At the beginning of the millennium, Marvel Comics launched its Ultimate Marvel line with *Ultimate Spider-Man*, the first of many reimagined versions of their most popular superheroes. The publisher’s intention was to update its characters for the new millennium and to win new readers, who might be intimidated by the dense continuity that Marvel’s comics were mired in, after decades of continuous publication. Among the revitalized properties was *The Avengers*, a superhero team originally introduced by writer Stan Lee and artist Jack Kirby, a legendary Marvel duo, in September 1963. The new *Avengers* series was handed to Scottish writer Mark Millar who would shepherd it through over half a decade and turn it into a highly political warning through allegory, concerning American foreign policy.

This development did not come from nowhere. Shortly after the Ultimate line launched, the terrorist attacks on 9/11 occurred. As a result, three important changes in American society emerged: America entered a War on Terror, the government implemented policies and passed bills that were designed to institutionalize the calamity and state of emergency, and political rhetoric and media representation helped inspire a culture of fear and securitization (see Rozario). A new foreign policy was also introduced, which quickly became known as the “Bush Doctrine”; it centered on the US “prevent[ing] any nation or combination of nations from challenging its military preeminence” and stressed preemptive strikes, noting that the US would not wait until it had “absolute proof” of danger from weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) before striking (Herring 943-944). Millar used *Ultimates* to speak out against these ideas.

Superheroes and American Politics

Although usually published on a monthly schedule, serialized American superhero comics constitute a remarkably immediate form of communication. Indeed, as comics writer Grant Morrison once remarked, writing superhero comics is “almost like a live performance. You don’t have much time to change things. […] That’s the nature of comics – to work fast, get it done and feed your imagination directly on to the paper, without a lot of self-editing” (DeFalco 231). Through this immediacy, superhero comics have, since their very beginnings, served as “a cultural barometer for American
society as a whole” (Johnson), and they have “helped shape the worldview and define a sense of self for the generations who have grown up with them” (Wright xiii; cf. Costello).

Speaking about his family-oriented 2004 superhero parody *The Incredibles*, director Brad Bird said: “Anyone making a film now consciously or unconsciously will have elements of 9/11 because it’s just an event that affects you” (Broder), which is certainly true about superhero comics. The serialized American superhero dwells in a largely simplistic, reactive, and conservative genre. Indeed, as one pop culture scholar has remarked: “At its core, the superhero genre is about boundaries. […] Specific plots are almost irrelevant, what the superheroes repeatedly enact for readers is a symbolic policing of the borders between key cultural concepts: good and evil, right and wrong, us and them” (Brown 78). This constitutive conservatism of so much superhero fare might owe to the immediacy with which comics communicate. The practice of cartooning is heavily reliant on “amplification through simplification,” the abstraction of images to particular elements or idea so as to be broader and more intense in their appeal for reader identification (McCloud 24-59). Serialization itself adds to this conservatism; “the comic book superhero remains fixed,” not allowed to affect any change that breaks too much from the extratextual status quo, because it could radically disconnect the superhero from the readers’ real-world experience (Lewis, *Superhero Afterlife* 25-26; Capitanio 262-263). Furthermore, the writing for a mass medium often needs to be inoffensive, so as not to alienate segments of the audience and risk profit.

With these factors in mind, it is entirely unsurprising that much of Marvel’s standard-continuity comics output since 9/11 has promoted a climate of fear, mistrust, militarism, and pessimism about America’s future (Johnson; see also Lewis, “Militarism”). Throughout the post-9/11 decade, Marvel’s comics grew darker, transforming into “a realm of overwhelming fear [that] forced readers to question who could be trusted” (Johnson). In the 2004 through 2005 “Avengers Disassembled” storyline, a member of Marvel’s eponymous flagship superhero team goes insane and tears it apart from the inside. In the 2006 “House of M,” the same Avenger transforms the whole world in order to make it fit her image of a perfect society. The next year, “Civil War” asked readers “[w]hose side are you on?,” as the government stepped in and tried to regulate superhero conduct after a superhero-related catastrophe, causing a violent rift in the superhero community. The list of similar events goes on. Historian Jeffrey K. Johnson concludes that “the decade’s stories reveal a country gripped by fear, suspicion, and mistrust.”

While these comics often focused on threats to America, Millar and his collaborators chose instead in *Ultimates* to figure America itself as a threat: “The idea behind The Avengers is that the Marvel Universe’s biggest players all get together and fight all the biggest supervillains they can’t find [sic] individually whereas *Ultimates* 2 is an exploration of what happens when a bunch of ordinary people are turned into super-soldiers and being groomed to fight the real-life war on terror” (Estrella). Thus, it is not interesting to ask if Millar’s *Ultimates* comics have elements of 9/11 in them; but, I will argue, it is worth asking how they configure those elements and how that differs from contemporary Marvel stories.
“Super-Human”: New Avengers

The first Ultimates story arc, “Super-Human” (Millar, Hitch, and Currie), ran between March and August 2002. Much of the arc is devoted to introducing the series’ main cast of characters, primarily the titular super-team, which initially consists of the same characters as The Avengers when they were introduced by Lee and Kirby: Hank Pym, a brilliant technician who as the Giant-Man has the power to grow to sixty feet; Janet Pym, the Wasp, who can fly and shrink to miniature size; Bruce Banner, the super-strong but uncontrollable Hulk; Tony Stark, or Iron Man, a billionaire with a high-tech suit of armor; Thor, who in this version is a Norwegian activist who, in an ambiguity upheld until the end of Millar’s run, may be either a Norse god or simply a mentally disturbed man with impressive super-powers; and the WWII-era war hero Captain America, aka Steve Rogers.

The first issue recounts Captain America’s origin story, familiar in its broad strokes to anyone who knows the character from earlier iterations: a chemically augmented “super-soldier” in WWII, he is believed dead after stopping a Nazi missile aimed at America. He is found frozen in a block of ice in the present day and, once thawed, joins a group of superheroes. The other heroes are introduced in subsequent issues, as they are all called together by Nick Fury, the head of the international spy-agency S.H.I.E.L.D., to join in a new government-sponsored initiative. It is important to note here that Banner and the Pyms are inside hires, who have long busied themselves with producing military technology and biotech for the armed forces and clandestine services; that prior to joining, Stark was a military contractor; and that Captain America was a soldier. With the exception of Thor, then, the Ultimates are deeply enmeshed with the military-industrial complex.

