.

Seldes was a curious figure in the history of comics, venerated for his original defense of comic books (a major scholarly society of comics studies names their award for public-facing scholarship after him), but less discussed is his near-complete pivot on the medium once the comic book became the dominant medium of consumption. Seldes opened his 1950 book *The Great Audience* by partially retracting his praise for the popular arts that made up most of *The Seven Lively Arts*. "Twenty-five years ago I made a proposal that seemed almost modest at the time: that popular entertainment could be accepted and criticized on the same basis as fine arts. I have now come to believe that this proposal contained a serious error. I didn't perceive then the direction American entertainment was going to take[.][450] What Seldes most objected to was the mechanization and corporatization of these popular arts.

He described their mass-produced nature, the contrite and stereotyped plots, the utter subjugation of the assembly-line tactics used to produce comics, movies, and television, and, most of all, he lamented that most mass culture, by virtue of its creation and purpose, was meant to be "promptly forgotten."[451] This, in a sense, was iconophobia, or the extension of the chromolithography moral panic into the seductive, allegedly totalitarian aspects of mass culture. He was less concerned with the medium as a whole but diametrically opposed to the visual presentation of violence in the comics of the late 1940s.

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[450] Gilbert Seldes, *The Great Audience* (New York: Viking, 1950), 3.
[451] Ibid.

In terms of comics specifically, Seldes felt that legal remedies to their proliferation did not match the level of public interest in their control. Much of Seldes' critique was a product of the time in which he was writing *The Great Audience*; he makes frequent references to the actions of Wertham but laments that no legal action followed and left the will of parents essentially paralyzed.[452] The existing legal actions that took place in the window of Seldes' writing time were the early local-level regulations against the sale of comic books in places like Detroit and Los Angeles, and the first major investigation of comic books took place shortly after the publication of Seldes' book with the Kefauver crime hearings in 1950. Most wider regulations on the sale of comics and similar material did not occur until the mid-1950s.

Seldes was also especially skeptical of the oft-invoked comparisons of comics to the dime novels of the previous generations, remarking that the visual nature of the comics made them that much more accessible to children (the dime novels "had to be read" as they were not illustrated), and that their popularity resulted in a much wider circulation, whereas both the content and availability of dime novels was somewhat restricted and the popularity of the crime genre had not reached a significant level of penetration in other cultural mediums like radio or the movies. Seldes' chronology is not clear owing to the emergence and success of the pre-Code gangster movies of the 1930s that predated the wider popularity of comic books, especially the more violent ones.

Seldes, and his work in *The Great Audience* in particular, illuminate the connections between iconophobia, antiradicalism, and Cold War concerns about the proliferation of mass culture. As with everything then, the existential threat of the atomic bomb had a overshadowing

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[452] Ibid., 270-276.

effect on all forms of discourse.[453] Thus, Cold War thinking utterly permeated *The Great Audience.* Seldes, ever the faithful liberal, tried to keep a level head as he critiqued the patterns of mass media and mass culture within the tight ideological parameters of Cold War America: "I accept neither the radical thesis that the system is too rigid to allow any changes nor the reactionary dodge that the system is perfect and no one but a communist would want to change it in any detail."[454] This put Seldes in line with some of the other, more radical intellectuals in that he did not seek systematic change of the cultural parameters of the United States, but rather more nuanced changes that pushed back against the growing anti-intellectualism fomented in his view by the unchecked effects of mass culture.

In the conclusion to *The Great Audience*, Seldes followed in the footsteps of a certain great Irish satirist by providing a modest proposal for the critical evaluation of mass media. Seldes made reference in his proposal to a comment by Arthur Compton, a Nobel laureate in physics who served on the Manhattan Project, that any decisions about creating the hydrogen bomb should be left to the American people.[455] "It is, perhaps," wrote Seldes, "the most complicated question of our time; it requires not only vast information and steady judgement, but a keenly developed moral sense as well."[456] Seldes was undoubtedly sympathetic to the ideas behind Compton's statement, believing that any government act performed against the will of the people amounted toward a step towards authoritarianism.[457] But he was ultimately distrustful, fearful even, of the effects of mass media especially in the Cold War paradigm:

> Considering our absorption in mass media, can the problem be fully exposed without the use of radio, the movies, television, and comic books? Are these media capable of

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[453] Noted in nearly any serious study of the culture of the time. See Hodgson, *America In Our Time*, Miller and Nowak, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were*, and especially in Boyer, *By The Bomb's Early Light: Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*.
[454] Seldes, *The Great Audience*, 6.
[455] Ibid., 287.
[456] Ibid.
[457] Seldes, *The Great Audience,* 287.

> conveying the problem intelligently to us, and are we capable of receiving it from them? Or have our mass media prepared us to acquiesce, without question, in any decision made?"[458]

Unlike Macdonald and others, Seldes was not as immediately fearful of the amorphous changes posed to high culture by mass culture, but rather what behavioral patterns it developed within Americans. Seldes, like many of the other mainstream public intellectuals of the time, clearly distrusted or reacted negatively to the developments in popular culture during the course of the twentieth century, even saying that he could not have predicted the way that mass media developed. His iconophobia stemmed in large part from fears of the ubiquity of images coupled with the ever present Cold War concerns over brain-washing and moral erosion.

Seldes believed that the mass media, in their current form, "[lowered] the political vitality of the nation," and at a time when the Soviet Union was using similar techniques of mass media to propagandize and unite their citizenry behind communist ideas and policies, that American type of media and media criticism was at the very least stagnating, at the very most dangerous.[459] What Seldes called for in response to the present state of American mass media was a greater study of their wider social effect, rather than their private effects on individual viewers.[460]

Seldes commented that much of the criticism applied to the mass media suffered from cultural lag. Criticisms levied on radio and movies formed in the brains of those raised on the theatre and the newspaper, moral standards for movies were little more than redressed Comstockianism of the 1890s.[461] The wondrous rapidity of broadcasting, and the endlessly-replicable ubiquity of comics and the movies, coupled with their nearly nonexistent financial barriers to their consumption, gave the masses easy access to these cultural fruits. Intellectuals

[458] Ibid.
[459] Seldes, *The Great Audience,* 287.
[460] Seldes, *The Great Audience*, 291.
[461] Ibid.

could not, reasoned Seldes, simply battle moral mossbacks over the aesthetic and moral qualities of the mass media, but needed to involve greater, more intellectual questions of the effect of the mass media in general on the citizenry.[462] Seldes, unlike many other intellectuals of this time, did not subscribe to the mass/public dichotomy. He retained a core belief in the redeeming power of mass media, using its power to investigate itself. Doing this, reasoned Seldes, would cause consumers to strike back at the Fordist hegemony of culture that permeated midcentury America, and would give the United States the ultimate cultural edge in the Cold War.[463]

Another concern held by midcentury intellectuals, and in fact one that crossed ideological lines, was the notion that iconocentric methods of publishing stories (especially for children) spoiled their taste and desire to consume great works of classic literature. Reminiscent of both Sterling North's original attack on comics in 1940 and of Macdonald's continued contention, originally expressed in "A Theory of Popular Culture," that popular culture ultimately infiltrated and absorbed "high" culture, criticisms of comics in the vein of *Classics Illustrated* proliferated. They abounded not just from teachers, worried that students would take shortcuts on their book reports by reading the oft-truncated renditions of stories in *Classics Illustrated*, but also from more established authors who sensed a more basic struggle between the image and the written word when it came to entrancing readers, especially young ones, to read great classic works of literature.

Not all staff writers at *Partisan Review* shared the dire cultural sentiments of its outspoken former editor. The modernist writer and poet Delmore Schwartz, affiliated with *Partisan Review* since its 1937 relaunch, had far more compelling literary credentials than many

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[462] Ibid., 291-295.
[463] Ibid.

of his comrades (he was the youngest nominee of Yale's Bollingen Prize in 1959).[464] Schwartz was also among the least radical of the *Partisan Review* universe, Alan Wald notes that he had no interest in radicalism until he transferred to New York University and studied with Sidney Hook while the latter still was still ostensibly a Marxist.[465] Schwartz admitted in a 1952 *Partisan Review* piece to keeping up with television and comic books (if only to appease his adolescent brother-in-law, who saw him as a "defrocked English teacher" and "hideous highbrow"), remarking that *Classics Illustrated*, typically left alone by critics of comics due to its highbrow basis, represented "the bottom of the pit" of comics publishing.[466]

Schwartz identified a contradictory message offered by Gilberton, the publisher of the *Classics* series (renamed from *Classics Comics* to *Classics Illustrated* amidst the postwar comics panic), in the comics themselves. He saw the company paradoxically of being proud of the highbrow content of their comics, but also suffering from a clear guilty conscience evident by their frequent apologies for paring down characters and plots from various novels (Schwartz uses *Crime and Punishment* as an extended example).[467] Schwartz, perhaps more than any other intellectual of the period, was well aware of the nuances present in the dialectical tension between printed words and images in the context of children's reading because of his literary preoccupation and belief that intellectuals could be the vanguards of no revolutions.[468]

He directly attacked the arguments invoked by some pro-comics liberals (and Gilberton's advertising department) that reading the truncated classic stories in *Classics Illustrated* might spur children to lose themselves in the original works, lending credence to the oft-stated idea that

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[464] Wald, *New York Intellectuals*, 209-211.
[465] Ibid.
[466] Delmore Schwartz, "Masterpieces as Cartoons." *Partisan Review* 19, July-August 1952, 461-471.
[467] He also points to the publishers omitting some of the morally questionable elements of these classic works, namely Sonia's prostitution in *Crime and Punishment*. Schwartz, "Masterpieces as Cartoons."
[468] Wald, *New York Intellectuals*, 209-211.

exposing children to great works of classic literature (famously argued by Sterling North) was one way to cure their addiction to comics. However, Schwartz saw the inverse as being true, relating comics to the visual language of films. Posing a rhetorical question concerning visual adaptations of literature, Schwartz asked "[W]ill the juvenile reader ever arrive at the point where he wants to see the original as it was intended to be, in its full actuality as a work?"[469]

To further this point, Schwartz turned an oft-used American aphorism on its head. He believed, counter to most pro-comics activists, that the entrancing potential of the image would lead readers to feel deprived in the absence of images. The aphorism "a picture is worth a thousand words" was, in Schwartz's eyes, misunderstood by the dominant ad-man perception of the phrase. "The Chinese meant that the visual experience of an object was more likely to give the full concreteness of that object than many of the words about it, which are for the most part abstract, generalized, colorless and the like. The advertisers mean that human beings are more interested in looking at things (and find it easier) than in reading about them, so that the pictures in an ad are more efficacious in increasing sales than the words that accompany the pictures."[470]

That is all to say that Schwartz he did not offer a concrete solution to the problem of comic books, admitting as much in his column. Schwartz did not believe in *prima facie* censorship of comics, arguing that "prohibition and censorship would have the usual boomerang effect."[471] He merely suggested that intelligent adult readers provide a good example by reading both the classics and their pictorial renditions, a point of view that many liberal reading specialists shared. The value in Schwartz's position lies in his keen awareness of the seductive

[469] Schwartz, "Masterpieces as Cartoons."
[470] Ibid.
[471] Ibid.

power of images, giving voice to the more ephemeral cultural debate that undergirded the more mainstream concerns about children's reading of comic books.

As the anti-comics movement wore on towards its peak in 1954, public intellectuals took note of both the content of the books themselves but also of the cultural positions and beliefs of the comics' strongest critics. Robert Warshow's *Commentary* article, "Paul, The Horror Comics, and Dr. Wertham" remains one of the most well-known pieces of intellectual commentary on the anti-comics movement through its equal reflections on fatherhood, the desires of youth, and the authority of the expert. Written a year before Warshow's death in 1955, the power of his analysis comes from the centering of his son Paul in his critique's narrative, which provided a point of view often missing from the comic debates, which tended towards the outlandish and emotional.

Warshow's views on comics had undoubtedly moderated since his initial dismissal of *Krazy Kat* as a serious work of art. His column primarily concerned the controversial comics published by EC Comics as they related to the consumption habits of his eleven-year-old son Paul. Paul, a card-and-patch-carrying member of the "EC Fan-Addict" club, was perhaps as close to a "normal" child reader of comics as one could find. According to Warshow, Paul "in some way" enjoyed being a member of the club even if he did not take it entirely seriously and, in Warshow's eyes, exercised not merely blind brand loyalty but sophisticated standards of discrimination in the purchase of his comics. "[H]e has occasionally sampled other comic books which imitate the E.C. group," wrote Warshow, "and finds them inferior."

Warshow himself found the parody comics produced by EC, *Panic* and more famously *Mad*, to be a cut above the normal crime and horror comics for which the company was notorious. Where he read *Mad* "with a kind of irritated pleasure," he felt that the mainline comics

merely presented violence without the mitigating presence of humor or parody.[472] Warshow, though not an alarmist comics opponent, was far from a legitimist for the form. Several times throughout his column, he reiterated his point that despite his irritated pleasure at *Mad*, he did not care for comic books and wished for his son to read other things (admitting that Paul does, in fact, do this).

Despite Warshow's distaste for comic books, he was notably not sympathetic to the critiques of Wertham that became widely publicized as a result of the 1954 hearings. He primarily objected to the alarmist nature of Wertham's critiques, noting that they were not helpful in determining the long-term effects of comic books on children. Where Wertham opines about children hurting themselves by pretending to be Superman and flying, Warshow notes that he tried the exact same behavior after reading *Peter Pan*.[473] "With a straight face," Warshow sighs, "he tells us of a little boy who was asked what he wanted to be when he grew up and said, "I want to be a sex maniac!"[474]

Warshow also pointed to an epistemological point unwittingly raised by Wertham. He notes that publishers like Dell and NCP, who mainly produced inoffensive comics, complained about Wertham's complete condemnation of the medium despite the presence of their editorial codes. To Warshow, this follows because of a significant difficulty in defining what a "good" comic might be.[475] Indeed, from work in Wertham's own papers, it is evident that he objected to even the smallest amount of violence in comic books.[476] His rejection of the Comics Code,

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[472] Robert Warshow, "Paul, The Horror Comics, and Dr. Wertham" in *The Immediate Experience*, 53-55.
[473] Ibid., 65.
[474] Warshow, "Paul, The Horror Comics, and Dr. Wertham," 65.
[475] Ibid., 66.
[476] Even a character punching another was grounds for his criticism. Carol Tilley, in "Superman Says, Read!" also notes this: "Wertham overreached in his definition of objectionable comics, so that it encompassed any depiction of crime, writ broadly, so that Donald Duck slapping another character was as much a criminal as a gangster murdering an informant." Tilley, "Superman Says, 'Read!'," 261.

depicted in his letters to the Cincinnati Committee as well as in his "It's Still Murder" column, reinforce this point of view.

Thus, as Warshow wrote earlier about *Krazy Kat*, the comics were "bad" on a more epistemological level. There existed not just the objectionable visuals to which so many anti-comics critics objected (Warshow, like Wertham enjoyed referring to "Foul Play" from *Haunt of Fear* #19 to illustrate this point) but also the epistemological damage that comics ostensibly performed to children that might otherwise seek out more gratifying literary pursuits. "If *The Lone Ranger* and *Superman* are bad," wrote Warshow, "they are bad in a different way and on a different level. They are crude, unimaginative, banal, vulgar, ultimately corrupting. . .Perhaps the worst thing they do is meet the juvenile imagination on its crudest level and offer it an immediate and stereotyped satisfaction."[477]

In a point that presaged both Wertham's identification as a real-life comic book supervillain, indeed even a nod to Daniel Boorstin's "pseudo-events", Debord's society of the spectacle, and Baudrillard's notion of simulacra, Warshow observed that Wertham's point of view about the comics was not far removed from a comic book storyline itself. He called *Seduction of the Innocent* a sort of crime comic book for parents, while also noting that Wertham's critiques relied on "…the same simple conception of motives, the same sense of overhanging doom, the same melodramatic emphasis on pathology, the same direct and immediate relation of cause and effect."[478]

Here Warshow takes to task the logic of anti-comics activists, which borrowed from similar Cold War tropes to describe the duplicity of the Soviet Union (though Warshow, adamant anticommunist that he was, would never realize or admit that). Under Wertham's (and others)

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[477] Warshow, "Paul, The Horror Comics, and Dr. Wertham," 66-67.
[478] Ibid., 68.

twisted comic book logic, the simple ownership of comics by a juvenile delinquent necessitated that comic books caused the crime. And under this logic it was also impossible for a company to take action against attacks on the industry by hiring professionals, as such agreements were naturally dishonest, and psychologists critical of comics were the only ones worth listening to, all others were "bought."[479]

The monolithic visions of publishers, comics defenders, and the industry itself, thought Warshow, made the critiques of Wertham and others meaningless. Here were critics that wanted us to take them seriously on matters of grave importance to children but could never bother becoming actually familiar with the cultural functions of images and their production. Here were critics that wanted to be taken seriously and yet seriously argued that the relationship between Batman and Robin was a homosexual fantasy. "[T]his particular analysis," scoffed Warshow, "seems to me a piece of utter frivolity."[480]

As other writers that commented on the comics problem reasoned, Warshow ultimately did not see the utility in arguing for greater regulation of comic books. He pointed to the astounding cultural power of comics, noting that good or bad, whether read by kids like Paul or gun-toting juvenile delinquents, comics might be their only conduit to any form of culture. He gestured at the emergent youth culture of midcentury, and admitted that children needed a place to be themselves away from the demands of the adult world, but ultimately admitted that censorship was a folly: "[A]s we sweep away one juvenile dung heap, they will move on to another."[481] "I think my position," wrote Warshow resignedly, "is that I would be happy if Senator Kefauver and Dr. Wertham could find some way to make it impossible for Paul to get

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[479] Warshow, "Paul, The Horror Comics, and Dr. Wertham," 68-69.
[480] Ibid., 70.
[481] Ibid., 72.

any comic books. But I'd rather Paul didn't get the idea that I had anything to do with it."[482] Warshow was ultimately not a legitimist for the comic art form. Serious critical appraisal of the medium was not to be found in the writings of these men and their elitist intellectual traditions, such reappraisals did not happen until the mid-1960s with the publication of Jules Feiffer's *The Great Comic-Book Heroes* (where, incidentally, may also be the origination of Wertham-blaming). Nonetheless, Warshow, through the lens of his son and his own irritated reading of *Mad* gave him more of a familiarity with the medium which lent an important legitimacy to not just his critique of the cultural work done by the images of comics but also of the faulty Cold War logic of Wertham and other anti-comics activists. He would not, however, be the sole literary intellectual to strike back at the comics critics.

