

The Wild West Rides into the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to correlate the cultural traits of the Wild West with some of the traditional values that can be found in contemporary American society. It is our belief that America's cultural identity rests on the broad historical substratum of the Wild West and its influence in building the icons and ideals of a people and of a nation. Internet sites dedicated to Wild West history and stories, as well as to some of the famous, or notorious, characters that helped people or depopulate the wilderness west of the Mississippi river will be used to point out some cultural traits that have endured into the 21st century.

Cultural traits, the Wild West, contemporary American society.

Tombstone, Arizona Territory, USA, October 26, 1881.

When Wyatt Earp, his brothers Virgil and Morgan, and notorious gambler, gunslinger and dentist John "Doc" Holliday walked down Fremont Street towards the O.K. Corral on that cold and blustery Wednesday afternoon, little did they imagine they were on their way to make frontier history and people the imagination of countless generations round the world. Besides their courage, determination and skill in the use of six-shooters, they carried with them their society's traits of individualistic attitudes, belief in meeting one's obligations, and directness that seem to have been passed down to so many of their fellow citizens through the years.

Various places, USA, January, May and June, 2002.

When Sherron Watkins and Cynthia Cooper blew the whistle on the illicit operations they had found out were being carried out at Enron and WorldCom, and Coleen Rowley warned her boss at the FBI of agency failures that were being swept under the carpet, one can argue that, although they might have had no inkling of the repercussions their actions would bring to the American business community and the general public, they were following the Earp brothers' footsteps down that dusty and deadly street such a long time ago.

We believe it is fair to state that current American cultural manifestations are inextricably intertwined to the behavioral patterns and attitudes of the pioneers who settled and developed the USA west of the Mississippi river, a land that came to be widely and variously known as the Wild West, the Far West or just plainly as the Old West. The notorious gunfight at the O.K. Corral in 1881 is the backdrop against which the actions of the three whistleblowers who were elected Persons of the Year by TIME magazine in 2002 will be considered. Using Hofstede's 5 cultural dimensions (HOFSTEDE, 2003), we will argue that said actions were a contemporary manifestation of American cultural values rooted in Wild West days.

HOFSTEDE (1980:21) defines culture as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another" and emphasizes that the values, morals and ethical principles a people hold dear are influenced by national culture. Thus, a given person will reflect the cultural values of the society s/he is inserted in. By means of a survey he applied between 1967 and 1973 to over one hundred thousand participants from over 70 countries, Hofstede was able to identify four main dimensions on which country cultures differ, namely Individualism, Masculinity, Power Distance and Uncertainty Avoidance. By carrying out a further survey in China some years later, he managed to identify a fifth dimension he named Long-Term Orientation.

Therefore, we shall proceed to comment Hofstede's dimensions by checking the results for the particular societal culture involved in our research project, namely that of the United States of America. Scores for the USA are as follows:

- Individualism – 91
- Masculinity – 62
- Long Term Orientation – 29
- Power Distance – 40
- Uncertainty Avoidance – 46

The USA's mark of 91 points in Individualism places it ahead of every other country surveyed and underscores its cultural bias towards relatively loose societal bonds, defining a people who look out for themselves and their close family members while valuing self-reliance and not being afraid to face challenges. Its high Masculinity score (62, compared with a world average of 50), defines a high degree of competitiveness, ambition and aggressiveness in both business and community life. The USA's lowest score is in Long-Term Orientation, 29 (world average: 40), which indicates a society that is good at meeting its obligations and at not allowing long-term commitments to become impediments to rapid change. Its low Power Distance score of 40, 15 points lower the world's average, points to a flatter hierarchical structure that leads to greater equality among its members. Lastly, its low Uncertainty Avoidance score of 46 denotes a society and a culture with fewer rules and where diversity of thoughts and beliefs is not stunted.

All the cultural traits ascribed to contemporary American society by the results of Hofstede's survey can be said to have had their roots in the culture developed during the wild frontier days when the country was pushing westward and building its unique cultural identity.