In this respect, “Super-Human” differs significantly from the original storyline. Marvel’s old heroes joined together to face a threat that neither could defeat alone (Lee, Kirby, and Ayers; Captain America was added to the team in Lee, Kirby, and Roussos); Millar’s Ultimates are instead enlisted by the military to serve as a super-powered deterrent. Furthermore, the first threat they face is Banner who, after being constantly belittled for his failure to duplicate the chemical formula that once gave Captain America his super-abilities, decides to let the monster inside him loose on Manhattan to give the team something to fight and thus look worthwhile in the public’s eye (#4-5); by the end of the volume, he is locked up in solitary confinement. Finally, in a recapitulation of a notorious and contested event in Avengers publication history, Hank Pym flees after beating Janet to within an inch of her life (#6; see also Shooter). Thus, neither the original team, nor the positive framing of the superheroes as morally pure protectors, last long in their Ultimate reimagining.

But our interest here is not with how Ultimates deals with Avengers continuity, but with how it addresses the War on Terror. “Super-Human” was published relatively close to the 9/11 attacks, and they affected Millar’s writing. The team-recruitment, for example, is presented with reference to escalating international tensions. Fury motivates the US move to create new super-soldiers by saying that “[w]e’re living in crazy times, Doctor. Crime is becoming super-crime. Terrorism is becoming super-terrorism.” Describing the super-team project, he goes on: “George Junior’s talking five state-sponsored super-people to begin with and I figure we need
someone up there with a flag on his chest more than ever right now” (Millar, Hitch, and Currie #2, n.p.; all emphases in original, unless otherwise noted). The deterrent role the team is supposed to play is made explicit in Fury’s comments to President Bush at the Ultimates’ ostentatious launch-party: “Add this Thunder God guy [Thor] to the mix plus all the other Super-Soldiers Banner can create from Cap’s blood and I don’t see anyone acting up for a while. Do you, sir?” (#3, n.p.).

This in itself is not necessarily a reference to 9/11, since terrorism had been a looming specter in American life since at least 1993 (Brands 304). Moreover, given “Super-Human’s” publication dates – March-August 2002 – it is likely that the arc had already been plotted in general outline by September 11, 2001. But, since comics writing is an immediate form of communication, it is reasonable to assume that the specifics of the dialogue were affected by the attacks and their aftermath. This observation does not apply to everything said in the arc, of course. For example, newscaster Larry King asks Stark if he can “seriously justify a fifty billion dollar headquarters off the coast of Manhattan when there’s only been one notable super-villain attack in American history? What if it’s another ten years before someone like Magneto (who attacked the White House in Millar’s Ultimate X-Men #1-6 [February 2001-July 2001; Millar, Kubert, et al.]) comes along? Supposing it never even happens again?” (#4, n.p.). Although these questions reference Ultimate Marvel continuity more than anything else, they can also be read as a general commentary on an industrialized military complex.

Captain America’s recruitment to the team does not initially go well. First, he believes he is being misled by Nazis. Once he has been calmed down and allowed to visit an old friend and a former fiancée, and heard how his entire family has died over the seventy-five years he was frozen, he is reluctant to return to service. “You should have left me in the ice where I belonged, General Fury,” he says. “Everything I ever loved is gone.” To this, Fury replies, “[n]ot everything, Captain,” and points to an American flag. That this gesture may be read as a hackneyed appeal to patriotism is suggested by the caption (which also serves as a segue into the launch-party) that accompanies a close-up of the flag: “Are we really paying these guys five hundred dollars a head just to wave a flag?” (#3, n.p.). Thor’s recruitment is also problematic. When first approached, he is highly critical of the US and of its armed forces: “Go back to your paymasters and tell them that the Son of Odin is not interested in working for a military industrial complex who engineers wars and murders innocents. Your talk might be of super-villains now, but it is only a matter of time before you are sent to kill for oil or free trade” (#4, n.p.). Eventually, he agrees to help the team stop the Hulk’s rampage, but only after Bush doubles the United States’ international aid budget (#5, n.p.).

These scenes might all seem like insignificant asides, but when read in the context they were written, Millar’s questioning stance on patriotism, defense spending, and US war-making is noteworthy. It must be remembered that in the months following 9/11, a strong consensus formed around the government’s frame of events and the intransigence with which the Bush White House rushed toward the wars in Afghanistan (see Entman; see also Reynolds and Barnett). Criticism and dissent was likely to be labeled as treasonous (Rozario 199-200), and, as philosopher Judith Butler described the situation, those who tried to offer historical
explanations for the attacks or to propose peaceful responses were mocked, marginalized, or even intimidated in a way that, in her words, put "into question in a very strong way the very value of dissent as part of contemporary U.S. democratic culture" (178).

It is especially noteworthy that Marvel would publish something that could even be considered as opposed to the official line since the publisher’s three official reaction-comics (Straczynski, Romita Jr., and Hanna; Heroes; Moment of Silence) had supported the government with so much belligerence. What this shift amounts to is a limited confirmation of Brad Bird’s contention; small elements of 9/11 and War on Terror discourse seem in “Super-Human” to be seeping into a story arc that was primarily meant to introduce a new team and, most likely, was plotted before the World Trade Center fell. More would come as Millar kept writing Ultimates stories.

“Homeland Security”: Escalation

“Homeland Security,” the second Ultimates arc (Millar, Hitch, et al.), took a long time to be completed. Due to production difficulties, it was published between September 2002 and April 2004, with long periods of downtime between some issues. During this period, massive changes in American political life took place, not least of which was the American invasion of Iraq on March 20, 2003. The main plot concerns a covert invasion by an alien race that self-styles as the universe’s “immune system,” come to Earth to eradicate free will. The aliens had tried this earlier, allying themselves with the Nazis to do so, but were stopped in large measure by Captain America’s efforts. The missile that the Captain stopped in the issue #1 flashback was of alien design. As expected, the Ultimates and their allies stop the aliens’ present-day invasion. The arc also concludes the Hank and Janet Pym domestic abuse storyline with Captain America tracking Hank down and beating him bloody (#8-9).

