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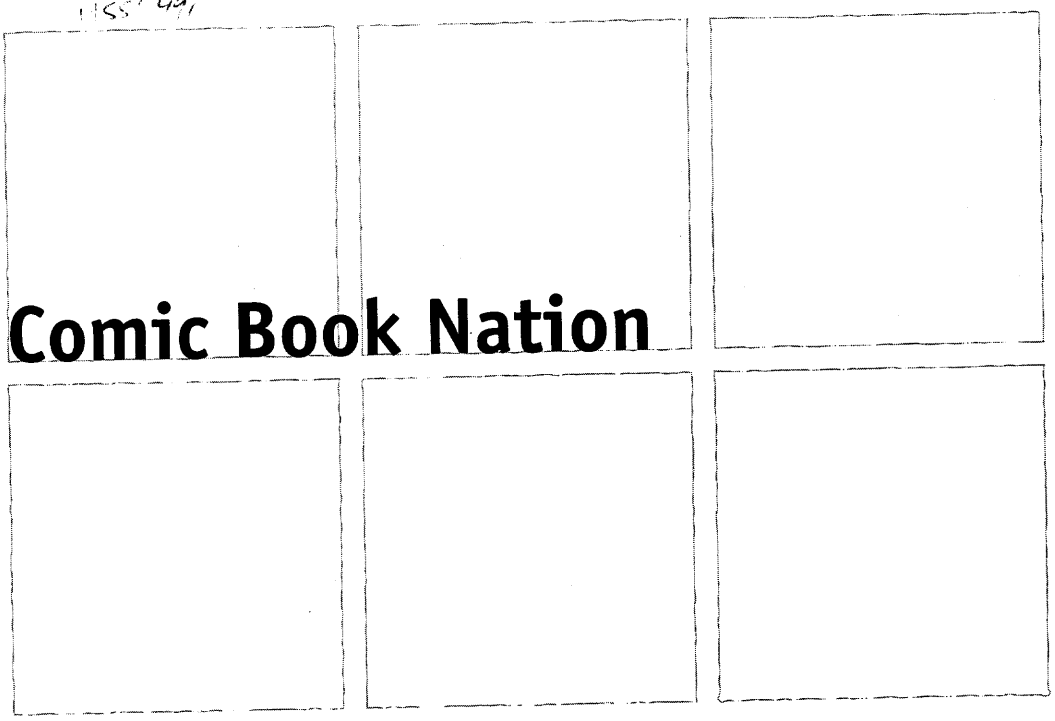

Comic Book Nation

OOK NATION

The Transformation of Youth Culture in America

Bradford W. Wright

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Youth Crisis

Comic Books and Controversy, 1947–1950

On December 10, 1948, the students of St. Patrick's Parochial School in Binghamton, New York, achieved brief notoriety. Under the auspices of their proud teachers and parents, the students gathered some two thousand comic books into a pile in the school courtyard and torched them. Community leaders staged the event as part of their movement to boycott comic books that "stressed crime and sex." Elsewhere in New York, the Bishop of the Albany Catholic Diocese urged all Catholics to boycott dealers who sold comic books with "sensational details" of crime and sex. Similar comic book bonfires followed at the Peter and Paul Parochial School in Auburn, New York, and at the St. Cyril's Parish School in Chicago.[1]

Outrage against comic books was not confined to the Catholic Church. These bonfires, disturbingly reminiscent of Nazi book-burnings, signified only the most extreme expressions of an emerging debate on comic books, young people, and the shaping of youth culture in postwar America. Controversy was, of course, nothing new to the comic book industry. Ever since they had first appeared on American newsstands, comic books had been attacked by parents, teachers, librarians, and guardians of traditional culture. Critics charged that comic books caused eyestrain, promoted illiteracy, celebrated bad taste, and encouraged antisocial behavior in children. The patriotic and "educational" comic books of World War II had resulted in part from publish-

ers' efforts to deflect these criticisms. But trends in certain postwar comic books, especially the crime titles, erased whatever progress had been made in that regard. Moreover, the heightened state of Cold War anxiety now raised the pitch of the debate over youth culture to such a hysterical extent that some influential critics began to attack comic books as a threat to the nation's social fabric.

In the broadest sense, the debate over comic books was really about cultural power in postwar America. As Americans looked to define their culture in an age of consumption and cold war, influence over young people became hotly contested terrain. And as the nation mobilized for the war against Communism, questions arose about the children who would one day wage it. Would they have the strength of character to defend the affluent lifestyle now available to them, or would they become complacent and corrupted by the luxuries it offered? Could traditional values and civic virtue be preserved when American youth was seduced daily by consumer culture and its promise of instant self-gratification? Might the very success of the consumer economy be planting the seeds for the ultimate demise of American society? These were profound questions that went to the very core of American culture. Because Americans did not grasp the full implications of these questions, or perhaps because they feared the answers, they debated (and continue to debate) the issues on a microscale, in a series of controversies over certain products of youth entertainment. Comic books would be succeeded by motion pictures, television, rock-and-roll, video games, and the Internet as the disputed agencies of cultural power operating on the nation's youth.

Throughout American history, adults have attributed undesirable changes in youth behavior to some aspect of popular culture. Gilded Age critics attacked dime novels for their sensationalism, violence, and appeal to instant gratification. In the first half of the twentieth century, movies, pulp magazines, and radio programs all came under similar criticism, even as the Victorian culture espoused by the critics became itself overwhelmed by emergent consumerism. Social and cultural concerns arising from the recent experience of World War II set the comic book controversy apart from these precedents, however. One such concern had to do with the newly established power of the media. The war had demonstrated the capacity of the mass media to mold public opinion: when harnessed for sinister purposes, as it had been by Nazi propagandists, it could work to turn citizens against fellow citizens. Another worrying consequence of the war was its social impact on the American home. The war had disrupted families. As fathers went overseas and

mothers went to work, a generation of children came of age under reduced parental supervision, raising alarm about an impending outbreak of juvenile delinquency. As postwar apprehensions about the mass media and juvenile delinquency came together, the comic book industry found itself caught in the crossfire.

