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Cowboys Go to Washington – Cowboy Culture in Presidential Politics

“Great principles don’t get lost once they come to light. They’re right here; you just have to see them again!”

Everyman in Washington

In the 1939 classic film by Frank Capra, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, the main protagonist, Jefferson Smith, played by James Stuart, a young, naive and idealistic leader of the Boy Rangers from an unnamed, western state, is chosen to fill a vacant seat in the U.S. Senate. There he is exposed to the corruption and depravity of eminent Washington politicians. Capra’s protagonist, by the authors’ assumption, was to be an American Everyman, a regular man from a small town who was not very smart, living in a world of ideals and warm-hearted people, which makes it hard for him to find his way in a big city, among intrigues and complex dealings. Smith is a construct of the ideal average American, believing in American values, who personifies the American spirit. This simple-heartedness, gullibility, and uncompromisingly defined good and evil help this simple boy reach success in Washington and gain the recognition of the president himself.

According to John Raeburn, Capra “was obsessively concerned with scrutinizing American myths and American states of consciousness” (Raeburn 1975: viii). His protagonists are built of properties necessary to true Americans, real although not realistic, half-mythical. Jefferson Smith is a young idealist who confronts his honesty with the world of corrupt elites. He comes from the West, which for many Americans, including Capra, is where the American spirit dwells. Essential to the American spirit is simplicity, honesty, a non-compromising nature and openness to other beings. Jeff’s arrival in

Washington “means the entry into the orbit of European thinking, associated with everything that emigrants arriving from Europe to the New World escaped from, including social inequalities and omnipresence of elites that absolutely resembled European aristocracy” (Ociepa 2006: 26).

Although Jefferson Smith does not wear a cowboy outfit, he comes from the West and is a cowboy at heart. He is a cowboy who, like a hero from a classic western, enters a town ruled by bandits to introduce order. He does not deal with the bandits with weapons, but conquers them with his honesty and the strength of better arguments, which are superior because they defend truly American values. Smith eventually becomes a politician destined to achieve success in Washington, while at the same time he remains a regular citizen.

For ages, in various cultures, there was a rule that a leader should be a superman chosen by gods, well-born, looming high over the commoners. It was the culture of the United States that, due to the democratic roots of American statehood, changed this state of affairs – the president is someone elected by the people, but he is one of us and someone like us. On the other hand, this one of us, in order to be elected, must differentiate himself and be outstanding in some way. The belief that the president of the USA must principally be a regular citizen with outstanding qualifications is confirmed by the biographies of many American leaders: John Adams, Abraham Lincoln, Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton. Also, famous works of popular culture, such as this film by Frank Capra, established the belief that Washington is for regular people, and the president of the USA is a kind of “Every American” who, owing to his hardworking nature, talent and firm character, has received the highest office of the state.

Myth vs. white man on the Wild West

If one searched for a ready model that is often used in the campaigns and policies of presidents of the USA, the most obvious model would be a cowboy. It is a distinct symbol of America recognized not only by American citizens, and a character full of clear semantic connotations. However, the cowboy referred to by American politicians is not a true cowboy, a real, flesh-and-blood person, or even a specific fictitious character. It is a mythic character – a mythic cowboy who ‘reincarnates’ into the specific physical beings of some politicians, stars, celebrities or ordinary people who find what they need in his image and values:

Yet the mythic cowboy is shaped out of image, not out of substance. His wonderful adaptability is evidenced by his ability to represent many things to many people, to symbolize whatever our needs require. He can be an innocent vagabond, a wizened old laborer, a strapping and courageous protector of the community, a sad-eyed loner in search of solitude, or a dozen other figures that possess allegorical power and versatility. The mythic cowboy can symbolize caution or recklessness, stability or galloping abandon – because his image is a very pliable kind of cultural clay (Martin 1983: 359).