More importantly, “Homeland Security” introduces four new Ultimates. The first pair consists of the super-spy Black Widow and Hawkeye, a crack archer, who are transferred from a S.H.I.E.L.D. black-ops team (#8). The second pair are the mutants Quicksilver, who is superhumanly fast, and his sister, the Scarlet Witch, whose powers allow her to manipulate probability. As will be discussed more in the next section, brother and sister are the children of Magneto, a racist radical and had both earlier been associated with a terrorist group. The inclusion of these new members thus puts the moral standing of the Ultimates even more into question; indeed, when challenged by Thor about the recruitment of the former terrorists, who confess that their participation in Ultimates activities comes “in exchange for the release of political prisoners,” Fury replies simply that this “[a]in’t the first time the security services done deals with terrorists, big man” (#8, n.p.).

Although the arc’s title, “Homeland Security,” certainly connotes elements of 9/11 – the US department of that name was founded as a direct consequence of the attacks – there is little in the narrative that can be regarded as significantly tied to the War on Terror. Indeed, more than anything else, Miller here tells a classic superhero story. The end of “Homeland Security” sums up this perspective. Hawkeye states, “Man, this is unbelievable. I mean, I was in Kosovo
and Afghanistan when they both got liberated. I was in Germany the night the Berlin Wall came down, but it was nothing like this. We were up against spaceships here. Fighting aliens who were in league with the Nazis, for God's sake. It doesn't get more black-and white than that, right?" (#13, n.p.). With the entire team posing behind her, Janet Pym replies, "I think this means we're officially super heroes now" (#13, n.p.). This comment bluntly conveys how well the arc conforms to the superhero formula.

That said, "Homeland Security" is not entirely devoid of elements of post-9/11 discourse. The arc begins on a note that immediately connotes the attacks: its first scene is of a vigil in St. Patrick’s Cathedral in downtown Manhattan, with a crowd of mourners and a close-up of a make-shift memorial containing pictures of and letters to the deceased (#7, n.p.). In the actual aftermath of 9/11, a large vigil took place at St. Patrick's a week after the attacks, and impromptu memorials of the same kind sprouted all over the city (Strozier 96-97; see also Hirsch).

The fact that Captain America delivers the eulogy is seen as a PR coup for the Ultimates (Millar, Hitch, et al. #7, n.p.). This comment on media relations continues a thread of media framing that ran throughout the first arc, and continues in issue #7 when Stark's company is said to have merged with a big media corporation. These arcs also reveal that the government is covering up that the rampaging Hulk is actually Ultimates-member Bruce Banner (Millar, Hitch, and Currie #6, n.p.; Millar, Hitch, et al. #7, n.p.). Furthermore, when the aliens take over the Ultimates headquarters as part of their plot, their leader explains to a captive Janet Pym that he will easily be able to explain the seeming death of the Ultimates at an alien base in Micronesia: "Oh, a plane crash. A terrorist attack. Whatever sounds convincing, really. We're running S.H.I.E.L.D. now, Mrs. Pym. That means we get to write whatever headlines take our fancy" (#11, n.p.).

The alien's comment likely refers to the sometimes imposed, sometimes voluntary self-censorship of the US media. Public relations (or propaganda) have become an ever more central part of US war-making since at least the first Iraq war, and military training in the subject has greatly increased since (Hiebert 243-244, 249). But the significance of this information, and the truthfulness with which PR is used by the US military, remains contentious. In the early 2000s, the US government and US media both claimed that the "case" for invading Iraq was strong while most of the rest of the world justifiably regarded it as thin and riddled with untruths, especially the fabricated claims about Saddam Hussein's supposed links to terrorism and al Qaeda, and his purported possession of WMDs (Lule, "War Metaphors" 186-187; Hiebert 245-247; Mann 211-218; Brands 356-358; Herring 946-951; Solomon and Erlich 43-55). In connecting the Ultimates with the government and weapons-development on the one hand, and adding a strong PR- and media-dimension to their work on the other, Millar links them with what security scholar James der Derian has called "the military-industrial-media-entertainment network (MIME-NET)" (329-331).

In der Derian's view, the military-industrial complex has since 9/11 become allied with the media and entertainment industries through, for example, Condoleezza Rice asking US news networks to prescreen or edit al Qaeda videos or the White House trying to "enlist" Hollywood in the war effort. Policy analyst Norman Solomon has similarly noted that "the
intersection between two avenues, Pennsylvania and Madison [Avenue in New York, a shorthand for the advertising industry], has given rise to media cross-pollination that increasingly sanitizes the mass destruction known as war” (Solomon and Erlich 32). Solomon and der Derian have a point. The US government framed the attacks on 9/11 as an unprovoked act of war that demanded military response (Entman). The media played along (cf. Reynolds and Barnett; see also Lule, “Myth and Terror”), and in the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq played a very similar role in promoting the White House’s public relations campaigns to manufacture consensus (see Lule, “War Metaphors”; see also Hiebert; Solomon and Erlich 21-33). One network, MSNBC, in early 2003 even went so far as to fire their one anchor who was critical of the invasion (Mann 100-101). Moreover, der Derian’s reference to Hollywood’s role is especially striking, since the Ultimates, with their flashy powers and colorful costumes, are a perfect mix of theatrics and destruction or, to use another of his terms, “weapons of mass distraction” par excellence (331).

Millar’s writing also continues his critique of superheroes and of the armed forces in other ways. Classic superhero rhetoric appears in a few places: on the eve of the Ultimates and S.H.I.E.L.D.’s strike on an alien base, for example, Captain America gives an impassioned speech that ends with him, in a striking pose, telling the soldiers that “[y]our country needs you” (#11, n.p.). The aliens’ commander talks about how afraid the Nazis had been of an American super-soldier (#12, n.p.). Tony Stark is at the center of a clichéd heroic moment in which his doubts about his own fitness as a hero are dispelled by US soldiers (#12, n.p.).

