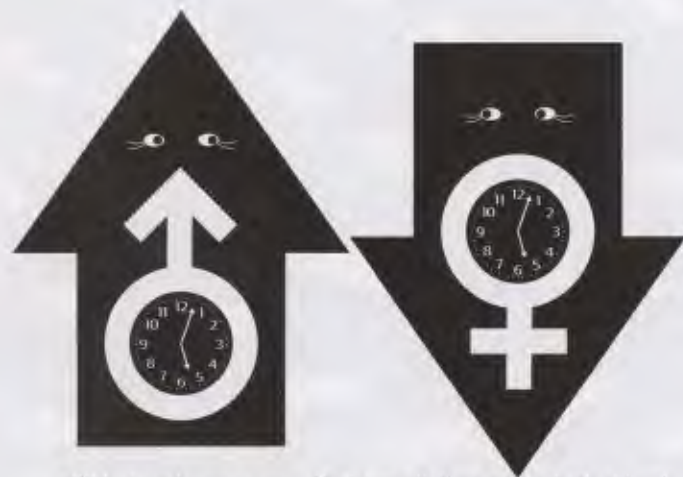


TO ASSUME INNOCENCE IS IGNORANT

American Double Standards Examined

Written by Brent Smith



"I'll just set in my room... Fuck 'em all. Squares on both sides. I am the only complete man in the industry."

—William S. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*

Union soldiers pull up to modest rural homes, dragging boys dressed in girls' dresses (as to avoid conscription) and tossing them into an olde tyme circus wagon. Piles of boys being hauled off to civil war in cages. Either pick a side or be hanged. In one home, Drew Dixon is hidden from the soldiers by his parents, who have already lost a son in battle. They give him \$100 and tell him to go the only way there is to avoid the war: West.

When he reaches St. Joseph, Missouri, Drew is confronted (and mugged) by Jake Rumsey, played by a young Jeff Bridges, and is forced to join Jake's gang—which makes due by stealing and conning—to survive the western journey and hope for any kind of fortune. "You stick around here, the Army's gonna get you," Jake tells Drew. "You can't go it alone. There's outlaws and Injuns and all them things... It just so happens I'm heading west myself. Me and some others, handpicked for gumption... which you got."

Such is the setup to the 1972 acid Western, *Bad Company*, directed by Robert Benton. Such setup is not unlike the current socio-political ambiance of 2018 America.

I see a lot of myself in these boys, caged up and cross-dressed and opting out of some "cause" to gang up and face a frontier of wayward chaos—however sobering and horrific that frontier turns out. Fact is, as an American, there's really no way around horror.

A lot of folks are aghast at the strange swerves our country has taken as of late and feel ashamed to be an American. But not me. No, sir. As a true American... that is, a Westerner... that is, a West Coaster, I thrive in America's strange, untamed corners. With that comes the acknowledgement of what it took to get here. Not just the derimation of indigenous cultures, but our own souls. We are a Faustian people, and to assume innocence as a born-American is as big a double standard as they come.

"It's the old American Double Standard," George Carlin mused in 1988, "y'know... say one thing, do somethin' different. And, of course, this country is founded on the double standard. That's our history. We were founded on a very basic double standard: This country was founded by slave owners who wanted to be free. So they killed a lot of white English people in order to continue ownin' their black African people, so they could wipe out the rest of the red Indian people and move west and steal the rest of the land from the brown Mexican people, giving them a place to take off and drop their nuclear weapons on the yellow Japanese people."

Like a bad dream, we shake it off, and on goes the rivalry between the Coke and Pepsi of politics—red and blue fighting over who's more righteous—as if both brands won't fill you up with cancer-to-the-bone. It used to be simply part of the fabric. Now it's all there is, like watching 500 channels of corporate-sponsored pro-wrestling. Loudmouths in fancy suits. There's no bigger killer of media, of literature, of film than polarized politics. Everything revolves around politics lately and so everything lately is shut. By "everything" I mean what matters: art. The only trickle-down that goes on is what trickles down from art, and

politics is the bottom rung—lowest of the low.

"Artists to my mind are the real architects of change, and not the political legislators who implement change after the fact," wrote William Burroughs. Are we really that surprised when 98 percent of Congress proves perpetually useless?

