**75 years after ‘The Grapes of Wrath,’ we need Ma Joad in the White House**

  
The “Grapes of Wrath” character would guide the nation’s jalopy through difficult times. (20th Century Fox Licensing/Merchandising / Everett Collection)

By **Susan Shillinglaw**

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After its publication 75 years ago this month [it will be 80 years next month – Boas], [“The Grapes of Wrath”](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/067001690X?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creativeASIN=067001690X&linkCode=xm2&tag=thewaspos09-20) became instantly renowned for its depiction of Depression-era poverty and homelessness; for the debate over whether John Steinbeck wrote truthfully about California’s miserable migrant camps (Eleanor Roosevelt stepped in to defend his accuracy); for its salty language (the book was banned in Bakersfield, Buffalo and San Jose); and above all, for the political education of Tom Joad, the man who floats free of the book’s gritty realism and becomes a figure for all time: “Wherever they’s a cop beatin’ up a guy, I’ll be there.”

These are the iconic images and memories of Steinbeck’s classic. But we should not overlook the power of the migrant women — those who gauge their men’s anger, watch their men draw circles in the dust and helplessly “figger” solutions to dispossession. In “The Grapes of Wrath,” men are stunned. Women adapt.

Ma Joad, the family bulwark, keeps the Joads rolling along Route 66 and beyond. Ma is a feminist — feisty, strong, loving, resilient — and the kind of leader, then and now, who might guide the nation’s jalopy through difficult times.

“Woman got all her life in her arms. Man got it all in his head,” she says late in the book. “Man, he lives in jerks — baby born an’ a man dies, an’ that’s a jerk — gets a farm an’ loses his farm, an’ that’s a jerk. Woman, it’s all one flow, like a stream, little eddies, little waterfalls, but the river, it goes right on. Woman looks at it like that. We ain’t gonna die out.”

When John Ford’s 1940 film was released, the promoters urged theaters to sponsor a contest: “Every woman can appreciate the great human problem that faced Ma Joad,” they said, suggesting that local newspapers offer prizes “for the best 200 word letters on this subject: How can a mother help keep a family together in the face of all adversity?”

Might a Ma Joad keep a nation together? Understand men and sons whose careers have been sidelined, like Pa Joad’s, like Uncle John’s? Ma pulls folks together, listens, counsels. As her clan slips back, she leans in.

America needs a Ma Joad in the White House.

In Ma, there is a bit of Steinbeck’s own fierce mother, the Olive Steinbeck who appears in his 1952 novel [“East of Eden,”](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0142000655?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creativeASIN=0142000655&linkCode=xm2&tag=thewaspos09-20)selling more World War I bonds in Salinas than any other woman. And there is some of Steinbeck’s wife Carol, who “willed” “The Grapes of Wrath” into being, as the dedication, in part, reads. With a social conscience initially more muscular than her husband’s, Carol nurtured the book’s partisan fervor. It was she who urged Steinbeck to write a novel after his 1936 journalistic series, “The Harvest Gypsies,” was published in the San Francisco News. It was she who typed and corrected the manuscript, she whose presence was indispensable as he wrote the book in 100 working days. And it was she who came up with the title, from the opening lines of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.”

It is fitting that Steinbeck would choose this Civil War tune with lyrics written by a woman ([Julia Ward Howe](http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/how-julia-ward-howe-wrote-battle-hymn-of-the-republic--despite-her-husband/2011/11/15/gIQAnQRaYN_story.html)) that were adapted to the masculine battle song “John Brown’s Body” — a woman symbolically leading Union troops toward Shiloh two months after her lyrics were published in February 1862. This feminism permeates “The Grapes of Wrath”; one cannot escape Ma leading the troops toward California.

Ma Joad is a fervent believer, not a pushover. When one of the cars breaks down — a family crisis — Tom Joad suggests that part of the family head on to California to find work. Wielding a jack handle, Ma tells Pa and her men that they can “whup” her, but she won’t split up the family. And if they somehow make her go to California and leave Tom behind fixing the car, she’ll wait until backs are turned and “knock you belly-up with a bucket,” or, if the men fall asleep, she’ll “slap ya with a stick a stove wood.” Think of how useful Ma would be during a congressional logjam.

Nor would President Ma be intimidated by foreign bullies. When a border agent dressed like a Nazi threatens her in Needles, Calif. — “We don’t want none of you settlin’ down here” — she picks up an iron skillet: “In my country you watch your tongue,” she snaps. He snarls back, “We don’t want you goddamn Okies settlin’ down.” Ma has never heard the word before, as a slur, and she is stunned and hurt. But she doesn’t crumple. (In this scene Steinbeck probably had in mind more than a California policeman and an Oklahoma woman, as World War II was looming.) Vladi­mir Putin, watch out.

Ma Joad can’t abide whiners, male or female. Throughout the novel, she checks her daughter Rosasharn’s misery after Connie, her husband, abandons her. “You git upright,” she tells her self-absorbed daughter. “You jus’ been mopin’ enough. They’s a ladies’ committee a-comin’, an’ the fambly ain’t gonna be frawny when they get here.” She counsels Rosasharn again and again on the importance of dignity and pride: “Jus’ shut up an’ git to work. You ain’t big enough or mean enough to worry God much.” That just might put Kim Jong Un in his place.

Ma is a patriot. Ma is proud of her Okie heritage. President Ma would, no doubt, sponsor a back-to-work program. Folks would be doing things with their hands and their hearts. Minimum wage? Ma would want to apply that concept to hedge-fund managers.

In a stark economy, Ma Joad notes the importance of generosity: “I never heerd tell of no Joads or no Hazletts, neither, ever refusin’ food an’ shelter or a lift on the road to anybody that asked,” Ma tells the preacher Casy and her assembled family at the beginning of the book. Of course the Joads squeeze Casy into their overloaded sawed-off Hudson Super Six, heading to California to escape the Dust Bowl.

Wealth in the hands of a few is inconceivable to the Joads and their companions. When told that there’s a “newspaper fella near the coast, got a million acres,” Casy is incredulous. “What in hell can he do with a million acres?” Considering that degree of wealth, he concludes, “If he needs a million acres to make him feel rich, seems to me he needs it ’cause he feels awful poor inside hisself.” Neither Casy nor his friend Ma is ever poor inside.

President Ma Joad wouldn’t cut food stamps. She wouldn’t deny education to immigrant children. She wouldn’t trim funds for the homeless. She would remind each American that lending a hand to those at the bottom is a quality of the species, Homo sapiens.

She would fire up the country with collective energy, too. “Maybe if we was all mad in the same way,” Ma offers to Tom when he first comes home. Ma’s notion of the American spirit would hardly be inherited privilege or wealth or capitalist fervor; as she puts it: “If you’re in trouble or hurt or need — go to poor people. They’re the only ones that’ll help — the only ones.” Pulling together is the Joad way, pure American democracy.

Hanna Rosin’s [“The End of Men”](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B00D9TA4VY?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creativeASIN=B00D9TA4VY&linkCode=xm2&tag=thewaspos09-20) develops the idea that, confronted with social upheaval, women adapt more readily than men. In our turbulent 21st century, a firm-minded, no-nonsense, generous, flexible and empathetic President Ma would be a beacon for all women and all men.

So elect a Ma Joad. She’ll be there for the 99 percent — the real Joad family.