The American Cowboy Myth in International Politics
by Maxwell Wegman

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Today in America, our president, the man who represents us to the world as our democratically elected leader, is a self-proclaimed cowboy. This does not mean that he is literally a man who drives cattle or shoots a six-gun, as a couple of popular images of the cowboy might suggest. It means that President Bush leads America with the image of the mythic Cowboy Hero as his source of national and ethical identity. He likens himself to a Cowboy Hero in international conflicts, such as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, by adopting a rhetorical stance that places America in the role of the frontier savior. He makes international conflicts interpretable in the mythic terms of the Noble Cowboy struggling against the Bad Men, people who would harm the United States politically, socially, and economically. While Bush’s supporters have argued that his use of the Cowboy image strengthens America’s international role as the world’s remaining superpower, I will argue that our current administration’s use of the Cowboy image hinders America’s positive influence as a leader on the global stage because this image both oversimplifies and romanticizes America’s political motives. The rest of

the world does not see itself as an untamed, open Frontier, and while Americans may love the archetypal confidence of our beloved Cowboy Hero, when it is expressed as aggressive swaggering, our allies and trading partners lose confidence in his trustworthiness.

In order to understand the power of the myth of the Cowboy Hero in American politics, it is first necessary to understand the nature and the importance of myth itself. Myths can be identified as either narratives (stories that recount specific events) or icons (images that encapsulate and convey a complete narrative in an instant) that are held sacred by a specific group of people. While a sacred image may seem at first to be an immutable icon that does not live and evolve within a society, this conception is mistaken. Over time, myths are adapted for different purposes by the people who make use of them, both consciously and unconsciously. The power of myth resides in the fact that people who are exposed to and influenced by such icons have inherited them without questioning them. Historian Richard Slotkin describes myth as “history successfully disguised as archetype” (20), suggesting that

White House photo of President Bush taken in 2007
history is sometimes reduced to myth. In the guise of an American archetype, President Bush is enlisting the mythic Cowboy of our collective imagination when he wears blue jeans and a cowboy hat at his ranch in Texas, or when he uses language like “Wanted: Dead or Alive” in reference to Osama bin Laden. He is deliberately draping himself in those emblems of historical memory that we most closely associate with idealized American values: manliness, freedom and autonomy, and a keen sense of justice.

Slotkin recognizes the importance of myth in politics when he states that the “moral and political imperatives implicit in myths are given as if they were the only possible choices for moral and intelligent beings” (19). In other words, myths provide answers to life’s problems, and make those answers seem both good and “natural”; they do not open debates about how to proceed, they close them. The “political imperatives implicit in myths” can become very powerful impulses and actions in the world, especially when a myth is held to be as sacred as the Cowboy myth is by Americans. Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence address the power of popular icons in the formation of American “civil religion,” which they describe as the “fantastic but credible narratives to which so many Americans feel a deep emotional attachment” (27). We may know that many of our cherished tales about the “taming of the West” are historically inaccurate—the North American continent was never, in fact, an uninhabited Frontier, for example. But, like most people, we prefer romance over history: it is vastly more comfortable to view oneself as a member of a pioneer culture, always striving to reach a further shore, rather than as an aggressive, exploitative colonizer. While relying on mythic influence is not uniquely American, the use of the Cowboy Hero by President Bush certainly plays on the nationalistic emotions provoked by the mythic narratives of our civil religion.

The significance of myth in American culture is nearly immeasurable. Every American can feel the tug of the Cowboy’s rope when it comes to our national identity. And why shouldn’t we? The Cowboy Hero grew in prominence as the country grew in size. By the time the Frontier was declared “closed” in the 1890s, he had come to represent the freedom-loving “spirit of the West” and, by extension, American identity as a whole (Stoeltje 248). The Cowboy Hero found his first home in widely read pulp fiction novels, where he earned his place in the American popular imagination. And, like all national heroes, the Cowboy confers a sense of national unity by his irresistible appeal: we are “with him,” even if only not to be “against him”; he is, after all, awfully good with a gun, a characteristic that gives the Cowboy Hero protector status, the ideal masculine role in the hearts of Americans. For these reasons, it is in the best interests of politicians to summon up this mythic image, especially in a time when we feel threatened by foreign terrorists: the Cowboy Hero has always saved the day, so there is no reason to doubt that, with the support of the American people, he will do so again.

