



Written by [Michael E. Telzrow](#) on August 8, 2016

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John Wayne: American Icon

For nearly five decades, John Wayne roped, wrangled, and punched his way through hundreds of films and into our collective memories. His image symbolized the rugged individualism that characterized an idealized America — an America rooted in liberty and the notion that one controls his own destiny. Wayne's characters reflected values he aspired to, but did not always achieve, and he once remarked that he played only the type of man he would like to have been. Strengthened by a respect for the nation's past and its cherished traditions, Wayne seemed almost archaic in a rapidly changing world. It was that sense of strength that drew successive generations to him. He reminded us of the things that made America great, and we admired him for it.



Wayne's folkloric stature in America, while still intact in many corners, has taken a hit in the last 40 years. Recently, a California legislative resolution to establish a statewide "John Wayne Day" failed to pass — falling six votes short in the 80-member assembly. The resolution praised Wayne as the "prototypical American hero, symbolizing such traits as self-reliance, grace under pressure and patriotism." Those legislators who voted against the measure cited a 1974 *Playboy* magazine interview in which Wayne made intemperate remarks about black and indigenous Americans. Such retrospective moral condemnation, however, has never prevented the progressive Left from glorifying public figures such as the eugenicist Margaret Sanger and the environmentalist John Muir, who at one time or another publicly held controversial ideas about race. It's more likely that Wayne's outdated masculinity and his identification with an American past that has fallen out of favor were the cause of the resolution's defeat. In any case, it is emblematic of the cultural shift that devalues what was once held in high regard, and elevates that which was once reviled.

Early Life

Born in Winterset, Iowa, on May 26, 1907, Wayne was christened Marion Robert Morrison. He would not receive his familiar public name until many years later. His father, Clyde, worked as a pharmacist's clerk. His mother Mary (Brown) Morrison was said to be a strict, unyielding person. Wayne never warmed to his mother and always preferred the company of his father. His early life was punctuated by frequent relocations and instability. Clyde Morrison endured several business failures in Iowa, and by 1914, the Morrison family relocated to Palmdale, California. After an abortive attempt at farming, Clyde moved the family once again, this time settling in Glendale, California, where he secured a position at the Glendale Pharmacy.

As noted in Scott Eyman's fine biography of John Wayne (*John Wayne, The Life and Legend*), it was in



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Glendale that the young future movie star would attend school and receive his famous moniker. Big Duke, the Morrison family's Airedale terrier, liked to chase fire engines with young Marion in fast pursuit. While his master was at school, Big Duke would lounge around the fire station until the boy returned. The two inseparable companions were so linked that the firemen naturally began to call the boy "Little Duke," and then simply "Duke." It was a name that would stick with him his entire life.

In Glendale, Clyde Morrison continued his record of instability, and his marriage continued to deteriorate. In 1921, Clyde and Mary Morrison separated. Duke remained with his father in Glendale, while his brother, Bob, stayed with his mother in Long Beach. The separation and continual domicile relocations in Glendale did not harm Duke Morrison, and by the time he had reached high-school age, he had developed into an above-average football player, and more importantly had developed a philosophy of self-reliance that later informed his worldview and the characters he chose to play. At Glendale he cultivated a reputation as an overachiever and hard worker. Perhaps his father's spotty work record and constant financial instability compelled young Morrison to work hard. Whatever the motivation, his extraordinary work ethic carried throughout his life until the very end. Academically proficient, athletically gifted, and socially popular, Morrison had little problem securing an athletic scholarship to the University of Southern California.

The Long Road to Fame

In September 1925, Duke Morrison began his collegiate career at the University of Southern California and experienced his first encounter with the film industry. Yearning for independence, he moved out of his father's residence and into a place of his own. In order to meet the increased revenue demands that came with solitary living, Morrison supplemented his income by taking a summer job at Fox Studios. Along with some other football players, Duke Morrison earned \$35 per week on the swing gang. The work consisted of moving props from set to set, but it was an entrée into an industry that Morrison had set his eyes on even before he showed up to work on the swing gang. A bit part as a football player in an obscure movie called *Brown of Harvard* was enough to whet his appetite. When an injury ended his not-so-promising collegiate football career, Morrison turned his attention toward acting and did not return to USC.

