

Superman's Foreign Policy:
Popular Discourses of Ethics, Power and Global
Responsibility

(This Paper is Still Very Much a Work in Progress and is Not Yet Intended for Citation)

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Superman as a World Power

Superman has evolved from a comic book character to an internationally-recognized cultural figure, and is widely considered to be the archetypal super-hero. His approach to superheroics is often set as the benchmark against which other fictional heroes are compared. As is the case in many superhero narratives, the theme of the relationship between power and responsibility is central to Superman's ongoing story. Since he is a being of nearly limitless power, the character must face questions about how far he should take his "never-ending battle for truth, justice and the American way."¹

This paper explores how the Superman mythos engages with one particular aspect of the power-responsibility problematic: its the global-scale element. While virtually all superheroes face this problematic in its general form, the relative magnitude of Superman's power sets him apart. While most superheroes are limited by the logistics of their circumstances and powers to operations within a localized domain, Superman's powers give him the potential to easily topple dictators, destroy missiles or clear mine fields. With abilities far beyond those of normal beings, he is powerful enough to rival entire armies. When it comes to suffering occurring beyond borders, therefore, he must therefore develop something akin to his own foreign policy, deciding whether he should be activist, interventionist, isolationist, or somewhere in between. He must decide how much national boundaries matter to him when people are suffering within them. When violent or reckless regimes spurn his help, he must weigh whether to violate the principle of sovereignty. He must choose whether or not to respect the requests and commands of elected and unelected heads of state who do not have the ability to control him by force.

¹ The 1940s cartoons by Fleisher Studios described Superman as fighting for 'truth and justice'. The introduction to the 1940s Superman radio drama and the 1950s George Reeves television show also included the phrase 'the American way'. See the very helpful Superman Homepage [www.supermanhomepage.com]. Uploaded May 3, 2008.

It is remarkable how closely the dilemmas faced by a fictional character mirror so closely the conversation about the ethics of power and responsibility that currently [] real-world global politics. The particular dilemmas the Man of Steel must face at the global level position him as an almost transparent metaphorical placeholder for powerful global actors. While Superman is perhaps most obviously representative the current global superpower, the United States, America is not the only global actor that must struggle with questions about intervention, responsibility and sovereignty. Many affluent and relatively powerful states have enough power that these difficult questions are also pertinent for them. So, too, does the ostensible ‘international community’ and its component coalitions and institutions. Superman’s responses to suffering, war, arms proliferation, and ‘dangerous’ political regimes closely parallel the engagement with very similar questions that being asked in contemporary global politics, especially those that stem from the just war tradition and the emergent doctrine of ‘the responsibility to protect’.

I shall leave it to cultural theorists or sociologists to confirm just how strong Superman’s actual purchase is on individual and collective consciousnesses and consciences. I do not aim to point to comic book stories as the cause of anything in global politics, but instead hope to show how their arguments can be read as pop-culture meditations on the difficult questions that currently dominate the discursive terrain of global ethics. I want to insist that the ‘lessons’ that Superman stories imply about global power and international responsibility do contribute something to the conversation. My current task is to characterize and assess that contribution and understand its pertinent questions, assumptions, depictions and limitations.

Superman and the American Way in World War II

Superman's first comic book appearance² introduced a muscular hero in a red cape with phenomenal powers who was something of a vigilante. However, Superman only crushed tanks and carried Hitler by the scruff on the covers of the comics, and not in the actual stories. *Superman* #25 in 1943 explained in an editor's note that Superman, upon being drafted in his secret guise as the reporter Clark Kent, had failed his eye exam when his x-ray vision accidentally caused him to read the chart in the room next door. The note explains that Superman had found that he could be of more use to the war effort by acting "on the home front as a free agent". Through this story device, Superman's contribution was limited to stopping the threats of spies and saboteurs in Metropolis.³ Contemporary comics writer Mark Waid suggests that the combined Nazi and Japanese threat "was the one threat [the writers of the 1940s] could never allow Superman to face, not without trivializing the very real sacrifices of G.I.'s worldwide (1997)." Unlike pulp serial war movies which showed 'regular' Americans fighting for their country, the concern was that Superman would be shown easily performing tasks and feats that real-life soldiers and citizens were dying and suffering to accomplish.

This reluctance to include Superman as warrior did not mean a lack of war imagery. While the interiors were for the most part devoid of military action, on the wartime *covers* to Superman comics the artists did not hesitate to depict Superman in battle. Covers were often completely unrelated to the storylines, and would show Superman coming face to face with flame-throwing Nazis (*Action Comics* #53, 1942), punching Japanese soldiers off of a motorcycle (*Action Comics*

² Siegel, Jerry and Joe Shuster (1938). *Action Comics* #1. In Superman: The Action Comics Archives Volume 1. New York: DC Comics, [1997].

³ A more contemporary plot device, developed retroactively in the 1970s, explained that Hitler came into possession of the mystical 'Spear of Destiny', which while in his possession made it impossible for any super-heroes to fight on German or Japanese territory. See Paul Levitz and Joe Staton, *DC Special* #29 (1977). "The Untold Origin of the Justice Society." New York: DC Comics.

#76, 1944), or riding a falling missile (*Superman* #18, 1942). Superman comic covers, as the first and sometimes only part of the comic seen by a shopper, took on the attributes of wartime posters. Superman could be seen one cover marching side by side with a sailor and an infantryman (*Superman* #12, 1941), while another cover would show Superman's love interest, Lois Lane, telling American soldiers "You're my Supermen!" Feats of strength were not the only device used to rally support for the war effort. The cover for *Superman* #26 (1944) shows the hero holding the Liberty Bell on one hand and an angry Nazi in the other while speaking into a Radio Berlin microphone. In one of the most famous cover pictures, Superman can be seen standing on the globe while holding Hitler up in the air in one hand and the Japanese Emperor in the other, as if he's about to teach them a tough lesson (*Superman* #17, 1942). The covers were also used to sell war bonds, both with simple captions like "War savings bonds and stamps do a job on the Japanazis! (*Superman* #18, 1942)." More complex depictions were drafted, such as the cover to *Action Comics* #86 (1945) where Superman is seen physically burying the Emperor of Japan in a pile of war bonds. "It isn't Superman who's doing this," Superman is telling him in the caption, "It's the American people!"

