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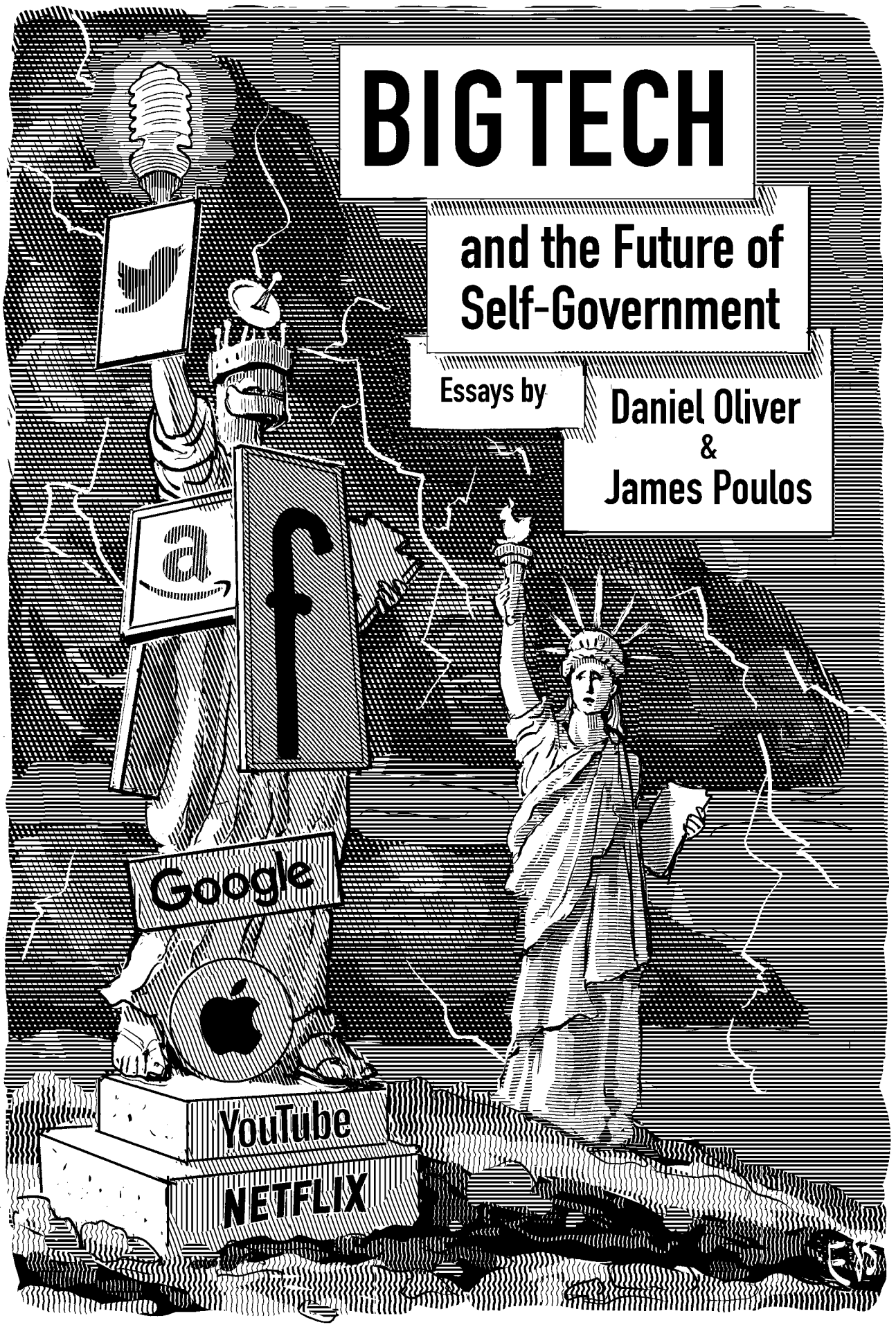