The alien commander also critiques American intelligence organizations in a manner that questions their readiness and efficiency: “That’s the intrinsic weakness of these super-spy organizations, I suppose. Nobody’s quite sure where their orders are coming from anyway” (#11). Immediately after Stark leaves to rejoin the battle, the same soldiers say “better him than us, huh,” and, as they walk away, push a child bystander, who had just been part of Stark’s moment of inspired heroism, to the ground (#12, n.p.). As part of his strategy against the aliens, Captain America has Bruce Banner thrown out of a helicopter, in the hope that he will transform into the Hulk; once this happens, the Captain proceeds to manipulate Hulk with lies, so that the monster will kill whoever he directs it toward (#12-13). When paired with a thread that runs throughout the arc, where the team’s members are constantly preoccupied elsewhere, what emerges is the image of a military organization that is image-conscious to a fault, but lacking in structure, readiness, and morality.

**Ultimate War: Terror in New York City**

Long before Millar was tasked with revamping the Avengers for the twenty-first century, he was given the reins of the Ultimate reimagination of the X-Men, which we must briefly dwell on before returning to the Ultimates. The X-Men, a Marvel superhero group that originally debuted alongside The Avengers in September 1963, are mutants – human beings with a slight genetic difference that imbues them with superhuman powers; over the years, this difference has led to them being feared and hated by humanity, which has often been used to address real-world prejudice, often with
questionable results (cf. Shyminsky; see also Lund). Millar’s *Ultimate X-Men*, which was first published in February 2001, uses the same premise and continues (and sometimes greatly amplifies) some of the ideological lines that in X-Men continuity had been drawn between the integrationist X-Men, mutant supremacists, and humanity.

In the first arc, from February through July 2001 (Millar, Kubert, et al.), Millar sends the X-Men’s oldest enemy, Magneto – here an explicitly racist terrorist demagogue – to wipe out humanity. Magneto’s Brotherhood of Mutants is a terror cell, and even as the first issue begins, the American government has already responded to their actions by unleashing giant robots that hunt and kill any and all mutants, regardless of their politics. The story ends with the X-Men stopping and seemingly killing Magneto on the White House lawn. (It is later revealed that Xavier did not actually kill Magneto, but rather erased his memory and tried un成功地ly to rehabilitate him [Millar et al. #2, n.p].)

Although, in a sense, Millar unintentionally prefigures the response to 9/11 of some Americans and American institutions against Arab and Muslim Americans (and others whom they believed to belong to either category), his imagined American response to mutant terrorism is a violent paranoia that, if it has a specific historical model, probably recapitulates and amplifies the internment of Japanese Americans after Pearl Harbor or the wave of anti-German sentiment during WWI. When, a year and a half later, Millar returned to the topic of terrorism in *Ultimate War*, he told a similar story, but with a more immediately identifiable model context at its base.

*Ultimate War* (Millar, Bachalo, et al.) is a four-issue crossover between *Ultimates* and *Ultimate X-Men* that was published between December 2002 and February 2003. Elements of 9/11 dominate the first pages, as the Brotherhood destroys the Brooklyn Bridge, killing over 800 people. A manhunt led by the Ultimates quickly leads to the terrorists’ capture, but Magneto, who has regained his memories, remains at large. The X-Men are forced into hiding from fear that Magneto will come after them next, seeking revenge; in turn, working from bad intelligence, the Ultimates believe that the X-Men have switched sides and are working with Magneto (#1-2). Even when the X-Men’s leader, Charles Xavier, tries to explain why he left Magneto alive, Captain America refuses to listen: “Tell Xavier he’s in this just as deep as Magneto and I’m bringing him down just as hard” (#2, n.p.). The Captain’s rhetoric is backed up with force: when he is later faced with one of the X-Men, he first confuses his target and then shoots him multiple times at point-blank range (#4, n.p.). Although it has been established that the Captain knows that this target has the ability to heal all wounds and will not die, it is still a remarkable departure from the standard-continuity character, who since his 1960s reintroduction to comics, has foresworn firearms (Costello 240). In the same issue, Hawkeye uses “a small-scale localized nuke” to take down another X-Man.

Unsurprisingly for a narrative that imaginatively reconfigures 9/11 and the War on Terror, New York plays a catalyzing role in *Ultimate War*: the Brooklyn Bridge attack takes the place of the attack on the World Trade Center. The escalation that follows seemingly takes the place of the US military involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as domestic post-9/11 developments. Immediately after the attack, Captain America notes that S.H.I.E.L.D. is “basing at least one super-human in every major city and detaining any
These dialogues seem to reference the FBI’s increased racial profiling, zealous detainment, and occasional deportation of thousands of Muslim and Arab Americans without cause after 9/11 (Bayoumi 121-122, 153-155; Davis 49). The scenes also connect with the policy of “special registration” that was enacted on the first anniversary of 9/11, according to which all nonimmigrant males over the age of sixteen were expected to register with the government (which led to even more detainment and deportation) (Bayoumi 51-60). The allegory gets most heavy-handed in three pages in the third issue. On the first two, Captain America pulls Janet Pym aside and tells her that “none of this DNA stuff matters to anyone else on the team.” This is a reference to her secretly (or so she thought) being a mutant. Janet is upset to have been found out, but the Captain is quick to point out that “Fury never brought it up because it’s inconsequential to him, sweetheart. It’s a war on terror we’re fighting out there, not a war on mutants. It’s important you appreciate the difference here.” On the third page, a news report discusses how mutant terrorists are being flown to a Cuban prison camp where “conditions have been described as inhumane,” and that White House spokes-people have said that they “refuse to make compromises in the wake of Magneto’s attack on the Brooklyn Bridge.”

Again, the references are fairly obvious: Captain America echoes the official rhetoric that the War on Terror was not a war on Muslims, which the biased enforcement of policies like “special registration” seemed so strongly to contradict while the Cuban camp is obviously a reference to the American base at Cuba’s Guantanamo Bay where hundreds of prisoners were being held, indefinitely, without trial or evidence, and in contravention of the Geneva Conventions (Mann 145-149; Bayoumi 80-81). The refusal to compromise, as expressed both by Millar’s White House and by Captain America earlier in this section, reflects the hard line taken by Bush immediately after 9/11 when he dismissed Afghani requests for evidence that Osama bin Laden was behind the attacks in response to extradition-requests, by saying that “we don’t need to discuss innocence or guilt...we know he’s guilty” (Mann 123-125).