It will not be possible to understand the essence of the mythic cowboy functioning without explaining the concept of myth. Because the cowboy is a hero of modern American mythology, a hero who started co-creating American history in the 19th century, the most useful concept to analyze this character will be the modern concept of myth created by a French specialist in semiotics, Roland Barthes, for whom “myth is a system of communication, that is a message” (Barthes 1973: 117). Barthes understands myth as “a second-order semiological system” (123), which acts on a first-order *system*, a *system* which generates meaning out of already existent meaning. In our case, these are stories about cowboys created by popular culture (dime novels, films, advertising) which were built over the *first-order system*, namely the true history of cowboys in the American West. As a result, Barthes claims, myth constitutes a deformed language. The character of the cowboy was not created by popular culture, but it was stylistically and ideologically processed by it; namely, it was mythologized.

Furthermore, for Barthes, the meaning of myth is never innocent, but ideologically saturated, and serves specific interest groups. Barthes claims that in order “to connect a mythical schema to a general history, to explain how it corresponds to the interests of a definite society” (Barthes 1973: 138), we must understand that “myth transforms history into nature” (140). Myth transforms what is socially identified, concrete, historically defined and specific into something that is naturally given and unquestionable, as it has always been and will be.

The historical truth about cowboys is not so interesting. Their lives were marked with long, hard, poorly paid work. Cowboys dealt with herding cows, and spent most of their lives on horseback, in dirty clothes, sleeping anywhere they could find and leading the lives of tramps.

The first cowboys were not presidents or generals, explorers or philosophers. They were laborers – lower-class boys, who, beginning in the 1850s, were hired for work in the saddle on the back of a horse – rounding up thousands of wild Texas cattle, branding and castrating them, then pushing them east into Louisiana and the Deep South, west toward California, and finally north to the railheads that connected the open plains to the population centers east of the Mississippi. Most of the historical

cowboys – who were called vaqueros and drovers until the flow of cattle out of Texas had almost stopped – were hard-working hands who endured the caprice of weather and the crush of isolation. But they were not heroes. They were of no greater collective historical significance than the men who baled cotton or built the railroads, the loggers or longshoremen or farmers (Martin 1983: 26-30).

The history of cowboys that was transformed into a myth is accompanied by the binary nature of opposition which is typical of myths. Firstly, cowboys are perceived as conquerors of the unknown world, the dangerous Wild West, who tame the land and adapt it for use by people and animals, while on the other hand they were seen as romantics who had better contact with nature than with people, and who preferred sleeping under the stars and wandering far away from civilisation. In the myth of the cowboy, there is a contradiction: on the one hand, cowboys did not have a good reputation, since they were blamed for a variety of offences, from shooting up cow towns to participating in range wars, while on the other they were ascribed such features as honor, a sense of dignity, and application of a certain ethical code.

In his deliberations on myth, Barthes points out that contemporarily, myths are created by popular culture – in literature, films, advertising and mass media. Popular culture is also responsible for creating the character of the mythic cowboy who lives and acts in an equally mythologized Wild West.

The man who was first to weave the thick mesh of cowboy myth was William F. Cody – actor and showman. He was the first to understand that for residents of eastern states the Wild West could be an exotic attraction. He himself was a perfect son of the West: he had no equal in killing bisons, could ride excellently and was a brave defender of white workers building the railway, whom he protected against frequent attacks by Indians. He was also an outstanding scout working for the Fifth Cavalry (Martin 1983: 29-30). This led to him becoming the protagonist of the dime novel *Buffalo Bill, King of The Border Men*, written by Net Buntline. The novel turned Cody into a star. When, in the early 1880s, he organized ‘Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, America’s Entertainment,’ an impressive traveling show, he did not need any advertising. He himself provided for advertising as the King of the Borderland. “Operating on a military-industrial scale, the Wild West became a mobile dream factory capable of producing narratives of heroic conquest for mass audiences numbering in the millions” (Rydell, Kroes 2005: 31). The show presented by Cody in the main narration line told stories of how the Wild West had been conquered by the White Man, and had sowed the “triumph of civilization over savagery” (Rydell, Kroes 2005: 32). In this way, the image of a brave white conqueror was created, non-compromisingly imposing civilization, swiftly using weapons and liberating new pieces of American land from the savages.

