



Dream West. In Fort Apache, a cavalry officer (John Wayne) recalls the way things once were. Director John Ford split the screen to present the man's romanticized memories in a manner that erases the distinction between past and present, collapsing the West of harsh realities with that of a nostalgic dream. Courtesy RKO Pictures.

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DOUGLAS BRODE
**DREAM
WEST**

POLITICS AND RELIGION
IN COWBOY MOVIES

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*Last of the giants. The old-time conservative cattlemen are often portrayed as anachronisms attempting to halt the coming of the twentieth century. Lionel Barrymore embodies the type in *Duel in the Sun*. Courtesy The David O. Selznick Studio.*

DON'T FENCE ME IN

RUGGED INDIVIDUALISM AND OPEN RANGE

We have money. We want to have more money.

— CATTLE BARON LORD PETER IN *JOHNSON COUNTY WAR*, 2002

“There go the last of the giants,” Prudence’s lover, Chris Mooney (Barry Sullivan), sighs as the old-timers, heads unbowed, ride off into the sunset at the end of *Texas Lady*. Earlier, when she first articulates her progressive plan, a bystander informs Prudence that the area’s biggest cattlemen “have run this country for so long it’s become sacrilegious to stand up against them.” These kings of cattle have taken on godlike aspects, if those of false gods, that give them mythic status. In time, the townspeople tell the big ranchers, “You’ll have to accept that the old days are gone.” At the finale, they do. A deal is reached between individualistic cattlemen and the growing collective of townspeople, small-scale ranchers, and dirt farmers. The town serves as their bastion even as the range was for cattlemen, all this achieved by a woman.

In a Western, the worst men are those who take up guns to violently oppose change, particularly change imposed from a federal level. In *Sea of Grass* (Elia Kazan, 1947), adapted from a novel by Conrad Richter, Bryce Chamberlain (Melvyn Douglas) is an Eastern-born, highly educated lawyer living on America’s final and fast-fading wild frontier, the once wide-open

spaces inhabited only by a few cattlemen and their cowboys now in the process of settlement by dirt farmers and townspeople. Chamberlain takes on a job as an agent for the national government at the request of the new settlers, community-oriented types who sense that they must all hang together or be hanged, possibly literally, by the unfriendly old-timers. The potential nemesis of these farm families is the rawest of raw capitalists, the cattle baron Colonel James Brewton (Spencer Tracy), a vivid representation of the rugged individualist. For a man of Brewton's conservative-libertarian politics, all the problems that arise on this range ought to be settled locally. This increases Brewton's hostility toward Chamberlain (already intense, as Brewton despises educated people, particularly from the East) owing to Chamberlain's emergent ties with the federal government, as a once-regional dispute will now be settled by the national legal system. When Brewton, furious, suggests that secession from the union ought not to be ruled out, this fictional character from a sixty-five-year-old film presages a position expressed by Texas Governor Rick Perry during the first decade of the twenty-first century. The federal government won't waver; if Brewton and his ilk refuse to bow to progress, the military will be brought in to disarm the cowboys and cattlemen, precisely what they most fear. Similarly in *Duel in the Sun*, Senator McCandles learns that his worst nightmare has come true: the railroad, which will bring in "nesters," is headed for his town. In defiance, this cattle baron rounds up his men, planning to kill the unarmed Asians laying down track. The confrontation serves as the film's centerpiece, thematically and visually. Here, too, a lawyer named Langford (Otto Kruger) and a doctor, Lem Smoot (Harry Carey), argue that the law is on their side. Cattle baron McCandles hisses, "There's *my* law, right there!" as he points to mounted cowboys with rifles ready.

Or, as Gene Autry joyfully sang in his theme song:

*Where you sleep out every night,
And the only law is right!
Back in the saddle again.¹*

Yet Ford, the greatest of all Western directors, saw things differently. At a political rally near the end of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), crusading reporter Dutton Peabody (Edmond O'Brien) attempts to make some sense of the entire history of the West. Peabody's speech summarizes not only



The march of time. In Ford's penultimate Western, The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, Dutton Peabody (Edmond O'Brien taking over for the deceased Thomas Mitchell) directly addresses the film's audience, summing up frontier history from the progressive point of view. Courtesy Paramount Pictures.