Superman's adventures on the home front were also infused with racial imagery that invoked the war. By including Japanese and German villains, names and locales in Superman's adventures, Superman comics no doubt helped to establish them as 'bad' and 'villainous'. Racial stereotypes were reinforced, such as in the 1942 issue of *Superman* (#17) where a villain named the Talon is visually depicted a very exaggerated caricature of an aged Japanese man. In a rendition which takes physical stereotypes to the extreme, and the result is unflattering to the point of making him appear almost inhuman and monstrous. Both on comic covers and within the books, DC Comics seems to have made extensive use of such visual stereotyping. By facing such a

'moral' hero like Superman against foreign threats, and by drawing on the unfamiliarity of foreign bodies, these covers reinforced the common knowledge that good and evil could be identified with certain nations, cultures and peoples. This trend has continued into contemporary writing, as I shall demonstrate below.

As the war ended, the comic-book market shifted and became politicized. A study of Superman's meaningful foreign relations must skip over a large part of the character's history. In the era of Senator Joseph McCarthy, the comics medium came under heavy scrutiny by critics like Dr. Fredric Wertham. Public outcry led the comics industry to form a self-regulating body known as the Comics Code Authority.⁴ This Comics Code Authority caused a tremendous shift in the creative direction of comic stories by setting out regulations for what could and could not appear in comic books. As a result, the comic books took a much more lighthearted tone. In effect, Superman was not *allowed* to have international adventures with any degree of seriousness. For several decades, Superman comics dealt more with light-hearted mysteries, mix-ups, romantic entanglements, sight gags, and novelty stories.⁵ Writers of the time stayed away from stories which would have played Superman against the many important political themes of the time. Superman almost entirely steered clear of Korea, Vietnam, Watergate, and the 1970's turmoil in the Middle-East. It was not until a major shift in direction at DC Comics that Superman would return to the international stage in a "serious" way.

After a major 1986 storyline called *The Crisis on Infinite Earths*, the Superman comics line was relaunched and the character's storylines started anew with more sophisticated stories in a more cohesive framework. In this more editorially-driven 'Post-Crisis' era, it is far easier to treat Superman as a consistent literary character than it was in his early years. Because the writers and

⁴ Daniels, Les. 1971, Comix: A History of Comic Books in America. New York: Outerbridge & Dienstfrey.

⁵ Daniels, Les. 1999. Superman: The Complete History. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.

editors have been encouraged to draw the stories tighter into ‘continuity’, it is possible to look at the modern Superman stories as a serialized epic, where the character ‘remembers’ past adventures and takes them seriously. As readership age demographics and cultural sensibilities shifted, the Comics Code Authority loosened its regulations, allowing stories that dealt with more gritty and serious issues – including national security and global affairs. In this era, the hero’s ‘foreign policy’ has often had to adapt to the times, with the content of the comic books reflecting relevant contemporary world issues and struggles.

Case I: Superman and Qurac

The reinvigorated Superman series did not waste any time in introducing more ‘serious’ international issues. The first issue after the relaunch in 1986, *Adventures of Superman* #424, introduced Superman to the world of international terrorism. A group called ‘The Freedom League’ takes responsibility for several bombings in Metropolis, describing them in a letter as “action against the imperialist war monger for their invasion”. Superman learns that the American State Department had determined that the attacks were the work of terrorists from the fictional state of Qurac. Contemplating the attacks, Superman muses: “Qurac. They seem to be competing with Libya and Syria for the world’s most crazed terrorist nation.”⁶ Publication of this issue took place shortly after the 1986 American bombing of Libyan sites in response to terrorist activity, and so perhaps it seemed quite normal to refer to Libya and Syria as ‘terrorist’ nations, but such judgments have been rare in the comics. By referring to Libya and Qurac as ‘crazed’ and ‘terrorist’ nations, the writer, Marv Wolfman, reinforces such classifications to the readers through Superman’s authoritative voice.

⁶ Marv Wolfman, and Jerry Ordway (1986). *Adventures of Superman* 424, pg. 18.

Comics writers and editors have often explored Superman's foreign affairs using the recurring use of the fictional nation of Qurac, as well as other fictional proxies such as Bialya, Pokolistan and Kahndaq. On occasion, these countries have been the site of comic-style conflicts where sovereignty has been a key theme. In *The Adventures of Superman* #427, Superman responds to the Freedom League terrorist attacks by confronting the Quraci military on Quraci soil. Superman's personal orientation towards foreign involvement begins to take shape in this issue, as the narrator describes Superman's attack as a reluctant endeavour which "violates his sensibilities" and "bothers him". The narration continues, explaining that Superman "has the strength to rule the world, but the wisdom to not even consider it."⁷ Superman fights the Quraci military as he heads to the Office of President Marlo of Qurac, and justifies his assault in terms of Qurac's role as a weapons producer. It is the weapons Superman physically focuses on as well, redirecting rockets at their launchers and using his heat vision to melt the guns of the panicked Quraci soldiers. As he destroys a tank (without causing casualties), Superman muses to himself:

"I've always hesitated before using my powers to affect the course of life on Earth... but if I were around in World War Two, I would have had to confront Hitler, or I'd be shirking my responsibility... People have to do the best they are capable of doing to make a difference in this world. It's the only way we progress! Qurac may have sent those war machines to demolish half of Metropolis. They certainly export terrorism to other areas of the world! And that has to stop – now!"⁸

Superman confronts the president, but intervention from a villain prevents Superman from taking Marlo on the 'tour' of Qurac. It is interesting to note that the same wartime technique of depicting foreign villains as monstrous continued into the 1980s. Whereas the 1940's character the Talon was a grotesque caricature of an old Japanese man, the psychic villain Prana is depicted as

