Letters to the Editor

The Shape of Steinbeck

When are we going to get a fresh analysis of the career of John Steinbeck? In Peter Shaw's article "Steinbeck: The Shape of a Career" [*SR*, Feb. 8], we unfortunately get the same old stereotyped view: Steinbeck's early novels were "fun" to read because they were simple; his social novels were "accurate" because he was personally involved; his philosophy was "primitive" because of the animal-human analogies; his postwar novels were "weak" because they were too moralistic or not social enough.

But Mr. Shaw's view is not really his fault; the "shape of a career" he notes has been perpetuated by most of Steinbeck's critics, starting with Edmund Wilson's now-famous remark about the "animalizing tendency." The trouble with these views is that they are dictated by a very narrow critical perspective, by criteria which allow no latitude. This is unfair, precisely because Steinbeck's great versatility (which Shaw notes) militates against it.

It is interesting to note that Warren French, one of the most influential and published critics of Steinbeck's life and work, has pleaded recently for a fresh look at Steinbeck as a "fabulist," as a writer of parables. Mr. French may, of course, be as wrong as Shaw, but the main thing is that a new critical outlook is needed if John Steinbeck's artistic demise is not to follow closely upon the heels of his physical death.

Lawrence William Jones,
Algonquin College,
Ottawa, Ontario.

Peter Shaw totally ignores the most powerful and governing motivation of Steinbeck: to tell a damn good story. That Steinbeck's books "showed the results of five years spent at Stanford" I very much doubt. To me, Steinbeck's prose shows the result of having a powerfully creative, inquisitive, and retentive mind, together with the gift of compassion for all humanity. No academic institution has yet found the formula for this.

When Salinas wanted to name a school after him Steinbeck refused. "A bar, all right," he said, "but not a school."

Jean Vounder-Davis,
Lihue, Hawaii.

Certainly Peter Shaw misreads if he includes Doc Burton of *In Dubious Battle* among the "spiritually crippled" intellectuals. Doc may be "detached" and above the fray but that is the stance of the truly objective scientist—"non-teleological thinking" is Steinbeck's term for the scientific approach which ignores projected hopes and considers only the "is" of raw nature.

Doc/Ricketts/Steinbeck is the goad, sharply questioning the absence of foresight of the strike organizers, Mac and Jim, who have no conception that angry men, massed together, become a new animal entirely, an unknown, unmanageable species of their own creation that can be kept in existence only by the blood of broken bodies. It is practical Mac, the true believer fighting under a humanitarian banner, who is totally without understanding of his medium: "We've got a job to do. . . . We've got no time to be messing around with high-falutin' ideas." It is Mac, the user of men, and his protégé Jim, the ecstatic zealot, who are the spiritual cripples.

Yet it is Doc alone who warns Mac and Jim that their cause has swept them far beyond their depths, and it is Doc alone, the detached observer, who, because he sees men in need and not because of any "religious" motivation, organizes and maintains the day-by-day life and health of the strikers' camp. He is hardly a man who "exists apart from the vital life of society," as Mr. Shaw would have us believe. While simplistic cause-oriented activism stands condemned, Doc Burton's admonition that man wait and see the "nature, ends, and desires of group man" before acting has neither been tested nor proved wrong by the novel's end.

George M. Bruender,
Umpqua Community College,
Roseburg, Ore.

The Unlikeliness of Events

In my article "H-Bombs in the Back Yard" [*SR*, Dec. 21], I took the Army to task for mistakenly claiming that the good record of having avoided very serious nuclear accidents in the past determines the likelihood of a future serious accident if missiles of the Sentinel ABM system are placed near cities. In letters to the editor [Jan. 18], E. F. Zuschlag accuses me of making the same mistake. The Army claim is that the lack of past serious accident proves that the likelihood of future serious accident is "essentially nil." I claimed only that *it cannot be used to prove* that the likelihood (in the Sentinel system in the next decade) *is less than* about 10 per cent. Mr. Zuschlag seems to have understood me to claim that it proves that the likelihood *is* about 10 per cent.

