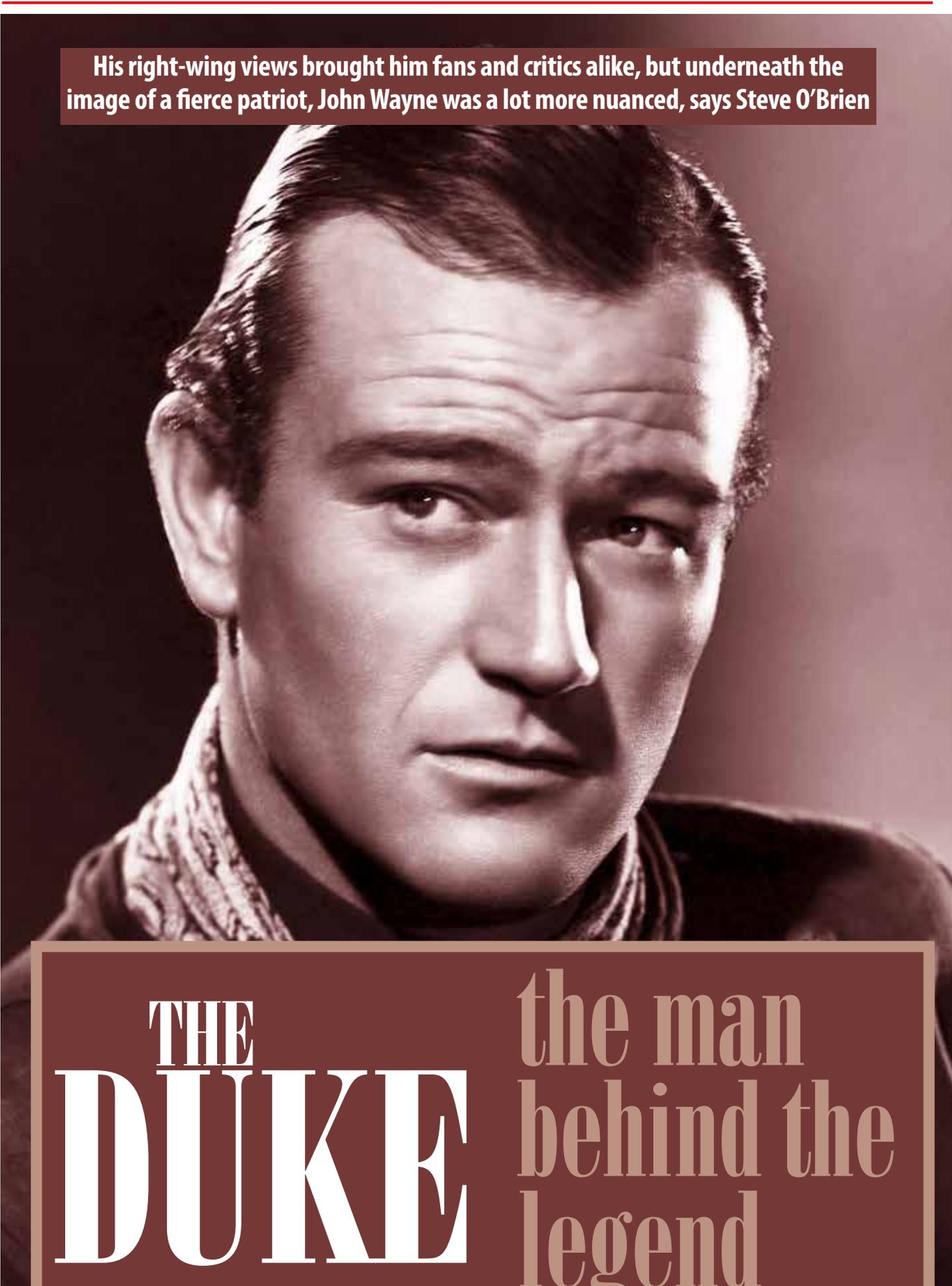


His right-wing views brought him fans and critics alike, but underneath the image of a fierce patriot, John Wayne was a lot more nuanced, says Steve O'Brien



**THE
DUKE**

the man
behind the
legend



John Wayne's first leading role was in *The Big Trail* (1930) (above). He starred as Ringo Kid in *Stagecoach* (below), directed by John Ford.



