

# Comic relief

As America battles the world's evil-doers, the superhero is making a big comeback. **Mark Juddery** explains why.

Comic-book hero Captain America has always changed with his nation. He fought the Nazis, both as a superhero and in his secret identity as Private Steve Rogers. In the 1960s, he was a swinging counter-culture hero. In 1990, he joined the War Against Drugs. More recently, he has been fighting Middle Eastern terrorists.

In times of turmoil, it seems, we turn to superheroes. Although sales of comic books still don't approach the figures during World War II, the so-called "golden age" of comics, they have certainly been helped along by 9-11 and the Iraq war.

Military comics – once popular but recently almost unheard-of – are also making a comeback. Image Comics' *G.I. Joe* (not sold in Australia due to licensing restrictions) is easily the top-selling non-superhero comic in the United States. A few others will compete for shelf space in coming months, including P4 Productions' *Specwar*, about the US Special Forces ("If you are their enemy, be afraid, be very afraid!") and DC Comics' *The Losers*.

But superheroes still corner the comics market, and they're not about to enlist. Things have changed since the golden age. Although ageless, Captain America did not join the fighting forces in Korea, Vietnam or the previous Gulf war, and is unlikely to invade Iraq for this one.

Comic books have changed their poli-

tics over the years, moving from the wartime rhetoric (even aliens such as *Superman* fought for the Allies and "the American way") to cynical, anti-authority stories. In the world of DC Comics, for example, Superman's arch-enemy Lex Luthor was elected US president in 2000. The underlying suggestion – that a criminal genius had won the presidency – was appreciated by many commentators.

Even in the post-9-11 atmosphere, many comics have adopted a progressive line. Marvel Comics recently revived the western hero *Rawhide Kid* as a homosexual, to the chagrin of conservative groups. Even *The Losers* introduces heroes who were once "the covert bloody hand of America", but have now turned against their government.

Other new comics avoid the war bandwagon altogether. Marvel's *411* tells stories, both true and fictitious, about people fighting aggression through non-violent means. As well as using popular comic book writers, *411* borrows contributors from different media, including Australian nuclear activist Dr Helen Caldicott.

For a publisher that made its name with action men such as Spider-Man and the Incredible Hulk, this is a dramatic change of pace. "The idea was to show non-violent solutions in a violent world, to come up with stories that reflected other possibilities, other options than going out and committing more violence and more violent acts," says another *411* writer, Chuck Austen, who worked previously on the gritty superhero comic *US War Machine*. "Writing something like *War Machine* shows me that people will continue to be horrible to people ... I guess that's the main difference. [*War Machine*] is more a reaction to the way I think things may continue to go, and *411* is the way I would like to see life happen."

Even some Marvel



► Aggressive or progressive? Anti-drugs Captain America, gay Rawhide Kid and the non-violence of 411

superheroes (such as the top-selling *X-Men*) are espousing non-violent solutions, saving their fight scenes for emergencies that, fortunately for sales, happen frequently.

Captain America, appropriately enough, is not so peaceful. Since the post-September 11 surge in patriotism in the US, Marvel has published several new comics featuring the flag-waving supersoldier. He still reflects his nation but, of course, the nation has changed. Gone are his trademark flowery, patriotic speeches. Now, he is an unsmiling, gung-ho soldier who beats his opponents senseless, rarely saying anything more colourful than "now step outside, you piece of trash". Despite his long-time aversion to killing, he angrily killed a terrorist named Faysal al-Tariq in a story last year. Overcome by shame, he then revealed his secret identity.

In this way, at least, he joins Marvel's move towards "kinder, gentler" superheroes. Along with his colleagues Daredevil and Iron Man, he has "opened up" to the world, removing his mask after 60 years. Mysterious vigilantes stopped being "cool" after 9-11. Nowadays, we all want to know who the good guys are. □