To say that Morrison worked his way up from the bottom is not mere cliché. He enjoyed the blue-collar atmosphere of the early movie industry, and he never shied away from hard work. He learned every aspect of production, from prop construction to rigging lights. His first break came in 1930 when director Raoul Walsh tapped him for a leading part in a Western called *The Big Trail*. It was then that Marion Morrison became, at the urging of studio head Winfield Sheehan, John Wayne. Allegedly, Sheehan was a fan of Mad Anthony Wayne, the Revolutionary War hero of the Battle of Stony Point, and favored the name because he admired the general's audacity. It was the perfect theatrical name, and although Morrison never legally changed his name, he would be known as John Wayne for the rest of his life.

Walsh selected Wayne for the part of an intrepid scout precisely because he did not want a "real" actor. He wanted to cast a real man, someone unsullied by the motion picture industry and someone who could convincingly portray a sense of command and pioneer individualism. In Wayne he found the traits that he was looking for and that would define Wayne's character for the next 40 years. Wayne performed reasonably well for a novice actor, but the film failed to live up to its epic billing. Shot on



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70mm film, the production lost more than \$1 million, and Wayne soon found himself exiled to the world of the B-grade Western. These low-budget Westerns were pumped out by Republic Studios and generally aimed at a younger audience. The plots were simple and unambiguous. There was a hero, a girl, and a bad guy, and the hero always won. The production schedule of these lower-tier films was grueling, but Wayne was ever the professional and rarely complained. His work ethic and belief in the value of hard work sustained his effort while he struggled to find another break. Besides, he had no intention of laboring in the B-grade “hoss operas” forever.

For the next 10 years, Wayne would labor from dawn until dusk in a series of B-Westerns before he got another break. The legendary John Ford, who would cultivate an affectionate but turbulent relationship with Wayne, directed the Duke in *Stagecoach* as Ringo Kid for the 1939 classic. Filmed in the magnificent Monument Valley, *Stagecoach* would emerge as the quintessential Western and begin a relationship between Ford and Wayne that would produce more than 20 films. Between the two of them, they produced some of the finest American movies, particularly Westerns. The relationship was so close that Wayne once remarked, “The man was my heart; there was a communion between us that not many men have. I have never been closer to any person in my life than I have been with Jack (John Ford).” Together, they made such classics as *Red River*, *Rio Grande*, *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, and *The Searchers*.

In Wayne, Ford had found the perfect vehicle for the transmission of his Western archetype characterized by staunch individualism, self-reliance — often the underdog — and incorruptibility, the essence of a pre-modern America. For the next 40 years, Wayne would play various versions of the character that defined his public persona, all of whom reflected his values and beliefs that he felt represented a vital part of America. For Wayne, it was a professional duty to play the type of character that conveyed a sense of honor. On one occasion, he upbraided Kirk Douglas for playing the part of Vincent van Gogh in *Lust for Life*.

Wayne’s characters culturally reinforced the attributes that most Americans believed held up our cherished national ideals, creating a link to the past that resonated with the public’s consciousness. He often did it without words, letting his physical presence convey the message.

Of course Wayne’s personal life did not always reflect national ideals — for instance, he was married three times, was sometimes unfaithful, and drank heavily — but he never veered from his on-screen persona. While his own life was far from perfect, he closely guarded his on-screen image.

John Wayne was the quintessential “everyman.” Like Wayne, John Ford held a similar perspective about the nature of the characters and represented it in film. Both men held an intense admiration for justice meted out by a loner, and little patience for a man or woman who lacked a sense of strength. Wayne’s Western characters eschewed the comfort of community and preferred to live on the outside of society. Nowhere is the idea of independence and an audacious search for justice more apparent than in Wayne’s portrayal of Rooster Cogburn in *True Grit*. Under the direction of Henry Hathaway, Wayne would earn his first and only Oscar for his portrayal of a U.S. marshal in pursuit of the murderous Tom Chaney. Paunchy and well past his physical prime, Cogburn doggedly pursues Chaney and his gang, along with a slain farmer’s daughter, played by Kim Darby, and a Texas Ranger, played by Glen Campbell. When Cogburn charges headlong into four well-armed outlaws after a brief exchange with antagonist Ned Pepper, it becomes a metaphor for Wayne’s approach to life and reflective of his deeply rooted ideals. He had a job to do, and he was not going to shirk his duty. A headlong charge was



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consistent with Wayne's public and private character.