It's rare for an actor who died more than four decades ago to be headline news. Yet that's what happened in June 2020 when a clutch of liberal-leaning US politicians spoke out in favour of changing the name of Orange County's John Wayne Airport, due to the late star's, shall we say, problematic politics.

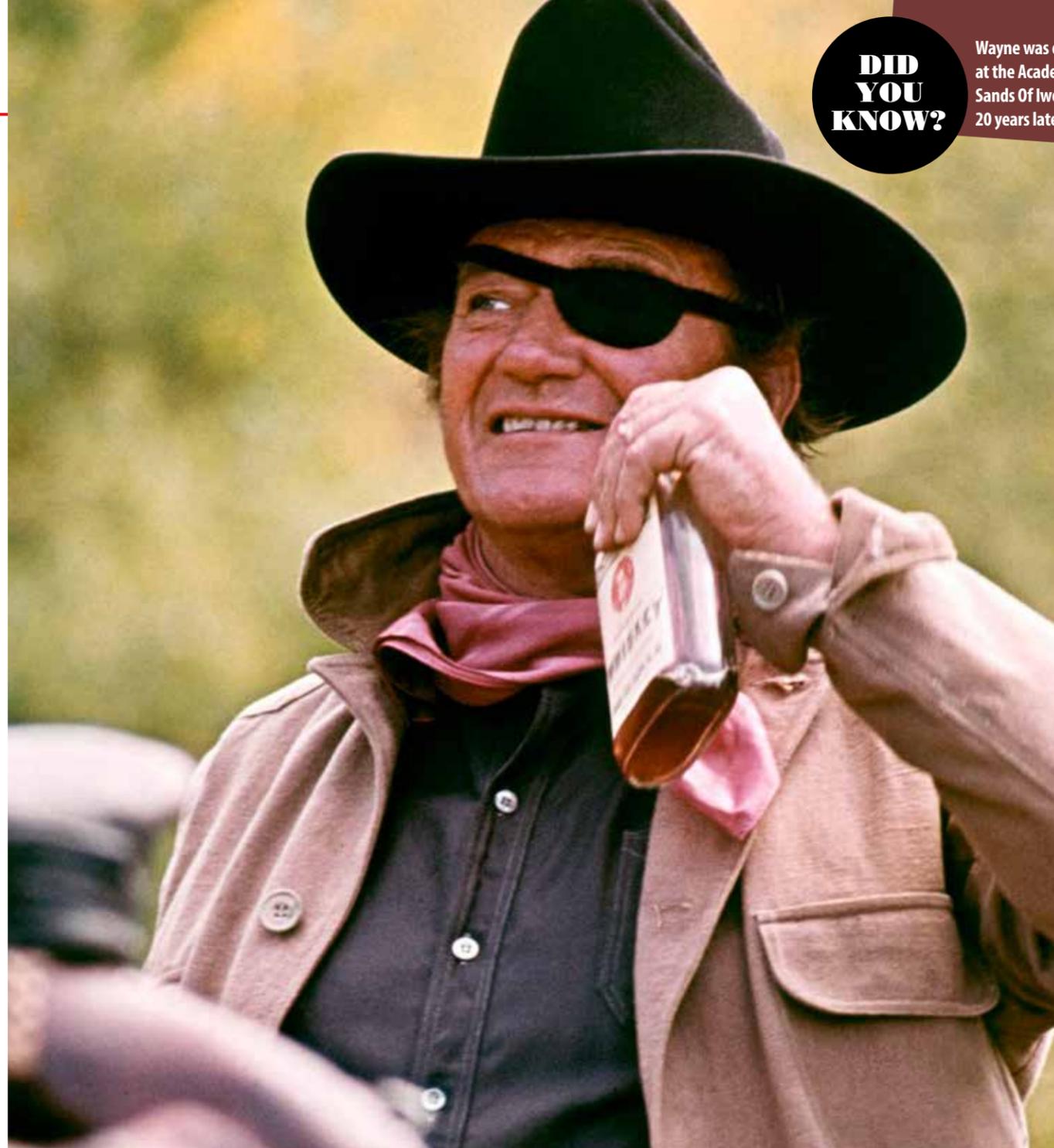
John Wayne had never made a secret of his right-wing views, but the resurfacing on social media of a 1971 *Playboy* interview certainly made them a talking point once more. Officials passed an emergency resolution condemning the actor's "racist and bigoted statements" and called on the Orange County board of supervisors to drop Wayne's name and likeness from the airport.