⁷ Marv Wolfman, and Jerry Ordway (1986). *Adventures of Superman* 427, pg.1

⁸ Wolfman and Ordway, *Adventures of Superman* 427, pg. 2.

a gray, feline humanoid wearing traditional Arabic clothing. This character, a member of a mysterious group called 'The Circle' lives in the sewers beneath the Quraci capital, and is shown to eat a live rat. When this character dies trying to psychically control Superman from a remote location, his veiled, human-looking wife Zahara is at his side. At his request, she removes the veil of her burqa so he can see her for the last time. Under her veil, Zahara's lipless jaw appears skeleton-like, and she appears ghastly as she cries for revenge against Superman. Of course, choosing to invent Middle Eastern villains who have inhuman qualities is not in itself offensive, as villains are commonly shown to have such qualities. But the decision to reveal that Zahara's veil hides a deformity is problematic, especially given that so few Muslim women are ever characterized in American comic books. The revelation of Zahara's face to the reader risks a cultural taboo, and her monstrous appearance carries a contextual message that is unsubtly orientalist in its reinforcement of the very problematic presumption that those Muslim women who wear a veil have something sinister to hide.

In the following issue, Superman returns to Qurac to disarm its Navy and Air Force (*Adventures* 428, 1987), finishing the job he had started. His attitude is cavalier, and when Marlo complains that his assault is a violation of international law, he advises Marlo to 'sue him' if he had a complaint. In context, this rebuttal can be read as a claim to public support from the international community. This second attack happens in the context of overwhelming global support, as explained by the narrator, including praise from Soviet Premier Gorbachev. The next day, a news report indicates that Superman's actions have resulted in "chaos in the streets" of Qurac, seemingly leading to revolution. The nation would re-appear years later, in a 1991 issue that would have been written in the late months of 1990, after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.⁹ Superman is told that President Marlo has been deposed and taken into American custody. The

⁹ Jerry Ordway and Dennis Janke, (1991). *Superman* 53. New York: DC Comics.

military requests Superman's help in transporting Marlo to America, but Superman is wary. "I overstepped my bounds once before on Quraci soil and regretted it." Marlo has been deposed, and is a "pariah to his own people" and is being guarded in his palace by the Soviet military. The American military requests that Superman help transport Marlo to America to be tried for war crimes.

After being convinced that he would only be escorting the plane carrying Marlo, Superman agrees to help the military transport Marlo. When the plane is attacked over the Suez Canal, Superman is shown to be concerned with a mistake causing an "international incident" between the many nations with interests in the area. When Marlo is delivered safely, Superman is frustrated when he realizes that he'd been part of a plan to expose a rogue American Major who wished Marlo dead. When a General thanks him for doing his duty, Superman seems a bit put off. "I believe in everything this flag stands for," he says, "But as Superman I have to be a citizen of the world. I value all life, regardless of political borders."¹⁰ Despite this issue's patriotic cover, which shows Superman saluting in front of a huge American flag, the story establishes Superman as more of an globalist than he ever had been before, and more aware of the potential problems that his military involvement might cause.

The Qurac saga, which only spans a few issues over the course of a few years, presents a very ambivalent and indeed muddled set 'foreign policy' on Superman's part. However, the key story elements elaborated above do give primacy to some key ethical and political principles about power and responsibility in global politics. As we shall see, these principles can be seen as exaggerated forms of the elements of the just war tradition.

Case II: Superman and Presidential Authority

¹⁰ Ordway and Janke, *Superman* 53, pg. 22

In 2001, the comic book world saw Superman's arch-nemesis Lex Luthor elected President of the United States as a nominee of the fictional Tomorrow Party. Superman, frustrated at the criminal mastermind's rise to office, refused to take action to prevent Luthor from being elected. When his grittier colleague, Batman, suggests that they try to undermine Luthor's campaign, Superman replies that "you have to put some faith in the American people to do the right thing."¹¹ This idealism shows the Superman character's absolute dedication to non-partisanship, non-interference, and his investment in the populace and the established democratic system. Luthor was apparently elected fairly, without manipulating the system (the clear-cut election provided a contrast to the real-life Bush vs. Gore election results which occurred simultaneously). Under the Luthor Administration, Superman has been shown to deal with international affairs more often than in previous years, which may reflect both a trend in modern comic towards epic 'blockbuster' stories, as well as the changed real-life dynamic of debates in international politics.

President Luthor has used his position on several occasions to prompt Superman to specific action, appealing to either his patriotism or his sensibilities. In *Adventures of Superman* #590, President Luthor appeals to Superman to rescue a reporter who has been taken captive in another mythical country, Bialya. Superman agrees, though he suspects that Luthor is withholding information and is wary about the potential for his efforts to be interpreted as an American act of war. After simply breaking the journalist from his prison cell, tells the Bialyan leader Colonel Rajak that he comes not representing "any nation or political ideology," but is simply "taking back an individual whose human rights are clearly being violated."¹² The journalist turns out to be an American agent, and Superman stops his attempt on Colonel Rajak's life. While Superman opposes human rights abuses by leaders like Rajak, he is strictly opposed to killing in any form.

¹¹ Jeph Loeb and Ed McGuinness (2001). *Superman* 164, New York: DC Comics, pg. 7.

