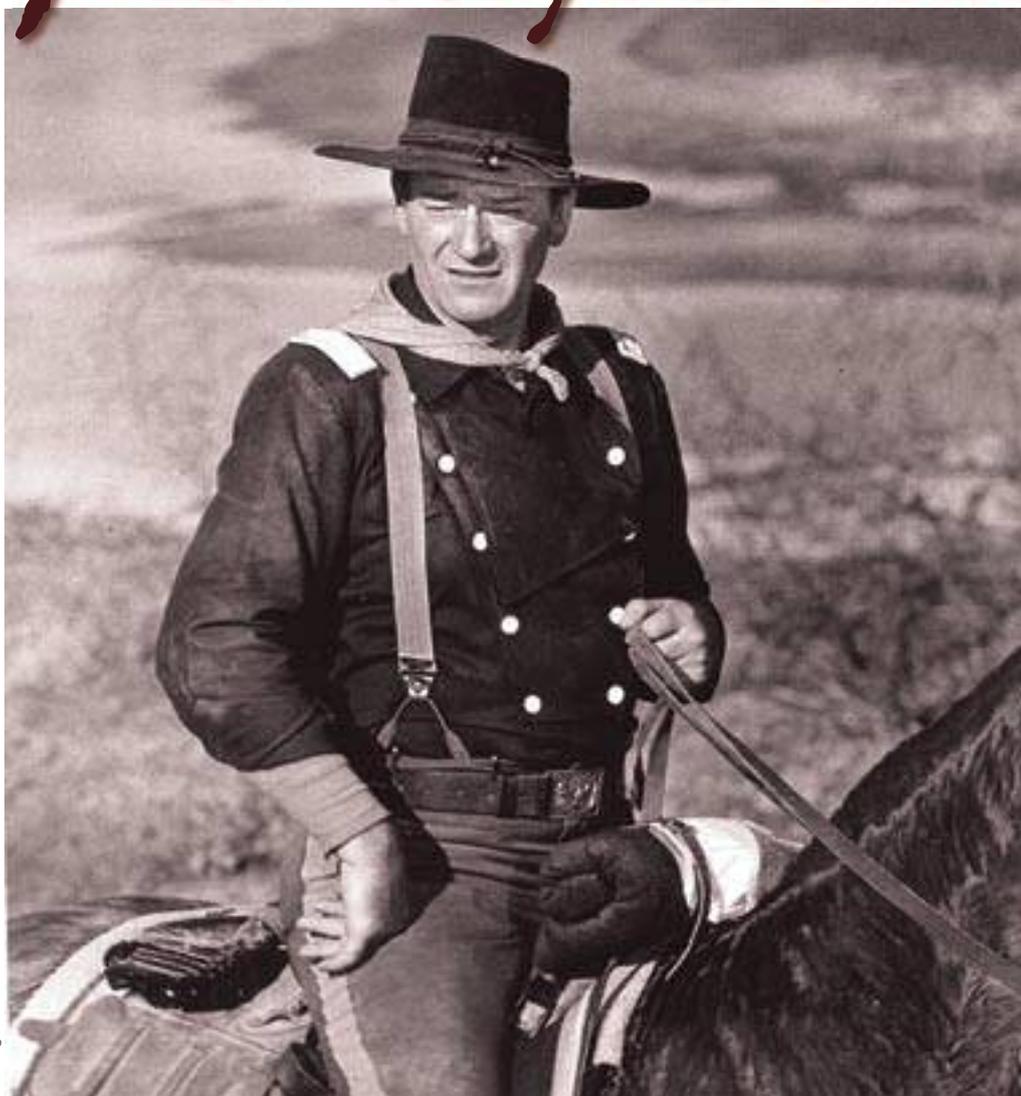


John Wayne: Mr. America



AP Images

A look back at John Wayne on the 100th anniversary of his birth reveals that he clearly understood the potential for Hollywood to be a positive influence on American culture.

