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THE 2252

26 February 2017

The Role of Burt Reynolds in *Smokey and the Bandit*

As a college student I am reminded on at least a weekly basis that alcohol is the forbidden fruit that many will risk legal repercussions, to just have a sip. Exactly forty years ago, a movie was created that epitomized this human struggle, but this time the specific alcohol in question was Coors beer and the law in question regarded interstate commerce. The movie, *Smokey and the Bandit*, which was released in 1977, explored one of the common themes associated with movies from the 1970s; the defiance of authority figures and even the government. *Smokey and the Bandit* follows the journey of Bandit, Snowman, and runaway bride Carrie as they attempt to move a Truckload of Coors to Georgia, all while trying to avoid Sheriff Buford T. Justice. Burt Reynolds played the main character Bo "Bandit" Darville. Both the actor and his character were known for charisma and sex appeal, two characteristics which only contribute to the lovable bad boy stereotype; the stereotype behooved Bandit in remaining popular despite his law breaking tendencies. The Bandit and his struggle against not only "The Smokeys," but the laws and regulations established by the federal government reflected the social and political climates of the time in which the movie was made.

Burt Reynolds' character in the movie is embarking upon a journey to move Coors, "The Best Beer in America," from West of the Mississippi River to Georgia under a very tight time

frame, an incredibly illegal feat per the twenty-first amendment of the United States of America. This amendment is best known for repealing prohibition, but it also specifically gave states the rights to regulate the movement of alcohol across their borders under very strict licensing laws (Douglass 1620). In 1977 Coors did not have any licenses East of the Mississippi; therefore, it could not be distributed at all in the Eastern United States. This aspect of the film was a distinctly political statement against the strong interstate commerce laws. The Bandit's informal protest of alcohol restrictions is portrayed well by the movie. For example, when first presented with the opportunity to complete the bootlegging run, The Bandit doesn't really ever give the offer a second thought. As well as, rather than accepting his friend, Snowman's, decision to stay with his family and avoid a second arrest for bootlegging persuades him to join him in exchange for half of the promised payment once the trip is complete. While at first glance these transactions may not seem like political statements, upon further inspection they are a classic example of sticking it to the man.

A corresponding social movement arises with the support that The Bandit and his compatriots receive. Rather than the code era justice that had dominated the screen previously, this film showed that defying the law was not only accepted but in some cases supported by the public. This may be a result of the alcohol friendly attitude held by the public since Prohibition or, more likely, a reflection of the low trust that many held in the government at that time. Low trust levels were a result of the Vietnam War, the OPEC Oil Crisis, and even the Cold War. The support of the Bandit may also at least partially be a result of his good looks and charisma, as seen by the help given to him especially by women. Throughout the movie, Bandit, Snowman, and Carrie are helped back to Georgia by everyone from fellow truckers to grandmas with a CB radio. These helpful bystanders' main tasks were to shield both the tractor-trailer rig hauling the

booze and The Bandit in his speed demon of a Trans Am, from Sherriff Bufort T. Justice and other law enforcement officers. Without the help of the public in the movie the Coors would have never made it to Georgia, Carrie would have never escaped her wedding, and The Bandit and Snowman would have both landed in jail cells. A great example of this public aid was displayed by the truckers which worked to hide The Bandit from pursuing State Troopers by putting him into "Rocking Chair," which meant he wasn't visible from the left lane at all as he was completely boxed in by large tractor-trailers. This level of cooperation was seen many times throughout the film.

Ultimately, *Smokey and the Bandit* is a film that highlighted the socio-political climate of its time. It clearly represented a distaste for government regulations and distrust of government authority figures. In addition, The Bandit also reflected the love that had developed toward the charismatic trouble maker in Hollywood as well.

Great!

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Works Cited

Douglass, Duncan Baird. "Constitutional Crossroads: Reconciling the Twenty-First Amendment and the Commerce Clause to Evaluate State Regulation of Interstate Commerce in Alcoholic Beverages." *Duke Law Journal* 49.6 (2000): 1619-1662.