

CNN LARRY KING WEEKEND

Interview With Sean Penn

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LARRY KING, HOST: Tonight, exclusive. A very rare interview with Sean Penn, his first interview, in fact, since that controversial trip to Iraq. He never talks to anyone, but he's talking to me. In- depth and personal for the whole hour, and he's next on LARRY KING WEEKEND. Welcome to a very special edition of LARRY KING WEEKEND. Our special guest for the full program tonight is Sean Penn, the three- time Oscar nominated actor, also director, producer and screenwriter, recently returned from a three-day trip to Baghdad.

This is his first interview concerning that trip, which, of course, caused great discussion in the United States and elsewhere in the world, as well.

One quote about his acting ability given to me by Marlon Brando, `He's the best actor living.` Of course, a lot of other guys are dead before him, but currently living, Sean Penn is the best.

Sean Penn, back from Baghdad. In October, he spent \$56,000 of his own money to place an advertisement in `The Washington Post` decrying the possibility of going to war against Iraq. The ad was an open letter to President Bush. It included the plea, `Sir, I beg you, help save America before yours is a legacy of shame and horror.` And in mid-December a three-day trip to Baghdad.

What brought all this about?

SEAN PENN, ACTOR/DIRECTOR: Well, the letter, I think, was brought about by a, sort of, increasing feeling of shame on my own part in not participating in what, for me, was not necessarily so much a political but a -- to the degree that humanitarianism and civic responsibility are the same thing, I think that it's -- we're living now in what Mailer said is probably the first century that -- because of technology and the conflicts in the world, maybe the first century in the history of man that the Earth survives without us.

And I have children who are going to face that century and live in that century. And so I felt that the popular media, by and large, which is really what most people who don't have even the opportunities that I have in this country, by my luck and good fortune in this country, which gives me, I think, an added responsibility this way -- don't have the time to attack their own ignorance on issues beyond popular media -- you know, you work a job, two jobs, you get home, you're exhausted, you kiss your child, maybe your feet get up and you turn on the television, and that's what you have. And I felt that it wasn't addressing enough in the area of debate, enough of reflection on something that's such a serious issue as what's going on right now.

KING: Well, couldn't the other side say the exact same Mailer quote and say, `We have great worries? This country, this Iraq is going to bring damage to its neighbors. It's going to spread it. It's got these terrible weapons. We have to do something?`

PENN: Yes.

KING: Couldn't that be made as a humanity plea?

PENN: Yes, and that's where we have to start. We start by taking out a pad of paper and every mother and father in the country -- and they can do it while this interview goes on -- writes down the words: `Dear Mr. and Mrs. So-and-so; we regret to inform you that your son, John, has died in combat in Iraq.` And then you have to finish that letter in a way that will comfort you.

If you can do that, then you have one side of the debate and I respect that position. But until we have the information, until we demand upon ourselves to avail of ourselves that information, upon our government to show us the evidence that they have, as long as we are going to be a country with a respect for the rule of law, we have to understand that if we go to war without having examined these things, that we are then going to be left with the question: "What America is it we protected?"

KING: So you did this ad and went to Baghdad, because you felt this country, its president, its administration, had not given you sufficient information to support its claim?

PENN: I believe that this administration is, in good intentions, inadvertently teaching a master class in the manifestation of rage into hatred. And...

KING: With good intentions?

PENN: I think that it's just misguided.

What we need, I believe, in leadership is counseling that rage which is -- rage can be productive, but the -- I'm not a pacifist. I'm neither a Democrat nor a Republican. I'm an American. I'm a father. And...

KING: Would have fought in World War II?

PENN: Probably would have fought in -- would aspire to be able to say I would have fought in World War II.

And I don't -- I don't come here with specifically an anti-war message. I believe that because of this -- the privileged position that I'm in and the opportunity that I had to go to Iraq and the access that I had to people -- some in the media, some in the military, and many Iraqis as well -- that that gives me this added responsibility to help the cause of promoting debate.

KING: Did you realize that there'd be a lot of criticism, first on 'Who is this actor? What makes him an international specialist on conflicts of war and peace?'

I mean, every American has the right to speak out, but who is this guy with -- you know, why -- what makes him...

PENN: No, but the opponents of actors speaking generally voted for Ronald Reagan. And I remember John Huston had a comment, you know, 'It's one thing to have an actor in the White House, quite another a bad actor.'