¹² Joe Casey, Derec Aucoin and Jose Marzan, Jr (2001). *Adventures of Superman* #590. New York: DC Comics

Superman is recruited precisely because of his ability to perform, as Luthor calls it, a “surgical strike.”¹³ In keeping with his normal practices, the hero destroys tanks and melts guns, but is extremely careful not to take even one life. The metaphor of Superman as a ‘surgical strike’ weapon in America’s arsenal recurs in several comics stories, most notably Frank Miller and Lynn Varley’s *The Dark Knight Returns*, a Batman story where Superman is somewhat unfavorably depicted as the unquestioning agent of a Reagan-esque President in a dystopic future.¹⁴ This aspect of their relationship has been reinforced in later comics. In a notorious issue of *Batman*, the villainous Joker is granted diplomatic immunity as the new UN ambassador for Iran (later retroactively switched to Qurac). Superman to deliver the news to Batman, who is pursuing the Joker for having killed his sidekick, Robin.¹⁵ Superman explains that the Joker’s appointment by the Ayatolla Khomeini is “legitimate and by the book,” explaining that “if we don’t honor Iran’s rights in this matter, there’s no reason for them to respect ours.” He suggests that going after the Joker could cause an ‘international incident’. This phrase is later repeated by a CIA agent who explains that the President has asked Superman to keep Batman “in line.” Batman is not pleased, but Superman confirms: “I’ll do what I have to do.”¹⁶

Especially in stories where he is contrasted to other heroes. Superman stands as a representative of process, law and the ‘necessary’ but counter-intuitive obedience to orders in the face of big-picture considerations. His respect for authority has been framed both as a reluctant virtue and as a character flaw smacking of naïvete. However, no matter what the evaluative framing, it has always been depicted as stemming from his sense of responsibility, either in its form as *duty towards authority*, or else in its form as *prudence*.

¹³ Casey and Aucoin, *Adventures of Superman* #590, pg. 9

¹⁴ Frank Miller and Lynne Varley, (1987) *The Dark Knight Returns* 1-4. New York: DC Comics.

¹⁵ Jim Starlin, Jim Aparo and Mike DeCarlo, (1988). *Batman* #428-429, Collected Edition. New York: DC Comics.

¹⁶ Starlin, Aparo and DeCarlo, *Batman* #429, pg. 3.

Case III: Pokolistan and General Zod

In one storyline, Superman's enemy is the dictator of a sovereign nation. Earlier in 2001, storylines showed the immensely powerful General Zod emerge as the dictator of the fictional East European nation of Pokolistan. Zod is shown as an aggressive military dictator, who leads Pokolistan to annex parts of Poland, Germany and the Czech Republic. In *Action Comics* #785, it is explained that Zod is allowed to get away with it because he had played a helpful role in repelling an alien invasion. This is a twisted version of Superman's own valour-based political immunity. Zod's origin story is the inverse of Superman's, and even draws on the spectre of the Soviet regime to complete the contrast. His pregnant Soviet mother and father were launched from Earth into space and killed in an accident which left Zod with superpowers. General Zod also represents a sinister reflection of Superman in that he has used his power to take control of a country, which is completely against Superman's beliefs. The threat Zod poses to Superman is made all the more difficult by Zod's political power and the protection of his status and sovereign territory, and by the international community's recognition of Zod's legitimacy and sovereignty. When Superman does try to save a friend's life in Pokolistan, Zod stops him and accuses him of "trespassing", and suggests that it is in "act of war" (*Action Comics* #785). Superman withdraws, and it is not until Zod makes a direct assault on America that Superman is able to confront him directly.

While Qurac serves to represent the threat of Middle East terrorist states, Pokolistan and General Zod seems to take the place of rival nuclear states such as Russia and China. With strength rivaling Superman's, Zod is also a 'superpower' and provides the counter to everything that usually makes it easy for Superman to exercise his powers on the international playing field,

removing his political, tactical, intelligence and physical advantages. The way in which Zod must be treated as a friend by Superman while obvious tensions bubble beneath the surface is reminiscent of American relations with Russia, China and other nuclear states, where direct disagreements are often suppressed in the pursuit of good relations and diplomacy.

Superman defeats Zod, with President Luthor's help, and an interesting representation of American beliefs about world affairs is demonstrated in the way Pokolistan completely surrenders after Zod's defeat, having "no fight left in the Pokolistan army" and with "those who didn't [surrender] swiftly dealt with by Superman."¹⁷ Since the issue was written shortly after the fall of Baghdad in April 2003, this is likely representative of the contemporary belief that eliminating dictators will cause the populace of a foreign country to see the error of their ways. Just like Marlo, whose rule ended quickly once his war machine was dismantled by Superman, Zod serves as an icon of this simplified and sometimes influential view of foreign affairs which depicts world leaders as real-life super-villains who are the linchpin holding failed states together.

Case IV: The Justice League and General Tuzik

A similar example of the 'linchpin trope' focusing on a single leader can be seen in a Justice League of America storyline which shows the team (including Superman) called in by the United Nations to apprehend General Tuzik, the leader of an unnamed country, for war crimes. The crimes are made evident by a panel depicting the speedy Justice Leaguer known as the Flash standing in the General's killing fields, a desert landscape with piles of bones. In the story, the general's exiled son has appealed to the Security Council for intervention by the Justice League and his request was approved unanimously. In the opening narrative, offered in Tuzik's voice, the

¹⁷ Joe Kelly, Pascual Ferry, and Cam Smith (2003). *Action Comics* #805. New York: DC Comics.

general muses that “the sole reason a country exists is to be a suit of armor for its leader.”¹⁸ Tuzik surprises the heroes by producing a letter granting him diplomatic clemency in his choice of several countries. Although it is not clear how this letter trumps a unanimous Security Council resolution, the League honors the clemency and delivers him to his chosen sanctuary. Diplomatic immunity, once again, becomes the foil of the super-heroes. Uncomfortable with the prospect of seeing a war criminal set free, the Flash suggests that perhaps the Justice League’s job *should* be to pre-empt and prevent war crimes by removing undemocratic and oppressive leaders. If Tuzik eventually commits more atrocities, the Flash wonders, “won’t we be at least partially responsible?”¹⁹

An adventure follows where Tuzik, operating from exile, launches a series of attacks against the Justice League and several world cities. A minor plot point involves Tuzik infecting Chinese citizens with a deadly alien virus intended to help him overtake the Chinese military. Superman visits the Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party to offer help, but is told that the Justice League’s help is not welcome. “If you enter Chinese airspace uninvited,” Chairmean Deng warns, “there will be grave repercussions.”²⁰ Superman withdraws, and muses about how the “willful, angry ignorance” of the Chinese leader is representative of so many global leaders. The story progresses, but the threat intensifies. Superman, protecting the Chairman from an off-panel threat, grabs him by the lapel and shouts: “Enough! I always try politeness first. But my patience has limits, Chairman Deng. Your country is in *danger*.” By threatening to free China’s political dissidents, examine its secret military facilities, and expose its entire database to the internet, Superman pressures the Chairman to make allowances for the Justice League. Although the nature

¹⁸ Gail Simone and Jose Luis Garcia-Lopez, (2006) *JLA: Classified*, #16-21. “The Hypothetical Woman.” Collected Edition. New York: DC Comics, Pg. 1.

