

8-5-2003

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Recommended Citation

Goldstein, Andrew, ""Depravity for Children -- Ten Cents a Copy!": Hartford and the Censorship of Comic Books, 1948 - 1959" (2003). *Hartford Studies Collection: Papers by Students and Faculty*. Paper 14.
http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/hartford_papers/14

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May 5, 2003
Revised August 5, 2003

**"Depravity for Children -- Ten Cents a Copy!":
Hartford and the Censorship of Comic Books, 1948 - 1959**

Whenever a new medium reaches a level of popularity, it will be subject to increased scrutiny under the public eye. So it was with comic books during the late 1940s and early 1950s. Comic books, unlike the comic strips that appeared in the newspaper, suffered the additional handicap of being perceived as a medium for children, a perception that led to nationwide attempts to regulate their content and distribution. Initially, criticism against comic books cited the medium as a contributor to illiteracy, but connections were soon made to allege a link with juvenile delinquency.

The campaigns against comic books in Connecticut, as similar campaigns elsewhere, were tied in with the broader concern about the emergence of youth culture. The late 1940s and early 50s were conservative times in America, and art forms that threatened the status quo were susceptible to criticism. In examining decency crusades against comic books, it is important to keep in perspective the fact that this criticism was occurring simultaneously with critiques of other aspects of youth culture such as fashions, radio and television, and rock music. The key issue was one of control, and an examination of the most concerned parties -- schools, law enforcers and legislators, religious and civic groups -- paints a clear portrait of who was attempting to do the controlling. In the introduction to *Generations of Youth: Youth Cultures and History in Twentieth-Century America*, editors Joe Austin and Michael Nevin Willard write:

The public debates surrounding "youth" are important forums where new understandings about the past, present, and future of public life are encoded, articulated, and contested. "Youth" becomes a metaphor for perceived social change and its projected consequences, and as such it is an enduring locus for displaced social anxieties. Pronouncements such as "the problems of youth today" used as a scapegoat for larger social concerns, objectify

and reify young people *as the problem in itself*. Young people are approached with the assumption that they are "problems".¹

Connecticut has had close ties with the comic book industry. The comic book itself, in its modern format, was a Connecticut invention, first produced in 1933 by a Waterbury firm, Eastern Color Printing. For many years, Connecticut maintained a strong role as a major industrial producer of comic books, and several major publishers have been headquartered in the Nutmeg State over the years. It is therefore not surprising that a state that was a leader in the industry's production would also become a leader in its regulation.

In the course of my research, I have come across numerous references to Connecticut -- and Hartford -- playing a prominent role in the censorship of comic books. These references however, were vague, begging the question of exactly how Connecticut was a leader in this national movement. Why and how did Hartford have such influence, and why were comic books of particular concern at that time?

Public concern over comic book content began as soon as the medium gained popularity in the mid-1930s. This concern was contemporary with criticism of newspaper comic strips, which were at the time turning away from humorous comic strips in favor of adventure-oriented strips such as Flash Gordon and Tarzan. Initially, the perception was that comic books were directing the nation's youth away from "higher" forms of literature, and the most outspoken critics were librarians and educators.

Criticism against comic books gained momentum shortly after the first appearance of Superman in 1938. In 1940, the *New York Times* began criticizing comic books in its editorial columns, claiming that comic books contained sensationalistic violence and were addictive to children. The first campaign against comic books to gain national attention came from literary critic Sterling North, in an Editorial for the Chicago Daily News. North's article "A National

¹ Austin and Willard, p.1; italics are in the original.

Disgrace", which ran on May 8, 1940, contained an elitist prejudice against popular culture that in the past had been used against media predecessors such as dime novels and would be echoed by future critics. North called comic books "badly drawn, badly written and badly printed -- a strain on young eyes and nervous systems...[that] spoil a child's natural sense of color, their hypodermic injection of sex and murder make the child impatient with better, though quieter stories". All of the themes within North's rhetoric -- criticism of comic books as a form, a dismissal of comic books' literary merit, and a perception of comic books as children's literature - - would be repeated by critics to follow.²

In the years following World War II, comic book publishers turned towards new genres to maintain their readership. The end of paper rationing marked a boom in publishing, but publishers adjusted the content of their comic books to suit the needs of postwar American culture. The genre of the superhero, which had thrived on patriotism, waned in the absence of Axis powers to fight³, and genres such as westerns, "funny animals", crime, and horror gained in popularity. New genres such as romance and teen humor (e.g., "Archie") also contributed to filling in the vacuum. The crime and horror comic books -- debatably marketed towards an older readership but unquestionably being bought by children as well -- began to become a particular concern to parents and educators, as publishers began to get more explicit with the material being published. Whereas earlier objections to comic books had focused upon comic books' status as popular culture and therefore detracting from more worthy pursuits, it is during the post-War era that comic books began to be regarded as a threat, inspiring calls to action against the industry.

In response to mass media criticism, the comic book industry formed its own organized attempts to defend itself. Many publishers such as Fawcett Publications, formed editorial advisory boards consisting of educators and psychiatric professionals. Another tactic used by

² Nyberg, p.3-4

³ Following World War II, many of the superheroes that lingered had their modus operandi changed by writers. For example, Fawcett's Spy-Smasher became Crime-Smasher, while Timely's Captain America turned away from fighting Nazis and Japanese in favor of opposing Communist threats.

comic book publishers was the publication of educational comic books such as *Classics Illustrated* as a means of diffusing criticism away from more controversial fare. Still other publishers attached themselves to charitable causes such as the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis and the Red Cross. A February 1947 article in the *New Republic* inspired the formation of a trade association of comic book publishers, the Association of Comics Magazine Publishers.⁴ The ACMP adopted a self-regulating code of standards modeled after the similar code in existence for motion pictures, but because of a lack of consensus from the participating publishers and relative leniency in its standards, the ACMP was not enough to protect the comic book industry from criticism.⁵

Despite reports of decreasing incidents of juvenile-related crimes, the Connecticut State Legislature organized an investigation into juvenile delinquency and its causes in late 1947; comic books, however, were not mentioned as a possible contributor to delinquency.⁶ Organized public outcry against comic books did not reach Hartford until the summer of 1948, beginning the first wave of anti-comics criticism within Connecticut. A number of events early in the year may have fomented public opinion. It was during this time that psychiatrist Fredric Wertham gained public attention for his studies linking the reading of comic books with juvenile delinquency. A March 27 article in *Collier's*, "Horror in the Nursery", presented Wertham's theories to a national audience for the first time. Wertham had established himself as a leading authority on the issue of juvenile delinquency and comic books, and *Time* magazine covered Wertham's presentation, "The Psychopathology of Comic Books," given at a Manhattan symposium held by the Association for the Advancement of Psychotherapy. Other articles written by Wertham followed

⁴ Nyberg, p.31

⁵ Wright, p.103-104

⁶ "Nine Appointed to Committee for Delinquency Study", *Hartford Courant*, 11/11/47

in the months to come and Wertham became, in the words of historian Bradford Wright, "a frequently requested speaker at forums on comic books and juvenile crime".⁷

Wertham is a controversial figure in the history of comic book criticism. The Bavarian-born psychiatrist studied under Freud before emigrating to the United States on the invitation of Dr. Adolf Meyer of the Phipps Psychiatric Clinic at John Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. Wertham's distinguished career⁸ includes tenure as director of the Bellevue Mental Hygiene Clinic and founder of the Lafargue Clinic, a free psychiatric clinic in Harlem that provided psychiatric services to blacks and low-income families.⁹

Many historians have misunderstood Wertham. Despite his criticism of comic books, Wertham's politics were quite liberal and he claimed to be opposed to censorship where adults were concerned. Also conveniently overlooked by fan historians is the fact that among Wertham's criticisms of the comic book industry was his valid concern about the rampant racism found within many comic books. Furthermore, Wertham did not believe comic books to be the sole cause of juvenile delinquency as some of his critics have maintained but believed comic book reading to be just one environmental factor to affect young minds.