Conversely, Xavier tries to capture only Magneto through covert means rather than through large-scale interventions or through causing physical and emotional collateral damage. Through this, Ultimate War expresses a cautious hope that cooler political and military heads could prevail. That Millar perhaps had little faith in this approach is indicated by Nick Fury and Captain America’s refusal to listen and by the lack of a proper conclusion: the crossover ends without the conflict between the Ultimates and X-Men being resolved, but it has repercussions for both series. For Ultimate X-Men, the ending represents a shift in the status quo: for his efforts, Xavier is locked up in the US mutant prison on Cuba; the X-Men are fugitives; and Magneto is at large, intent on preying on the
uncertainty and vulnerability of the young, hunted mutants. For *Ultimates*, the conclusion has somewhat less far-reaching consequences: it mainly deepens already established characterizations of the team as unwilling to compromise and prepared to use both lethal force and weapons of mass destruction. But the X-Men are clearly primary here, and as a result the Ultimates come to embody the worst of post-9/11 America; most notably, they are accepting of civil and human rights abuses of American "others," simply because the national leadership tells them that no such violations could happen. This recapitulation of the status quo, however, is noteworthy in itself because when Millar next created something new for his Ultimates, he would slowly, if imperfectly and impermanently, turn that status quo on its head.

“Gods & Monsters”: Enter the War on Terror

*Ultimates 2*'s first narrative arc, “Gods & Monsters” (Millar, Hitch, and Neary), premiered with a February 2005 cover date – but was on shelves already in December 2004 – and ended in July 2005. By then, the invasion of Iraq had led to chaos, the prisoner abuses of Abu Ghraib had become public knowledge, and the flimsiness of the US case for invasion had come to light, but it was not yet certain that America would stop invading small "rogue states." The arc was, in part, the author’s critique of and his warning about American international conduct. In an interview, Millar described his plan when the first issue came out:

> The worry in *Ultimates 2*, as the heroes talk among themselves, is that the whole thing has been a scam. They’ve been created to fight this preemptive war across the Middle East, according to Thor, and I’m using them as an allegory for the American people. My feeling is that over the next year some kind of incident will happen or be arranged that prompts a nationwide call for the draft and preemptive strikes on Syria, North Korea, Iran and all the world hot spots. This isn’t such a conspiracy theory here in Europe. (Estrella)

The seeds for this shift were planted already in “Homeland Security” as is particularly evident in the titles of issues #12 and #13: “Persons of Mass Destruction” and “How I Learned to Love the Hulk,” respectively (Millar, Hitch, et al.). These two issues deepen the connection between *Ultimates 2* and the War on Terror.

On the topic of WMDs, sociologist Michael Mann has noted that “[t]he term […] conventionally refers to nuclear, biological or chemical weapons. However, it is a very biased term. It is rarely invoked against the present members of the nuclear club who obviously possess far more ‘weapons of mass destruction’ than do the Southern countries now seeking them” (Mann 29-30). The notion of a “person of mass destruction” becomes a structural metaphor (Lule, “War and Its Metaphors” 183) for *Ultimates 2* already in the first issue as we will see below. Mann also notes how the US is the world’s greatest proliferators of WMDs (30), which is also an important, if somewhat peripheral, aspect of “Gods &
Monsters.” The story arc reveals a collaboration between the Ultimates and other national super-soldier programs. As could be expected, the first such soldiers encountered is Captain Britain (#2). Later, a number of other European super-soldiers, grouped together in the European Defense Initiative, are introduced (#4, n.p.). What is most important to note here is that super-soldier technology is limited to Euro-American nations.

As for “learning to love the Hulk,” the connection with WMDs is unmistakable; the title is a clear reference to Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb, director Stanley Kubrick’s 1964 satire of the Cold War’s doctrine of mutually assured destruction. But this connection, together with Banner’s misguided attempts to help the Ultimates in “Super-Human,” also makes the Hulk a symbol of what Mann describes as the American Empire: “a military giant, a Back-seat [sic] economic driver, a political schizophrenic and ideological phantom. The result is a disrobed, misshapen monster stumbling clumsily across the world. It means well. It intends to spread order and benevolence, but instead it creates more disorder and violence” (13; emphasis added).

Although perhaps somewhat overtheorized through the reference to Mann, Ultimates shows the US in all these guises: the team itself embodies military power; the economic aspects are seen most clearly in its references to the US aid budget; the political schizophrenia becomes evident in, for example, Fury’s choice of allies above or his realpolitik below; while the ideological aspects ring throughout, from Banner’s threat-manufacturing to Ultimate War’s references to mutant round-ups and Cuban prison camps. The idea of American Empire is clearly part of Millar’s thinking, as evidenced when a girl in a nightclub tells Thor that what she likes most in his book is the part where he writes “about America thinking it’s the new Roman Empire” (Millar, Hitch, and Neary, Gods & Monsters #2, n.p.). In Ultimates 2, Millar turns the whole team into a monster to rival the Hulk in its political destructiveness. We will return to this point soon, but first a few more words about Banner need to be said.

Banner plays another important role in the arc: in the first issue, the link between him and the Hulk is leaked, which taints American public opinion and sours relations between the team and the White House. This revelation leads to Banner’s trial and inevitable death sentence. At one point, Fury speaks bluntly, in terms that can relate either to the hunt for Osama bin Laden, or more likely, to the rush to condemn and topple Saddam Hussein through fabricated links between him and the al Qaeda network: “[T]his isn’t about finding a peaceful solution to the problem anymore. This is about giving the public a villain they can blame for the Manhattan situation” (#3, n.p.). Ultimately, they do; Banner is sentenced to death and his execution is carried out on the deck of a decommissioned aircraft carrier, with a nuclear weapon (#3, n.p.). In important ways, this marks the beginning of the end of the Ultimates.

