

THE

*Nick Zegarrac's*

*Hollywood*

ART

JOHN WAYNE

AMERICAN

# THE DUKE'S LEGACY CONTINUES TO CAST A GIANT SHADOW

by Nick Zegarac

***“Oscar and I have something in common,”*** John Wayne proclaimed at the 1979 Academy Awards, ***“Oscar first came to Hollywood in 1928. So did I. We're both a little weather-beaten, but we're still here and plan to be around for a whole lot longer.”***

It was a statement fraught with irony and possibly a few quietly bitter regrets. For in the intervening decades, John Wayne had seen his reputation plummet amongst a new generation of film goers who viewed his patriotic legacy as fraudulent (partly, because Wayne himself had never served in the armed forces even though he frequently donned military regalia for his films) but more to the point, misperceived as blatant war mongering in a decade where Viet Nam divided the nation into pro and con encampments.

***“It's kind'a sad thing when a normal love of country makes you a super patriot,”*** Wayne openly declared. He had tolerated his place in the new Hollywood so far as it went, though he never accepted the suggestion that his views were out of touch. ***“Very few of these so-called liberals are open-minded. . . . They shout you down and won't let you speak if you disagree with them.”***

The year before, John Wayne had been scheduled to appear as a presenter at the annual Oscar telecast but had to bow out due to complications from surgery to remove a malignant tumor. In his place on that night in 1978, presenter Bob Hope held back his emotions to offer encouragement to the ailing American icon. ***“We expect to see you saunter out here next year, duke”*** Hope declared to thunderous applause, ***“...because nobody can walk in John Wayne's boots.”*** And Wayne did not disappoint.

(Top: an early publicity still taken at Monogram Pictures. Right: an athletic Wayne during his USC football years. Wayne's pin-up quality as a leading man was certainly evident in his early film career and he appeared mostly as just another 'congenial' cowboy, fighting hard, laughing loudly and riding his horse to victory against outlaws and Indians. Facing page: a Republic still – colorized.)





It seems ironic now, nearly 30 years after his death, but it is a fairly safe assumption that had it not been for director John Ford, American cinema might never have been blessed with a John Wayne. Although Wayne had toiled in movies – first as a general laborer on the Fox back lot, then as an extra in a string of B-westerns at Republic Pictures, the young lowan had little more than a workhorse mentality and 122 forgettable film appearances to recommend him and distinguish his early career.



## THE LONG JOURNEY HOME

At 6 feet 4 inches, Wayne towered over most of his fellow actors. Yet, despite handsome looks, an athletic physique and congenial good nature, he was regarded as little more than a blip on the celebrity radar.



John Wayne was born on May 26, 1907 in Winterset Iowa as Marion Robert Morrison, with his middle named officially changed to Michael after his parents decided to name their second child Robert. His youth and teen years were spent, first in Palmdale, then Glendale California where he held down a part time job at an ice cream parlor and attended the local high school. Young Marion's hopes to attend the U.S. Naval Academy were dashed, so instead he decided to attend the University of Southern California (USC).



Wayne had come to acting in a round about way, working as property man and stunt double to help pay for a USC education. At university Wayne, who had already adopted 'the duke' persona (borrowed from his Uncle Tommy, a prize fighter), excelled at football while studying pre-law. By 1920 however, films were taking up more of his time.

It was at this juncture that a football injury permanently ended Wayne's wavering dreams to play professionally. Unable to cover his scholarship he left college for the movies, beginning at the bottom. His work ethic impressed fledgling director, John Ford who frequently asked for Wayne on the set. Ford befriended the young man almost by accident and eventually entrusted his young protégé with a single line of dialogue – ***"What do they do in the movies, Mr.?"*** in his film, **Salute** (1929).



(The many early faces of 'Duke' Wayne: top – mugging for studio publicity with an unknown child extra and a puppy on the Republic Studio back lot. Middle: his first starring role in Raoul Walsh's *The Big Trail* – winsome male handsomeness...but the role demanded something more. Middle: As the Ringo Kid in John Ford's seminal western, *Stagecoach*. Bottom: donning military garb for *They Were Expendable*. In later years, the fact that Wayne never actually fought in WWII was misperceived as hypocritical typecasting, particularly after Wayne began making his conservative views more public in the mid-1960s and throughout the rest of the decade.)





Ford, who fancied himself a star maker en par with Svengali – or at least, Louie B. Mayer - had quietly decided that the young Morrison was going to be his to mold. On Ford's recommendation, veteran director Raoul Walsh cast Wayne in his first important movie, **The Big Trail** (1930) an epic western shot in both conventional and highly experimental widescreen aspect ratios. Unfortunately for all concerned, Wayne's lack of leading man experience was laid bare on the project and the resulting epic was a disastrous flop that set Wayne's career back by ten years.