Viewed today, Wayne's comments in that interview certainly make for uncomfortable reading. Yet its exhumation only served to paint Wayne as a sort of cartoon villain, a remorseless racist and homophobe ripe for a 21st Century mauling.

A PEOPLE PERSON

While it's true that Wayne was on the right, politically, and was a rock-ribbed Republican for much of his life, the reality was that he was a good deal more complicated than that. This was a man who supported the hardline Senator Joseph McCarthy and his anti-Communist witchhunts, yet broke with Republican orthodoxy in the Seventies to support President Carter and the Panama Canal Treaty. And while he

Left: McCarthy's accusations that Communists had infiltrated the State Department were unsubstantiated. *Right:* Wayne was a lifelong chess enthusiast, often playing against such stars as Marlene Dietrich, Rock Hudson and Kirk Douglas.



DID YOU KNOW?

Wayne was only nominated for Best Actor at the Academy Awards twice: once for *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949), then winning 20 years later for *True Grit* (1969).



served as president of the anti-Communist (and, some say, anti-Semitic) Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals (MPA), his long-time agent was the Jewish left-winger Charles K. Feldman. The famously liberal Orson Welles, too, was a close friend. As the actor's biographer Scott Eyman says, "For Wayne, personality always trumped politics. If he liked you, he was willing to overlook your ideology."

Like those other totemic Hollywood conservatives Ronald Reagan and Charlton Heston, John Wayne started out more Democrat than Republican. He voted for Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1936 presidential election and spoke fondly of Roosevelt's successor, Harry S. Truman. But it appears over time his distaste of big government and his loathing of Communism hardened and, in the Forties, he joined the MPA, an organisation set up to, it was said, "resist the effort of Communist, Fascist, and other totalitarian-minded groups to pervert this powerful medium into an instrument for the dissemination of un-American ideas and beliefs."

By the mid-Forties Wayne was one of Hollywood's most outspoken anti-Communist crusaders. "When I was a sophomore at USC, I was a socialist," he explained. "I quickly got wise. I'd read about what happened to Russia in 1917 when the Communists took over - Communism just doesn't work."

When Senator Joe McCarthy embarked on his war against



Right: Wayne with director and mentor John Ford and James Stewart on the set of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962). When Wayne was a college student doing prop and stunt work to earn money, he met Ford, who used him as an extra in 1928 and gave him his first speaking role.



American Communists in the Fifties, Wayne was right behind him, even going so far as signing on to play an investigator from the House Un-American Activities Committee in the anti-Red propaganda drama *Big Jim McLain* (1952).

"I never felt I needed to apologise for my patriotism," Wayne reflected, years later. "I felt that if there were Communists in the business - and I knew there were - then they ought to go over to Russia and try enjoying freedom there. We were just good Americans and we demanded the right to speak our minds. After all, the Communists in Hollywood were speaking theirs. If you're in a fight, you must fight to win, and in those early years of the Cold War I strongly believed that our country's fundamental values were in jeopardy."

COMPLEX PATRIOTISM

Of course, the drive to expunge the 'Red scare' from the movie industry destroyed the careers and lives of thousands. Writers, producers, directors and actors who were found to be either card-carrying Communists or simply sympathetic to the cause had their names added to a career-killing 'blacklist'.

