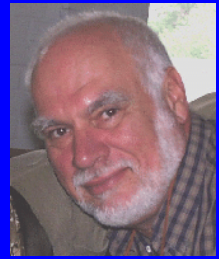


## FRONTIER JUSTICE

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George F. Simons

*Frontier Justice.* The words bring to mind my boyhood heroes, the Lone Ranger, Hopalong Cassidy and endless Sunday matinees of double features and serials. Roy Rogers and Gene Autry didn't really fit the mold for me. They spent too much time singing, and besides, the girls liked them—the kiss of death. It was the homeless, moving-on and anonymous--Who was that masked man?--range rider, ever protecting, ever defending, who struck the chord.

Cowboy heroes were reluctant but violent peacemakers. Their image sticks in the US psyche, coloring our sense of who a hero is and what he does. Even Zorro, a story paradoxically based on Joaquin Murieta, a Mexican miner who struck at the gold-hungry, violent gringos who overran the Mexican town of San Andreas, was transformed from a Mexican resistance fighter into a US style avenger.

What is the perennial piece of US thinking embedded in these characters? It runs something like this. Evil is afoot. The justice system is either weak or corrupt. Somebody has to take charge. Enter the man in the white hat, or in the case of Hoppy, the man with Topper the white horse. He reluctantly shoots up the bad guys and rides off into the sunset to the big music of female heartthrobs. He leaves the sheriff in charge of the hen house.

These heroes are deathless, not only because Hollywood needs sequels, but because they are ideals, bearers of the cultural script. These "real men" are not real men. They are comic book superheroes projected on the big screen. Step aside, Lois Lane, there is man's work to do. Or, perhaps, nowadays, do it yourselves, Thelma and Louise. Today power-chick films are chic. All-American Halle Berry can finally upstage 007, that degenerate Brit.

The big guys would have been even more colorless and austere if they didn't have minority, or comic sidekicks like Jay "Tonto" Silverheels or George "Gabby" Hayes to remind them that they were flesh and blood during quest for justice. Witness the solitary righteousness of Rambo, until now the final statement of the stubborn, blow-'em-up loner against everybody. Rescue with vengeance, vengeance for my lost buddies, vengeance for my wife and children, vengeance for my loneliness.

While the earlier cowboy imbedded themselves in our memories as selflessly principled, they paled before John Wayne who boasted unflappable and indomitable "man of the hour" qualities. As one website describes him by his movie titles, "John Wayne was a man of *True Grit*, who was *Tall in the Saddle*, and *Without Reservations* stood up for what he believed. Through adversity he remained one of *The Undefeated* as he *Cast a Giant Shadow* over this great land of ours." The Duke had just enough vulnerability to keep his testosterone poisoning from being easily diagnosed. Given the necessary provocation, whether riding the plains or flying the planes, Wayne would fight to the death (almost always someone else's). Peace through violence--this is the shadow he cast over the land.

But gun slinging, bounty hunting, and war were, then as now, not very romantic adventures, as Clint Eastwood tried to show in "Unforgiven" (1992). Here is one eyewitness account of Frontier Justice from Texas the last quarter of the 19th century.

"On the Trinity Creek bottom N.E. of Grandview there now is still standing an Oak tree which was the court house and temple of justice used by the ranchers who enforced their law. The tree is a large one and during its early period of growth it was bent out of its normal position. The tree grew in a slanting position and one special limb extends out in a straight level with the ground. During one two year period I know of 11 men whom were made good citizens by hanging at the end of a rope from that straight limb. The 11 hanged men were the results of 55 trials held under the tree."

Whatever the justification for frontier justice and taking the law into one's own hands, projecting it into 2003's world is a dangerous undertaking. Today's mutant Texas gunslinger sashays out on the world stage and undermines the system of justice instead of supporting it. He lives in his own white-hat vision of the world in which no one but himself can get it right. Whether bombing a courthouse or a nation of children, he is the loner terrorist living in and among us that we all fear, because he becomes a law unto himself. He is entitled to shoot first and ask questions later, if ever. He knows with absolute sureness, "You are all wrong but me."

How do we heal this hero wound in our consciousness, perpetuated in so many incarnations of frontier justice, the private eye, the busted cop, the sheriff with the big stick, the tragic martial artist? Is it Steven Segal's violent Aikido? Eddie Murphy's smart-ass cop?

I offer you Colombo, who never picks up a weapon or strikes a blow, never judges, who doesn't need to walk tall, but never goes away, who never says, "I'm getting impatient!" He keeps asking questions until the truth shows up. Under his needling curiosity the problem collapses of its own weight, the perpetrator self-destructs. True, we never see Mrs. Colombo, but she is always there. He is not alone, dogged as he may be in the search for truth and for "the cheapest cigars money can buy." He sleeps in his own bed at night. You don't have to have a shabby raincoat, drive a *bagnole* Peugeot (yes, French), or walk a Basset. Just keep asking the right kind of questions, "Just one more thing... Just one more thing..."