Western history but also the vision we receive of it while watching Western movies, particularly those of a liberal, progressive order. Having listened to a pompous orator (John Carradine) speak on behalf of cattlemen who are sitting on the right side of the screen from a viewer's perspective, Peabody addresses the issue of statehood from viewpoints of the farmers, townspeople, and small-scale ranchers, Tom Doniphon (John Wayne) included:

While under the spell of his eloquence, I could almost see once again the vast herds of buffalo, and the savage redskin, wandering with no law but the law of survival: the tomahawk and bow and arrow. And then with the westward march of our nation came the pioneers . . . and the boldest of them were the cattlemen, who regarded the wide-open range their own domain. Their law was the law of the hired gun. Now, today, has come the railroad and the people. Hardworking citizens, the homesteader, the shopkeeper. The builder of cities. We need roads to lead to those cities. We need statehood to protect the rights of every man and woman, however humble.

They need, the filmmaker's spokesman continues, for the federal government to impose order on local chaos. Ford's authorial voice sides with liberals

who believe that change is good, not conservatives in favor of maintaining the status quo; the farmers who wave signs proclaiming “Progress with Statehood” rather than cowboys shouting “Keep the range open!”; with law and order, not anarchy; with progress, not traditionalism; with community values over and above rugged individualism. In later years, John Ford proudly considered himself a Republican.² Thus he has often been misinterpreted as a conservative. The problem in understanding his work, so often progressive in nature, comes in assuming he was a twentieth-century Republican. Ford’s personal hero, as *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939) with Henry Fonda in the title role makes clear, was Honest Abe, the bygone liberal Republican.

Antilibertarian thinking exists not only in big Westerns but B features as well. *Tornado Range* (Ray Taylor, 1948) opens with this statement: “Pioneers discovered the land they had come for was in the hands of a small group of ranchers who meant to keep [the range open] for their cattle.” The hero (Eddie Dean) arrives to impose national values on the local area. Under the Homestead Act of 1862,³ he asks armed militiamen who try to block his way, “Are you men prepared to defy the United States Congress and the highest court in the land?” Though some consider doing so, most back off. Despite its identity as a rootin’, tootin’, shootin’ oater, *Tornado Range* defends the imposition of blue-state values on red ones. The winning of the West, to borrow from Teddy Roosevelt, could not occur without this necessary civilizing process, as cowboy movies mostly reveal.

The ultimate dramatic slight to the cattleman was to move him beyond tragic figure through outright villain to object of ridicule. That would occur in *Liberty Valance*, derived from a short story by Dorothy Johnson, a writer with a protofeminist sensibility. The hero, Ransom Stoddard (James Stewart), yet another populist, progressive lawyer from the East, kills (or thinks he does) the ruthless Valance (Lee Marvin). Like Jack Wilson in *Shane*, Valance does the cattle barons’ dirty work such as running off stock and terrorizing farmers. Stoddard is then nominated for political office as a liberal Republican. His opponent, a conservative Democrat favoring open range, appears as a caricature of all cinematic barons who preceded him. Running on a law-and-order ticket, Stoddard wins. Meanwhile, Doniphon (Wayne), the man who actually killed Liberty Valance, fades away, Shane-like. Though he was on the right side, he had used the gun.

Wayne would in time play his share of cattle barons, if relatively enlightened ones, in such films as director Andrew McLaglen’s *McLintock* (1963)



“Only a man who carries a gun needs a gun!” Harry Carey speaks that line at the end of *Angel and the Badman* after Quirt Evans (John Wayne) decides words are mightier than the sword—or pistol. Courtesy John Wayne Productions/Republic Pictures.

and *Chisum* (1970). Earlier, the man known as Mr. Conservative enacted the voice of the common man, not only in Ford films but in others that the Duke devised for himself under the banner of his own company, Batjac Productions. In *Angel and the Badman* (James Edward Grant, 1947), wounded loner gunman Quirt Evans is cared for by a group of gentle farmers. As he recuperates, water stops running through the land. When he learns that nearby rancher Fred Carson (Paul Hurst) dammed the source, Quirt rides over to convince the unpleasant fellow that whatever his legal right as an individual, damming the water “ain’t neighborly.” Quirt informs Carson that a man ought to take into consideration the well-being of his fellow man, the community at large. The only angle from which this might be considered conservative is that the problem is resolved on a local level, without a need for federal intervention.

