1. Cultural mythology and global leadership in the United States

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INTRODUCTION

Imagine that your organization is interviewing several well-known leadership gurus with the hope of improving business performance. Person A speaks about how to utilize cutting-edge technology to produce results. Person B wants you to leverage your competencies in a more effective and socially responsible manner. Person C emphasizes the challenges and opportunities of diversity, recounting how a capable woman can make good in a world dominated by men. Person D talks about boundary management and emphasizes how an outsider can adapt and contribute to an organizational culture. Team E focuses on uniting young diverse talent into an empowered work group.

Sound like typical CEO talking points? Or a management consulting firm’s pitch? Perhaps derivative of a standard MBA curriculum?

Leadership guru A is Batman, his show on cable television, using his fancy gadgets to battle the evil Riddler and Two-Face. Leadership guru B is Spiderman, his blockbuster movie at the local cinema, who strives to find his core identity. Leadership guru C is Wonder Woman, her comic book at the local bookstore, trying to balance personal and professional callings. Leadership guru D is Superman, his action figure sold on the Internet, dedicated to fighting for individual freedom and justice in his new home. Leadership gurus E are the X-men, their like-named candy products at the corner drug store, seeking to manage diverse talents and personalities toward a common goal.

The central premise of this chapter is that United States leadership style, if such a heterogeneous culture can be boiled down so simply, might be at its core akin to acting like and creating the image of the mythological super-hero.

Classic US mythology is centered on the heroic nature of a leader in a wide variety of life situations (see, http://www.americanfolklore.net, http://www.rabbitears.com). These myths pervade US folklore, emphasizing rugged individualism and super-human spirit, as per: Casey Jones, heroic railroad engineer who always brought the train in on time; Davey Crocket, brave
woodsman and defender of the Alamo; Ethan Allen, gruff but gallant leader of the Green Mountain Boys; John Henry, mighty steel-driver who outperformed the machine; Johnny Appleseed, benevolent naturalist who sowed the Earth and spread goodwill; Paul Bunyan, ‘big as a mountain and strong as a grizzly bear’ lumberjack; Pecos Bill, the original cowboy hero of the wild-west; Annie Oakley, guns-blazing angel with sharp-shooter exploits; and Brer Rabbit, clever defender of the village who outsmarts Boss Lion.

In this modern age of high-technology, US myths are now played out on the big screen in Hollywood movie productions. As such, the American Film Institute’s (AFI) list of top ‘heroes’ can be seen to exemplify superhero-like characteristics, for instance the idealistic Atticus Finch, resourceful Indiana Jones, clever Rick Blain, macho John Wayne, indomitable Rocky Balboa, noble George Bailey and courageous Ellen Ripley. These images are magnified when set against a similar list of AFI villains, suggesting an ongoing battle with evil (Darth Vader), cunning (Hannibal Lecter), manipulative (Nurse Ratched) and exploitative (Mr Potter) forces. Jumping to the business context, the prototypical American CEO heroes exhibit a similarly superhuman and charismatic, yet also entrepreneurial, drive akin to those of folklore and film but clad in business suits and set inside the corner office. These heroic icons have reached mythological larger-than-life status and are easily recognizable by single-word monikers such as …Walton, Disney, Ford, Sloan, Rockefeller, Watson, Hewlett, Turner, Welch and Jobs. A pictorial in Business Week (2002) made this argument explicit, actually depicting famous American CEOs such as Bill Gates, Michael Dell and Meg Whitman as cartoon superheroes.