Worried observers noted what they viewed as disturbing and undesirable changes in adolescent behavior. Yet much of what concerned adults termed *juvenile delinquency* was simply adolescents asserting their independence and discovering themselves as individuals within their peer group. These young people and their discrete generational tastes became so pronounced that a new word, *teenager*, came into use to describe them. Statistics did not support the widespread fears about rising juvenile crime, but the press, professional "experts," civic groups, and government agencies all heightened public anxiety about it nevertheless. In their efforts to explain the appearance of delinquency, many focused on the peculiarities of youth culture. Some charged, in effect, that a commercialized peer culture had intervened between adolescents and sources of traditional values—that is, parents, teachers, and religion. Adults seemed to fear the young generation as the harbingers of a new and frightening social order, one transformed and corrupted by the media and consumer culture.[2]

Comic books were an easy target for those who attributed juvenile delinquency to products of youth culture. The most visible, least censored, and most popular expression of youth entertainment, comic books were also the most bewildering and alien medium to adult sensibilities. Crime comic books, in particular, seemed to many the most outrageous evidence of a menacing youth culture that violated and mocked traditional values. The appearance and proliferation of these comic books coincided with the apparent increase in juvenile delinquency, and many observers viewed this as more than a coincidence. As the controversy escalated, comic books of nearly all varieties came under attack for many different reasons. Critics attacked the comic book industry as a subversive agency working to corrupt impressionable minds. As the nation's political leaders planned their strategy of containment in the Cold War, many citizens began to advocate an agenda of cultural containment as well.

The Comic Book Scare

By the end of World War II comic books had assumed an increasingly visible presence in American popular culture. *Publishers Weekly* reported that an estimated 540 million comic books were printed in 1946.

Within a few years that figure nearly doubled. In 1945 the Child Study Association, anticipating the public concern over this proliferation, conducted a study of comic books and their audience. The association's findings, published in the *New York Times Book Review*, explained that comic books were really just contemporary fairy tales adapted to incorporate elements of current everyday life. Today's children, the author noted, were "very conscious of living in a 'modern' world," and they found comic books appealing and relevant to that world. Noting the concerns of many parents, the experts acknowledged that there was a lot of violence in some of the comic books, but they also pointed out that there is "an impulse toward violence in children and that some of this is worked off vicariously through the medium of the comics." The Child Study Association, whose members included several paid editorial consultants for DC Comics and Fawcett Publications (a fact that was not divulged in the article), assured parents that, properly supervised, comic book reading posed no threat to their children.[3]

Columnist Reita Bean offered similar reassurance in the November 1945 issue of *American Home*. As a mother worried about her own son's fascination with comic books, "especially the lurid ones," she nevertheless permitted them in her home. "If the child was raised in a decent home and inculcated with proper values," she wrote, "then he will take as pure fiction the comics that don't follow graphically and truthfully his own way of life."[4] Even the most influential of child-care experts assured parents that comic books were not necessarily harmful to the development of children. Dr. Benjamin Spock wrote in the first edition of *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* that children between the ages of six and ten especially were attracted to comic books. Children of this age group, he noted, felt that they understood the difference between right and wrong, and they delighted in comic book stories where right always triumphed. He added that even violence in comic books could serve a healthy emotional purpose for children, because it allowed them to indulge their aggressive impulses without acting upon them. Although Dr. Spock appreciated the valid concerns of parents about excessive comic book reading, he advised them to regulate rather than forbid the activity.[5]

An increasing number of observers, however, branded comic books a serious menace, especially after 1947, when juvenile delinquency seemed to be on the rise and the number of crime comic books on the market had multiplied. In August of that year the Fraternal Order of Police publicly criticized those comic books that "glorify criminals." At their convention in Indianapolis, the police condemned such comic

books as "one of the contributing factors to the cause of juvenile delinquency" and urged citizens to fight for the abolition of this "unrestrained, bold, vicious, salacious, and immoral" literature that was "detrimental to the youth of this nation." Law enforcement officials and court judges around the nation echoed this call to civic action.[6]

Even if statistics did not always support the notion of rising juvenile delinquency, knowledgeable observers contended that the brutality of violent crimes committed by young offenders had definitely worsened in recent years. New York's deputy police commissioner in charge of the Juvenile Aid Bureau warned that the crimes committed by today's youth were "in many instances more serious and even of a more violent nature than those committed by youth in the past." To help explain this troubling pattern, the criminal law section of the American Bar Association conducted a survey of comic books and concluded that a large percentage of them emphasized crime and violence. Furthermore, the ABA warned that juvenile violence was not the only problem resulting from these books. A spokesman for the association maintained that even if particular localities did not see an increase in the rate of juvenile crime, these comic books still weakened the "moral codes and ethical concepts" of American youth. He concluded cynically that "with almost every child and adolescent bombarded many times daily with the jargon of the criminal and the horrors and depraved methods of his activity, we should rejoice that we have as much normal and rational child behavior as we do."[7]

Especially troubling to many was the increasing frequency of juvenile crimes allegedly inspired by comic books. In September 1947 a coroner's jury in Pittsburgh blamed comic books in connection with the hanging death of a twelve-year-old boy after the boy's mother told the jury that her son had been an incessant reader of comic books and probably had hanged himself while reenacting a scene depicted in one of them. In May 1948 two boys aged eleven and twelve stole an airplane and flew it 120 miles across Oklahoma. They later told police that they had learned how to fly the aircraft from reading comic books. Three months later, in rural northern Indiana, three small boys aged six to eight strung up another young boy by his neck and tortured him with lit matches. After the boys—all reportedly from "good families"—told authorities that they were avid fans of comic books dealing with crime and torture, official calls arose for a county-wide ban of such publications.[8]