Similar protagonists of brave white men introducing civilization in previously wild areas also appear in many dime novels that were written, published and read by Americans in vast numbers starting in the 1850s. Titles such as *Malaeska: The Indian Wife of the White Hunter* and *Seth Jones; or, The Captives of the Frontier* (Rydell, Kroes 2005: 34) speak for themselves.

The character of the mythic cowboy was well-constituted in a novel by Owen Winster published in 1902, *The Virginian*, “the first full-length serious cowboy saga. The Virginian was handsome, strong, and stoic. Whenever the need arose, he too could quickly fill his hands with iron; he brought outlaws to justice and won the heart of the heroine; ... he was often silent and essentially mysterious. Yet something about the Virginian was immensely appealing. The quiet force of his actions became a model for the thousands of fictional cowboys who followed him” (Martin 1983: 34).

The movie was full of tough men in hats, simple and uncomplicated, who spoke rarely but were effective in action. The Hollywood movie industry made the western horseman its focal heroic subject: William S. Hart, Buck Jones, Ken Maynard, Tom Mix, John Wayne and Gary Cooper removed the cowboy from his mundane, difficult and uninteresting work with cattle. These cowboys fought for the right cause and this made them true American heroes.

The cowboy became America’s most prominent and enduring symbolic figure. He has come to represent American manhood and a spirit of self-reliance and independence. ... The mythic cowboy is unquestionably America’s predominant symbolic native son. His myriad images have come to represent the American ideals of individualism, strength, and courage; and his imagined role in the settlement of the West is a national metaphor for the American commitment to action, work and achievement (Martin 1983: 26).

The cowboy identity and politics

This ready model of manhood and certain strategy of action was taken over by politicians, at first spontaneously, such as Theodor Roosevelt. Later, cold-hearted, calculated specialists in image-building put cowboy hats on politicians, thus marking their views and in a way branding the properties of a political leader. What aspects of the cowboy personality proved particularly precious to politicians, particularly those at the White House, in order to use them to build a political personality?

Firstly, the cowboy represents the essence of being American – putting on a cowboy hat is a clear message that American values are important to a particular politician, and that he identifies himself with them and feels like a true

American. Secondly, the cowboy is principally a man of action who speaks little, does not use particularly sublime language and is not eloquent, but is very potent. Thirdly, the cowboy is decisive and non-compromising – hence politicians identifying themselves with cowboy culture are those who communicate to their citizens that they will rule with an iron hand, will provide order, and will ruthlessly deal with evil, mismanagement and crime. Their rule will be effective because they observe tough rules, and the law is the priority value to them. Despite the fact that for a politician-cowboy, it is important to introduce law and order, this is not a new order, but rather restoration of an old, good and tested order, where traditional values are praised: religion, home, family, hard work, and honesty – as the politician-cowboy is also a guarantee of constancy and stability. The very character of the knight of the American Wild West is related to a past full of nostalgia for a world where everyone knew their place and their roles, and where everything was clear and natural.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the most obvious aspect of being a cowboy, which is certainly the most important to many politicians. Considering the fact that American politicians are mostly men, acting as a political cowboy automatically provided them with the attributes of true men. In American culture, a cowboy represents the absolute essence of masculinity, a male archetype, namely a man who is physically fit and brave, and who cares about concrete results, not volatile impressions.