The most valid criticism of Wertham lies in his faulty methodology, which reasoned backwards from juvenile delinquents to the comic books they read as a causation. Milton Barron, one of Wertham's contemporaries, notes:

...To argue, as has one psychologist, that an increase in juvenile delinquency has gone hand in hand with the distribution of comic books is the same kind of fallacy that enables statisticians jokingly to "prove" that the stork delivers babies, simply because storks and the birth rate are more numerous in rural areas.¹⁰

Wertham's other flaws include his presentation of single comic book panels out of context to prove his points and other misrepresentation of comic book content plus misguided concerns such as his condemnation of covert homosexuality in Batman and Robin. Despite certain flaws in

⁷ Wright, p. 97

⁸ In addition to his criticism of the comic book industry, Wertham is noted for his testimony during the landmark desegregation case, *Brown vs. Board of Education*.

⁹ Nyberg, p. 85-90

Wertham's reasoning however, he was no fool and did seem to possess a genuine concern for his subjects.

The other significant event of early 1948 was a Supreme Court case, *Winters vs. New York*. This court case struck down a New York statute prohibiting the distribution of crime magazines; Justice Reed declared that the law was "vague and indefinite" as written, to the extent that it violated the First Amendment.¹¹ Although the Winters case dealt with an adult crime magazine, it was used as a rallying point by groups both opposing and advocating legislation against comic books. The pro-legislation camp justified the decision as proving the need for obscenity laws that were more strongly worded, while the anti-legislation camp cited the case as an example of democratic advocacy of freedom of speech. The case set a precedent for future court cases, and was cited in many future legislative reports on both national and statewide levels. Historian Jon Berk attributes the Winters case as a causative influence on the comic book industry's boom in the publication of crime comic books, citing the increase from twenty crime titles in 1947 to over one hundred in 1948.¹²

On June 14, 1948, Hartford City Councilman Thomas J. Kerrigan, Jr. successfully lobbied against comic books and pocket novels [paperbacks] "glorifying crime and sex"¹³; the resolution targeted material "of a serious, immoral and criminal theme, thus endangering and possibly contaminating the plastic minds of our youth."¹⁴ Kerrigan sought to launch a campaign against juvenile delinquency, beginning with a resolution signed by Mayor Cyril Coleman proclaiming June 20 to June 27 to be "Cleanup the News-stand Week", in which vendors would be asked to cooperate in removing objectionable material from news stands and drug store displays. Kerrigan cited a Juvenile Court report that stated that "many 15-year-olds got ideas on

¹⁰ Barron, p.197

¹¹ Wright, p.99; see also Nyberg, p.39

¹² Berk

¹³ "Move to Clean City of 'Comic' Books Sought", *Hartford Times*, 6/16/48, p.1

holdups and other crimes from comic books," an assertion that was backed up by State's Attorney Meade Alcorn. Kerrigan also cited support from the state's Catholic newspaper, the *Catholic Transcript*, in favoring a unified drive beginning at the countywide level. If the voluntary program failed, Kerrigan made it known that he would recommend that the City of Hartford adopt an ordinance aimed at halting the distribution, display, and sale of objectionable comic books and magazines.

The resolution passed unanimously, and approximately 200 copies of the resolution were sent to all drug stores, news vendors, and magazine and book wholesalers.¹⁵ Mayor Coleman stated that he agreed that "some of the magazines are not fit for children".¹⁶ Removed from the resolution was Kerrigan's initial proposition that news vendors be threatened with the threat of a high license tax if they did not comply with the cleanup campaign. Kerrigan continued to express favor of this policy even after it was declined by the City Council. The Council also voted down an amendment proposed by Councilman Milton Nahum to refer the matter to City Manager Sharpe for further consultation of the matter with the Police Department, "relative to the enforcement of existing ordinances on the subject".¹⁷ This practice of passing the buck set the tone for the later 1954-55 campaign, and was typical of the campaign in Connecticut. Even among those who favored censorship, it seemed that no one wanted the responsibility of deciding and enforcing what material was to be considered acceptable or objectionable.

Despite the resolution for a weeklong program, the *Hartford Times* declared the cleanup to be a year-round action; Councilman Lucy C. West stated "I'd prefer to have it forever instead of a week".¹⁸ As a part of investigative efforts, Francis J. Rago of the Connecticut Department of Public Health, made a survey of objectionable comic books and turned in two reports. Rago's study estimated that the total intake of the comic book industry exceeded \$48,000,000, "most of

¹⁴ Hartford Court of Common Council minutes, 6/14/48. Hartford Collection, Hartford Public Library.

¹⁵ "Comic Books On City Hall Newsstand Not Registered Among Best Sellers", *Hartford Courant*, 6/17/48

¹⁶ "Council Asks News Stands Eliminate Improper Books", *Hartford Courant*, 6/15/48

¹⁷ Hartford Court of Common Council minutes, 6/14/48. Hartford Collection, Hartford Public Library.

which was clear profit because of the cheap quality of paper and authorship of most of them"¹⁹.

Rago's study provided ammunition for the critics who alleged that comic book publishers were more interested in turning a profit than in the welfare of young readers.

Not everyone was enthusiastic as the City Council was about the resolution, however. Many news vendors were quick to object, although some did support the cleanup efforts. In the words of one newspaper article:

They left it to the vendors to decide for themselves which ones are offensive. "So there are 12 to 14 hundred retail outlets for magazines, comic and cartoon books in Hartford", the newsstand boys say. "So that means Hartford will have 12 or 14 hundred individual judges of what is too sexy or what glorifies crime". In addition, some stands and stores handle as many as 800 or a thousand titles, with new ones coming along a half a dozen a week. Is a man who has a newsstand supposed to look over all these periodicals every week...?²⁰

News stand operators, in addition to not wanting to be placed in the unfeasible role of censors, also protested that the refusal of materials from publishers could jeopardize their franchises. Retailers noted that many publishers profited from tie-in sales, in which comic books were included among packages of titles distributed in bulk. News vendors and distributors -- particularly Herman P. Kopplemann, one of Hartford's main distributors of periodical literature -- proposed that a federal or state governmental agency be responsible for ensuring that comic book publishers keep their material within acceptable standards. Kerrigan rebuked this complaint by stating that "Distributors have a moral obligation to their community".²¹

Soon after Coleman signed the resolution, the Hartford County Druggists Association took it upon themselves to approach the City Council regarding a board of standards for newsstand literature. Simon I. Sless was designated by the association to meet with members of the City Council, along with local clergy, members of the school system, teen-agers and law

¹⁸ "Council Votes Cleanup Week on Comic Books", *Hartford Times*, 6/15/48, p.1

¹⁹ "Articles on Misnamed Comics Merit High Praise", *Hartford Courant*, 2/21/54

²⁰ "Dealers Ready To Clean Up Magazines But Who's To Decide Which Are Bad?", *Hartford Courant*, June 16, 1948

²¹ "Druggists Offer Cleanup Plan on Comic Books", *Hartford Times*, 6/16/48

enforcement authorities.²² On July 26, the City Council resolved to appoint a Comic Advisory Committee consisting of seven members to assist and advise local distributors regarding the sale of periodicals that might be regarded as unfavorable literature.²³ The resulting council included clergymen of different faiths, members of the Board of Education and the Hartford City Council of the PTA in addition to Mr. Sless and Mrs. Emily Getchell (whose role in the committee was not defined)²⁴. Following the appointment of the committee, there is little information about the council's duties and activities. The committee was intended to serve until December 6, 1949, but what their influence was and what sort of criteria they used in censorship remains unclear. Author Bradford Wright hints that municipal regulation of objectionable comic books and magazines was modeled after measures taken in Los Angeles.²⁵

The campaign within Hartford carried influence elsewhere in the state. Almost immediately after Kerrigan's resolution was announced, New Britain took steps towards the removal of objectionable comic books from its news stands, and a Middletown druggist took it upon himself to ban detrimental comic books from the two drug stores he managed.²⁶ It is important to note that the events in Hartford were part of a national movement. By October, fifty cities nationwide "had enacted measures to ban or censor comic books, ranging from voluntary community efforts to legal regulations and ordinances."²⁷

Ironically, newspaper comic strips were exempt from criticism. Councilman Thomas Kerrigan was quick to praise newspaper comic strips, stating that "Comics in Hartford's newspapers are wholesome and conservative".²⁸ While it is possible that Kerrigan saw the need to remain on friendly terms with Hartford's newspapers, the relatively mild view of newspaper

²² "Councilmen Invited to Comic Book Parley", *Hartford Courant*, 6/25/48; also, "Mayor Urges Cleanup of Crime, Sex Books", *Hartford Times*, 6/23/48, p.1.

²³ Hartford Court of Common Council minutes, 7/26/48. Hartford Collection, Hartford Public Library.