Like Schwartz and Warshow, literary critic Leslie Fiedler also prided himself on his familiarity with the comic medium in his well-known critical critique, "The Middle Against Both Ends". "I am surely," wrote Fiedler, "one of the few people pretending to intellectual responsibility who can boast that he has read more comic books than attacks on comic books."[483] Fiedler expressed his consternation with comic book critics who, in his eyes, failed to understand comic books as a medium, to appreciate and learn that they were in fact a widely-diverse genre of publication "midway between icon and story," and thought instead, in the modes of Legman and Wertham, that they were "schools for murder."[484] Fiedler sought answers to similar

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[482] Warshow, "Paul, The Horror Comics, and Dr. Wertham," 74.

[483] Leslie Fiedler, "The Middle Against Both Ends," 122. Originally published in *Encounter*, August 1955, 16-23. Reprinted in Heer and Worcester, *Arguing Comics*. Citations refer to the reprinting.

[484] Ibid., 122-123. "Perhaps I am a little sensitive on this score, having heard the charge this week that the recent suicide of our college freshmen was caused by his having read Goethe, Dostoevsky, and *Death of a Salesman*. Damn it, he *had* read them, and he *did* kill himself!" Of course, liberal reading experts like Josette Frank had, in fact, made serious studies of the genres present in comic books for parents to educate themselves, and even the Cincinnati Committee made rudimentary attempts to understand which genres of comics were the most prevalent, though they did not perform any truly deep examination of comics as a literary medium.

questions posed thus far in my study. *Why* were comics as popular as they were, and *why* did most of the virulent critiques of them come at the height of their popularity?

What Fiedler concluded about the critics of comics on a surface level is frankly not of much use to us. "What they have in common," mused Fiedler, "the sense that they are all, according to their lights, righteous."[485] This does not tell us much we do not already know, whether critics of comics drew their legitimacy from a religious iconophobic tradition, fears of didactic replacement, anticommunism and antiradicalism, or misguided scientific thought. Surely, if they did not think there was something to their crusade, they would not have embarked on it. Yet Fiedler's summation is a helpful reminder of all the real—or imagined—evils that comic books posed to children in the eyes of their various guardians, whether those guardians were at home, at school, in the pulpit, or in Congress. Children needed saving from having their eyesight dulled, their vocabularies filled with bawdy street goon slang, from violent "blueprints for delinquency," from the immediacy of the icon and the icon's dark undercurrent. In many ways, Fiedler's viewpoint on comics and culture echoed those of his fellow literati, but his continued engagement with the medium led to some interesting disagreements.

Fiedler, like Seldes, bemoaned the immediacy and disposability of mass culture, remarking that its facets were much like "…a disposable diaper or a paper milk container."[486] He commented on two wider societal changes made possible by a populace that increasingly preferred mass culture, beginning by noting that mass culture as a driving force cheapened institutions like libraries and archives, arguing that the temporary nature of mass culture made it impossible to preserve. He also remarked, along the same lines as Macdonald, that mass culture

[485] Fiedler, "The Middle Against Both Ends," 124.
[486] Ibid., 125.

gave to the common man the ability to consume conspicuously that had for so long been the sole domain of the elite.[487]

Where Fiedler diverged from some of his fellow intellectuals, however, was in his idea of new modes of literacy arising due to the prevalence of comic books. Fiedler repeats the liberal trope of reminding his readers that comics were simply the latest scapegoat when it came to being accused of lowering the standards of literature, just as popular novels were once accused of dumbing down classic literature.[488] Searching again for an answer to his original question about the vitriol of anti-comics critiques, Fiedler notes that what discerned comics from other urbanized developments in mass culture like jazz and cinema was the comics' appeal to "post-literates."[489] Fiedler connected this attack to a rejection of his fellow intellectuals' fetish for the folk art/kitsch dichotomy, where, in the tradition of Leo Marx (perhaps the most astute observer of the clash between technology and the pastoral idea in literature), he laid out the differences between genteel and mass culture, noting that "[t]he haters of our own popular art love to condescend to the folk."[490] To Fiedler, all of these developments pointed to a continuing trend of post-literacy, illustrated by the consumer's perceived rejection of the "gift" of literacy for the instant gratification of being able to come to terms with their situation in life.

What Fiedler came to fear most of all from comic book critics was a tidal wave of overwhelming mediocrity that threatened to reduce all culture to a blasé, sterilized genteel "semiliterate" version of the world. As Fiedler notes, "it is not the fully literate, the intellectuals and serious writers, who lead the attack, but the insecure semiliterate."[491] And, from what we

[487] See, famously, Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*.
[488] Fiedler, "The Middle Against Both Ends," 125.
[489] Ibid.
[490] Ibid., 126.
[491] Ibid., 127

have excavated of the wider anti-comics movement, Fiedler's summation stands. Outside of the lightning rod of Wertham, Fiedler reminds us that it was rank-and-file civic groups and community organizations that led much of the ground-level organizing against comic books. The worldview of the type of literature that these church groups, community organizations, and parent-teacher committees wanted to see, in Fiedler's eyes, was "a literature of the middle ground which finds its fictitious vision of a kindly and congenial world attacked from above and below."[492]

Finally, Fiedler took issue with the simple criticism often levied at producers of mass culture as a "conspiracy of profiteers."[493] Again he remarks that the biggest challenge presented by mass culture is the apparent confirmation, against the wishes of Godkinesque genteels, that the ordinary consumer is not interested in the slightest in taking advantage of his god-given gift of literacy. In fact, comics and other aspects of wordless narrative (to use Fiedler's phrase) were a step backwards in a transhistorical, whiggish advancement of literacy as an idea. "The fear of the vulgar," wrote Fiedler, "is the obverse of the fear of excellence, and both are aspects of the fear of difference: symptoms of a drive for conformity on the level of the timid, sentimental, mindless-bodiless genteel."[494]

With Fiedler we see a continuation of the more sophisticated literary critique of the predominance of iconocentric culture like Schwartz, and both men arrive at a similar conclusion,

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[492] Fiedler, "The Middle Against Both Ends," 129. Scholars of the 1950s have observed that decade as the point when Americans truly began to take note of how violent American society and history truly were. "Of course," wrote Warren Susman, "we have always been an aggressive people and have always talked about violence, but not until the 1950s did readers begin to see thousands of articles analyzing it as a fundamental character defect in American life. . .Violence is built into the American mythology. Yet, in this period violence was suddenly defined as a major problem that society needed to solve." Warren Susman with Edward Griffin, "Did Success Spoil the United States? Dual Representations in Postwar America," in *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).
[493] Fiedler, "The Middle Against Both Ends," 132.
[494] Ibid., 133.

that rather than encourage readers to seek out great works of classic literature, the immediacy of mass culture would instead cause them to bypass or reject the notion of literacy entirely, sating themselves entirely on "picture, typography, even in many cases the illusion of reading along with the relaxed pleasure of illiteracy."[495] But what was even more unforgivable in his eyes, more so than this widespread rejection of literacy, was the genteel push for conformity by the new midcentury middlebrow middle class for consensus, for Dick and Jane in the absence of any challenging or controversial literature. Middlebrows, like enjoyers of high culture, detested the vulgar culture of the masses lest they revert to that state of cultural enjoyment but also despised more traditional intellectuals for their perceived snobbishness and rejection of their own mediated cultures.

These rejections, wrote Fiedler, "suggest the intolerable notion of a hierarchy of taste, a hierarchy of values, the possibility of culture classes in a democratic state; and before this, puzzled and enraged, he can only call a cop."[496] Fiedler skillfully identified the implicit rejection of a class system that most middle-class Americans believed in, because comics (and by extension mass culture) were clear indicators that there were wide gulfs in taste and consumption, not only because so many early comics stories dealt with gritty, urban, immigrant-inspired stories (and in many ways reflected their creator's hard-edged urban sentiments), but because there was an overwhelming association between comic consumption and class status.

These tensions spoke clearly to an even larger legitimation crisis that arose over the middlebrow's contentious lot in the cultural landscape of America, fighting off the depredations of vulgar culture from below and the mysteries of avant-garde culture from above. All told, given the other social constraints of the 1950s, this caused middlebrows a great deal of anxiety,

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[495] Fiedler, "The Middle Against Both Ends," 126-127.
[496] Ibid., 133.

and, as Fiedler mentioned, the main way that they could cope with this anxiety, this clear threat to their way of living, was to organize, pathologize, and demonize comic books for their endless array of apparent evils.

Yet, the horizon of possibilities for intellectually understanding the strange relationship between Americans and comic books was not completely bleak. In his prescient, sweeping, and regrettably unfinished survey of American culture, *American Civilization*, C.L.R. James, the great Trinidadian intellectual, expressed optimism for how both present observers and future historians might use popular culture to understand the motivations of everyday Americans and how their cultural demands represented their way of reacting to a rapidly changing and often terrifying reality. *American Civilization* represented the intense contradictions that defined the intellectual life of C.L.R. James. It was an attempt by a lifelong Marxist to understand the individuality of a country that rejected him as both a political radical and a Black man (he wrote the drafts of *American Civilization* and his study of Melville, *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways,* while detained at Ellis Island by the INS), but it was an also an exhortation of the American way of life and an examination of the new contexts that individualism and liberty took in the era of mass production. "[I]t is in the serious study," wrote James, "of, above all, Charles Chaplin, Dick Tracy, Gasoline Alley, James Cagney. . .that you find the clearest ideological expression of the sentiments and deepest feelings of the American people and a great window into the future of America and of the modern world."[497] In fact, James explicitly believed that studying the cultural works beloved by other intellectuals of the day would not lead to the same insights because they expressed such a narrow worldview.[498] The movies, the comic strips, and

[497] C.L.R. James, *American Civilization*, ed. Anna Grimshaw and Keith Hart (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993), 119.
[498] Ibid.

the gangster pulps, reasoned James, were the inverse of the easily-manipulated mass culture that critics like Greenberg believed in. James believed that it was the audience's demands that drove the success of mass culture, rather than the nefarious manipulations of studio bosses and publishers.[499]

He also noted, like Warren Susman, that the immensely violent turn in the popular arts transpired after the Depression, reflecting what the populace desired to see as the legitimation of the capitalist order in the United States faced its greatest reckoning. Despite these reflections, and despite James' contentions that consumers of mass culture were active, rather than passive, some political consternation still took place. "The films, comic strips etc. of the United States are what they are," wrote James, "because of the specific stage of the relations between the classes. Each agrees to leave the dangerous topics alone."[500] Mass culture, in his eyes, was not a simple injection of soma, a distraction from alienation, but a way for an individual to have their individuality reinforced in an increasingly rationalized society.

"If even for the sake of argument," wrote James,

> It is agreed that the publishers, the movie magnates, the newspaper proprietors and the banks which directly or indirectly control them, are interested in distracting the masses of the people from serious problems or elevated art, then the question still remains, why, at this particular time, this particular method of distraction should have arisen and met with such continuous success. To believe that the great masses of the people are merely passive recipients of what the purveyors of popular art give to them is in reality to see people as dumb slaves.[501]

James also reminds us that the spirit of Frederick Jackson Turner is never far away, in that mass culture arose partially because members of that regimented, rationalized society could no longer pick up and head West to escape those tight societal parameters.

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[499] Ibid., 123.
[500] James, *American Civiliation*, 123.
[501] Ibid., 122.

The divergent views presented by James in *American Civilization* remind us of the disparate views that radical intellectuals had regarding comics and mass culture as a whole. As perhaps the most unrepentant Marxist of the bunch, a Trinidadian intellectual cast adrift from many traditions and American ways of thinking, he represents that rare, outsider point of view often missing in the comics debate. Comics were not a simple analgesic, reasoned James, but rather an essential demand by the masses to ease the tensions created by twentieth century industrial society.

The debates between the varied intellectuals mentioned in this chapter showcase that, despite the primary understanding of the anti-comics movement as being primarily animated by sensationalist psychoanalysts, scheming politicians, and reactionary mossbacks, there were far deeper ramifications of mass culture to some intellectuals. These radical intellectuals, more than anyone, realized the immense power that the image and icon held, and combined with the mass distribution possible at midcentury, reckoned with what effects that transformative power would have on ordinary Americans.

The more pessimistic among them, like Seldes and Macdonald, had immense fears about what the immediacy of mass culture would do to the critical thinking skills and ability to stay informed by the masses. Seldes, who was originally so enraptured by the early comic strips and their quasi-folkiness, became horrified by the developments in mass distribution and feared that mass culture would render Americans complacent to the larger political questions. The more sophisticated literates among the men, Schwartz and Fiedler, expressed their fears that the preponderance of comics and other visually-focused media were detrimental to what they saw as the divine gift of literacy. James, ever the optimist, found a balanced ground that would inform future serious studies of popular culture. To these men, comics and mass culture became

something of a new "chromo-civilization" similar, yet crucially different to the one envisioned by E.L. Godkin. Rather than a society of morons who each thought himself a Solon, this new crop of intellectuals feared both an irrational mass that would be ill-equipped to stay informed and make key decisions in the age of totalitarianism and the short-sighted puffery of middle-class reformers who were confounded by both high art and vulgar culture and struck out at both.

In a retrospective column for *Commentary* in 1968, Irving Howe penned a "chronicle and critique" of the New York Intellectuals, which was also an opportunity for Howe to take potshots at the New Left, who he (along with Norman Podhoretz, the czar of *Commentary*) detested. A significant part of Howe's article sought an explanation for the sudden disappearance of the type of polemic-oriented public intellectual debate that characterized the New York Intellectuals. "For years," wrote Howe, "hardly a word could be found in the advanced journals about what a little earlier had been called a crucial problem of the modern era."[502]

Howe felt that the Manichaean dichotomy of mass culture and kitsch advanced by Greenberg and Macdonald was flawed similarly to Hannah Arendt's contemporaneous idea of totalitarianism in that it pigeonholed the dialectic nature of cultural production into a recurring cycle of "grisly instances" without a real suggestion for escape.[503] Howe's summation is on the mark here. The *Partisan Review* school of understanding mass culture was, in the words of political scientist Adolph Reed, Jr., invoked as an alternative to an explanation of the consumption habits and tastes of the masses, which said more about the intellectuals' reliance on elitist forms of discourse and commitment to advancing the cause of modernism than anything they penned about these various cultural forms. Howe offered a further point that I hope does not

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[502] Irving Howe, "The New York Intellectuals: A Chronicle and Critique," *Commentary*, October 1968, 35.

[503] I am sympathetic to Howe's critique of Arendt and the overall utility of the phrase *totalitarianism*. However, I will leave the point at that as to not invite my committee to open several cans of worms at my defense. If everything is totalitarian, alas, nothing is.

put a hole in the side of this manuscript: “[A] critic who contributes a nuance to Dostoevsky criticism is working within a structured tradition, while one who throws off a clever observation about Little Orphan Annie is simply showing that he can do what he has done.”[504]

There was also a sense of the political at play as well, which speaks to the perception of the 1950s as an interlude.[505] Since the assumption of consensus and unity was so crucial to American political life during those years, the critiques of these men against the powerful cultural forces of the country stood in for their critiques of class and of bourgeois society writ large until such time that there were new things to say in the turbulent years of the 1960s.[506] The writings of Greenberg and Macdonald, seen as “heavy and humorless,” became replaced by critics like Susan Sontag who developed a more freewheeling approach to the consumption and appreciation of art, alongside the replacement of interpretation and judgement with, as Howe wrote, “programmed receptivity.”[507]

Ultimately, though they offered many thoughts on the ramifications of mass culture vis-à-vis the comic medium, none of these intellectuals were committed to serving as legitimists for comics for various reasons. All of them, however, united in a wariness of the increasingly commodified culture that comics represented. Seldes, good liberal that he was, feared that mass culture might lull Americans into complacence with whatever directions and decisions the governance made, creating a curious synonymy with the tendency of mass culture to facilitate domination as Adorno might have argued. Howe and Macdonald took this point of view as well, but from a more orthodox left-wing position (however that manifested itself in the 1950s), believing that the two poles were irreconcilable. History remembers Fiedler and Warshow better

[504] Howe, “The New York Intellectuals,” 35.
[505] As James Gilbert argued in *Another Chance: Postwar America*.
[506] Howe, “The New York Intellectuals,” 36.
[507] Ibid.

for their polemics attacking comics critics rather than any defenses of the medium they might have showed, despite Fiedler's professed familiarity with comic books and Warshow's "irritated pleasure" at *MAD Magazine*. Even James, who testified to the historical usefulness of comics and other aspects of mass culture as evidence, offered little in the way of other legitimacy to the medium.

Whatever their faults, the discourses of these intellectuals showed that there were more sophisticated analyses of comics beyond simple bluenoses affronted by the content of the books themselves. They were the best equipped group at midcentury to discuss the wider ramifications of images without reverting to simple reactionary tendencies as did so many other critics of comics. Though they could certainly be reasonable and level-headed about their critiques of comics, few, if any of them were willing to be legitimists for the medium especially at such a socially-repressive time as the mid-1950s. There were not, unlike film, any observers foreign or domestic willing to make the case for the comics and, indeed, many foreign intellectuals expressed their distaste at these wholly American blights on their country's popular culture, a notion amplified by the involvement of the United States in rebuilding the postwar European order. The impulse to legitimize the comics medium as a cultural form would, alas, come from the same professional strata that attacked it most vociferously: Experts.

Chapter 5: “A Powerful Forum:” Experts, the NSWA Comics Project, and the Didactic Possibility of Comics

To this audience of some 40 millions we have been able jointly to present in cartoon form a wonderful variety of subjects, such as religious tolerance, the importance of mental health, the work of the United Nations, and the magic of a library card.

—Robert E. Bondy

In the conclusion of his introductory editorial to the December 1944 issue of *The Journal of Educational Sociology*, urban sociologist and noted comics defender Harvey Zorbaugh wrote “It is time that the amazing cultural phenomenon of the growth of the comics is subjected to dispassionate scrutiny. Somewhere between vituperation and complacency must be found a road to the understanding and use of the great new medium of communication and social influence. For the comics are here to stay.”[508] Zorbaugh was responding to the apocalyptic sentiments about comics stoked four years earlier by Sterling North in the *Chicago Daily News*, adding that pulpits thundered as a result and that some towns even organized comic book burnings.[509] Zorbaugh also noted, correctly, that North’s column was a crystallization of the rumblings of parental anxiety that provided a launching point for the anti-comics movement that was to follow.