All in all, the superhero is a foundational US leadership mythology. Superheroes are among the most popular and durable cultural stalwarts as portrayed in books, comics, film, television, consumer products and toys (Poniewozik et al., 2002). Thus they are readily accessible potential role models for values and behaviors, especially in the early life socialization of children – that is, future leaders. Superheroes connote distinct values, ideas, methods of play, genres of experiences, and diverse cognitive structures to their impressionable audiences that, as proposed here, manifest themselves into behavioral and leadership styles. They may even be seen to express the ‘American Dream’ (Bischoff, 2007). The superhero concept is therefore interesting and useful in studying global leadership in at least two respects: (a) Descriptive – how has superhero mythology influenced US leaders?; and (b) prescriptive – is it beneficial to act like a superhero? First, the metaphor speaks to the issue of socialization – superheroes affect leaders in terms of who they become and how they behave. They are stories, read by children and adults alike, which serve as vehicles for transferring esteemed values and modes of behavior (Bandura, 1977; 1985). Second, it allows us to look at the more and less desirable aspects of superhero leadership in terms of its relative
functionality. It can highlight preferred styles, as well as their strengths and blind-spots, and ultimately the establishment of competitive advantage both within and across cultural contexts. So this is just what I propose to examine in the remaining sections of this chapter.

OVERVIEW OF USA AND SUPERHEROES

Although the ‘hero journey’ is a somewhat universal mythology that permeates nearly all corners of the globe (Campbell, 1968), the US superhero is a rather distinctive manifestation of the lone individualist calling up super powers to overcome evil and rescue the powerless (Faludi, 2007). US business, political, athletic and related folklore has consistently emphasized larger than life leaders who are said to stand above their peers and perform superhuman feats (Shamir, 2006). Lawrence and Jewett (2002: 6) contend that ‘Americans have not moved beyond mythical consciousness … in the distinctive pattern of what we call here the American monomyth’, which echoes the theme of a lone superhero coming to rescue a threatened community. Thus superheroes are both a contributing factor to and a reflection of cultural contexts insofar as they represent a distinct art form (Bongco and Philipzig, 2000; Saltzberg, 2002). Indeed this conception of superhero leader is consistent with studies (for example, Hofstede, 1980; Javidan, et al., 2006) characterizing the US culture as highly individualistic, assertive, and performance oriented.

Moreover, although hero idolization per se is not particular to the US context, Kamm (2001) observes ‘what is new is the degree to which their values are impacting the rest of the culture’. Superheroes have been part of the social fabric for some time and are a major presence in the US market (Coville, 2002). Sales for action figures and accessories, a category that includes the superhero toys, has been estimated to exceed $1.3 billion (Ebenkamp, 2006). Total gross receipts for superhero motion pictures is enormous, with combined revenue for just the Superman, Batman, Spiderman, and X-Men movie franchises topping $4.5 billion (www.boxofficemojo.com, 2007). Alliances between comic book hero and consumer products purveyors take the mythology to another level. For example, a deal between Kraft Post, Warner Bros. Inc. and DC Comics Inc. enabled superheroes’ collectible trading cards to jump out of 15 million kids’ cereal boxes (Reyes, 2004). A recent Zogby poll shows that people in the US are actually more familiar with Superman than with current events and world leaders, emphasizing ‘how much more effective popular culture information is communicated and retained by citizens than many of the messages that come from government, educational institutions and the media’ (Harper, 2006). The devotion to superhero myths has even been described as
akin to ‘worship’, and their glamorous motion picture manifestations certainly maintain this image (Postrel, 2006).

Models of leadership are rooted in a social framework and, as such, comic book heroes can be understood as a visualization of US oral folk history (Fletcher, 2004; Scott, 2006). Perhaps the first genuine US ‘superhero’ was George Washington, whose image was important in inspiring colonial troops in the battle for national independence (McCullough, 2005). The ubiquitous penetration of like myths has since permeated all facets of the culture. The US Postal Service issued sheets of classic superhero characters from DC and Marvel Comics. US television featured network shows based on superheroes as well as the modern breakout drama ‘Heroes’ and popular cartoon ‘Ben-10’. Disney pop icon Hannah Montana has been described as ‘the superhero for tween girls: she’s got the secret identity, a more relevant superpower and a blond wig instead of a cape’ (Poniewozik, 2007). Superheroes are also trendy on college campuses (Hertz, 2005). The Economist (2003) likened bosses to supermen. Clergy have been described, or at least viewed, as possessing superhero status (Crowe, 2005). Taylor and Greve (2006) have utilized the superhero metaphor in evaluating individual (superman) versus group (Fantastic Four) performance. All in all, in multiple arenas, we see that ‘the American century produced scores of larger-than-life people with enduring legacies’ (Hunt, 1999). Combined with comic book and film heroes, this offers ‘further proof of American popular culture’s extreme devotion to the … superhero myth’ (Patterson, 2007).

