We remember mass America’s fierce, homo americanus response to the French refusal to collaborate with the US ‘preemptive’ invasion of Iraq in 2003 and with the subsequent occupation of the formerly sovereign Middle Eastern nation. Homo americanus invectives against the French consisted in large part of accusations of some historical propensity of the French toward cowardice. This frivolous claim is, of course, ill-considered, based as it is on an ignorance of a history that includes names such as Lafayette and Bonaparte and a multitude of courageous civil revolts and revolutions. But it is true, nonetheless, that twentieth-century French history reveals some cases of what might be interpreted uncritically as ‘cowardice.’ Take, for example, the mass mutiny of French soldiers that occurred during World War One. James C. Davis summarizes the mass mutiny as follows:

In 1917 the French began a drive that led to mutiny. While marching to the front a regiment bleated like sheep led to slaughter. Fifty-four divisions refused to fight, and many thousands left the lines. The French commander had some soldiers shot, restoring order, but he promised France would wage no other big attacks.

(The Human Story 289)

This was the subject of the Stanley Kubrick film Paths of Glory, which mostly deals with the trial and execution of the insubordinate French soldiers. Kubrick portrays these soldiers as courageous men betrayed by their superior officers, as intelligent and collectively-conscious men whose primary fault was probably that they were braver than the common herd and took, in essence, an alternative path to glory.

Many Americans also ridicule the French for their surrender to German occupation early in World War Two, accusing them of yet another spineless attempt to save their own skins. This judgment ignores the fact that before pursuing an armistice, the French army had been eradicated, having
lost nearly 100,000 soldiers in a few months of fighting – about the same number of total losses of American soldiers in World War One. If homo americanus thought like homo gallicus, he might take a more dialectical approach to these instances of French resistance to war and aggression, one which considers the larger historical context and the long-term effects on humanity and human culture. This approach might find that the French soldiers and citizens were not ‘cowards.’ Nor were they ‘intellectuals’ (an equally pejorative term from a homo americanus perspective) in the conventional sense, but critically thinking individuals who were comprehensively and rationally ‘thinking through’ their predicament, their behavior, and, most important, the true, real-life consequences of following questionable orders from their superiors – in the case of the French soldiers in the European war – and a controversial plan for the new world order from their superpower Western ally – in the case of the opposition of the French citizenry and politicos to the war on Iraq. We might reasonably conclude that the alternative path to glory that homo gallicus has sought is a cultured one, a more committed, existentially authentic, and socially viable form of bravery.

The violence and aggressive instincts bred by the wilderness of the American West, and ultimately inherited by contemporary homo americanus, come into conflict with the principles of sociocultural progress in Western civilization. The approach to violence in the United States is different from that found in France and the rest of contemporary Europe. The raw hostility of the Far West is perhaps best illustrated through the cinema. To be sure, the general subject of the American West, as well as the more particular focus on its barbarous nature, were a good deal more prominent in the film genre than in the theatre. We cannot overlook the cinematic potential of the topographical beauty, the action of the gunfights, the pursuits and battles on horseback, and the encounters with the Indians in the desert. The action was prominently violent and characteristically American. In his study of the American western, André Bazin reminds us of the proliferation of violence in the cause of an ultimately flawed sense of morality and justice: ‘To be effective, this justice must be applied by men who were as strong and reckless as the criminals … the sheriff is often no better than the men he has hanged’ (223). Consider the 1973 American film Westworld, in which perfectly ‘normal’ late twentieth-century American males vacation at a resort that offers them the opportunity to kill without actual consequence. They take great delight in participating in violent brawls and gun battles in which they ‘murder’ robots who are, nonetheless, near-perfect replicas of real human beings. The excitement and satisfaction of these ostensibly rational men owes largely to the sensation of hurting and killing real human beings.

In their book Why Do People Hate America?, Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies discuss the United States’ special interest in violence in a chapter