²⁴ Hartford Court of Common Council minutes, 8/23/48. Hartford Collection, Hartford Public Library.

²⁵ Wright, p. 98

²⁶ "New Britain Wants Comic Books Banned", *Hartford Courant*, 6/17/48; and "Middletown Stores Restricting Comics", *Hartford Times*, 6/26/48.

²⁷ Wright, p.98

²⁸ "Kerrigan Praises Newspaper Comics", *Hartford Times*, 6/16/48.

strips in comparison to comic books is consistent throughout the history of comic book criticism. Amy Nyberg points out that comic strips' presence in newspapers lent them legitimacy not enjoyed by comic books.²⁹ Fredric Wertham notes that newspaper strips were regulated by the self-censorship policies of the newspaper publishers, policies that were more concerned with appealing to a widespread public than the comic book publications needed to be³⁰. The distinction between newspaper strips and comic books was noted by Hartford clergyman Rev. Dr. Edwin W. Grilley Jr., who publicly praised comic strips, "the good ones," in a sermon delivered over radio station WDRC.³¹ Dick Tracy, a crime comic strip similar in content to the crime comic books under criticism, was singled out as acceptable in testimony delivered during the legislative hearings in 1955.

Despite the attention given to the "problem" of comic books in the summer of 1948, by autumn the issue had virtually disappeared from public concern. *Hartford Courant* reporter Irving Kravsow recalls a public opinion of "complete indifference" regarding the issue of comic book content.³² In 1949, Wertham's colleague Gershon Legman published a 100-page polemic titled *Love and Death: A Study in Censorship*. Legman's argued that the emphasis on restricting sexual content present in current censorship laws prompted writers to use violence as a titillating substitute. The book, which contained a general criticism of American culture and attacks on other critics of comic books, gained little interest.³³

On the national and international level, however, outrage about the reading of comic books continued. In Canada, the United Kingdom, France, and several other nations movements began to curb "American-style" comics -- i.e., American imports and their homegrown imitators - - mixing concerns over comics' alleged connection to juvenile delinquency with worries about

²⁹ Nyberg, p.5

³⁰ Wertham, p.14

³¹ "Reading Good Comics Recommended to Prevent Taking Life Too Seriously", *Hartford Times*, 6/21/48

³² Interview with Irving Kravsow, April 30, 2003

American cultural imperialism. In the U.S., American cities saw continued attempts at municipal legislation and organized movements from community action teams. Nationally syndicated television and radio programs also covered the comic book controversy occasionally.

In 1949, there was a movement in favor of stronger laws against the dissemination of unfavorable literature, but this motion appears to have received little attention in the popular press. Historian Mike Benton states: "[In 1949,] Connecticut made an attempt to regulate 'objectionable comics' out of existence by requiring an approved application fee for each comic book."³⁴ A revision to Connecticut General Statute Section 8567, a general obscenity law penalizing the production, purchase, and dissemination of obscene literature and pictures³⁵ indicates that this movement may have been successful, but there is nothing in the law to indicate its connection to concerns over effects on minors. However, a 1954 *Hartford Courant* letter to the editor relates that during this year the Parent-Teacher Association of Connecticut issued a booklet titled "Unfinished Business of Juvenile Protection". The author of the letter, organization president Mrs. Byron F. Wilcox, states, "We were prompted to do this partly because of the fact that a movement was on foot to present a bill in the General Assembly³⁶ to govern the sale of objectionable literature". Wilcox goes on to inform that both the National and Connecticut PTA organizations published in their bulletins articles advocating the fight against comic books, both before and during this period.³⁷

Aside from these efforts however, from 1948 through 1953 there was less organized reaction within Hartford to comic book content and any alleged connections to juvenile delinquency. Concerns about comic books' destructive influence have often been tied closely to public alarm over the larger issue of juvenile crime, and indeed in 1948 the *Hartford Courant* repeatedly reported a decrease in juvenile-related crimes. Hartford-based activity expressing

³³ Wright, pp. 91-92

³⁴ Benton, p.75

³⁵ 1949 General Statutes of Connecticut

³⁶ Unfortunately, there is no record of this proposal in the Connecticut State General Assembly minutes.

concern about the effects of comic books that did exist during this period came largely from unconnected parents' groups and educators. The concern that did exist regarding juvenile delinquency blamed a wide variety of other causes, including music, pinball machines, and adult-oriented "confession" and "true crime" magazines. In 1952, the *Hartford Courant* produced a series of articles decrying the problem of "zoot-suiters", although several editorials in various newspapers insisted that contemporary teenagers were no worse than previous generations.

In 1950, U.S. Senator Estes Kefauver of Tennessee became chairman of the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Crime in Interstate Commerce. The committee investigation, which attracted a great deal of public interest, was particularly concerned with the problem of juvenile delinquency, which Kefauver regarded as non-controversial enough to provide a platform for his own try at a presidential nomination.³⁸ The committee sent out questionnaires to psychiatrists, juvenile courts, public officials and other interested parties soliciting opinions on comic books and their possible connections to juvenile delinquency.³⁹ Among the authorities questioned was Hartford Juvenile Court Judge Thomas D. Gill. Gill denied any connection between delinquency and comic books. A *Hartford Courant* editorial remarked:

The attempt to make a scapegoat of the comic books is just another evidence of some of the specious thinking about this problem. It would be nice if there were a single cause of juvenile delinquency. Then it would be easy to have a single remedy...It is fair to say that delinquency follows because of an unfortunate combination of individual characteristics and environmental pressures. But it is as silly to say that comic books cause delinquency as it is to say that red hair causes it.⁴⁰

Judge Gill was not alone in feeling that there was a lack of connection between comic books and delinquency, and the results of the questionnaire were inconclusive. Nonetheless, the investigative committee continued its investigations and became a powerful voice against the comic book publishing industry four years later.

³⁷ "Worked Against Comics For a Long Time", *Hartford Courant*, 2/20/54

³⁸ Nyberg, p.53

³⁹ Wright, p.157

⁴⁰ "Crime and the Comics", *Hartford Courant*, 11/18/50

Gill maintained his moderate position on the issue of comic books, disapproving of their content but denying that they had any significant effect on the psyches of juveniles. He was quoted extensively in later newspaper articles dealing with Hartford's comic book crusade and appears to have been popular. A 1952 *Hartford Courant Magazine* feature by Thomas E. Murphy focused on Gill's compassion for juvenile offenders. Gill's stance was that "emotionally immature parents", not media influence, was the prime factor contributing to juvenile delinquency. The same feature revealed Gill's unchanging stance in relation to comic books:

Comic books, crime movies? Not prime causes of delinquency but contribute to it only if the twig is inclined in that direction. But neither does Judge Gill deny that the mental pabulum served through radio, television, and comic books, may be helping to perpetuate the cycle of frustration, helping shape parents of pronounced emotional immaturity.⁴¹

During his testimony at a 1955 hearing by the joint legislative committee formed to investigate comic books and juvenile delinquency, Judge Gill admitted that comic books could be a contributing factor towards juvenile delinquency. The *Hartford Courant* reported:

Juvenile Court Judge Thomas Gill of Hartford said he knows of no case in which a juvenile read a comic book and then went out and committed a crime because of what he read. However, he added, "We can't just say that comic books are not a contributing factor to juvenile delinquency. Delinquency is a result of conflicting values and standards in the adult world."⁴²

The early 1950's saw an increase in attacks on the comic book industry, as the New York Joint Legislative Committee to Study the Publication of Comics introduced legislature to regulate the comic book industry. In 1953, a new series of Wertham articles published in *Ladies' Home Journal* coincided with the announcement of the formation of the United States Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, which began hearings investigating media effects and delinquency the following year.