by R. Cort Kirkwood

When John Wayne died 28 years ago, Japanese newspapers declared, “Mr. America Is Dead.” One would have thought the Japanese would handle Wayne’s death differently

or not at all, given the merciless shellacking he gave the Japanese in two of his war films, *The Sands of Iwo Jima* and *The Fighting Seabees*. The former, detailing the raw-boned valor of U.S. Marines in the Pacific, culminates in the mythic flag-raising at Mount Suribachi and includes three of the real flag-raisers — Rene Gagnon, Ira Hayes, and John Bradley. The latter is the entertaining if fanciful story of the Navy’s

construction battalions. At the end, before a sniper fells Wayne’s character Wedge Donovan as he sets ablaze an ant-like horde of the Tojo’s finest swarming up a hill, Donovan says, “We’ll have our own barbecue. That’ll fill that north canyon with enough hot oil to scorch those Nips back six generations.”

Maybe Japan’s headline writers hadn’t seen that one, or maybe they had and didn’t care, or maybe they just decided to set down the truth. For much of the world, John Wayne was Mr. America. In more than 200 films, he created an iconic image that said as much about what Wayne wasn’t as it did about what he was.

Explaining what Wayne was, as deeply flawed a man as we all are yet still a symbol of decency and right, would have been less important when he died than it is today. Then, despite the reverberations remaining from the convulsion of the 1960s, the morals Wayne expressed in his films were still widely recognized as correct morals to emulate and live by. Today, that is much less the case — particularly in Hollywood, which over time has begun to reject and mock the old morality in favor of carnal depravity, flagitious violence, and even hatred of Christianity. The industry of which Wayne was a part has changed radically since Wayne’s day. What Hollywood

and the bulk of its stable of actors are today, Wayne wasn’t. But Hollywood is as influential on the attitudes of the present generation of movie-goers as Wayne’s efforts were on his.

Thus does the 100th anniversary of his birth occasion contemplating Wayne apart from his well-known biography and a run-down of his best films. Treated as a complete body of work, Wayne’s films are a cul-

tural statement not only on American history but also on the American man, how he viewed himself, and his place in the world.

Wayne's Image

Central to understanding John Wayne, born May 26, 1907, is understanding how he viewed himself and his craft. For starters, he didn't think as much of his opinions as actors do today. Granted, the conservative actor spoke politically, but he didn't think most Americans believed actors had much to say. Asked to run for president, Wayne refused. No one, he said, would turn the country over to an actor.

Wayne also knew films were as serious and profound as the director and actor wanted them to be, that an actor or director could make a statement

with a film, good or bad. Wayne realized the effect Hollywood has on culture, and he wanted his movies to reinforce American culture, not undermine or change it.

He thought the film *High Noon* was un-American because the hero, Will Kane (Gary Cooper), tosses his sheriff's badge to the ground at the end. For Wayne, that showed disrespect for the law. He thought another Cooper film, *They Came to Cordura*, along with Montgomery Clift's *Suddenly Last Summer*, both of which treated homosexuality, were "poison polluting Hollywood's moral bloodstream." The latter, he said, was "too disgusting even for discussion."

Wayne didn't like films depicting raw carnality or gratuitous violence or that used foul language. When director Don Siegel asked Wayne to play *Dirty Harry*, the role Clint Eastwood made famous, Wayne refused because the character was too ruthless. Wayne didn't think much of Eastwood's films. In Siegel's autobiography, the director recounts a conversation with Wayne about Eastwood, and Wayne's asking why the younger star's films were so violent and profane. Replied Siegel,

Not just "actors": In this scene from *The Sands of Iwo Jima*, Capt. H.G. Schrier (left), who carried the American flag up Mt. Suribachi during the actual battle, hands the flag to John Wayne. The movie's depiction of the battle also included three of the actual flag raisers — Rene Gagnon, Ira Hayes, and John Bradley.



AP Images

"There's very little gratuitous violence, sex, or bad language in an Eastwood film." "Exploding," Siegel reported, Wayne offered this rejoinder: "[Expletive deleted]! His films are full of [expletives deleted] obscenities. It's a bad image to paint himself into. A [expletive deleted] shame."