But I'm not here as an actor. I'm not here as anything but a citizen. And I believe...

KING: But a citizen, as you said, couldn't have done this, or would have done it, wouldn't have been on this show. If it was John Jones that went...

PENN: But that's the heightened responsibility I believe we have. And I -- you know, again, you know, I could never go into politics; you know, as Brenard Beam (ph) said, 'I only have one face.'

But I -- and it's why, you know, I don't think my most productive position in a situation like this is to strongly take one particular side or another, so much that it is that I have been afforded the access and opportunity to see that the debate is not been stimulated enough in this country.

KING: When you placed the ad you knew there'd be a lot of talk. And, like, what led to the idea of going to Baghdad? And how did you do that? How'd you make the arrangements?

PENN: I was -- as a result of the ad -- the letter that I wrote the president, I was invited by the executive director of the Institute for Public Accuracy, Norman Solomon. And I went on a trip that was organized by that group.

KING: And that is a -- does that have an agenda, the Institute for...

PENN: It's an American non-profit think tank. And they basically -- I think their agenda is primarily motivated by the fact that facts are stubborn. And it's their pursuit to propagate facts.

KING: Did you go with an agenda?

PENN: I would say that I went without any reluctance. I felt that -- when I was given that opportunity, immediately drawn to go. It was absolutely clear to me that the Iraqis may, to some degree, propagandize that event. But I don't necessarily see myself as as potent a propaganda weapon to the Iraqis as those who have considered this, sort of, knee-pad hound of Mr. Murdoch who went after me in this way. And so...

KING: Murdoch went after you, do you mean (UNINTELLIGIBLE).

PENN: Yes, all that, all those outlets. But I think that there -- you know, there's a commonsense balance. And to go there and to have a couple of newspapers say things that I didn't say...

KING: Yes, I want to clear all of that up. We'll get to everything. The essential question is, why'd you go?

PENN: Well, I think there are a couple of issues on -- when I wrote the letter before I went to Baghdad, one of the things that became a discussion point -- those who I consulted as I was writing the piece -- had to do with -- you know, I think the cynical view that all of this is pissing in the wind; that we're headed for some kind of a disaster. I'm not in a position to accept that as a father of two children.

And so, I think that there became one thing that I believed very strongly in, which is that we have been conditioned often to underestimate the power of preaching to the choir. Because the choir itself, I believe, is out there, in terms of the debate that I am looking for.

KING: We'll be right back with more of Sean Penn. He's with us for the full show on this special edition of LARRY KING WEEKEND. Don't go away.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

KING: We are back on LARRY KING WEEKEND with Sean Penn.

Recently I interviewed Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and asked him about Sean Penn. Here was his comment.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

KING: Does that bother you...

DONALD H. RUMSFELD, U.S. SECRETARY OF DEFENSE: You know, I...

KING: ... celebrities coming out against it?

RUMSFELD: I guess it doesn't. I think that people have a right in our country to say what they want to say and to think what they want to think.

KING: Do you think it's harmful for Sean Penn to go over to Baghdad and express feelings of support for them?

RUMSFELD: I was not -- didn't have enough free time to follow what he said or how he behaved himself. I just don't know.

But it -- yet, yet, I would say that the national dialogue on this subject has been a good one and an important one. And the debate in the Congress and the discussion in the United Nations and the discussions on television and in the press; we needed that.

(END VIDEO CLIP) KING: Would you agree with that?

PENN: Well, first, Larry, I would correct you there. I didn't say anything in support of the Iraqis...

KING: I misspoke to say that you had spoken in support.

PENN: Yes, I think what's interesting in watching Secretary Rumsfeld in that piece is when you ask him about people's involvement. And he reluctantly says, 'I guess it doesn't bother me.'

I think there's a lot to be seen in that. We know that the White House also released statements saying that -- when asked about protests -- in that case it was the anti-war demonstrators they were referring to -- they acknowledged protest, I felt, very condescendingly in this case, and -- as a longstanding tradition to be applauded.

Protest in this kind of circumstance is not a longstanding tradition to be applauded. It is a human cry of American citizens saying, 'Please pay attention to this,' and it demands to be heard.

KING: But you realize, Sean, that these people and the United States may be at war, and the people that you visited may be shooting people who get that letter you described earlier.