⁴¹ "Juveniles Get a Break in this Court: Hartford Treats Young Delinquents With a Real Understanding of Their Problem", *Hartford Courant Magazine*, 3/30/52

⁴² "Psychiatrist Raps Crime Comic Books", *Hartford Courant*, 2/22/55

A *Hartford Courant* editorial by columnist T. E. Murphy in January 1954 set in motion Hartford's second wave of organized criticism against comic books. Murphy spoke out against the violence within the comic books popular at the time: "...many of the comic books seem to be the products of diseased minds. It is not the violence that is objectionable, but the sadism, the torturing, the decay and the perversity that are daily served the little ones in the guise of entertainment."⁴³

Murphy's editorial inspired *Courant* supervising editor William Clew to produce a four-part exposé on comic books. Assigned to writer Irving M. Kravsow, the purpose of the series was to make parents aware of what material their children might be reading.⁴⁴ The first installment of the series was sensationally titled "Depravity for Children -- 10 Cents a Copy!" and sampled the plots of several comic books purchased in an area of Hartford reputed to have problems with gang activity. Kravsow warned that any child could buy a "short course in murder, mayhem, robbery, rape, cannibalism, carnage, sex, sadism and worse."⁴⁵ The article was accompanied by an editorial asking parents, "Do you know what your children are reading? If you have not made a check of their comic books lately, you may be surprised to find that their daily diet is made up of murder, mayhem, lust, sadism, necrophilia, depravity, and just plain filth"⁴⁶.

In the second installment of the series, "Public Taste, Profit Used to Justify Horror Comics", Kravsow interviewed comic book publishers. The article declared that "Profit is the ruling factor", and alluded to the myriad of crime and horror titles published by the small publishers that chose not to associate with the ACMP. The article notes publishers' typical defense of marketing their more explicit titles towards older readers yet hints at a certain level of irresponsibility:

⁴³ "Of Many Things", *Hartford Courant*, 1/28/54

⁴⁴ Interview with Irving Kravsow, 4/30/2003

⁴⁵ "Depravity For Children -- 10 Cents a Copy!", *Hartford Courant*, 2/14/54, p.1

⁴⁶ "What Do Your Children Read?", *Hartford Courant*, 2/14/54

If parents think these comic books are undesirable, let the parents take care of it, the publishers advise. Their products are for older teen-agers and young adults. If children read them, that's not the concern of the publishers, they say.⁴⁷

The article concludes with an interview with William Gaines, publisher of EC Comics.

EC -- short for Entertaining Comics -- was the perfect target for criticism of the comic book medium. EC produced comic books that not only pushed the envelope in gory content, but also contained a strong element of social criticism. EC's comic books, aimed at a slightly older audience, frequently attacked social problems such as racism and the horrors of war with a subtlety that was missed by many critics. EC books were also known to contain a "shock" ending (what Gaines called "the O. Henry ending") that turned the message of the tale on its ear. The *Courant's* exposé provoked a heated response from Gaines, who stated,

With comic book censorship now a fact in Hartford, I look forward to an immediate drop in the crime rate in that fair city. I trust that there will now be fewer wife-beatings, fewer robberies, fewer grafting politicians, and perhaps it is not too much to hope that free from the 'evil' influence of comics, there will be fewer dishonest reporters.⁴⁸

In the third installment of the *Courant* exposé, Kravsow interviewed Hartford civic leaders. Kravsow quoted Hartford Board of Education President John J. Daly; Rev. James A. Connelly, assistant director of the Archdiocesan Schools; Rabbi Abraham Feldman of Temple Beth Israel; and Mrs. Harold Sanderson, director of Christian education, Greater Hartford Council of Churches. Daly and the clergymen interviewed discussed the need for an increased public awareness of the comic book "problem" as well as support from libraries and other educational institutions, and a call for parents to become involved in their children's leisure activities.⁴⁹

The fourth installment of the series contained a warning to publishers to "clean up" their publications, containing quotes from State Police Commissioner John C. Kelly, Hartford Police Chief Michael J. Godfrey, and Attorney Leo J. Parskey of the City Council. Another authority, U.S. District Attorney Cohen states, "If publishers don't police themselves, public reaction will

⁴⁷ "Public Taste, Profit Used to Justify Horror Comics", *Hartford Courant*, 2/15/54, p.1

⁴⁸ "Comic Book Publisher Blasts *Courant* for 'Unfairness' in Cleanup Campaign", *Hartford Courant*, 2/26/54

⁴⁹ "Contents of Comic Books Appalling to Civic Leaders", *Hartford Courant*, 2/16/54, p.1

force prosecution."⁵⁰ A sidebar noted that Herman P. Kopplemann, who had objected so strongly to the cleanup campaign of six years earlier, had stopped deliveries of all comic books.

The series ended with a warning note from City Councilman Parsky against censorship, favoring parental responsibility over legislation. In a conversation with Irving Kravsow⁵¹, the author was quick to note that both he and other members of the *Courant* staff were strongly against censorship. According to Kravsow, the *Courant* staff felt that it should be up to the parents to monitor their own child's reading material. Kravsow noted that this was the main objection towards those who supported censorship, and it was this point of view that was conveyed to readers who expressed concern over the *Courant* series.

The response to the *Courant* exposé was dramatic and immediate; Kravsow recalls an "enormous community reaction." Six weeks after the series ran in the paper, the *Courant* was still receiving letters and telephone calls. The newspaper published a magazine-sized compilation of articles, editorials, and letters to the editor concerning the series and other material concerning comic books and juvenile delinquency. The series, which was distributed for free to whoever wanted one, was sent out to requestors from all over the country. Thousands of the pamphlets were printed, necessitating the need for a second printing. The articles gained Kravsow and the *Courant* considerable praise, with Kravsow winning several awards for his contribution to public awareness of the issue.⁵²

The series was widely reprinted, appearing in national publications such as *Readers' Digest*, *Editor and Publisher*, and *Catholic Digest* and distributed through various local civic and parents' organizations. The *Courant* series inspired *New York Times* editor Peter Kichs to follow with the *Times'* own series about the comic book controversy. The *Times* and other newspapers

⁵⁰ "State and City Officials Warn Comics Publishers to "Clean Up" ", *Hartford Courant*, 2/17/54, p.1

⁵¹ Interview with Irving Kravsow, 4/30/2003

⁵² "Kravsow's Comics Series Wins Christopher Award, *Hartford Courant*, 8/24/54, p.1; "Kravsow Honored by VFW For Comic Books Series", *Hartford Courant*, 12/5/54; Interview with Irving Kravsow, 4/30/2003

referred to the *Courant* coverage in their own articles about comic books, all contributing to national attention to Hartford's decency crusade.

Civic organizations and municipal committees throughout Connecticut reacted to the *Courant* series. Almost immediately after publication of the articles, the New Britain Common Council appointed a committee to investigate the sale and display of comic books, passing a resolution calling for state and federal regulation on March 18.⁵³ In Simsbury, the Knights of Columbus formed their own investigative committee, while in Willimantic the Lions Club took similar action. Throughout the state, various PTA groups and individual news vendors pledged their support in the campaign and in April the Connecticut Parent-Teacher Association pledged that the removal of objectionable comic books from Hartford newsstands would be a part of the state's municipally-based PTAs.⁵⁴ By the end of March, community action had been organized in at least ten Connecticut towns. The Hartford and East Hartford boards of education likewise supported a program to ban objectionable comic books. The Veterans of Foreign Wars posts were particularly active in the crusade against comic books, promoting action in thirty different towns within Hartford County.⁵⁵

The *Courant's* campaign gained media attention through radio and television programs as well. Irving Kravsov appeared on a panel discussion on a Connecticut radio broadcast alongside Senator Thomas Hennings, who was involved with the United States Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency. Hennings, who had requested a copy of the *Courant* articles following their publication, played a significant role in organizing state-level hearings against the comic book industry in New York.⁵⁶

⁵³ "New Britain Council Acts To Regulate Comic Books", *Hartford Courant*, 3/18/54. Also, "Crime Comics Removed From New Britain Stands", *Hartford Courant*, 3/8/54

⁵⁴ "Civic, Social Organizations Join Clean Comics Drive", *Hartford Courant*, 2/18/54. Also, "The Needed Capstone to the Comic Book Ban", *Hartford Courant*, 5/3/54

⁵⁵ "VFW In 30 Towns Backs Fight on Comics Menace", *Hartford Courant*, 3/15/54

⁵⁶ Interview with Irving Kravsov, 4/30/2003

In late February, Kravsow appeared on the WKNB-TV television program, "The Current Scene", moderated by *Courant* education editor James F. Looby. The panel consisted of Kravsow, comic book industry public relations counsel Vernon Pope, and Simon Sless, who had chaired the 1948 committee appointed by Cyril Coleman.⁵⁷ Kravsow mentioned the three "most mentioned" solutions to combating "comic book evils": "Closer parental supervision, that druggists on all levels resist influx of the books and that the publishers themselves clamp down on the types of books they publish." Pope agreed with Kravsow but stated that "good publishers should be encouraged;" quoting J. Edgar Hoover, Pope stated that "good comics have a good educational value."⁵⁸ Sless stated, "We would be glad, as druggists, to have anyone of authority state that this book or that book is good or bad. Then we will remove them. At present, we are in the middle."