Some critics saw a more profound threat in the comic books than even these apparent copycat episodes suggested. Marya Mannes artic-

ulated the elitist critique of comic books in the February 1947 issue of the *New Republic.* She noted with concern that comic books had become "the addiction of three out of four American homes," and in two-thirds of these homes they were "virtually the only reading matter." Comic books, she argued, represented "the absence of thought," and a nation of young people weaned on such trash was on a perilous course towards cultural bankruptcy. She acknowledged that the superheroes tended to be "highly patriotic and virtuous" and commended the "sincere" efforts of DC and Fawcett to "inject material of educational and social value into the existent adventure stories," but she lamented that high-minded series like Fawcett's "Radar, the International Policeman" sold relatively poorly. Most of the superhero comic books, she insisted, simply glorified violence and vigilantism. She found the jungle comics especially repulsive, citing their sexual content as their chief offense—but, notably, not mentioning their racism or imperialist overtones. And she deplored crime comic books as the most "lurid and hideous" vignettes in American entertainment.[9]

Citing an unnamed study that seemed to confirm her assumptions about a class dimension to the comic book problem, Mannes claimed that those residing in poorer households were most likely to be regular readers of comic books while those in wealthier homes read them the least. Such evidence suggested, at least to the author, that comic books appealed most to the unsophisticated and poorly educated. If this "intellectual marijuana" filled "some vacuum in the people who need them," she warned that America would face the frightening consequences of "a people incapable of reading a page of ordinary text . . . a society based on the impact of a fist on a jaw . . . [or] a nation that left [law enforcement] to the man in the costume." Comic books, in Mannes's estimation, were the harbingers of cultural doom.[10]

The most idiosyncratic critique of comic books came from a New York folklorist named Gershon Legman. In a 100-page polemic titled *Love and Death: A Study in Censorship,* published in 1949, Legman contended that current censorship laws were exerting an immoral influence on American popular literature. Because obscenity laws greatly restricted portrayals and discussions of sex, he argued, writers used violence in their work as a titillating substitute. Moreover, he charged, Americans relished violence, even as they harbored an irrational fear of sex. He attacked literature ranging from the novels of Ernest Hemmingway to comic books as evidence of the American cult of violence and advocated the abolition of censorship laws, stating that sex in literature was far more desirable than violence. It was a curious little book

with a strange argument—and, according to a review in the *New Republic*, not a very convincing one. Still, the reviewer found Legman's incidental points about comic books to be the most interesting and important feature of the book.[11]

Legman despised all kinds of comic books, but he targeted superheroes in particular. Echoing the familiar charge that Superman was a fascist figure, he claimed that superheroes had given "every American child a complete course in paranoid megalomania such as no German child ever had, a total conviction of the morality of force such as no Nazi could even aspire to." He pointed to the use of symbols in superhero comic books—Superman's *S* and Captain Marvel's lightning bolt—as "trappings of Nazism." Moreover, he noted, "all the more sinister villains" in comic books "have 'Jewish' noses." The liberal reviewer in the *New Republic* found Legman's arguments on this point especially compelling and compared the implications of vigilante superheroes to the "paranoia of the present loyalty crusade," being waged against suspected Communists in the government.[12]

The *New Republic*'s commentary aside, Legman's book generated little interest. His critique of comic books did not resonate with the American public because it was rooted in a general condemnation of American culture. He even attacked other critics of comic books as hypocrites. Noting that "people want to know what can be done" about comic books, he retorted, "Nothing can be done. Not for children," because "American parents" were "themselves addicted to the same violence." Pointing to evidence throughout American entertainment, Legman argued that "violence in America is a business—big business," and the problem of comic books could only be resolved when parents were ready to confront the degrading implications of their own violent consumer culture.[13] This was not the kind of argument that parents wanted to hear, and it denied Legman a leading voice in the debate over comic books.

Fredric Wertham's Crusade

A far more successful approach was taken by a New York City psychiatrist named Dr. Fredric Wertham. Born in Bavaria in 1895, Wertham had studied medicine in England, Austria, and Germany before earning his medical degree in 1921. The following year he emigrated to the United States and took a position as chief resident at the Phipps Psychiatric Clinic of the Johns Hopkins Hospital. He participated in Baltimore's intellectual community, became a member of H. L. Mencken's Saturday Club, and developed a reputation as a liberal progressive con-

cerned about the poor and disadvantaged. He was also among the few psychiatrists at the time who would see black patients. In 1932 Wertham moved to New York City to become the senior psychiatrist at Bellevue and director of the clinic connected with the New York Court of General Sessions. In 1939 he was appointed director of the Psychiatric Clinic at Queens Hospital Center, where he remained throughout the next decade. In New York Wertham became more active in social issues, working (though unsuccessfully) to get the city to establish a low-cost psychiatric clinic in Harlem. In March 1944 he personally opened the LaFargue Clinic in the basement of Harlem's St. Philip's Episcopal Church, where he and his staff offered psychiatric service to poor clients, most of whom were African Americans, at a cost of twenty-five cents per visit. *Time* magazine ran a favorable story on the project and quoted the rector of St. Philip's, who praised the clinic as "the greatest thing that has happened in Harlem in years."[14]

Wertham's experience treating African American and juvenile patients led him to develop theories about how sociocultural factors acted on personality development. Unlike most of his Freudian-trained colleagues, Wertham emphasized exterior social conditions to explain the psychological disorders afflicting the human psyche. He pointed to the harmful psychological effects of racial segregation in a set of arguments later used in the Supreme Court's landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* desegregation ruling. He applied the same social-psychological theories to his analysis of disturbed juveniles. This led him to investigate their cultural background, their patterns of play, and their choice of reading material. Consistently, he found that the common cultural influence shared by virtually all of the juvenile cases before him was comic books.[15]

Wertham's analysis was clinical as well as theoretical. From interviews conducted with juvenile patients, he concluded that certain instances of delinquent and criminal behavior in children were directly attributable to the comic books they had read. Wertham singled out comic books because they were the most uncensored, unregulated, and youth-oriented media products widely available on the market. Comic books were also—unlike movies, radio, or television—a pastime that children engaged in completely beyond adult supervision. They purchased them on their own and took them to school, to bed, or to anywhere else they chose. They could share and swap them with friends. Most importantly, they could secretly enjoy comic books by hiding them away from parents. The juvenile offenders themselves often seemed to confirm Wertham's suspicions by identifying comic books,

especially the violent ones, as their favorite entertainment and inspiration.[16]

Like other critics, Wertham objected to comic books for their ideological content. Echoing common elitist critiques and adding some of his own, he criticized crime comic books most of all for their violence, deplored superheroes for their fascist implications, and especially despised the racist, imperialistic, and pornographic images littered throughout the jungle comics. Wertham's private writings reveal that his assault on comic books was, like Legman's, rooted in a general, almost Marxist, critique of American commercial culture. It was this culture, he believed, that subverted the morality of children for the sake of profit. He rarely let the leftist angle of his critique emerge in his public arguments, however.[17] It was a wise tactic. For by understating his broader position on consumer culture, he was able to garner far more popular influence and grassroots support for his attack on comic books.