Wayne's West

While *True Grit* did well at the box office, the time of the classic Western as embodied by John Wayne had largely passed, and the West as imagined by popular culture had already changed. With the exception of a few films, Hollywood had begun to turn the traditional idea of the Western upside down. Until then, the image of the West created by popular culture largely reflected the interpretation of men such as John Ford and John Wayne — an idea that had begun long before Ford and Wayne emerged as the two principal purveyors of the mythical West. It began in the 19th century with James Fennimore Cooper's tales of Natty Bumppo. The fascination with the frontier and the men who tamed it was a central element of the American experience, and included all forms of literature and art. That fascination continued unabated, as evidenced by the success of Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West shows of the late 19th century. Among later writers, Owen Wister's novel *The Virginian* is perhaps the best example of popular fiction west of the Mississippi, and John Wayne would have been completely at home in Owen Wister's interpretation of the West. It was a West populated by "heroic figures and a heroic life; not heroes and the heroic life as they are conceived by the cloistered intellect," opined Theodore Roosevelt. Wister himself wrote longingly of a West that he recorded in fiction as though it were history. In the introduction to his 1902 novel, he wrote, "What is become of the horseman, the cowpuncher, the last romantic figure upon our soil? For he was romantic. Whatever he did, he did with his might."

When *The Virginian* was made into a film in 1929, the *New York Times* praised Gary Cooper and Walter Huston for their "accurate" portrayals of the Virginian and his antagonist, Trampas. For the *New York Times* writer and most Americans, both Cooper and Huston were believable because they "brought to life (characters) from the days of half a century ago." The film adaptation of Wister's *The Virginian* helped solidify the time-honored notions of individuality and frontier justice that became hallmarks of film Westerns. Whether these attributes were distinctively western, or whether they were common traits among individuals of the period, or whether it was the way the West was won, mattered not. Films such as *The Virginian* served to reinforce a national ideal that Americans looked to as an example of the type of virtuous individual who had helped shape America since the first European arrivals. Indeed, it was this character's longevity that compelled Wister to remark, "His wild kind has been among us always, since the beginning: a young man with his temptations, a hero without wings." Wayne's concept of an unchanging American West dovetailed nicely with Wister's idea of the American hero.

If there is an original source of Wayne's western ideal, one must look to men such as Cooper, Wister, and other writers such as Louis L'Amour. Responding to an inherent civic need, they constructed literary versions of the type of men that Wayne would later portray. Again Wister prefigures Wayne's characters in his introduction to *The Virginian*: "If he gave his word, he kept it; Wall Street would have found him behind the times. Nor did he talk lewdly to women; Newport would have thought him old-fashioned."

The Changing Western

By the end of the 1960s, the image of the traditional Western archetype had changed dramatically. Wister would not have recognized the new portrayal. While there is little doubt that the Westerns of



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Wayne's heyday rarely dealt with the West as it truly was, a new brand of Western emerged that sought to overturn the romantic and idealized version of the 1940s and '50s. The Western of Wayne's day was dying, replaced by a grittier, iconoclastic version that challenged the old image and seemingly held national myths and ideals in derision.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in Hollywood's portrayal of General George Custer and his defeat at the Little Big Horn. Arthur Penn's 1970 portrayal of George Custer in Thomas Berger's *Little Big Man* depicted the man as a one-dimensional lunatic. Penn, a close friend and devotee of U.S. official and communist spy Alger Hiss, painted a picture of a character completely devoid of any redeeming virtues: genocidal in nature, bent only on destroying the Indians, including women and children. Custer's men do not escape Penn's ideological-based character assassination. For Penn, they were no more virtuous than their insane commander. At least in Thomas Berger's novel, the protagonist Jack Crabb affords Custer some grudging respect when he says, "Custer had had to die to win me over, but he succeeded at long last; I could not deny that it was real noble for him to be his own monument."