Sless was not alone in expressing vendors' concerns over the method of censorship, the same concerns that had been remained unresolved in 1948. Over the early months of 1954, several pharmacists wrote to the *Courant* to oppose the use of druggists as a scapegoat for the spreading of objectionable comic books. Typical of the pharmacists' arguments was the complaint that to place the burden of censorship upon vendors was an unreasonable demand; one Hartford pharmacist recommended that censorship be organized through state and municipal approval boards.⁵⁹ Raymond E. Mercier, editor of *Connecticut Pharmacist* wrote in to the *Courant* to condemn the publication of objectionable materials, but stating:

...It is rather difficult to prevent a citizen from reading filth if it is their nature. Horror stories and sensational comics have their places for certain people but it still remains to the parents of a child or minor to determine what their own will read. To place the wreath of wrath upon "drug stores" and pharmacists in a general way is a rank injustice, which is uncalled for.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ "Panelists Split on Ways to Fight Lurid Comics", *Hartford Courant*, 3/1/54

⁵⁸ This is consistent with Hoover's views on comic books and comic strips; in the early 1930's, initiated production of *War on Crime*, a comic strip appearing in Eastern Color Printing's *Famous Funnies* and portraying true stories of the heroism of FBI agents. (See Benton for details.)

⁵⁹ "The Place to Clip Comics is at the Source", *Hartford Courant*, 2/24/54

⁶⁰ "It's Up to the Parents", *Hartford Courant*, 3/13/54

The issue of tie-in sales also resurfaced⁶¹. Although one pharmacist insisted that vendors in fact did have the right to return unwanted periodicals without penalty, Wertham noted that "Comic books that don't 'move' are a great headache to the small vendor. If he doesn't return them he has to pay for them. But returning them makes a lot of work bookkeeping, so sometimes he just keeps them and tries to sell them."⁶² The problem of the responsibility of administering a code of standards led to suggestions by various organizations and individuals of organizing a state-level censorship board. The Connecticut Police Association supported the proposal because it did not want the responsibility of enforcing ill-defined obscenity laws falling on members.⁶³

The *Courant* campaign had its critics however, and Hartford newspapers soon published many editorials warning of the dangers of censorship. Most of these editorials were written from the angle of freedom of speech or freedom of the press,⁶⁴ and often cited parents' responsibility to monitor and educate their own children. Very few editorials defended the content of the medium. Those that did cited parallels with fairy tales,⁶⁵ or praised publishers such as Dell who specialized in wholesome material.⁶⁶ "Lil Abner" creator Al Capp spoke in Litchfield in defense of comic books, using another popular defense, the assertion that only a small minority of comic books contained objectionable material.⁶⁷ Some educators urged parents and libraries to lure children away from comic books with quality literature, and many organizations circulated approved reading lists within Hartford.

In spring of 1954, Fredric Wertham published his most infamous attack on the comic book industry, a book titled *Seduction of the Innocent*. Incorporating Wertham's essays from the

⁶¹ "Many Magazines are 'Packaged' to Druggists", *Hartford Courant*, 2/18/54

⁶² Wertham, p. 261

⁶³ "No State Censorship, Please", *Hartford Times*, 7/31/54; also, "We Don't Need Any Board of Censors", *Hartford Courant*, 4/1/54

⁶⁴ "Free Press Held Vital to People", *Hartford Times*, 1/3/55

⁶⁵ "Comic Books Viewed From a Scholastic Level", *Hartford Courant*, 2/23/54

⁶⁶ "The Case For Comic Books", *Bridgeport Herald*, 5/9/54

⁶⁷ "Al Capp Defends Comics in Litchfield Address", *Hartford Courant*, 11/1/54; and "Capp on Comics", *Hartford Courant*, 11/4/54

Ladies' Home Journal and other writings, *Seduction of the Innocent* was "the most famous and influential investigation of comics ever published."⁶⁸ Written for a popular audience, Wertham's book summarized his arguments against comic books. *Seduction of the Innocent* became a best seller, and was considered for inclusion as an alternate selection for the Book-of-the-Month club. The book received a favorable review from Hartford's Catholic newspaper, the *Catholic Transcript*, which also maintained that many comic books were "anti-religious" and funded by Communist causes.⁶⁹ Like the *Hartford Courant's* exposé, the main purpose of the book was to alert parents to the content of crime and horror comic books, and that these titles were being read by children. Wertham hoped to rekindle national interest in legislation at the state and federal levels against the comic book industry. *Seduction of the Innocent* gained national attention, and Wertham was called in as an expert witness when the United States Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency conducted its investigation of the comic book industry shortly after publication of Wertham's book.

The Hartford Courant articles, which had been reprinted in the *Congressional Record* at the request of Connecticut Senator William A. Purtell, were used as key evidence in the U.S. Senate investigation.⁷⁰ During the hearings, Hartford was cited as an example of a city that was taking appropriate measures towards cleaning up its newsstands.⁷¹ The hearings, which involved a number of childcare and psychiatric professionals as witnesses and representatives of the comic book industry, were televised nationally. The hearings focused almost exclusively on crime and horror comic books, and EC was a prime target.

The two star witnesses of the hearings were Fredric Wertham and William Gaines. The tone of the hearings was set early on in the hearings when cover illustrations and panels from

⁶⁸ Nyberg, p.50

⁶⁹ "Comics and the Seduction of the Innocent", *Catholic Transcript*, 4/29/54

⁷⁰ "Senate Probers to Use Courant Comics Expose", *Hartford Courant*, 3/7/1954

⁷¹ *Comic Books and Juvenile Delinquency, Interim Report of the Committee on the Judiciary pursuant to S. Res. 89 and S. Res. 190* (83d Cong. 1st Sess.) - (83d Cong. 2d Sess.) (New York, 1955), at <http://www.collectortimes.com/~comichistory/kefauver.html>

crime and horror comic books, taken out of context, were presented as evidence to the investigative committee. The committee took a respectful tone with Wertham, allowing him to make a long statement before beginning its questioning.⁷² When it became Gaines' turn to testify however, Gaines -- who was experiencing health problems at the time -- was quickly put on the defensive and bombarded with questions.

Gaines spoke out forcefully regarding the right of freedom of speech and defended his comic books against Wertham's skewed portrayal of EC stories; Wertham overlooked any moral message that the stories being criticized may have contained. Gaines told the committee, "It would be just as difficult to explain the harmless thrill of a horror story to Dr. Wertham as it would be to explain the sublimity of love to a frigid old maid."⁷³ Gaines had done nothing to endear himself to the investigative committee -- Gaines ran a satirical advertisement in all of EC's titles several months earlier, titled "Are You A Red Dupe?" The feature, used as further evidence during the hearings, accused critics of the comic book industry of being vehicles of a censorious Communist plot, using exactly the same sort of rhetoric against his opponents that had been levied against his own publications. When Gaines was called upon to uncomfortably defend the cover of one of his publications featuring a bloody axe and a woman's severed head, he knew that he had done more harm than good to the comic book publishing industry⁷⁴.

The subcommittee adjourned on June 4 to mull over the evidence. In the months that followed, the comic book industry "reeled in a state of crisis."⁷⁵ The *Hartford Courant* stated, "In a way the publishers have nobody to blame but themselves."⁷⁶ The comic book publishing industry, preferring self-regulation to legislative action, announced the formation of the Comics Magazine Association of America in September, and the appointment of New York magistrate

⁷² Nyberg, p.60

⁷³ *Comic Book Confidential* (Sphinx Productions, 1988)

⁷⁴ Nyberg, pp. 62, 75

⁷⁵ Wright, p.172

⁷⁶ "The Comic Books Face a Crisis", *Hartford Courant*, 7/12/54

Charles F. Murphy as the chief censor for the Comics Code Authority.⁷⁷ The CCA was the administrative body for a newly formed Comics Code, a strict code of regulation for comic book content. The CMAA included all major publishers but three,⁷⁸ as well as producers such as wholesalers, engravers, and printers.