By 1948 Wertham had become a leading spokesman on the issue of comic books and juvenile delinquency. He presented his theories in March of that year at a Manhattan symposium held by the Association for the Advancement of Psychotherapy titled "The Psychopathology of Comic Books." There, a number of "specialists" on comic books, including Gershon Legman, gave their views on the topic. In its coverage of the symposium, *Time* magazine devoted the most attention to Wertham's testimony and printed a photograph of him to accompany the article. Several representatives from the comic book industry attended, but they had little opportunity to state their defense of comic books. Wertham equated their presence there with distillers attending a symposium on alcoholism.[18]

Judith Crist's March 27, 1948, article in *Collier's* gave Wertham his first opportunity to articulate his theories to a national audience. The substantial piece, titled "Horror in the Nursery," quoted Wertham and his assistants extensively and presented him as the leading muckraker in the crusade against the comic book industry. Wertham charged that comic books "in intent and effect" degraded the morals of youngsters. Contending that comic books were "sexually aggressive in an abnormal way" and made "violence alluring and cruelty heroic," he urged that if those responsible refused to desist, then "the time has come to legislate these books off the newsstands and out of the candy stores."[19]

Wertham tried to clarify his position by noting that comic books did not "automatically" cause delinquency in children, but clinical studies demonstrated that "comic book reading was a distinct influenc-

ing factor in the case of every single delinquent or disturbed child" that he had studied. He insisted that comic books also contributed to the particular brutality that juvenile crimes had begun to assume. He referred to some recent examples, such as a Long Island brother and sister, aged eleven and eight, respectively, who had assaulted a seven-year-old boy simply "to see what it felt like to kill." They had stabbed the boy with a fountain pen and tried to squirt ink into his wound, mimicking a hypodermic injection. This horrible act, Wertham insisted, could only have been inspired by a crime comic book.[20]

Wertham also warned of the sexual threat posed by comic books. Comic book makers, he claimed, made a "deliberate attempt to emphasize sexual characteristics." Even more sinister, he contended, was the way in which comic books taught that sexual pleasure went hand in hand with violence, especially violence directed at women. Recalling an interview with a twelve-year-old boy who admired the "tough guys" in comic books, Wertham had asked the youth what made a man tough. "A tough guy," the boy had explained, "is a man who slaps a girl."[21] Likewise, Wertham observed that girls exhibited feelings of inferiority and insecurity as a consequence of reading comic books full of glamorous women with impossibly developed physical attributes. Lamenting that they did not possess "the full bosom and rounded hips" of comic book women, girls became withdrawn and depressed. "Even more dangerous," he insisted, was the affected "adolescent girl's fear of sex and her sometimes resultant frigidity."[22]

Wertham made the case against comic books in his own article, "The Comics . . . Very Funny!" published in the 29 May 1948 issue of the *Saturday Review of Literature*. It established the style that Wertham would employ throughout his crusade. Beginning with a sensational account of horrific juvenile crimes, Wertham seemed to be appropriating the lurid style of the very comic books that he condemned: a group of boys between the ages of three and nine assault a four-year-old girl by pushing her off a bicycle, stealing her toys, and binding her with handcuffs purchased from an ad in a comic book; a fifteen-year-old boy extorts money from a twelve-year-old by threatening to push him from a fire escape; a twelve-year-old boy kills his younger sister; another twelve-year-old kills his older sister.[23] In all of these cases, Wertham pointed out, the young perpetrators had confessed their enthusiasm for violent comic books. He supported the article with a set of shocking illustrations lifted, out of context, from unidentified jungle and crime comic books. One of them shows a bikini-clad woman being carried off by a gorilla. Another, taken from *True Crime Comics*' "Mur-

der, Morphine, and Me," depicts a hand about to plunge a hypodermic needle into a screaming woman's eye.[24]

Pressing his argument further, Wertham called comic books "the greatest book publishing success in history and the greatest mass influence on children." He cautioned parents against heeding the advice of so-called "experts" who defended comic books. These people, he warned, were "apologists" paid by comic book publishers to disseminate favorable "propaganda" about the industry.[25] By singling out comic books as the greatest among many contributing factors to juvenile delinquency, Wertham offered parents a highly visible scapegoat to explain what adults regarded as disturbing changes in youth behavior. His rhetorical arguments resonated with a Cold War audience fearful of corrupting propaganda and subversion.

Wertham's case seemed powerful, but his evidence was highly contentious. The flaws in his arguments were obvious. It was hardly surprising that juvenile delinquents read comic books, since upwards of 90 percent of all children and adolescents read them. Wertham devoted intense clinical study to the worst cases of juvenile behavior, but he could not account for the millions of young people who read comic books and demonstrated perfectly normal behavior and attitudes. Yet even if Wertham's theories about the sweeping influence of comic books were dubious, his contention that particularly violent comic books incited certain disturbed children to commit crimes was more difficult to refute.