Experts, *in toto,* held a complicated and controversial role in the unfolding of the anti-comics movement. The pervasive stature of Fredric Wertham, an expert (however misguided) in his own right, overshadows many of the earlier contributions from professors, teachers, librarians, and other more tempered voices in the comics debate. Another reason for the marginalization of more liberal experts in the comics debate resulted from a concerted campaign by anti-comics activists and sympathizers both during the anti-comics movement itself and in

[508] Harvey Zorbaugh, “Editorial,” *Journal of Educational Sociology* 18, no. 4 (December 1944), 193-194.
[509] See generally Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague* on these rare, though sensational events.

later years to paint certain experts working in advisory roles in comics publishing houses as merely paid shills that uncritically defended whatever material their respective companies put out and thus not worthy of serious consideration.

Though the presentation of advisory committees by comic publishing companies were certainly done to safe face in light of increasing criticisms of the medium, the experts (at least in the case study presented here) that took on these roles performed their jobs sincerely, freely criticized editorial content that they disagreed with, attempted to effect changes in stories where they could, and boasted the support of their respective institutions for their work with comics. From the earliest studies enacted about the basic verbiage of comics to more sophisticated studies that delved into the psychological ramifications of children's reading of comics, experts put forth significant time and effort to investigate comics as a social force, responding in kind to the main criticisms levied by both the prewar and postwar critics of comic books; and their critiques cannot be dismissed *prima facie* in light of their work for the industry.

The experts that stood on the liberal side of the anti-comics debate generally shared many commonalities. Many were from the immediate New York City area and shared connections with the progressive Teachers College of Columbia University or were otherwise progressive, cosmopolitan, urban university professors.[510] Thus, as the anti-comics movement wore on into the more conservative Cold War years, the perceived political sensibilities of these experts came under tighter scrutiny and reaction. Before World War II, these experts contended with a separate set of challenges from anti-comics activists largely from a pedagogical standpoint. The main

[510] Robert Thorndike, the son of the famous educational psychologist, and Paul Witty, a fellow psychologist who published pro-comics journal articles, both received their graduate training at Columbia (Thorndike remained there, while Witty taught at Kansas and Northwestern). Florence Brumbaugh, an education professor, Lauretta Bender, perhaps the largest target of anti-comics scorn for her writing and editorial work, Harvey Zorbaugh, a prolific comics defender, and Frederic Thrasher, a professor who disputed Wertham's conclusions, were either educated at or affiliated with New York University.

criticisms of comics that early defenders of comics addressed focused on how the visual component of comics might compromise a child's vision, or how the slang in comics might dull their imagination. Thus, as many of the first wave of critics were teachers or otherwise in the realm of education (*Childhood Education* reprinted Sterling North's early critique of comics in their journal), many of the experts to publish their own research on the comics were also in that field, albeit with differing opinions.[511]

Government experts, too, played a smaller but no less important role in framing the terms of the comics debate. The United States Children's Bureau, which became more involved in the comics debate after World War II as the comics panic began to dovetail with the postwar juvenile delinquency panic, acted as a mediating voice in the increasingly sensational debates that arose over comics during the 1950s. As the primary government agency responsible for tracking and mitigating the hot-button issue of juvenile delinquency, the Children's Bureau carried much weight in the debate, and it is of note that they always remained firmly opposed to the critiques of comics employed during the anti-comics movement and stressed that media did not contribute in large part to juvenile delinquency. They encouraged those that contacted them with concerns over comics to trust the opinion of experts, sent back psychological research that disagreed with the notion of media causing juvenile delinquency, and encouraged civic groups to focus their energy into more worthwhile pursuits such as local organizing or working with the comics industry rather than blindly attacking comics.[512]

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[511] Educational criticisms of comics continued after the reigniting of the movement in 1948, but this latter wave was much more focused on juvenile delinquency. Carol Tilley notes that at least in the realm of librarians, comics disappeared from their professional literature by 1956. Carol L Tilley, "Of Nightingales and Supermen: How Youth Services Librarians Responded to Comics Between The Years 1938 and 1955," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 2007, 241.
[512] On the Children's Bureau and comics, see generally Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage.*

The efforts of all these experts, whether they came from the academy, the government, or the web of national federative civic service organizations, reflected both the expanded governmental push for a wider welfare state in the aftermath of World War II as well as an increasing willingness by Americans to put faith in the authority and knowledge of experts. In a 1949 Gallup poll regarding how much Americans trusted various professions, professors and teachers ranked behind only doctors for general trustworthiness.[513] This poll surely reflected the popular mood, as the postwar era has been identified by some historians as "the era of the expert. . .It was now up to the experts to make the unmanageable manageable."[514]

While many experts in the postwar era spoke to older Americans' uneasiness in the Atomic Age, many more spoke to the changing status of child development and of raising children in this new age. In a letter to social workers, the great anthropologist Margaret Mead outlined yet again the legitimation crisis that the genteel tradition of child raising faced in Atomic Age modernity. According to Mead, the world of a child was "suddenly shrunk into one unit, in which radio and television and comics and the threat of the atomic bomb are everyday realities."[515] The emergence of the existential dread caused by the atom bomb led to even greater anxieties of parents over their children's development, as Peter Stearns notes, one cannot measure anxiety in a quantitative fashion, but we may look at all the literature produced on these questions, and Stearns' point certainly applies to our examination of the comics debate and for the points of view espoused by the many experts that weighed in on comics.[516]

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[513] Cited in Louis Galambos, *The Creative Society: And the Price Americans Paid for It* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 132.
[514] Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, Revised edition (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 29-30.
[515] Quoted in ibid., 31.
[516] Peter N. Stearns, *Anxious Parents: A History of Modern Child-Rearing in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 12.

However, where there were Sterling Norths in the world, there were also Harvey Zorbaughs, Lauretta Benders, and Josette Franks ready to provide defenses of comics reading against the apocalyptic rhetoric of anti-comics crusaders. In this chapter, I highlight the role of experts in pushing back against anti-comics sentiments from the earliest days of the movement to the height of anti-comics criticism. I argue that the liberal experts covered in this chapter provided an important foundation for the cultural legitimacy of comics by demonstrating the utility of the form as a vessel for inculcating socially desirable traits in children.

These experts accomplished this mainly through the efforts of National Comics Publications (the future DC Comics), which had an established track record of using their comics to promote positive projects (such as an earlier editorial project to promote children's reading), and their partnership with the National Social Welfare Assembly, a confederation of social, human, and youth services organizations.[517] This project, known simply to its participants as the Comics Project, published hundreds of public service announcements from 1948 to 1967 in the style of single-page comic book stories that used both stock characters as well as DC superheroes to spread positive messages that ranged from staying in school to anti-smoking and littering campaigns to liberal messages that attacked prejudice. The Project, coordinated between a committee of service group heads, NCP's head of public relations Vernon Pope, as well as longtime editor Jack Schiff, was ultimately not without controversy, but the positive responses and public successes outweighed any of the conservative pushback they received even at the height of the anti-comics movement.

To this point, our story has largely, though not entirely, been one of reaction, of pessimism, of jeremiads toward children's reading of the comics. In this final chapter, however,

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[517] On the NCP reading project, see Carol L. Tilley, "'Superman Says, "Read!"' National Comics and Reading Promotion," *Children's Literature in Education* 44, no. 3 (September 2013): 251–63.

we begin to discover optimism as it relates to the comic medium. Even within that optimism, however, we find careful reasoning and wariness from our final, rather un-examined set of experts from the NSWA Comics Project. While there were other efforts to use the comic medium for didactic purposes, as in Will Eisner's work for the US Army, NCP's aforementioned reading project, and the various "true fact" comics that proliferated in the postwar years, the Comics Project stands apart from other educational comics as a continued collaboration between professional social service organizations, comic writers and editors, and public relations agents. The Project, housed with great fanfare at National Comics Publications (the future DC Comics) had no analogues at any of its competitors.[518]

For Vernon Pope, NCP's shrewd public relations man and the original proponent of the Comics Project, the endeavor was dually serving.[519] It was, to be sure, a sincere exercise in working with experts that allowed the company to save face in light of renewed criticisms of comics. It was also a savvy public relations and advertising move that attempted to garner more credibility with the general public by involving a more independent set of experts in the publication of their public service announcements. This charge undoubtedly aligned with the political climate of the editors at NCP.

The company, more than any contemporary comics publisher (save the unabashedly leftist minds behind Lev Gleason Publications), had an editorial staff of left-leaning, largely Jewish editors whose editorial lines often reflected their penchants for New Deal liberalism. NCP

[518] Dr. Tilley notes in her examination of the *Superman* reading project that in this and other ventures, National stood apart from its peer publishers in promoting positive reading: "In this effort, National was unique. Other popular comics publishers of this period such as Fawcett made no similar efforts during these years to promote non-comics' reading." Tilley, "Superman Says, 'Read!'," 252.

[519] Pope was very perceptive regarding challenges to NCP's image, he often took initiative to nip potential issues in the bud, as he did with the Cincinnati Committee, where he questioned its credibility and criticized its editorial code. Pope also wrote to Lauretta Bender, who was an NCP editorial advisor at the time, to gauge whether she thought the company should go on the offensive against Fredric Wertham's attacks. Tilley, "Seducing the Innocent," 402.

also had a demonstrated history of using their comics for the public good, as was the case with the Superman Good Reading Project that ran from 1935 to 1946. In an effort to encourage children's reading, the company serialized great works of classic literature (beating *Classics Illustrated* to the punch by several years), and ran columns written in part by approachable, warm female NCP staffers that suggested books for children to read.

The project developed into the Superman Good Reading Project once the man from Krypton became the established face of the company, and he would recommend several books to young readers in each issue, which led to increased circulation numbers for the specified books (some children would grouse that there was no Superman in the novels, and some wanted to just read comics).[520] This progressive ethic translated, as the company moved into the 1950s, into advertisements that reflected the growing sentiments of liberal consensus that dominated American life in the 1950s. The editorial stances of these men reflected what would become the dominant liberal paradigm of viewing comics in light of the midcentury conservative panic over them. In the eyes of these liberals, not only were the jeremiad criticisms of comic books overblown, but they misunderstood the didactic power of a visual medium to inculcate liberal values in children.

Indeed, later authors, notably Louis Menand, remarked that the late 1960s (the Comics Project itself ended in 1967) marked a pronounced disappearance of liberal attacks on popular culture.[521] The reason for this, Menand surmised, was that youth culture finally penetrated the adult market which is, overall, not inaccurate, but erases much of the nuance in assessing comics readership. To be sure, people of all ages read comics, but a disproportionate amount of these

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[520] Tilley, "Superman Says, 'Read!'," 256-260.
[521] Louis Menand, *The Free World: Art and Thought in the Cold War* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), [695].

readers were children, and regardless of the hard readership figures (which always remain elusive), children were almost always the *assumed* consumers of comics.

The Comics Project was also a savvy exercise in advertising for the NSWA, reflecting twentieth century trends in visual advertising. Advertising professionals were long aware of the public's proclivity for the comic medium even before it took on the form of the comic book. Simply put, people were much more likely to take in an advertisement if it was in the form of a comic story, and people overwhelmingly complained when the comics section of the newspaper was omitted.[522] The important Gallup study cited by Marchand also revealed two key elements of the public's obsession with the comic medium that runs, at least partially, against some of the traditional observations about the demographics of comics readers. First was the notion that adults also read comics in significant quantities ("they preferred them to the leading news stories by an overwhelming margin," writes Marchand), the second that they were not merely an atomized, urban phenomenon of the post-literate dregs of society. "Bankers and professors," wrote Marchand, "read the comics as eagerly as waiters and truck drivers. Midwestern Iowans had tastes similar to those of the tabloid readers of polyglot New York City."[523]

It is possible, though not certain, that Pope was aware of the Gallup study, which was conducted in 1931 in Des Moines, IA, where Pope worked at the *Des Moines Register* as an editor before joining with *Register* owner Gardner Cowles, Jr. (who later became one of the co-owners of Quality Comics, a prominent Golden Age comics publishing house) on the staff of the visually-focused *Look* magazine, intended to compete with other large general interest magazines like *LIFE*. These experiences in the news business undoubtedly keyed Pope into the

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[522] Roland Marchand has an excellent discussion of earlier comics as an advertising phenomenon. *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 110-116.
[523] Ibid.

attractiveness of the visual medium. In his initial letter proposing the project to John Moore, assistant director of the NSWA, Pope wrote “It is generally recognized that the comics magazine is the most effective of all media in reaching younger minds, and, it seems to me, it is an offer which most organizations would welcome.”[524]

To counter the claims of comics pessimists that NCP was merely using the NSWA as a front, Pope was very open in his initial proposal that NCP was eager to prove that they were a cut above other, more controversial publishers: “Unfortunately, and inevitably,” wrote Pope to NSWA head John Moore in 1949, “National Comics, along with other reputable and respectable publishers of comics magazines, is hurt by the current campaign. And, naturally, they are anxious to make it clear to group leaders and parents that they are ‘good citizens’ and should not be confused with offenders in the field.”[525] Pope was also quick to mention, reinforcing NCP’s status as a publisher of popular and unobjectionable comics, that no NCP titles appeared on the widely-publicized police ban lists in Detroit and Indianapolis in 1948 and 1949.[526]

And reach younger minds they did. Not only did the PSAs produced by the comics project run throughout any NCP titles that were on sale (the first PSA, starring NCP’s Archie competitor, Buzzy, ran in 17 different comics), the Project made a point of making the one-page

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[524] Letter from Vernon Pope to John Moore, 1/11/49. NSWACP.
[525] Ibid.
[526] After referencing the banned comics list published by Harry S. Toy, the right-wing police commissioner of Detroit, I discovered that Pope was misinformed, or lying. Though the list published on Toy’s behalf by prosecutor James McNally could not get the basic names of several comics correct (typically bastardizing them somehow and adding the word “comics” even if the title itself did not have the word “comics” in it), I feel safe in assuming that the “Gangbuster Comics” banned by the city of Detroit was, in fact, NCP’s principal entry in the crime genre, *Gang Busters*, which was a graphic adaptation of the popular, long-running radio drama of the same name. Upon (Footnote 512 cont.) …examining a *Gang Busters* comic that would have been on sale around the time of Toy’s ban, the intended audience (reading in part through the advertisements) was fairly obviously high school boys and not small children, what violence was in the comic itself was incidental to the plot and not gratuitous. Seemingly, containing crime in any capacity merited a ban in notoriously repressive Detroit, though it remains ironic that Toy, who claimed that comics contained “Communistic teachings, sex, gory crime stories and racial discrimination,” also requested the banning of *Is This Tomorrow,* perhaps the most famous anticommunist comic published in Cold War America. See Jack Schermerhorn, “McNally Outlaws 64 Comic Books,” *Detroit Free Press*, April 29, 1949.

strips available for distribution to any organization that wanted them, indeed this was a major way that they tracked the success of their PSAs throughout the term of the project. It was in the distributions of these PSAs that they took on even more meanings, speaking to the variability of the reception of the image. Within the pages of NCP comics, the PSAs were advertisements for good behavior and good morals–functionally, they were child-centric advice manuals, a youthful rendition of a dominant advertising medium that reflected greater trends in said medium. These advertisements did not, in the genteel sense, promise improvement for children by self-denial and discipline, but rather gave them instructions on how to fit in and how to behave in a pleasing manner to others that would allow them to retain their position in peer groups, the key skill of the postwar child at school and, later in life, at work.[527] Outside of the comics, they were an equal advertisement and PR boon for NCP, who worked tirelessly to ensure that their comics would not be viewed with the same furor as other mainstream publishers'.

Also crucial to understanding both the aims and success of the Comics Project is situating it in the context of the social history of advertising. The Comics Project's power came from taking a trend in American advertising identified by Roland Marchand as the "parable of the captivated child" and turning it on its head. In Marchand's view, the parable of the captivated child was a natural response of advertisers to the rise in prominence of child psychology, which insisted that mothers play a more active role in manipulating the early years of childhood while simultaneously raising the stakes on how their skill as mothers would be monitored.[528] *Parents' Magazine*, which was so intimately involved contemporaneously with the Cincinnati Committee in making sure parents were informed in guiding their children's consumption of comics, helped to lead this charge. "Before advertising elaborated the idea in its parables," wrote Marchand,

[527] Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 209.
[528] Ibid., 229.

"leading psychologists had already prescribed the replacement of traditional discipline with psychological manipulation of the child's natural impulses for its own good. The same sensitivity to the increasing necessity, in a modern environment of complex, bureaucratic institutions, to mold people's behavior and facilitate their "adjustment" by psychological manipulation rather than authoritarian coercion was also finding expression in the 1920s and 1930s in the rising enthusiasm for professional 'personnel management' in industry."[529]

Thus, the PSAs of the Comics Project acted in the inverse to this Parable of the Captivated Child. Rather than act as a guide to consumption for manipulative parents to use, the PSAs used friendly fictional characters like Buzzy, Peter Porkchops, and, of course, Superman and Batman to provide a kid-focused way of providing instructions for children to adjust themselves to the expectations of postwar childhood. The Comics Project was consciously and deliberately child-centric, using the powerful and accessible medium of the visual to meet the child at their level of understanding and aid their development, even as later surveys of the project noted that adults read their PSAs to a significant degree as well.

Even prior to the establishment of the Comics Project, NCP demonstrated that their editorial and advertising staff were keenly aware of the power of the comic medium to express good ideas about citizenship to children. "Good comics," opined a National Comics Publications advertisement in a 1948 issue of the *Saturday Evening Post*, "are as much a part of the life of every American boy and girl as radio, hot dogs, newspapers, ice cream and movies." In the centerpiece of NCP's the ad, they boldly claimed that "[a] million young people will be better citizens…because of a Comics Magazine [sic] character!"[530] The ad noted, in line with

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[529] Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 231-232.
[530] "A million young people will be better citizens…because of a Comics Magazine character!", National Comics Publications advertisement, *The Saturday Evening Post*, August 14, 1949, 73.

