

There are times when everyone experiences a slight hesitation between approaching a doorway and actually knocking on the door. No matter what is behind that door, the reason one raps is to have a question answered. *Are you giving me the job I'm interviewing for? Could she be "the one"? Doctor, what were the test results?* The hesitation between intent and action is fobbed off on checking to make sure a fly is zipped or lunch's garlic-laden falafel has been purged from one's breath. But the real reason for the pause is to allay any fears that crop up right around the time one first forms a fist. *What if my boss finds out I'm interviewing? She must be going out with me as penance for some horrible sin. The tests are going to be positive.* The doorway for this text came, in the parlance of my father, in an ass-backwards manner.

Not to bury the lede, but the conclusion of this book is that John Steinbeck was a CIA asset during the 1950s and '60s. This text supports that hypothesis, but there are some elements of the tale where the story of how I performed my research crosses over with my findings. First and foremost is the interaction I had with John's son, Thomas. One might have thought that in starting out with the insane-sounding premise that John Steinbeck was a CIA spy would begin with the world's one true Steinbeck expert. While there are men and women who have spent their professional lives examining John's life and works, they are experts in Steinbeck's wake. Thomas represents the single person alive who truly knew the Nobel Prize-winning author.

It was because of his intimate knowledge that Thomas was the last person I spoke with about this project. One does not call up someone's son to say, "I've got this wild theory that your dad was a spy. What do you say about that?" At least, not without proof. Before contacting Thomas, I had to have enough evidence to convince a best-selling author of my interpretation of the "truth" about an area of his father's life Thomas likely knew nothing about. So after receiving a pair of

letters from the CIA in August of 2012, I set out to compile my prior research and write this book's manuscript. What better way in forming an argument to present to Thomas than putting everything down on paper?

In late February of 2013, my manuscript made enough sense to a select group of readers that I felt it was time to contact Thomas about my suspicions. I had spoken with Thomas in autumn of 2008 about John's fascination with Arthurian lore and the works of Sir Thomas Malory. At that time, I had become convinced that there was an untold story in the work of John's research assistant, Chase Horton. The enigmatic co-owner of Greenwich Village's Washington Square Bookstore had been an integral part of the research for what would become Steinbeck's posthumously published *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights*. On that occasion, Thomas and I spoke for over an hour about his father, Horton, and the quest for the Holy Grail. From that conversation, I came away thinking that there was something in Steinbeck's life overlooked by the literary critics, biographers, and scholars. So for the next few years, I picked at the problem as one might fiddle with a loose tooth. Somewhere between November of 2008 and sometime a few years later, that notion became the untold story of Steinbeck and the CIA.

So standing at my own metaphorical doorway on a February morning, I sent Thomas a purposely obfuscated email. There was no mention of spies or the CIA; I simply reminded him that we had spoken a few years back and that I had obtained documents via the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) about his father that were not public knowledge. The next day I received a response from Thomas's wife and gatekeeper Gail, saying she would be interested in speaking with me. I called her the next day and explained the documentation I had and other supporting evidence for my theory. Throughout the conversation, Gail would interject questions and at no time dismissed me out of hand. At the end of my spiel, I asked Gail rather bluntly if she thought I was a nutter.

“No. There’s something to this and you’ve done your research. You really need to talk to Thom, but why are you not just publishing what you have now?”

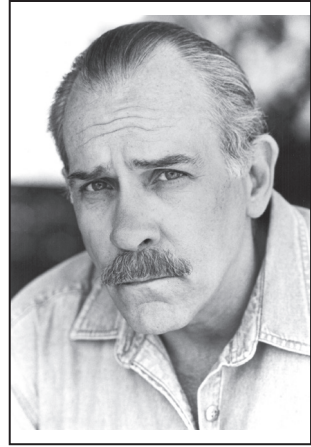
I explained to Gail that beside some legal concerns I had about elements of the book, I couldn’t just let Thomas find out about this by picking up a newspaper. If you had found out that your father was a spy, wouldn’t you want a heads up before it became public knowledge? Going about this without speaking with Thomas simply wasn’t the right thing to do.

Gail agreed and after another thirty minutes of chatting, she told me that Thomas would be calling me in the next few days. Indeed a couple of days later, I faced the only critic of this work that truly mattered.