Anyone who regularly followed the news over the summer of 2005 was continually bombarded with images of President Bush at his ranch in Texas. Most of the footage was motivated by controversy over the extended length of his summer vacation, yet he tried to present himself to America as a man who didn’t mind getting his hands dirty. While an ideal vacation for most Americans would be a trip to the mountains, or spending some time in the sun, President Bush takes a ranching vacation. Like Teddy Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan before him, he dresses up in the workman’s clothes of the nineteenth-century cowboy, complete with a faded pair of blue
jeans and a wide-brimmed Stetson hat. He represents himself as a working man, a simple man with simple ideals. And while most Americans use idle relaxation to recharge themselves to return to the working world, President Bush displays himself as a man who needs simple manual labor, such as chopping wood or digging holes, in order to replenish himself for his job. President Bush and his colleagues in the White House have carefully engineered every aspect of his image to convince Americans that he is the fully realized personification of the Cowboy Hero of America’s civil religion.

Susan Faludi points out in The New York Times that “Vice President Dick Cheney used his ‘Meet the Press’ appearance to make clear that the president is a ‘cowboy’ who ‘cuts to the chase.’ Mr. Bush’s blunt talk, the Vice President told Tim Russert, is ‘exactly what the circumstances require’” (1). The circumstances of which Mr. Cheney speaks are the government’s needs for support for the President’s unilaterally declared “war on terror” on the eve of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. More importantly, the fact that President Bush has his Vice President working to advance his Cowboy status demonstrates that Bush’s cowboy attributes are not just parts of his character, but parts of his strategy for controlling American public opinion. Bush’s appearance as a cowboy cannot be considered a neutral or natural characteristic of the man when it is actively promoted by members of his staff.

The President successfully portrays the outward demeanor of the classic Cowboy Hero, but when it comes to embodying the archetypal virtues of that same hero he is less apt. Granted, the Cowboy Hero is interpretable in many ways, which makes it impossible for any man to exemplify all of his characteristics: to some, he is the self-contained and fair-minded Knight of the Plains, to others a self-appointed dispenser of vigilante justice. It is also true that his myth has changed to meet the needs of American society over time. While nostalgic fans of bygone Americana may still see the Cowboy perfectly embodied in the icon of the calm, self-contained Marlboro Man, American moviegoers may also see him as the once-and-future champion of the shootout at high noon. This ambiguity has made him versatile; he is now a hero who can stand for two radically different ideologies simultaneously, each charged with America’s national identity concepts. It is important to pay close attention to which forms of the Cowboy Hero—and which cowboy virtues—President Bush chooses to imitate when he argues for America’s interests, so that we may ensure that those interests are being properly represented in the global arena.

The original literary Cowboy was not the ultra-violent type that would come later, especially in films. The archetype of the nineteenth-century Cowboy, Owen Wister’s Virginian, was a man who used peaceful methods to solve social problems before resorting to violent ones. In The Virginian (1902), a card dealer present at an altercation between the Virginian and the novel’s villain describes the Virginian as “a brave man” (Wister 30). He is brave not because he handles the dispute by whipping out two pistols and shooting up the place, but because he leaves his gun on the table. The dealer goes on to say that “It’s not a brave man that’s dangerous ... It’s the cowards that scare me ... Fello’ came in here las’ Tuesday ... before we could put him out of business, he’d hurt two perfectly innocent onlookers” (Wister 30). In the original form of the Cowboy Hero, readiness to use violence is not a virtue; it is his willingness to stand up courageously in the face of evil combined with a mastery of the violence in himself that makes him admirable (Bernstein). The original cowboy ethic asserts that if a man can solve an argument without shooting someone, then he is more rather than less brave. The innocent onlookers of today’s wars in Iraq and Afghanistan might be for-
given for not seeing this particular quality in President Bush.