Marchand, that it was first advertisers that noticed the appeal of the comic medium to youth, followed by psychologists that "…recognized that the comics magazines' combination of picture and text, visual and verbal expression, made ideas and information easier to absorb."[531] The ad featured write-ins from children around the country and bragged how the company's comics, especially Superman, supported American ideals of freedom and equality.[532]

The responses printed in the ad were a paean to the developing liberal consensus of midcentury, the notion that there was a basic unity of American values and common belonging that necessitated at least a tacit condemnation of racism.[533] From a Pennsylvania boy: "...[w]e are all equal in the sight of God. It doesn't matter to Him where we were born, or what color our skin is. Every child should be treated alike regardless of color or religion." From a West Virginian youth, "All men are created equal means that our colored janitor's kid has as good a chance of being a good citizen as I have, and my dad's a preacher."[534] The advertisement also indirectly referenced some of the critiques of comics, attacking censorship in gentler terms:

> While parental censorship in the home may keep publications away from the children. . . it invariably fails in keeping children away from publications. They find in the homes of others the delights denied in their own. . .Nobody in his right mind regards the comics as a substitute for home training or supervised education, religious instruction, normal discipline. With respect to maladjusted children, deficient in natural faculties, education and environment – any influence may be unwholesome. . . It is on record that Cain killed his brother. And Peter Rabbit *stole* a carrot, if we remember rightly![535]

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[531] Ibid.

[532] A reference to a contest held by the popular Superman radio show that urged children to write letters about what "All Men Are Created Equal" meant to them claimed that National received over a million letters in response.

[533] Works on the liberal consensus and its related historiographical school are legion. On the phenomena itself, I have found Godfrey Hodgson's *America In Our Time*, in any edition, to be the best distillation. See also Hodgson's updated views in Robert John Mason and Iwan W. Morgan, eds., *The Liberal Consensus Reconsidered: American Politics and Society in the Postwar Era* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2017). Other notable books include Miller and Nowak, *The Fifties: How We Really Were*, James Gilbert, *Another Chance: Postwar America*, Wendy Wall, *Inventing the "American Way"*. For an authoritative view of the associated historiographical approach common to midcentury, see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*, a book that I read at the very beginning of my graduate education and one that, astoundingly, keeps resurfacing.

[534] National Comics Publications advertisement in *The Saturday Evening Post*, August 14, 1948.

[535] Ibid.

The snippets from the NCP ad referenced above demonstrate clearly the commitment to a level-headed approach to comics criticism put forth by NCP. Pope quoted many selections from the above-referenced *Saturday Evening Post* ad in his letter proposing the project to John Moore, highlighting the company's editorial board and code, and their belief that the content of comics should match what they perceived as the simplistic morals of children, as Pope put it, "distinguishing clearly between right and wrong. . .the good wins and the bad loses; virtue is vindicated and the evil doer vanquished—before the story ends." Furthermore, Pope pointed out, the ad implores teachers and parents to stay familiar with the distinct types of comics since they so influenced children.

Prior to the initial meeting of the group that became the NSWA's Advisory Committee on the Comics Project, Moore issued a memorandum to NSWA staff detailing Pope's proposal and some of the background work that Moore and his assistants did to ensure that the offer from NCP was legitimate and earnest. Moore noted the company's history of both an editorial code and advisory board, writing that "…considerable but not exhaustive exploration has uncovered no evidence contrary to that presented by NCP. Inquiries had indicated a generally favorable attitude toward both NCP and Mr. Pope."[536]

The NSWA's public relations committee took up Pope's suggestion over the course of three meetings and, at their March 17, 1949, meeting held with the NSWA's Youth Division, recommended embracing the project.[537] Working first in a trial capacity, the NSWA sent NCP a list of stipulations. The NSWA wanted to select which issues the PSAs would appear in and requested final approval over all PSAs. They also desired the ability to criticize the general

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[536] John Moore, memorandum to NSWA staff, March 9, 1949. NSWACP.

[537] National Social Welfare Assembly, "Progress Report on Comics Project," n.d., late 1949-early 1950. Box 48, Folder 26, NSWACP.

content of National's comics and offer suggestions for improvements, and to ensure that the PSAs would not read as endorsements of specific comics. National was to reimburse the NSWA for its provided copy and use the NSWA's name only with its approval.[538] In a memo to one of his staffers, Moore indicated that Arch Crawford, head of the National Association of Magazine Publishers, informed him that he had complete confidence in the character of both National Comics Publications and of Pope himself.[539] Moore also contacted two members of NCP's Advisory Board, psychology professor Lauretta Bender and children's reading specialist Josette Frank, in the course of assessing National's reputation outside of their public relations department.

Both scholars, observed Moore, were far from uncritical company shills, despite later efforts by Wertham and others to portray them in that light. Moore noted that Bender "consider[ed] National Comics Publications good in general, although she has on occasion taken exception to material with influence."[540] Frank, however, had more to say about National's comics than did Bender, even disagreeing with her on the content of certain magazines. Claiming to have read every issue of DC's thirty-something titles, Frank routinely criticized the material and especially their "crime" magazines *Boy Commandos* and *Mr. District Attorney*.[541] Bender was more concerned with the format of the material that NPP and the NSWA sought to introduce. She feared such material might push youngsters toward more objectionable magazines, as those comics would not be filled with, in Bender's words, "namby-pamby" material.[542] The solution, reasoned Bender, was to include the PSAs as fully illustrated inserts,

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[538] Ibid.
[539] Some comic publishers, since many viewed comics at that time thematically as magazines, belonged to Crawford's group, and Crawford testified on comic books at the 1952 Hearings of the House Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials, otherwise known as the Gathings Committee hearings.
[540] Moore memo, 3/15/49.
[541] Ibid.
[542] Ibid.

rather than as small prose sections common to comics of that era. Bender's note to add the PSAs as visual rather than simply text reflected both her long understanding of the visual appeal of comics to children and her belief in the reflective didactic fantasy they were able to provide children.

A report prepared by Margaret Dawson, an NSWA staff member who was the administrative head of the Project from the Assembly end, sheds some interesting light on the expert consensus surrounding comic books before the tenor of the postwar anti-comics movement grew increasingly dire. Dawson's research came in the form of meetings with several academics and reading journal and magazine articles that drove the national conversation about kids and comics. Her scope included several notable *Saturday Review of Literature Articles*, including Wertham's "The Comics…Very Funny!," as well as a pamphlet on comics, radio, and movies by Josette Frank. Dawson also attended a seminar put on by Wertham and briefly spoke with him.

Dawson had high praise for German émigré and anti-Nazi scholar Norbert Muhlen's article "Comic Books and Other Horrors," from the January 1949 issue of *Commentary*, calling it "the most interesting, fair minded, and thoughtful piece" she read in the course of her research, recommending it highly."[543] Muhlen's article, subtitled "Prep School for Totalitarian Society?," acquiesced to the popularity of comic books among children, but fretted that children consumed them in such high quantities. Near the end, Muhlen surmised that most comics readers identified with the "weak person" that depended on superheroes and other "omnipotent hero-rulers," and feared that comics "may be helping to educate a whole generation for an authoritarian, rather

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[543] Margaret Dawson, report on comics industry research, May 10, 1949. Box 48, Folder 26: Reports, 1949-1956, NSWACP.

than a democratic society."[544] At once, Muhlen offered a subtle reiteration of the idea that comic books were fascist, as Jesuit scholar Walter J. Ong bluntly claimed in *TIME* back in 1945, and laid the foundations of a critique that asserted comic books served as communist propaganda by subverting the morals of the nation's youth.

While Dawson partially agreed with Muhlen's overall point, she believed that the claims of Wertham and others who posited a direct link between comics reading and juvenile delinquency were less firm, writing that "[t]he contention that the comics lead children to commit crimes of violence and sadism does not appear to be well substantiated."[545] Dawson recognized helpfully that there were swathes of research, polemics, and other literature surrounding the comics debate, and said that a brief summary would serve the committee better. Her summation, a prescient and clear analysis of both the medium as a whole and NCP in particular, bears printing in full:

> On one point I have come to firm personal conviction, i.e., that there needs to be much more discrimination on the part of the public — parents, teachers, critics — between the good, fairly good and bad comics. To condemn them wholesale may lead to a very dangerous form of legal censorship, and while it might lead to a partial elimination of some objectionable features, it is a plain failure to make constructive use of the most powerful mass medium ever known. It is also a failure to uphold the hand of those who are trying to put out a decent product or to improve their own standards, whether the motive is commercial or defensive. To say that the comics are "all right", *en masse*, and "good for kids" is equally stupid. There is sadistic, blood-curdling and sordid material in many of them that cannot possibly be defended and is not defended by any rational person. I would say the average of the National comics is fairly good. Certainly in comparison with the worst, it is positively refreshing. (None of the magazines, I am glad to report, were represented in Dr. Wertham's chamber of horrors.) In deciding whether to deal with them on a long term basis, the Assembly might consider that this is one of the biggest distributors in the country and that if its papers can be improved be practical suggestions as well as by good copy submitted monthly, a chance to raise standards, however slightly, is presented. I think the Assembly should take seriously the opportunity to press for improvements as well as watching carefully to see that all clauses of the

[544] Norbert Muhlen, "Comic Books and Other Horrors," *Commentary*, January 1949, 80-87.
[545] Dawson, research report, 2.

agreement are scrupulously fulfilled by the National company.[546]

The first official meeting of the proposed project's overseeing committee, the National Advisory Committee for the Comics Project (NAC), took place on April 14, 1949 at the NSWA's offices on 56th Street in New York City. The committee represented a wide array of the NSWA's affiliate organizations, including the Family Service Organization (whose staffer James Scull was the advisory committee's first chair), the National Publicity Council, Community Chests and Councils, Girl Scouts, the American Jewish Committee, the Child Welfare League, the New York Public Library, the National Health Council, and the Camp Fire Girls.[547] Topics discussed at the meeting included whether to include the committee's name and the results of another staffer's investigation into National's slate of titles, particularly the "questionable" ones. Though some members of the committee had their own private reservations about comics and raised concerns about the New York Public Library's complete condemnation of comics, the group reached a consensus that they "[recognized] hazards," but wanted "to help raise the standards in this medium."[548]

At the first meeting, the group also discussed more candidly what the subject matter of their strips was to be, and how it might change during the year. They decided not to provide agency-specific information in the strips, but to rather deal in subjects of interests of young people that also aligned with "common concerns" of the various agencies that comprised the NSWA. The group agreed with Loretta Bender's opinion that the campaign would not be effective if simply confined to the prose sections of the comics that publishers included to qualify comics as second-class mail. After a back-and-forth discussion with Margaret DeWestfelt

[546] Ibid., 4-5.
[547] NSWA, "Progress Report," 2.
[548] Marion Robinson, NAC Meeting minutes, 4/11/49. NSWACP.

of the Girl Scouts over who would hold authority for final approval, Moore proposed that any reference to an agency would be cleared with the respective group. The committee agreed that their ultimate goal was to identify the comic PSAs with the NSWA but decided to wait until the project took off before definitively signing their names to the material.

The project's first comic strip, written by freelance writer and editor Margaret Dawson, starred one of NCP's competitors to *Archie*, Buzzy Brown, and ran in 17 NCP comics for the October-November 1949 print run. The issue itself really went on sale in August, as common practice at this time was for companies to cover-date issues several months in advance.[549] Titled "Buzzy says STAY IN SCHOOL – Give Yourself a Break!," the comic depicts the affable protagonist appearing a bit downcast as he picks up his gal pal Susie. "Woe is me, Susie," declares Buzzy, "My future is ruined…I have just unearthed some fatal facts in the library. Statistics show that the amount a young man will be able to earn in the future depends on the amount of education he has had!"[550] Buzzy confesses that he dropped out to get ahead of his peers in earning money, but Susie reassures him that he can easily go back to school, impressing upon readers the importance of seeking guidance: "That's the best thing anybody can do who's thinking of leaving school! **Talk it over** with somebody–their parents, their teacher or some friend."[551]

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[549] Don Markstein, a former Disney comic writer who started the internet's first cartoon encyclopedia, *Don Markstein's Toonopedia*, in 2001, writes of Buzzy: "But he wasn't a clone of Archie, who was quickly becoming the template on whom stars of teenage humor comic books are generally based. Buzzy was a musician, a horn blower of the "hep cat" school, tho that term was already starting to seem a tiny bit quaint. His five-piece combo, in which his best pal, Bink, played saxophone, drove at least as many early stories as his rivalry with Wolfert the Wolf for the affections of Susie Gruff, the deficiencies of the broken-down old jalopy he drove, or the rest of his typical teenage adventures in and around the town of Cupcake Center." Don Markstein, "Buzzy," *Don Markstein's Toonopedia*, 2004. http://www.toonopedia.com/buzzy.htm. As far as this author is aware, Archie Andrews did not embark on his musical adventures until the late 1960s.

[550] "Buzzy says STAY IN SCHOOL – Give Yourself a Break!" reproduced in NSWA, "Progress Report on Comics Project." Script by Margaret Dawson and Jack Schiff, art by Bob Oksner.

[551] Dawson and Schiff, "Stay in School!" Emphasis original.

Pope brought a rudimentary version the strip to the NAC meeting on May 18, where the committee agreed that the work done on the strip "was a fine job and represented a good start." The committee had no recommendations for changes.[552] Moving forward with the NSWA's uneasiness to attaching its own name to the comic strips, the committee agreed to a descriptive, but helpfully vague boilerplate text for the bottom of the page: "Published as a public service in cooperation with leading national social welfare and youth-serving organizations. This page appears in more than ten million magazines of the National Comics group."[553]

After the initial publication of "Give Yourself A Break!," the NSWA wasted no time in publicizing its venture, coordinating with Sue Mellett of the Women's National News Service, who interviewed Moore for a planned story on the Comics Project. "Reacting to the recent wave of local bannings and censorship threat directed at the comic magazines that are alleged to be harmful to children's morals," wrote Mellett, "the publishers have jumped in several directions."[554] Mellett mentions earlier NCP collaborations with the Ad Council (in June and July 1949), as well as the formation of the Association of Comic Magazine Publishers, as ways comic book publishers fought back against criticism of comic books.[555] Mellett added that "the Social Welfare Assembly announced two reasons for its decision to go into cooperation in the

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[552] Marion Robinson, NAC Minutes, May 18, 1949. Box 48, Folder 20, NSWACP.
[553] Meeting minutes, 5/18/49.
[554] Sue Mellett, "Comic Uplift," *Women's National News Service*, August 16, 1949. Box 49, Folder 5: Publicity, 1948-1959, NSWACP.
[555] Ibid. Founded by several smaller publishers, Bradford Wright writes that "[t]he formation of the ACMP appeared to be a savvy business maneuver, but it was doomed from the start." Only twelve of thirty-four major publishers joined, and the organization saw the departure of many large publishing houses like NCP, who believed that their comics could be controlled by their own in-house editorial codes. In addition, the publishers of the most lurid material, Fox and Harvey, left the organization shortly after its founding. The ACMP also charged between $50-100 to screen comics for objectionable content, and many publishers simply put the ACMP seal on without sending comics in for review, a practice that continued until the early 1950s. Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 102-103. On this subject, see also David Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008), 130-131.

comics field: first, to reach young people with constructive ideas, and second, to experiment on what can be done through this mass medium."[556]

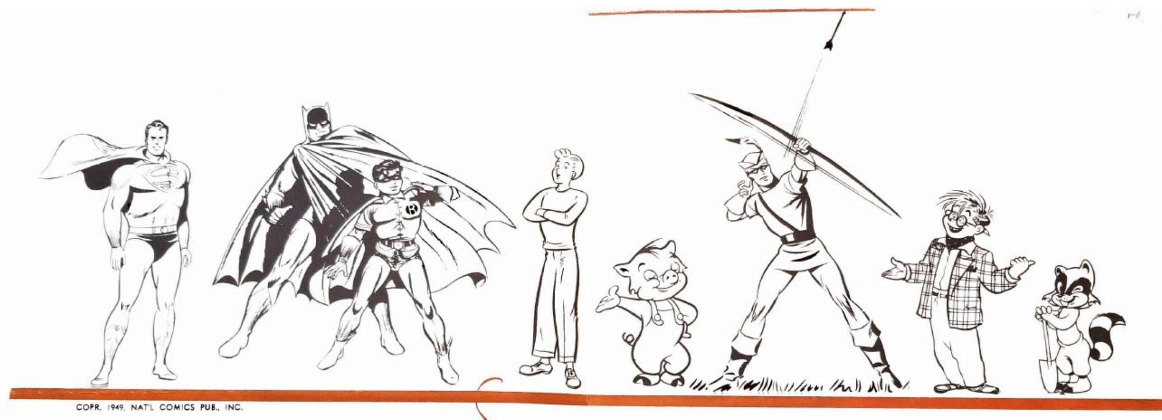

Figure 9: A photostat of the most frequent characters in the Comics Project PSAs, including Superman, Batman and Robin, Buzzy, Peter Porkchops, Green Arrow, and others. Scanned from NCP Comics Project advertisement poster, n.d. late-1949 to early 1950.

Larger newspapers caught on to the NSWA's project as well, and articles on the project and "Give Yourself A Break!" appeared in *The New York Times*, *TIME*, and other smaller news services.[557] NCP, too, desired to spread the good word of its collaboration with the NSWA, releasing a special poster-sized advertisement in August after securing the NSWA's approval back in June.[558] The National Comics Group," read the cover, "takes pleasure in announcing the inauguration of a unique public service program." Readers unfolded the poster once to see the above image, and learned that "each month with the aid of such American heroes as Superman, Batman, Buzzy and other well established comics characters…all 33 National Comics titles will present one or more subjects, and show how each reader can play his part in the solution of the

[556] Mellett, "Comic Uplift."
[557] "Comics to Carry Messages to Children; August's to Tell 10,000,000 'Go to School', *New York Times*, August 18, 1949, "Take it From Buzzy," *TIME,* August 29, 1949.
[558] Vernon Pope to John Moore, June 21, 1949. Box 48, Folder 20: Correspondence, 1949-1956, NSWACP.

problem." Unfolding again to see, in fact, covers of all thirty-three of the claimed titles, the poster noted "All National Comics magazines identified by this cover symbol…[the Superman-DC bullet]…," and after the final unfolding, "feature such public service pages as these." The poster reprinted in full size the three NSWA-affiliated PSAs, and three older ones done in cooperation with the Ad Council on one side of the poster, with a listing of participating organizations and commendatory letters received by NCP on the other.[559]

Of course, not all experts were on board with the comic medium and its proximity to children. Near the end of 1949, James V. Bennett, the director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, who also served as secretary for the American Bar Association's influential Criminal Law Section, wrote to NSWA director Robert Bondy to express his doubts regarding "the wisdom of the proposed project."[560] Within the ABA, Bennett served on a committee along with Criminal Law Section head Arthur Freund that investigated portrayals of law enforcement in mass culture and later attempted to sponsor research into mass culture's purported effect on juvenile delinquency.[561] One of their goals, he wrote, was to reach out to organizations sponsoring various media projects, and, in essence, make sure they were inadvertent fronts for nefarious comic book publishers.[562] Bennett referred to NCP's crime titles *Gang Busters* and *Mr. District Attorney* as "two of the most vicious crime comics," and cited a protracted push by municipalities and the National Organization for Decent Literature to ban the books. "I hope,"

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[559] NCP Public Service Promotional Poster, n.d. late 1949, Box 48, Folder 20: Correspondence, 1949-1956, NSWACP.
[560] James V. Bennett to Robert E. Bondy, December 12, 1949,
[561] See chapter "The Lawyer's Dilemma" in Gilbert's *A Cycle of Outrage* for a deeper reading of the ABA and its flirtation with regulating mass culture. Drawing on Arthur Freund's personal papers and ABA records, Gilbert's chapter is the most complete treatment of the ABA and its proximity to comic books.
[562] Bennett to Bondy, 12/12/49.

wrote Bennett, "that if you are still contemplating going forward with this project, you will give the matter more careful consideration."[563]

As a part of the Comics Project's "experimental phase," a term used by many committee members to describe the formative first two or three years of the project, four women on the National Advisory Committee formed a Subcommittee on Criteria. Working with NCP's editorial code that debuted in 1948, the women completed handwritten evaluations of the issues, noting the formats of each issue, potential violations of the NCP code, and adding their own comments at the end. In the few handwritten evaluations that survived to the archival record, the women on the committee found no violations of the NCP code, though it is worth mentioning that most of the issues evaluated were for at a young audience—*Buzzy, Date with Judy, Funny Folks*, and others.

