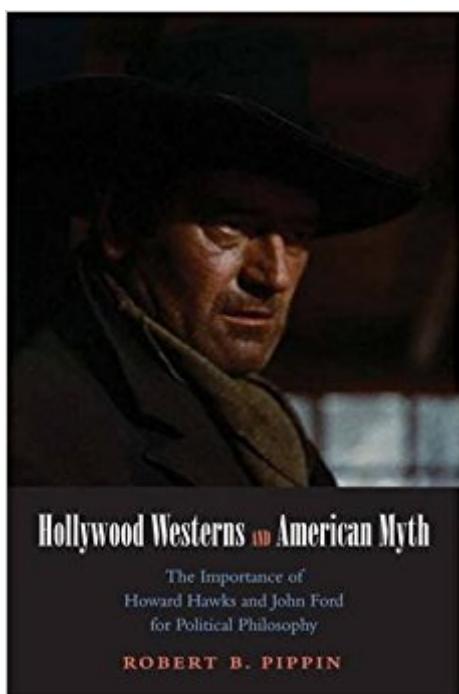


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# Hollywood Westerns And American Myth: The Importance Of Howard Hawks And John Ford For Political Philosophy (Castle Lectures Series)



## Synopsis

In this pathbreaking book one of America's most distinguished philosophers brilliantly explores the status and authority of law and the nature of political allegiance through close readings of three classic Hollywood Westerns: Howard Hawks' *Red River* and John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* and *The Searchers*. Robert Pippin treats these films as sophisticated mythic accounts of a key moment in American history: its second founding, or the western expansion. His central question concerns how these films explore classical problems in political psychology, especially how the virtues of a commercial republic gained some hold on individuals at a time when the heroic and martial virtues were so important. Westerns, Pippin shows, raise central questions about the difference between private violence and revenge and the state's claim to a legitimate monopoly on violence, and they show how these claims come to be experienced and accepted or rejected. Pippin's account of the best Hollywood Westerns brings this genre into the center of the tradition of political thought, and his readings raise questions about political psychology and the political passions that have been neglected in contemporary political thought in favor of a limited concern with the question of legitimacy.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Let me say straightaway that it is a very thoughtful, observant book, well worth the time for any reader who takes Hawks, Ford, and the Western seriously. "The New Republic "This book is an important read in both form and substance for all cultural historians." "D.P. Franklin, Choice "A

trenchant and illuminating study of three great Westerns and a convincing case for their importance both to political psychology and to our own self-understanding as American citizens." C. D. C. Reeve, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill "Robert Pippin's study of three great Westerns is a fine meditation on the place of heroism in democracy and the ambiguous relationship between legend and history in the making of heroes. It can stand with the best recent books on the Western as a genre, but it is driven by a thought all its own: the difficulty of the search for order, and the elusive possibility of an American politics." David Bromwich, Yale University  
Pippin's marvelous book is a more than worthy successor to the classic essays on the Western by André Bazin and Robert Warshow. This volume is remarkable for its clarity and depth of argument. • George Wilson, University of Southern California

Robert B. Pippin is the Evelyn Stefansson Nef Distinguished Service Professor in the John U. Nef Committee on Social Thought, the Department of Philosophy, and the College at the University of Chicago.

I read this for my philosophy class strangely enough. The other book that we had to read was a bit more of a traditional philosophy book, and honestly, a bit dry. This one was much more engaging. The critiques are well thought out and easy to read. I didn't expect to like this book, but it was much better than I expected it to be.

Great history

Very interesting and insightful treatment of the films in the title and also other related films. This is well written and cogently argued analysis, for the most part. I learned a lot by reading and re-reading it. My only complaint is that at times the treatment of "The Searchers" seemed a little far afield, moving into over-analysis that to me, exceeded the support offered. But, this was a thoroughly enjoyable book that I recommend to anyone interested in American mythology, the movies, and the directors treated in this volume.

The Kindle version lacks the movie stills that the author discusses. A lame refusal by the Publisher to exercise "Fair Use Rights."