Jane Fonda was in that place when there was a war going on. She went to North Vietnam. Did you think at all that you may be hurting your country's position, not in speaking out, but in making the trip?

PENN: I think that there are -- you know, I -- as I just said, I think that there are things that the administration is simply doing to herd us into this position. We as citizens have to take stock of our own conscience on these issues. And I felt very sure, and do feel sure, that I didn't hurt this country's position.

On the other hand, this is not without limitation, in my mind. I spent nearly an hour and a half with Tariq Aziz...

KING: The deputy -- the foreign minister?

PENN: Yes. I don't believe that, despite some compelling arguments -- and I went in as a very suspicious listener and I -- (UNINTELLIGIBLE) in that conversation -- that it is legitimate for someone in my position to quote him and to be a messenger of anything to do with that message.

And I'll say also, you know, one thing I came away from Iraq on, again, as somebody who is -- who really believes that we are -- that we do not have the evidence to be America, the America we want to be, and go in right now, that as it -- there's a big difference between Saddam Hussein and Iraq, and these are all very different circumstances.

I think there's probably two legitimate places for Saddam Hussein: it's either Bellevue or a meat grinder. This man's a horror and a criminal, there's no question about it.

KING: So you did not come back as any sort of spokesman for the Iraqi point of view?

PENN: Do I sound like it?

KING: No, you don't sound like it.

So the purpose was to what?

PENN: The purpose was information. You know, these trips can be -- this kind of a thing can be seen as a -- the brief interlude that it is.

But we know from places that we visit, you say, 'Well, you know, we're going to -- I'm going to go to New Orleans for the first time.' Gosh, I can imagine what's that like. I can imagine my hotel room. You get there, it's completely different, it's not -- it's a completely different thing.

On top of that, when you take that on you find yourself learning about it, you know, you spend 20 hours on airplanes reading about it, it's a way for me, as a privileged American, in terms of the pursuit of this information, to be able to invest this way and participate in the system the best way I know how.

KING: Let me ask you about Iraq. First, were they familiar with you?

PENN: Not particularly. Some.

KING: But you were not walking down the street, major movie star?

PENN: No, I was walking down the street as a Western face. Often I had a camera on me. And, you know, Iraq's -- on the streets of Iraq, the topic is -- would be the topic -- it's been said before, but baseball being the topic here; there the topic is sanctions. And a Western face there, I believe, represents some hope to them that there's discussion on this.

KING: Much American pop culture there?

PENN: Not a lot at this stage. However, on television, yes. I watched you.

KING: Yes, we're seen in Baghdad, right?

OK, story of alleged quotes initially turned up, I think, on the `Drudge Report`, was picked up by the `New York Post`, which was a strong critic of you, and that's a Murdoch paper.

`Iraq Daily` claimed the American movie star Sean Penn has condemned the United States-British threats to wage war. `Iraq Daily` also claimed Penn confirmed that Iraq is completely clear of weapons of mass destruction, and the United Nations must adopt a positive stance toward Iraq."

PENN: Well, see, being discredited, I feel in fantastic company with a lot of people.

Here's what I think about when I'm asked something like this. That as somebody who's had, you know, in my own world of movies and all of that stuff, a 20-year history of a front-row seat to accuracies and inaccuracies in the media -- and I've been very critical of the media at times on that level -- but I would take this opportunity to applaud a section of this that I had never seen this way, which is the war correspondents, the people on the ground in Baghdad, which was, for me, a very valuable source.

KING: Was this a bum rap? Did you not say anything that -- did you not say that Iraq is completely clear of weapons of mass destruction? How would you know?

PENN: You know, I think it's just a preposterous thing and I think there's an argument to be made that it's anti-American for them to abuse -- for those papers to abuse the press this way in a discrediting campaign.

But, again, you know, I'll give you an example of somebody who's a much better spokesman on that category, someone like Scott Ritter who, you know, has...

KING: Former inspector.

PENN: Former inspector, impeccable record as a major in the United States Marines, combat veteran. And, you know, to the man, the journalists in Baghdad seconded that about him, as did everyone that served under him.

But that's not been the case in Murdoch's media.

KING: You knew, though -- you're smart enough to know that Iraq would use your trip. I mean, you're not dumb.

PENN: Yes, but I saw potentially more potent abuse of my trip propaganda-wise in this country in the way that they capitalized on that thing. Yes, of course, I knew that. Of course, I didn't expect to be told the truth on everything. But I don't consider myself in Iraq -- in Iraqi propaganda, the significant player that they'd like to portray me to be.