MAJOR AMERICAN SUPERHEROES AND LEADERSHIP STYLE

Our central thesis is that superheroes are a valuable tool for understanding how US leaders and their organizations have acquired values and behavioral propinquities and what they might teach us about understanding the dynamic. In a general sense, we might look at the classic US superhero myth as suggesting that leaders should strive to be larger than life – super-brave, super-strong, super-smart, with super technology, doing super deeds, and so on; an individual that towers above everyone else. This aligns with what has been termed by Kamm (2001) as a ‘superman syndrome’, described as the ‘active glorification of speed and toughness’ and is so pervasive that ‘anyone not wishing to be part of this hyperactive-interactive world is in danger of being labeled an outcast, slow, irrelevant, or depressed’. Let us now consider ten representative US-style superheroes, how they might act as CEOs, and some potential ‘lessons’ for understanding and modeling leadership styles (see Table 1.1).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hero/myth</th>
<th>Advises leaders to leverage …</th>
<th>Advises leaders to avoid …</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aquaman</td>
<td>Diversity, communication, domain</td>
<td>Straying from core, poorly-transferable competencies, overextended resources</td>
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<tr>
<td>Batman</td>
<td>Innovation/technology, creativity, judgment under uncertainty</td>
<td>Dark side, greed, overly emotional responses</td>
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<tr>
<td>Captain America</td>
<td>Courage, identity, commitment, loyalty</td>
<td>Self-doubt, rigidity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fantastic Four</td>
<td>Diverse talents, synergy</td>
<td>Ill-managed transformations, disharmony, self-loathing, trappings of celebrity</td>
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<td>Flash</td>
<td>Speed, first mover advantages</td>
<td>Going too fast, poor advanced planning, losing control</td>
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<tr>
<td>Incredible Hulk</td>
<td>Power, physical resources</td>
<td>Rage, in-your-face competition, poor self monitoring, low emotional intelligence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spiderman</td>
<td>Learning, intuition, flexibility, social responsibility</td>
<td>Ego-orientation, loss of public sentiment, stress/angst, confused identity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Superman</td>
<td>Strength, moral code, resiliency, vision</td>
<td>Rigidities, blind spots, over-confidence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wonder Woman</td>
<td>Wisdom, strength, beauty, stealth</td>
<td>Base prejudice and bias, uneven work-life balance, poor alliance and relationship strategies</td>
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<tr>
<td>X-Men</td>
<td>Transformations, core values, teamwork, youthful energy</td>
<td>Public mistrust, negative motivation, ineffective image management, indiscretion</td>
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Aquaman

(First Appearance: November 1941 – More Fun #73), alter ego Arthur Curry, also known as King of the Seven Seas and Marine Marvel, was born of Tom Curry (ex-sailor) and a woman from Atlantis. Aquaman can live underwater, perform great marine feats, and communicate with sea creatures. However, he cannot survive more than one hour without some contact with water. Because of his superior performance within a limited domain, he recalls Porter’s (1980) ideas of niche strategy and competitive advantage. His interaction and synergistic coordination sea denizens invoke ideas on diversity management and cross-cultural communication. CEO Aquaman, the proverbial king of his realm, might emphasize these ideals to his organization while warning against straying too far from one’s core domain, lest one suffer suffocating over-extensions of capacity and poorly-transferable practices. A leadership lesson: Strength in one area does not guarantee universal generalizability.

