The Falcon and the Winter Soldier

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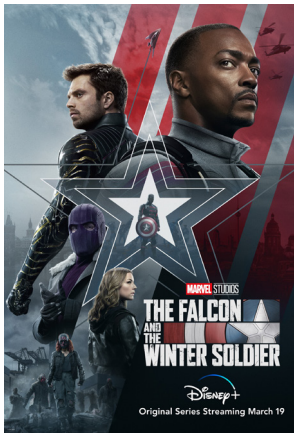
Spellman, Malcolm, creator. *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*, Marvel Studios, 2021.



The recent flurry of Disney+ shows based in the Marvel Cinematic Universe are interesting not only as examples of well-budgeted and thoughtful superhero media, but also in their roles as episodic extended meditations. *WandaVision* was an examination of the lingering power and debilitating nature of grief. Viewers watched with fascination as an emotionally devastated Wanda Maximoff warped reality itself in an attempt to create a fictional life free from horrific family tragedies. Loki explored, among other things, the nature of identity – the titular God of Mischief confronted multiple versions of himself from different timelines and as a result began to come to grips with what and who made him who he is. *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* (F&TWS), on the other hand, chooses for its own part to present an extended meditation on the concept and emotional burdens of legacy. What we owe to the past and what it owes to us – these form the thematic spine of the series and guide the motivations and actions of every major character in the show, from hero to antihero to villain.

As importantly, the scale of legacy is not only overlapping and multilayered but varies from moment to moment in the series. Overwhelming everything else is the Blip (the wiping out of half the intelligent life of the universe by Thanos in *Avengers: Infinity War*, undone five years later in *Avengers: Endgame*), which reshuffled the social and political order of the entire planet. In those intervening years, borders changed or were erased; the return of the Blipped forced millions to become refugees in what had been their own homes. And the fates of the un-Blipped were not universally positive, either, to say the least. For former CIA agent and once-ally of the Avengers Sharon Carter (Emily VanCamp) for example, survival in the Blipped world and abandonment by her otherwise occupied hero friends meant carving out a place for herself as the ruthless crime lord Power Broker, a significant moral compromise that betrays her own past as well as the heroic legacy of her deceased aunt Peggy Carter.

In *F&TWS*, a UN-like agency called the Global Repatriation Council (GRC) directs the lives and fortunes of both the remaining and the returnees, herding many from both sides into temporary resettlement areas while promising 'to get back to the way things were'. It is this immense power over peoples' futures that is the disastrous legacy of Thanos' choice to curb universal overpopulation, and it also drives the series' antagonists—the Flag Smashers, an

international group of rebels whose rallying cry is "One World, One People" and want a return to the Blip's simpler world of porous or entirely absent national borders.

However, the show makes clear that—tactics aside—the GRC and the Flag Smashers are both responsible for the societal injustices seen on the screen. Power differentials are the key: the GRC operates from a position of high political power where people are only masses and numbers and obstacles and threats. The Flag Smashers and their superpowered leader Karli Morgenthau (Erin Kellyman) work at the more visceral street level, engaging in direct action with traditional terrorist tactics of bombings, kidnappings, smuggling, and assaults while interacting with actual victims of the Blip-caused upheavals. The latter murder on an individual scale, while the former is poised to bring intense disruption and destruction to peoples' lives. Both groups have the potential for immense good and immense carnage, and the decisions they make have consequences. As Sam Wilson (Anthony Mackie) notes to the rescued GRC members in the series' concluding episode, the end of the Blip means the birth of a common struggle, and the powerful have a responsibility to "do better", to step up else the next Karli will, and the results will be even more horrific. Power's use or misuse leaves behind its own legacy. Among its other virtues, the series can provide media and popular culture scholars as well as scholars of more traditional social sciences with an examination of the ways in which superhero media looks at variations in structural power. Although the Flag Smashers are admittedly thinly drawn in character and motive, they nonetheless are intriguing as a symbol of popular revolt against established power structures.

But though smaller scale than the Blip, the legacy central to the series is that of Captain America, both as man and as symbol. Captain America since the 1960s has been an interestingly complex comic book figure, far more so than the patriotic propaganda symbol he began life as in 1941. He is meant to represent the promise and dream of America—the concept of a democratic and equal society, rather than the too-often unfair reality that America is for so many. On multiple occasions in the comics, Steve Rogers has resigned as Captain America rather than serve a government he believes to be corrupt or unjust, doing so again in the 2016 MCU film *Captain America: Civil War*. Both the comics and films make clear that Captain America is not a great hero because America is great; he is great because Steve Rogers is a good man. All these burdens are part and parcel to the role of Captain America, and in *F&TWS* they fall with intense and increased weight upon Steve's friend Sam. Sam has served through several MCU films as the highflying hero Falcon, but in the last scene of *Endgame*, an aged Steve (Chris Evans) passed the role and shield of Captain America to him. Sam wrestles with this choice both as a man who feels unworthy of Steve's example and as an African-American in a racist society. The reality that Steve was a handsome blond-haired blue-eyed white man, the racist American ideal and the perfect mold of an acceptable American hero, has never escaped him. In a moment of great decision, he returns the shield to the US government, noting that "we need new heroes, ones suited for the times we're in. Symbols are nothing without the women and men who give them meaning."