In the June 1950 meeting where they shared their results, however, chair Margaret DeWestfelt shared her reservations about the NCP criteria. In their evaluations, the women rarely found actual violations, but rather what DeWestfelt felt were "violations of the spirit" of the NCP code, referring to a character taking "knock out drops," which DeWestfelt thought was nearly as bad as the use of a hypodermic needle, which the NCP code forbade.[564] The involvement of these women in undertaking a third party critique of NCP's comics under their own code lends credence to the notion that they were seriously interested in improving the content of comic

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[563] Ibid. In a later letter to Bondy, Bennett doubled down on his claims, calling the material depicted in *Gang Busters* "sadism" and inferring that NCP's crime comics had "no legitimate apologists." In a manner typical of moralist anti-comics critics, Bennett embellished his telling of a *Gang Busters* story to make it seem much more violent than it was. A "thug feeding cocktails to a young girl" really showed the crook drinking champagne and trying to woo a grown woman, and "using a machine gun silencer generously on those who do not disagree with him" became the crook shooting a fellow criminal from across a room–no impact, nor blood shown. Bennett, like other critics of comics, opposed even the smallest amount of violence, even implied violence, in comic books. If Bennett thought the comparatively tame *Gang Busters* was sadist, then we may hope he never read the much more lurid *Crime Does Not Pay.*

[564] Marion Robinson, National Advisory Committee minutes, June 22, 1950. NSWACP.

books, rather than serving as uncritical mouthpieces for a nefarious corporation as was so often charged during this period.

The Advisory Committee saw its first membership shake-up in 1950 as founding chairman James Scull asked to be removed due to an increased workload with his employer, the Family Service Association of America. Ed Leibert, the chairman of the NSWA's public relations committee, led the meeting in Scull's stead and congratulated Scull on his tenure, noting that "he was sure the committee joined him in feeling that the success of the project was due in large part to [Scull's] leadership."[565] Margaret DeWestfelt assumed leadership of the committee in Scull's stead, a position she retained until 1954. Furthermore, Leibert added that the NSWA committees overseeing the Comics Project work, the Public Relations and Executive Committees, "held an increasingly favorable attitude to the project and were pleased with the progress that had been made.[566] Scull prepared an outgoing report to serve as a retrospective on the first year of the Comics Project and the fourteen public service announcements they published. "Nine of the 14," wrote Scull, "have presented practical and informational ideas which come close to youthful experience and interest. . .five have been frank attempts to "sell" socially desirable attitudes: encouraging young people to give community volunteer service, to appreciate the work of the United Nations, to adopt a modern philosophy of giving to needy people, to take a stand against racial and religious discrimination."[567]

Scull also wrote that among the NSWA's member organizations, only one (James Bennett) lodged a negative complaint, and remarked more broadly that the significance of the

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[565] Marion Robinson, National Advisory Committee minutes, October 5, 1950. NSWACP.
[566] Ibid. During the project's "experimental phase," the Comics Project functioned as a pseudo-subcommittee of the Public Relations Committee.
[567] James H. Scull, "An Experiment in Influencing Social Attitudes," Reports, NSWACP.

Comics Project lay in its ability to unite NSWA affiliate organizations in pursuit of their common interests:

> There have been questions at times as to whether the NSWA ever could reach the aims of its founders to be a spokesman for social welfare in matters of broad public interest, as well as a forum, a mart for the exchange of experience, and a device for coordinating action on practical, professional problems. . .it has shown that wide differences in approach do not separate many common aims among social agencies and that it is possible for them to be jointly articulate on fundamental matters, other than fund-raising.[568]

The results of the experimental phase thus far were clear—working with NCP, and thereby taking a stance of attempting to improve the content of comics was a far preferable stance to abstaining from the discussion or condemning the material outright. James Bennett's complaints aside, the initial response from the public and NSWA affiliate organizations was one of wide acceptance. The NSWA organizations recognized the power of these strips, and with the new practice of providing reprints of comic pages free of cost to organizations that wanted them, the strips would find new life as they proliferated around the country.

1951 saw several major milestones for the Comics Project, as they sought to move beyond the experimental phase and seek more definitive proof that their comic strips were fulfilling their intended purpose and reaching young readers. To this end they appointed new committee member Dr. Dallas Pratt to head a subcommittee on research that sought to answer questions surrounding children's readership of the Comics Project pages, their reactions to the same, and any potential influence the pages had on children's behavior. Pratt's committee met sparingly, but the conclusions they reached with the aid of New York University professor Harvey Zorbaugh had important implications for the committee's projects.

[568] Ibid.

Zorbaugh, an educational and urban sociologist, was the most prominent academic defender of comic books during the 1940s. As editor of *The Journal of Educational Sociology*, Zorbaugh oversaw two special issues of the journal in 1944 and 1949 that exclusively discussed comics. The former issue discussed the potential of comic books to serve as an educational medium, while the latter sought to, in Zorbaugh's words, "[bring] the controversy over the comics into the realm of constructive discussion."[569] After consulting with Pratt's research committee, Zorbaugh suggested several tests, including product giveaways related to specific readings, calls to action, evaluations of pages used by schools, and a larger controlled experiment done in conjunction with trained investigators.[570]

The committee would soon have a chance to see one of Zorbaugh's suggestions realized. Pratt had connections with the American Friends Service Committee of the Quaker church and was involved in a past charity venture of theirs. The AFSC indicated to Pratt that they would be interested in working with the committee and formulated a base proposal with secretary Marion Robinson to create a comic story that coincided with the AFSC's "shoelaces" campaign, which accompanied their war relief efforts overseas.

The idea evolved into a Superboy page titled "Superboy says 'Share with Others!'," which ran in twenty-two NCP magazines cover-dated January-February 1952. The story depicts children playing outside a sweetshop when Superboy arrives and announces winter is on its way. One of the children, a foreigner named Paul, looks down and murmurs "Wouldn't it be wonderful if winter could be fun for young people everywhere?," and his friends learn that children in war-ravaged Europe relied heavily on foreign aid to ensure that they wouldn't run

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[569] Harvey Zorbaugh, "Editorial," *Journal of Educational Sociology* 23, no. 4 (Dec., 1949): 193-194.
[570] Marion Robinson, Meeting minutes of Subcommittee on Research, Feb 14, 1951 and National Advisory Committee minutes, March 7, 1951, NSWACP.

barefoot through their towns. Dejected that their meager allowances didn't allow for large-scale help, Paul helpfully suggests that they buy an extra pair of shoelaces and send those along to aid agencies. "It's just a little thing," exclaims Superboy, "but it will mean a lot mostly because those youngsters will know we are their friends and want to share what we have with them!"[571]

By the AFSC's standards, the Comics Project's involvement in the shoelaces campaign was a resounding success. The AFSC received 1,310 letters that provided 2,210 pairs of shoelaces and received seventy-five subscriptions to their children's newsletter. According to the AFSC's data, contributors ranged from age four to adulthood (evidenced by letter-writers writing on military stationery or signing Mr./Mrs.), lived in every state and five foreign countries, and were of diverse faiths and races. Ninety children even requested pen pals from the AFSC. It was not just children that read comics, the AFSC data showed, but adults, too, and their appeal spread around the globe.[572]

1951 also saw the first readership study of the Comics Project, included in a larger study of advertising taken on by NCP in the middle of the year. The Daniel Starch firm interviewed 100 men and 109 women over twenty-one, and 117 boys and 105 girls between the ages of eight and twenty. Further data indicated that over half the men interviewed were skilled or unskilled laborers, and 61.5% of the women were housewives.[573] Starch and Co. checked for three degrees of readership, "Noted," which meant readers indicated that they saw the ad in question, "Seen-Associated," which indicated that readers remembered seeing the ad *and* who was associated with it, and "Read Most," showing readers that read more than fifty percent of the ad's text.[574]

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[571] "Superboy says 'Share with Others!," in *Mr. District Attorney* 25 (January-February 1952). Script by Jack Schiff, art by Win Mortimer.
[572] Mary Esther McWhirter, "Data Concerning 'Comics Project'," March 24, 1952. Research, NSWACP.
[573] "Digest of Readership Study Made by Daniel Starch and Staff for National Comics Publications, Inc.," Correspondence, 1949-1956, NSWACP.
[574] Ibid.

The report indicated that Vernon Pope celebrated the reading results as "phenomenally high."[575] 51% of the adults surveyed and 53% of the children recalled seeing the ad, 45% of adults and 47% of children remembered who was associated with it, and 42% of adults and 45% of children recalled reading over half of the ad.[576] Starch and Co.'s data showed that more adults responded to the strip, leading the next ad (for shoes) by 9% for men and 15% for women for a 12% lead overall out of seven ads in the "Read Most" category.[577] The ad dropped slightly for children, as Starch and Co.'s data displayed that the NSWA's page ranked third out of seven in "Most Read" for both boys and girls, behind a bubble gum ad and the Hood Shoe Co. ad.

Vernon Pope brought more good news about the increasing visibility of the project to the October meeting of the National Advisory Committee, noting that NCP's program of providing free reprints of Comics Project pages to interested groups was rapidly gaining momentum. Pope cited distribution of 20,000 copies of August 1951's page, "Lost: A Free Education" to school superintendents across the country.[578] A memorandum sent by Pope a few months later in early 1952 provided a much broader indication of who was requesting which strips. "Lost: A Free Education" dominated across the country, as Pope inferred, with 21,800 copies sent from Long Beach, CA (which requested 7,000 copies) to Baltimore, MD. Columbus, OH, Harrisburg, PA, Amarillo, TX, and Detroit, MI all requested at least 1,000 copies at a district level, while Woodrow Wilson High School in Camden, OH requested 2,000 copies for the school itself.[579]

"Look For The Real Reason!," a fable starring Buzzy's counterpart Binky, which issued a reminder for young people to check on their friends if they felt down, got 9,600 requests for

[575] Ibid.
[576] Ibid.
[577] Ibid.
[578] Marion Robinson, National Advisory Committee minutes, October 3, 1951.
[579] Vernon Pope, "Report on Reprint Requests – Comic Pages," February 5, 1952. Correspondence about strips, NSWACP.

reprints. The National Association for Mental Health, where committee member Dallas Pratt worked, requested 5,000 copies, and the Montgomery County, PA Health and Welfare Council requested a further 2,000.[580] "Buzzy says 'Old Folks are People Too!'," a tale about a friend of Buzzy's who continually underestimates his grandfather, garnered 4,545 reprint requests, 2,500 of which came from the Board of Hospitals and Homes of the Chicago Methodist Church. The other stories cited by Pope ranged from 1,200 to 1,400 copy requests, though "Superboy says 'Know Your Country!'" was by far the lowest at 550 requests, 450 of which went to the National Jewish Welfare Board.[581] The large number of reprint requests showed that the Comics Project was accomplishing its intended goal and more. Not only did they reach children through comic books themselves, the reprint campaign assured that children who did not read comics, for whatever reason, might see the strips in a different way, whether through distribution at their doctors' offices or other community health organizations, or usage in their school classrooms.

The summer of 1952 marked the true end of the project's "experimental phase," with more studies on the effectiveness of NCP's strips, as well as a glowing report to the NSWA Executive Committee that heartily advocated for the project's continuance. As another measure of exploring what children retained from the Comics Project's strips, they worked with Dr. Irving Lorge, a Columbia University professor who oversaw the school's Institute of Psychological Research. Lorge's experiment saw graduate students assess the readability of 30 NCP pages with regard to word count and difficulty, interview children and assess their responses and criticisms, and perform test-based measures at schools across the city and greater area.[582] Lorge noted that his research showed mostly positive results, but he still took a critical

[580] Ibid.
[581] Ibid.
[582] Marion Robinson, National Advisory Committee meeting minutes, June 11, 1952. NSWACP.

stance toward some of the writing and art, which he relayed to the committee constructively in order for them to have something to work on while waiting for the full publication of his report. Lorge's research demonstrated, he inferred, that children "do not go for stories which preach or moralize."[583] Furthermore, he insisted that the committee scrutinize each story's vocabulary, "idea density," sentence length, and connections between message and story.

Lorge's report, in addition to the earlier Starch firm and AFSC reports, made their way into a report prepared for the NSWA's Executive Committee, the first comprehensive report since 1950. Like the previous report, prepared by outgoing chairman James Scull, the 1952 report boasted of the project's great success and implored the NSWA to continue supporting the work of the committee. George Rabinoff, an NSWA member on the committee, reported to NSWA director Robert Bondy that he met with Vernon Pope, who felt equally strong about continuing the project. However, Pope shot down Rabinoff's idea of potentially turning the Comics Project into an industry-wide program, saying "[National feels] they have nothing in common with the other publishers."[584] While chair DeWestfelt and secretary Marion Robinson prepared the executive report, they brought to the committee's attention a letter sent in April by a

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[583] Ibid.

[584] Memorandum from George W. Rabinoff to Robert E. Bondy, July 1, 1952. NSWACP.

special NSWA committee, which urged the group to become more active in fighting prejudice and discrimination. The committee agreed to the proposal and sent along four comic stories that they felt worked towards that end.[585]

In a final truncated report, the committee published its recommendations concerning the continuation of the project and its future plans. "After three years' work," wrote Robinson, "the Committee believes that this experiment in influencing social attitudes of children and young people through the medium of comics has proven to be well worth while and should be continued." The committee also requested that the NSWA consider the project fully on its own merits, rather than as an experiment. Lastly, the committee decided that they no longer wished to

Figure 10: Scan of "Buzzy's Special Brotherhood Week Quiz" appearing in House of Mystery #25 in author's collection. Note the official placement of the NSWA's name.

[585] Marion Robinson, National Advisory Committee minutes, October 9, 1952. NSWACP.

be anonymous on the comic pages, and recommended placing the NSWA's name since they no longer feared "adverse criticism."[586] Moving forward, the committee planned, as Vernon Pope suggested to Rabinoff, to make better use of their affiliate organizations in soliciting topics for the comic pages.

1953 passed largely without any major developments for the NSWA and its Comics Project. After the Executive Committee approved its report in January and the NCP comic pages began to officially print the organization's name, the meetings continued their established pace of sending stories to NCP and reporting on various goings-on in the greater community of their affiliate organizations. Guichard Parris of the National Urban League attended an October 1953 meeting, marking the first contact the committee had with a primarily black service organization. Parris helped provide some input on a National Brotherhood Week feature originally focusing on the 300th anniversary of Jewish settlement in America, but the committee wished instead to promote a general message of unity through diversity rather than single out a specific racial or religious group.[587] They opted instead to turn the story into a quiz, which became "Buzzy's Special Brotherhood Week Quiz," appearing in twenty-five titles in April 1954, and twenty-two issues in March 1957 (reproduced on previous page).

Five months passed between the committee's final meeting in 1953 and the first in 1954, a year that became a trying time for the comic book industry and anyone connected with it due to the publication of *Seduction of the Innocent* and the Senate subcommittee hearings on juvenile delinquency. The committee's first meeting in March 1954 gave them much to celebrate. Vernon Pope reported that the total distribution of comic reprints now reached nearly 65,000 copies, and

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[586] Marion Robinson, 1952 Executive Committee Report re-write, December 18, 1952, Correspondence, 1949-1956, NSWACP.
[587] National Advisory Committee minutes, 10/28/53. NSWACP.

their network of subscribers reached nearly 200 New York City schoolteachers and 15 affiliate organizations.[588] Ann G. Wolfe of the American Jewish Committee assumed the position of committee chair at this meeting, as Margaret DeWestfelt tendered a resignation due to a new position at the Girl Scouts. Wolfe also noted later in the meeting that she received word of "hearings on the possible relationship between comics and juvenile delinquency" to be held in New York in the coming months.[589]

A few weeks later, the Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency came to the NSWA's doorstep. Herbert Beaser, who served as assistant counsel for the comic book hearings, came to the NSWA's office unannounced and encountered Marion Robinson, who was alarmed enough by the encounter that she sent a detailed letter to Rabinoff and Bondy. "Mr. Beaser did not seem much interested in our project as such, except to remark that 'it was thought' that NSWA was being 'used' by National Comics Company. When I asked who thought so, he seemed kind of evasive.[590] Beaser then grilled Robinson on her contacts at National – Jack Liebowicz, Whit Ellsworth, and Jack Schiff. "He wanted to know what I thought of [Schiff] and I said what I always say– he's a high caliber person, a good editor, and has an unusually good grasp of educational ideas and child psychology."[591] Beaser also inquired about the beginnings of the NSWA's partnership with NCP, to which Robinson replied that she was sure the NSWA took proper steps in investigating their potential partner. Finally, Beaser asked for a list of committee members, but Robinson only had one copy and refused to give it to him. "He didn't seem too interested in any of them," wrote Robinson, "Took no notes."[592]

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[588] Marion Robinson, National Advisory Committee meeting minutes, March 5, 1954. NSWACP.
[589] Robinson, NAC minutes 3/5/54.
[590] Letter from Marion Robinson to George Rabinoff and Robert Bondy, March 19, 1954. NSWACP.
[591] Ibid.
[592] Ibid.