While many histories of comic book censorship portray the formation of the CCA as the end to controversy about comic book content, in Hartford this was in some ways only the beginning. Murphy was deemed to be overly lenient in his censorship of comic book titles, and voices began to call for legislative action to remedy the situation. Again, it was educators and civic organizations such as the Connecticut State Federation of Women's Clubs who were the most vocal advocates of the campaign against comic books.⁷⁹

EC attempted to find ways around the Comics Code. An initial attempt to distribute comic books without Code approval proved to be a failure. EC then relented to joining the CMAA, but this association was short-lived due to disagreements between Gaines and the Code reviewers. Gaines also attempted to introduce adult-oriented "Picto-Fiction" magazines: text-heavy, pulp-like comic book publications clearly labeled for adult readers. These were predictably targeted by organizations such as the New York State Joint Legislative Committee to Study Publication and Dissemination of Offensive and Obscene Material despite the obvious intention to market towards older readers.⁸⁰ EC also reprinted material from their successful comic book, *Mad*, in paperback format, prompting another criticism from the *Hartford Courant*.⁸¹ *Mad* itself was converted into a black-and-white magazine format to avoid subjection to the

⁷⁷ Wright, p.172

⁷⁸ EC declined to join, as Gaines felt targeted by the formation of the Code. This was not an unjustified assumption, as the Code language specifically forbade the use in comic book titles of many of EC's best sellers. The other two publishers to stay out of the CMAA were Dell (publisher of Disney comics) and Gilberton (publisher of *Classics Illustrated*) who correctly claimed that their comic books were not a subject of controversy.

⁷⁹ "Women Aim Campaign at Comic Books", *Hartford Courant*, 11/4/1954

⁸⁰ *Annual Report of the New York State Joint Legislative Committee to Study Publication and Dissemination of Offensive and Obscene Material*, 1955.

⁸¹ "Lurid Comics Back on Newsstands Disguised as Pocket-Sized Books", *Hartford Courant*, 12/5/54, p.1

Comics Code. Given the enduring success of *Mad* magazine, which survives to this day, Irving Kravsow concludes that the *Courant* series "probably did him [Gaines] a favor."

On January 27, 1955, State Senator Philander Cooke of Wallingford introduced a resolution calling for an investigation of comic books and their alleged connections to juvenile delinquency. The resolution appears to have been both a response to increasing concern about comic books and a reflection of a plank introduced in the GOP platform, introduced the previous year in the wake of the criticism introduced by the *Hartford Courant*.⁸² The resolution, which pledged to "investigate and make a thorough study of and survey of the causes of juvenile delinquency, and the entire subject of publications known as comic books"⁸³ received support from both the Democratic and Republican parties. Rep. Anthony Kirker of Norwich stated, "I...would like to say, Sir, that I think an orchid should be given to the *Hartford Courant*, one of your local newspapers here in Hartford, who really started the crusade, against these lurid comic magazines."⁸⁴ Three of the four committee members -- Rep. Benjamin Parker of East Lyme (R), Rep. Bernard J. Quigley of Portland (D), and Sen. Cooke -- were immediately named,⁸⁵ with State Sen. James J. Whelan of Bridgeport (D) added shortly thereafter.

The following day, Thomas Kerrigan -- now a State Representative -- introduced a bill making tie-in sales of comic books with other publications illegal. The bill was referred to the Cooke committee for inclusion in their investigation. Kerrigan declared, "as far as Hartford and the surrounding towns are concerned, I feel that much of the responsibility for trash landing in the corner drug store might well be pinned on the wholesale distributors in Hartford."⁸⁶

⁸² "Republicans Pledge Comic Book Probe", *Hartford Courant*, 7/7/54, p.1

⁸³ *Journal of the Senate*, Hartford, Connecticut, January 27, 1954.

⁸⁴ Transcript, *Connecticut General Assembly House Proceedings*, January 27, 1955. Connecticut State Library.

⁸⁵ "Legislature Opens Comic Books Probe", *Hartford Courant*, 1/28/55, p.1

⁸⁶ "Bill Hits Comic Book Tie-In Sales", *Hartford Courant*, 1/29/55

The State Legislature directed the committee to bring in a report and recommendations for action by May 15, based on the results of a series of seven public hearings representing each of Connecticut's eight counties.⁸⁷ A total of eleven hearings were held, with the remaining additional hearings held in Hartford and involving testimony from police chiefs, educators, publishers, religious leaders, juvenile authorities, psychiatrists, and other authorities.⁸⁸ The first of the hearings was held on February 14 and included testimony from various distributors. The witnesses, who included Abraham Kopplemann, concurred that a screening committee would be helpful in guiding distributors. Samuel Gingold of the Atlantic Coast Distributors Association denied the existence of tie-in sales and questioned the wisdom of giving the power of censorship to a screening committee. Gingold added that since the creation of the Comics Code Authority, no news dealer would distribute a comic book that was not Code approved.⁸⁹

A special conference of prosecutors was called on March 21 at the State Capitol to review evidence collected in hearings around the state. The prosecutors were then asked to evaluate existing laws covering the display, distribution, and sale of comic books.⁹⁰ In April, Judge Murphy, censor for the CMAA, was called upon to testify for the investigative committee. Rep. Quigley challenged Murphy's leniency with the Code. Defending his decision to pass a story in which a murderer gets his comeuppance, Murphy stated that the story was passed on account of its "crime does not pay" message, adding that the story was "probably one of the first to pass through." Quigley replied, "If this is the case, why bother to draft a code at all? All of these books wind up with the hero winning in the last scene. The hero always wins, but unfortunately he only wins in the last two paragraphs."⁹¹

⁸⁷ "Connecticut Probe to Seek Comic Book, Delinquent Tie", *New York Herald-Tribune*, 2/6/54; and "Comic Book Hearings Start in Connecticut on Feb. 28", *Hartford Times*, 2/13/55

⁸⁸ *Journal of the Senate, Report of the Special Committee on Juvenile Delinquency*, p.889. Hartford, Connecticut, 5/6/55

⁸⁹ "Distributors Hail Plan to Screen Comic Books", *Hartford Courant*, 2/15/55

⁹⁰ "Comic Book Probers Ask Legal Advice", *Hartford Courant*, 3/10/55

⁹¹ "Comic Book Censor Challenged on Code", *Hartford Courant*, 4/12/55

On May 6, the Cooke Committee presented its report to the General Assembly with a summary of the hearings and recommendations for regulatory legislation.⁹² The committee recommended a law carrying a penalty of \$500 or six months in jail for the display or sale to minors of comic books dealing with crime, horror, or sex.⁹³ During the final hearing of May 17, Senate Bill 1284 was favored, although there was some objection raised. A Norwich distributor declared, "This is a bad bill and is very badly drawn".⁹⁴ A request from Senator Borden to include a "warning period" of 24 hours for the benefit of vendors was vehemently turned down.

Major objection to the bill as written came from Chester Kerr of Yale University Press, and Walter Thor of the Bureau of Independent Publishers. Both men favored stricter enforcement of the 1949 general obscenity statute over the new bill. Kerr cited *Winters vs. New York*, and noted the vagueness of the language of S.B. 1284. Kerr noted, "One can hardly name a great novel which does not undertake to comprehend and deal with the fundamental human problems of sexual morality and immorality," and noted that the language of the bill would condemn classic novels such as "The Scarlet Letter".⁹⁵ There also appears to have been a suggestion to create a State Advisory Committee to advise distributors and retailers on approved publications, but there is little record of the proposal beyond a *Hartford Courant* article of June 2.⁹⁶

Kerr and attorney Walter G. Farr, Jr. immediately drafted a substitute bill that amended the objectionable language.⁹⁷ The amended bill, designated S.B. 1284 "Schedule A," passed through the State Senate on June 3 and passed through the State House of Representatives on

⁹² *Journal of the Senate*, Hartford, Connecticut, May 6, 1955

⁹³ "Comic Book Bill Seeks Fines, Jail", *Hartford Times*, 5/8/55; and "Assembly Comic Book Ban Backs Courant Campaign", *Hartford Courant*, 6/12/55

⁹⁴ "Comics Measure Favored; Some Clarification Asked", *Hartford Courant*, 5/18/55

⁹⁵ Transcript, Connecticut General Assembly Joint Standing Committee Hearings, Judiciary Committee, 5/17/55.