Jeff Sessions and his Religious Liberty Task Force is a prime example, which he characterizes as a necessary step in firing down the prevailing forces of secularism: "A dangerous movement, undeterred by many, is now challenging and eroding our great tradition of religious freedom," Session stated, which "must be confronted and defeated." Billy Lee Tuttle in *True Detective*, anyone? Is there anything more mystifying than a worldwide religious community of 2 billion crying persecution?

And as life is imitating art, art is being shit on left and right.

The Right has always caved to hysteria, being the repressed and easily-triggered lot they are. Now that the Left has stooped, the vessels are closing in on both sides. The Right claims the Left is all ideology, as if the Right hasn't played identity politics from the jump. And while there's a warranted #LeaveTheLeft movement, don't think taking up with the Right makes one any less of a rube. Chickens dressed in eagle feathers.

The suffocation in America is real, and it's reached the West Coast. There's no way out of civil war these days, unless you care to drown.

Calls for peace fall on deaf ears. I'm sick of good faith. These arms aren't worth the handshake. If Jeff Sessions wants a pig sticking match, we'll give him one. I'm rooting for Civil War Dence. Praying, in fact. Like, Jesus, I beseech thee, let's get this over with and have these self-righteous killjoys pick each other off already. And I'm not talking about those punching proud Neo-Nazis in the face. Neo-Nazis are many things but being American isn't one of them. Punching Nazis was a once-great American pastime, but even punching Nazis isn't something Americans can agree on anymore. I'm talking about these incessant political mudslingers who've got the time to scroll ten years back into someone's Twitter feed to look for ammo. Time to put up or shut up.

Last civil war saw, what, 600,000 dead? I dare us to double it. Hell, triple it. No sweat off our brow. Look at it this way, it wouldn't even shave off 2 percent of Kim Kardashian's combined follower count. Let's take off the Twitter gloves and show the world what we're really made of. Duke it out and spit blood, True American Exceptionalism.

Maybe we'd get a twofer out of it and exorcise this Corporate Demon—parasitic possessor of both sides fooling themselves into thinking their precious ideologies aren't already bought and sold. No family-friendly, politically-correct corporation would dare sponsor Civil War II. We'd probably be left with the Baytheous and Lockheed Martins of the world, and then we can finally expose them for the genocidal opportunists that they are.

Christ, hear us. Deliver us into that which we yearn; plague, war, and everlasting death. We pray: for American strip malls to be leveled by cannon fodder; never to return; for American families to be torn apart as easily as sawed-off limbs; for American lands to once more stink of field hospitals and gangrene. We, sinners, beg for you to hear us.

Let's get away from good ol' American Puritanical bloodthirst for a moment (and issue a trigger warning because here comes some "dangerous" secular humanism). Unlike the Evangelical rats currently running the madhouse, I subscribe to a polytheistic pantheon of gods and goddesses (i.e. archetypes) that reflect the multitude of the human spirit.

I invoke Janus, the Roman god of beginnings, transitions, time, duality, doorways, and endings, who is depicted as having two faces since he looks to the future and to the past. He has recently taken dominion over this land. America is two-faced. And neither side has proposed a compromise, both gazing at dual horizons. So be it. Just when I think the two-headed news cycle can't get any more absurdist, tomorrow always comes.

I'm shocked either side takes it so seriously.

Both sides' obsessive crusade for order, for morality, for justice, while expanding into two different virtual realities, will beget two different fascist flavors (and the horror that ensues). The road of good intentions, and all that. We're standing in this present threshold,

laid out by Janus, gazing at parallel dimensions, with the possibility of opposites to collapse into singularity, like some dire communion.

But fear is at the crux. We're all afraid to merge, panicked to the point of self-quarantine, paranoia, and social anxiety. Afraid of what, exactly? Some clandestine threat hiding behind every corner? If I were to wager, I'd guess it's as simple as looking in the mirror—confronting our shadow. But that's so hackneyed. Is there anything worse for a people, for "the greatest country in the world," than becoming hack?