Theodore Roosevelt: cowboy and intellectual missionary

The first resident of the White House who introduced the cowboy hero to the presidential political stage was Theodore Roosevelt. The very genesis of Roosevelt's interest in cowboy culture is inherently related to his youth. Young Roosevelt, from a rich, aristocratic family from New York, did not present an overtly manly type; according to Sarah Watts, he rather evoked amusement among his companions with his unmanly looks, squeaky, slightly womanly voice and dandified clothing. He was referred to as 'Jane Dandy' or 'Punkin Lily,' and New York society proclaimed him "chief of the dudes." Thus we can say that in his youth Roosevelt was everything the mythical cowboy was not.

"Duly insulted, he began to construct a new physical image around appropriately virile Western decorations and settings, foregrounding the bodily attributes of a robust outdoorsman that were becoming new features in the nation's political iconography" (Watts 2003: 126).

When he was 25, he bought a ranch in Dakota. There are known photos of Roosevelt, until recently a typical Easterner-dandy, in the costume of a Lea-

therstocking frontiersman or classic cowboy. He began to live the cowboy's life, spending several hours per day on horseback. Roosevelt became truly fascinated with the American West. He manifested this fascination not only by living according to the rules of a man of the West, but also by intellectual reflection contained in books describing life in the American West: *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman* (1885), *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail* (1888) and *The Wilderness Hunter* (1893).

At first, his fascination with the life of a classic Westerner evoked pity and was laughed at in the media. Soon, however, the media started to admire the new, manly, strong and weather-beaten Roosevelt.

When war broke out with Spain in 1898, Roosevelt organized many of his cowboy friends into the First U.S. Volunteer Cavalry Regiment. When he returned from Cuba as a war hero, he was elected governor and then vice president. When President William McKinley was assassinated in 1901, Roosevelt became the nation's youngest president at the age of 42. Republican Senator Mark Hanna was said to have uttered: "Now look! That damned cowboy is president of the United States." Although some critics feared that he would be reckless and despotic, most Americans found Roosevelt's cowboy spirit invigorating. He ultimately became a personification of the nation's vitality in the early twentieth century" (theatry.org). And as Sarah Watts has proven, Roosevelt's personal obsession with masculinity established in the nation the idea of 'mighty manhood.' Watts claims that "Roosevelt represented a stratum of elite white leaders who feeling the enervating effects of modernism created ideologies of social and political power based on whiteness and manhood" (13).

President Roosevelt ruled with an iron hand, which he stressed by quoting his favorite saying: "Speak softly and carry a big stick." His rule fell during the Era of Progressivism, characterized with intense reforms and a struggle against social pathologies such as corruption or non-ethical practices of big business. Roosevelt believed that the authorities should act as an arbiter between capitalists and workers to guarantee justice to both parties. At the same time, he implemented a very vivid anti-trust policy and was sensitive to social justice.

He was also an assertive player in the international arena. While referring to Monroe's Doctrine, he did not allow the building of alien military bases in South America, reserving the USA's exclusive right to military interventions in this area. He proved to be an outstanding negotiator – his contribution to ending the Russian-Japanese War was awarded with a Nobel Prize in 1906.

As a true cowboy, Roosevelt was very involved in environmental issues. It was during his presidency that many national parks and nature reserves were created.

Roosevelt preached the need to preserve woodlands and mountain ranges as places of refuge and retreat and wanted the United States to change from exploiting natural resources to carefully managing them. Roosevelt identified the American character with the nation's wilderness regions, believing that our western and frontier heritage had shaped American values, behavior, and culture (whitehouse.gov).

Although Roosevelt's direct successors did not refer in such a straightforward manner to this model of masculinity, a certain model of the leader – strong, independent, guarding permanent values, not susceptible to fashion or peer pressure – has remained in the White House. The cowboy identity was often defined in opposition to eastern intellectualism and dandyism. It seems that it is still the same cowboy, continuously defending his world and his values regardless of how much and how quickly the country and the people around him change. Therefore, the myth of the cowboy is principally referred to by politicians with conservative views and values adopted by Roosevelt when he defined himself as a tough Westerner.

