

JESUS, JOHN WAYNE, AND JOHN DEWEY

NEIL DHINGRA
University of Maryland



Volume 5 · Number 2 · 2021 · Pages 388 - 404

In her brilliant *Jesus and John Wayne*, Kristin Kobes Du Mez argues many evangelical Christians envisioned Donald Trump as the “reincarnation of John Wayne.”¹

Trump was apparently unhindered by political correctness, democratic norms, or traditional Christian virtues in his willingness to protect an imperiled United States. If their coreligionists claimed evangelicals had to choose between Jesus and Trump, these evangelicals negotiated the “conflict.” “There might be a place for the softer virtues, but the perilous times necessitated ruthless power.”² They joined other Trump supporters who acknowledged he was “worse than imperfect” and “only in a corrupt republic, in corrupt times, could a Trump rise.”³ Nevertheless, he

¹ Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2020), 271. Du Mez’s fellow historian, Victor Davis Hanson, an influential Trump supporter, directly compared Donald Trump to *The Searchers’* Ethan Edwards. See, for instance, Victor Davis Hanson, “Donald Trump, Tragic Hero,” *National Review*, April 12, 2018. For a dissenting view, which mentions *The Searchers*, that suggests that John Wayne may be used to critique as well as bolster Donald Trump, see Daniel Cole, “Donald Trump is Not John Wayne,” *Comment*, September 1, 2021.

² Du Mez, *Jesus*, 304, 59.

³ Michael Anton, “The Flight 93 Election,” *Claremont Review of Books*, September 5, 2016.

seemed uniquely able to win, and these “imperfections” lent him “energy, his dynamism.”⁴

How should college and university educators respond to such thinking? I argue that educators can use *The Searchers* (1956) to help students scrutinize two claims. First, they can question the archetype of John Wayne as a “good” protector through redemptive violence. Second, they might ask whether, even with reluctance, a society can rely on ruthless power *and* retain its innocence.⁵

Those evangelicals who support Trump may at best be characterized as bad tragic pragmatic thinkers.⁶ They did

⁴ Joshua Hochschild, “Once Upon a Presidency,” *American Mind*, February 19, 2021.

⁵ For the use of a Western (*High Noon*) in an introductory political science course at the college level to interrogate “extreme action,” see Brandon Valeriano, “Teaching Introduction to International Politics with Film,” *Journal of Political Science Education* 9 (2013): 57-72, 62.

⁶ This is not to discount the possibility of mob psychology replacing critical intelligence. See Randolph Bourne, “Twilight of the Idols,” in *War and the Intellectuals: Collected Essays, 1915-1919*, edited by Carl Resek (New York: Harper, 1969): 53-64. It should be noted that Du Mez claims evangelical support for Trump was not “merely a pragmatic choice,” explicable in “purely transactional terms” (3). Her book seems consistent with a transactional field reconstructed by habits and social customs, particularly the theologically intensified perception of threat. (Thus, she writes, for evangelicals, “the ends would justify the means” [133], and “it wasn’t about how you played the game. It was about winning” [156].) See Roudy W. Hildreth,

not retreat from political action to a principle of absolute morality—Jesus or John Wayne. That could mean either faithfulness inattentive to any consequences or unproblematic recourse to a quasi-pagan “warrior” ethos.⁷ Instead, cognizant of a genuine moral dilemma and the inevitability of tradeoffs, they supported a flawed but potentially effective leader to protect threatened values. Eddie Glaude writes of John Dewey, “He refuses to reconcile such conflicts and see harmony in tragic situations. He also refuses to be paralyzed in the face of tragedy.”⁸ As Michael Anton told would-be Trump voters, “There are no guarantees.”⁹ In this case, the problem with evangelical voters may not be their reasoning but their values. This could be true.

Still, is there something wrong with their reasoning, which educators and students may examine without

“Reconstructing Dewey on Power,” *Political Theory* 37, no. 6 (2009): 780-807.

⁷ See Rowan Williams, “War and Statecraft: An Exchange,” *First Things* March 2004, 14. Du Mez’s figures often tellingly evince at least initial reluctance.