The NSWA fared better, however, in light of the comic book hearings than the Child Study Association of America (CSAA), whose reading expert Josette Frank served on NCP's editorial board since its inception in 1941. Writing to Bondy, Rabinoff relayed some conversations he had with Gunnar Dybwad, director of the CSAA. Unlike anyone from the NSWA, Dybwad received a call to testify before the subcommittee and was grilled by Kefauver and Beaser over the CSAA's ties to comic book companies. "He and CSAA got a very bad press," wrote Rabinoff, "and wanted to discuss his situation with the Assembly Committee."[593]

The NSWA faced a much more direct public relations challenge later in 1954, when Wertham directly attacked them in an article titled "The Curse of the Comic Books" in the November-December edition of *Religious Education*:

> The advertising of the crime comic book industry is ingenious. Let me give an example, one where it makes use of prominent religious organizations. National Comics Publications, Inc. (which publishes among others such harmful comics as Superman, Bat Man, etc.) sends out reprints of public service pages inserted in their comic books. These public service pages, of course, do no good whatsoever. They camouflage the real content of the comics. These sheets go to people who have professional contact with children. The real advertising is that the return address on the envelopes in which the sheets are mailed is not the publisher, but the National Social Welfare Assembly, Inc. This is a very prominent organization. Whether their directors know that they are aiding in the corruption of children I do not know. [Wertham then provides a long list of the NSWA's affiliate organizations.] This is the chorus helping to advertise the fascist Superman, the lesbian Wonder Woman and the homosexual Bat Man![594]

With Dybwad's experiences in mind, the NSWA moved quickly to shield itself from criticism spurred by Wertham's article. The committee agreed quickly to have Ann Wolfe, the new chair, write a letter to the editors of *Religious Education* to tell the committee's side of the

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[593] Letter from George Rabinoff to Robert Bondy, June 7, 1954.

[594] Excerpt from Fredric Wertham, "The Curse of the Comic Books," *Religious Education*, November-December 1954. Correspondence, 1949-1956, NSWACP. Carol Tilley makes a persuasive argument in a recent article that many of the homophobic sentiments proffered by Wertham were initially advanced by his respected collaborator, Hilde Mosse, who believed that homosexuality was degenerate and reserved special scorn for lesbians. Carol L. Tilley, "A Regressive Formula of Perversity: Wertham and the Women of Comics," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 22, no. 4 (October 2, 2018): 354–72, https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2018.1450001

story.[595] Wolfe's letter spoke of "gross distortions of truth coupled with totally unsubstantiated accusations," and inferred that Wertham's assertion that the pages were actively harmful "would be merely ridiculous were it not so outrageous."[596] Heading off an anticipated wave of complaints to affiliate organizations (Rabinoff noted one call from a disturbed staffer already), the NSWA rushed out a memorandum in early 1955 under Bondy's auspices that provided Wertham's charges and Wolfe's response in case affiliate organizations needed to respond to criticism.[597]

As 1955 drew on, the intense panic that colored Americans' views of the comic book industry quickly subsided thanks to the new Comics Code administered by the Comics Magazine Association of America, a trade group of the industry's largest publishers. With lurid comics stifled and only inoffensive juvenile fantasy remaining, the NSWA continued their mission of spreading socially constructive messages through the medium of comics. In the mid-1950s, the committee was especially interested in continuing their earlier research into the changes in children's attitudes brought on by comic books. Wolfe reached out to Bertram Beck, director of the United States Children's Bureau's project on juvenile delinquency, who seemed unable to suggest any helpful methodology for the proposed study.[598] Beck did, however, send Elizabeth Herzog, a member of the Children's Bureau's research division, to meet with the NSWA in October 1955.

Herzog's visit helped clear up the research-related ambiguities that the National Advisory Committee held since taking up the question in late 1954. In a summation of Herzog's

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[595] Marion Robinson, NAC Meeting minutes, December 15, 1954. NSWACP.
[596] Letter from Ann Wolfe to *Religious Education*, n.d. Dec. 1954. NSWACP.
[597] Letter from George Rabinoff to Robert Bondy, December 23, 1954 and Robert Bondy, Memorandum to Executives of Affiliate Organizations, January 6, 1955.
[598] Marion Robinson, NAC meeting minutes, June 8, 1955. NSWACP.

contributions, Robinson noted “what we really wanted to know boiled down to three questions: What is it [*sic*] youngsters like in comics? What are the essential elements that appeal? Are these elements at odds with what we are trying to do? Herzog also expressed skepticism over the “feasibility of testing effectiveness; the necessity to ‘spell out’ objectives, questions, and goals; and the possibility that inquiry into children’s perception and response to comics might show much about both comics and juvenile delinquency.”[599] Herzog’s notes also revealed an on-the-ground response to the seemingly arbitrary censoring powers of the Comics Code, which often elude historians:

> [T]he committee members view the code as ineffectual in its presumed aims and ludicrously obstructive in its actual operation. For example, they say that in one of their 'uplift' comics, a fire engine was rushing along and saying 'Whee!'. According to the code the fire engine was not allowed to say 'whee' four times but was permitted to say it only two times on the grounds that more than two whees would unduly excite the juvenile readers."[600]

By the end of 1955, Wolfe believed the committee found itself at a turning point after a lengthy discussion at its final meeting of the year over its “quo vadis question.”[601] Despite happiness at having the reprint circulation of a lauded page titled “How A Nation is Born: Your United Nations At Work!” reaching nearly 80,000 copies, the recent conversations with Herzog and the Children’s Bureau revealed some uncertainties concerning the project’s direction and the effect of its work. Committee members offered several explanations and ideas, but ultimately decided the project’s overall outlook was good. Their approach to research queries did not solidify until the following March, when Wolfe said “It was thought that we had gone as far as

[599] Marion Robinson, Notes on conference with Mrs. Elizabeth Herzog, October 19, 1955. NSWACP.
[600] Elizabeth Herzog, Notes on meeting with the Comics Project Committee of the National Social Welfare Assembly, October 13, 1955. United States Children’s Bureau, Central Files, “Environmental causes of juvenile delinquency,” file 7-1-2-2-2, boxes 438 and 658, RG 102, National Archives.
[601] Marion Robinson, National Advisory Committee meeting minutes, December 12, 1955.

out own competence would take us and that through a study of the medium in general was beyond our scope, a study of our own pages was not."[602]

Even though the committee faced great uncertainty over research, they began their most comprehensive assessment of the Comics Project in 1956, when they provided copies of the popular "Welcome, Amigo!" story to several Detroit schools and gave teachers questionnaires to fill out.[603] Between November 1956 and May 1957, the NSWA tested five comic pages in 31 schools across the Detroit area, garnering around 6,000 individual test results.[604] Based on teacher assessments of twenty-two school demographics, most students were middle-class, with four schools primarily upper-class and two mainly lower-class. Sixteen of the schools were majority white, while four were majority black and two answered "mixed."[605] Student ages were mostly eleven to fourteen but went as old as fifteen and as young as nine. Teachers replied that the comic pages were easy to work into their pre-established lesson plans, and that children responded enthusiastically to the content.[606]

Wolfe resigned her chair position after the committee's first 1957 meeting, and submitted a report, as was custom, to the NSWA Executive Committee reflecting on her time and accomplishments with the committee. "As the work of the past four years is reviewed," wrote Wolfe, "it becomes clear that a shift in emphasis in the direction of addressing schoolteachers has taken place. To some extent our original aim to 'reach the unreached' child has been sidetracked."[607] Wolfe implored the committee to more effectively use NSWA affiliate agencies and to do an in-house analysis of the 90-or-so comic pages published since 1949, summarizing

[602] Marion Robinson, National Advisory Committee meeting minutes, March 12, 1956.
[603] Marion Robinson, National Advisory Committee meeting minutes, November 1, 1956.
[604] Detroit Area School Project Final Report, September 1957. NSWACP.
[605] Ibid.
[606] Ibid.
[607] "The Comics Project, 1953-1957," Ann G. Wolfe, n.d. late 1957. NSWACP.

her report by saying “the Committee believes that much has been accomplished in this cooperative relationship with NCP.[608]

Margaret Dawson took over the helm from Ann Wolfe but served only for a short time as her husband took a job in Israel two years later, forcing Dawson to resign. After all the reports from the Detroit Area School Project came in, the committee declared that project successful and officially shuttered it.[609] As a way of closing the door on the Detroit project, Wolfe (who remained on the committee until 1961) shared feedback she received while presenting on the Detroit Area School Project at Wayne University (now Wayne State University) in Detroit. According to her notes, the audience, which comprised teachers that participated in the project, school superintendents, university deans, and members of Detroit social agencies, were “very interested in both the project and its history and in NSWA as an organization.”[610] In particular, the teachers in the audience got what Wolfe called a “real lift” out of being part of the test, and were excited about serving in such a large project. Not all agreed, however, and some teachers felt that the comics did not help children enrich their vocabulary–some feeling strongly enough about it to decline to participate in the NSWA’s project.[611]

Before leaving the committee in 1960, secretary Marion Robinson prepared a retrospective 10-year report of the Comics Project, its successes, and its failures. Robinson recapped the Starch, Lorge, and Detroit School studies, also reporting on the self-study the NSWA performed on their own material in 1958 and 1959. “On the whole,” wrote Robinson, “it was pleased with its ten years’ work, but found a number of dismal failures among the successes. As one summarizer put it, ‘There are successes in the majority of pages, but failures are total

[608] Ibid.
[609] Marion Robinson, National Advisory Committee minutes, January 13, 1958.
[610] Robinson, meeting minutes, 1/13/58.
[611] Ibid.

flops!' Members judged that in general the strong points have been in the handling of subjects, and the approach and clarity of message. Weak points were in presentation and consistently reaching younger children."[612] While the committee's published summary of the self-study did not directly identify these flops, they noted "most of the Citizenship and Democracy group as well as Nature pages could be handled better."[613]

The 1960s proved to be a challenging decade not just for the Comics Project, but also NCP and the entire comics industry. Changes in children's leisure habits, the ascendancy of television, and competitive pressures from Marvel forced NCP into making tough choices about its company direction which ultimately spelled doom for the Comics Project. Yet the minds behind the Comics Project seemed blissfully unaware of any problems plaguing the comic book industry. Former chair Ann Wolfe presented on comics at the White House Conference on Children and Youth in March 1960, arguing for a dispassionate examination of comics and youth: "Those of us who want to help create materials of good taste and substance for children and youth must view comics realistically, without being thrown off balance by unproved charges and counterclaims."[614]

The committee celebrated Wolfe's work at their May 1960 meeting, noting the warm reception of Wolfe's speech by comics industry representatives present at the conference.[615] However, the meeting's overall mood turned mixed, as George Rabinoff, the assistant NSWA director who served as a strong internal advocate for the project, announced he was leaving the committee for unspecified reasons. Harriet Scantland, an NSWA staffer who took over

[612] Marion Robinson, "Experiment with Educational Comics Pages: 1949-1959," August 1959. NSWACP.
[613] "Self Study of Pages," April 16, 1959. NSWACP.
[614] Ann G. Wolfe, "Comic Books and Comic Strips: Their Effects on Children and Youth," transcript of speech delivered at White House Conference on Children and Youth, March 28, 1960. NSWACP.
[615] Harriet Scantland, NAC Meeting minutes, May 2, 1960.

secretarial duties from Marion Robinson, also announced her intentions to leave the committee after serving for less than a year. On a more positive note, Josette Frank, NCP's longtime editorial consultant and renowned children's reading expert, joined the committee in 1960.

In 1961, Irving Rimer, a guest of the committee from the American Cancer Society, floated an idea to the committee about a comic page dealing with smoking. This aligned with his organization's policy, as the ACS, along with the National Tuberculosis Association, sent a letter to the White House that year urging the creation of a government commission to study smoking's effect on personal health.[616] The committee waffled a bit on Rimer's suggestion, worrying that the strip would too implicitly condemn smoking parents, that an anti-smoking PSA would be too unpleasant, that the story would be too "preachy" all in light of general lack of universal agreement over the health effects of smoking. The committee did not reject Rimer's proposal outright and tabled it for further discussion.[617] As we shall see, Rimer's proposal had important implications for future Comics Project stories.

At the committee's following meeting in September, Alice Adler, who replaced Ann Wolfe as chair, resigned her position but remained on the committee in an *ex officio* position. Ann Wolfe herself resigned from the committee in December 1961, citing an increased workload at the American Jewish Committee. In a letter of resignation, Wolfe wrote "I would hope that the Committee will continue to place considerable emphasis in its pages and content on the area of intergroup relations. I think it becomes increasingly important that the comic medium as a whole,

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[616] "The Rise of Anti-smoking Movements," part of *Selling Smoke: Tobacco Advertisiing and Anti-Smoking Campaigns*, Yale University Library online exhibit. Accessed December 6, 2019. http://exhibits.library.yale.edu/exhibits/show/sellingsmoke/antismoking
[617] Elma Phillipson Cole, NAC Meeting minutes, May 8, 1961.

and certainly our pages, should reflect the American situation as it really is, that hat members of minority groups should be portrayed in a realistic and natural fashion."[618]

As the 1960s rolled on, the work of the committee regarding United Nations subjects and pages continued to win wide support of teachers and other community personnel. The committee's past work with the United Nations included the Indonesia-centered "How A Nation is Born: Your United Nations at Work," which garnered tens of thousands of reprint requests, and an ill-fated feature on the Food and Agriculture Organization scuttled as the comic was ready to go to press by an FAO staffer who objected to the appearance of the USSR in the story. The committee's new work, "Superman talks about…Pennies for UNICEF!," helped UNICEF's Halloween child-oriented fundraiser garner more attention, and the United States Committee for UNICEF ordered 50,000 copies of the story from NCP.[619]

Mrs. Daniel Soyka, Adler's replacement, resigned her chair position in early 1963 due to personal reasons, leading ex-chairs Alice Adler and James Scull to serve as temporary chairs through the year. Harold Weiner, of the National Public Relations Council of Health and Welfare services, joined the committee in September 1963.[620] The committee faced another round of criticism that year as Hilde Mosse, a medical associate of Fredric Wertham's, criticized the Comics Project in *New York Magazine* using language similar to Wertham's attack in 1954. Citing the "very astute grasp" comics publishers held on public relations, Mosse infers that the Comics Project showed that "national welfare organizations are letting themselves be used for comic book promotion."[621]

[618] Letter from Ann G. Wolfe to Elma Phillipson Cole, December 4, 1961. NSWACP.
[619] Elma Phillipson Cole, NAC Meeting minutes, September 12, 1962. NSWACP.
[620] Elma Phillipson Cole, NAC Meeting minutes, September 23, 1963.
[621] Hilde Mosse, "Comics: 'Whap!' 'Wham!' 'Pow!' 'Blam!' 'Thud!'," *New York Magazine*, November 3, 1963.

Similarly to their other dealings with public critics of their work, the NAC moved to write a letter to the publishers of *New York Magazine*, in their words "[being] on record with the accurate information, rather than letting the statements stand without reply, and possibly [averting] the publisher from taking on a 'witch hunt' on reputable comics."[622] NSWA director Robert Bondy took up the letter, which also, as did the response to Wertham, went to leaders of NSWA affiliate organizations. In it, Bondy strongly defends the Comics Project, as well as the conduct of NCP:

> This charge is an example of negative criticism of the most destructive kind. Not only does it suggest that an organization composed of the leading child welfare, health, recreation and similar agencies in the United States is being duped, but it implies bad faith on the part of the publishing company concerned and entirely distorts the 14-year relationship between the two organizations. . .[i]n light of the long-standing, productive relationship between the Assembly and the publisher, the allegation that the Assembly is being 'used' can only be dismissed as reckless and irresponsible.[623]

1964 saw both highs and lows for the committee. By this point, resignations from the committee started to build and affiliate organizations were no longer able, as they had in the past, to keep a steady rotation of members coming to the committee. The committee generally accepted these resignations, and only in 1966, one year before the committee ceased meetings, did secretary Elma Phillipson Cole ask resignees to reconsider.[624] A high point this year came from the committee's choice to re-open a discussion into Irving Rimer's proposed anti-smoking page, owing to the groundswell of public interest concerning effects of smoking thanks to the famed *Report of the Advisory Committee to the Surgeon General of the United States* in January 1964. Even before the strip ran in August 1964 (cover dated October), the American Cancer

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[622] Elma Phillipson Cole, NAC Meeting minutes, November 26, 1963. NSWACP.
[623] Letter from Robert Bondy to editors of *New York Magazine*, December 1963. NSWACP.
[624] Letter from Elma Phillipson Cole to Howard Kieval, August 26, 1966, ibid to Francis Schmidt, August 26, 1966. NSWACP.

Society ordered 100,000 advance reprints of the strip, ordering 100,000 more in September.[625] As another public service, the committee offered the original art of "Salute to Courage," which gave a brief illustrated eulogy to John F. Kennedy, to the Kennedy family for eventual deposit in the John F. Kennedy Library, which they graciously accepted.[626]

The end of the committee came to a complete surprise to the NSWA, which spent 1965 and 1966 seeing business as usual in developing their comic PSAs, even celebrating "Smoking Is For Squares" as its popularity continued to climb and fetch close to a million reprint requests. It was the retirement of Jack Schiff in early 1967 that rang the committee's death knell. NCP itself faced tough times – 1967 saw a slump for the industry that dragged down all companies save the Stan Lee-fronted Marvel Comics, which built their entire superhero roster in the early 1960s. Even more insulting to NCP, Marvel topped it in sales that year for the first time since 1953.[627] To help combat this change, NCP radically altered their editorial outlook. They promoted artist Carmine Infantino to editorial director, ending decades of editors who mainly focused on writing. "The new editorial personnel," wrote French historian Jean-Paul Gabilliet, "were expected to produce comics that would attract the readers of Marvel titles, nowadays no longer receptive to the work of the older generation of editors (notably Mort Weisinger and Jack Schiff) and writers (such as Gardner Fox, France Herron, or Otto Binder)."[628] The move did not work, as Marvel's comics continued to outsell NCP's comics at double the rate.[629]

Schiff wrote to Elma Phillipson Cole in February 1967 to inform her of his impending retirement, and Vernon Pope followed up almost immediately to express his doubt that the

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[625] Elma Phillipson Cole, NAC Meeting minutes, June 15 and September 30, 1964. NSWACP.
[626] Letter from William F. Bulkeley to Mrs. John F. Kennedy, November 23, 1964 and Nancy Tuckerman to William F. Bulkeley, December 7th, 1964. NSWACP.
[627] Jean-Paul Gabilliet, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen, *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 59.
[628] Ibid., 60.
[629] Ibid.

project would be able to continue. "[I]t will be virtually impossible for us to carry on the program without Jack. . .I have talked this problem over with Mr. Liebowicz. . .and, although I dislike very much severing my association with National Periodicals and this project, I advised him that I think we have no alternative but to discontinue the project."[630] Cole and a new NSWA director named McNeil met with Liebowicz and Pope in May, and learned more about Liebowicz's reservations toward keeping the project going. With NCP's turn to a publicly-owned venture, he worried about justifying the cost of lost ad revenue as well as out-of-pocket expenses to his shareholders. However, Liebowicz received many letters expressing widespread approval of the project and a genuine sadness over what appeared to be its imminent cancellation.