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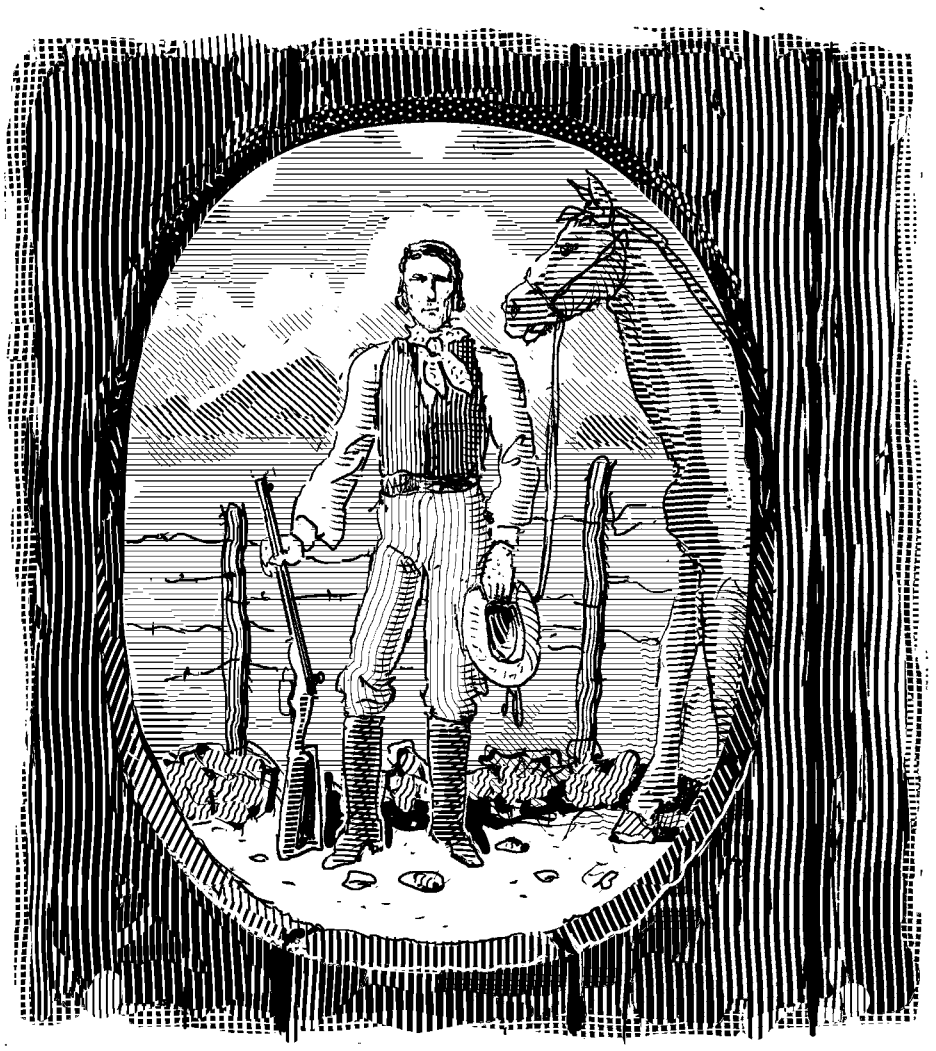
Book Review by Christopher Flannery

Ride the High Country

The Western: Four Classic Novels of the 1940s & 50s, edited by Ron Hansen.
Library of America, 1,100 pages, $39.95



"He rode into our valley in the summer of '89." So begins the classic Western novel *Shane*. The '89 is 1889, the valley in Wyoming Territory, and trouble is brewing. The local big cattleman is finding the handful of recently arrived homesteaders a nuisance. He wants the range for his own and is bent on driving them out. The land is theirs by right of settlement and guaranteed by the government, but the government is far from the "valley way up there in the Territory." The nearest marshal is a hundred miles away. They don't even have a sheriff in their town, which is "not much more than a roadside settlement." Then a mysterious horseman rides into the valley. He's not like other men. His past is obscure. The boy watching him ride in has never seen such "magnificence" in a man. The boy's young, pretty mother immediately knows that the man is not just mysterious but the most dangerous man she has ever seen. The boy's decent, hard-working father knows at the same time that the stranger is the safest man they could ever invite into their home. He will be the deadliest man in a fight, but his deadliness lies deep within a character of iron self-command, like the single-action Colt wrapped in his saddle roll, and is reserved exclusively for those who require it. The deadliness and the control and direction of it are inseparable parts of his completeness, his magnificence. He is alert to everything around him. Nothing seems beyond his capacities; some can't imagine a bullet could kill him, but he is as mortal as he is deadly, or he couldn't be what he is. He is a hero—frightening and beautiful. His presence rouses the world he steps into. Without him, the seemingly insurmountable problem that world faces could not be resolved. When, with his indispensable aid, it is resolved, all he will have left to offer is to ride away and become a legend.