Initially the most critical and compelling rejoinder came from David Pace Wigransky, a fourteen-year-old comic book enthusiast who spoke for the most underrepresented party in the debate—the readers. In an articulate letter that belied the age of its author, Wigransky wrote that "capable as Dr. Wertham may be in the psychoanalyzation of adults, I certainly do not believe him able to deal equally well with children, due to his fanatic hatred and prejudice toward comic books." Wigransky argued against adult perceptions about the "innocence" of childhood, insisting that children ought not be kept in "utter and complete ignorance of anything and everything except the innocuous and sterile world that the Dr. Werthams of the world prefer to keep them prisoners within from birth to maturity." Today's young people, he insisted, were more independent and sophisticated than adults realized. They resented the authority wielded over them by adults and worked in various ways to rebel and subvert it. If a child is told not to read comic books, he claimed, that child will "break his neck to do it." Wigransky contended that "comic book publishers know what the kids

want and they try to give it to them. This is not only democratic policy but good business sense." Wigransky's was a refreshing perspective on a cultural debate often obscured by confused and judgmental adult perceptions. But most adults were not prepared to grant young people the voice that Wigransky demanded. Some skeptics even suggested that Wigransky's letter itself may have been forged by an adult, perhaps someone working for the comic book industry. After investigating the matter themselves, however, the *Saturday Review* confirmed that the author was indeed a genuine teenager.[26]

Meanwhile, following the publication of his *Saturday Review* article, Wertham became a frequently requested speaker at forums on comic books and juvenile crime. Citing his own clinical studies as evidence of the causal link between comic books and juvenile delinquency, Wertham advocated a legislated solution. He called for a "public health measure" prohibiting the sale and display of crime comic books to children under the age of fifteen. By defining "crime comic books" loosely as those that suggested "criminal or sexually abnormal ideas" or created an "atmosphere of deceit, trickery, and cruelty," Wertham's proposed measure would have restricted the sale of virtually all comic books. Curiously, Wertham also claimed to oppose censorship, maintaining that while adults should have the right to read what they wished, First Amendment rights did not extend to material directed at children.[27] Wertham's proposal was nevertheless a form of censorship, because such onerous restrictions on the medium would have compelled publishers to abide by a code of standards imposed on them or, more likely, it would have simply deprived publishers of their largest audience and forced them out of business.

The politics of the comic book controversy made rather strange bedfellows. Wertham was a liberal who sought and won a leading role in the crusade against comic books, but he remained aloof from conservative organizations like the Catholic National Organization for Decent Literature, which advanced a broad agenda of cultural censorship. His own politics were hostile towards those whose critique of the media was rooted in anti-Semitism, racism, or nativism. And he resisted the temptation to link the comic book problem to a Communist conspiracy. Wertham would have been uncomfortable, for instance, in the company of the Daughters of the American Revolution, which, in a resolution sent to President Truman, listed their crusade against comic books alongside calls for immigration restriction, opposition to compulsory health insurance, and other efforts to "combat the forces of Socialistic planning invading our country." (The DAR apparently saw

nothing "Socialistic" about trying to regulate an entertainment industry.)[28] By remaining coy about his own politics, Wertham was able to attract a wide spectrum of support from those concerned about the mass media and juvenile crime. So perhaps the most curious feature of a controversy plagued by peculiarities and contradictions was that a grassroots crusade marked by calls for censorship and book burnings found scientific legitimacy and leadership in an elitist liberal psychiatrist and professed opponent of censorship.

Censoring Comic Books

The year 1948 was not a good one for the embattled comic book industry. In May, officials and civic groups in Indianapolis gained the cooperation of local magazine distributors to effectively ban twenty-five comic book titles from the city's newsstands. Police and community leaders in Detroit banned thirty-six comic book titles. In June, Fredric Wertham proudly reported to the *New York Times* that the most articulate and vigorous attempt yet made to control comic books was gaining wide support in California's San Diego County. Parent and teacher associations, civic organizations, and women's clubs across the nation led efforts to curb the distribution and sale of comic books. The National Congress of Parents and Teachers planned a national publicity campaign against comic books, recommended a code of standards for publishers, and urged city officials to enact controlling measures.[29]

By October 1948 fifty cities had enacted measures to ban or censor comic books, ranging from voluntary community efforts to legal regulations and ordinances. These efforts threatened to deprive comic book publishers of substantial local markets. The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors lauded an ordinance that made it a misdemeanor, punishable by a $500 fine or up to six months in jail, for anyone to "sell, give or in any way furnish to anyone under eighteen a book, magazine or other publication" that depicted "an account of crime . . . through the use of drawings or photographs." The drafters of the ordinance extolled their "pioneering" act, which eliminated virtually all "objectionable" comic books from Los Angeles newsstands.[30]

The Los Angeles measure served as the model for municipal legislatures in every region of the country. Chicago, Hartford, Topeka, Des Moines, and Birmingham all adopted similar measures. In Philadelphia, the County Council of the American Legion petitioned the city legislature to pass a ban on crime comic books. In New York, the State Pharmaceutical Association called upon its 6,900 member drug stores

to refuse to sell comic books until publishers complied with the standards established by the National Organization for Decent Literature.[31]

In January 1949 the U.S. Army Character Guidance Council advised army purchasing officers at bases across the nation to refuse the sale of comic books that went "beyond the line of decency." The decision was prompted by concerns raised by an army chaplain who objected to the violent and sexual content of comic books read by U.S. servicemen. But, perhaps aware of the embarrassing irony in shielding professional soldiers from comic book violence, the council deferred the final decision on this matter to the discretion of local officers.[32]

A preliminary study prepared by Charles S. Rhyne for the National Institute of Municipal Law Officers ranked the control of comic books among the most serious issues confronting the nation's local governments. Rhyne contended that the harm done by comic books to "the morals, thinking, and behavior of our youth is becoming more evident every day." Municipal governments and police departments, who were being "bombarded with demands by civic groups and newspaper campaigns to bring a halt to this literary menace," had an imperative to take action. Rhyne cautioned, however, that comic book control was bound to encounter constitutional difficulties. Lawmakers would have to carefully draft legislation to curb the sale of objectionable comic books without violating the First Amendment rights of publishers, merchants, and adult consumers.[33]