Batman

(First Appearance: May 1939 – Detective Comics #27), alter ego millionaire socialite Bruce Wayne, also known as the Caped Crusader and Masked Manhunter, was ‘created’ when witnessing his parents’ murder and thus swearing an oath to prevent this tragedy from happening to others. Batman is a master scientist and creative criminologist/detective, of impressive physical prowess, owner of state-of-the-art technology (Waid, 1990), and aided by side-kick Robin. However, he is constantly struggling against his ‘dark side’ and inner daemons. These characteristics relate to leadership and technology, the functionality of personal reflection and introspection, and the need for strategic flexibility and adaptive decision making under uncertainty. CEO Batman might emphasize practical innovation, combined with sound yet malleable judgment, while warning against the lure of greed and overly emotional responses to wrongdoing (see similar manifestations in popular media, including the Star Wars franchise). A leadership lesson: Technology is not panacea, and logic does not always rule emotion.

Captain America

(First Appearance: March 1941 – Captain America #1), alter ego World War II army Private Steve Rogers, is a symbol of patriotism and was once displayed as punching Adolph Hitler. Also known as Cap and the Star-Spangled Avenger, his powers genesis from a secret government experiment with a special serum to build the body and brain. Captain America is distinguished by his athleticism, intelligence, and especially strong shield. However,
he is haunted by doubts about hero persona (re: public sentiment during the US-Vietnam War). Cap prompts one to consider leadership interventions oriented toward organizational loyalty, courage and commitment, as well as approaches to conflict (for example, competition versus collaboration). CEO Cap might leverage these attributes while working to understand and manage genuine questions of self, values and identity. It is interesting to note that in 2007 Cap was ‘killed off’ in the comics, executed amid a modern chaos of shifting alliances and deep internal divisions when he refused to betray old-school values and unmask. A leadership lesson: There are many layers, and chapters, to competitive dynamics and conflict resolution.

The Fantastic Four

(Or F4, First Appearance: November 1961 – Fantastic Four #1) is a team of superheroes. They consist of Mr Fantastic (a.k.a. Reed Richards), Invisible Girl (Sue Storm), the Human Torch (Sue’s brother Johnny Storm) and Thing (Benjamin Grimm). The F4 gained their powers when a test pilots’ ship was penetrated by cosmic rays. Modeled after the four classic Greek elements, they have the unique abilities of elasticity, invisibility, fire and strength. Sometimes they cannot control their collective infighting or personal transformations to and from their alter-egos, especially the hotheaded Torch and short-fused Thing. Thing’s self-loathing and self-pity are reminiscent of the success-trap executives sometimes find themselves in. Leadership issues such as team management, flexibility, diversity management, and emotions relate to these characters. Their celebrity status also speaks to the leadership mystique. Top management team F4 might emphasize teamwork and synergy while seeking to increase control over one’s environment (see Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978), as well as deal more effectively with their heroic status and public persona. A leadership lesson, as per President Lincoln: A house (that is, individual or collective) divided against itself cannot stand.

Flash

(First Appearance: January 1940 – Flash Comics #1), alter ego police scientist Barry Allen, also known as the Scarlet Speedster and Sultan of Speed, gained his abilities from a lightning-induced explosion at a chemical lab. Flash is an incredibly fast runner, with a top velocity estimated at 10x light (or faster than the speed of thought, perhaps suggesting act > think?), and has a good sense of humor, yet can sometimes operate too fast and lose control of a situation. Flash maps quite well with leadership issues relating to speed, time management and accelerated practices. CEO Flash might lead his organization toward a speed-based paradigm (see Kessler and Chakrabarti, 1996) and possible
first-mover or fast-follower strategic orientation. He would hopefully remain vigilant against going too quickly, outpacing one’s strategy and structural capabilities, not planning ahead sufficiently and losing control. A leadership lesson: Speed kills … but faster is not always better.

The Incredible Hulk

(First Appearance: May 1962 – Incredible Hulk #1), alter ego nuclear scientist Dr Bruce Banner, also known as the Green Goliath and Jolly Green Giant, emerged from Dr Banner when he was exposed to a gamma-bomb weapon while saving a teenager at its test site. Hulk is renowned for his brutal, awesome strength but at the same time is held prisoner by his rage-induced transformations, so much so that he cannot risk revealing it in his daily relationships. This superhero gains his advantage as well as handicap from areas overlapping the issues of power, personality, and (lack of) emotional intelligence or EI (Goleman, 1995), specifically that related to anger management. CEO Hulk might be well served to mitigate his focus on in-your-face competition with training in self-monitoring, emotional intelligence and self-control. A leadership lesson: Physical resources are but tools that must be properly managed.