¹⁹ Simone and Garcia-Lopez, “The Hypothetical Woman.” Note: the pages in this volume are not numbered.

²⁰ Simone and Garcia-Lopez, “The Hypothetical Woman.”

of the exchange stretches plausibility, the sentiment behind Superman's position is clear.

Superman is willing to accept China's sovereignty on principle, but refuses to recognize it if the Chinese government refuses to perform its responsibility for ensuring the well-being of its citizens and the stability of the world.

At the story's conclusion, Tuzik somehow melds himself with his own weapons technology and is transformed into a grotesque and monstrous figure in order to battle the Justice League. The exiled son returns at the moment of his father's defeat and is installed – whether democratically or otherwise is never made clear – as the next leader of his home country, while proud and supportive Justice League looks on. Wonder Woman grants the young leader the gift of a golden lasso, representing Truth, and suggests that leaders need something “to remind them of their responsibility.” Batman lingers behind, and suggests that he will be back should the young man fail in his responsibility. The simple change-over in administrations once again contributes to narrative validation of the linch-pin trope.

Superman and Just War Theory

As I have noted, insofar as Superman can be understood to have anything resembling a foreign policy, it is highly reflective of the principles found in the just war tradition. The just war tradition is based around two main categories. The first category is known as *jus ad bellum*, and deals with justice in starting or entering war. In other words, it develops ways to judge the justness or legitimacy of a particular war. The second category concerns the way that war is actually conducted, in terms of protocols and rules of engagement. This category, *jus in bello*, focuses on the justness of particular methods, prioritizations, actions and tactics. These categories are interdependent: justice in a war often depends in nuanced ways on the justness of that war, and

vice versa. judgments concerning one category quite often rely on factors and considerations from within the others. Taken as a whole, the most widely accepted normative content of these categories can be collectively understood as just war theory, or the just war doctrine (Walzer 1977; Johnson 1981; Bellamy 2006; Orend 2006).

Insofar as we can identify an existing just war doctrine, it is comprised of those principles on which there is widespread agreement. Many thinkers agree on at least some of the *questions* that are pertinent to justifying acts of war and acts in war. Indeed, each of just war theory's main categories has its own pertinent questions and criteria. Considerations of *jus ad bellum* have typically focused on whether the motivation for war is founded on a 'just cause'; whether war in each case is used as a 'last resort'; whether it is likely that there can be an appropriate 'balance of consequences'; whether war-makers have the 'right intentions'; and, finally, whether those who begin and fight the war are a duly constituted and 'legitimate authority' with the right to make war. The just war tradition suggests that political actors who want to be certain that their wars are just should consider these factors carefully (Walzer 1977:51; Orend 2006, 31-67). These criteria are used to determine the justness of acts of war, where this stands for the particular action or set of actions that starts a war. The justness of a war's initiation and the justness of the war 'as a whole' are separable, but are highly interrelated.

In contrast, *jus in bello* considerations focus on issues such as whether there is sufficient 'discrimination' in selecting targets, suitable 'proportionality' in the use of violence, and the appropriate treatment of non-combatants. Choices about the appropriate selection and use of weapons, tactics, techniques, technologies, and allies are all pertinent to the justifiability of acts *in* war (Walzer 1977, Pt. 3; Watkin 2004). *Jus in bello* considerations are seen reflect on the justness of a particular war because a war fought inappropriately becomes delegitimized. Similarly, where

jus ad bellum factors weaken the clear legitimacy of a war, the burden of proof is seen to be higher when evaluating which means are justifiable.

The key principle that guides Superman's rules of engagement is the refusal to kill in combat. Superman takes the just-war principle of discrimination a step further, using his power to avoid not only civilian deaths but deaths altogether. What is noteworthy is that Superman always succeeds in this goal flawlessly. For example, the main target of Superman's power in his assault on Qurac is the military weaponry, and not the soldiers or citizens of the country. This is reminiscent, of course of the depictions on the wartime comics covers decades earlier. In Qurac, the hero destroys weapons emplacements, twists tank barrels and melts the guns of soldiers with his heat vision. His entire sortie takes place without any loss of life, thanks to the tendency of minor comic adversaries to flee when faced with Superman's aggression. Such minor plot devices in fact have a powerful enabling effect for the story; if the hero's path of destruction took even one life the plot would be unwriteable, or at least vastly complicated. As a 'foreign policy' principle this is applaudable, but is only made possible by the fantasy of the possibility of a perfect surgical strike. The super-power of super-discrimination and non-lethal force cancels out a good deal of the ethical tension involved in martial violence, since it skews the balancing of consequences by avoiding them.