The film's failure also strained the mentor relationship between Wayne and Ford, the latter rarely tolerating weakness or defeat. It had been director Walsh's foresight to professionally change Marion Morrison to John Wayne. To Ford it seemed as though his own aspirations for molding the young actor's career as his exclusive star had been dashed, or at the very least - snubbed. From that moment on the Wayne and Ford barely spoke – a rift that hurt Wayne considerably as he toiled in cheap westerns apart and away from Ford's tutelage over the next decade.



But in the spring of 1938, John Ford had other problems. Although he was one of Hollywood's most prominent directors with a string of critical and financial successes to his credit, he could find no one willing to finance his latest project – **Stagecoach**. Ford had based his screenplay on various source materials including French novelist Guy de Maupassant's *Boul de Suif* (Ball of Fat); the story of a whore who sleeps with an army officer to help people escape to freedom on a stagecoach. However, it was Dudley Nichols adaptation about social hypocrisy that inspired Ford to move the project forward and gave **Stagecoach** its psychological underpinning that later would dub the film 'Hollywood's first 'adult western'.



Initially, Ford had proposed the project to independent producer, David O. Selznick – whose marginal interest was dashed when Ford informed Selznick that Wayne was to be cast in the pivotal role of the Ringo Kid. Known for his fastidious attention to gloss and detail, Selznick could see only Gary Cooper as his all-American and the project fell through. It was probably just as well. Ford was more interested in grit than gloss.

(Top: good times on the set of *The Searchers*, Wayne center and singing off key. Middle: two photo ops for the aspiring football star that would never be. Bottom: an early supporting role, playing a football player, no less.)



The project was next shopped to independent producer Merian C. Cooper who accepted the challenge. Unfortunately, any hopes for an enjoyable shoot were dashed when sparks began to fly between Ford and Wayne on the set.

Determined not to repeat Walsh's mistakes on **The Big Trail**, Ford verbally admonished Wayne's performance at every opportunity, relentlessly bullying the actor to such an extent that costar Claire Trevor later commented she found the whole experience quite painful to observe.

For his part, Wayne quietly absorbed the abuse, convinced that the antagonism would be worth the final product. It was a clairvoyant assessment. **Stagecoach** reinvigorated the Hollywood western and jumpstarted John Wayne's career to a 35 year run as America's ultimate action hero.

If only to save himself from the prospect of repeating these intolerable working conditions, John Wayne should have departed from Ford's ambitions immediately followed **Stagecoach's** premiere. Yet for much of his later career, Wayne chose to align his star and his allegiances closely with his first mentor.



To be certain, the alliance was fortuitous and profitable for both. Ford made Wayne a star and Wayne made Ford's westerns profitable. Only occasionally did their on screen union show signs of strain behind the scenes, as on the set of **They Were Expendable** (1945) a story about accepting war time defeat rather than celebrating success. The film has since proven to have more than an ounce of artistic merit, though when it premiered it was not a financial success.

(Top: a publicity still for John Ford's memorable **The Long Voyage Home** in which Wayne played a drifter aboard ship who reluctantly decides to go home to his mother in the final reel. The film was laced with Ford's sentimentality for family and belonging. Left: fighting a marauding Arab in **The Black Watch** – a minor programmer.)

Throughout the forties, Ford refined Wayne's persona. In **Forte Apache** (1948) Ford helped Wayne cultivate the torments of a noble soldier struggling to reconcile the differences between sworn duty and resigned fate. In **She Wore A Yellow Ribbon** (1949), Ford transformed Wayne's charismatic good looks into an aged careworn veteran on the verge of retirement. Throughout these filmic excursions, Ford also continued his relentless assault on Wayne's acting prowess, perhaps because he had begun to realize that his young star was making quantum strides apart from his guidance toward becoming an independent man and certifiable screen legend.