Wayne’s Quirt is that most admirable of movie heroes, the mediator who manages to resolve long-standing arguments. In actuality, such problem solvers were few and far between. “The cowboy and the farmer should

be friends," a hopeful chorus sings in *Oklahoma* (Fred Zinnemann, 1955). "Should be" seldom turns into "will be" in Westerns. In *Guns and Guitars* (Joseph Kane, 1936), cattle fever spreads across Texas. The plot deals with the need to move beyond a local approach to the problem to regional and in time national solutions. In a similar vein, the importance of enacting federal laws that limit localized freedoms is basic to *Home on the Prairie* (Jack Townley, 1939). Gene Autry and sidekick Frog run a government inspection post. Their task is to ensure that no sick "dogies" pass over into the national market. One rugged individualist, Belknap (Walter Miller), attempts to rush his herd through. Given the potential for hoof-and-mouth disease, Gene and Frog will not allow this to happen. The worst of the raw capitalists, H. R. Shelby (Gordon Hart), takes a self-serving position: "Move 'em out and then let somebody *else* worry." He lacks any sense of community, local or national.

The raw-capitalist rancher is often shown as a villain, his only interest the acquisition of ever more land, power, and money. Among the most vicious to appear on screen are the characters played by Edward G. Robinson in *The Violent Men* (Rudolph Mate, 1955), Donald Crisp in *The Man From Laramie* (Anthony Mann, 1955), Louis Jean Heydt in *The Badge of Marshal Brennan* (A. C. Gannaway, 1957), Leslie Nielsen in *The Sheepman* (George Marshall, 1958), Lee J. Cobb in *Lawman* (Michael Winner, 1971), Jon Cypher in *Valdez Is Coming* (Edward Sherin, 1971), Gene Hackman in *The Hunting Party* (Don Medford, 1971), Robert Duvall in *Joe Kidd* (John Sturges, 1972), George Hamilton in *The Man Who Loved Cat Dancing* (Richard C. Safarian, 1973), Clifton James in *Rancho Deluxe* (Frank Perry, 1975), John McLiam in *The Missouri Breaks* (Arthur Penn, 1976), Jason Robards in *Comes a Horseman* (Alan J. Pakula, 1978), Sam Waterston in *Heaven's Gate* (Michael Cimino, 1980), John Russell in *Pale Rider* (Clint Eastwood, 1984), Ray Baker in *Silverado* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1985), Richard Bradford in *The Milagro Beanfield War* (Robert Redford, 1988), Pat Hingle in *Gunsmoke: To the Last Man* (TVM, Jerry Jameson, 1992), and David Carradine in *Miracle at Sage Creek* (James Intveld, 2005).

Often the rancher's nefariousness is heightened by making him British; an aura of "class" adds to an American audience's immediate sense of dislike. Alan Rickman in *Quigley Down Under* (Simon Wincer, 1990), David Fox in *Promise the Moon* (TVM, Ken Jubenvill, 1997), Christopher Cazenove in *Johnson County War* (TVM, David Cass Sr., 2002), and Jeremy Irons in *Appaloosa* (Ed Harris, 2008) all come to mind.

He can, in some cases, be an Eastern capitalist hoping to bring a big-city approach to family-farm country. *Cattle Town* (Noel M. Smith, 1952) takes place after the Civil War when the governor of Texas (Charles Meredith) sells large sections of government-owned open land to a syndicate head, Judd Hastings (Ray Teal), to save the state from bankruptcy. Initially Hastings appears enlightened, requesting that the governor send special agent Mike McGann (Dennis Morgan) to make sure the small-scale ranchers whose herds graze there move off. We expect the leader of the little people, Ben Curran (Philip Carey), to fight. He does not; he organizes his friends for an exodus. Now, though, the capitalist shows his true (and raw) colors. He orders his men to slow down the evacuation for as long as possible. If the cattle are not removed from his land by a certain date, they will become his property. Upon arrival in the disputed area, McGann is shocked to realize that any resistance to moving the herds will not come from their current owners but from a baron hoping to acquire vast wealth.