A key subtext of Superman's military-themed forays into global conflict is that in his world, such bloodless conflicts are not only desirable, but *possible*. This is one of the major disjunctures between Superman's contrived comics universe and our lived world of global politics. In actual conflict, violence causes suffering on the parts of human beings, innocent and otherwise. Read as commentary on the use of violence in global politics, therefore, Superman's adventures in global politics largely skip over complex and unsettling questions about violence, fulfilling the

criteria of *jus in bello* by avoiding their application altogether. Here Superman represents not only the perfect soldier, but the perfect precision-guided weapon. Superman's is a weaponized power so extremely potent that it is antiseptic, thus enabling its own intensified deployment without human collateral damage. His global adventures serve as the wish-fulfilment of militarism in the contemporary era, desirous of the advantages of ultimate coercive power but wary of being responsible for killing. This desire for potency that overrides the demands of responsibility through technological efficiency is the same impulse that makes precision-guided missiles and 'smart' arms technology so seductive to military leaders. The idea that the weapons themselves can discriminate shifts the attribution agency – and thus responsibility – onto the weapons themselves and away from the human decision-makers that build and launch them. As Marshall Beier has argued, the illusion that these technologies work flawlessly enables an intensification of their use by developing an exaggerated narrative of antiseptic violence.²¹ Superman-as-weapon is the pop-culture embodiment of this fantasy. When Superman takes martial action he is able to transform himself into an unstoppable being of pure will, whose potency is made possible through the fantasy of a non-violent violence that is effective in the extreme but without toll.

So well does Superman do in meeting the criteria of *jus ad bellum*? As the preceding cases have shown, Superman holds firmly to an emphasis on the 'right authority' that prevents him from toppling regimes and trespassing unwelcomed across sovereign borders. This is sometimes portrayed as a simple respect for elected officials and government representatives, but is increasingly framed as a prudent understanding of the practicalities of global stability. Stories regularly explain that certain actions cannot be taken because of the consequent risk of an "international incident". Where Superman and his allies *do* overstep the bounds of sovereignty,

²¹ Marshall Beier, (2003). "Discriminating Tastes: 'Smart' Bombs, Non-Combatants, and Notions of Legitimacy in Warfare," *Security Dialogue* 34:4, 411-425.

this tends to be justified through the ‘legitimate authority’ granted by international consensus, as in the Qurac saga. In a more recent trend transgressive actions are justified through the moral authority of UN Security Council, which tends to reach unanimous resolutions in favour of action more frequently in the DC universe than in ours.²² This authority is divested with ease, it seems, at least partially because of Superman’s self-identification as a global citizen and the way his resultant indiscriminate benevolence is borne out in practice. As a non-state actor, Superman and the Justice League are endowed with a tremendous level of performance legitimacy as well as charismatic authority.²³ In either case, responsible international action is shown to be that which is wary of the threat to stability which any intervention or violation of sovereignty can cause.

The threats and offenses that motivate Superman into sovereignty-transgressing action, because of their egregious nature, tend to provide a clear just cause for action. That most of the stories involve super-villains or weapons of mass destruction certainly facilitates the dismissal or quick fulfilment of the principle of last resort. In comic-book adventures involving global politics, the balance of consequences is always clearly in favour of action because the danger is always sufficiently steep and because – as we have seen – the likely human costs are so minimal. Another plot device that helps ensure legitimacy is the way in which armies and whole nations are depicted to be used as reluctant ‘armor’ by a single leader. The casting of these characters as grotesque figures of sometimes racialized inhumanity or meta-humanity underscores not only their Otherness and attackability, but also the unnaturalness of their domination. Indeed, enemy leaders are depicted, sometimes physically but always by disposition, as not only an other but also as

²² In the DC comics universe the UN is often depicted as a more robust and active organization, though it continues to be the site of politicking between nations. In the late 1980s and early 1990s the Justice League became an extension of the United Nations, and its headquarters was set up in a UN embassy. In more recent storylines, the UN Security Council oversees the elite group known as Checkmate. See Keith Giffen and J.M DeMatteis, *Justice League International* #7-12. New York: DC Comics.

²³ On the former, see Richard Stubbs, (2001). “Performance Legitimacy and ‘Soft Authoritarianism’” in Amitav Acharya, Bernie Frolic and Richard Stubbs, eds., *Democracy, Human Rights, and Civil Society in South East Asia*.

somehow other than Other, a bastardized distortion of the Other. In this way, the authors and artists of these comic stories avoid whitewashing entire societies and, instead, seem to play to the idea that the ‘regular’ citizens of the society in question are really like ‘us’, the predominantly western readers, after all. This idea of an oppressive leader as linch-pin not only does guarantee a simple success, but also legitimates the use of violence as an emancipatory act. In comic books, just as in the real world, the repeated depiction of the linch-pin trope makes it possible to imagine that the just warriors who remove the single ‘bad guy’, or at worst his elite guard, will be “greeted as liberators” by oppressed societies yearning to be granted democracy and freedom.²⁴

Superman’s global adventures, but especially the Tuzik story, including its Chinese subplot, very closely mirror the basic premise of the doctrine of the responsibility to protect. This doctrine was developed in the eponymous report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, and an abbreviated version of its key principles were included in the resolution that concluded the 2005 world summit of the United Nations General Assembly.²⁵ The basic premise of the original report is that the sovereignty a country is contingent upon its fulfilment of its responsibility to protect its own citizens from harm. The original report suggests that when states are “unwilling or unable” to protect its citizens, “the principle of non-intervention yields to the international responsibility to protect.”²⁶ Superman’s own ostensible foreign policy certainly seems to reflect this principle of contingent sovereignty. For him, sovereignty is not an end in itself but a means to guarantee the maintenance of human rights and world stability. The main ethical tension in Superman adventures stems from the fact that the responsibility not to

²⁴ This, of course, is an allusion to the infamous comment made by Vice President Richard Cheney on *Meet the Press*, March 16 2003.

²⁵ See: The International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty {ICISS}, (2001). *The Responsibility to Protect: Report of the ICISS*. Gareth Evans and Mohamed Sahnoun, co-chairs. Ottawa: International Development Research Centre. See also: United Nations General Assembly, Resolution A/Res/60/1: 2005 World Summit Outcome. Accessed May 15th, 2008, (<http://www.un.org/summit2005/documents.html>).