Recall the 1981 film, *Stripes* (an aged comedy the Left would easily gripe over), in which Bill Murray's character gives a much-needed pep talk: "We're Americans, with a capital 'A,' huh? You know what that means? Do ya? That means that our forefathers were kicked out of every decent country in the world. We are the wretched refuse [...] We're all very, very different, but there is one thing that we all have in common: We were all stupid enough to enlist in the Army. We're mutants. There's something wrong with us, something very, very wrong with us. Something seriously wrong with us! We're soldiers, but we're American soldiers!"

America is no homeland, it is not your land or my land, it is a land of orphans, of diasporic bastards whose spirits never died. We've endured mutant wars before, and we'll endure this one.

As *Bad Company* draws to its conclusion, freeze-framed on Drew Dixon and Jake Rumsey—polar opposites to one another—drawing their pistols and, together, holding up a Wells Fargo, you soon realize there's not much difference in America between being a good soldier and being a murderous thief.

AS I AM NOW, SO YOU WILL BE; YOUR AGEISM IS HYPOCRISY

Taking Down Age Discrimination

Written by Ashton Applewhite

A lovely, stylish 65-year-old woman crossed the room to where her 29-year-old lover, an exceptionally beautiful man, was talking to a stranger. "Is he your son?" the stranger asked.

"No," she replied with a grin. "He's my boyfriend."

After a quick double-take, the stranger gave the woman an enthusiastic high five. Her boyfriend, also grinning, asked "Where's my high five?"

This happened. Why does it seem so improbable? Because when it comes to aging, double standards are everywhere, especially for women.

- Silver hair on young woman? She's styling. Silver hair on older woman? She's let herself go.
- Digital natives? Hot properties. Experienced executives? Incompetent relics.
- Trendy outfit on young person? Sharp. Trendy outfit on older person? Pathetic.
- Amorously entwined twenty-somethings? Hot. Amorously entwined seventy-somethings? Cute. Or gross.

Think of aging as something unattractive that happens to old people, or celebrities, or your parents? Think again. Aging is living, and everyone is doing it. Growing old is the one universal human experience. It's also the one thing every person aspires to: no one wants to die young.

Why are we so apprehensive about it? Because our ageist and capitalist culture frames aging as a problem to be "solved," a disease to be "cured"—and what a market, because everyone's going to come down with it! And because all prejudice pits people against each other—in this case the young against the no-longer-young—in order to maintain the status quo so things stay comfy for those at the top of the food chain. That includes a lot of the people celebrated in this magazine—which, in fairness, is named *Flaunt*.

We all have double standards, because we're not robots, because we're social beings, because the way we think about a given behavior depends on who's doing it, because we want life to feel fair and our choices to feel right (I've raised my kid to think for herself; his



is a disobedient brat!). A double standard is a way of justifying or legitimizing a flawed way of thinking—a prejudice or bias—whether about parenting styles or what someone's age says about them. It's a way of rationalizing inequity and papering over our discomfort with difference.

We're prejudiced any time we make an assumption about a person based on a group they belong to. It's especially punishing when the bias is based on something we can't change about ourselves, like skin color or country of origin or age. Age bias means making assumptions about a person or group of people—what they're capable of, or listening to, or secretly yearn for—based on how old we think they are. That's being ageist.

All prejudice relies on "othering": seeing a group of people as "other" than us. The strange thing about ageism? That "other" is us. Ageism is prejudice against our own future selves. A double standard turns what's acceptable for one group into something that another group shouldn't be allowed to get away with. The strange thing about ageism? The group that's "getting away with something" is either the group we hope to live long enough to join or the group we used to belong to (ageism cuts both ways, and young people experience a lot of it).

Until we embark on the uncomfortable task of examining our largely unconscious bias, we remain hostage to the negative myths and stereotypes about aging that bombard us from the media and popular culture, from childhood into old age. Deeply entrenched and unexamined double standards around aging divide us, cost us money, fill us with needless dread, and cripple our personal and professional lives.

At work:

Age discrimination in the workplace is rampant. Often expected to work for free, youngers can't get hired because they lack experience while elders can't get hired because they have too much of it. How's that for a double standard? The personal and economic consequences are devastating, especially for the hundreds of thousands of older