

# Penn Felt Urgency to Produce Nixon Film

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TORONTO — While Hollywood shied away from reminders of Sept. 11, 2001, Sean Penn figures the terrorist attacks added urgency to produce his film "The Assassination of Richard Nixon."

Set in 1974, the film stars Penn as the real-life Samuel Byck, a business failure who blamed his shortcomings on societal corruption and attempted to kill President Nixon by hijacking a plane to crash it into the White House.

Penn, 44, who had been developing the project for two years before Sept. 11, said he never viewed the similarities between the Byck incident and the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks as impediments to the film.

"Not at all. If anything, it might have encouraged it," Penn said in an interview.

The dismay Byck felt over revelations of government deceit as Watergate unfolded is relevant today amid allegations that President Bush misled Americans by fanning fears of future terrorism to gain support for the Iraq war, Penn said.

The film follows Penn's Academy Award-winning performance in 2003's "Mystic River."

Penn who co-stars with Nicole Kidman in the upcoming United Nations thriller "The Interpreter" and a remake of the political drama "All the King's Men," sat down with The Associated Press at last fall's Toronto International Film Festival to discuss the Oscars, politics and the seven minutes during which Bush sat without acting in a Florida school room after learning of the Sept. 11 attacks.

**AP: You showed up to accept your Academy Award, but you skipped the Oscars the three previous times you were nominated. What have you got against them?**

Penn: I don't know, for some reason I cannot share the whole allure of the thing or equate it to something that really makes a statement of who you are as an actor. Sure, you're aware that it's a trademark. You know you're going to get more money and all that stuff. That's a good thing. The horror of the Academy Awards is what the press does leading up to it to make it a popular TV show. Where they'll actually make it like it's an arm-wrestling event between two actors. That becomes very petty, and that's something that's embarrassing to follow up with accepting the invitation to the party.

**AP: You were in your early teens when Watergate came up. What did you make of Nixon and the hearings?**

Penn: I had grown up in, I would say, a socially left home, and so at that age, I think a lot of your politics are dictated by that. When Watergate came up, I was extremely interested. I don't think I missed, the hearings, a day of it. But at that time, I had come into a history class with a history teacher who got me pretty interested in government. I think it was the first thing I really paid a lot of attention to other than the war. And this wasn't the most crooked thing I'd sensed in him.

**AP: Has corruption in government grown worse since Nixon?**

Penn: No question about it. The arrogance with which it's played out. I think you'd have a very difficult time Watergating George Bush. The spin and the manipulation of media, the distraction of planned emergencies, is on a whole new level. And there's a kind of general lack of diversity of principle within the Congress. So I think when you can get something like the Patriot Act passed, it would be kind of like child's play to pull off a Watergate ...

**AP: How about news media, then vs. now?**

Penn: That philosophy that sells best in a sound bite reigns, so very black-and-white, dramatic, hyperbolic ideas are going to get through. The other thing is, you have such demand in immediate storytelling today. Where investigative journalists covering the Vietnam War, a correspondent there would play detective, and one event in and of itself was rarely the story. It was connected to things that played out over a week, two weeks, while that journalist put together his piece. Now, it's, "Get that thing on the wire service by tonight. We've got to get it out by this time. Give me footage of the last 24 hours." Yet there are journalists who are still trying very hard, people who are very good. They're up against that spin machine, and it's a tough one.

**AP: What did you think of Michael Moore's "Fahrenheit 9/11"?**

Penn: All of that footage — how long was it, seven plus minutes (when Bush sat in the classroom)? ... That's who George Bush is. I think it speaks very specifically to something that not everybody has. Forget politics, forget Republican, right, left. But it speaks to his unfitness to lead anything.