Calvin Coolidge – cowboy hobbyist

Calvin Coolidge was another American president who recalled the values represented by cowboys. The cowboy outfit in which he appeared publicly reflected his conservative views. But his fascination with the Wild West and its heroes took a somewhat humorous form:

It is known that to keep fit, already as a president at the White House, Coolidge rode an electrically operated horse that was given to him as a gift. He often rode the horse, according to legend, in nothing but his underwear. In 1925, Coolidge invited Tom Mix, the most popular movie cowboy of his day, to dinner at the White House. During the visit, Mix and his famous horse Tony performed tricks for the president and First Lady. While vacationing in the Black Hills of South Dakota in 1927, Coolidge often wore a Tom Mix-style cowboy hat (theatruy.org).

Many people thought Coolidge's cowboy image made him more approachable, but critics condemned him as a poor role model for the nation's youth. Coolidge's presidency also had many critics, and there were main claims that he was an idle leader, making political capital of the economic prosperity experienced by the United States during his presidency.

The political genius of President Coolidge, Walter Lippmann pointed out in 1926, was his talent for effectively doing nothing: "This active inactivity suits the mood and certain of the needs of the country admirably. It suits all the business interests which want to be let alone ... And it suits all those who have become convinced that

government in this country has become dangerously complicated and top-heavy ...” (whitehouse.gov).

Coolidge’s cowboy nature corresponded well with his conservatism. Coolidge was also an advocate of great capital – he reduced taxes and introduced prohibitive customs duties. In turn, he did not listen to poorer representatives of society, nor minor farmers, workers or veterans. When the era of dynamic economic growth ended and the Great Depression began, Coolidge faced accusations that with his conservatism and short-sighted fiscal policy he had burdened Americans with one of the most traumatic experiences in history.

It would be unfair to blame Coolidge for sharing the prevalent optimism of his time. In retrospect, however, it became apparent that his policies contributed to the stock market crash of 1929 and the Great Depression that followed. His fiscal policy encouraged speculation and ignored inequality, as the flow of dollars into the pockets of the wealthy helped tip the healthy investment of the mid-1920s into the gambling that followed. His hands-off regulatory policy took its toll especially in the financial arena, where the dangerous practice of margin trading was allowed to flourish unrestrained. And for all the heady growth of the 1920s, Coolidge’s policies exacerbated the uneven distribution of income and buying power, which led to the overproduction of goods for which there were not enough affluent consumers (millercenter.org).

Coolidge’s fascination with cowboy culture was in the form of a hobby, or perhaps even eccentricity, yet the views he presented and his policy, political strategy and political decisions authorized him to make use of the attributes of the Westerner. Unfortunately, Coolidge was not a cowboy by conviction. He had not studied the principles of cowboy ethics as Theodor Roosevelt had done, hence he lacked the sense of social justice.

Lyndon B. Johnson – cowboy from birth

Lyndon Johnson came from Texas, hence he was a native cowboy. He became president in difficult times and tragic circumstances: the escalation of the Cold War, conflict in Vietnam, increased social discontent, and the death of JFK, which resulted in Johnson, previously the vice president, leading the nation. After a year of “inherited” presidency, Johnson was a candidate in the next election. He then challenged Barry Goldwater, a Republican senator from Arizona, whom he presented in his campaign as a dangerous extremist. What is interesting, the competition between these politicians did not only refer to the sphere of ideas and political practices, but also to the symbolic sphere.

Not only did Johnson work hard to attract extremist stigma to his Republican opponent, he also wisely took advantage of the media's fascination with the nation's first Texan President to initiate a public relations campaign designed to negate the potential appeal of Goldwater's frontierism and cowboy persona. Johnson dictated the when, where, and how of virtually all his photo ops in Texas and was often pictured on his ranch riding his horses, boots shining and a cowboy hat doffed. He was privately obsessed with his desire to be seen a 'cowboy' and 'local hero' (Cunningham 2010: 63).