⁸ Eddie S. Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 39.

⁹ Anton, “Flight 93.”

viewpoint discrimination in the college classroom? I think so. Eddie Glaude notes Hilary Putnam's criticism that Dewey's pragmatism fails to consider that our actions are not just about maximizing the good. They are also about realizing who we are. Glaude responds that for Dewey, action, as it involves habit and customs, involves *self-discovery*. This is "our attempt to figure out, as best we can, given the circumstances, why one impulse carries us this way and the other that way."¹⁰ Thus, we can ask what *existentially* has been revealed in the election of the "reincarnation of John Wayne" in President Trump.

Ironically, this question is best posed by John Wayne himself in John Ford's 1956 film, *The Searchers*. The film questions not only Wayne's Ethan Edwards, an embodiment of redemptive violence, but also the innocence of the surrounding "civilized" society. The film remains imperfect in its portrayal of Native Americans. Nevertheless, it suggests that pragmatic recourse to an

¹⁰ Glaude, *Shade*, 30. For Dewey and habits, see Sarah M. Stitzlein, "Habits of Democracy: A Deweyan Approach to Citizenship Education in America Today," *Education and Culture* 30, no. 2 (2014), 61-86.

Ethan-like figure, even one finally left outside and relegated to the past, never leaves society innocent.

...

The Searchers begins with disruption. “Uncle Ethan” comes to his brother’s homestead. He is a veteran of many conflicts, wearing a worn Confederate overcoat, gifting one of his nieces a medallion “appropriate to Maximilian of Mexico.”¹¹ He possesses currency alluding to bank robbery. Ethan resents their adopted son, Martin, because of his part-Cherokee blood. There is a darkly hinted relationship with Ethan’s sister-in-law. Then, his brother’s family is attacked by Comanches, with all killed save for Martin and two abducted girls. Ethan and Martin, uneasy partners, set off to rescue them—eventually, just the younger Debbie—in a years-long search.

The Western hero is about a style—“A hero is one who looks like a hero,”¹² Robert Warshow wrote. Ethan has

¹¹ Frank Nugent, *The Searchers: Shooting Script* (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street Press, 2004).

¹² Robert Warshow, “Movie Chronicle: The Westerner,” in *The Immediate Experience: Movies, Comics, Theatre, and Other Aspects of Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 123.

style. He looks like a much-needed hero rescuing women from captivity's horrors. However, Ethan's search, which comes to focus on Debbie's abductor, the Comanche chief Scar, gradually deconstructs this image. While a Westerner must know the ways of Native Americans, Ethan increasingly mirrors the "savage" chief, Scar. Ethan will even surpass the Native Americans in brutality, showing not liminality between civilization and "savagery" but the complete absence of restraint. Martin kills Scar, but *Ethan* scalps the chief, defiling the corpse of a man he did not kill.¹³ It soon becomes disturbingly clear to Martin that Ethan aims to find Debbie to kill the beloved niece he now considers defiled. Yet when Ethan scalps Scar, his reaction is not one of release but bewilderment at what might be belated self-recognition. When Ethan finally comes upon Debbie, he does not kill her. He lifts her in his arms, places her on his horse, and says, "Let's go home."

Nevertheless, the film's famous last scene has most of the characters, including Martin and a reunited Debbie,

¹³ J. David Alvis, and John E. Alvis, "Heroic Virtue and the Limits of Democracy in John Ford's *The Searchers*," *Perspectives on Political Science* 38, no. 2 (2009): 69-78, 76.

enter the home while Ethan remains outside. Ethan remains disruptive. A song asks where he might find “peace of mind;” the silhouetted Ethan grabs his arm in a lonely sign of vulnerability.¹⁴ If figures like Donald Trump seem to mimic John Wayne, we must consider why Ethan remains outside and the political significance of this isolation.

