

Superheroes choose sides in war on terror

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During World War II, the United States unleashed more than just its military against the Axis powers. In the pages of comic books, a new and timely generation of superheroes — Captain America, the Submariner and the Human Torch — took on the enemy as well.

Every soldier who thumbed through the dog-eared pages of a comic knew exactly where the superheroes stood. With them.

In "Civil War," a seven-part comic book series that pits Captain America, Iron Man and other heroes against each other over issues grown of today's war on terrorism, Marvel Comics is throwing out a challenge not only to its pantheon of superheroes, but also to its readers: "Whose side are you on?"

The question is not about the hot war in Iraq but the battle now being waged at home over warrantless wiretaps, watch lists, data mining and loss of privacy.

While these questions in the real world are being argued in the courts and through legislation, in the Marvel universe they're also being debated by muscle — and web, shield, claw and ray.

In a nutshell, popular and government fear of superheroes comes to a head after a group of second-rate heroes who star in a reality TV show bungles the takedown of some supervillains in Connecticut. The battle triggers an explosion that kills as many as 900 people, many children among them.

Faster than you can say "campaign donation," the Superhero Registration Act is hammered out in Congress

and Marvel's great heroes and antiheroes break into two camps.

Iron Man, a.k.a. Tony Stark, billionaire industrialist and arms manufacturer, takes the government side.

"Becoming public employees makes perfect sense if it helps people sleep a little easier," Iron Man tells a roof full of superheroes gathered at Fantastic Four headquarters to discuss the pending legislation.

Captain America, who has been wearing the stars and stripes as a uniform and fighting America's enemies for more than 60 years, comes down on the other side.

"Super heroes need to stay above (politics) or Washington starts telling us who the supervillains are," he tells the government's heavily armed "superhuman response unit" sent to sign him up or take him down.

With only the first two of seven "Civil War" issues released so far, and with the third set to hit shelves in mid-July, no one outside Marvel can say with any authority how this story is going to unfold or end. Those on the inside aren't talking.

The plot, which already is developing beyond the core seven-book series into existing Marvel comics and new spin-off comics, has generated buzz among comic-book enthusiasts, including many in uniform.

In Fayetteville, N.C., home to the Army's Fort Bragg and also to Dragon's Lair, a 25-year-old comic-book shop, owner Bernie Mangiboyat says about 75 percent to 80 percent of his customers are service members, and so far, he says, most are lining up with Captain America.