*"I made up my mind that I was going to play a real man to the best of my ability,"* Wayne later explained in an interview, *"I felt many of the Western stars of the twenties and thirties were too goddamn perfect. They never drank or smoked. They never wanted to go to bed with a beautiful girl. They never had a fight. A heavy might throw a chair at them, and they just looked surprised and didn't fight in this spirit.*

*They were too goddamn sweet and pure to be dirty fighters. Well, I wanted to be a dirty fighter if that was the only way to fight back. If someone throws a chair at you, hell, you pick up a chair and belt him right back. I was trying to play a man who gets dirty, who sweats sometimes, who enjoys kissing a gal he likes, who gets angry, who fights clean whenever possible but will fight dirty if he has to. You could say I made the Western hero a roughneck."*





# THE LONE STAR

***“Courage is being scared to death, but saddling up anyway.”*** – John Wayne

Away from Ford, John Wayne made several well received WWII thrillers, including **The Flying Tigers** (1942), **Back to Bataan** (1945), **The Fighting Seabees** (1944) and **Sands of Iwo Jima** (1949). He also starred opposite Montgomery Clift in Howard Hawks’ seminal western, **Red River** (1948) – the tale of an embittered cowboy whose ruthless pursuit and public assault of a young cowhand closely mirrored Wayne’s own tempestuous relationship with Ford.

Asked to define John Wayne on screen Wayne explained, ***“I want to play a real man in all my films...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.”***

Yet, throughout the war years Wayne kept silent about being turned down by the draft. Instead he focused on building a reputation as one of Hollywood’s most dependable and bankable stars. For his legion of fans, John Wayne personified the high-minded idealism and optimistic spirit of bravery and leadership that was America. While his hero, John Ford was off making military propaganda films on the front lines, Wayne was starring in a solid string of war movies that presented him as everybody’s favorite hero.

At war’s end, John Wayne’s success in front of the camera allowed him the luxury to move behind it. He produced as well as starred in many of his movies and co-founded Batjac Productions – a lucrative company that made films distributed by Paramount Studios. By the time John Ford approached Wayne to star in **The Searchers** (1956) the balance of power between these two ‘sometime’ friends had shifted. Wayne was now the driving commodity of any film’s failure or success.

(Top: Wayne at home, reading to his children. Middle: on the set of *The Wings of Eagles*, singing with Dan Dailey and other cast. With frequent co-star Walter Brennan in *Red River*. Bottom: as a salty sea captain in *Wake of the Red Witch*. Taking a break with a four footed friend on the set of *Tall In The Saddle*. Previous page left: publicity still for *Tall in the Saddle*. Previous page, bottom: two views of John Ford. A gifted director and very influential in Wayne’s career, the two often hated one another on the set – though their animosity rarely carried over.)







(Above: posing for publicity on Fort Apache – another Ford masterpiece in which Wayne played somewhat second fiddle to Henry Fonda who leads his troops into a valley of certain death despite Wayne's strenuous objections. Previous page: a Kodachrome publicity still for Rio Bravo.)

Ford was an aging curmudgeon whose best days in the director's chair were fast becoming a part of his past. Nevertheless, John Wayne endured Ford's badgering and belittlement as he had done a decade earlier. For his part, Ford did not go easy on his talented star. What emerged from their collaboration on **The Searchers** was one of Wayne's most finely wrought and intricately crafted filmic performances.

As Ethan Edward – a man driven to near insanity and certain compulsion to find his niece, Debby (Natalie Wood), Wayne laid bare the depiction of a ruthless, tyrannical – often frightening – racist on the verge of becoming a murderer for the sake of family honor. It was this sobering portrait of the American west, not witnessed in Hollywood's prior glamorization, that Wayne eventually declared his most satisfying performance and it marked an indelible turn in the mythic perceptions about Wayne and, in fact, the western film genre.

Most of Wayne's subsequent endeavors apart from John Ford were extremely lucrative, including **Angel and the Bad Man** (1947), **Island in the Sky** (1953), **Hondo** (1953) and **The High and The Mighty** (1954). 1958's **Rio Bravo** was such a colossal hit that Wayne and director Howard Hawks chose to remake it later – twice; first as **El Dorado** (1966), then **Rio Lobo** (1970).



In 1960, John Wayne embarked on his most ambitious and personal project, **The Alamo**. He no longer needed the guidance or reputation of John Ford to help bolster his own credibility. In fact, the opposite was true. Ford had burned a lot of professional bridges in his relentless pursuit of cinematic excellence. Hence, when Ford showed up unexpectedly on the set of **The Alamo** in Texas and began to take charge of Wayne's project, the star/director chose to provide Ford with a second unit as a gesture of respect.

There were, however, signs that John Wayne's legend had begun to reach its prime. In September 1964 producers issued press releases when Wayne entered Good Samaritan Hospital to undergo cancer surgery. In fact, Wayne had his entire left lung and four ribs removed during that surgery. His belated public service message, that all Americans should screen themselves for cancer, proved to have its own backlash in Hollywood – perhaps because his own screen image did not accommodate for heroism in the face of illness. ***“Those bastards who make pictures only think of the box office,”*** Wayne reportedly confided to a friend after he found it difficult to procure film work upon his recovery, ***“They figure Duke Wayne with cancer isn't a good image.”***



It was at this juncture that Wayne, who had always been a Conservative Republican, began making his political views well known to the outside world. He emerged as a conservative spokesman in support of America's involvement in Viet Nam, and backed his opinion by directing and starring in **The Green Berets** (1968). Although audiences flocked to see the film, critics of America's involvement in the war were not amused.

