

Letter from President Lyndon B. Johnson to John Steinbeck

LEE ANN POTTER

ON MONDAY, May 16, 1966, John Steinbeck and his nineteen-year-old son John visited President Lyndon B. Johnson in the Oval Office of the White House. The brief meeting took place a few weeks after John, Jr., had completed basic training in the army and a few weeks before his departure for Vietnam.

Although Elaine Steinbeck, John's wife, and Lady Bird Johnson had known each other years earlier when they both had attended the University of Texas, the president and the Nobel Prize-winning author first met in late 1963 when the Steinbecks attended a private dinner at the White House. At that time, the couple had just returned from a trip to Eastern Europe and the then-Soviet Union, as part of the U.S. Information Agency's (USIA) cultural exchange program. The Steinbecks were in Washington, D.C., for three days of debriefing by the State Department. The dinner at the White House was their opportunity to report directly to the president on their travels behind the Iron Curtain.

Following the dinner, the two couples developed a warm relationship. In the summer of 1964, Steinbeck helped Johnson write his acceptance speech for the democratic nomination. In September of that year, LBJ conferred upon Steinbeck the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian award. Throughout the Johnson administration, the Steinbecks were frequent overnight guests to the White House, and in the spring of 1966, at the request of his son, John Steinbeck asked the president for a favor—to make sure that his son would be given orders to go to Vietnam. In a July 1966 letter to his son, Steinbeck claimed that it was the only request he ever made of the president and that he was not happy about making it; but if he'd had to request that his son not be sent, he would have been "far more unhappy."

So in the spring of 1966, when Steinbeck contacted presidential assistant Jack Valenti to set up a meeting to introduce his son to LBJ, it was not out of the ordinary. According to the president's daily diary, the meeting lasted only four minutes, but it prompted Steinbeck to write a letter of thanks twelve days later.

In Steinbeck's single-page note, typed in all uppercase letters on his personal stationery, he thanked the president for reassuring his son that "responsibility is behind him and

backing him." He also asked the president to remember to pray for his son, and he included a paragraph offering the nation's leader encouragement in the face of demonstrations against his Vietnam policy. He asked the president to "remember that there have always been people who insisted on their right to choose the war in which they would fight to defend their country"; he explained this statement through a number of historical examples.

He told the president that

there were many who would have no part of Mr. Adams' and George Washington's war. We call them Tories. There were many also who called General Jackson a butcher. Some of these showed their disapproval by selling beef to the British. Then there were the very many who denounced and even impeded Mr. Lincoln's war. We call them Copperheads. Then there were those who not only denounced but destroyed President Wilson's policy. Because of very special circumstances, we will not call them anything—for a while.

Finally, he assured the president that "only mediocrity escapes criticism."

President Johnson found a great deal of encouragement in these words, and sent a thank you note of his own on June 21, 1966, that is featured in this article. Johnson was apparently dismayed at the lag time between Steinbeck's letter and his own reply. (In the correspondence file at the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, there is a dictation note from the president to his secretary that reads, "I am going to cry next time there is a letter being answered so late. I never want more than three days to go by without an answer.")

John, Jr., did serve in Vietnam; Steinbeck's older son Thom served also. John Steinbeck himself reactivated his war correspondent's card and went to Vietnam and Southeast Asia with his wife for five months, between December 1966 and April 1967, as a correspondent for *Newsday*, a Long Island newspaper. In his "Letters to Alicia" column, he recorded his observations about the war, American GIs, the South Vietnamese, and the president and his policies,

"tell Juanita I'm going to cry next time there is a letter being answered so late. I never want more than three days to go by without an answer."

LBJ/yb
6/23/66
8:15p



Checked by Kardex

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EXECUTIVE

PRR-1/S*

ND9/S*

ND19/00312/ND9

June 21, 1966

Dear John:

Your visits and your letters never fail to refresh me.

John Steinbeck, Jr

I was delighted to meet your son, and share your pride in him. He is a Steinbeck through and through, perhaps the greatest of the many gifts you have given to this grateful nation. I shall pray for his safe and swift return to you.

Your own wise words of encouragement are a great source of comfort to me.

Sincerely,

lby

Mr. John Steinbeck
Box 1017
Sag Harbor, L.I., New York

LBJ:REK:CMM:trd

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*Mailed special delivery 6/24/66
11:35am*

RECEIVED
JUN 24 1966
CENTRAL FILES

Copies of all this sent to Dick Wallman

and even offered the U.S. government advice.