The emotional core of the series involves a reflection on the legacy of this symbol and those who bear it into battle. Sam encounters Isaiah Bradley (Carl Lumbly), an African-American

veteran of the Korean War with a horrific secret in his past. He himself is a super soldier, the only successful result of repeated US military experimentation upon Black soldiers to recreate the serum that gave Steve his superpowers. In a deliberate echo of the notorious Tuskegee experiments (as well as those of Nazi doctors), Bradley and his fellows were given dangerous unproven serums without being told the reason, with Bradley being the only survivor. For his pains, he was jailed for decades and repeatedly experimented on, his record and life erased from history to prevent exposure of the secret. In the series' fifth episode, "Truth", Sam faces this horrific legacy face-on as he debates whether to take up Cap's shield at last. As he tells Bradley, "I need to understand", to which Bradley responds simply, "You understand. Every black man does." He goes on to say, "They will **never** let a Black man be Captain America. And even if they did, no self-respecting Black man would ever want to be." Sam's emotional struggles over his debt to his friend Steve, to his love of country, and to the history of his people, are profound. What does Sam owe to his past and that of those Black people who went before him? In the end, Sam decides that he (and Bucky [Sebastian Stan]) need to stop looking to other people (specifically to Steve) to know oneself, and despite the complicated legacy of the shield, he is fit to wield it. He tells Bradley near the series end, "We built this country, bled for it. I'm not going to let anybody tell me I can't fight for it."

Sam's greatest triumph is, perhaps, less his and Bucky's defeat of the Flag Smashers before they can successfully kidnap the members of the GRC, and much more his success in having Bradley's story brought into the light of day and the first Black superhero given the recognition (at the Smithsonian, no less) he deserves as part of the Captain America story, and the American story. *F&TWS* can serve researchers well in its analysis of patriotism and the ways in which our cultural icons and heroes both reflect and refract our stated national values.

Steve's shadow also looms over his best friend and fellow super soldier Bucky Barnes. Bucky labors with his own historical legacy—as the Winter Soldier, he was a brainwashed Hydra operative who assassinated countless people. Having been broken of that conditioning, he seeks to make amends by bringing former Hydra associates to justice. At the same time, Bucky judges himself relative to the impossibly good and noble Steve, who never stopped believing in Bucky's goodness. In a powerful scene in episode 2, we find that Sam's decision to refuse the role Steve offered him left Bucky angry and scared, because as Bucky notes, if Steve was wrong about Sam, then he might have been wrong about Bucky, too. Even the choices and decisions of a well-meaning man like Steve can cause ripples in the lives of others, traces of worry and anger and insecurity. That is part of the power of legacy, too.

The weight of the past and its expectations affects yet another key character, John Walker (Wyatt Russell), the official replacement for Captain America after Sam returns the shield. Walker is, like Steve, a handsome chiseled white man; unlike Steve, Walker is also a decorated soldier and high school football hero, used to being popular and admired. Though a brave warrior who wants to do good, Walker lacks the core of common decency and compassion that made Steve such a particularly good man. He is prone to anger and quicker to resort to brutal tactics than his predecessor—a fatal flaw that ends with his publicly murdering a Flag Smasher in a vengeful

frenzy and his removal from the role so symbolic to what his country should represent. Like Sam, Walker lives in Steve's shadow, unable to live up to the legend; that insecurity torments him into a permanent sense of inferiority. But he also lives in the aftermath of his own past—he angrily protests to the commission that fires him that he has always done what is expected of him in the service (even unsavory things), and that whatever he is, "you built me". His deep-seated trauma and guilt are parts of his inheritance, his own legacy, as is, arguably, a powerful sense of privileged entitlement that clashes with his deep fears of failure.

The end of the series posits that the response to historical legacy is ultimately malleable—that people can change it to serve new causes and be represented by new symbols (people like Sam); that people can actively do service to their legacies in making true amends rather than pursue toxic revenge (Bucky); that legacies can do real psychological harm that negatively affect their outcomes (Walker, Sharon); and that legacies have serious emotional weight that, if left to fester, can corrupt and twist one's entire life. Legacy is multifaceted, and *F&TWS* shines brightly in its equally multifaceted exploration of its effects—the good it can serve and the damage it can do both to individuals and to populations.

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