Spiderman

(First Appearance: August 1962 – Amazing Fantasy #15), alter ego high school student Peter Parker, also known as Spidey and Web-Head, transformed after the combined events of being bitten by radioactive spider and realizing that his misuse of this power contributed to his uncle’s death. This superhero is distinguished by such spider-like attributes as climbing, leaping, web-slinging, and a special sense-of-danger. However, he is constrained by a misunderstood public sentiment, personal ego, identity crises, and human angst. There are many links between the Spiderman character and leadership issues such as the learning organization, strategic flexibility, intuitive decision making, and the call for greater corporate responsibility. CEO Spiderman might lead a flexible and socially oriented enterprise, but must also reconcile personal doubt and stress, better deal with the ‘burden of leadership’, and buttress this with initiatives in external relations and image management. A leadership lesson, as per the Spiderman theme song: ‘With great power comes great responsibility’.

Superman

(First Appearance: June 1938 – Action Comics #1), alter ego newspaper reporter Clark Kent is the oldest of the considered superheroes and the recog-
nized usher of the ‘golden age of comics’. Also known as the Man of Steel and Man of Tomorrow, this character escaped to earth from the destroyed planet Krypton. Despite his mild mannered appearance, he boasts amazing strength, the ability of flight, impenetrable skin, and x-ray vision. However, his powers are compromised by exposure to home planet elements such as Kryptonite or a red sun. His steel, flight, and strength map well onto issues such as resiliency, resource-based competition and power and influence. CEO superman might enjoy the fruits of these awesome advantages but keep an eye towards fundamental strategic vulnerabilities and blind spots and perhaps incorporate some form of sound contingency planning, lest his ‘strategic kryptonites’ get the best of him. Even the most powerful leaders and organizations are not omnipotent. A leadership lesson (or two): Do not judge a book by its cover; and too much confidence can be dangerous.

**Wonder Woman**

(First Appearance: December 1941 – *All Star Comics #8*), alter ego army major Diana Prince, is our sole female representative on the list. Also known as the Amazing Amazon, she was born when the Goddess Aphrodite brought a statue to life on the Amazon people’s Paradise Island. She is known to be as strong as Hercules, swift as Mercury, wise as Athena, and beautiful as Aphrodite. Wrapped in the US flag, Wonder Woman wields an invisible robot plane, magic lasso, and bullet-resistant feminium (yes – ‘feminine-idiom’) bracelets. She is also hampered by her rather ineffectual boyfriend, Steve Trevor, and the widespread and rather villainous negative stereotyping of women. One can see numerous desirable characteristics in her stealth (plane), corporate intelligence (rope), and form/function (bracelets) tools. CEO Wonder Woman might easily combine her godlike attributes and cutting-edge technology to forge supernormal rents but she must at the same time be weary of energy-draining alliances, personal responsibilities and relationships, and base prejudice that might mitigate her successful completion of her missions. A leadership lesson: The playing field is neither level nor insurmountable.

**The X-Men**

(First Appearance: September 1963 – *X Men #1*) consist of The Beast (a.k.a. Hank McCoy), Iceman (Bobby Drake), Cyclops (Scott Summers), the Angel (Warren Worthington III) and Marvel Girl (Jean Grey). These youngsters are mutated teenagers with extra powers, the proverbial next step in the evolutionary chain, who were recruited and gathered into a team by Professor X – note the prominent role of a professor in superhero lore! They leverage the diverse abilities of apelike attributes, freezing, eye-laser, wings, and teleportation. They
also are on constant guard against the trappings of youth as well as public distrust and potentially evil mutants’ motivations. We can see the issues of stakeholder relationships, teamwork and synergy, team leadership, values and social responsibility mirrored and developed in the X-Men saga. Top management team X-Men might do well to combine a focus on continuous professional development and the management of complex relationships with a better reconciliation with perception and public sentiment. After all, the constructed schema (by employees, customers, competitors, and so on) is ultimately the foundation for action – that is, image is everything. A leadership lesson: Perception, both of self and others, is the practically important reality.