Further controversy erupted after the release of Mark Rydell's **The Cowboys** (1972) which outraged liberals who could not see past its justification of violence as a solution to lawlessness.

(How far the western hero had come, top left: as the Ringo Kid in Stagecoach – an outlaw but one with a largely congenial palette of personal integrity, seen here with costar Claire Trevor as the prostitute with a heart of gold.

Bottom and next page: nearly 2 decades later, as raw and removed from 'the Kid' as possible, playing Ethan Edwards in The Searchers. Wayne's performance laid bare a raw emotion tinged in overt racism – as potentially powerful a performance as he had ever given.)



Wayne's importance on the political scene reached its zenith when it was reported that the Republican Party asked him to run for President even though he had no previous political experience. Wayne turned down the offer, saying that he did not believe America would take a movie star seriously.

If a political Wayne was not what a goodly percentage of the public wanted to see, on screen Wayne's galvanic reputation as a bankable commodity emerged practically unscathed. The curmudgeonly 'Fordesque' marshal Rooster Cogburn in **True Grit** (1969) won Wayne his only Best Actor Academy Award. ***"If I'd known this was all it would take, I'd have put that eye-patch on 40 years ago,"*** Wayne mused. That same year, he provided his own cream of the jest when he told Time Magazine that he ***"...would like to be remembered, well...the Mexicans have a phrase, 'Feo fuerte y formal'. Which means; he was ugly, strong and had dignity."***

Wayne continued to mock his own celebrity, with a memorable appearance as an overstuffed fluffy pink bunny on **Rowan and Martin's Laugh In**, in 1968. Wayne's ability to laugh at himself did much to soften his reputation as a hard line conservative, something Wayne staunchly denied throughout his later years. ***"The sky is blue, the grass is green,"*** Wayne read aloud on **Laugh In**, ***"Get off your ass and join the Marines."***



While this display of goofiness amused both sides of the political spectrum, a May 1971 *Playboy* magazine interview in which Wayne openly stated that he believed in 'white supremacy' until blacks were educated enough to take a more prominent role in American society, did not bode well with the changing times.

Nevertheless, Wayne's iconography was larger than life and Teflon-coated. He was inducted into the Hall of Great Western Performers of the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum in 1974. In defiance of that legacy, The Harvard Lampoon invited Wayne to their annual 'Brass Balls Award' ceremony for his 'Outstanding machismo and penchant for punching people'.



Assuming that Wayne would never accept such a (dis)honor, Wayne shocked his detractors by arriving atop an armored tank before ad-libbing his way through a series of derogatory questions with such adroit wit and charm that he quite easily won over even his harshest critics. The loudest chuckle of the evening came in response to a question about Wayne's choice of career. *"If it hadn't been for football and the fact I got my leg broke and had to go into the movies to eat, why... who knows, I might have turned out to be a liberal Democrat."*

Wayne returned to filmmaking an invigorated star. However, while preparing for his role in **The Shootist** (1976) word leaked out that his battle with cancer had been ongoing for more than ten years.

(With frequent costar Maureen O'Hara in *The Quiet Man* – top – and *Rio Grande* – bottom. Wayne and O'Hara were often cast as bitter rivals or contemptuous lovers. In reality they had the utmost of mutual respect for one another. O'Hara was chief architect of lobbying congress to pass a bill for Wayne receiving his Congressional Medal.)



(The aging façade of Duke Wayne, top left: publicity still for *The High & The Mighty* – mid 1950s. Center: after a hard days shoot on *The Alamo* – an arduous film spectacular that failed to find its audience at the box office. Publicity still for *Chisum*. As Wayne aged, his screen performances became more curmudgeonly and more John Ford-esque. Left: on the set of *Rooster Cogburn*. Below: appearing at the Academy Awards as a presenter the year before his death.)

As it became better known beyond his private circle of friends that John Wayne – the legend - was indeed dying of the ailment, Senator Barry Goldwater introduced legislation to award the actor a Congressional Gold Medal.