But America’s image of the Cowboy has not remained tied solely to nineteenth-century codes of chivalry. He has changed from a peaceful, working-class man who minded his own business and dealt only with the troubles that came to him into a violent vigilante who rescues innocent people from the evils that threaten them with his gun. This is the Cowboy Hero of the twentieth-century film industry—the man whom Americans equate with John Wayne and with Clint Eastwood in the movies he made with Sergio Leone.

An example of a violent vigilante whom Americans find it hard not to love and admire is the hero of the popular television series *The Lone Ranger*. While viewers may have seen a polite, well-dressed, and well-meaning hero in the Lone Ranger, he relies almost exclusively on his gun, his horse, and his Native American companion Tonto to get things done. His solitary nature means that he has to operate outside the laws of democracy—laws intended to preserve America’s most sacred freedoms. Although the Lone Ranger does not adhere to normal legal and judicial processes with the criminals he encounters, we admire him for his violence because he makes us, the viewers, feel safer in the knowledge that there are men in this world who will protect us by any means necessary. “The Lone Ranger redeems a different helpless democratic community in every episode” (Jewett and Lawrence 31), but his violent nature demonstrates that this new Cowboy Hero is simply a more polished form of the “coward” in Owen Wister’s novel. The new Cowboy Hero is a man who does not wait for violence to become unavoidable; he embraces vigilante violence and makes it a way of life.

Robert Warshow adroitly addresses the issue of the new form of the Cowboy Hero in American western films. He cites “The Westerner” along with another American movie icon when he states that “the two most successful creations of American movies are the gangster and the Westerner: men with guns” (105). The defining element of the Westerner, or movie Cowboy, is his gun. He is a violent man who lives and dies by his gun. The “Shoot ’em Up” movie Cowboy, the “gunslinger” hero, has become an American cliché. An important exemplar of this type is the character Bill Munny played by Clint Eastwood in the 1991 film *Unforgiven*. Bill Munny is an ex-gunslinger who falls back on his violent nature at the end of the movie when he slaughters a group of corrupt lawmen to avenge their murder of his friend. This kind of violent gunmanship replaced the stoic bravery of the literary Cowboy in the world’s imagination generations ago and has persisted.

However, the Cowboy Hero in American politics is the most deceptive form of the Cowboy image. The Cowboy icon—with all its goodness and naturalness—stands for America; therefore, any disagreement with decisions made by our “cowboy” leader would constitute disagreement (bad, unnatural) with America altogether. President Bush represents himself as a simple, working-class cowboy who lives a quiet life, but his words and deeds are those of the Lone Ranger. Who in America can forget the numerous times President Bush has told us that the way to capture terrorists is to “smoke ’em out of their holes”? And who can forget the way that America charged into Iraq in order to save the world from weapons of mass destruction? We thought we were in danger because of 9/11, and President Bush cast himself as the Lone Ranger riding into town to save the day—i.e., to rescue the citizens with whom we identified (the Iraqi people) from outlaws (its own government).

George W. Bush uses the Cowboy image to convince Americans that they are on his side simply because they are Americans. He has
harnessed the myth of the extra-democratic, vigilante Cowboy to justify his rashness in moving on to ever-bigger conflicts. While you would be hard-pressed to find an American who did not agree with the invasion of Afghanistan, the country found to harbor the terrorists who attacked the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, the invasion of Iraq is a different story, and this is where Bush’s use of the Cowboy myth becomes seriously controversial. Iraq never attacked the United States on our own soil. While it may have been ruled by a corrupt and evil man, and while we contested that man’s rule in the Gulf War of 1991, Iraq was never a direct aggressor against the United States. However, George W. Bush created a scenario which made it acceptable to the American public for him to send our armies into Iraq to disarm and depose Saddam Hussein. In 2003 many Americans saw him as the hero, riding into town just as the Cowboy in an old western movie does. He used the Lone Ranger form of the Cowboy Hero to make Americans feel that it was right for him to use non-democratic methods to save a society from itself. The Cowboy image not only masks Bush’s rashness but also works to quell suspicions that America is in Iraq in order to secure a portion of the world’s oil market. George W. Bush had successfully duped America into believing that the only “American” thing to do was to go in and save Iraq from its own government.