⁹⁶ "Advisory Group on Comic Books to be Proposed", *Hartford Courant*, 6/2/55

⁹⁷ Chester Kerr to Governor Abraham Ribicoff, May 24, 1955; and Walter G. Farr, Jr. to Governor Abraham Ribicoff, May 27, 1955. RG 005: Records of the Governors of Connecticut, Box 646: Ribicoff Subject File 1955-1961, "Comic Books". Connecticut State Library Archives, Hartford, CT.

June 6.⁹⁸ Opposition to the bill came from Rep. Wood M. Cowan of Weston (R) and Keith E. Dubay of Bristol (D), both of whom believed that it was the parents' duty to monitor their children's' reading material, but this resistance was not enough to prevent the bill from being passed. A suggestion that newspapers be added to the list of regulated publications was also rejected.⁹⁹ Governor Abraham Ribicoff approved S.B. 1284 into the Connecticut General Statutes as Public Act No. 464 on July 18, 1955.¹⁰⁰

In the days preceding the signing of the bill, Governor Ribicoff was met with a flurry of letters of protest. Some of these were from wholesalers such as the American Book Publishers Council and the New Haven News Agency; the CMAA protested as well, calling the legislation "abhorrent as a matter of principle." These protesters stated concerns including freedoms of the press and free speech and concern over the welfare of retailers, and on a couple of occasions cited the precedent of *Winters vs. New York*.¹⁰¹ Many letters from concerned citizens were received as well, often containing strongly worded rhetoric such as calling regulatory legislation "fraught with danger,"¹⁰² and "a flagrant betrayal of American law and tradition."¹⁰³ As with the Hartford Courant editorials, the protests typically cited concerns over freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Surprisingly, many of the protesters were of the same group of people who had been extremely supportive of the bill, including clergy, educators and librarians, and housewives.

The revived discourse about comic books and juvenile delinquency provoked by the hearings inspired within Connecticut a resurgence of crusading activity by community

⁹⁸ Connecticut General Assembly Senate Hearings, 6/3/55; and Connecticut General Assembly House Proceedings, 6/6/55.

⁹⁹ "House Approval Completes Action on Ban of Comics", *Hartford Courant*, 6/7/55

¹⁰⁰ Connecticut Public Acts, 1955; 1955 Supplement to the General Statutes, State of Connecticut, Chapter 423, Sec. 3293d.

¹⁰¹ New Haven News Agency to Governor Abraham Ribicoff, May 25, 1955; and Telegram, Henry Edward Schultz to Governor Abraham Ribicoff, June 11, 1955. RG 005: Records of the Governors of Connecticut, Box 646: Ribicoff Subject File 1955-1961, "Comic Books".

¹⁰² Rabbi M. Herschel Levine to Governor Abraham Ribicoff, June 7, 1955. RG 005: Records of the Governors of Connecticut, Box 646: Ribicoff Subject File 1955-1961, "Comic Books".

organizations. In an article of March 29, the *Hartford Courant* reported that New London County's Crime Comics Committee "announced plans to expand to a state-wide organization to give better support to legislation curtailing salacious material in comic books."¹⁰⁴ The plans were probably announced in anticipation of the investigative hearing in New Haven, although what became of the New London committee and its strategy remains unclear.

The Naylor School conducted a campaign to get their pupils to stop reading objectionable comic books, and published a booklet titled, "A Young People's Guide to Good Reading," accompanied by a scrap book documenting students' work in the cleanup campaign. The book consisted of newspaper clippings about Hartford's anti-comics crusade, letters from parents, teachers, and experts, samples of objectionable comic books, and a reading guide of recommended magazines and comic books. The scrapbook was sent to the Hartford Board of Education for use in other Hartford schools.¹⁰⁵

One particularly notable public program took place in Norwich. The Norwich American Legion established a program to "swap one book it felt was a 'good, clean' book for every 10 comic books turned in by Norwich youngsters. Then it planned to burn the comic books." The book burning was cancelled when both the American Civil Liberties Union and the American Book Publishers Council protested. The Civil Liberties Union, who played an active part in protesting other censorship efforts, stated that book burning "is an imitation of totalitarian dictatorship that is wholly contrary to the American way of life."¹⁰⁶ The ACLU also protested state legislative action, a stance that earned it criticism from the *Hartford Courant*.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Nathaniel Raucher to Governor Abraham Ribicoff, June 7, 1955. RG 005: Records of the Governors of Connecticut, Box 646: Ribicoff Subject File 1955-1961, "Comic Books".

¹⁰⁴ "Crime Comic Unit Plans Statewide Organization", *Hartford Courant*, 3/29/55

¹⁰⁵ "Naylor Teachers Compile Booklet To Fight Comics", *Hartford Courant*, 2/12/55

¹⁰⁶ "'Operation Swap' Nets 5,000 Comics In Norwich; Burning Plans Canceled", *Hartford Courant*, 2/29/55

¹⁰⁷ "Civil Liberties and Horror Comics", *Hartford Courant*, 7/18/55

The Connecticut Intercollegiate Student Legislature conducted its own "mock hearing", which included discussion of a hypothetical anti-comic books bill. Introduced by Albertus Magnus College students Patricia Crotty and Elizabeth McCauley, the bill made it mandatory for all comic books sold in Connecticut to carry the CCA seal of approval.¹⁰⁸ The bill was rejected on the grounds that the student legislators felt that the current code was not doing enough to regulate comic book content.¹⁰⁹ The *Catholic Transcript* misunderstood the reasoning for turning down the bill, resulting in explanatory replies from two of the CISL delegates.¹¹⁰

The *Transcript* had been keeping up with the comic book controversy for some time, with the majority of its coverage focused on two influential Catholic organizations, the Committee on the Evaluation of Comic Books in Cincinnati, and the National Organization for Decent Literature. NODL evolved out of the Catholic Church's Legion of Decency, which had pressured the film industry into self-regulation as well as establishing a rating system that provided organized films into degrees of acceptability. Founded in December 1938, NODL was originally only concerned with magazines, publishing a list of those it found objectionable. According to Amy Nyberg, "The organization was concerned with materials available to youth, and it did not pass judgement on adult reading material."¹¹¹ In 1947, the organization expanded its activities to include the evaluation of comic books and paperbacks.

In May 1955, the *Transcript* began its own print campaign against comic books. The *Transcript* published a four-part series warning against the evils of comic books, each installment written by a different clergyman. The first article targeted romance comics. Author Rev. John C. Knott wrote, "If so many young wives today are unhappy, frustrated, disillusioned and bitter it may well be because these romantic comics, among other influences, have given them this distorted notion of what life, love and marriage are all about and how happiness is to be

¹⁰⁸ "Comic Books Bill Heads Student Legislature Slate", *Hartford Courant*, 2/14/55 and "Comic Books Under Mock Hearing Fire", *Hartford Courant*, 2/26/55

¹⁰⁹ "Comic Book Issue", *Hartford Times*, 3/17/55

¹¹⁰ "Mock or Mockery?", *Catholic Transcript*, 3/3/55

achieved."¹¹² Part two of the series warned against copycat crimes and other destructive behavior learned from comic books and imitated by youths.¹¹³ Part three brought a more moderate stance, concluding that comic books were just one aspect of a juvenile's environment that might contribute to, but not solely cause, juvenile delinquency. Author Charles W. Leonard wrote:

If we are to fully understand the impact of crime and horror comic books, we must include such in a broad program of research directed at the many facets that relate to these problems. The influence of comic books is but one aspect of the multiple causes of these problems.¹¹⁴

The last installment of the series was titled "Cleanup of Printed Filth Job For All Catholics, Priest Says" and was a call for unified action among Catholics to clean up the "insidious, diabolical filth" invading the news stands.¹¹⁵ Despite the strong wording of this series however, not all of the *Transcript's* coverage of comic books was damning. A 1954 article headlined "No Comic Book Problem If Good Reading Tastes Are Developed Early" cited the cultivation of taste for literature as the antidote to comics' alleged corrupting influence,¹¹⁶ and a June 1955 article even acknowledged that the medium has the potential to do good if used correctly¹¹⁷.