Fast-forward 20 years, however, and you have *True Grit* (1969). Wayne would scoop his only Oscar for his role as the gruff, one-eyed Civil War veteran Rooster Cogburn, and yet the movie had been penned by a blacklisted writer, Marguerite Roberts. Even by the late Sixties, screenwriters who had been censured by McCarthy were finding it nigh-on impossible to find work and those who did, like Dalton Trumbo on *Roman Holiday* (1953), were forced to hide behind pseudonyms. Despite his earlier support for blacklisting, Wayne praised Roberts' screenplay as "the best script [he] had ever read", and was instrumental in securing her an on-screen writing credit.

In many ways, Wayne's screen roles, and the ones that solidified his image as a take-no-prisoners patriot, were an attempt to fabricate an image of himself that he simply couldn't live up to in real life. Take that iconic, purposeful swagger of his that we know from such westerns as *The Searchers* (1956) and *Stagecoach*

(1939). That was something he'd worked hard to master, after director John Ford once barked at him, "Can't you walk, instead of skipping like a goddamn fairy?"

And that image we have of Wayne as a kitted-up war hero, from such jingoistic war flicks as *The Longest Day* (1962), *The Green Berets* (1968) and *Back To Bataan* (1945), well, that was another carefully contrived fiction. Wayne never actually served in the military, and would claim that a letter he'd received from the Office of Strategic Services had been intercepted by his wife, who was against her husband surrendering his blossoming film career. Whatever the truth of it, Wayne would spend the rest of his life attempting to justify his lack of military service.

"I didn't feel I could go in as a private," he said, many years after the war. "I felt I could do more good going around on tours and things." Certainly, his friend and occasional tormenter John Ford would berate him for being a "draft dodger" and during production on 1945's *They Were Expendable*, the director scolded Wayne in front of the film crew saying, "Duke, can't you manage a salute that at least looks like you've been in the service!"

A LASTING LEGACY

Despite the contradictions in Wayne's life, they haven't stopped him from being the boogeyman of the left and the patriotic icon of the right. After the talk of removing Wayne's name and likeness from Orange County's airport, President Trump, clearly aware what a figure like Wayne meant to his fanbase, tweeted that the Democrats were exhibiting "incredible stupidity".

While it's true that many of Wayne's views, as laid out in that interview, are unpardonable today, the real John Wayne was a more nuanced and complex individual than the one both his critics and his cheerleaders claim.

Whatever the truth of John Wayne the person, John Wayne the icon, the movie star, looms far larger in American culture. That's the John Wayne of *Stagecoach*, the John Wayne of *Red River* (1948), the John Wayne of *Rio Bravo* (1959), that's the man who remains cherished by Americans of all political colours.

WAYNE'S PROUDEST FILM ROLES

Often, John Wayne chose his movie roles to reflect his political positions...

BIG JIM MCLAIN (1952)
Wayne stars as House Un-American Activities Committee investigator Jim McLain who, along with his partner (played by James Arness), hunts down Commies in post-war Hawaii.



THE SEARCHERS (1956)
John Wayne was no advocate of Native American rights ("I don't feel we did wrong in taking this great country away from them," he stated in that 1971 *Playboy* interview), and this 1956 western in which he stars as a man with a fierce prejudice against Indians, certainly did little to forward their cause.



THE GREEN BERETS (1968)
Wayne plays a tough-as-nails Army colonel in this self-directed pro-Vietnam War drama. Despite being released to poor reviews and protests from anti-war activists, the movie was a commercial success, grossing more than \$32 million.



BRANNIGAN (1975)
The 1975 thriller headlines Wayne as a no-nonsense American cop seconded to London who, frustrated by its timid, by-the-book policing, employs his own brand of law enforcement. Like that other hero of the right, *Dirty Harry's* Harry Callaghan, Lieutenant Jim Brannigan is the kind of shoot-first, ask questions later cop that liberals hated.