Shane is one of four novels Ron Hansen has gathered in *The Western: Four Classic Novels of the 1940s & 50s*, volume 331 in the Library of America series. The novels are presented in chronological order: *The Ox-bow Incident*, by Walter Van Tilburg Clark (1940); *Shane*, by Jack Schaefer (1949); *The Searchers*, by Alan Le May (1954); and *Warlock*, by Oakley Hall (1958). The first three are short: 208 pages, a mere 113 pages, and 236 pages, respectively. *Warlock*, at 522 pages, is more than twice as long as the longest of these and almost five times as long as *Shane*—and reads like it. Each was successful as a book and quickly made into a successful, or great, movie. The 1943 film adaptation of *The Ox-*

Bow Incident, starring Henry Fonda, was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Picture. *Warlock* was a finalist for a Pulitzer Prize in 1958. Roughly 35 years after *Shane* was published the Western Writers of America ranked it the "best Western novel ever written." As the years grew on John Ford's film of *The Searchers* (starring John Wayne) the American Film Institute eventually voted it the greatest Western movie of all time. The movie *Shane*, directed by George Stevens and starring Alan Ladd, is third on the list.

Hansen is himself a Western novelist and is the Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J. Professor in the Arts and Humanities at Santa Clara University. His *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (1983) was nominated to the short list for the PEN/Faulkner Award and was the basis for a movie of the same name (2007), directed by Andrew Dominik and starring Brad Pitt. His most recent novel, *The Kid* (2016), is about Billy the Kid. He is aware that Westerns are often looked down upon as formulaic. But he thinks there is something in each of these novels that makes it a "classic" Western for all times. Just what makes the good Western novel or film classic? I think it is some combination, made by genius, of the setting, the problem, and the hero.

The classic western setting is not a confining parlor or drawing room, or even the mean streets of a city, but the Wild West, the great outdoors. At its best, the scene is awe-inspiringly grand, like Arizona's Monument Valley where John Ford shot so many of his westerns. You can lose your way in the vastness of it. It is harsh and powerful enough to kill you, even if you're strong, experienced, and vigilant, but certainly if you are soft, inexperienced, and careless. As Jack Schaefer sums it up, the Western typically takes place in "extremes of topography and climate beyond those of the east, the highest and lowest areas of the entire nation, the hottest and the coldest, the flattest and the ruggedest, the driest and the wettest." It's "a rough country," Amos Edwards says in *The Searchers*, "a country [that] knows how to scour a human man right off the face of itself." It's the *Wild* West partly because, at the time of the story—typically mid- to late 19th century—the land is still relatively untamed and largely uncharted wilderness.

Whatever the altitude, it is the High Country—overwhelming to the timid and small-souled but exhilarating to the free spirit. And free spirits are drawn to it. Only the brave and self-reliant can survive or rise to its inexhaustible grandeur—men to match mountains, and plains, and deserts. The people are few and far between and come from everywhere, leaving their pasts and sometimes even their names behind. What matters is their character and what they can do. They are starting anew, with nothing and from nothing—from scratch (life in the Wild West is always a *Novus Ordo Seclorum*, a New Order of the Ages, like the American Revolution). They build their simple homes where there had been no homes before; they build their towns where there was nothing but empty space and cactus and tumbleweeds. Law and government are far away, weak, or nonexistent. It is the frontier. Not just the historical frontier of Wyoming Territory in the 1880s or northwest Texas in the 1860s (as in *The Searchers*), but the eternal frontier, the frontier that is always there waiting for us—as we have seen in hundreds of American cities since the summer of 2020—when civilization is left behind, has not arrived, or takes a knee.

Because man is by nature a political animal, people on the eternal frontier are always faced with the problem of establishing and securing political communities. If there are no communities to join, they invent them. Though natural, communities don't grow on trees. This is why founders are thought to be great benefactors of mankind. They help establish the necessary conditions for the fulfillment of human nature. To survive and flourish, communities need justice. "No justice, no peace," to paraphrase—loosely—James Madison. But inevitably and necessarily, human nature being what it is, that justice and peace will be hard to come by. It will be threatened or violated—by outlaws, hostile Indians, unscrupulous cattle ranchers, or a gang of marauders carrying signs proclaiming "No Justice, No Peace!"

