

The Timeless Wickedness of Ellsworth H. Gatewood

In the lecture I said that the American Civil War (1861-1865) reshaped America. Before the Civil War the orientation of the country was North-South (first as rivals and then as enemies), but after the Civil War the orientation shifted to East-West (1865-1890). During this time the nation was focused on expanding westward. Hollywood Westerns are usually (but not always) about this 1865 to 1890 time period. But like Japanese *Jidai Geki* these films were made *after* the time period when they are set. The “golden age” of the Hollywood Western film is from 1939 to 1962 and this golden age begins with Ford’s *Stagecoach*. Although *Stagecoach* is set in the year 1880, Ford’s film is as much about the decade before the film was made (1929-1939) as it was about the old west.

In September of 1929, the New York stock exchange began to crash. Over the next three years the market lost 83% of its value. Many economists believe “the crash” caused the Great Depression which was to follow and which would spread across the entire world. Many people, including John Ford, believed that the Crash and the Great Depression were caused by the greed and corruption of *bankers* who had encouraged and financed wild stock speculation and corruption. Ford was also convinced that the Republican Party was the party of the businessmen and bankers who brought about the Crash and Depression.



The cruelty of the Great depression is depicted in Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* a mother of seven children, in Nipomo, California, March 1936. (from Wikipedia)

American voters agreed with Ford and they overwhelmingly voted the Republicans out of power in the election of 1932 when the Democrat, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, beat the incumbent Republican President, Herbert Hoover, by 57.4% of the popular vote to 39.7%. Roosevelt would win a record four presidential elections (all overwhelmingly) by putting himself on the side of the “little people” against the greed and corruption of the businessmen and bankers.

America’s longest serving
and greatest President,
Franklin Delano Roosevelt



When John Ford made *Stagecoach*, he and his writer Dudley Nichols made the character Gatewood a banker who was actually robbing his own bank. Remember that the money he is stealing is not his money, it is the money of all the little people who trusted him with their money. In addition to being a thief Gatewood is the only truly unlikable character on the journey. His wife was also the leader of the Ladies of the Law and Order League which had forced Doc and Dallas to leave the town. We might wonder what Mrs. Gatewood and the other ladies would have to say if they knew her husband had just left her and also robbed his own bank. But Gatewood seems to be a perfect match for his nasty, hypocritical wife. Like her, he feels that he knows exactly how things *should* be. He goes into a long speech about how the government should “help businessmen” and how ridiculous it was for the government to inspect his books. In fact, after the Crash of 1929 the government did pass laws forcing banks to allow their books to be inspected to stop just the kind of corruption that Gatewood is engaging in. Gatewood continues to rave on to the rest of the passengers about America needing “a businessman for President” and America should be for “Americans” (who does he think “Americans” are?) This is exactly what the Republicans argued during the Great Depression and it is almost word for word what the current Republican President, Donald Trump, says.



The corrupt and bigoted banker who wants “America for Americans”, Ellsworth H. Gatewood.

The corrupt and bigoted businessman who shouts “Make America great again”, Donald J. Trump.



For John Ford Gatewood was a symbol of the very worst in America: corruption, hypocrisy, bullying, social prejudice and narrow mindedness, not to mention his selfishness and cowardice (which we will see later). Men like Gatewood (e.g., Trump) will unfortunately always be with us, but Ford clearly shows us that everyone else on the stagecoach regards him with a mixture of disdain, pity and contempt.