Following 1955, Hartford's comic book crusade began to fade from the public consciousness. A 1956 article in the *Connecticut Bar Journal* questioned the wisdom of the new legislation, doubting the constitutionality of the law as written.¹¹⁸ With the new legislation passed, there also remained the same old question of how to enforce it. How this was done in the months immediately following the new legislation is uncertain, but a hint may lie within a series of memos from Albert N. Sherberg, executive secretary for the Connecticut Board of Education of the Blind, to vending stand operators. The Board of Education of the Blind had set up a

¹¹¹ Nyberg, p.23

¹¹² "Beware Romance: Crude, Sexy Comics Not Only Offenders, Cana Director Wams", *Catholic Transcript*, 5/5/55

¹¹³ "Don't Underrate Comic Books' Evil Influence on Young People", *Catholic Transcript*, 5/12/55

¹¹⁴ "Comic Books But One Aspect of Problem, Says Youth Authority", *Catholic Transcript*, 5/19/55

¹¹⁵ "Cleanup of Printed Filth Job For All Catholics, Priest Says", *Catholic Transcript*, 5/26/55

¹¹⁶ "No Comic Book Problem If Good Reading Tastes Are Developed Early", *Catholic Transcript*, 7/8/54

¹¹⁷ "School Survey Sees a Potential For Good in Comic Book Appeal", *Catholic Transcript*, 6/16/55

program to assist the blind through administration of newsstands in Hartford run by persons with visual impairments. In 1958, Governor Ribicoff ordered the board to take steps to remove objectionable articles from newsstands run by the organizations.¹¹⁹ Assisting the vendors was a list of titles to be updated regularly. The acceptable reading list was compiled with the assistance of the Trinity College Library, West Hartford Public Library, the State Board of Education Bureau of Library Services, and a trade list of publications supplied by the Kopplemann agency.¹²⁰ It is plausible to conclude that administration of other Hartford newsstands was accomplished through the dissemination of similar lists.

Connecticut's campaign against comic books had an impact that lingered past the life span of the campaign itself, as critics and advocates alike scrutinized the legislative efforts from out of state. On the national level, Ribicoff corresponded closely with Estes Kefauver, as the Washington DC hearings occurred simultaneously with the campaign in Hartford. On the state level, Connecticut's campaign was closely tied with that of New York, and New York laws served as the model for S.B. 1284. During New York's legislative hearings, the New York Joint Legislative Committee to Study the Publication and Dissemination of Offensive and Obscene Material reported correspondence with the *Hartford Courant* and a number of other Connecticut organizations and publishers.¹²¹ Particularly following the passing of Connecticut's anti-comics bill, Governor Ribicoff furthermore received many letters of request for copies of the legislature. Such requests came from interested state and municipal legislators, and educational and community groups, from around the U.S. plus one request from the Ontario Legislative

¹¹⁸ "Recent Decisions and Statutes", *Connecticut Bar Journal* (March 1956) vol. 30, pp. 98-101

¹¹⁹ Alan Sherberg to Vending Stand Operators Who Handle Magazines, February 7, 1958. RG 005: Records of the Governors of Connecticut, Box 646: Ribicoff Subject File 1955-1961, Blind, Board of Education of. Removal of Objectionable Literature from Vending Stands. Connecticut State Library Archives, Hartford, Connecticut.

¹²⁰ Alan Sherberg to Vending Stand Operators Who Handle Magazines, March 11, 1958. RG 005: Records of the Governors of Connecticut, Box 646: Ribicoff Subject File 1955-1961, Blind, Board of Education of. Removal of Objectionable Literature from Vending Stands. Connecticut State Library Archives, Hartford, Connecticut.

Assembly. The Connecticut bill was cited in numerous official reports from legislative and investigative committees, as was Hartford's 1948 municipal level campaign.

Why did concern about comic books take such a strong hold in Hartford? That is a question that is difficult to answer. Although the anti-comics campaign gained bipartisan support, it is possible that the issue was at least in part political. We have seen the recurring participation from politicians such as Thomas Kerrigan, and the inclusion of an anti-comic book plank on the 1954-55 Republican platform. The *Hartford Courant*, undeniably a strong voice in the campaigns and a catalyst for action at nearly every level, was known to be a Republican newspaper.

But, more likely, the campaign simply struck the same chord in Hartford that it did with the rest of America with regard to contemporary social concerns. Although Wertham's biographers have been quick to disassociate him from McCarthyism, it is interesting to note that Hartford's debate over comic book censorship occurred simultaneously with the debate over censoring Communist literature. The parallel with McCarthyism was picked up on by critics of the censorship campaign. One Bridgeport Herald editorial asked, "...Must we stand silent while rabid McCarthyites, blind leaders of the blind, ride the current wave of anti-intellectual hysteria?" The editorial drew a further parallels with Communist and Fascist regimes and the Ku Klux Klan.¹²² Hyperbole aside, the comic book censorship campaigns tapped into conservative America's mood to maintain the status quo of mainstream culture and values.

Why comic books were targeted is a question that is relatively easy to answer. The anti-authoritarian message of many comics -- particularly the crime and horror books that were of such concern -- threatened the status quo. On a similar note, comic books had become a part of a market system in which children had the power to choose their own reading material. While in

¹²¹ *Annual Report of the New York Joint Legislative Committee to Study the and Dissemination of Offensive and Obscene Material*, 1956, p.88. Collection of the Connecticut State Library, Hartford, Connecticut.

the past parents were able to easily monitor the movies and books enjoyed by their children, comics' affordability and portability empowered the purchaser with a much greater level of freedom.

The concern over juvenile delinquency was often linked with worries that comic books would incite copycat crimes and other destructive behavior performed in imitation of comic book material. Wertham's citation of a six-year-old boy who jumped off a cliff in imitation of Superman¹²³ has worked its way into American urban folklore. In Hartford, Police Department Sgt. Daniel Killoran presented to the investigative subcommittee a homemade zip gun confiscated by a boy who claimed to have learned to construct it from reading a 25-cent paperback.¹²⁴ The article also cites testimony from Richard D. Roberts, chief probation officer of the Juvenile Court of Fairfield County: "I have found several instances where the juvenile offenders have gotten into difficulty because of crimes they learned to commit through comic books and pocket-books".¹²⁵ The Connecticut Journal of the Senate report of May 6, 1955 summarizes police department testimony related to copycat crimes. The report states, "One officer related an incident of the arrest of a minor for trafficking in prostitution. The minor was carrying a .38 calibre revolver at the time of his arrest and admitted that he received the idea and the mechanics of operation from a pocket book that he had read."¹²⁶ The report continued that there was "difficulty in dispersing groups hanging around newsstands in drug stores and similar establishments where this type of material was being displayed." Also cited was the common concern expressed by critics of minors obtaining weapons through mail-order offers in comic books; the 1954 Comics Code specifically forbade the advertisement of weapons, drug paraphernalia and other items deemed unsuitable for minors.

¹²² "Comic Censorship is 'Monster'", *Bridgeport Herald*, 5/15/55

¹²³ Wertham, p.115

¹²⁴ Note that despite differences in authorship, publication, and intended audience, paperback books and magazines of several varieties were frequently lumped in with comic books in the public mind.

¹²⁵ "Psychiatrist Raps Crime Comic Books", *Hartford Courant*, 2/22/55

¹²⁶ *Journal of the Senate*, Hartford, Connecticut, May 6, 1955

Comic books were also an easy target. Produced cheaply and suffering the stigma of lowbrow culture, the medium had few defenders. Despite the fact that there were many adult readers of comic books¹²⁷ as evidenced by testimony from publishers and vendors, few people came forward to defend the medium. Even opponents of censorship tended to frame their arguments more on principle rather than as an advocacy of comic books' content. Those who were left to defend the medium were usually producers who had a financial investment in doing so.

In 1956, Mrs. Guy Percy Trulock replaced Charles Murphy as the Code Administrator for the national Comics Code Authority. This change in staff seems to have resolved most of the controversy surrounding comic books, for Mrs. Trulock enforced a stricter standard of censorship for the comic book industry. In the years of 1954-55, many comic book publishers went out of business, hampered both by the Comics Code and by an industry-wide depression caused by problems with distribution. Would-be censors quickly moved on to other concerns and by the end of the decade comic books had nearly completely disappeared from public thought. Many of the same arguments, solutions, and complaints resurfaced in regards to other media however -- witness recent controversies over Internet sites, video games, or rap music lyrics -- just as the comics campaigns had closely paralleled earlier worries over dime novels and motion pictures.

¹²⁷ Al Feldstein, in an interview in *Comic Book Confidential*, notes that comic books enjoyed a large military readership, and many G.I.s continued to read comic books after returning from WWII. Benton notes the significant adult readership of crime comic books, and Robbins mentions that the primary audience of romance comic books was adult women.

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