No present-day critic considers Ethan to be a straightforward hero. However, scholars imagine that he is left outside for two reasons. First, even if Ethan ceased his redemptive violence before murdering Debbie, his inability to enter the household prolongs an individual tragedy. His self-defeating drive for purity, seen in the hatred of miscegenation and fears of his own sexual desire, separates him from the salvific homestead.¹⁵ Second, his isolation may

¹⁴ Martin M. Winkler, "Tragic Features in John Ford's *The Searchers*," *The Bucknell Review* 35, no. 1 (1991): 185-208, 201. The gesture has multiple meanings; it also alludes to the silent Western star Harry Carey; see Graham Fuller, "The Searchers," *Sight & Sound* 22, no. 11 (2012).

¹⁵ See especially Catholic readings: Anthony Burke Smith, "The Nationalization of the Catholic Imagination: The Westerns of John Ford," *US Catholic Historian* 17, no. 3 (1999): 51-66, 60; Richard Blake, *AfterImage: The Indelible Catholic Imagination of Six American Filmmakers* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2000), 161; Caesar A. Montevicchio, "Eucharistic Imagery in Film: Two Patterns of Usage," *Journal of Religion & Film* 19, no. 1 (2015): 1-27, 21.

suggest cycles of violence will be superseded by the “steady hand of the law.” There will be “historical evolution of the country from savagery to civilization.”¹⁶ These reasons suggest the homestead can be differentiated from its violent protector, whose tragedy remains his own, who finally is superseded. We might vote for Trump and go safely inside, innocent of his quarantined volatility.

However, *The Searchers* bears another interpretation. Richard Slotkin points out that Ethan being played by the famous John Wayne means “we retain a sense of kinship with him.”¹⁷ The problem is never *only* Ethan. As Richard Pippin recognizes, the homestead in that final scene is dark, while Ethan is illuminated.¹⁸ Ethan may even stay out to preserve his family’s illusions. *He* has confronted the bewildering depths of his racism and exits to let *them* remain

¹⁶ Casey J. Wheatland, “‘They’re Saved from the Blessings of Civilization:’ Violence, Law, and Progress in the Westerns of John Ford,” *The Philosophical Journal of Conflict and Violence* 4, no. 2 (2020): 59-80, 78; Winkler, “Tragic Features,” 202. See also Glenn Frankel, *The Searchers: The Making of an American Legend* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 309.

¹⁷ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 463.

¹⁸ Richard Pippin, *Hollywood Westerns and American Myths* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

innocent. Their apparent happiness, however, conceals deep uncertainty.

The returned Debbie is confused, and the life of the historical Debbie, Cynthia Ann Parker, remained tragic. She never fit in with her biological family.¹⁹ Those inside ignore the violent Ethan, but the wedding scene in *The Searchers*, complete with Bible and white dress, had itself turned violent. That violence had fascinated the women, the film's symbols of civilization. Most importantly, we see Laurie, the conspicuously literate love interest of Martin, the part-Cherokee son who had accompanied Ethan. Laurie, upset that Martin was leaving her, had praised Ethan's plan to kill Debbie, the "leavin's of Comanche bucks." Slotkin recognizes that Laurie shows racism poisoning everything and everyone, even those whose literacy would otherwise suggest a better Texas to come. (Here, we can note the film had previously shown the US military, not just Ethan, committing atrocities.)²⁰

¹⁹ See Frankel, *Searchers*.

²⁰ See Matthew Carter, *Myth of the Western: New Perspectives on Hollywood's Frontier Narrative* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 105-7.

...

Thus, *The Searchers* challenges not only images of a “good” John Wayne but also the pragmatic use of the redemptive violence of disruptive figures. Its portrayal of the uncertain Texas-to-be contrasts to the Athenian self-awareness displayed in classical tragedy. As Rowan Williams notes, Euripides’ tragedies never place the Chorus safely away from the tragic action. Nor do they leave disruptive individuals like Medea outside the city gates. Instead of fostering an unreflective solidarity in “civilized” innocence, Athens becomes a city aware of its own fragility and the vulnerability of its self-conceptions. Even invocations to law and reason, like those of Medea’s oath-breaking (and doomed) husband, Jason, and the ruler Creon, can become dangerously self-serving.²¹

Educators can use John Wayne, in *The Searchers*, to cast out John Wayne, in some of his jingoistic roles, as political exemplar. Even if “good” citizens may consider themselves tragic pragmatic thinkers, the pragmatic

²¹ Rowan Williams, *The Tragic Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 21ff.

recourse to a demagogue for protection likely reveals self-serving existential commitments. These commitments, even if subdued and concealed and limited to dark times, may resemble those of the demagogue. *The Searchers* invites what Dewey and Glaude recognize as *self-discovery*. After all, as Du Mez argues, the evangelical negotiation of Jesus and John Wayne reveals that their Jesus had already contained quite a bit of John Wayne. This remains so, even if he is left outside, silhouetted in a doorway.