As a result, and possibly owing to the image he had chosen, Johnson won the election, achieving 61.1% of the popular vote, which was the highest victory achieved by a candidate since 1820.

During his presidency, Johnson persuaded Americans "to build a great society, a place where the meaning of man's life matches the marvels of man's labor" (whitehouse.gov.). The main objectives of the program was the struggle against poverty, as well as discrimination and racial exclusion. Later, the program was extended by further initiatives: aid to education, medical care, urban and transportation renewal, prevention of crime and delinquency. All of these initiatives were related to high governmental expenditures, and the results of such measures were generally criticized, principally by the Republicans, who accused Johnson of wasting taxpayers' money and killing citizens' initiative and entrepreneurship. On the other hand, as pointed out by Joseph A. Califano, owing to the Great Society program, the effects of which Americans could only sense in the early 1970s:

... the portion of Americans living below the poverty line dropped from 22.2 percent to 12.6 percent, the most dramatic decline over such a brief period in this century. ... This reduction in poverty did not just happen. It was the result of a focused, tenacious effort to revolutionize the role of the federal government with a series of interventions that enriched the lives of millions of Americans (Califano 1999).

Many initiatives in the Great Society program, including ones fighting racial segregation, changed the image of American society for good. Others were continued by Johnson's successors, Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, contributing to many important and positive changes. Moreover, there are some that still operate and continue to change American reality. "Without such programs as Head Start, higher-education loans and scholarships, Medicare, Medicaid, clean air and water, and civil rights, life would be nastier, more brutish, and shorter for millions of Americans" (Califano 1999).

As Califano points out, when implementing his vision of the Great Society, Johnson behaved like a cowboy, and was assertive and consistent: "Lyndon Johnson didn't talk the talk of legacy. He walked the walk. He lived the life. He didn't have much of a profile, but he did have the courage of his con-

victions, and the achievements of his Great Society were monumental” (Califano 1999).

What probably ruined the image of an assertive leader who challenged many previously unconquered opponents, such as poverty, racism or crime, was the involvement of the United States in the conflict in Vietnam. Johnson became the first cowboy-president in American history accused of unnecessary war intervention and the senseless death of thousands of young Americans. Because of this, the negative association of Johnson’s cowboy presidency was so strong that his predecessors sought to distance themselves from the image.

Ronald Reagan – cowboy at heart

Probably the most convincing image of a cowboy in the White House was created by Ronald Reagan, who played many cowboys during his career as an actor. Reagan made his political capital on the image of a cowboy as early as in 1966, in his victorious campaign for governor of California. In summer and fall of 1980, billboards with Reagan’s photo in a cowboy hat said *This is Reagan country* (Martin 1983: 371). Although Reagan never called himself a cowboy, it was obvious that both he and the people in charge of his image took great care to nurture the images that would appropriately strengthen Reagan’s cowboy brand. He managed to convince voters that he was a man to raise the country out of the despair of the 1970s and bring it to glory. The two elections that he won with a high advantage over his opponents proved the effectiveness of the communication carried out by Reagan and his staff.

Television often showed Reagan during afternoon horseback rides at his California home, Rancho del Cielo, while reporters informed citizens that the president relaxes by chopping wood or repairing a fence. We must remember that Reagan was an actor – and his cowboy outfit was only a costume.

For Americans, the West meant constancy, stability, tradition and conservatism, and these were the values Reagan identified with. He criticized the main area of Lyndon B. Johnson’s activity in the famous, witty and very cowboy-like phrase: *LBJ declared war on poverty and poverty won*. Seemingly, Reagan was a different cowboy, cutting himself off from the activities begun by Johnson by initiating and supporting social change. In fact, the image of the cowboy also allowed him to authenticate and sanction many political decisions and strategies, such as the struggle against the empire of evil and conquering communism.

