

# The Duke: Dignity and Honor

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## John Wayne, American

A simple epitaph for a complex man who became an enduring part of *Americana* and a symbol of *America* itself.

A man of *epic* proportions, Wayne wore his greatness with *grace*.

The Duke's Code of Conduct, as expressed by J. B. Books in *The Shootist*, governed Wayne's life. He was an *honorable* man who *expected* honor from others; a man of dignity who *dignified* others. Commanding respect, Wayne gave respect. [See "What the Scout Law Means to Me" – *Ed.*]

A towering man of 6' 4", Wayne talked *up* to people. The Duke used his strength and courage for *good*, never abusing his power or position.

## Dignity and Honor

Wayne's life is replete with examples of treating others with dignity and honor. This trait was the consistent *core* of his celluloid characters and the *reality* of the man himself.

His grace was perhaps best illustrated during the filming of *The Alamo* ('60), financed by, produced by, directed by and starring John Wayne. Wayne's mentor, John Ford, was an uninvited guest during the filming. Ford wanted to be part of Wayne's pet project. Despite tremendous pressures, cost overruns, and the burden of wearing so many different hats, Wayne graced Ford with his own production crew and afforded Ford his time and respect at considerable financial and emotional cost to himself.

Garry Wills, in *John Wayne's America*, wrote at length of Wayne's grace in stance and style – *physically* – attributing this to deliberate *affectation*. In addition, Wills provided numerous examples of Wayne's grace in *character* and *temperament*. [See "*John Wayne's America*" – *Ed.*]

John Wayne was a man of character and courage who *lived* his principles *passionately* and *compassionately*. Even his foes recognized his inherent dignity and honor, and they respected the *man* if not his *views*.

"Never think anyone is better than you, but never assume you're superior to anyone else. Try and be decent to everyone, until they give you reason not to." – John Wayne<sup>1</sup>

Director Burt Kennedy recognized the *genuineness* of John Wayne: "The great thing about Wayne is that despite this [stardom] he is not a movie star. He acts and talks like a real person. He has held on to his humanity and not lost it. Sometimes he is tough and sometimes he is mean, but he is always himself and he is not phony and bogus. And it comes across. ... That's why the people love him."<sup>2</sup>

## Valor and Forgiving Spirit

In his war movies and westerns Wayne “played only variations of the same hard moral man – ornery and uncompromising, but truthful, loyal and likeable.”<sup>3</sup> *Heroism* – courage under fire – was a Duke trait, both *on* and *off*-screen. Many have written of this aspect of his life and his persona. Often overlooked is the flip side of the coin of courage.

John Wayne was a man of compassion and forgiveness. While he had the courage of his *convictions* he graced others with his *compassion*. Wayne was unafraid to extend himself to and for others. Indeed, he had the courage to forgive others even when it was to his own disadvantage.

For example, during the 1950s Hollywood came under attack for Communist infiltration and Wayne (along with Ronald Reagan) took a stand for the American way of life. While critical of Communists, Wayne had a forgiving nature, willing to extend the hand of reconciliation to those who were repentant. “John Wayne, to his credit, was one of the quickest members of the [Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals] to extend his forgiveness despite the problems that caused him with anti-Communists.”<sup>4</sup>

“Not all the members of the alliance were so free with handing out second chances [to repentant Communists].”<sup>5</sup> Yes, “Duke was a forgiving man – toward people who wanted to be forgiven.”<sup>6</sup>

## Manly Grace

“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.” – John Wayne<sup>7</sup>

Yes, Duke was a *man’s* man. A *man’s* man, not a *mean* man. Wayne’s code of conduct compelled him to *do* the right thing, to behave *decently* towards others.

“Perhaps other actors can walk away from people and not be friendly and gracious. I cannot.” – John Wayne<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, Wayne’s compassion and grace – so evident to all who knew him – is often overlooked by those who magnify his macho image. His genuineness – universally recognized – was exhibited universally to others. “Duke’s kindness and charm also endeared him to the crew. ... he accepted people as they were and treated them all – from stars to gaffers – the same.”<sup>9</sup>

## John Wayne – a man of *character*

John Wayne drew on his *own* character to bring the character of his *roles* to life. “John Wayne’s image of the hard, stoic, decent man provides the immovable foil for all the other characters [in his movies].”<sup>10</sup> Wayne’s screen *image* was often an accurate reflection of *him*.

“He was indeed a force for good – putting decency above all else. Neither an activist nor an ideologue by nature, Wayne’s politics revolved around a simple issue: He felt protective of his country and its way of life.”<sup>11</sup>

“What he stands for – duty, decency, the integrity of the individual, and rule by law – are the only things worth believing in.”<sup>12</sup>

Within a body of work which includes over 100 films, it is not surprising to see the emergence of a particular perspective on life. These themes include courage, perseverance, honesty, integrity, character. [See “John Wayne, On Screen.” – *Ed.*]

“I’ve played the kinda man I’d like to have been.” – John Wayne<sup>13</sup>

Duke, you did.

## Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> Randy Roberts and James S. Olson, *John Wayne: American*, Free Press, 1995, p 500.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 529-530.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p 250.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 345-346.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p 347.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p 349.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p 604.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p 413.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p 402.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p 442.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p 348.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p 440.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p 325.