The antipopulist villain cuts across race and gender boundaries. The character manifests as beautiful if ruthless women, played by Veronica Lake in *Ramrod* (Andre de Toth, 1947), Alexis Smith in *Montana* (Ray Enright, 1950), Jeanne Craine in *Man without a Star* (King Vidor, 1955), and Barbara Stanwyck in *The Violent Men* (Rudolph Mate, 1955) and *Forty Guns* (Sam Fuller, 1957). The villain takes the form of Latinos in the characters portrayed by Pedro Armendáriz in *The Wonderful Country* (Robert Parrish, 1959) and John Saxon in *The Appaloosa* (Sidney J. Furie, 1966). He can be fictional or factual. New Mexico's famed rancher John Chisum is lionized in John Wayne's depiction of him in *Chisum* (Andrew McLaglen, 1970) and vilified in *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (Sam Peckinpah, 1973) and *Young Guns II* (Geoff Murphy, 1990) as played by Barry Sullivan and James Coburn, respectively. Likewise, budget knows no restraints; actor Roy Barcroft played a ruthless cattle baron in more than two dozen singing-cowboy mini-epic films. In nongeneric Westerns, this role may be portrayed in a more sympathetic light, Lear-like, a great man who does bad things. Such a deeply troubled figure appears in *The Big Country* (William Wyler, 1958). Charles Bickford's cattle baron, Major Henry Terrill, appears polite, even civilized, and open to a modernized West. He approves of his daughter (Carol Baker) marrying an Easterner (Gregory Peck) and is quick to speak against violence, which he professes to abhor. Yet he demands that guns be employed when dealing with a white-trash family that encroaches on his land.

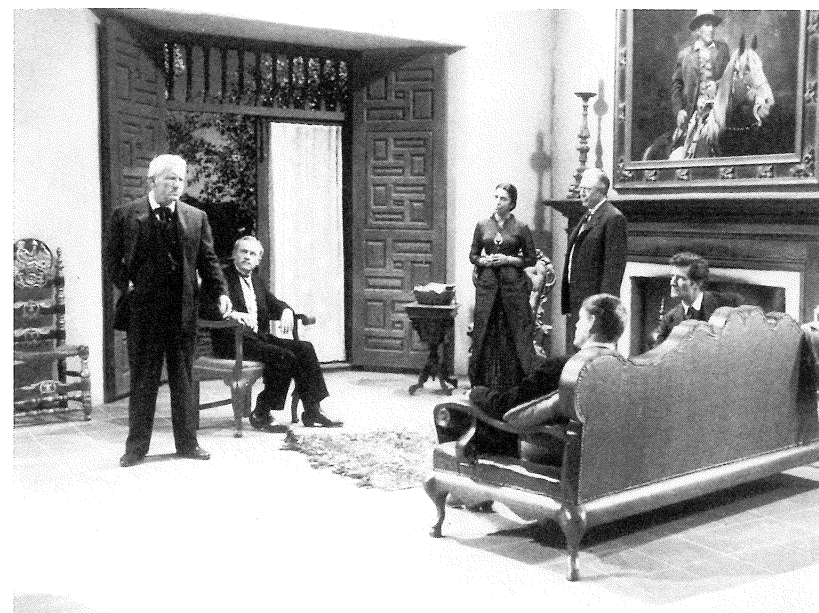
Some of the most complex cattle barons are portrayed by Hollywood's greatest actor, Spencer Tracy, who assumed the role for the first time in *Sea of Grass* as Colonel James Brewton. Going up against Brewton is Eastern lawyer Bryce Chamberlain. On the very day Lutie (Kathryn Hepburn) arrives by train to marry Brewton, Chamberlain explains to the wide-eyed young woman, "We're making history in Salt Fork today. I hope it will be the right kind." By that he means limiting the power of the cattlemen, particularly Lutie's intended. The barrister hopes to win a conviction against the colonel for having his cowboys run a farmer off his own land. Everyone knows Brewton is guilty; many are fearful to return a fair verdict. "A lot of land for one man," the farmers mutter. What they want are rights to the water Brewton controls. The colonel sets forth his defense:

I have sympathy for the early pioneer who came out here and risked his life and his family among the Indians. And I have little charity for the nester who waited until the country was safe and peaceable before he filed his homestead on the range of someone else who had fought for it.

His words echo the social Darwinism of Herbert Spencer.⁴ His viewpoint is self-serving. Homesteaders file on government land that is legally offered to them. The colonel, believing he has the market cornered, cannot know that in time the federal government, in the manner of Roosevelt Republicans, would operate as a trust-buster. His words would be echoed often, notably by Ryker in *Shane* when Starrett says the farmers are on the right side of history:

You in the right? Listen, Starrett, when I came to this country you weren't much older than your boy there. We had rough times. Me and other men that are mostly dead now . . . We *made* this country. Found it and made it [on] hard work and empty bellies. Cattle we brought was [run] off by Indians and outlaws. They don't bother you much because *we* handled 'em. Made a safe range out of (all) this . . . then people move in who never had to rawhide it through the old days. Fence off my range, fence my cattle off from water . . . an' you say we have no *right*? The men that did the work, run the risks? *No right?*