The most serious constitutional challenge to comic book legislation was a decision handed down by the U.S. Supreme Court earlier in 1948. In *Winters v. New York* the Court struck down by a vote of six to three a New York statute that prohibited the distribution of magazines composed principally of criminal news, bloodshed, or lust. The majority opinion delivered by Justice Reed declared that the law as written was so "vague and indefinite" that it violated the First Amendment. Moreover, Reed questioned the defense's dubious claim that massed written or illustrated accounts of crime and bloodshed incited criminal tendencies in the people who read them. He was careful to note, however, that the Court's decision respected the right of states to prohibit the circulation of material that was obscene or otherwise unprotected by the First Amendment, and he seemed to imply that a more carefully worded statute might hold up under constitutional scrutiny. Dissenting Justice Frankfurter gave further hope to the advocates of comic book legislation. In the minority opinion, he argued that the New York statute should have been upheld because the state had not exceeded its

constitutional right to exercise "police power to minimize all incentives to crime, particularly in the field of sanguinary or salacious publications with their stimulation of juvenile delinquency." His point, of course, stood on the remarkably large assumption that legislation taken against entertainment publications was indeed a measure to control crime.[34]

The specific publication at issue in the *Winters* case had been a pulp magazine, not a comic book, but the Supreme Court's decision held important implications for the war against comic books as well. Chicago was the first battleground. In October 1947 the mayor of Chicago asked the city's police commissioner to act against the circulation of crime comic books. Citing a section of the Municipal Code of Chicago, which declared it "unlawful for any person to exhibit, sell, offer to sell, circulate or distribute any indecent or lewd book, picture or other thing of an immoral or scandalous nature," the commissioner ordered Chicago distributors to discontinue the circulation of Lev Gleason's *Crime Does Not Pay*. The Chicago City Council also introduced a resolution to create a censor board that would screen all comic books before they were distributed for sale to children. When Gleason learned of the *Winters* decision, he successfully filed a suit for injunction in the Illinois Superior Court. The Chicago Law Department then set about the formidable task of trying to prove that crime comic books constituted "obscene" material liable to government control, a case that it ultimately could not make. Crime comic books were violent, but they were clearly not obscene. It appeared that if the comic book industry pursued this legal course in other instances, all of the state and local measures enacted to control crime comic books would be fatally jeopardized.[35]

The controversy over American comic books also assumed international ramifications. Some of America's closest allies dealt with the problem far more swiftly and decisively than the United States had. In January 1949 the French National Assembly approved a measure prohibiting the publication and circulation of all children's periodicals that glorified "banditry, lying, stealing, laziness, cowardice, hatred or any acts of crime." French officials judged American crime comic books to be a contributing factor in the increase of juvenile delinquency in France. The law even banned comic books featuring relatively innocuous superheroes like Superman and Batman because they constituted an "imperialistic" threat to French culture. The measure enjoyed broad political support within France, but the French Communist Party had fought especially hard for it. Linking the comic book issue to their opposition to the Marshall Plan, French Communists accused the United

States of feeding the French people Hollywood movies and "degenerate comics" in an effort to "colonize" the nation through economic and cultural means. Even prior to the Marshall Plan, however, the Communists had supported the French Union of Illustrators when they had lobbied the government to curtail imports of competing American comic books.[36]

In December 1949 Canada became the second major U.S. ally to ban crime comic books. The Canadian Parliament passed into law an astonishingly broad measure that stipulated a maximum sentence of two years in prison for anyone who made, printed, or sold publications that "exclusively or substantially" comprised "matter depicting pictorially the commission of crime, real or fictitious." The law's sponsors claimed that this would combat the spread of juvenile delinquency in Canada. A similar crusade to do away with crime comic books of domestic and American origin was also underway in Great Britain, although it would not come to fruition for a few years yet.[37]

The international controversy over American comic books further fueled the industry's troubles at home. At a time when the United States was locked in an intense propaganda war with the Soviet Union for world opinion, some critics charged that American comic books shipped overseas presented an unfavorably distorted image of American society and culture. In November 1948 the *New York Times* reported that the Economic Cooperative Administration (ECA), an agency of the Marshall Plan, had approved Fawcett Publications' application to ship 10,000 assorted comic books monthly to occupied Germany. The United States and British military governors reportedly agreed to extend $87,000 in funds for the importation of the comic books, stating they could not find the publications objectionable—meaning the comic books were not "Nazi or unsuitable from a security point of view." This news provoked letters of protest to the *New York Times* and the ECA. One argued that sending American comic books overseas handed the Soviets "unlimited material to present further distortions and untruths about our society." Adding that "the worst feature of these so-called 'comics' is the establishment of right over wrong by direct action, usually by killing someone," the writer argued that comic books weakened respect for democratic societies and tacitly endorsed the kind of totalitarianism that the West opposed.[38] The ECA subsequently denied the *New York Times* report, and a spokesman for the U.S. military insisted that these comic books were "exactly the sort of material we have been screening out" of Germany.[39]

Fredric Wertham often made the argument that comic books de-

graded the image of America abroad. "Taxpayers pay millions to persuade the world's people that we don't consider dark-skinned races inferior human beings," he noted, but "the crime comic book industry does just the opposite." In comic books, he argued, the heroes are always white Aryan types, while the villains are "foreign-born, Jews, Orientals, Slavs, Italians, and dark-skinned races." Wertham claimed that these comic books demonstrated to the world that "the United States is at present the only nation that teaches race hatred to its children."[40]

The Communists had, in fact, made such charges themselves. Soviet spokesmen accused the American "Superman" of serving the same ideological function as the Nazi "Superman" and claimed that violent comic books contributed to the "mass fascisization" of American youth. To counter this perception, the U.S. State Department printed 260,000 copies of its own comic books, featuring "great Americans" like Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Edison, and Andrew Carnegie, and circulated them throughout regions of East Asia susceptible to Communist influence.[41]