Through his own writings, Steinbeck revealed a variety of sentiments about the war. These began with doubt about U.S. involvement, then shifted to strong support (especially of the president and of American troops), and then returned to skepticism.

At the time that Steinbeck and his son visited the White House, Steinbeck was a strong supporter of the president and his Vietnam policy. On his travels earlier in the decade with the USIA to the USSR and Eastern Bloc nations, Steinbeck had witnessed firsthand how communism and totalitarian regimes prevented individual fulfillment. As a result, he had become a staunch anti-communist and a strong defender of democracy and freedom. For these views, he was both harshly criticized and warmly praised.

Teaching Activities

1. Document Analysis

Provide students with a copy of the featured document. Ask a volunteer to read it aloud while the others follow along. Lead a class discussion with the following questions:

- ▶ What type of document is this?
- ▶ When was it created?
- ▶ Who created it?
- ▶ Who received it?
- ▶ What was the purpose of the document?
- ▶ What questions does the document raise?

2. Class Discussion

Ask students to consider what President Johnson meant by “the many gifts you [Steinbeck] have given this grateful nation.” Lead a class discussion about what it is that authors and literature “give” to people, and what John Steinbeck’s contributions in particular were. (If students have not read much of Steinbeck’s work, encourage them either to read various literary criticisms about his books, or, for insight into what Steinbeck believed was the role of “the writer,” suggest that students read the speech that Steinbeck gave on December 10, 1962, when he received the Nobel Prize for Literature. The speech is reprinted in *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*.)

3. Small Group Research Activity

Share with students the section of the background essay that quotes Steinbeck’s letter to the president. Ask students to identify the wars that Steinbeck referred to (the American Revolution, the War of 1812, the Civil War, and World War I). Divide students into five groups. Assign each of the first four groups one of the wars referred to in the letter, and assign the fifth group the Vietnam War. Ask student groups to research the dissent by Americans to the group’s assigned war and determine whether Steinbeck’s characterization of the protesters was accurate. Ask a volunteer from each group to report its findings with the class.

4. Research and Paired Discussion

Share information with students from the background essay about the relationship between John Steinbeck and President Johnson. Inform students that Jackson Benson, one of Steinbeck’s biographers, claimed, “Support for the war in Vietnam tragically affected the reputations of both men and unfairly tarnished their other accomplishments.” Ask half of the class to research the accomplishments of Lyndon B. Johnson and the other half to research the accomplishments of John Steinbeck. Then divide students into pairs (one student who researched LBJ with one student who researched Steinbeck). Ask them to share their findings and discuss whether they agree with Benson’s claim.

5. Individual Opinion Paper

Assign students to write a two-page opinion paper explaining their agreement or disagreement with Steinbeck’s comment that “only mediocrity escapes criticism.” Encourage them to cite at least five examples from history to support their argument.

6. Individual Letter Writing Exercise

Remind students that Steinbeck helped LBJ draft his speech for the 1964 Democratic Convention. Ask students to pretend that they are running for a political office and have decided to seek writing assistance from a literary figure (living or deceased) whose writing style they admire. Direct students to write a one-page letter to that individual, asking for his or her assistance and explaining why they chose him or her.

7. Class Discussion

Inform students that John Steinbeck, Jr., in his book *In Touch*, described his father as “a kind of American-conscience figure.” Ask students what they think that meant and whether they can think of other such figures.

8. Individual Extension Activities

Invite student volunteers to complete one of the following projects:

- a. Through research, investigate Steinbeck’s trip to Vietnam and Southeast Asia. On a map, identify places he visited in Southeast Asia; write a brief summary about his experiences and the articles he wrote; and present a ten-minute overview to the class.
- b. Read Steinbeck’s *East of Eden* (1952) and compare his perspective on the impact of World War I and that time period on families and culture with the impact of the Vietnam War on families and culture during the 1960s; and present a ten-minute overview to the class.
- c. Research the criticism Steinbeck received for his support of American policy in Vietnam, write a two-page summary, and present a ten-minute overview to the class.

Note: The document and photograph featured in this article come from the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library in Austin, Texas.

References

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- Hayashi, Tetsumaro. *John Steinbeck and the Vietnam War (Part I)*. Steinbeck Monograph Series, No. 12, 1986. Muncie, Ind.: The Steinbeck Research Institute, The Department of English, Ball State University.
- Steinbeck, Elaine, and Robert Walsten. *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*. New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1975.

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