Thus did Wayne understand the power of films and the effect a popular actor could have in depicting events in a morally compelling way. He also understood that certain roles could affect his image, something he carefully cultivated because it meant something more to him than money. Wayne's oft-expressed opinions clearly show he worried less about movie-goers' thinking he was a poor actor than about their thinking he was a man of poor moral character and taste. "I want to play a real man in all my films," Wayne said, "and I define manhood simply: men should be tough, fair, and courageous, never petty, never looking for a fight, but never backing down from one either." Time was, the average American man who viewed Wayne in a film, whether a grocery clerk, banker, or lawyer, saw a character worthy of emulation.

"I don't want ever to appear in a film

that would embarrass a viewer," he said. "A man can take his wife, mother, and his daughter to one of my movies and never be ashamed or embarrassed for going." A topless waitress would never serve a drink in one of his films, he promised, and profanity is not a sign of masculinity. Of pornographers he said, "Any man who'd make an X-rated movie ought to have to take his daughter to see it." That was then. Today, you wonder if a man who'd make an X-rated movie would ask his daughter to star in it.

Three Films

More than a few of Wayne's films illustrate the point. Not least of those is *The Searchers*, which many critics believe to be his finest collaboration with John Ford. Wayne's character, Ethan Edwards, is an unrepentant Confederate searching for his niece, Debbie, whom the Comanches kidnapped after butchering her family. The film opens with some profound dialogue about loyalty and honor. Asked to take an oath to become a deputy in the Texas Rangers, Edwards refuses. "I figure a man's only good for one oath at a time,"



AP Images

A labor of love: John Wayne, shown here directing *The Alamo*, mortgaged everything he owned to finance his depiction of the courageous stand of 185 men against hopeless odds. Wayne played Davy Crockett in the movie.

he says. “I took mine to the Confederate States of America.”

Many modern critics can’t view the film without gibbering about Edwards’ “racism,” apparently evident in his pathological hatred of the Comanches that energizes his five-year search for Debbie. A more intelligent, practical, and historically accurate view is that Edwards is a man of his time who, having had some experience with Comanches, believes they are murderers. Indeed, it’s hardly going out on a limb to say that modern film critics and directors who think *The Searchers* is Ford’s statement on “racism” have little knowledge of the Comanches or the brutal, unspeakable agonies to which they subjected their captives — like dragging an infant through a field of cacti until he was ripped to shreds.

So, Edwards’ ferocity in killing Indians, slaughtering buffalo to deny them winter meat, and his plan to kill Debbie because Scar, the Comanche chief, despoiled her, isn’t blind racial hatred. Rather, it’s the typical Southern (and Celtic tribal) reaction to seeing his sister-in-law, Martha, whom he admired romantically from afar, and her family suffer the Comanches’ rape and murder. Still, when Edwards finally frees Debbie, he relents. Despite her sexual congress with Scar, Edwards returns her to home and hearth, kith and kin.

The Alamo is a Wayne film utilizing his carefully cultivated patriotic image. After 10 years of trying, Wayne

used his own money and mortgaged everything he owned to make the epic tale of Texas independence. It cost \$1.2 million. Whatever the movie’s fictive inventions, Wayne’s purpose wasn’t literal historical accuracy, but retelling the tale of 185 courageous men who, facing certain death, fought tooth and nail against 5,000 Mexicans. “We wanted to re-create a moment in history,” he said, “that will show this generation of Americans what their country still stands for ... what some of their forebears went through to win ... liberty and freedom.” The film failed financially, but succeeded artistically and culturally. The film depicts the heroism of Texans and Mexicans alike, depicting both as fearless men of honor and principle.

Yet another of Wayne’s films, *The Cowboys*, is regrettably unheralded. Made just seven years before he died, Wayne, still hale and hearty, plays rough-and-tough rancher Wil Andersen, who leads a group of grammar-school boys on a cattle drive. *The Cowboys* is a story of maturation, of boys becoming men by facing hardship and hard work, tough discipline and sudden death, and ultimately, by fighting a believable gun battle against hardened outlaws who murder Andersen and steal the herd.