After Banner’s execution, a protest against rumors of European super-soldiers is violently put down in Rome, until Thor intervenes. Also at this time, it is suggested that Thor is actually the brother of Gunnar Golmen, the head of the Norwegian super-soldier program, who has stolen their equipment and made himself out to be a god. Significantly, Fury and Golmen both acknowledge that they knew this fact,
but let Thor alone until recently when he started “encouraging violence against democratically-elected governments” by supporting anti-war protesters and protecting them against police brutality (#4, n.p.). A massive showdown follows, in which Thor professes his sanity, claiming that Goliath, whom he claims is the god of mischief, Loki, has orchestrated the rift between him and the Ultimates: “They’re trying to silence… the conscience of the team,” Thor says as he defends himself, in reference to his many warnings, that the team is going to be used in a preemptive military capacity (#4, n.p.).

From a characterization-perspective, there is something to recommend Thor’s protestations since he remains the only moral actor throughout the brawl. While Thor tries to explain what is happening and why and only defends himself, Captain America dismisses him as “nuts” and orders an all-out attack. Black Widow, in order to gain the upper hand when Thor predictably stops fighting, morbidly tricks him into thinking that one of his strikes caused her to miscarry in a fake pregnancy (#5). In the end, Thor is defeated and the remaining team-members are soon called into Fury’s office. There are big problems, he says, proving Thor right: “Something’s come up in the Middle East” (#5, n.p.).

“Gods and Monsters” begins one year after “Homeland Security” with Captain America clandestinely and illegally parachuting into Northern Iraq to rescue nine captive aid workers. Fury says that the “last thing we need is nine little body-bags lined up at Dulles Airport, you know what I’m saying?” when Quicksilver questions Captain America’s deployment, with reference to guarantees given by S.H.I.E.L.D. that the Ultimates would only be used domestically, Fury responds in realpolitikal terms: “Yeah, well, that’s the thing about being a grown-up, Pietro. Sometime you gotta break these little promises” (#1, n.p.). This attitude aligns Fury with how historian George Herring described Bush’s vice president Dick Cheney and Secretary of State Colin Powell: “They believed the United States must maintain absolute military supremacy and use its power to promote its own interests, not permitting the niceties of diplomacy or the scruples of allies to get in the way” (Herring 939, also 960; Hoffmann 136; Solomon and Erlich 51).

Although Captain America is widely hailed as a hero after the successful rescue, others question his deployment; Larry King notes that some people regard it as the Ultimates overstepping their mandate and deploying “Persons of Mass Destruction.” He also asks Stark if he is willing to give “a firm guarantee that you […] would never take part in a preemptive strike against any kind of rogue state acting contrary to American interests?” (#1, n.p.). Throughout the arc, questions about the purity of the Ultimates’ mission and a sense that something is about to change in the team keep growing. Thor warns that the trial of Bruce Banner for his rampage in New York is just smoke and mirrors: “Forget this little street theater they’re numbing you with. Our primary concern should be the rumors of The Ultimates being deployed in Syria and Iran” (#3, n.p.). As Millar said in the quote above, this belief was not far-fetched at the time. “If successful,” wrote Mann about the invasion of Iraq, “more interventions might follow. Threats against Iran and Syria began even before victory in Iraq was assured” (84). In the next issue, Thor is again referenced as warning about forthcoming Gulf deployments and encouraging anti-war protesters (#4, n.p.).
Gradually, others begin to share Thor’s fears. After the Banner-Hulk connection is leaked, Fury tries to justify the misdirection. As if recapitulating largely left-wing, and roundly denounced, post-9/11 critiques that argued that recent American foreign policy might have been a contributing factor to the attacks (see Butler), Captain America counters that “[we lied, Nick. We told them we were heroes when all we were doing was cleaning up our own mess” (#2, n.p.). Later, Hank Pym visits Banner while he is awaiting trial: “I think we all got used to making this terrifying military force they put together seem nice and friendly for a while,” says Pym, echoing der Derian’s theorized MIME-NET. Pym continues: “Y’know, playboy billionaires and eccentric geniuses to pave the way for all the big, crazy soldiers they’re going to have in these costumes by the end of the year?” (#3, n.p.). That Pym’s fears are justified is supported by the fact that Fury is listening in, and the issue ends with a close-up on his face, wearing what can only be described as a sinister-looking expression.

But nothing comes of these fears. In the arc’s finale, which is otherwise a farcical look at how Pym is adjusting to life after the Ultimates, an unseen traitor, who is later revealed as Black Widow, tells him why she turned on the team: “I never asked for Homeland Security or Guantanamo Bay or this big preemptive strike they made us do on a third-world country. You should have seen their faces today, Hank. They were terrified of us.” When Pym asks what she is talking about, she turns on the TV: “Oh, Hank. It’s been on every channel...we crippled a nation this morning” (#6, n.p.). The Ultimates’ foreign deployment here marks them as vehicles of the Bush Doctrine and of Mann’s American “new imperialism”: the US after 9/11 “invaded and imposed rule on countries half a world away, without having itself been attacked by them, and without being invited by locals” (vii-viii). In “Gods & Monsters,” then, the Ultimates become Mann’s monster described above.

**Ultimates Annual #1: Proliferation**

*Ultimates Annual #1* is a one-shot comic book released in October 2005 (Millar, Lee, et al.). It is narrated by Fury who addresses the reader directly. Person of Mass Destruction-proliferation is the main thread. This theme is signaled both by the issue title – “The Reserves” – and in the narrative first-person captions that begin the story and prove Hank Pym right: “We didn’t stop the atomic bomb with Robert Oppenheimer, so why stop super-soldiers with The Ultimates? Truth is that The Reserves have been in the cards right from the beginning. […] Phase one had only nine super-soldiers, but that was just to get people used to the idea. The President and I [Fury] want to increase this to a full twenty-six for Phase Two” (np). This speech bookends a scene in which the Ultimates, along with some Reserves, stop stereotypical Arab terrorists who have hijacked a plane. This scene is followed by a list of new recruits.

A B story runs throughout the issue: an assassin known as Mr. Nix is hired to kill Fury. Nix takes no payment for a job; all he wants is a reason why the world would be better off if his target died. In the end, however, it is revealed that Fury himself hired the assassin anonymously, in order to kill him first. Fury’s killing of Nix ends the issue while Fury continues his narration: “There’s a gun at your head twenty-four hours a day and it’s my job to make sure that the bad guys don’t ever
pull that trigger. I'm building this armor for your own good…
Trust me.”