Whole families packing up their belongings into a covered wagon and leaving the relative safety of hometown life to face the unknown wilderness west of the Mississippi river made a powerful statement for an individualistic society that was not afraid to face challenges and break away from their past lives. Moreover, it did not matter what you had been or done before you set out on your journey; silver spoons or rascally deeds, if any, were left behind and everyone started out with a clean slate. Born in Kentucky, Roy Bean ran away from home at age 15 and kept moving West, killing a man, gambling and smuggling stolen goods along the Mexican border. He ended up a saloonkeeper in a small Texas town where he was elected judge and became known as a 'hanging judge', thereby starting the legend of 'The Law West of the Pecos River'. A consumptive Georgia judge's son, J. H. Holliday, a fully qualified dentist, would come West for his health and become a gambler and gunslinger, notorious and feared for his prowess at both callings. Victorious in over 30 gunfights to the death, he rode on for fifteen whisky-sodden and bloody years and ended up dying in bed with his boots off. Reportedly, his last words were: "This is funny". Low Power Distance and Uncertainty Avoidance scores also ruled the day in the Wild West.

In 1877, prospector Ed Schieffelin finally struck a rich vein of silver ore in Arizona after spending 10 years prospecting in Idaho, Nevada, Colorado and New Mexico. As his family had told him his tombstone would be all he would ever find, he now named his mine and the town that sprang up around the diggings, Tombstone. After selling his claims and becoming very rich, Ed got married and traveled all over the country, staying at the finest hotels and eating at the finest restaurants; everyone wanted to see the man who had discovered a whole mountain made of silver. It is significant to learn that he gave it all up some 5 years later by donating his fortune to his wife and his brother and returning to his old prospecting ways. He was found dead of natural causes in a lonely cabin within a couple of years, surrounded by the ore he so dearly loved.

It was into Tombstone that the Earp brothers rode in 1879; three gamblers, faro dealers and poker players all, out to make their fortune in the West, following the lure of the big strike that would make them rich. While waiting for fortune to put in her appearance they also took jobs as stagecoach shotgun messengers and town and county law enforcement officers. Curiously enough, they listed themselves in the 1980 population census as 'farmers'; they had a sense of humor, these Earps did. Within two years Tombstone would grow to 8,000 souls, 110 saloons, countless brothels and a graveyard aptly named 'boothill' for the great number of erstwhile local denizens and nameless drifters who died with their boots on and were dumped unceremoniously into the hard and dry desert soil. It was a town whose population thrived on rapid change, a town where a man could wake up destitute and go to bed rich from the silver he had found that day or the money he had won playing cards at the faro tables. He could also wake up rich and lose it all during the day, or maybe even end up in boothill. If Individualism was rampant, so were the Masculinity dimension traits of competitiveness, ambition and aggressiveness, which could be found in every nook and cranny in town.

Take the story of T. J. Waters' demise, as reported by the newspaper 'The Tombstone Epitaph' on July 25, 1880. Waters had bought a new shirt the day before and became upset when some people made 'good natured remarks' about it. Having declared he would hit the next man to remark about his shirt, he ended up punching his best friend, E. L. Bradshaw, who then went home, armed himself and sat outside the saloon waiting for his miscreant friend. When Waters came out of the saloon, Bradshaw killed him with four shots. Four shots also did Lester Moore in. A Wells Fargo agent and, by all accounts, a very unpleasant character, Les got into an argument with customer Hank Dunstan about a torn envelope. Harsh words led to gunfire and they managed to kill each other, Hank taking Lester's bullet in the chest while Lester was shot four times. He now rests in boothill and his tombstone reads:

“Here lies Lester Moore;
Four bullets from a .44,
No Les, no more.”

Nothing is known of his opponent’s current whereabouts. However, Lester Moore’s grave lies not far from E. L. Bradshaw’s. Seven years after ruining his best friend’s new shirt, Bradshaw was found dead on the streets of Tombstone early one morning with a clean bullet hole through his forehead. It seems he was married to a woman ‘Buckskin’ Frank Leslie had taken a fancy to; surely not conducive to a ripe old age.