Ryker is not some motiveless malignancy but a flawed person whose entire design for living has been challenged. Starrett can only counter by taking his



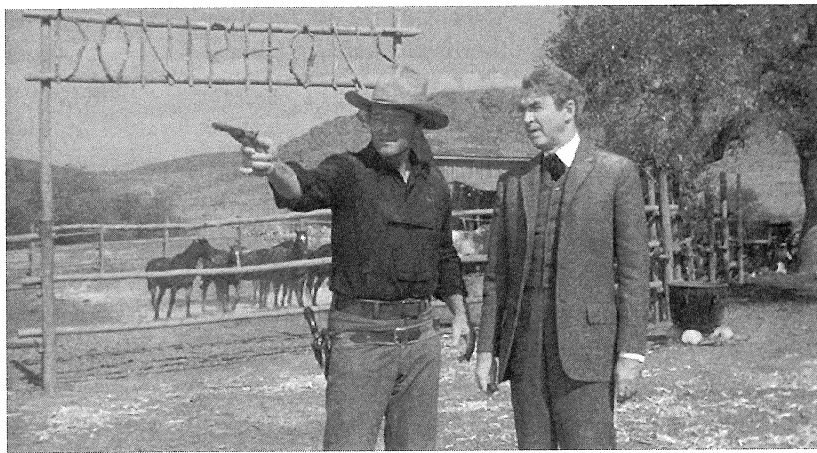
Social Darwinism in action. The mightiest of the old-timers, Matt Devereaux (Spencer Tracy) grows paranoid as newly arrived Easterners change the face of the West in Broken Lance. Courtesy Twentieth Century-Fox.

blue-state approach of relying on federal rather than local authority that so antagonizes Ryker and other individualists: "The *government* doesn't see it that way." If Schaefer and Stevens clearly make Ryker an antagonist rather than a villain, it is also obvious that this Western's loyalties are with the progressives.

In *Duel in the Sun* it is his money that Senator McCanles cares most about when opposing incoming people: "New immigrants will put in *taxes!*" Schools and the like—fire departments, police, and so forth—will cost him. In opposing him, a kinder, gentler man of the West, Lem Smoot, is accompanied by a suited, Eastern lawyer, Langford (Otto Kruger). Enlightened men can see what the hard-core conservative cannot: there are worse things than higher taxes. More often than not, the female lead speaks for this liberal point of view. That principle is in *Sea of Grass* embodied by Lutie, at once old-fashioned feminine and forward-looking feminist; Chamberlain, the lawyer, tells her that "it'll be a woman's country" once schools and churches are established.



*The true villain. In many Westerns the villain is less likely to wear black garb than a suit, identifying him as a raw capitalist rather than an adherent to the code of the West. Few actors ever filled the role so effectively as Raymond Burr in *Count Three and Pray*. Courtesy Copal/Columbia Pictures.*



*A shift in values. During the twentieth century's second half, the stigma of the suit would be questioned in movies that revised attitudes in earlier oaters. In *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, the unarmed Easterner (James Stewart) gradually replaces the armed and ready cowboy (John Wayne) as top dog in town, even winning away the woman they both love. Courtesy Paramount Pictures.*

Without a strong, at times even defiant woman to stand up to him, a cattle baron finds himself without the conscience that he probably does not know he desperately needs, as in the case of Wayne's Dunson in *Red River*. In *Broken Lance* (Edward Dmytryk, 1954), Tracy's Matt Devereaux appears even more tragic than his Brewton in *Sea of Grass*, as here his Latina wife (Katy Jurado) feels too intimidated to oppose his often absurd, ego-driven choices. Devereaux unwisely divides his kingdom among scheming sons (played by Richard Widmark, Hugh O'Brian, and Earl Holliman) and the sole loyal one (Robert Wagner), who becomes a male Cordelia. Devereaux's conflict puts him in a more sympathetic light here than in *Sea of Grass* since his enemies aren't humble farmers but a huge mining company. Owned by an Eastern conglomerate, this operation pours waste from copper excavations into the rivers that both big-time ranchers and poor squatters depend on. What eventually brings this cattle baron down is a conservative's insistence on dealing with the problem through direct action rather than the slow-moving legal system. It is his reactionary methods, not his sincere if admittedly self-interested concern for the environment, that creates the film's tense dramatic situation and his fall from grace.