The conversation with Thomas started out as rather one-sided. He didn’t remember speaking with me in 2008, and I could find no real foothold in easing into the topic at hand. So I launched into my hypothesis by simply explaining my research, the CIA documents, and finished with a letter I received from the FBI stating that they had destroyed elements of John’s official file. I paused to take a breath and Thomas, who had been silent through my discourse, asked me if I believed the FBI had actually destroyed his father’s file. Never having had much of a verbal filter, I blurted out, “No, Thom. It’s horseshit.” I half expected Thomas to call me a loon before disconnecting the call. After a short pause, Thomas agreed and said that J. Edgar Hoover had always hated John and he felt there was much more in their [FBI] files than the public had ever seen. There was another hesitation in Thomas’s next statement, and I think the words surprised me as much as they did him.

“I always knew my father was up to something,” Thomas said.

For the remainder of that conversation, I fleshed out how and why I had gotten to the point of presenting my material to him. Like his wife, Thomas



Thomas Steinbeck. Courtesy of the Paladin Group.

was curious as to why I had bothered contacting him before going to press. I reiterated that I didn't want him to be blindsided by one of his buddies telling him there was a book out accusing his father of being a CIA spy. Thomas's reaction portrayed all the angst and pride a man living "in the shadow of the big man" could muster.

"My father has been dead and buried for over forty years. Anything that comes out now won't matter to him. What matters is the truth."

At that, Thomas and I spoke more about the finer points of my research and he rang off with the promise to call me back after fully digesting my message.

I have spoken with Thomas a number of times since that February night. Gail had warned me that Thomas keeps "writer's hours" and every couple of weeks, Thomas would call well after the end of PM newscasts. The aim of his calls was sometimes to tell me an episode he'd remembered from his childhood that might be useful to my work. Other times, the calls were much less calculated and Thomas would talk about his own memoir that he is currently writing. He was always quick to point out that his work was in no way a biography of his father, but what it was like to live with the man. We would speak about Thomas's memories of his childhood and the points where they intersected with my own efforts. A great number of stories Thomas told me had nothing to do with my own work, but I believe were born out of a need for Thomas as he reevaluated his relationship with his father.

Thomas's tales ran the gambit of his formative years. There was the six- or seven-year-old Thomas being called into his father's study to meet someone. To Thomas, that someone looked much like a transient. His hair was unkempt. The stranger was missing a sock and didn't have a first-rate odor about him. The new face was seated upon Thomas's arrival and opened his arms to Thomas, bidding the youth to come closer. Thomas walked over and the man picked him up and placed the lad on his knee. At that John said, "Thom, I'd like you to meet Albert Einstein." In a later conversation, Thomas was a teenage boy

and his brother John IV had brought a letter to him. It was something John IV had found on the elder Steinbeck's desk and it sported a State Department letterhead. Thomas, who admittedly was more interested at the time with the mysteries of girls than those of his father, had discounted his brother's find. John IV was always "the nosy little brother," Thomas told me.

At other times, Thomas's stories were darker and difficult to listen to. He told of the day he had received his draft notice for Vietnam. John was in the hospital recovering from back surgery and Thomas went to the hospital to relay the news. After telling his father, Thomas tried to make a deal with John: If the elder Steinbeck would use his influence to keep Thomas from going to Vietnam, Thomas would agree to an additional year in the Army. According to Thomas, he had no dilemma about going to war; he had a problem with going to war with "people he hadn't been properly introduced to." John did not share his son's views on service in Vietnam and wanted his son to visit Arlington National Cemetery to remind him that all those there had given their lives so Thomas could ask such a question. Needless to say, Thomas pulled his tour in Vietnam.

In Thomas and John IV's minds, the elder Steinbeck was pushing his sons into the possibility of dying in a Vietnamese rice paddy when he had never been in the line of fire himself. (The danger John was exposed to as a war correspondent in the Second World War was not considered by his sons, because John never spoke of the inherent hazards of his assignments.) The two brothers could not understand why their father had pushed them into service and at the time, felt it was a cruel thing for their father to do. Thomas sounded discomfited in telling me that story. The probability that John had been risking his life on a regular basis for the CIA meant that many of Thomas's views and opinions of his father had been skewed for the last forty-five years. Not that the possibility made matters "all right" by any means, but Thomas had simply not fully understood the motivations of his father. Then again, what child fully understands the decisions a father makes on behalf of his offspring?