However, when it comes to adding the high score in Individualism to that in Masculinity and to the low one in Long Term Orientation, no one can surpass what the three Earp brothers did in the ‘Town Too Tough To Die’. Having almost cornered the law market in town (Virgil was the town marshal and Wyatt and Morgan his deputies), they opposed county Sheriff John Behan’s close links to a band of ranchers collectively known as the ‘cowboys’. Accusing these cowboys of cattle rustling and sundry other misdeeds, the Earps kept them under scrutiny. Events came to a head in October 1881, after one of the cowboys had spent the previous day making threats against the brothers all over town. Displaying the traits Hofstede’s survey found for the USA, the three brothers, with Doc Holliday tagging along, walked over to the OK Corral and shot it out with five of the cowboys in front of the whole town. Two cowboys ran away and the three who stood their ground died on the spot. Two of the Earps were later murdered in Tombstone and the last one, Wyatt, after taking his revenge on his brothers’ killers, lived to the age of 80 having to face unfounded and undocumented accusations put forth by his enemies’ supporters.

The episode of the ‘Persons of the Year - 2002’ whistleblowers is a privileged moment to return to the cultural values described above. By writing a letter to Enron Chairman Kenneth Lay in the summer of 2001 warning him of the company’s illegal accounting

procedures, Sherron Watkins, a vice-president at Enron, was running great professional risks. Ostracized at work, she left her job a year later; Lay was indicted and convicted on 11 counts of fraud and over forty thousand employees were laid off. At WorldCom, Cynthia Cooper trod the same path and exposed a US\$3.8 billion scam. Former CEO Bernard Ebbers was sentenced to 25 years in prison “for his role in orchestrating the biggest corporate fraud in the nation's history,” as published on the CNN Web site (www.cnn.com). Colleen Rowley, an FBI staff attorney, did not manage to make herself heard on a case she deemed essential to national security and that might have avoided the events of 9/11. It is interesting to note that none of the three went public with their disclosures but reached out for those who were higher-up in their organizations in an attempt to correct what they thought was wrong. Despite a law that is supposed to protect whistleblowers (the Sarbanes-Oxley Act in 2002), real-life episodes have made it clear that this law is not tough enough to impede retaliation by those exposed for their shortcomings or illicit actions, a fact that the three ladies involved must have been fully aware of.

Just like the Earp brothers in Tombstone and those who made the long trek westward, Watkins, Cooper and Rowley realized they were playing a game for high stakes, jeopardizing their careers and financial resources, though not their lives. It is significant that all three women were the chief breadwinners in their families, a fact that can be associated to the high score in Hofstede's Masculinity achieved by the USA, which reflects a culture that “experiences a higher degree of gender differentiation of roles. The male dominates a significant portion of the society and power structure. This situation generates a female population that has become more assertive and competitive as women shift toward the male role model and away from their traditional female role” (http://www.geert-hofstede.com/geert_hofstede_resources.shtml).

If we accept the Wikipedia dictionary's definition of whistleblower as "someone who witnesses behavior by members of her/his society that is either contrary to acceptable public values, or threatening to the public interest, and who decides to speak out publicly about it" (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Whistleblower), we can say that the Earp brothers acted as such during their sojourn in Tombstone. As the county sheriff would not move against his friends, the 'cowboys' who could rustle cattle, hold up stages and hinder local development with impunity, the brothers took it into their hands to impose law and order. The 30 shots fired in less than 30 seconds behind the O.K. Corral can be seen as an extreme episode where whistleblowers laid it all on the line, even their lives, using the means available to them at the time. Neither the brothers nor the three women thought they could afford to wait for others to do what they felt needed to be taken care of right pronto.

It is interesting to notice that the concept of whistle-blowing, wrapped in a dense aura of heroism, patriotism even, that is evidenced by the way TIME magazine repeatedly refers to Watkins, Cooper and Rowley, cannot be found in the context of Brazilian culture; there is no word that manages to convey a similar meaning. The 'despicable' "dedo-duro" (snitch) is on the opposite end of the spectrum to the 'brave' whistleblower. By following the logic of Hofstede's analyses in dealing with the correlations among his five cultural dimensions, we could reach the conclusion that such a hero/heroine and the concept itself can only occur in a culture where the scores for Individualism, Masculinity, Uncertainty Avoidance, Power Distance and Long Term Orientation blend in particular amounts. Following our own logic in analyzing the subject, we could state that behind the concept of whistle-blowing in contemporary American culture lies the broad historical substratum of the Wild West and its influence in building the icons and ideals of a people and of a nation.

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