²⁶ ICISS, *The Responsibility to Protect*, “Synopsis”, xi.

cause an 'international incident' must be balanced against the responsibility as culpability-by-omission that stems from standing idly by while humanitarian disasters unfold.

Structural Violence, 'World Power' and Responsibility

As the preceding discussion has shown, most Superman stories focusing on global responsibility are decidedly militarized in that they deal with questions about 'security threats' that are the result of purposeful and offensive action. Yet Superman's power also begs a question not addressed in military-themed stories: if he has so much power, why does he not make it his mission to stop global suffering by helping to alleviate poverty and disease and the world's poorest and most afflicted regions? He *could* actualize the greatest dream of the modern ego: to shape the world in ones own beneficent image. So why does he spend most of his time in Metropolis, working a day-job at a newspaper while he waits for super-villains to attack? He fights super-villains and natural disasters wherever on earth they strike, but why doesn't he take more preventive action to help alleviate systemic and 'mundane' humanitarian problems?

Superman is much more hesitant to help when it comes to serious long-term structural and 'political' problems than he is in moments of 'crisis'. His explanation, when it is offered, tends to be somewhat rhetorical. Whenever a story necessitates an exposition of this standpoint, he adopts the position of extra-terrestrial visitor, and explains that it would be not appropriate interfere in world affairs. This strongly parallels a plotline in the film version of the mythos, in which the technology-preserved spectral image of Superman's natural father forbids him from becoming overly involved in shaping human affairs. "It is forbidden to interfere with earth's history," the simulated Jor-el tells his son. He explains that humankind has a great capacity for good. "They

only lack the light to show the way. For this reason, I have sent them you: my only son.”²⁷ A similar theme recurs in the fourth film in the series, where similarly spectral elders from Superman’s home planet admonish him: “If you teach them to put their faith in any one man, even yourself, you are teaching them to be betrayed.”²⁸

This theme of benevolent non-interference has carried over from the films into the comics, where it is generally understood as a part of Superman’s operating philosophy. This is perhaps best exemplified in a widely-read story arc involving the Justice League of America, a team of heroes led by Superman. In the story, the Justice League faces off against a rival team of super-beings known as the Hyperclan who take a much more proactive approach to problem-solving on the global scale. The Hyperclan vows to bring life to desert wastelands, to feed the starving, house the homeless and fix the damaged biosphere. After much celebrated success, it is revealed that the rival heroes are in fact villains plotting to enslave humanity. The Hyperclan is defeated by the Justice League, who afterwards contemplate the ordeal. The team stands in a desert formerly restored by the Hyperclan as its vegetation withers, and the imagery shows Superman breaking a branch from a dried-out tree. Superman explains that the Hyperclan’s environmental and political ‘solutions’ were short-term and unsustainable because they were forced unnaturally from above. Wonder Woman, his team-mate, asks: “Are we doing too much or too little? When does intervention become domination?” Superman’s conclusion is that if superheroes take charge in solving humanity’s problems, the results will be false and not sustainable. He suggests that for any

²⁷ Richard Donner (Director), (1978). *Superman: The Movie* [film]. Screenplay by Mario Puzo. The Christian allegory evident in this line have been widely discussed. See Anton Karl Kozlovic, (2002). “Superman as Christ Figure: The American Pop Culture Movie Messiah. *Journal of Religion and Film*, 2:1. [<http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/superman.htm>]

²⁸ Sidney Furie (Director), (1987). *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace* [film]. Screenplay by Lawrence Konnor and Mark Rosenthal. Note that in both films, Superman ignores the advice of his elders. In the former, he spins the world back in time in order to save Lois Lane and prevent a cataclysmic geothermic event. In the latter film, he forcibly rids the world of all nuclear weapons, only to later and inexplicably conclude in the denouement that his actions were wrong-headed. “I thought I could give you all the gift of the freedom from war,” Superman announces, “but I was wrong. It’s not mine to give.”

real change to take place, it is up to humankind to realize its own potential. “Humankind has to be allowed to climb to its own destiny.” Another hero, the Flash, asks what humanity needs the Justice League for if this is the case. As the team poses for a distance-gazing tableau, Superman replies: “To catch them if they fall.”²⁹

In this scene, the theme of responsibility is emphasized again, this time in its incarnation as *temperance*. Here the danger is that of over-stepping the boundary between helpfulness and overbearingness or worse yet, domination. The use of power must be wielded carefully, the argument goes, because doing too much for the recipients of assistance can rob them of the skills and abilities gathered through problem-solving and perseverance, can lead to inauthentic results different from those the recipients would choose on their own, and can turn into an unhealthy state of dependency. Looking through the lens of international relations theory, it is hard to ignore the ways in which this problematic parallels discourses of development in global politics. Superman, posed as the powerful and knowing foreigner from an advanced civilization, must decide whether to assist those in the awkward and sometimes violent throes of advancement and progression. Real-world discourses of development often depict foreign aid as potentially harmful, in the sense that outside ‘meddling’ diminishes the autonomy of societies to decide their own direction and shape their own future. In this discourse, ‘responsibility’ means knowing when it is best to withhold help and when to intervene.