Amidst our crisis of liberal democracy, college educators should use *The Searchers* to help students question any reliance on John Wayne-figures, including populist leaders. Educators should ask students what the society in *The Searchers* may fail to realize about itself, particularly its “savagery” and virulent racism. This society, and now perhaps ours, have left violent protectors safely outside—individual tragic figures, superseded by “civilization”—and perhaps kept themselves from self-knowledge. A good assignment for civic education amidst crisis would ask students to imaginatively write about what happens after *The Searchers* ends.

References

Alvis, J David and John E. Alvis. "Heroic Virtue and the Limits of Democracy in John Ford's *The Searchers*." *Perspectives on Political Science* 38, no. 2 (2009): 69-78.

Anton, Michael. "The Flight 93 Election." *Claremont Review of Books*, September 5, 2016.

Blake, Richard. *AfterImage: The Indelible Catholic Imagination of Six American Filmmakers*. Chicago: Loyola Press, 2000.

Bourne, Randolph. "Twilight of the Idols." In *War and the Intellectuals: Collected Essays, 1915-1919*, edited by Carl Resek. New York: Harper, 1969.

Carter, Matthew. *Myth of the Western: New Perspectives on Hollywood's Frontier Narrative*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014.

Cole, Daniel. "Donald Trump is Not John Wayne." *Comment*,
September 1, 2021.

Du Mez, Kristin Kobes. *Jesus and John Wayne: How White
Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*. New
York: Liveright Publishing, 2020.

Fuller, Graham. "The Searchers." *Sight & Sound* 22, no. 11 (2012).

Glaude, Eddie S. *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of
Black America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Hanson, Victor Davis. "Donald Trump, Tragic Hero." *National
Review*, April 12, 2018.

Hildreth, Roudy W. "Reconstructing Dewey on Power." *Political
Theory* 37, no. 6 (2009): 780-807.

Hochschild, Joshua. "Once Upon a Presidency." *American Mind*,
February 19, 2021.

Montevecchio, Caesar A. "Eucharistic Imagery in Film: Two Patterns of Usage." *Journal of Religion & Film* 19, no. 1 (2015): 1-27.

Nugent, Frank. *The Searchers: Shooting Script*. Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street Press, 2004.

Pippin, Richard. *Hollywood Westerns and American Myths*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010.

Slotkin, Richard. *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998.

Smith, Anthony Burke. "The Nationalization of the Catholic Imagination: The Westerns of John Ford." *US Catholic Historian* 17, no. 3 (1999): 51-66.

Stitzlein, Sarah M. "Habits of Democracy: A Deweyan Approach to Citizenship Education in America Today." *Education and Culture* 30, no. 2 (2014): 61-86.

Valeriano, Brandon. "Teaching Introduction to International Politics with Film." *Journal of Political Science Education* 9 (2013): 57-72.

Warshaw, Robert. "Movie Chronicle: The Westerner." In *The Immediate Experience: Movies, Comics, Theatre, and Other Aspects of Popular Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001.

Wheatland, Casey J. "'They're Saved from the Blessings of Civilization:' Violence, Law, and Progress in the Westerns of John Ford." *The Philosophical Journal of Conflict and Violence* 4, no. 2 (2020): 59-80.

Williams, Rowan. *The Tragic Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Williams, Rowan. "War and Statecraft: An Exchange." *First Things*. March 2004.

Winkler, Martin M. "Tragic Features in John Ford's *The Searchers*." *The Bucknell Review* 35, no. 1 (1991): 185-208.