


Substantial Disruption



The Man Who Sought Liberty's Balance

By Mike Tully

Shinbone was a town in a lawless land. The local marshal, [Link Appleyard](#), was no Wyatt Earp. “You folks all know that, well, the jail's only got one cell,” he once said, “and the lock's broke, and I sleep in it.” When it was suggested that he capture and jail the notorious outlaw [Liberty Valance](#), the rotund Appleyard nearly skipped dinner. “You mean Liberty Valance?” he exclaimed. “Just when I was starting to get my appetite back.”

Washington is a town in a lawless land. Instead of Link Appleyard, the nation's capital has the feather-stuffed Attorney General William Barr. Unlike Appleyard, Barr doesn't sleep in a jail cell. He's quite comfortable curling up at Donald Trump's feet.

Liberty Valance was not only an outlaw. He was also the hired gun of wealthy landowners. “(V)otes won't stand up against guns,” [Tom Doniphon](#) told [Ransom Stoddard](#) and [Dutton Peabody](#), the Publisher of the *Shinbone Star*. “You think Valance stays away because he's afraid of you? He's recruiting hired guns for the big ranchers.” “Valance and his men crossed the river yesterday,” he added, “killed a couple of sobbusters, old man Holiday and his son.”

Ransom Stoddard first encountered Liberty Valance when Valance robbed the stage coach he was riding in and beat him. He witnessed Valance and his thugs bully restaurant patrons. Stoddard was a young lawyer and teacher who sought to bring law to the lawless land. “He is a man who came to us not packing a gun, but carrying instead a bag of law books,” Peabody declared.

[As the saying goes](#), history rhymes. Stoddard's dedication to the law placed him in danger. Donald Trump currently faces a growing impeachment inquiry inspired by a confidential whistleblower's report. The whistleblower wants to restore the balance of liberty and power, which has been tilting Trumpward toward autocracy. Like Liberty Valance calling out Ransom Stoddard, Trump demands to confront his accuser: “I want to know who's the person, who's the person who gave the whistleblower the information? Because that's close to a spy,” [Trump told](#) a silent, uncomfortable gathering of American diplomatic personnel. “You know what we used to do in the old days when we were smart? Right? The spies and treason, we used to handle it a little differently than we do now.” Recently, two Trump supporters [offered a large cash reward](#) for information about the identity of the whistleblower. Trump is recruiting hired guns.

The law prevailed – with an assist from lawlessness. Valance called out Stoddard and challenged him to a gunfight in the streets of Shinbone. Stoddard was not a gunman and had no chance against Valance. Nonetheless, he faced him in a showdown, knowing he

was on the side of law and justice – and likely to die. But the one who died, who lunged into the street with fatal wounds, was the evil Valance. The fatal shot came not from Stoddard’s pistol, but from a shotgun wielded by Doniphon in the darkness nearby. As Stoddard stumbled off to treat his own gunshot wounds and the town celebrated liberation from the evil Valance, Doniphon quietly slipped away in the night. “Cold-blooded murder,” he later told Stoddard, “but I can live with it.”

Liberty Valance’s death broke the big ranchers’ power, leading to a lawful society that launched Stoddard’s political career, as described by [newspaper editor Maxwell Scott](#): “Three terms as governor, two terms in the Senate, Ambassador to the Court of St James, back again to the Senate, and a man who, with the snap of his fingers, could be the next vice president of the United States.” When Stoddard told him the truth and the editor refused to print it, the Senator decided to retire from politics. Doniphon had also retired after he shot Valance. “He didn't carry no handgun, Rance,” Appleyard told him. “He didn't for years.” That’s how he “lived with it.”

[The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance](#) was filmed in 1962 with John Wayne as Doniphon, James Stewart as Stoddard, Lee Marvin as Valance and Edmund O’Brien as Peabody. Few movies have captured American ambiguity about law and violence so vividly. Stoddard’s law books brought law and order to the Shinbone region. So did Doniphon’s shotgun. Books and bullets are the paired DNA of our national heritage.

Ultimately, ours is a nation of laws. While we may disagree over when and how to apply the law, we share basic values. We don’t like bullies. We don’t like liars. We don’t like those who use their power to frighten, intimidate, or fool others. And we sure as hell don’t like politicians who forgot why we sent them there.

The New York Times [describes the current impeachment](#) proceeding against Trump as a “constitutional and political showdown.” Trump, like Valance, is a bully. Author Michael D’Antonio wrote of his “bullying ways” [in a recent essay](#) on the *CNN* website, noting Trump’s comment to Bob Woodward: “Real power is, I don't even want to use the word, fear.” Former Vice-President Joe Biden [has described Trump](#) as “the bully I knew my whole life.”

When Stoddard wound up in Shinbone he was appalled when Doniphon told him, “I know those law books mean a lot to you, but not out here. Out here, a man settles his own problems.” “But do you know what you're saying to me?” asked Stoddard. “You're saying just exactly what Liberty Valance said. What kind of community have I come to?” The answer came from [Hallie](#), played by Vera Miles: “A little law and order around Shinbone wouldn't hurt anyone.”

Nor would a little law and order around Washington. It’s time to take to the street and confront the bully.