In a discussion at the committee's final meeting on May 10th, 1967, the committee wondered if they could have done more to increase the visibility of the project, and some thought that the committee may have taken the project for granted, but others felt the program was validated and desired to look for continued sponsorship.[631] With support from NCP gone and no other avenues for sponsorship readily apparent, members of the committee began to take a grim outlook on the future of the Comics Project. In a response to a communication from Elma Cole regarding the final meeting minutes and outreach to new potential sponsors, longtime committee member Irving Shapiro wrote "It looks like an end, doesn't it?"[632] Despite these struggles, the committee was not officially disbanded until August 1968, and got smatterings of letters until September 1969. Its last comic page, "Make Your Summer Count!," ran in twenty-two NCP titles in July-August 1967.

[630] Letter from Vernon Pope to Elma P. Cole, February 15, 1967.
[631] Elma Phillipson Cole, NAC Meeting minutes, May 10, 1967.
[632] Letter from Irving Shapiro to Elma Phillipson Cole, December 11, 1967.

The Comics Project is useful on many fronts as a way of examining the changes within the comics industry, the effect of advertising and experts on the business of comics and nonprofit work, and the changing perspectives on comics at the height of their popularity and controversy. Crucially, studying the Comics Project and the individuals it presents a more complete picture of how experts and professionals viewed the utility of the comic medium and their awe at the power of the visual. It also complicates the typical narratives of full-scale condemnation of comics and of profit-mongering companies, as it allowed NCP to demonstrate its continued commitment to using the medium for the public good. The project's longevity also challenges typical accounts of the comics industry evaporating after the introduction of the Comics Code.

The deployment of the widely varied PSAs combined with the meticulous record keeping of the Project demonstrates what they had been looking for all along — proof that a visual medium was not as damaging or harmful as conservatives had let on for the past decade and, in fact could be used to promote socially desirable ideas to youth at a time when their expectations were radically reconfiguring to promote the ability to fit into a group.

The abrupt end of the Project, too, demonstrated the fleeting nature of the industry and foreshadowed the changes in the market that would define the next two decades (detailed further in the concluding essay). The Project, at long last, outlived the anti-comics movement by a considerable amount of time, proving that the beaten, weary, proletarian funnybook was much tougher, resilient, and adaptable than its critics held it to be.

Conclusion: A Requiem for the Good Doctor, or; Fredric Wertham Drives a Sports Car

A spectre is haunting comics history — the spectre of Fredric Wertham.

“He lived on a farm, a very, very beautiful farm in Pennsylvania,” mused historian James Gilbert in an interview conducted in February 2020. “He told me that he used to drive into New York City from there. And he had a sports car, I can’t remember what it was…it was a red sports car,

maybe it was a Jaguar."[633] In the course of writing *A Cycle of Outrage*, which detailed in part the anti-comics movement, Gilbert visited Wertham at his home on a few occasions in Pennsylvania shortly before Wertham's death in 1981, where he noted the presence of woodcuts by Louis Lozowick, the great communist lithographer, on the walls of Wertham's office (known to Wertham and his wife as the "piggery" as it was in a converted pigpen).

"I was kind of stunned," remarked Gilbert about the Lozowick woodcuts on the walls, "and I said to him after a couple of minutes, 'I'm amazed that you have such wonderful Louis Lozowick woodcuts.' And he said, 'Oh, Louis was a good friend of mine.' So immediately, I began to think, all right, that means that Wertham has got communist friends. . .I didn't ask him, because I didn't want him to get defensive. But it's clear that he had ties to the left. […] My impression of him was that he was slightly mad but very intelligent, like an *idee fixe* sort of person."[634]

And so truly was Dr. Wertham a real-life supervillain (as he has come to be known in the decades since) not only to comics creators but their fans as well. Wertham's voice, captured on film during the 1954 hearings, almost too perfectly reminds one of a stereotypically sneering German supervillain out of a Superman cartoon.[635] And, in that vein, Wertham played a wonderfully flexible villain during both the great pseudo-event of the midcentury anti-comics movement and in modern comics discourse. Wertham, ever the capable performer, was guilty of

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[633] It was, in fact, an MG Motorcar. One can find a photo of it in James Reibman's essay "Fredric Wertham: A Social Psychiatrist Characterizes Crime Comic Books and Media Violence as Public Health Issues," in *Pulp Demons: International Dimensions of the Postwar Anti-Comics Campaign*, ed. John A. Lent (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999): 234-267.

[634] James Gilbert, interview with author, February 12, 2020. Gilbert goes on to compare Wertham with John Nash of *A Beautiful Mind* fame.

[635] I have been unable to find a full recording of the televised hearing, but this reference largely stems from the 1988 documentary *Comic Book Confidential*, which is a valuable historical artifact in one part for having footage of the key interactions between the committee and Wertham/Gaines but in another mostly derives from interviews with affronted comic book creators bashing Wertham's ghost.

"dressing mom up as a psychiatrist" and using "para-Marxist cliches from the attic," as conservative sociologist Ernest van den Haag once wrote.[636] He was also guilty to later scholars of "[engaging] in moral panics about comics and queerness."[637] He was at once an alleged proto-Marxist and a regressive conservative, a foil to whatever good cause existed at the time.

That Wertham's work was roundly disproven in later years and that he has been the subject of no small amount of reappraisal and rehabilitation has been of no matter to his wider perception by the American public.[638] In almost all framings of the anti-comics movement, whether popular or academic (outside of the most studious and insular comics history weirdos), the movement starts and ends with Wertham, and if not solely him, then with the juvenile delinquency hearings in 1954. Much of the folk wisdom points to Wertham, and by extension *Seduction*, as a catalyst for the juvenile delinquency hearings, but here readers must be reminded that the release of *Seduction* and the initial openings of the hearings took place *in the same week*!

This over-promotion of Wertham, and by extension, the 1954 hearings, obscures more than it reveals about midcentury and cuts out completely the antidemocratic undercurrents, ontological crises of legitimation among the older, genteel order, and the more metaphysical force of iconophobia that all fueled the anti-comics movement as a subset of the greater cultural struggles of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s**.** Bart Beaty described much contemporary criticism of Wertham as missing the forest for the trees, rightfully pointing out Wertham's otherwise stellar progressive record — his defenses of the Rosenbergs, all of his antiracist work with the Lafargue Clinic, the use of his research by the NAACP in *Brown v. Board of Education* — in opposition to

[636] Ernest van den Haag, "Of Happiness and of Despair We Have No Measure," in Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White, eds., *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1957), 530.
[637] Megan Condis and Mel Stanfill, "Debating with Wertham's Ghost: Comic Books, Culture Wars, and Populist Moral Panics," *Cultural Studies* 36, no. 6 (November 2, 2022): 953–80, https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2021.1946579.
[638] Ibid. Comicsgate refers to a concerted effort of online right-wing comic fans and creators decrying diversity in comics.

those who perceived him as the singular individual responsible for both the destruction of the livelihoods of artists and writers and the downturn and kiddification of a comics reader's favorite medium.[639]

Here we must extrapolate Beaty's view of Wertham to the anti-comics movement as a whole. That is to say that by viewing the movement as A) something that occurred only in 1954, or at the very least from 1948 to 1954, and B) viewing the movement as occurring primarily as a result of Wertham and his work, is to again miss the forest for the trees. By examining the early actions of Noll and the National Organization for Decent Literature, we see not just another episode in a long-running saga of Catholic censorship, but a concerted push led by a popular far-right bishop and his organization that culminated in a challenge to censorship that went all the way to the Supreme Court of the United States. Noll and the NODL sought, as many throughout these censorious years did, to restrict the presentation of sex in both written and the less ambiguous pictorial form, but their motivations also came from a deep-seated antiradicalism, believing that the presentation of sex and violence in printed media served communist ends by working to subvert the morals of the nation's youth.

Another shortcoming to considering Wertham the entire source of the anti-comics movement comes as a result of privileging what Beaty described as Wertham's drawing on "conservative and elitist discourses about the relative values of high and mass culture."[640] Focusing solely on the intellectual dimensions of the latter part of the anti-comics movement,

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[639] "When comic book fans tell me that Wertham should rot in hell for criticizing EC Comics I am mystified. Here's a man who opened a free psychiatric clinic in Harlem at a time when he was one of a small handful of doctors who would even treat black psychiatric patients, working there no less then two nights each week as a volunteer, and providing testimony that was important to overturning American school segregation, and we're worried about the fact that he didn't like EC? Talk about missing the forest for the trees." Bart Beaty, "Let's You and Him Fight: Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture Day One," 12/12/2005, *The Comics Reporter*. https://www.comicsreporter.com/index.php/briefings/commentary/3607/

[640] Bart H. Beaty, "ALL OUR INNOCENCES: Fredric Wertham, Mass Culture and the Rise of the Media Effects Paradigm, 1940 - 1972" (Montreal, McGill University, 1999), 269.

especially those dimensions surrounding the responses of intellectuals to mass culture that occurred around the time of the 1954 hearings, obfuscates the long historical origins of the anti-comics movement and privileges an elite perspective when many quotidian critics of comics opposed them for their own varied reasons and even found room to disagree with the prevailing orthodoxy as the Cincinnati Committee and those working in the NCP Comics Project did. Wertham was, to be sure, among the most influential drivers of opinion during the anti-comics movement, but centering him obscures as much as it reveals about both the anti-comics movement itself and the numerous other cultural shifts and discourses that pervaded America during the early years of the Cold War. The anti-comics movement, in the long run, did not start with Wertham and it does not end with him.

What, then, of comics, and what of the anti-comics movement? Where did the anti-comics fervor that drove the movement for almost twenty years go? Did it simply dissipate or was it redirected to other sources? There are several reasons for the disappearance of the anti-comics movement. First were the immediate changes to the industry following the implementation of the Comics Code, which quelled the fervor from all but the most outspoken critics of comic books, the weakening of the industry's distribution networks due to negative publicity from the comic book hearings and sudden demise of American News Company as well as the supplanting of comics by television as the preferred medium for children's leisure.[641]

Jean-Paul Gabilliet reminds us that, contrary to popular/fan wisdom, the Comics Code did not alone cause the comics industry slump before the reintroduction of superheroes in the late

[641] Paul Witty, "Comics, Television and Our Children," *Today's Health*, February 1955, 18-21. Quoted in Beaty, "All Our Innocences," 215.

1950s and early 1960s:[642] "The crisis had only two objective consequences: first, the temporary disappearance of horror comic books (until Warren resurrected them in 1964) and the definitive departure of crime comics; second, the renewed supremacy of the publishing houses that would dominate the mainstream market during the 1960s (Archie, Charlton, DC, Dell/Western, Harvey, Marvel)."[643]

As many observers both casual and academic noted, the rapid increase in household ownership of televisions also played a key role in the marginalization of both comics as a mass medium and the specific cultural panic over comics. The peak of comics as a mass medium occurred, as underground cartoonist and historian Leonard Rifas described it, "between the brief interval between the temporary collapse of Hollywood's movie industry and the full arrival of television."[644] Television became the immediate replacement in the eyes of cultural critics, for all the societal ills and dangers to children, that comics had apparently posed. This newer medium, even more seductive and immediate through its delivery of the moving image and up-to-the-minute coverage of global events, quickly grabbed the nation's attention and took the spotlight off of comic books. Even intellectuals that had previously written dispassionately about comic books quickly shifted their perspectives on television, arguing that it would harm the academic possibilities of students to an even greater degree than comics ever could.[645]

The second reason for the downturn of the anti-comics movement follows a twin path. With the imagery of comics largely regulated by the Comics Code, many of the conservative

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[642] Publication figures peaked in 1952 and had been declining ever since, in some regard the apogee of the anti-comics movement in 1954 alongside the passage of the FitzPatrick Act comic sale regulations in 1955 and the eventual folding of American News Company in 1957 (two far less-remembered events) were tripartite nails in the coffin of the thriving industry; though one should not read that metaphor for the common fan wisdom that comics disappeared and merely became kiddie fare.
[643] Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men*, [76].
[644] Leonard Rifas, *Korean War Comic Books* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2021), [25].
[645] Beaty, All Our Innocences, 215.

moralizers that attacked comic books shifted their attention to the nascent anti-pornography movement, to say nothing of how the civil rights movement and Vietnam was gripping the day-to-day attention of the country. Their consternation was amplified by a series of Supreme Court decisions that put further constraints on how communities could utilize obscenity as a coercive tactic against objectionable images, the classic technique used by Catholic morality campaigners. Briefly, these cases were *Roth v. United States* in 1957, which despite affirming the obscenity convictions of its petitioners struck a blow to obscenity laws by more strictly defining obscenity in terms of material ("without redeeming social importance"), *MANual Enterprises, Inc. v. Day* in 1962 which declared that nude photos of men could not be considered obscene, *Memoirs v. Massachusetts* in 1964, which further clarified the *Roth* decision to only apply to "patently offensive" material without social value, and the landmark *Miller v. California* in 1973 that reclarified the standard of obscenity to be material that chiefly lacked "serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value" and remains the law of the land in terms of obscenity law today.

A third reason for the decline of the anti-comics movement came later with the emergence of the direct market and the rise of underground comix. Much of the furor raised against comic books had to do with the pathways to their consumption. For much of their early existence from the late 1930s through the 1960s, comics were sold akin to magazines and newspapers in that they were widely available not only on street corners but in drug stores, corner stores, and grocery stores, places that were ordinary for children with a small amount of pocket money to congregate.

It was in this paradigm that the Comics Code was designed to operate by providing a clearly visible symbol for parents to be reassured that their children would not bring home any objectionable material. The prevalence and creation of underground comix informed many future

developments in the medium, but in terms of this specific line of understanding, they were primarily responsible for A) demonstrating contrary to folk wisdom that there was a significant adult market for comics and B) having a consumption pathway through head shops that was, in effect, a proto-direct market as the countercultural and often lurid and graphic comix would have never passed muster with mainstream retailers. The direct market proper emerged alongside the decline of local neighborhood stores in conjunction with changes in distribution practice that put more of the risk on the individual seller, rather than the distributor or publisher.[646] Moving the main point of purchase for comic books out of the generalized public eye and into specialty stores beginning in the late 1960s meant that the Code as a guide to purchasing became largely irrelevant, and publishers would further challenge the coercive power of the Code soon in 1971 with DC and Marvel running non-approved stories to highlight the issues of drug abuse.[647]

A fourth reason for the collapse of the movement was the ultimate acceptance (or rediscover) by liberals of mass culture as a way to communicate socially desirable ideas, moving in a different direction from most of the elitist liberal intellectual views of mass culture.[648] The work of the NCP-NSWA Comics Project typified this development, as its membership frequently commented their reasons for undertaking the project had to do with recognizing the visual power of the comics medium especially because it was so attractive to children. In the eyes of these liberals, comics became a source of good images, especially given the shifting social context of childhood throughout the 1950s and 1960s which emphasized the importance of being able to fit into peer groups. The later PSAs done in service of promoting the ideals of the United Nations,

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[646] For a thorough account of the nuts and bolts of comics publishing, see Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men*, Chapter 11: "The Business of Comic Books."

[647] Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men*, [106].

[648] The notion of mass culture used for didactic purposes was not new, as evidenced by the proletarianized culture of the 1930s, but by this time liberals (as opposed to the leftists and fellow travelers of those years) finally put aside their complaints and embraced the power of the mass media. See Denning, *The Cultural Front*, and Giovacchini, *Hollywood Modernism*.

as well as the tributes to John F. Kennedy align with a general leftward drift in the copy of comic magazines during the 1960s.[649]

Crucially, however, the conservative energy that undergirded the anti-comics movement, in tandem with all of these other factors, went elsewhere during the 1960s as the comics industry reorganized itself. Conservatives refocused their concern on what they saw as an even more harmful form of imagery, that of pornography. Indeed, Whitney Strub, author of *Perversion for Profit: The Politics of Pornography and the Rise of the New Right*, argues that the anti-comics movement served as a rehearsal of sorts for the antiporn movement that would coalesce in the 1960s and later become a key element of conservative sexual politics into the 1970s and the rise of the religious right.[650] The Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency reconvened in May 1955, this time seeking to investigate pornography as the newest and most dangerous threat to American youth, which ended with Kefauver declaring it a "definite factor" in juvenile delinquency.[651] As Strub notes, the former New York Joint Legislative Committee to Study the Publication of Comics quickly renamed itself the New York State Joint Legislative Committee Studying the Publication and Dissemination of Offensive and Obscene Material, and magazines like the mainstream Catholic publication *America* pivoted quickly from anti-comics articles to more general articles pushing for "decent literature" that attacked pornography and obscenity.[652]

The Cold War charge of pornography and obscenity as a fundamentally communist tool also returned in force during the 1960s, aided in part by the new radical right. A February 1960 issue of the *American Mercury*, which by that point had fallen deeply into far-right and

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[649] Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men*, [105].
[650] Whitney Strub, *Perversion for Profit: The Politics of Pornography and the Rise of the New Right*, (New York, Columbia University Press, 2013), 14. Strub's analysis of the anti-comics movement, while good, mostly centers Wertham and the hearings and makes the forgivable but common mistake of saying that Kefauver was the main impetus behind the 1954 hearings.
[651] Quoted in Strub, *Perversion for Profit*, 25.
[652] Ibid.

antisemitic conspiracy theories, declared “at the present time, obscenity and communism often go hand-in-hand.”[653] Though the *Mercury* at that point was little more than a front organization for an eclectic collection of cranks and antisemites (American Nazi Party founder George Lincoln Rockwell was hired as a staff writer in 1956), the point of view espoused in the column was a less subtle rendition of the common conservative belief about pornography.