They said that I said this, they said that I said that. I think it's meaningless horse (EXPLETIVE DELETED) -- excuse me -- you know, that is the way that they behave. But, you know, that's a price I was willing to pay.

KING: What did you get from it? How long were you there?

PENN: Three days.

KING: What comes to mind? What's the first thing that struck you about Iraq, other than the people talking about the sanctions?

PENN: The desperate, sad conditions of a country under 11 years of sanctions.

I mean, when we talk about -- and, again, I feel I need to go back to that I am not standing here as a pacifist. I'm not saying here ultimately that I am going to stand in an anti-war position. I have a feeling that we are entering an age where we can't -- we cannot afford the choice of military use. We can only exercise it in the necessity.

KING: Because we're the only superpower?

PENN: Well, because -- we shouldn't under -- over-estimate what that will mean in terms of world harmony. And I would quote somebody on that. Do I have time in this segment?

KING: Let me get a break and come back and we'll have you quote them. And I also want to ask you, what if the inspectors come back and find a lot of this stuff?

We'll be right back with Sean Penn on this edition of LARRY KING WEEKEND. Don't go away.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP, "I AM SAM")

PENN: I don't understand exactly what you mean. You told me that you would be my lawyer.

MICHELLE PFEIFFER, ACTRESS: Yes, Sam, I mean...

PENN: Golly, because I thought -- maybe I must have misunderstood you.

PFEIFFER: I told you that when we first met.

PENN: You said you would be my lawyer?

PFEIFFER: Yes.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

KING: I think no matter how you feel about his opinions, you will not deny that Sean Penn is one of America's, if not the world's, finest actors. Three-time Academy Award nominee, back from Iraq. And he's not here to talk about a movie, but to talk about that trip.

You wanted to quote someone.

PENN: Yes. I would say first -- I want to go back for a moment. You asked -- you know, this preposterous accusation that I went there with the presumption of being a weapons inspectors in some way.

There is -- you know, one of these -- the areas of information that I think is -- has been, sort of, consistently disregarded in most popular media, there is this discussion about the possibility -- whether the inspectors are able to find really. And often I've heard, is it a needle in a haystack?

I can say from research, that I have worked hard to fact-check and so on and so forth, the science that exists that has not been talked about, what they have -- what it is that this country right now is an incredibly sophisticated crime scene with extremely capable investigators and with very high-tech instrumentation, that by no means is it a needle in a haystack.

KING: If it's there, we're going to find it, is what you're saying?

PENN: If it's there, and we're given the time, we will find it.

KING: And if we find it, does that mean your position is wrong?

PENN: Well, that's assuming that my position is against the war. My position now is that I do not see any evidence that we are under immediate threat, and that we don't have the time to find out what's right.

KING: What if neighbours are under threat, neighbors that we care about? What if Israel is under threat?

PENN: Well, that's where I think we have -- these are, again, issues that need to be taken to the people in an informed way. And I think the way that things are -- that's why I wanted to refer to this, because I think that this -- that ultimately where this conversation goes has to do with the philosophical question of whether or not it's the American manifest destiny to police the world, and in what cases do we make those decisions.

KING: And your question is, it is not our destiny. I mean, your opinion is that we don't go to war to help others or protect the world.

PENN: I'd like to voice the opinion of what's considered my opposition in this for a moment.

KING: OK.

PENN: And that's what this is.

Fellow Republicans, it is the cause of Republicanism to resist concentration of power, public or private, which enforce such conformity and inflicts such despotism. It is the cause of Republicanism to ensure that power remains in the hands of the people. And so help us God, that is exactly what a Republican president will do with the help of a Republican Congress. It is further the cause of Republicanism to restore a clear understanding of the tyranny of man over man in the world at large. It is our cause to dispel the foggy thinking which avoids hard decisions and the delusion that a world conflict will somehow resolve itself into a world of harmony. And this is hogwash." And that is Barry Goldwater.

And I also believe that it represents the platform that our standing president ran on. And so when they use phrases like 'a new kind of world', we have to say, 'Well, OK, but does that mean that we ignore history?' Or do we say, 'Wasn't the drug war a new kind of war? And what kind of a disaster has that been to date?'

KING: What surprised you about Iraq?