Amidst a flurry of protest, Wayne's frequent costar and long time friend, Maureen O'Hara rallied support for this honor from Wayne's friends both in politics and Hollywood; most of whom arrived on Capital Hill to give glowing testimony in support of his receiving the medal. Given Wayne's life long Conservative Republican views, the most poignant of endorsements came from a rather unlikely source, staunch Democratic, director Robert Aldrich.



***"It is important for you to know that I am a registered Democrat and, to my knowledge, share none of the political views espoused by Duke," Aldrich began, "However, whether he is ill disposed or healthy, John Wayne is far beyond the normal political sharp shooting in this community.***

***Because of his courage, his dignity, his integrity, and because of his talents as an actor, his strength as a leader, his warmth as a human being throughout his illustrious career, he is entitled to a unique spot in our hearts and minds. In this industry we often judge people, sometimes unfairly, by asking whether they have paid their dues.***

***John Wayne has paid his dues over and over, and I'm proud to consider him a friend, and am very much in favor of my***

***Government recognizing in some important fashion the contribution that Mr. Wayne has made.”***

In the end, the bill passed unanimously in both houses and the medal was presented to the Wayne family the following year. As suggested by Maureen O’Hara, the inscription on Duke’s Congressional Gold Medal is simple, though fitting: ***‘John Wayne - American.’***

John Wayne died of stomach cancer on June 11, 1979. At the time of Wayne’s death there had been some speculation that his cancer was the result of a film shoot in Utah for 1956’s *The Conqueror* – a location downwind from where the U.S. government tested nuclear weapons. While it is a fact that a relatively large number of both cast and crew related to that project eventually developed their own cancers, Wayne always attributed the cause of his to a six pack a day smoking habit.

**(Right: with Sophia Loren and Brian Donlevy in *Legend of the Lost* – a forgettable film about treasure hunters. Below: with Loren on location for the same film.)**

**Bottom right: with Anna Lee in *The Fighting Tigers* one of Wayne’s more rousing patriotic contributions to the war effort.)**





## HOW BEST TO REMEMBER A LEGEND?

*"Male menopause is a lot more fun than female menopause. With female menopause you gain weight and get hot flashes. Male menopause — you get to date young girls and drive motorcycles."*

— John Wayne

John Wayne's filmic legacy is arguably not unique. He was, after all is said and done, primarily a western movie star — a title he shared with contemporaries like Gene Autrey, Errol Flynn, Randolph Scott and Gary Cooper. Since Wayne's time there have been other action heroes who have stepped into that genre with varying degrees of success and frequency. The most obvious is Clint Eastwood, though Kevin Costner, Val Kilmer and Kurt Russell also come to mind.



Those looking only at his body of work, some 200 films, will quickly discover that many are not very good — particularly from Wayne's earlier period. Yet and in totem, Wayne's legacy is arguably the most prolific and satisfying of any film star of his generation.

Yet, it is Wayne, not the films that have become iconic and lasting. As an audience, we seem to live for the alluring expectation of that towering rough and tumble man from the west; the guy who can kiss any girl and kill his worst enemies with one blast from his six shooters. The nobility that Wayne brought to his mid-career and later roles is also what tends to stand out upon further reflection.

His characters may not be of the 'singing cowboy' ilk or even that congenial wide-eyed optimist that brings peace to a small town single-handedly. In point of fact, Wayne's best heroes are socially flawed; men with an axe to grind and a bitter resentment that they wear like a badge of honor.

However, John Wayne - the man - also provided a perfect counterbalance to all this seriousness in the way he viewed himself and acting as a career. When asked by one critic what his 'motivation' had been in a critiqued scene from one of his films, Wayne – who did not believe in 'method acting' bluntly replied, ***“Just to remember and say my lines and not bump into any furniture on the way out.”***

Perhaps, in the final analysis of Wayne himself, this is why the vision of 'John Wayne – American' lives on as an integral part of that tapestry depicting America as she was. Wayne has transcended his place in the social fabric of the country – moved on from an actor, a western and war hero propagandizing conservative values to the increasingly liberal social structure. The myth of John Wayne is now what matters most – what is remembered best – and what is likely to endure in the hearts and minds well into our next century. As Wayne himself aptly hypothesized;

***“We must always look to the future. Tomorrow - the time that gives a man just one more chance - is one of the many things that I feel are wonderful in life. So's a good horse under you...or the only campfire for miles around; or a quiet night and a nice soft hunk of ground to sleep on. A mother meeting her first-born. The sound of a kid calling you dad for the first time. There's a lot of things great about life. But I think tomorrow is the most important thing. Comes in to us at midnight very clean. It's perfect when it arrives and it puts itself in our hands. It hopes we've learned something from yesterday.”***

– John Wayne