For our purposes, perhaps the most important part of “The Reserves” is when, at a social function, Fury is approached by Viktor, a Russian general. What follows is a rather heavy-handed dialogue, dense with War on Terror discourse. Viktor berates Fury for sending super-soldiers on missions in “nice, peaceful countries.” When Fury counters by asking “[w]hat kinda nice, peaceful country has a secret nuclear weapons stash,” Viktor responds that there are protocols for dealing with conventional WMD proliferation, “United Nations charters we have adhered to for over half a century. We do not, without warning, send super-soldiers into volatile situations in sovereign states.” When Fury claims that he sent them in to avoid a volatile situation, Viktor adds that the “expansion of the Super-Soldier Program is in direct violation of test-ban treaties.” This dialogue plays hard and fast with recent history: in recent years, the US has declined to sign nuclear test-ban treaties that have been signed by most other nation-states (Mann 37-39) and has flouted or exited many more (Solomon and Erlich 51). But Millar’s point is clear: although part of the UN, the US disregarded the referenced UN protocols for dealing with WMDs as needed when it invaded Iraq.

Most damning, Viktor adds that “[w]e turned a blind eye to the Ultimates as a gesture of goodwill after 9-11, but we cannot ignore these new monsters.” This is a none-too-subtle comment about how, in rushing to war, the Bush “administration’s haughty demeanor squandered much of the international goodwill lavished upon the United States” (Herring 950, also 942; cf. Mann; see also Hiebert). Fury is dismissive and confrontational, after which Victor storms out. “Within the hour,” Fury narrates, “I get a call from three Presidents and four Prime Ministers urging me not to take the world into a whole new arms race. But they would say that, wouldn’t they?” Millar’s Fury thus embodies post-Iraq international perception of the US as cavalier about international opinion, as subscribing to a hypocritical double-standard about WMDs, and as having a sense of being entitled to unilaterally intervene against “rogue states,” a status for which, as Mann puts it, “the most fundamental criteria […] are that the US does not like it [the state], and that it is not too powerful” (195; Hoffmann 137).

“Grand Theft America”: Repercussions

Mann writes that the “US itself constitutes the biggest present threat of nuclear proliferation” (38). Throughout his book, he argues that the application of “rogue state” status and the sense of pressure that comes with it might, in fact, be a prime motivator for many targets of American power or rhetoric to seek WMD capacities. In his final arc, September 2005 through February 2007, “Grand Theft America,” Millar seems to subscribe to a similar viewpoint.

“Grand Theft America” (Millar, Hitch, and Neary, Grand Theft America) was published in September 2005, but due to publication-related difficulties, it would not be finished until May 2007. The arc begins with a more detailed view of the Ultimates’ nuclear weapons raid in the Middle East, and a tense conversation between the imprisoned Thor and Tony Stark. As if channeling Bush’s inflated warnings about Saddam (Brands 357), Stark says that “[t]hese people were
targeting neighbors at the same time they were assuring us they didn’t even have a weapons program.” “They’ve got you, haven’t they,” responds Thor: “All they need to say is ‘nuclear weapons’ and Tony Stark falls into line like the rest of them.”

In this plotline, Millar recognizes how important the spurious claims about Saddam Hussein’s WMDs were in making the case for invasion. As Herring puts it: “Even before the end of 2001, top officials had turned from the complicated task of destroying terrorist cells to the threat of weapons of mass destruction” (943). Further, in constructing the “Axis of Evil,” Bush “connected the global war on terrorism […] with the danger of nuclear proliferation” (943; see also Brands 363). About Fury, Thor adds that he “has to turn back now. These aggressive acts are only confirming the worst fears of his enemies and they’re already taking steps against you” (#7, n.p.). Indeed, the War on Terror does seem to have inspired more violence and, as Herring points out, the “war in Iraq boosted recruitment among Muslims across the world” (959, 954; cf. Mann).

The steps taken against America unfold over the next couple of issues, as Black Widow leads a contingent of soldiers to capture Hawkeye and murder his family and to frame Captain America who is apprehended – violently – by S.H.I.E.L.D. (#8-9). This chaos paves the way for a massive invasion of the US by hundreds of super-soldiers, fronted by a group calling itself the Liberators, introduced in an issue titled “Axis of Evil” (#10). The Liberators round up and plan to publically execute America’s super-powered people (including the X-Men and the Fantastic Four), Nick Fury, and Bush (#11, n.p.) on the White House lawn. Unsurprisingly, the captives are rescued by Captain America, Wasp, and Hawkeye, who have all escaped, as well as by the Hulk, who was secretly saved from execution by Hank Pym. The battle that follows spans most of two oversized issues (#12-13). Suggestive of the massive scale of the conflict, issue #13 contains a fold-out of the climactic battle which, when extended, is eight standard comics pages wide.

Much attention is given in the story arc to the root causes of widespread contemporary policy-based anti-Americanism, the anti-Americanism of “those who attack the United States for what it does or fails to do,” as opposed to the essentialist anti-Americanism of those who attack the US for what it is (Hoffmann 136-137; see also Herring 962). While the invasion unfolds, Loki, who has orchestrated the whole thing and who reveals himself as a god in this plotline (#12, np), remarks to his force commander, the Colonel, that “[a]ll this carnage must be very satisfying after everything the Americans have done to your country” (#9, n.p.). The Colonel, a Middle Easterner who witnessed the Ultimates’ intervention in his homeland first-hand and a super-soldier like Captain America, responds, “I didn’t come here for revenge, Loki. I volunteered to lead this international collective because America’s plans simply must be curtailed. This world is a safer place now this new Roman Empire has been restrained” (#9, n.p.).