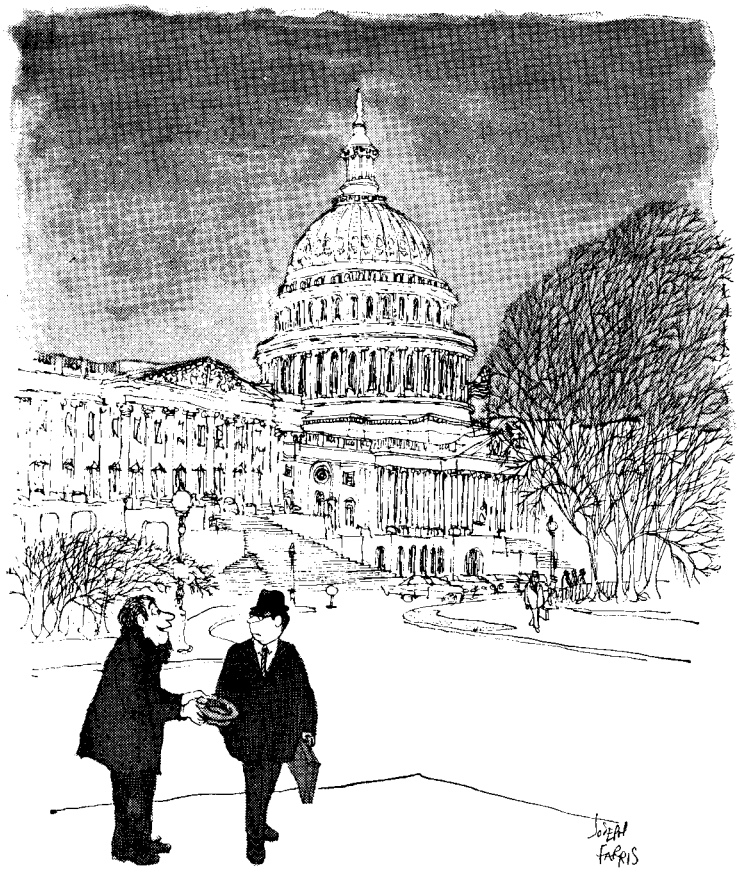
David R. Inglis,
Western Springs, Ill.

The Active Aged

Robert Burger's article "Who Cares for the Aged?" [*SR*, Jan. 25] gives the impression that the majority of people sixty-five and over are in nursing homes, or should be. Research has shown that only 4 per cent of these people are in institutions, including nursing homes, homes for the elderly, and hospitals.

The majority are well and active. No doubt many have a chronic disease or chronic condition. However, having such a condition is quite different from having a chronic illness. Only when the condition becomes an illness is a nursing home or other institution needed. There are many people, both under and over sixty-five, who have chronic conditions with which they have learned to live. Recent Presidents of the United States are eminent examples: Presidents Johnson, Kennedy, and Eisenhower each had a chronic condition. They were not chronically ill!

Mariel B. Wilbur,
University of Rhode Island,
Kingston, R.I.



"Congratulations on your raise, Sir."

SAUL K. PADOVER

The Grand Strategy of de Gaulle

To maintain balance of power
the seemingly mercurial President of France
practices the ancient art of equipoise.

THE PRESIDENT of France and his restless, troubled country are not, of course, synonymous; but de Gaulle himself would probably be the last to deny that his motto might well be *L'état, c'est moi,* and a lot of Frenchmen would agree with him. John L. Hess, the correspondent of *The New York Times* in Paris, is clearly angry at the way de Gaulle in particular and France in general have been treated—mishandled might perhaps be a better word—in the American media and misrepresented in American opinion. "America," he writes in *The Case for de Gaulle* (Morrow, 154 pp., $5), "has gone out of its collective mind on the subject of France." Leaders in this country have denounced de Gaulle as a "mortal enemy," a "renegade friend," a "homicidal lunatic," and "the most ungrateful man since Judas Iscariot." Hess believes that this is an American "paranoiac delusion," resulting from poor information about France and its President. "The French point of view," Hess writes, "has been consistently scanted."

There *is* a French point of view, he insists, and it is an important one. Hess's objective is to correct the wild distortions and to put de Gaulle and his policies in proper perspective. He believes that not only does de Gaulle's viewpoint merit attention but also that the President of France has been right more often than not. As examples, we can take two widely held misconceptions about de Gaulle—his presumed anti-Americanism and his alleged anti-Semitism.

On the subject of America, Hess quotes a revealing interview with U.S. Ambassador Charles E. Bohlen in Paris in 1967. Asked by an American correspondent whether it was not true that "Charley" (de Gaulle) gets up every morning and asks himself what he can do today to hurt the United States and then proceeds to do it, Ambassador Bohlen replied: "You know, I have talked with General de Gaulle maybe forty times over the last five years and I'll tell you: *I don't think he's anti-American at all* Time and again, he likes to talk of power relations like solar systems. He just doesn't think a small or medium-sized country should get too close to a great power; it would get pulled into its orbit."

Basically, then, de Gaulle is not against America as such but against America's big-power politics, which he considers a menace to French independence. He is equally emphatic in his opposition to Soviet power, and for the same reason. Hess thinks that such a policy of independence, far from being inimical to America, "may conceivably be in the best interest of the United States." De Gaulle believes that a Europe consisting of independent and economically healthy states, satellites neither of the West nor the East, would serve as a powerful balance and a force for peace. Hess is inclined to agree. "I am not a Gaullist," he writes, "but I

SAUL K. PADOVER is chairman of the Department of Political Science of the Graduate Faculty at the New School for Social Research in New York. He is the author of numerous books on foreign affairs, the most recent being *French Institutions: Values and Politics.*

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