In his speeches, Reagan often used the good-versus-evil theme, which allowed him very effective communication with the voter, and, regardless of

the circumstances, made people think that he was always on the good side. “What kept Reagan immune from the virus of public criticism was his extraordinary ability to convince people that he was not really part of the evil thing called government, that he was in the White House not as a politician, but a crusader intent on cleaning up the mess left by the previous administration” (Edel 1992: 279-280).

It should be noted, however, that Reagan’s political decisions and actions were not always far different from the ideals of the Great Society, while the fact that today they are perceived otherwise is due to Reagan’s exceptional communicative skills:

Reagan was an effective communicator of conservative ideas, but he was also an enormously practical politician who was committed to success. The welfare bill that was the signal achievement of Reagan’s second term as governor of California, the reform that salvaged Social Security for a generation during his first term as President, and the tax overhaul of his second presidential term were bipartisan compromises, defying “liberal” or “conservative” labels. In the tradition of American populists, Reagan ran for office as an outsider who was determined to restore traditional values. In fact, he was a master politician who expanded the reach of his party at home and pursued his vision of a nuclear-free world abroad (millercenter.com).

Many people liked Reagan’s cowboy image; he was perceived as a very colorful personality. “James Reston once remarked that the American people didn’t ‘elect’ Ronald Reagan, they ‘fell in love with him’” (Edel 1992: 280). Many polls of support for the president showed that even though people did not like Reagan as a politician, they loved him and trusted him as a man (Edel 1992: 280). As a result, Reagan’s presidency was so spectacular that all subsequent presidents attempted to use the cowboy image.

George W. Bush – the fake cowboy

He had grown up in West Texas and spent his vacations there, and spoke with a Texan accent. It was obvious he would be the next cowboy in the White House. Bush based his campaign on the promise of a “return to old values.” His policy – both domestic and foreign – remained under the clear impact of neo-conservatists, and the image of the cowboy served to authenticate that. He was, however, considered a fake cowboy, as he did not apply cowboy ethics and lacked dignity. Both the first and second election as president gave rise to many controversies. It is interesting to see how mainly right-wing media built the image of Bush as a manly, decisive cowboy, impervious to external pressures. In the 2004 presidential campaign, Bush’s cowboy personality

was opposed to the “French cheater” John Kerry, who charmed but cheated, contradicted himself, and – worst of all – went skiing in France.¹ In the context of the scandal concerning medals from the Vietnam War, Kerry’s winter vacations in France were interpreted almost as treason. Furthermore, Kerry was presented as a womanish dandy and was laughed at, just like Theodore Roosevelt before he decided to become a cowboy.

Bush seemed to develop his own ‘cowboy’ style. He tended to see the world in black and white and in his rhetoric he used special frontier lingo, saying that he will “ride hard” over Middle Eastern governments and “smoke out” enemies in wild mountain passes. He branded Saddam Hussein’s Iraq “an outlaw regime” and took the vanquished dictator’s pistol as a trophy. As for Osama bin Laden, Bush declared, “I want justice. And there’s an old poster out West, I recall, that says, ‘Wanted: Dead or Alive’” (Baard 2004).

Karen Hoffman claims that:

One of Bush’s rhetorical strategies was the use of visual imagery. He was known as a poor speaker, but in terms of imagery he did a much better job of communicating. For example, visually identifying himself as a cowboy allowed Bush to tap into the powerful frontier myth. Wearing a cowboy hat and boots and living and working on a ranch in Texas allowed Bush to communicate that he possessed the characteristics of the mythic cowboy – strong, decisive and always on the side of what is right. While his spoken words did not necessarily highlight these qualities, the visual images managed to convey the message without having to be explained. ... Ironically, in conjunction with the visual cowboy image, Bush’s faulty spoken address confirmed Bush’s identity as a cowboy. Cowboys were men of action, not words, and a lack of skill in public speaking simply implied that Bush was too busy acting to protect the country to worry about speechwriting, which in the context of the cowboy myth is a positive attribute (Hoffman 2010: 142).