One ancient definition holds that justice is obeying the law, injustice breaking it. Always and everywhere, men arise who think they can gain some advantage by breaking the law. They become outlaws. To protect against outlaws, who are sometimes employed by wealthy and powerful interests, lawmen are needed—peace officers. Lawmen themselves must be hired by powerful interests. We need to do what is necessary to prevent outlaws from disrupting our justice and our peace. If you want peace, you must prepare for war, as the old saying goes. The classic Western paints the unending human quest for justice, and the clash between good and evil, with broad strokes on a vast canvas. It presents this eternal human problem vividly because it presents to us a world where peace is not established, law is far away, and the human need for justice is raw, full-blown, and in the open. This is a world more and more like our world today, in which violent mobs, sponsored by the wealthy and powerful, invade peaceful neighborhoods where private citizens, abandoned by law enforcement, must defend their lives, homes, families, and businesses. Welcome to the Wild West.

Underlying the struggle for justice in the classic Western is a vision or hope of securing or restoring domestic peace. In *Shane*, it is the domestic peace of a family of homesteaders and their neighbors in Wyoming Territory; in *The Searchers*, of a handful of families on the west Texas frontier, building their homes, raising their children, driving their cattle, and trying to survive waves of savage onslaughts by Comanches and Kiowas. At the heart of domestic peace is the love between a man and a woman in the most essential human community. The most poignant scene in *The Ox-bow Incident* features the innocent traveler, about to be hanged by the lynch mob, writing a last letter to his young wife.

To establish law and order is to establish the rudiments of civilization. Wallace Stegner wrote of his friend Walter Clark, author of *The Ox-bow Incident*, that "his theme was civilization and he recorded, indelibly, its first steps in a new country." When the troubled town of Warlock hires a new marshal, the marshal's saloon-keeping sidekick brings with him the town's first piano. Violence and the rule of violence are the alternatives to law and order, or civilization. It turns out that to withstand the rule of violence—to establish and preserve justice—requires all the human virtues, beginning with courage. Civilization—and the fulfillment of human nature it makes possible—requires an exertion of heroic virtue. It requires heroes.

The people who need Shane or Amos Edwards (named Ethan in the movie) are for the most part good, strong, capable people. But their decency is not self-sustaining. The peaceful farmers in the Wyoming territory need someone as deadly as Shane to keep their peace; the west Texas settlers, remarkably sturdy as they are, need someone as ruthless as Edwards to defend their homes. The more problematic citizens of Warlock require a Clay Blaisedell (who bears striking similarities to Wyatt Earp) to protect them against the lawless cowboys from San Pablo. The peaceful families pursuing happiness today in Portland and Seattle and every other American city increasingly feel the need for their own heroes.

The hero in the classic Western is usually a lone, brave, and just man. He is also usually an outsider, with no stake in the prob-

lem that calls for his heroism. He frequently comes into the valley or town, like Shane, on horseback and is good with a gun and with his fists. He is not looking to reform the world; in fact, he often scrupulously, even callously, confines himself to his own business. His own business can be very private and independent of others, until those others try to push him around. "Don't Tread on Me" is a fair motto for his stance in the world.

Only from a point of view that recognizes the heroic for what it is can we understand our more mundane problems. The hero is what makes the classic Western riveting. The setting might be enticingly majestic and wild; the problem—the human need for justice and the infinite variety of difficulties in obtaining it—is eternally interesting. But it is the hero that puts us on the edge of our seats. Even the decent people who need him are in one way or another frightened and uncertain when he comes on the scene and usually recognize the need for him to ride off into the sunset. They have their doubts about his methods or his morality. Their dilemma is with us always: how to defeat the outlaws without becoming outlaws ourselves. How to defeat the merciless savages without ourselves becoming savage. The solution seems almost to require divine intervention; in any case, it is frightening and can never be institutionalized to be relied on ever after.