One of those choices John made for his sons was to never tell them of his work with the CIA. One might think that this would have angered Thomas. On the contrary, Thomas is quite proud that his father reached out to the CIA. There were flashes in our conversations that Thomas regretted not putting the pieces together himself, such as on the night Thomas called me to talk about their 1954 trip to Paris. Each Thursday, John would take Thomas and his brother to “get lost in and around Paris.” (This story is covered fully in chapter ten.) Thomas now feels that these trips could have been used for John to meet with Agency contacts. After telling me the story, I asked Thomas if he remembered any specific people they might have met on the Thursday treks. Thomas said that he was just beginning to discover girls and he did not recall the names of anyone they might have met. There was a pause after Thomas answered and I knew what he was thinking. I told him that there’s no way he could have known about John’s covert life. The CIA is, arguably, the best espionage outfit the world has ever seen and ferociously guards their secrets. The Agency’s assets and intelligence officers are, by extension, the best spies in the colorful history of espionage. I reminded Thomas of these facts and asked him how a pre-teen boy could possibly have picked up on any additional agenda for the Thursday trips. Thomas lowly said that he knew and dropped the subject.

The details of John’s service weren’t the most important part of the story to Thomas. In all my discussions with Thomas Steinbeck, talk of CIA redactions to John’s FBI file, or if publisher Frederick Praeger had been one of Steinbeck’s handlers, was not nearly as important to Thomas as why John would have enlisted with the CIA. To that score, Thomas stayed resolute in the conclusion that John had been involved on a deeper level with the government than just doing Radio Free Europe interviews and providing counseling (in Thomas’s lifetime) to presidents Kennedy and Johnson. In talking to Thomas, there seems to have been the same tickle, as I have had, in the back of his mind that John had a covert agenda.

After reviewing the manuscript for this book, Thomas pointed out that I had not addressed the question of John's agenda adequately.<sup>1</sup> I admitted to Thomas that I had shied away from speculating too much about a man's motivations I had never met. Although I did have a feeling that I knew John Steinbeck as well as any man could know another from copious research, I had never been "properly introduced" to John. There is a discussion of my take on John's motivations in chapter two, and Thomas's mindset closely mimics my own.<sup>2</sup>

As stock and as simple as it may sound, the Cold War and John's intense sense of patriotism are what Thomas would attribute to John's covert life. After being too young to enlist in the First World War and turned down for uniformed service during the Second World War, John had a desire to contribute to his country in a way equal to those who had been combat veterans. As the Cold War ramped up in the years after the Second World War, if offered the opportunity to serve covertly for his country, Thomas believes that John would have jumped at the chance. This type of service would have fulfilled everything the elder Steinbeck had wanted—to very literally put his life on the line for the American ideal.

One has to remember that what some might see as clichéd 1950s idealism was John Steinbeck's reality. It is difficult for those who never lived through the Cold War to understand that terms like "mutually assured destruction," "brinksmanship," and "nuclear proliferation" were not academic theories. From the time the Soviets detonated their first nuclear device in August of 1949, to the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, a misstep in any of the previously mentioned terms would have resulted in the end of civilization. With the introduction of ICBMs, burning in a nuclear fireball could happen in the span of ordering a home delivery pizza. The perception of the threat was never far from the minds of those living through those years.

I recall watching *The Day After* the night before I turned eleven and asking my father if the Russians would target our home in Nashville. Dad,

always the realist with me, reminded me that with Fort Campbell to the north and Nashville as the state capitol, the coordinates of Music City were surely programmed into more than a few Russian nukes. What was an eleven-year-old boy going to do for thirty minutes after the missiles started flying? I didn't know, but the prospect scared me witless. And who was the cause of my fright? It was not my father for telling me the truth—it was the Russians.

Thomas told me that his father held much the same view of Soviet-style Communism. John didn't have a problem with American Communists because, according to Thom, John believed they "couldn't get out of bed early enough to attend protests." The real threat was with the true believers in the Soviet Union—the Party thugs who euphemistically "purged" their ranks of dissidents, and unapproved words on a page meant a one-way ticket to a Siberian prison camp. This, coupled with the constant threat of nuclear war, was more than enough reason for John Steinbeck to enlist with the CIA.

The revisionist history of the Cold War would paint the United States military industrial complex as the true villains of the period. To increase profits, the weapon-mongers created the Soviet boogiemán threat when in reality, the Soviets would eventually collapsed under the weight of a failed political/economic system. The merits of such a point-of-view are arguable, but should not diminish the heroism of any covert service Steinbeck performed. Any American acting to undermine a threat to one's country through means of subterfuge, rather than violence, shows a special measure of heroism. Certainly, John Steinbeck's many accomplishments are surrounded by invisible laurel wreaths unseen while Steinbeck was living. The American public has the right to know that one of our greatest authors can be counted as one of our greatest heroes as well.