It is true that Bush sent the death warrant for Osama bin Laden, but it was the next president who captured and killed him.

Barack Obama – cowboy in action

Although Obama represents the political party whose policy does not refer to values that would be close to the mythical cowboy, and his skin colour does not much the traditional concept of the mythical cowboy representing

¹ Contrasting the image of Bush-Cowboy and Kerry as a dandy was particularly frequent in the materials of Fox Television. This motif was also discussed in the famous production *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch’s War on Journalism* – a 2004 documentary by Robert Greenwald.

archetypal American white manhood, his decisions and actions are often called ‘cowboy acting.’ Obama entered the White House with the message that now the era of Cowboy diplomacy was over, gone with Bush, and that in fact all evil left with him, while now only good would enter. Obama appeared as a new cowboy in a global city, who would clean up the mess left by the old administration.

However, the war in Afghanistan led to accusations of Obama using a Bush-style *cowboy diplomacy*. In turn, the successful mission against Osama bin Laden caused Obama’s actions to be interpreted by the use of narrations characteristic of actions of a true mythical cowboy, who does what must be done, keeps his promises, is tough but fair, talks less and says more.

Barack Obama is not afraid of putting on a cowboy hat and taking the risk of the symbolic values it carries. In 2008 he invited conservative pastor Rick Warren, founder of the Saddleback Church, “religious haven of every evangelical cowboy, to present his inaugural invocation in order to begin his inclusive administration in a way that would include a large number of religious conservatives” (Weaver 2010: 478). In November 2011, Obama organized a country and western concert at the White House. “At its most pure, that’s what country music is all about – life in America. It’s about storytelling – giving voice to the emotions of everyday life,” said Obama (whitehouse.gov).

It seems that Obama wants to make everyone happy – cowboys and Eastern liberal intellectuals, Whites and Blacks, hip-hop dancers and country and western singers – but as a result, he now lacks a clear, legible, and effective political image. He is neither Black nor White, neither an Easterner nor a Western cowboy – his intention is to be a President for Every American, but in political reality this can only be a dream.

While observing the last election campaign and searching for its use of references to cowboy iconography and values, it was easy to see that while Obama referred to them from time to time, and put a cowboy hat on if circumstances thus required it, Mitt Romney never used the cowboy image or ideology, although he represented the Republican Party and the world of traditional values. Romney built his political identity on the basis of an image of a responsible and effective businessman. He is from Detroit, Michigan. He did his mission in France and lives in Massachusetts – there are no cowboy motifs in his life. It seems that he really felt that the cowboy identity did not fit his image.

Whatever one could say about cowboys at the White House, it seems that Capra’s protagonist as every American would not have a chance to become the president, because although responsible and uncompromising, he is too young and inexperienced. He also lacks one more important feature: he is not rich, while the White House rather gives refuge to ranch owners than to regular cowboys.

After Bush left, it seemed cowboys would not be welcome at the White House any more – yet now by flirting with cowboy culture, Obama signals that against his roots, race, education, intellectual level and truly European social sensitivity, he does not want to be perceived as a Jack-a-dandy from the East Coast, but as a True American, while values represented by the mythic American cowboy still constitute the essence of Americanness for Americans.

Cowboy-presidents have almost always had enemies either in flesh and blood, such as Osama bin Laden, or more abstract yet equally dangerous: communism, poverty, corruption, or racism. It is true that the image of the mythic cowboy is very broad and can serve many often contradictory political initiatives. Simple, recognizable iconography and a fixed set of values identified with the mythic cowboy can still be an effective tool in political communication. However, in order to deserve the name of a true American it is not necessary to put a cowboy hat on; it is enough to apply the Great American Principles, like Jefferson Smith, and this can prove difficult at the White House.

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