Films portraying Custer in a less-than-favorable light were not entirely new, but the level at which Penn destroyed Custer was unheard of. Even John Ford produced a less-than-sympathetic version of the fate of Custer, but in the end he left Custer's heroic nature intact. In *Ft. Apache* he changed the names of the characters, but it was clear that Colonel Owen Thursday, the unyielding commanding officer, was meant to portray Custer. Unlike Penn, Ford, ever cognizant of the civic need to maintain national heroes, allowed Thursday the benefit of redemption. Captain York, played by John Wayne, provides the counterpart to Henry Fonda's glory-seeking Colonel Thursday. Thoughtful and respectful of the opposing Indian forces, York is everything Thursday is not, and the two personalities clash. Ford, however, allows York to rehabilitate Thursday after the latter's death, and thus leave the idealized Custer legend intact. In the final scene, York answers questions from a group of reporters. When told that officers such as Thursday will be remembered, but that the rank and file members are typically forgotten, York remarks, "You're wrong there. They aren't forgotten because they haven't died. They're living — right out there.... Collingwood and the rest. And they'll keep on living as long as the regiment lives. The pay is thirteen dollars a month; their diet: beans and hay. Maybe horse meat before this campaign is over. Fight over cards or rotgut whiskey, but share the last drop in their canteens. The faces may change ... the names ... but they're there: they're the regiment ... the regular army ... now and fifty years from now. They're better men than they used to be. Thursday did that. He made it a command to be proud of." By contrast, Penn's Custer deserved and received no shot at redemption.

Hollywood's perversion of the mythical American West continued through the late '60s and '70s, even as the Western became rarer. Increasingly, graphic violence and the glorification of the antihero became *de rigueur* for directors hoping to satiate a violence-hungry public. Characters that once represented law and order or were part of the movement west were necessarily seen as corrupt, venal, and hypocritical. Banished from film by progressive revisionists, the heroes of the West were now held beneath contempt. With the exception of a few films, the last 40 years has seen a continuation of the movement started in the late '60s. Even wildly popular films such as Kevin Costner's *Dances With Wolves* portrayed members of the military in much the same fashion as Penn did a decade earlier. More recent offerings, such as Quentin Tarantino's bizarre and cartoonishly violent *The Hateful Eight*, offer the public a perverted vignette set in the West, complete with every manner of depravity that is his forte.



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There were exceptions to be sure, but they were few. Wayne's last film, *The Shootist*, comes to mind. But even in that film, Wayne had to insist that an ending that called for him to shoot someone in the back be changed. He had never shot anyone in the back, and he was not going to violate his core principles. The scene was changed.

Dying Breed

By the time John Wayne died in 1979, the nation that Wayne had known, and the cinematic West that he helped shape in our popular imagination, was largely gone, having evolved into an iconoclastic version where notions of right and wrong are ambiguous at best. Wayne saw the West as an unchanging environment and a reflection of our national core values. He played different characters. Some were not necessarily good men, but he always played men of conviction and he never compromised his ideals.

The rejection of the traditional notions of the American West and its development are a natural extension of a concerted movement to denigrate and overturn the notions of self-reliance, individualism, and sacrifice that stand in direct opposition to the increasingly popular ideas of statism, where the state assumes all responsibility for individuals. John Wayne's characters stand in direct contrast to such ideas, and perhaps that is why progressives feel threatened by his body of work. He is the embodiment of the ideals that helped shape this nation, and in particular the West. He was not a cowboy, nor a soldier, but it hardly mattered. Whether the West was actually as he, John Ford, and others portrayed it is not important. Their work was civic in nature and meant to convey to successive generations uniquely American ideals in a uniquely American film genre.

Before he died of cancer in 1979, John Wayne was honored by the U.S. Congress with the Congressional Gold Medal. Speaking in support of the measure was Maureen O'Hara, a frequent co-star with the Duke, most notably in John Ford's *The Quiet Man*. Breaking into tears, she told the subcommittee; "John Wayne is not just an actor, John Wayne is the United States of America." The medal was subsequently approved by President Carter. The inscription on the medal simply read: "John Wayne, American." The California Legislature's recent failure to pass a resolution honoring John Wayne is emblematic of how far removed we are from a time when the mythological West was accepted by most Americans. John Wayne may have ridden off into the proverbial sunset, but his filmography remains, and it stands as a stark rebuke to those who would denigrate his memory and our nation's cherished ideals.



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