A month or so after my February conversation with Thomas, he called me and our discussions turned toward my own motives. Thomas and I both agreed that this book is bound to cause controversy. It has never been my intention to stir the pot, but to start a conversation. The suggestion that one of America's



treasured authors had an association with the CIA will change the way we view the life of John Steinbeck. I hope that a discussion of Steinbeck's life and the role of secrecy in America's intelligence services will emerge from the evidence and conjecture presented within. Ultimately there are far more questions that will be asked in this book than answers given. While this doesn't seem like a proper way to go about writing a book, I am left with little recourse. The only definitive answers to any of the questions I have raised about John Steinbeck's involvement with the CIA lie locked in the recesses of their headquarters.

The CIA has made it abundantly clear that they "can neither confirm nor deny" the existence of any other documents (than those presented in chapter two of this text) in their possession related to a relationship with Steinbeck. My sincere hope is that by publishing this information, public support will cause the veil of secrecy to be lifted somewhat. Even if my central thesis is incorrect, the public will never have a true answer to the Steinbeck question until the CIA releases additional documentation proving otherwise. Unfortunately, I believe those documents will not come out without some pressure from the public.

Another matter that I hope this book brings to the public's attention is the destruction of historical documents by the FBI. One of the primary sources of information for my claims is John Steinbeck's FBI file. The document is readily available to anyone visiting the FBI's "FOIA Vault" website. Once there, anyone can access the FBI files of not only John Steinbeck, but those of a multitude of other entertainers, writers, and politicians. One would think that if a file has been archived in this fashion, the FBI would have preserved corollary documents related to that file as well. As I have come to find out, this is not the case. A number of redacted pages and the text of classified sections of Steinbeck's FBI file were destroyed in 2005.<sup>3</sup> In a digital age, there is no excuse for any governmental agency to destroy any documents, let alone documents relating to a historical figure, such as Steinbeck.

After encapsulating these reasons to Thomas during the same phone call, I felt that he only politely accepted my reasons for writing this book. There

still was some unfinished business in my mind and in his. Thinking back on everything I had discovered about John Steinbeck as a person, I realized that my reasons didn't really matter that much. It's easy to view a celebrated author by only citing his or her works and the trigger points in their lives. But that method doesn't fully give one the measure of "who a person is." I felt that Thomas wanted to know how well I really understood the psyche of John Steinbeck. I would shortly find out if I truly had the measure of his father as I offered another explanation to Thomas.

"Enough time has passed; the information can't be used against you or anyone else he cared about." Searching for mutual understanding, I continued, "I think John would have wanted this to come out."

There was an audible sigh from Thomas as he replied, "I've been waiting for you to say that."

Thomas was kind enough to offer a short commentary on this work. I believe it is fitting to end this section of the introduction with the words of the man who knew John Steinbeck as only a son can:

As a Vietnam-era journalist, I am quite aware that there has always been something of a special, though predominately clandestine, relationship between the press corps and national security organizations of various descriptions. However, as his oldest son, I can honestly testify that John Steinbeck played his cards very close to the chest when it came to any relationship—good, bad, or indifferent—that he might have maintained with government agencies of any category, including, of course, the FBI and the Internal Revenue Service. One must accept the standard principle that if one wishes to keep an important secret, the very first rule is not to tell the children, and at the time this particular subject matter was in play, we were indeed children.

Though we often traveled together as a family, I must assume our father, who enjoyed the occasional innocent deception, brought his sons along because we made very believable domestic

camouflage. Bickering, troublesome children lend a certain verisimilitude if one is claiming to be traveling with the family for pleasure. Though we journeyed to quite a few exotic and colorful destinations, any number of which were experiencing domestic complications of one kind or another, my father never once even hinted that he might have had focused motives when choosing our destinations. As far as I know, not even my stepmother knew anything about my father's mixed agendas. It now occurs to me that he obviously didn't even trust his third wife, Elaine. She was even worse than we were at keeping secrets, especially if she believed they were really important and would make an impression on the listener. This was particularly important where her sisters were concerned.

My final comment is based on curiosity alone. John Steinbeck was a relatively controversial figure throughout his professional life. This time Steinbeck will make a much softer target; having been dead for over forty years means he can't argue the point, nor do I think he would honor the challenge. As far as he is concerned, the whole question is moot, and not worth his time or effort.

I can't wait to hear what his public is going to say about Mr. Kannard's revelations.