Pornography and obscenity, then, became the primary paradigms that the increasingly conservative decency movement attempted to tar materials that they found objectionable since the Comics Code and FitzPatrick Act performed such a thorough job in cleaning up the comics. There were more good images now, so they focused their attention on the more outwardly bad ones. Though the *Roth* decision in 1957 decisively moved away from the antiquated and child-oriented *Hicklin* test for obscenity, it did not mark a meaningful change in the political mood of the 1950s as it upheld its appellant’s conviction and affirmed that obscenity was not protected by the First Amendment.[654] Owing to the complicated and contradictory jurisprudence produced by the *Roth* decision, the Supreme Court revisited the decision multiple times in multiple future cases to in essence clarify the confused jurisprudence of *Roth*, a confusion compounded by a Supreme Court that contained considerable disagreements from First Amendment literalists like William O. Douglas and Hugo Black, and more conservative jurists like Tom C. Clark and John Marshall Harlan, II.[655]

In the context of this new legal framing of obscenity, mainstream comic books never faced any serious legal challenges during the 1960s, with the *Baltimore City v. Siegel* case

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[653] John Benedict, “Pornography: A Political Weapon,” *American Mercury*, February 8, 1960, 3-21.
[654] Marjorie Heins also notes that Massachusetts hung on to the *Hicklin* standard until the 1950s. Heins, *Not In Front of the Children*, 46.
[655] *Jacobellis v. Ohio* and *Memoirs v. Massachusetts* were the primary cases in question prior to the decision in *Miller v. California*.

described in Chapter 3 as the final incidence of court challenges to comic book bans, rather than challenges to declare a singular work obscene. As the 1960s wore on and grew more politically turbulent, conservatives would frequently invoke the obscenity defense to censor speech critical of establishment figures or the war in Vietnam. This censorship largely took the form of protests against cartoons in underground or otherwise radical newspapers of the period.

One such case where the comic medium received First Amendment protection prior to the change in testing in *Miller* was *Papish v. Board of Curators of University of Missouri*, where a graduate student expelled for producing an allegedly obscene newspaper cartoon successfully sued for her readmittance on the grounds that the University had dismissed her due to the content of the underground newspaper she published.[656] The court, led by doctrinaire free speech defender William O. Douglas, argued that the language and images contained in the cartoon were not obscene, and that the University could not discipline a student for "indecent conduct for speech" in its Student Conduct codes.

However, a minority of conservative and conservative-leaning judges dissented, and court archconservative William Rehnquist attacked Papish's (admittedly dilettantish) academic record while claiming that he believed the usage of the term "motherfucker" was obscene and that her selling of the underground papers outside the university's Memorial Union, which comprises a large memorial to students that died in World War I and II, was intended to "provoke a confrontation with the authorities by pandering a publication with crude, puerile, vulgar obscenities.[657]

The *Papish* case followed two other similar cases involving similar materials (in fact, the same underground newspaper) and similar objections from similar people. The first of these

[656] Papish v. Board of Curators of University of Missouri, 410 US 667 (1973).
[657] Papish v. Board of Curators at 675.

cases was *Dillingham v. State*, contested in the Maryland Court of Appeals. *Dillingham* arose when Joseph Dillingham, a vendor for the left-wing underground newspaper *Washington Free Press*, was arrested for selling "obscene pamphlets or drawings" outside the headquarters of the Montgomery County Police headquarters.[658] The primary impetus for his charges was a cartoon within the paper (reproduced below) depicting controversial Montgomery County Judge James G. Pugh masturbating while sitting on a swastika-adorned throne.[659]

Figure 11: The offending cartoon from the March 15-31 issue of the Washington Free Press. Taken from the Internet Archive.

The Appeals court, which overturned Dillingham's conviction via a 2-1 decision ultimately did not find that the cartoon nor the newspaper met the *Roth* standard for obscenity. The decision drew in part from other court cases concerning the cartoon, and its presence in a

[658] Dillingham v. State, 9 Md.App. 669 (1970).
[659] Pugh, known as a tough-on-crime judge unsympathetic to the protests of the 1960s, controversially sentenced three Black minors to death in 1961 for the rape of a White girl, though the charges were later dropped. The death penalty for rape was not made unconstitutional until the *Coker v. Georgia* ruling by the Supreme Court in 1977. Pugh also infamously sentenced a common burglar to fifteen years in prison.

newspaper, rather than as a standalone image, was of benefit to the defense. Following instructions set forth in *Roth*, the court considered the cartoon in the context of the entire newspaper issue and also within the context of the accompanying text. The court stressed that words and images needed to be considered together in any judgment of obscenity, but also that "the mere insertion of innocuous text will not salvage otherwise obscene illustrations."[660] Another reason for the overturning of Dillingham's conviction, according to the opinion, was a lack of credible witnesses for the state to establish that the cartoon was either entirely made for a prurient motive or lacked redeeming social value. Their solitary witness on that front was a priest who had no knowledge of the wider issue but only things told to him and his own thoughts and opinions. The court went on to call his testimony "obviously valueless" in determining whether or not the cartoon violated contemporary community standards."[661] As to the prurient interest, one of the defense experts, a psychologist, noted that "Just because there is a penis there doesn't mean the primary impact of the cartoon is sexual."[662]

A similar case the following year was *Woodruff v. State,* also contested in the Maryland Court of Appeals. This case also involved the arrest of someone for the sale of the *Washington Free Press*, though in markedly different circumstances. While the accused in the *Dillingham* case was hawking his newspapers outside of the headquarters of the county police, the accused in *Woodruff* was Marshall "Woody" Woodruff, the erstwhile 25-year old owner and manager of Joint Possession, a head shop adjacent to the campus of the University of Maryland described by the court as " [specializing] in selling leather goods, posters, and other objects of interest

[660] *Id*. at 676.
[661] Dillingham v. State at 684.
[662] *Id*. at 686.

primarily to young people including several varieties of underground newspapers."[663] Though the newspaper at the heart of the case was again the *Washington Free Press*, the comic to which the authorities objected this time around was quite different.

Where the controversial political cartoon under scrutiny in *Dillingham* was a rather crude and to the point single-panel cartoon, the object of controversy in *Woodruff* was a reprint of a comix strip penned by legendary underground cartoonist Robert Crumb for the inaugural issue of *Gothic Blimp Works*, an all-comix supplement published by the *East Village Other*, a major New York underground newspaper. Crumb's strip, the ostensibly inspirational "Don't Gag On It. . .Goof On It!" contained a message of not giving up that was palatable enough, but supplemented this message with lots of breasts and fellatio. Owing to this perceived indecency, Woodruff was arrested after one of his staff sold the issue in question to a local police officer and was sentenced to six months in jail after a non-jury trial. He appealed his conviction on the grounds that the cartoon was not obscene, that the original trial court handed down a prejudicial ruling due to not allowing testimony on his behalf, and that the court had not properly demonstrated that he was knowingly selling indecent newspapers.

The appeals court, considering the newspaper as a whole, declared that it was "seditious perhaps, but no more titillating than *Das Kapital* or *Mein Kampf*."[664] It paid special attention to the Crumb comic, which was in their eyes the main object of debate in the case. The experts testifying in Woodruff's defense at his original trial were undoubtedly qualified to speak on the topic of comic art – Paul Richard, the *Washington Post*'s art critic and Walter W. Hopps, the acting director of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, both testified in Woodruff's defense and noted

[663] Woodruff v. State, 11 Md.App. 202 (1971) at 204. Despite his purveyance of all things relevant to the counterculture (including "a complete line of snuff accessories" as advertised in *The Diamondback*, the University's student newspaper), Woodruff, who died of cancer in 2021, was a cobbler by trade.
[664] Woodruff v. State at 211.

that Crumb's art, while hedonistic and undoubtedly pleasure-seeking, was not primarily designed to cater to a prurient purpose. "I get to see a lot of art as an art critic," remarked Richard, "and I have seen art that I felt was far less funny than this particular comic strip."[665] The majority on the appeals court ultimately agreed with the men, declaring that the paper, even with the Crumb comic, was "to be certain, not *Ladies' Home Journal*. Neither, however, is it *Playboy*."[666]

What the court found most reprehensible from the original trial was the failure to allow the above-mentioned witnesses, as well as two library experts that Woodruff asked to testify on his behalf. The trial court refused to even consider the expert opinions, instead questioning Woodruff's lawyer as to why an ordinary person could not supply the same information. The trial court also refused to allow Woodruff to introduce various other magazines and newspapers purchased in the county as evidence of the contemporary community standards at play. "We believe," wrote the court, "that the refusal of the court below to receive the testimony of the two witnesses offered by the appellant […] and the refusal of the court below to receive the exhibits of other newspapers […] were abuses of the court's discretion."[667] They also disapproved of the manner in which the trial court baselessly dismissed the testimony of Richard and Hopps, where the trial judge stated:

> We have an official with [the Corcoran Gallery] telling me as a layman, trained in the science of law, sociology and criminology, that this is art. It is repulsive to even suggest it. As the trier of the fact in this case, […] I disbelieve the evidence of both of the so-called professional witnesses, because I feel that it is so farfetched that it isn't even worthy of belief. That is what I think of your professionals.[668]

[665] *Id*. at 217.
[666] *Id.* at 218.
[667] Woodruff v. State at 220-221.
[668] *Id* at 223.

The appeals court judges invoked language from a previous obscenity case in Maryland pertaining to film to explain their rejection of the trial court ruling: "In our view, neither the judge who may sit in the circuit court to review the action of the Board nor the judges of this Court ordinarily would be qualified to determine whether a film exceeded these constitutional standards or tests without enlightening testimony on these points."[669] Though the court ultimately overturned Woodruff's conviction in a narrow 4-3 decision, they were not sympathetic to his claim that he did not knowingly sell obscene material, even though he described in great detail how, after hearing of the *Dillingham* case, he inquired with county authorities for his other store who advised him not to carry the paper in his Ocean City store where he had heard no such reaction in Prince George's County where his College Park store was located. Further, Woodruff's store did not deny access to minors, nor did he sell the *Free Press* at a high markup or wrapped in cellophane as was the case with any material that might have smacked of pornography.[670] Judge Orth, who joined the majority on the *Dillingham* case, dissented alongside two other judges in Woodruff's case and believed that the Crumb cartoon was unambiguously hardcore pornography and that the trial judge was correct in dismissing the expert testimony.[671]

These cases, taken together with *Papish*, point to the continued repressive strains of thought that conservatives afforded to the graphic medium. As they did with crime comics during the early years of the Cold War, they used the political circumstances of the day to justify restrictions on speech that spoke of an alternative to the liberal consensus of the day. However, as the 1960s moved on, these prosecutions became less about protecting children from

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[669] Dunn v. Maryland State Board of Censors, 240 Md. 255, quoted in Woodruff v. State at 224.
[670] Woodruff v. State at 227-229.
[671] *Id.* at 247.

objectionable material and more about punishing speech critical of the establishment and suppressing countercultural ideas. The repressive influence laid down in the 1930s by Noll and the NODL and carried through midcentury by the various government investigations, local decency efforts, and nationally-published outcries against comics continued through the decades, its antiradical and iconophobic influences repackaged again in a new form.

Even as late as 1989, repressive forces were still at work on the local level, as when Michael Correa, a comic shop owner in suburban Chicago, was arrested and convicted of selling obscene magazines by a beat cop whose duty took him to places that youths frequented. In a hearkening to the apocalyptic moralist criticisms of the midcentury anti-comics movement, the town police claimed that "'satanic influence' was in many of the shop's comics."[672] Upon Correa's appeal, the court quickly overturned his conviction in a unanimous two-page opinion, noting that some of the more adult comics objected to by the police, despite their nudity and sexual content, were unquestionably not obscene. "We are not impressed with the literary or artistic merit of the cartoon comic books before us," wrote the court, "However, that is not the standard which we must apply."[673] Correa's case led, in part, to the formation of the Comic Book Defense League Fund after efforts by underground cartoonist and publisher Denis Kitchen to solicit funds for Correa's defense.[674]

The arrest of Correa, in addition to other atomized arrests of comic sellers for perceived violations of obscenity law across the 1990s and 2000s, coupled with reservations about the primacy of television at the expense of reading as expressed by a 1988 National Endowment for

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[672] Quoted in Marc H Greenberg, "Comics, Courts & Controversy: A Case Study of the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund," *Loyola of Los Angeles Entertainment Law Review* 32, no. 2, March 1, 2012: 137.
[673] People v. Correa, 191 Ill. App. 3d 823 (1989) at 939.
[674] For a litany of cases in which the CBLDF was involved, see their case files section. https://cbldf.org/about-us/case-files/cbldf-case-files/

the Humanities report authored by Lynne Cheney, demonstrated that iconophobia was quite alive as the twentieth century wore on towards its end.[675] The material conditions of iconophobia, that original, cardinal fear, changed drastically across the decades. No longer were comics attacked for dulling children's imaginations, turning them into criminals, or subjecting them to sex and violence *a la* the underground comix.

By the 1980s, even though the CMAA claimed the Comics Code's purpose was still to provide good reading material for children, the Code was obsolete – there was now a sizable adult audience for the medium, comics were purchased in specialty, fan-oriented stores, and publishers put out mature material without any fear of reprisal, owing in part to the increasingly fringe nature of whatever right-wing decency groups continued to exist past the 1970s. The liberal acceptance of popular culture, coupled with the increasing corporatization of the mainstream superhero comics and other varied merchandise makes it hard to believe the gargantuan industry of our contemporary times, worth billions of dollars in revenue, was once so stigmatized and criticized. But it is equally as important to remember, as has been the main point of this study, that those criticisms did not emerge solely from a driven and single-minded German psychiatrist and a gaggle of opportunistic United States politicians, but a long-running antiradical, conservative distrust of images coupled with a coercive desire to avoid any undesirable changes in children which could, at their most logical conclusion, cause fundamental damage to the great American experiment at a time when the country could least afford it in the throes of the Cold War.

As we greet our daily lives in a post-truth society, bombarded on all fronts by the simulacra of late stage capitalism, we would do well to remember and consider the actions of

[675] Lynne V Cheney, "Humanities in America: A Report to the President, the Congress, and the American People" (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Humanities, September 1988).

those who contested and defended comics and images, and the lessons found in those badly-printed, objectionable, lurid blueprints for communism and delinquency. Studying these criticisms of comics, as well as criticisms of their critics, underscores the need for a more critical approach to the hegemonic visual culture, both on print and screen, of our own times. Clement Greenberg declared in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" that "Here, as in every other question today, it becomes necessary to quote Marx word for word."[676] And so I shall. "But, if constructing the future and settling everything for all times are not our affair, it is all the more clear what we have to accomplish at present: I am referring to *ruthless criticism* of all that exists, ruthless both in the sense of not being afraid of the results it arrives at and in the sense of being just as little afraid of conflict with the powers that be."[677]

Coda: Whatever Became of Fredric Wertham? Fictional Portrayals of the Good Doctor

During the intervening years of authoring this dissertation, more than one person informed me that I needed to make sure I read Michael Chabon's Pulitzer-winning *The Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* lest someone quiz me on it during my oral defense. Naturally, I did not until such time as I neared the end of the dissertation. Chabon's novel, a quasifictional treatment of the Golden Age of Comics, intersperses historical characters, like Wertham and Kefauver, alongside his own fictional Kavalier and Clay. His depiction of Wertham and the hearings is mostly tangential to the fictional plot but done in a mostly even-handed manner,

[676] Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review* 6, no. Fall 1939: 34–49.
[677] Karl Marx to Ruge, *Letters From the Deutsch-Franzosische Jahrbucher*, September 1843. Marxists Internet Archive. https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/letters/43_09.htm

emphasizing their commitment to investigating comics (though he does, through his character's voice, call him an idiot).[678] It is worth contrasting this depiction with others that followed in comics (and comix) themselves, such as his inspiration for the late-run underground anthology series *Dr. Wirtham's Comix & Stories*, where the supposed backlash of underground writers and artists, angered by Wertham's demonization of EC Comics, fueled much of the creativity in the genre.

Scanning through the world of comics/comix for depictions of Wertham would be a daunting yet quite interesting task for some poor graduate student. Some are passing, like the introduction to the first issue of *X-Terminators*, a spin-off *X-Men* title from the company's 1989 *Inferno* event. Here, a demon teleports to a New York graveyard, alerting a pudgy, greying, longhaired fellow (possessing a striking resemblance to Bill Gaines) reading an issue of *Tales of the Crypt* while wearing a shirt with *Mad* mascot Alfred E. Newman on it. We learn that the caretaker's name is Bill, and as ventures out of his caretaker's house to cavort with an intergalactic demon, he passes a gravestone marked "RIP Frederick Wertham."[679]

My second anecdote, and one that has stuck with me since I read it many years ago, is a parody of Wertham published by Simpson's creator Matt Groening's Bongo Comics as part of its *Radioactive Man* spinoff, intending to give the in-universe stock superhero character some background. The limited series, in essence, parodies various generations of superhero comics with the first one lampooning the anti-comics movement in one of its stories. John Goldwater, head of Archie Comics and the mastermind behind the Code, becomes J.J. Bellwether, arguing

[678] Chabon, like myself, likes to refer to Wertham as "the good doctor," though he is much more hung up than me on Wertham's misreading of the relationship between Batman and Robin.
[679] Louise Simonson and Joe Bogdanove, *X-Terminators* #1, Marvel Comics, October 1988.

that comics produced by his competitor, William G. Maimes, were responsible for juvenile delinquency and that they should be tossed in favor of his own *Hartley* comics.

Wertham appears as Dr. Hedrick Hertzmann (in reality J.J. Bellwether in disguise), attacking comics at the story's presentation of the 1954 hearings. The parody at this point tends toward the absurd and, perhaps on purpose, bends some historical facts in several directions (the least of which is implying that Richard Nixon ran the hearings). But the publication of this story in 1993, well after Wertham's death, shows that the memory of his actions was still vividly present in the minds of comic book creators and fans.

Perhaps I am guilty of reading too much into a *Simpsons* parody comic book, but I have always found the presentation of the story to be representative of the way that most observers view the anti-comics movement. Too often is it reduced to a simple punchline, a historical curiosity of some crazed German calling Wonder Woman a lesbian and some politicians who thought that comics turned kids into communists. To hold this *Simpsons*-esque view prevents us from understanding the far deeper significance of the wide-ranging objections to comics, obscures the antidemocratic tendencies that fuel moral panics (that still reverberate to astounding degrees today with panics over gender identity), and warrants us against taking actually critical views of the media that we consume. Perhaps, just perhaps, it is the case—as Mark Evanier once wrote—that Wertham was right.

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