The principal theme of the film is a boy’s learning what it means to be a man: put in a day’s work for a day’s pay, keep your promises, and stand up for what’s right. Grow up to be strong and straight. More importantly, a man must set a good example for his sons, so they grow up, as Andersen says in his dying words, “better’n he was.”

An off-screen conversation during a break in filming *The Cowboys* demonstrates Wayne’s comprehension of his image and popularity. “America will hate you for this,” Wayne told actor Bruce Dern

While Wayne’s personal and family life left something to be desired, unlike stars and starlets today, he did not trumpet his sins as worthy of admiration or imitation, either in his public statements or on celluloid. In fact, he tried to use his iconic image as a force for good.

Wayne's image and films are of an era long past, when a man, though not perfect, met his obligations and knew what those around him expected. Wayne was, in some sense, one of the first soldiers in America's culture war.

about his character's shooting Wayne's Andersen in the back. "Yeah," Dern replied, "but they'll love me in Berkeley."

Wayne the Man

Yet Wayne's personal life presents no small measure of incongruities compared to his characters on celluloid. He was married three times. He had a fling with Marlene Dietrich. To the everlasting delight of his detractors, he ducked service in World War II. Many believe Wayne was exempted from the draft because he was 34 and had four children, but other actors faced similar circumstances and went to war anyway. Wayne regretted this last decision for his entire life, particularly given the war record of his thespian colleagues. Jimmy Stewart, for instance, twice earned the Distinguished Flying Cross flying bombers over Germany, something of an irony given that *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* depicts Wayne as the hero and Stewart as the waffling knee-knocker of uncertain mettle. It may also explain what Wayne's critics derisively call his "superpatriotism."

If the question these facts invite is how we can resolve them with Wayne's image, the answer is, we don't have to. Like all men, Wayne had feet of clay, as he knew himself, and while Wayne's personal and family life left something to be desired, unlike stars and starlets today, he did not trumpet his sins as worthy of admiration or imitation, either in his public statements or on celluloid. In fact, he tried to use his iconic image as a force for good.

Whatever Wayne's personal thoughts on religion, he wasn't like the irreligious or anti-religious men

and women, personally or professionally, who slither around modern Hollywood. How many, like Wayne, would entertain a priest and nuns in their homes? He married Catholics and raised his children in the Catholic faith. And he converted to that faith on his deathbed.

Wayne understood that depravity must yield to decency, which is why, whatever his personal foibles, his movies exclude excessive and gratuitous profanity, sex, and violence. Again, Wayne was concerned not just for his image but for his audiences, whether a man could take his wife and children to see one of his films. Clearly, few stars in Hollywood are concerned about this measure of acceptability, as films such as *Seven* (Brad Pitt), *Brokeback Mountain* (Heath Ledger), and *Cape Fear* (Robert DeNiro) amply demonstrate. You'd never see Wayne molest a teenage girl in a film. DeNiro did the deed in *Cape Fear*.

The point here isn't to denounce films

more appropriate for adults than children. But even if one argues that Wayne's personal life is no better exemplar than that of any star today, one cannot credibly argue that Wayne's films are no better for the public. Many of his films aren't just good, they are masterpieces of moral storytelling that uplift heart and soul by imparting, through historical fact and fiction, useful lessons about masculinity, love, loyalty, friendship, forgiveness, reconciliation, and courage. Wayne's image and films are of an era long past, when a man, though not perfect, met his obligations and knew what those around him expected. Wayne was, in some sense, one of the first soldiers in America's culture war.

The Searchers. The Cowboys. The Quiet Man. In Harm's Way. Fort Apache. The Sands of Iwo Jima. She Wore a Yellow Ribbon. The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance. True Grit.

All these films and others are timeless wonders, and on the centennial of Wayne's birth, viewing this treasury of cultural classics is worth a few hours of time. ■



Legends of Hollywood: Wayne was not the only big-name actor of his day who portrayed positive role models on the Silver Screen worthy of emulation. He is shown here with Jimmy Stewart in *The Shootist*. Stewart embodied America's concept of courage and decency in films such as *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*.