All in all, we can glean several themes from these classic US-style superheroes. On the macro level, they reinforce the notions of developing and leveraging competitive advantage (through unique, valuable, and difficult-to- replicate powers), the pitfalls of poorly managed relationships and networks (coordination among diverse individuals is key, à la the Fantastic Four, X-men), the virtues of ambidexterity and contingency (through their changing forms), and skepticism toward wholehearted reliance on public institutions (resembling a free market, capitalistic, and in some senses Darwinian view of competition). On the meso level they reinforce the potential of power, creativity, speed and technology (gadgets and gizmos) as well as the balancing of individual forces (win-win partnerships, image management, and supportive infrastructure). At the micro level they speak to ethical distinctions of good versus evil and the importance of self-reflection and finding one’s place in the world.

Delving deeper, we might extract from the proceeding a profile of the prototypical US ‘superhero leader’ who seeks to:

- fight for noble personal and societal goals;
- be strong, fast, brave, and nimble;
- leverage cutting-edge technology and physical resources;
- creatively develop and exploit unique advantage;
- be self-reliant yet compassionate;
- manage reputation and image; and
- self-reflect on identity and purpose.

Further, as the superheroes are inherently and thus inevitably human, they do not always approximate these metrics. Goals are not always met and character is often tested. As per Poniewozik and colleagues (2002), US superheroes, though possessing amazing powers, are particularly ‘human’ insofar as they reflect our anxieties, embody our weaknesses, and are basically normal and flawed. Indeed as these characters illustrate, even heroes struggle with internal conflicts, external challenges and complex contingencies in their
enactment of values and their pursuit of ideals. Thus the prototype is unevenly pursued and imperfectly realized. Notwithstanding, its idealistic lure remains a perennial benchmark.

GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS

We have thus far considered the US superhero myth in somewhat of a vacuum, largely immune from cultural and other relevant contingencies such as history, genre, and the like. Here, let us at least partly take up the challenge and consider three particularly interesting ones – culture, domain, generation – as well as a particularly critical pitfall of the superhero lens.

Culture

Comic book superheroes are among the most globally recognized fictional characters. Batman and Superman images can be found on T-shirts and in toy boxes across the four corners of the earth. Notwithstanding, the native superhero is often differentially portrayed between cultures as illustrated by the following examples (Mayfield et al., 2001). In France, comics appeal to all age groups via genres of humor, fantasy, adventure, erotica and psychological drama. The Italian comic book industry focuses mainly on national norms and historical works, crime stories, erotic and even classical literature adaptations. The Japanese comic book industry is both the oldest and most successful in the world, leveraging animation (anime) to create highly popular and transportable characters such as Pokémon and Power Rangers. Mexican comics show a strong national character in their humorous works involving historical protagonists and cultural icons. There is also a rich history of superhero lore in China, including the Monkey King, White Snake, and Ghosts and Fox Spirits. Take for example the Monkey King, a 400 plus year old allegorical rendition of a shape-shifting master of magic tricks and kung-fu. Or recently developed ‘Soccer Boy’, about a group of children who succeed only by obeying their coach’s authority and working together (http://www.gospelcom.net).

In total, one might see in these examples some cultural divergences (for example, collectivist versus individualist, high versus low power distance – see Hofstede, 1980) from ‘traditional’ US-based superheroes. These in turn might be attributed to deep-seated mythologies and ultimately manifest in organizational approaches and personal predilections. It also suggests that there might be more than one best way to lead. Consider the following question: Should Superman engage issues differently depending on where in the world he is called (or assigned)? This speaks to the need to develop diagnostic acumen and behavioral flexibility required for global leadership success.
and on the flip side, the frequent difficulties encountered by ‘ugly American’ supermen who do not consider these nuanced relationships.