Thomas Steinbeck

## Tradecraft

As much as I appreciate the support of Thomas and Gail in this project, I would be remiss if I did not mention one more person integral to this text. In a number of places in this text, I make reference to an unnamed source as “TC.” This person is a decorated CIA intelligence officer who served with the Agency from the Eisenhower to Reagan administrations. TC’s work was mainly clandestine and being the consummate spy, TC has no wish for his name to be in the public domain. TC is one of the thousands of CIA officers who will never be able to publicly acknowledge their ties with the Agency. Even after retirement from the CIA, the vast majority of intelligence officers sign an agreement that they will never “out” themselves to the public. There is also a very real danger that by printing TC’s real name, either he or I could be in violation of the Espionage Act of 1917. At the time of this publication, the Obama administration has prosecuted twice the number of individuals for breaking silence on security matters than have all other presidents combined, since the law’s inception. (At the time of publication, the fate of National Security Agency (NSA) whistleblower Edward Snowden is still in limbo.) Most recently, ex-CIA operative John Kiriakou was charged with violating the Espionage Act for disclosing covert operatives’ names to journalists.<sup>4</sup>

Even though TC has not been an active intelligence agent since before my voice changed, in respect for TC and the agents who are in similar positions, I will hold TC’s identity in confidence until sometime after his death (which, I hope for TC’s sake, is many years from now). I understand

that there will always be the charge by some naysayers that TC is a figment of my imagination or a glory seeker leading me down the primrose path. I hold ample proof that TC is not only a very real person, but also one whose credibility is not in question.

I would also like to make it clear that TC never discussed specifics about any CIA operations during our conversations. The only names that TC mentioned were of CIA officers who are already known to the public as such. (The William Colbys and E. Howard Hunts of the spook world.) TC also made it a point of being very general in any discussion about CIA operations. There was never a time when TC told me dates, locations, or operation names. TC did intimate that he utilized members of the media as assets during his tenure with the Agency. Any precise knowledge about the names, method of contact, or other specific information of any of TC's assets were never discussed. TC did provide background to my own research and helped me understand some of the nuances of Walter Bedell Smith's response to Steinbeck's 1952 letter, and to overall CIA operations during the 1950s and '60s. TC's assistance was invaluable to this project and I appreciate all the time TC spent with me.

John Steinbeck

Office: 206 East 72nd Street

New York 21, N. Y.

Jan 28, 1952

Dear General Smith:

Toward the end of February I am going to the Mediterranean area and afterwards to all of the countries of Europe not out of bounds. I am commissioned by Colliers magazine to do a series of articles - subjects and areas to be chosen by myself. I shall move slowly going only where interest draws. The trip will take six to eight months.

If during this period I can be of any service whatever to your self or to the agency you direct, I shall be only too glad.

I saw Herbert Bayard Swope recently and he told me that your health had improved. I hope this is so.

Also I wear the "Don for 52" button concealed under the lapel as that shy candidate suggests.

Again - I shall be pleased to be of service. The pace and method of my junket together with my intention of talking with great numbers of people of all classes may offer peculiar advantages

Yours sincerely  
John Steinbeck

Jan 28, 1952

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Also I wear the “Lou for 52” button concealed under the lapel as that shy candidate suggests.

Again—I shall be pleased to be of service. The pace and method of my junket together with my intention of talking with great numbers of people of all classes may offer peculiar advantages.

Yours sincerely,

John Steinbeck

6 February 1952

Mr. John Steinbeck  
206 East 72nd Street  
New York 21, New York

Dear Mr. Steinbeck:

I greatly appreciate the offer of assistance made in your note of January 26th.

You can, indeed, be of help to us by keeping your eyes and ears open on any political developments in the areas through which you travel, and, in addition, on any other matters which seem to you of significance, particularly those which might be overlooked in routine reports.

It would be helpful, too, if you could come down to Washington for a talk with us before you leave. We might then discuss any special matters on which you may feel that you can assist us.

Since I am certain that you will have some very interesting things to say, I trust, also, that you will be able to reserve some time for us on your return.

Sincerely,

*Walter B. Smith*

Walter B. Smith  
Director

O/DCI:REL:leb  
Rewritten: LEBecker:mlk  
Distribution:

Orig - Addressee  
2 - DCI (Reading Official) *WBS*  
1 - DD/P *✓ w/Basic*  
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RELEASE DATE  
18-Jul-2012



6 February 1952  
Mr. John Steinbeck  
206 East 72nd Street  
New York 21, New York

Dear Mr. Steinbeck:

I greatly appreciate the offer of assistance made in your note of January 28th.

You can, indeed, be of help to us by keeping your eyes and ears open on any political developments in the areas through which you travel, and, in addition, on any other matters which seem to you of significance, particularly those which might be overlooked in routine reports.

It would be helpful, too, if you could come down to Washington for a talk with us before you leave. We might then discuss any special matters on which you may feel that you can assist us.

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Distribution:

Orig – Addressee

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