

Penn's New Role: Dissident

BAGHDAD, Dec. 16, 2002



Actor Sean Penn walks past a picture of President Saddam Hussein during his visit to al-Mansour children's hospital in Baghdad. (AP)

QUOTE

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Sean Penn

(CBS) Iraq is not a place known for its subtleties, and neither is Oscar nominee Sean Penn, who wasted little time defending his visit to America's would-be enemy. CBS News Correspondent Lee Cowan caught up with him in Baghdad.

"If there's going to be blood on the hands of the United States, whether some feel it's justified or not, that that blood is going to be on my hands too, and I'm determined that it's not going to be invisible blood," said Penn.

Hollywood's former bad boy was welcomed in Baghdad with open arms. He even was granted a private meeting with Iraq's deputy prime minister, Tariq Aziz. But like so many public appearances in Iraq - this, too, was turned into propaganda.

Iraq's newspapers quoted Aziz as saying he "appreciated Mr. Penn's stance on rejecting all forms of aggression and war." Even Penn admits that is not exactly what he said. "I cannot tell you that I'm necessarily a pacifist in all cases," said Penn.

He certainly isn't one on the issue of Iraq. He spent \$56,000 of his own money for an ad in the The Washington Post in which he criticized the Bush administration for "promoting fear through unsubstantiated rhetoric" and called an attack on Iraq only "temporary medicine."

"It's not a time for any citizen or any politician, or anybody in the media, to jump into conclusions that they can't back up with fact, and so I think that I'll force myself to find a kind of humility that today I'm unfamiliar with" he said laughing.

He isn't the only Hollywood celebrity to voice opposition to any future war, but he is the first to come to Baghdad personally, a choice he says was based on conscience.

"I didn't feel informed enough as an American and I had this incredible opportunity to come here and anything short of coming here would have been unpatriotic at that point, in my view," Penn said.

Penn's three-day tour included a peace demonstration at a Baghdad water treatment facility and a visit to an Iraqi children's hospital, something the Iraqi government has always been willing to put on display to show what it claims are the youngest victims of war and U.N. sanctions. Penn was visibly moved.

"When I was at the hospital, inconceivable enough was the idea of bombs outside, or on top of it, I didn't want someone to slam a door too loud for these kids," he said. "They've got it rough enough."

As for his critics - and there are plenty - he hopes at least his visit will stir debate.

Penn's visit was organized by the Institute of Public Accuracy, a U.S. group of policy analysts. More than 100 other American celebrities, including Hollywood stars Kim Basinger, David Duchovny and Mia Farrow, signed an open letter last week which said rigorous United Nations inspections, not war, is the best way to disarm Iraq.

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