Confronted with mounting public criticism, comic book burnings, boycotts, bans, and an avalanche of bad publicity, some of the leading publishers of crime comic books fought back. In 1948 Marvel Comics followed the lead of DC and Fawcett and acquired—briefly, as it turned out—the services of a psychiatrist from the Child Guidance Bureau of the New York City Board of Education to serve as a paid editorial adviser.[42] Lev Gleason, who had pioneered the crime comic book genre and endured the brunt of criticism directed at it, also put up its most determined defense. In a series of editorials printed in his comic books, Gleason and his writers pointed to the ostensible anticrime message of the stories. Arguing that the criminals in these comic books always paid dearly for their crimes and lived a brief, sordid existence that no child in his right mind would wish to emulate, they printed testimonial letters from parents, police officers, and even convicted criminals in their defense. In a letter apparently written by a convict serving time in the Missouri State Penitentiary, the author regretted that he "didn't start reading *Crime Does Not Pay* until too late."[43]

Gleason personally stated his defense of comic books in a lengthy letter published in the *New York Times*. Attacking the outspoken critics of comic books as cultural elitists determined to "set up an intellectual dictatorship over the reading habits of the American people," Gleason passionately defended comic books as a respectable popular entertainment medium. While he acknowledged that their artistic and educational potential remained largely untapped, he added that the audience

preferred it this way, as was their right. Moreover, Gleason argued that many of his readers were adults, so any attempt to censor or "control" comic books would violate their First Amendment rights.[44]

Publishers realized, however, that it would take more than a few editorials and endorsements to quell the increasingly serious threat posed by hostile public opinion. Some publishers reluctantly decided that their best opportunity lay in cooperation and self-regulation. On 1 July 1948 a dozen publishers formed the Association of Comics Magazine Publishers (ACMP) and adopted a self-regulating code of standards modeled after Hollywood's Motion Picture Production Code. The ACMP established an office to administer the code and ensure that every comic book published by a member company met these standards. Those comic books that qualified would receive a seal of approval on the cover to assure parents that they met acceptable standards for children. The ACMP code contained six general provisions. The first, and most important, placed restrictions on the presentation of crime, stating that lawbreaking should not be depicted in a manner that would "throw sympathy against law and justice or to inspire others with the desire for imitation." It also declared that policemen, judges, government officials, and "respected institutions should not be portrayed as stupid, ineffective, or represented in such a way as to weaken respect for established authority." The code also prohibited the depiction of "sadistic torture," "sexy, wanton" images, "vulgar and obscene language," and ridicule of religious and racial groups. The ACMP hired an attorney and member of the New York City Board of Higher Education, Henry E. Schultz, to serve as its "comic book czar," charged with enforcing and publicizing the industry's program of self-regulation.[45]

The formation of the ACMP appeared to be a savvy business maneuver, but it was doomed from the start. Initially only twelve out of thirty-four publishers became members, accounting for just 15 million of the 50 million comic books sold each month.[46] Publishers remained aloof for various reasons. Dell Publications claimed, with justification, that since its own wholesome comic books had not come under attack, it should not associate itself with other less scrupulous publishers. Large publishers like DC, Fawcett, Marvel, and Harvey initially joined but left after several months, also claiming that their comic books were already beyond reproach. Cost was a factor for some publishers. The ACMP charged members $100 to screen any publication with a circulation of more than 500,000 copies, and $50 for those with a circulation between 250,000 and 500,000. Dell calculated that this system would cost them $3,000 each month. Other publishers refused to join or sub-

sequently departed simply because they did not wish to subject their comic books to the code.[47]

Lev Gleason was one of the few major publishers who joined and remained in the ACMP. For a time, his crime comic books reflected the changes imposed by the code. The narrative emphasis shifted from the criminals to the police, and tales became noticeably less violent. Within a few years, however, the code's impotence became evident as Gleason's comic books returned to focusing on criminals in all their lurid glory.[48]

Critics generally scoffed at the ACMP and its code. Many saw it as a feeble and deceptive ploy on the part of comic book publishers to deflect deserved criticism. Dr. Wertham ridiculed the effort and accurately predicted its failure. Meanwhile, Henry Schultz struggled to make the ACMP work and implored the public to be patient. But internecine warfare within the comic book industry made his task difficult, if not impossible.[49] After it had become clear that the ACMP code was not going to work, Schultz changed his tactics and launched a media counterattack against the critics of comic books, especially Wertham. In his article, "The Comics as Whipping Boy," published in the magazine *Recreation*, Schultz criticized those who argued "without credible evidence" that a causal relationship existed between comic books and juvenile delinquency. He attacked Wertham's charges, in particular, as "more emotional than scientific or logical." Schultz elaborated on these points more forcefully in an article published in the scholarly *Journal of Educational Sociology*. Echoing Wertham's own indignant rhetorical style as well as his reductionism, Schultz charged that "the recent hysteria" over comic books was a reckless and unfounded assault on American civil liberties "directly attributed to the activity of Dr. Fredric Wertham."[50]

In any case, the ACMP was not the solution. As more publishers left the association, the code became increasingly meaningless. By 1950 it was effectively defunct, and whatever self-regulation remained existed only in the minds of the comic book makers. That still did not stop some publishers from deceitfully affixing the ACMP code to the covers of their comic books, even though there was no longer an office to screen them.[51]

Of all the ordinances and pending legislation to control comic books, the most important was introduced on 13 January 1949 in the New York state legislature. Republican Senator Benjamin Feinberg of Plattsburgh proposed a bill that would require the distribution and sale of comic books to be regulated by the State Department of Education.