Part of the problem is that you can't simply separate the good from the evil. Shane has to kill two men to solve the problem in that Wyoming valley. And he knows "[t]here's no going back from a killing.... Right or wrong, the brand sticks and there's no going back." Shane can live with the killings; but the town couldn't, and he knows this. Amos Edwards and young Martin Pauley—the "searchers"—have to become as murderous as Comanches to avenge the Comanche murders, mutilations, and kidnappings that are the cause of their search. They have nearly to forget what home is, in their years of searching, to defend the home they are trying to save. It can't be helped. The good guys need to be as dangerous as the bad guys—even more dangerous.

Machiavelli used to relish saying that in a world where so many are so bad, it is necessary for those who are thought good to enter into evil. In the world of the classic Western, where so many are so bad, it is necessary for at least some of the good to be heroes. This involves something like what Aristotle had in mind when he reflected that natural right is changeable. Universal human experience recognizes the distinction between right and wrong. But human circumstances are so variable that sometimes, at the edge—at the extreme—we are faced with choices for which no rulebook can prepare us. There are no untainted options. We are morally bound to do the least evil we can with the options facing us. The classic Western is fully aware of this complication, and the great achievement of the Western hero is to reveal vividly, in this full awareness, the objectively true and critical distinction between the good guys and the bad guys.

When this distinction began to fade or become obscure or confused in the minds of authors, directors, readers, and moviegoers, the classic Western began to ride slowly off into the sunset. How and why this happened Claremont Institute senior fellow John Marini has explained in his writings on the Hollywood Western and related subjects. A good place to start is his "Defending the West: John Ford and the Creation of the Epic Western," in *Print the Legend*, edited by Sidney A. Pearson, Jr. (2009). Anything worthwhile in the foregoing reflections on the Western is indebted to Marini's pioneering work. You can see the classic Western starting to ride off in the last and longest novel in this collection. It is not that Oakley Hall doesn't include in *Warlock* all the ingredients of the classic Western. But he wraps these ingredients in one questionable "narrative" after another, each burdened with vagueness of memory, conscious or unconscious prejudice, ignorance, or plain malice. The upshot is an account (or rather several accounts) of events that the reader is invited to doubt, but which the author seems to wish could go on forever. By the time the hero grapples with the problem, Hall has little to offer the reader but irony. "Yippie ki yay...!"

Writer Thomas Pynchon, an English major at Cornell in the late 1950s, was taken with *Warlock* when it was first published and later wrote admiringly of it: "It is the deep sensitivity to abysses that makes *Warlock*, I think, one of our best American novels." The kind of literariness that made *Warlock* appeal to Pynchon may partly account for its being selected for inclusion in the Library of America series, but those sensitivities and abysses are a step away from the classic Western toward Quentin Tarantino.

"In the beginning, all the world was America," wrote John Locke in the 17th century. By the 1940s and '50s, the classic Western, especially the Western movie, represented America to the world. As actress Maureen O'Hara, speaking as an immigrant and a proud citizen, testified in 1979 before Congress about America's greatest Western actor who was then dying:

> To the people of the world, John Wayne is not just an actor, and a very fine actor, John Wayne is the United States of America. He is what they believe it to be. He is what they hope it will be. And he is what they hope it will always be.

Following O'Hara's suggestion, the Congressional Gold Medal honoring Wayne has inscribed on it merely, "John Wayne, American." But already by that time, many educated and influential Americans had lost faith in America and lost their taste for classic Westerns and Western heroes. They had begun to teach the younger generations the lessons of nihilism, hate, and despair that would lead them to tear down statues, not only of John Wayne, but of Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Frederick Douglass, and every other American hero they could get their hands on.

The Ox-bow Incident and *Shane* were the first books published by their respective authors. Even a novice reader can see ways in which these books could be improved. Better classic Westerns could be written—which could be made into great classic Western movies. Such is the state of our affairs that to write such books and make such movies today would take not only genius, but a kind of heroism. But if done with sufficient genius, classic Westerns can help a generation begin to overcome the dark night of the soul they have been plunged into by their criminally irresponsible elders. Every young person wants to be a hero and wants to know a hero and have a hero in his life. America, and the classic American Western, have plenty of heroes to offer. The Wild West, the eternal frontier, is the place where you have to start all over. It is the eternal need for a *Novus Ordo Seclorum*, the eternal need for heroes, a need that is hard upon us for all to see.

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