Well, Robert Pippin does a pretty thorough job of analyzing three major Westerns that came out of

Hollywood, Howard Hawks' "Red River", a kind of "Mutiny on the Bounty"; John Ford's "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence", in which a political career is founded on a lie; and Ford's "The Searchers", which might have been called "What's The Matter With John Wayne Today." Pippin is a philosopher of note, with a named chair, specializing in such lightweight German thinkers as Hegel and Nietzsche. It's surprising to find that he's able to cover relatively conventional Western movies in as much detail as he does? (Where does he find the time?) He dismisses the B Westerns full of stereotypical heroes and villains but believes that the more ambitious examples of the genre have something to teach us. He's certainly convinced me. Pippin hasn't just watched the three movies and taken notes in the dark. (He throws in a sketch of Nicholas Ray's "The Lusty Men" as a kind of bonus.) He cites some important theoretical literature on movies as well -- Bazin, say, and Warshow and Kitses; and he's not above allusions to theorists in anthropology either, like Levi-Strauss, and that's my field. I applaud his way of getting directly to the point, when he's not skirting around it. Why, at the end of "The Searchers", does Ethan pick up Debby and cradle her in his arms rather than shoot her dead? Ford's original script had such a tragic scene written in it, and Ford scotched it. Pippin outlines half a dozen or so possible answers without resolving the question he's posed. All the explanations have some plausibility and all may feed into the common channel that produced the events we see on screen but none is itself sufficient. That's ambiguity of a particularly rich sort. For what it's worth, Pippin's analysis of "The Searchers" suggests that Ford deliberately set us up for a typical John Wayne character, then knee-capped our expectations with enough subtlety that, without thinking about it, we are still able to cast Ethan as a straightforward hero of the old school. The problem with the common public interpretation -- Wayne as hero -- is that we have to do a lot of mental work to "not think about it." The evidence of Wayne's brutality and self hatred is everywhere in the film. He's an outright racist, for instance. Yes, the butchery of his brother and family intensifies his bitterness, but he was a racist BEFORE he had that excuse. He dislikes his companion, Jeffrey Hunter, for being one eighth Cherokee. "A fella could mistake you for a breed." He wears the remnants of a Confederate uniform. He carries fresh gold coins without explaining where they came from. He chooses to ride off and kill Comanche raiders rather than stay and protect the woman he loves. He goes berserk and kills as many buffalo as possible. He shoots three men in the back. He shoots the eyes out of an Indian corpse. He scalps a Comanche's dead body. He's willing to kill Hunter in order to get at Debby. Until the climax, he's thoroughly committed to killing his own innocent niece because she's been with the Indians who kidnapped her as a child. Nor, with the exception of Jeffrey Hunter, does the Western community oppose his murderous intentions. Even the virginal, desperate-to-be-married Lauri, played by Vera Miles, angrily tells

Hunter not to interfere with Ethan's plans to murder his niece. Let Ethan "put a bullet through her head" because Debby is just "the leavings of some buck." In the end, when Ethan brings Debby back, the community shuts him out. They don't scorn him. They just forget about him and he wanders off thankless. I enjoyed Pippin's analysis of the three films. I was hoping to learn a bit more about philosophy than I did. As a philosophical ignoramus I needed a better understanding of how political philosophy provides a template for our grasp of the issues involved. (Most of the philosophical stuff shows up in the end notes, without much in the way of description.) The first encounter with Carl Schmitt is parenthetical -- something is described as "even Schmittian." Well, who is Carl Schmitt? I never heard of him. By the end of the book I had the crudest idea. It would have been useful if Pippin had stopped at the first mention of Schmitt (and the dozen other philosophers he alludes to, like Rawls and Nuzick, and given us a brief, relevant sketch of their ideas and their application to the films under scrutiny -- a kind of Kindergarten, A, B, C, approach. And, given my own background, I would have thought that Max Weber's typology of authority -- traditional, charismatic, and rational/legal -- might have gotten more attention, though, granted, they don't have much to do with the mythology behind the founding of a society. My advice to those considering this book is to forget about philosophy and treat the book as an insightful analysis of three noteworthy and ambitious films that treat the founder myths necessary in keeping us together in a community, despite the rifts in that community. Did you know that George Washington chopped down the cherry tree and confessed, "I did it"? (He didn't.) Maybe "mythos" would have been a more apt analytical tool -- the alpha stories that explain how this nation of ours got started, regardless of the ratio of fact to fiction.

As a much-published historian of Western films and a biographer of John Wayne, I bought this book expecting to see how John Wayne's impact on modern GOP imagery. The author makes a good, indeed provocative, thesis statement, then lapses into large-scale critiques of the movies without showing their impact on modern politics. Great concept, weak execution.

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