However, people outside our nation saw that the Americans’ violent, imperialistic conquest of Iraq may not have been the morally or politically correct move to make. Members of the United Nations were content to keep weapons inspectors in Iraq to find or to keep production of weapons of mass destruction in check. However, sitting idly by and waiting for a perceived threat to slowly vanish into obscurity was not acceptable to George Bush the Cowboy. Instead of simply trying to contain Iraq’s military ambitions, Bush used a semblance of an American national icon to justify an attack which, never having been sanctioned by the U.N., was outside normal democratic and international civil procedures.

Expressions of sentiment against Bush’s quick action in Iraq came from all over Europe. In his article, “To Some in Europe, the Major Problem is Bush the Cowboy,” David E. Sanger points out that Europeans feel that “the president’s language is far too blunt” (1). Sanger also quotes a German official, Hans-Ulrich Klose, saying that Bush’s way of talking feels as if he is “jabbing ... his finger at you” (1). In other words, Bush’s Cowboy demeanor offends Europeans and alienates them from the prospect of allying themselves with us. Bush has taken the Lone Ranger act to the extreme; all his Cowboy talk and actions have left the
United States almost alone as aggressors in our struggles in Iraq and Afghanistan. Bush has made America into what Andrew Bernstein describes as a reflection of the Cowboy’s “willingness to stand up to evil and do it alone, if necessary” (1). Aside from England, whose prime minister Tony Blair is increasingly identified in the British press as “Tonto,” we are standing nearly alone, and that may not be necessary.

Some Europeans find our international policies ineffective, saying there might be better ways to accomplish our goal of making Iraq a safer place to live and trade. Sanger quotes one German official, Karsten D. Voigt, saying, “We [Germans] know about containment. ... We lived with it for 50 years. It worked. And at the end, we got a regime change” (4). Voigt is telling us that America did not have to charge into Iraq and try to solve its problem quickly. A non-violent containment method would have effected change with less bloodshed, and with lower costs on all sides. Containment was a Cold War strategy used to contain communism in the Soviet Union until that self-destructive form of government fizzled out. Containment avoided the deaths of thousands on both sides and was an American triumph in the end. Not only would a containment strategy more likely have been approved by European nations, it also would have been a better representation of the ethic of the nineteenth-century, peace-loving Cowboy Hero.

Some Americans may argue that it doesn’t matter what Europeans think about the American Cowboy and his role in politics. Andrew Bernstein points to “his unshakable moral confidence in the face of evil. It is this vision of the cowboy, not the European slander, that Americans find inspiring” (1). Bernstein argues that American inspiration and unity are more important than global solidarity. However, this stance is inappropriate for a nation whose international relations have become more and more important since the nineteenth century.

In today’s era of internationalism and of global treaty organizations, a country’s role in the global community is much more significant than in the past. And the consequences of unnecessary wars are, by their nature, much more severe than are the consequences of Americans not being able to identify their leader as a mythic hero. Effective leaders do not have to dress up in the costume of a cultural myth if they are truly great. If it were not for George W. Bush’s ineffectiveness as a leader in the global community, he would not have to pretend to be an American myth. America should not have to find inspiration in myth during times of trouble; we should be able to turn to a strong leader made of flesh and blood to inspire us and give us security.

While the use of the Cowboy Hero in American politics was originally effective in creating a sense of national unity at the beginning of the Iraq conflict, that unity has dissolved as approval of the war efforts reached an all-time low this October (2005 Pew Global Attitudes Survey). The true significance of President Bush’s ineffectiveness of America’s use of the Cowboy Hero is in the global arena. European nations neither understand nor approve of Bush’s use of blunt language and concrete absolutes. His “finger pointing” attitude puts European nations in a “you’re either with me, or you’re against me” position, making international democratic diplomacy nearly impossible. Bush’s violent embodiment of the Cowboy is a bloody and wasteful way to solve our nation’s problems. While one man can violently conquer evil in a western movie, riding into town with guns blazing is not the way to foster international peace. George W. Bush’s use of the Cowboy Hero is not only inappropriate, but outrageous and backward-thinking in a world that should be progressing in a peaceful direction.
Works Cited