The legislation proposed the creation of a comic book division within the department that would be empowered to screen all comic books circulated in the state. Publishers whose comic books were deemed "acceptable" would be issued a permit from the state. The division would refuse a permit to any publication judged to be "indecent" or "of such a character as to encourage breach of law." A publisher who had been denied a permit could still attempt to sell its comic books, but each issue not approved would have to indicate on the cover that a permit had been refused. Additionally, the publisher of unapproved comic books would have to file a copy of each title with the district attorney of the county where they were to be sold at least thirty days prior to the date of sale.[52]

The implications of this bill were huge. Because nearly every comic book publisher operated out of New York, the bill proposed to effectively establish state regulation of the comic book industry. So drastic were the implications of this measure that the proposal garnered the comic book industry some powerful, if reluctant, defenders. The American Civil Liberties Union assailed the bill, characterizing it as "the kind of legislation which a Stalin or a Hitler might have invoked." The president of the American Book Publishers Council, Curtis McGraw, formally protested the legislation in telegrams sent to state senators and in an open letter to Governor Thomas Dewey that asked him to veto what could become "a dangerously repressive precedent." The *New York Times* also came out against the bill. While acknowledging that "comic books have, on the whole, had an injurious effect" on children and adults, the *Times* insisted that existing obscenity laws and public opinion would keep the worst transgressors in check. The pending legislation, the *Times* maintained, was a clear violation of the First Amendment and a rather ludicrous one at that.[53]

The bill passed both Houses of the New York state legislature overwhelmingly. In the Senate it passed by a vote of forty-nine to six. All six opposed were Democratic senators from New York City who expressed concerns about the bill's constitutionality. Opponents of comic books across the nation eagerly anticipated, and publishers dreaded, the signature of Governor Dewey that would give New York the most restrictive comic book legislation in the land.[54] But on 19 April 1949, Dewey vetoed the bill. Citing the Supreme Court's ruling in *Winters v. New York*, he objected to the legislation's vague and sweeping language. His veto on constitutional grounds effectively killed the legislation and carried ramifications beyond New York State. The New York bill had been a crucial test for legislation of its kind, and its failure heralded a series

of reverses for the opponents of comic books. Within weeks of Dewey's veto, a similar measure pending in the Massachusetts legislature died before coming to a vote. No other comic book bills made it as far as New York's had that year, and in December the "pioneering" Los Angeles ordinance was struck down in Superior Court.[55]

As the legality of comic book censorship legislation came under increasing attack, so too did the credibility of its leading proponent. In February 1949 the *New York Times* quoted Dr. Paul Tappan, a professor of sociology at New York University, who warned that it was "oversimplification" to blame juvenile delinquency on comic books. Several months later, a New York judge presiding in the criminal case of a young man charged with murder disregarded the testimony of Dr. Wertham, who had contended that the defendant was temporarily insane at the time of the killing. The judge then took the opportunity to blast the theories of those who blamed crime on comic books, arguing that such theories improperly diverted responsibility away from criminals. By the summer of 1949, even the usually sympathetic *Science Digest* cautioned that, although comic books were generally deplorable, Dr. Wertham's charges against them "may be exaggerated."[56]

The most damaging professional critique came in the *Journal of Educational Sociology*, whose December 1949 issue was devoted entirely to defending comic books and attacking Wertham's theories. The *Journal*'s editor, Professor Harvey W. Zorbaugh, who also taught a well-publicized course on the comics medium at New York University, set the tone by stating that "no thoughtful citizen can fail to be disturbed over the emotional excesses generated by the current controversy over the suitability of comics as reading for children." While acknowledging that "the community should concern itself with the developmental experiences of its children," Zorbaugh deplored the "unreasoning condemnation, the setting up of scapegoats, the burning of books and cries for censorship" that had characterized the attacks on comic books.[57] Articles by Zorbaugh, Frederic Thrasher, Josette Frank of the Child Study Association, and Henry Schultz called into question Wertham's theories, research, and even his motivations. Wertham later countered their charges and correctly pointed out that several of the contributors (Thrasher, Frank, and Schultz) were or had been paid consultants and associates of comic book publishers—a fact that the *Journal* had not disclosed.[58] Nevertheless, this sustained assault from a respected scholarly journal raised serious questions about Wertham's findings. At the very least, the comic book industry could now counter Wertham's professional credentials with some of their own.

In 1950 Henry Schultz reported with relief that "sanity is creeping into the entire picture on the comics." Noting the recent trend of constitutional rulings on comic book legislation, Schultz called upon parents to assume responsibility for their own children without relying on "reformers" or the government to do so for them. He added that publishers had begun to demonstrate a greater intention to "put the comic book back on a decent level."[59] Confirming Schultz's latter point was the survey of the Cincinnati Committee on the Evaluation of Comic Books, published in *Parents' Magazine*, which found that of 555 comic book titles surveyed, 57.47 percent were "suitable for children and youth" compared to only 12.43 percent that were "very objectionable." The Cincinnati committee's next survey later that year found only 6 percent to be "very objectionable." The committee concluded that industry self-regulation and public pressure seemed to have resolved the comic book problem.[60]

An editorial in the July 1951 issue of *Harper's* attacked Wertham's theories about comic books and insisted that it was "a dangerous oversimplification to blame the current wave of juvenile delinquency and crime upon comic books or any other reading matter which is available to youth." Wertham replied angrily and accused *Harper's* of misrepresenting his argument, adding that he did not "know anybody in his right mind who says that delinquency as such has increased on account of comic books alone." What could be traced "more or less directly to crime comic books," he insisted, was "the forms of delinquency . . . there being more acts of violence and brutality by children than existed a decade ago." To the critic's charge that he oversimplified and neglected the socioeconomic conditions that caused juvenile delinquency, Wertham retorted that comic books were "one of the clearest and most direct expressions of socio-economic conditions I know of—conditions which permit an immensely rich industry with fantastic profits to reduce children to a market." Equating comic books with slums and broken homes as contributing factors in the degradation of youth, he advocated action against comic books because, as he cynically noted, "it should be easier to clean them up than to abolish the slums."[61]

If, as his personal writings suggested, this was the linchpin of Wertham's argument, then he had underrepresented it himself and wisely so.[62] For if his critiques had located the problem of juvenile delinquency in the consumer economy that made comic books possible, he would have found a popular audience far less receptive to his arguments. Wertham had achieved his greatest influence by understating the broader implications of his cultural argument and focusing instead on the

simple remedy of legislation against comic books for the immediate problem of juvenile delinquency. It was a tactic that he would employ with even greater effectiveness several years later. For although the comic book controversy waned slightly as the new decade began, Wertham was not finished with comic books, and concerns about juvenile delinquency persisted. In several years' time, the issue would again surface and plunge the comic book industry into its greatest crisis yet. But before that moment came, publishers would have one last opportunity to demonstrate that comic books could play a positive, as well as a profitable, role in Cold War America.