Moreover, the arc is laden with irony: over images of the Statue of Liberty falling, in a way similar to the famous statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad’s Firdos Square, the Colonel records a message: “We told you to stop making super people, America. We told you not to interfere with cultures you can never understand. This is what happens when your ambitions outstrip your capabilities. The empire takes a fall.
Congratulations, ladies and gentlemen…The Great Satan has just been liberated (#9, n.p.). Perhaps a somewhat crude reversal, but the initial expectation that Americans would be regarded as liberators by Iraqis is roundly dismantled here. Moreover, another Liberator snipes after the invasion that “[m]aybe we should give them free elections now, Colonel Al-Rahman. I understand there’s been some contention over the legitimacy of their current Caesar” (#10, n.p.). First, this remark reads as a comment on America’s goal of democratization, which, once the absence of WMDs became undeniable, transformed into a retroactive prime motive for the invasion (Brands 364; Herring 965); second, it clearly references the alleged election irregularities in Ohio that if investigated could have won John Kerry the presidency shortly before Millar wrote this issue (Brands 366). The invasion, then, is clearly framed as the US getting a taste of its own proverbial medicine.

Moreover, for most of the arc, the Liberators seem more moral than their American counterparts. Loki’s involvement is hard to square with the politics of the series, but the others’ involvement is explained by a Chinese super-soldier: “We did it to stop more preemptive strikes. Likewise, the Russians, the Arabs and all the North Koreans. Even the Widow infiltrated these people for free because she feared what America might do next” (#9, n.p.). Thus, for example, when the invasion has succeeded, the Colonel is made to say that a priority is keeping casualties to a minimum: “The American people shouldn’t have to suffer for the crimes of their government” (#10, n.p.). Implicit here, perhaps, is the suffering rained down on Afghanis for the crimes of al Qaeda and which the Iraqi people suffered for being led by Saddam. According to one early estimate, as many as 17,000 Iraqi civilians became casualties of America’s invasion (Mann x-xi, 227-232); later estimates put the toll as high as 200,000 through 2008 (Herring 958) while millions more were either forced to flee the country or became internally displaced (956).

This morality does not hold. Once the tide of battle turns against the Liberators, their orders abruptly change: “It’s a suicide mission now! Shoot everything you can see!” (#12, n.p.). This turn indicates that, for all of Millar’s critique of US policy and fears that it is verging on running amok, he does not see a military reaction from the invaded as justified, even though he seems afraid that one might be forthcoming. Whatever the case may be, the Liberators are all villains by the end of the arc, seemingly deserving of the brutal deaths most of them suffer, perhaps to better sell the ending, wherein the US stands victorious and the status quo is nearly reinstated. But the US seems to have learned nothing from the attack. Then Secretary of State Robert Gates is made to say that he and the president hope to be able to find a diplomatic way to deal with the aftermath, but that they cannot rule out deploying super-humans: “This is, after all, what the Ultimates were put together for.” The Ultimates themselves, however, have a small change of heart. “We can’t fight your wars,” Captain America tells Fury, “if it opens people up to this” (#13, n.p.). They instead choose to freelance, financed by Stark’s wealth. Importantly, they retain close ties with Fury who is happy to remove such a big cost from his budget. At the end of Millar’s run, then, the military-industrial complex remains intact, if somewhat shaken, and ready for whoever would take up writing duties for the next volume.
Conclusion

Judging by his comments in an interview, Millar wrote his scripts from Europe (Estrella), which probably accounts for much of the critical stance he adopts throughout his Ultimates writing, and particularly in *Ultimates 2*. Compared to the American media, news outlets across Europe were far more open about events and far more critical about US policy and actions, as well as more willing to consider deeper motivations for the terrorist strikes than that they “hated” the US for its freedom, modernity, and wealth.

“Neither good nor bad, metaphor may be the only way for humans to comprehend profound and complex issues,” such as war, writes communications scholar Jack Lule: “It is almost a commonplace that the determination to go to war is perhaps the most critical decision a nation can make. The news media should play a vital role in the decision-making process” (“War Metaphors” 180). From the attacks on 9/11, through the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq, US government and media discourse was replete with metaphorical language in support of war. With his Ultimates, Millar provided counter-metaphors – or allegories. These were flawed, to be sure, and the stories are full of irresolvable contradictions that detract from the warning: much of the conflict in *Ultimates 2* is engineered by Loki, which partly absolves the United States of responsibility for the consequences the reader is supposed to consider as having been at least partly self-inflicted; when the Ultimates cripple a nation in *Ultimates 2* #6, they really do remove WMDs, which again softens the criticism of the US invasion’s illegitimacy; and in “The Reserves,” Fury defends people of mass destruction by saying that the world is changing, a claim that is made legitimate by images of super-humans fighting super-human threats. Moreover, as noted, his storyline ends on a note reaffirming the pre-Bush Doctrine military-industrial status quo. When he returned to the Ultimates in the 2010s, there was none of the earlier critical edge to his character.

Nonetheless, through an increasing use of references to 9/11 and the War on Terror, Millar’s Ultimates grew into a warning about post-9/11 US militarism and what it might bring to America’s shores if it continued. Other Marvel comics of these years were either militant or held up a mirror to the US, speaking about what the War on Terror meant for American identity or the nation’s founding ideals (Lewis, “Militarism”; Johnson; Costello 195-241). Millar’s comics, while still Americentric in their focus, instead suggested the damage that the War on Terror was causing and what effects it was having on America’s international standing; as Herring summarized it elsewhere, “[t]he Bush administration’s dismissive attitude toward allies in the run-up to the war, its scandalous incompetence in fighting the insurgency, and its abandonments of the Geneva Conventions, widespread use of torture, and detention of suspects without recourse to the law compromised its claims to world leadership” (960).

The center did not hold for the US’s new Empire, however, perhaps because of Iraq; although the invasion went smoothly, the occupation quickly became a quagmire, as Mann and others suggest (Brands 361-366; Herring 951-957). Because of the time-lag between issues, particularly in “Grand Theft America,” the series’ critique was dated already as it came out. By summer 2007, the war was unpopular
even among many former Republican supporters (Herring 957); Bush’s second term was less ambitious or unilateral (959); and by the end of the new millennium’s first decade, commentators “agreed that America’s unipolar moment had ended” (961). What is clear, however, is that US belligerence did create more chaos in the Middle East and the North African region than it solved, not least in its contribution to the emergence of ISIS, the consequences of which are only peripherally felt in the US (see Cockburn; Herring 960). Thus, Millar was right: belligerent US unilateralism will inspire only more violence, but he was wrong about who would be on the receiving end of the blowback.

Works Cited