But how well does this rhetoric hold up, in terms of ethical thinking? One problem with Superman’s approach is that this sort of approach locates all moral authority on the knowing, beneficent actor who has the power to intervene, and does not lend any voice to those who might be in a position to request or demand it. Yet in many ways, Superman’s approach to non-

²⁹ Morrison, Grant, Howard Porter and John Dell (1997). *JLA* #1-4. “New World Order.” Collected Edition. New York: DC Comics, pg. 91.

intervention reflects dominant real-world ‘intervention narratives’ that focus on moments of crisis without contemplating how they came about. As Orford writes:

The focus is always on the moment when military intervention is the only remaining credible foreign policy option. The question that is produced by law’s focus on the moment of crisis is always ‘What would you suggest we do if we are in that situation again?’ The assertion that this is the only moment which can be considered renders it impossible to analyse any other involvement of the international community or to think reflexively about law’s role in producing the meaning of intervention.³⁰

Superman’s “to catch them if they fall” line, transposed onto contemporary global politics, is reflective of the crisis-oriented attitude that delimits much of the conversation on global responsibility. What counts as the sort of ‘falling’ that is sufficient to warrant responsible action on the part of global actors with the power to help? In the comic stories, as in modern geo-politics, this category is limited to “genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity”³¹ Indeed, this exact phrase recurs several times in the portion of the World Summit outcome that encapsulates the ideas of the *Responsibility to Protect* report. Whereas the original report allowed for the possibility that there might exist a responsibility to *prevent* suffering (broadly defined) through investment and aid, the text in the World Summit document limits the focus to responses to exceptionally violent cases. This is par for the course in global politics. A focus on reactions to violent forms of insecurity preoccupies most of the discourse of global responsibility, and overshadows a consideration of those responsibilities which may be present in the absence of overtly violent humanitarian emergencies. The conversation regularly fails to assess those responsibilities and culpabilities that may result from the participation of the powerful in the

³⁰ Orford, Ann, *Reading Humanitarian Intervention*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 18.

³¹ United Nations General Assembly, Resolution A/Res/60/1: 2005 World Summit Outcome, §138-139.

perpetuation of unjustifiable schemes, relationships and arrangements. An ethos of already-knowing and benevolent responsibility in the form of guardianship is privileged over an ethos of *responsivity* and accountability.³²

This concern with autonomy, self-determination and authenticity is certainly an important part of the politics of development, but it only one thread in the larger web of discourse. But the aid-autonomy problematic is most appropriately and powerfully articulated and mobilized by countries and people in need as a form of resistance to the patronizing attitudes of those who have already determined how to respond. When it is appropriated by those who might be *called* to respond, however, it becomes an excuse or justification for inattentiveness and unresponsiveness by powerful actors who prefer to think that *they* know when intervention or assistance is appropriate. This monopoly by the powerful over the ability to decide when responsibility needs to be taken is also an exercise of power. It enables a willful ignorance, a lack of interrogation and discussion that prevents powerful global actors from being “aware of and responsible [i.e. culpable] for social, economic, and political actions that, to date, they would rather not be held accountable for.”³³

Superman’s rhetoric of non-interference is reflective of the contemporary transfixity on moments of crisis in global ethical discourse, and of the ethos of knowing benevolence which is underpinned by destiny-driven discourses regarding political advancement and development. Superman’s mythos does serve as a pop-culture meditation on the relationship between power and global responsibility, but the metaphor only stretches so far. Unlike Superman, those actors who

³² I have elaborated this point in yet-unpublished work. See Mark Busser, (2007). “Critical Versus Problem-Solving Approaches to Security and The Responsibility to Protect.” Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Canadian Political Science Association, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, June 1, 2007. <http://www.cpsa-acsp.ca/papers-2007/Busser.pdf>

³³ Dyan Mazurana, (2005). “Gender and the Causes and Consequences of Armed Conflict” in Dyan Mazurana, Angela Raven-Roberts and Jane Parpart, eds., *Gender, Conflict and Peacekeeping* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 29.

have power in global politics are not strange visitors from another planet, literally falling from the sky into human history. They do not stand outside human civilization, but are a part of it. Whereas Superman is arguably free from complicity in perpetuating the injustices he seeks to alleviate, in our reality the globally powerful are beneficiaries of historical and ongoing relationships, schemes and arrangements. They are situated as participants who have helped to determine the trajectory of human affairs and will continue to do so. In the comic books, Superman's reticence to act, and its rhetorical justification, are simplistic plot devices that are necessary to prevent a complete shift in the editorial direction of the ongoing series. In contemporary global politics, however, a change in the direction of the storyline would be welcome.

Conclusion

The burgeoning real-world conversation about global power and responsibility is in many ways still quite limited. It is still quite rare to hear talk about transnational ethics in the mainstream of the popular media. Heroic narratives like Superman's are one of the few places in popular discourse where the grandeur and scale of the story elements allow for an exploration of these global issues. As we have seen, changes in the political context of pop fiction over several decades corresponded with a series of shifts in how fictional superheroes like Superman are shown to interact with the world around them. The plot devices of the comic-book universe, as well as the necessities of action-adventure story-telling, all contribute to making some of Superman's determinations and points of view just as muddled and quixotical as those of his real-world counterparts in global politics.

Yet those principles that Superman *is* clear about are quite reflective of dominant discourses of duty and obligation, especially insofar as they are encapsulated in just war theory and

the doctrine of the responsibility to protect. The comic-book landscape allows Superman stories to serve as relatively frictionless examples of these global ethical traditions, especially because many of the difficulties and ambiguities involved in the ethical use of violence are avoided thanks to the convenient simplicities of the comic book universe. The stories operate in an ethical and political landscape where international geopolitics complicates the heroic performance of ‘the right thing’ in the face of black-and-white security dilemmas, the circumstances always eventually allow for the successful – but exceptional – use of consequence-free emancipatory violence.

The limitations of Superman’s approach to global affairs, it turns out, also reflect those of the dominant discourse. In both cases is not so much a matter of inappropriate responses, but of an incomplete breadth of *questions* delimited by the confines of a focus on moments of crisis involving traditional security threats. This focus on emergency, which plays well in comics stories, excludes any satisfactory response to questions about those global duties which may apply *outside* of the moment of crisis. Both in the comics universe and in ours, this is reinforced by an approach to responsibility which is hero-centered, focusing on the duties that stem from using and not using power potential when others can be seen to need assistance. What is absent in both narratives is a focus on responsibility as *responsivity*, which emphasizes the importance of political accountability. The heroic motif of benevolent power-and-responsibility, too dominant in global affairs, overshadows the possibility of a less omnipotent and pretentious ethical disposition which is vulnerable to the demands of the Other and which commits to giving satisfactory responses.

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