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JOHN WAYNE: BEHIND THE LEGEND

A 52' by JEAN-BAPTISTE PERETIE

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Through his impressive list of movie credits, John Wayne came to embody the legend of the West. But behind this heroic figure who bore the values of America, who was this man who never went to war?



AN AMERICAN STORY

In 1939, at the age of 32, John Wayne became a star thanks to his performance as the Ringo Kid in John Ford's *Stagecoach*, after a decade of playing minor roles. **For the first time, he had a chance to show his charisma on-screen, a blend of masculinity and casualness, humor and roughness.** *Stagecoach* won the Oscar for best picture and opened the door for Wayne to starring roles. Barely two years later, the United States entered the Second World War. The conflict left the actor facing a tough choice: Should he sign up and risk losing his newfound fame, or stay home and continue making movies? He hesitated. Meanwhile, other high-profile actors were leaving Hollywood to take part in the war effort. Wayne profited

from this, filling roles in their absence. At the end of the war, his status as a star was firmly established. But his decision to stay haunted Wayne his whole life.

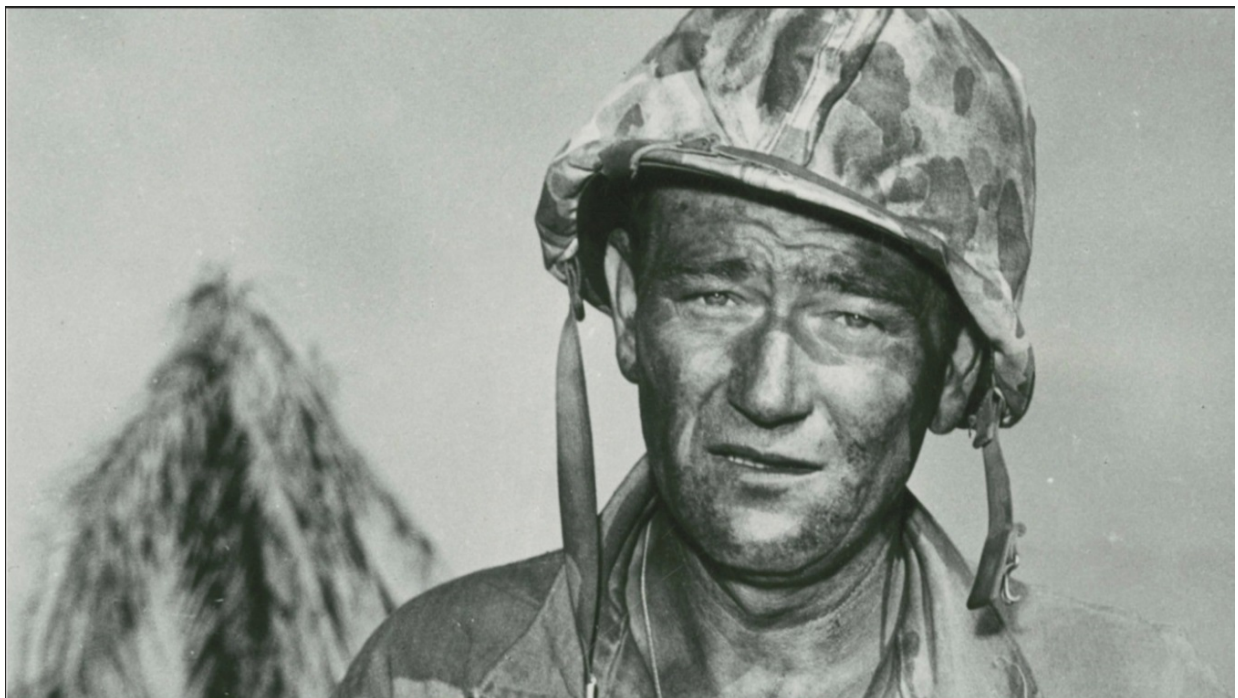
The man who so often played the quintessential American hero, fighting for democracy and freedom, never went to war... Meanwhile, he began to trumpet the values of nation, the army, America.

Despite not having fought the Germans and Japanese, he declared war on the Communists. His convictions soon influenced the roles he took on. His engagement for the cause reached its peak when the Vietnam was raging. In 1968, he starred in *The Green Berets*, a celebration of American military intervention and a full-blown propaganda movie. An enthusiastic supporter of Nixon, and then Reagan, Wayne went as far as declaring in 1971: "I believe in white supremacy until the blacks are educated to a point of responsibility. I don't believe in giving authority and positions of leadership and judgment to irresponsible people."

The man who embodied the American hero had become a rigid and ultra-conservative public figure. He was a prisoner of his own character.

HOW JOHN WAYNE BECAME JOHN WAYNE

John Wayne was born Marion Morrison in 1907. His feminine-sounding name earned him the mockery of his classmates, and he hated it throughout his life. In his early films, he had the charm of a young leading man, with his blue eyes and dark wavy hair, yet **he seemed surprisingly awkward, as if his body was too big for him.** He appeared in a series of B-movies, in which he did not even appear in the credits, or else under names such as "Duke Morrison". In 1930, when he had his first lead part in a western, the director thought he needed to find a more serious stage name. Without even consulting the actor, he was given



the name John Wayne and he stuck with it. Throughout the 1930s, he gradually developed a

persona as a leader of men. The man who had been a somewhat clumsy actor with a severe lack of self-confidence had acquired the authority of a solid, virile guy. Marion "Duke" Morrison had become John Wayne. He was a major worldwide box-office draw for a quarter of a century. His on-screen persona brought him such success that it became hard to separate the man from the legend. Having become the emblem of a confident nation, starring in films which mythologized the great episodes of American history, he convinced himself he had a role to play in the destiny of his country...

THE ACTOR AND HIS DOUBLE

The complex relationship between the actor and his characters, the man and his public image, forms the heart of this film. The fluctuating tension between the two drives the narrative. The story tracks the two distinct personas as a way to reveal they are two sides of the same person, moving towards a resolution in the last years of his life, when he finally let the armor slip somewhat. From the end of the 1960s, **John Wayne was contested by the younger generation, those who fought in Vietnam and who saw him as a symbol of the past.** He battled for many years against cancer, no doubt contracted on the shoot of *The Conqueror*, filmed near a US army nuclear test site. In his last film, *The Shootist* by Don Siegel (1976), he agreed to play a sheriff riven with cancer, a dying hero, physically and historically condemned, in a town submerged by modernism. The film is a sort of testament, a true-life epilog to the legend of John Wayne. Three years later, he made a moving last public appear at the 1979 Academy Awards ceremony. Invited to present the Oscar for best director, he attended the event wearing a thick under-garment beneath his tuxedo to hide how thin he was. He won a long standing ovation. Wayne died three months later. His tomb is engraved with his stage name, as if the actor wanted to keep to himself the identity of Marion Morrison, the shy, awkward boy from Iowa, who never did like his name.

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