**Domain**

There are of course a plethora of rich fields in religion, history, literature, and the like from which to draw similar superhero comparisons. Insofar as US culture was traditionally conceptualized in relation to the Judeo-Christian ethic, consider for example the following link between Superman and the religious figure of Moses (Saltzberg, 2002):

His people faced destruction. They sent out a baby boy, placing him in a box, to ensure his survival. He grew up to be a hero, a savior, able to achieve feats that no ordinary man could do. Moses? Or Superman? It could be either. Superman was drawn by two Jewish boys, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, and was based on Moses. It is reported that the Superman comics were never drawn on Thursday night, as Mrs. Siegel needed her breadboard to knead her loaves of bread for Shabbat!

For a more recent blending of biblical ‘superheroes’ and modern media, see for example Jones’ (1995) discussion of Jesus as CEO or the children’s cartoons based on Bill Bennett’s virtues (1996) and ‘Veggie Tales’ series. These latter vegetable-based heroes include superman-like Larry Boy, a caped cucumber who along with his vegetable character friends battle the evil Weed (spreads rumors about people), Big Gourd (tells lies and gets others to fib), and star in adventures such as ‘Leggo My Ego’. Upshot – One should not underestimate the myths and leadership values embedded in religious traditions and lore. Similarly, one should not view superheroes as divorced from their spiritual and ethical context.

**Generation**

It is our contention that the superhero mythology is both snapshot and cinema insofar as it is useful in describing general values and characteristics as well as shifting trends and evolving affinities in the culture. Superheroes are not static, and their meaning and influence cannot be wholly captured cross-sectionally. This is to say; in addition to the prototype’s functionality as a conceptual overlay, the superhero genre is also reflective of social changes in a culture (Grossman, 2005). For instance, compare the do-gooder Batman of the 1970s with the darker, more introspective character in the 1990s. Indeed, the United States comic book industry has adapted to many social and political issues in its narratives through the years (Palmer-Mehta and Hay, 2005). Societal tensions are even on display, as Stanley (2005) argues that there is a general poor US response to female superhero films, reflecting a ‘glass ceil-
Insofar as superheroes are mirrors of their societies, we can expect the mythology to keep adapting to reflect widespread values and conditions which bear upon US leadership styles. For instance, the toy industry has recently created ‘business’ action figures such as MoneyMan, BossMan, and IT-based GeekMan (Trancos, 2005). Disney has launched a film and products franchise based on a seemingly normal but secretly superhero family called the ‘Incredibles’. This trend begs the question; just as Captain America led the charge against the Nazis, can superheroes address today’s challenge of unconventional war against terror? Or compete in a context of rapidly advancing technology and constantly shifting markets? To the former point, Poniewozik (2001) wonders if Superman could defeat global terrorist networks and argues that, in a post-9/11 world, it is ordinary citizens that embody the true nature of heroism. This was reinforced by a young boy, whose father worked near the former World Trade Center, who identified firefighters and police officers as superheroes (Kessler, 2002). As such, superhero myths, and by extension their leadership implications, must be appreciated as a constantly evolving genre that reflects an equally dynamic cultural context.

**Potential Pitfall**

It is important that we do not come across as being exclusively positive on the superhero myth. One particularly important blind-spot is raised by what has been termed (and this certainly is no coincidence) ‘post-heroic leadership’. The argument is that collaborative, or post-heroic models of leadership, may be more congruent with post-industrial society than ‘classic’ models emphasizing the great individualist, partly because single individuals simply cannot unite all the multifarious expertise needed and process all the contingencies required to succeed in the modern business context (Dentico, 1999) – see Commentary box below. In a post-heroic paradigm, leaders are less towering figures and more akin to coaches or partners, sharing power and addressing challenges through open collaboration and teamwork (Bradford and Cohen, 1998). It counters what has been labeled the ‘romance of leadership’ (Meindl et al., 1985), the tendency to idealize leaders and to attribute to them much greater influence on outcomes than they actually have. Post-heroic leadership
embodies a different way of looking at the world, which admits limitations and delegates true power. Thus Dutton (1996) asks us:

\[
\text{Are you a hero? If you answer ‘no’, you are probably a better leader than those who said ‘yes’. Heroic leaders – those who have all the answers, make all the decisions and are totally responsible for their departments’ or companies’ fates – are being swept away by a business environment that requires leaders to share responsibility, implement a tangible vision and encourage a sense of ownership among employees at all levels of their organizations – and accept criticism well.}
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Indeed, creating a sense of collaboration (or post-heroic leadership) is seen by many as a necessity for the modern organization to succeed. As such leaders must relent in their attitudes toward centralized control and purely individualized competency (Roth, 1994). Wonderful examples of US post-heroic leadership are embodied in the practices of its plethora of high-technology and entrepreneurial juggernauts (for example, Google, Microsoft, Apple, HP, 3M) as well as W. L. Gore and Associates, which has enjoyed profitable growth for over three decades due in large part to a leadership philosophy of no hierarchy, no titles, and no permanent team leaders (Dutton, 1996). This and other post-heroic companies work from a strong set of core values and a dedication to flexible and collaborative leadership. Thus merging these two spheres of myth – heroic and post-heroic – may help approximate enduringly successful, perhaps even wise, leadership in organizations (Kessler and Bailey, 2007). The resultant framework would recognize the extraordinary intellectual prowess and principled objectives endemic in an individual leader but also their synergistic orientation, inherent humility, and essential interconnectedness with organizational actors and stakeholders.

**COMMENTARY BOX:**

President of Consulting Firm and Former CEO/COO of Major US Corporations

I had the personal experience of following a ‘superhero’ into a job … He was an autocrat who prided himself on his knowledge of the industry, the market, technology, with very visible stature in the business community. He took steps to flatten the organization, removing the layer of leadership below him, ostensibly to speed decision making, but in practice to consolidate power and decision making. All strategic decisions were made by him alone, and he was constantly deferred to with any questions or issues, and no one openly disagreed with him.
USAF Lt Col (retired) and Senior VP Finance for Major US Corporation

I have worked with and for individuals who had the ‘superhero’ or ‘Lone Ranger’ complex … I see them more on Wall Street than in the military … Superheroes tend to be rewarded with bonuses, raises and promotions – which feeds their belief in the value of the superhero approach to work … The people I’ve seen engage in this behavior are very competitive, and seem to believe that for them to win others must lose. They think this is the path to success in terms of compensation and prestige … If successful, they tend to work long hours and get a lot done … Some superheroes tend to be disruptive inside an organization, and cause low morale and increased turnover in their wake. Long-term organizational effectiveness can be diminished by a superhero leader who is not developing a strong bench.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter we have considered the United States superhero mythology and its implications for understanding leadership style, including its origins, strengths and blind spots, as well as applications to modern challenges. The prototypical US superhero leader develops and leverages unique competitive advantage, esteems strength and speed, competes vigorously, embraces flexibility and contingency, actively manages reputation and image, does not rely on public institutions, develops cutting-edge tools and technology, constantly explores moral and ethical issues, and self-reflects on power and purpose. This ideal might be more or less closely approximated and is accompanied by both advantages and potential pitfalls. Ten popular superheroes were discussed that illustrate these cultural characteristics and project lessons for global leadership.

Throughout its history, US superhero mythology has evolved throughout frontier lore, cultural conglomeration, industrial and mass-media development, and geopolitical expansion. It has been revealed in campfire stories, cinematic productions, and perhaps most unabashedly through comic book idols. Although such a heterogeneous and complex culture is difficult to capture with a single metaphor, understanding the US superhero mentality, including the core values and behavioral dynamics that it connotes, is a useful vehicle for making sense of manifest leadership. And more than this, perhaps harmonizing this mentality with more distinctly collaborative attributes is the
next step in its engagement within an increasingly interconnected global area. Superman, Batman, Aquaman, and others did in fact work together within the rubric of the ‘Justice League’ to synergistically leverage their diverse personal attributes across multiple domains in pursuit of a greater good. Perhaps it is also the wise leader – and as per the chapter’s opening vignette the wise CEO, consultant or educator – who can creatively blend heroic and post-heroic characteristics to create true and enduring organizational greatness.

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