PENN: The warmth of the people. You know, we are -- those anti-war friends of mine often talk about -- and it certainly hits my heart -- the collateral damage, you know, involved with children and innocent civilians anywhere that we might go militarily.

But to be there, to be in the hospitals -- you don't want to have someone slam a door too loud when one of these sick children is sleeping, much less drop a bomb on this place. I couldn't find, in three days, an Iraqi who didn't greet me with a smile. It liked -- and this doesn't speak to Iraq, it speaks to the best of where we share a lot of things.

KING: But, Sean, war is horrible. There are sick children in North Korea. There's also sick children in Harlem.

PENN: You bet.

KING: And there's sick children all over the world.

PENN: That's right.

KING: And whenever you're at war -- we've bombed Hiroshima to end World War II...

PENN: That's right. And...

KING: ... and maimed a lot of people.

PENN: ... that's why we can't do it without very careful reflection. We've had all of this time. Donald Rumsfeld has gone on television innumerable times telling us of the hard evidence they have. Why aren't they sharing that evidence with the United Nations inspectors? Why aren't they saying: 'Here's where it is. Go get it?'

KING: We'll be right back with more of Sean Penn on this special edition of LARRY KING WEEKEND. Don't go away.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

GEORGE W. BUSH, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES: *We'd certainly prefer voluntary compliance by Iraq. See, the use of military force is this nation's last option, its last choice. Yet if a force becomes necessary to disarm Iraq of weapons of mass destruction and enforce the will of the United Nations, if force becomes necessary to secure our country and to keep the peace, America will act deliberately. America will act decisively. And America will prevail because we've got the finest military in the world.*

(END VIDEO CLIP)

KING: We're back with Sean Penn.

Don Rumsfeld said he welcomed the discussion, but you accused President Bush of trying to stifle the debate.

PENN: Yes. Well, you know, a lot of this stuff happens as a conditioned response of a, sort of, established Washington culture, I think. And they have their, sort of, attack dogs that are sent out in various -- in most cases right-wing groups that come out to, I think, discredit things.

I think, you know, one of the things that is -- that they've done very effectively having to do with, you know, in the case of my profession, actors speaking out, you know, they can give it an air of buffoonery, instead of celebrating somebody stepping up and voicing their opinion.

So I feel that, while I believe that, as he said it, I think that he believes that he's in support of it. But I don't think that you can twist facts in an effort to do that. And I don't think you can -- in the same way you can't twist facts and arbitrarily say that you have a -- you know, 30-year crusader against the kind of fundamentalism that they have in Iran and Saddam Hussein and say that he -- of course, he is a secular tyrant. And to connect him to somebody who's called an apostate, someone to kill, Osama bin Laden, is the same kind of arbitrary couplings that they did in the attacks on debate that doesn't support them, anything that represents dissent.

KING: Under what circumstances would you support the government's action against Iraq? What would they have to show you? What if -- you're saying, 'Show me'. What if they showed you weapons of mass destruction and chemical warfare outlets, all of that there...

PENN: All right.

KING: ... and a despotic leader who you suggested would go to Bellevue running the show, pushing the button? What would you do?

PENN: Well, let me see if it turns out that I come around to voicing my opinion, because I certainly don't think that that's primary in this.

But I think that before we can -- that, as the government or an individual -- and its wide democracy is potentially such -- the greatest possible system available in the world -- is this takes a lot of heads to decide what to do.

What is it they have? How much of it do they have? What is the immediate threat of it? What are the ramifications of what we do about it? For example, the same -- those same enemies of the state of Iraq today who, on the other hand, are Arab brothers. My friend -- you know, the enemy of the enemy and that whole notion.

Who is going to give terrorists nuclear capability as a result of us going into Iraq in a certain way? Who is going to? All of these things have to be considered.

The best way that, for my own opinion, I think, you know, given what are the facts of -- the only way that I'll answer it is to say that, you know, again, I do not stand here as a pacifist. I would aspire to be a pacifist. I'm not. I doubt I ever will be.

KING: So there would be occasions you would take up arms?

PENN: Yes. But I'm not going to be a party to that without voicing, you know, questions first.

KING: What -- are the Iraqi living in fear of those bombs coming?

PENN: I think they're living in devastation. You've got these masses in incredible poverty. We're creating a culture of those who are exploiting it, of players and manipulators, as opposed to thinkers and strategists, that we're going to have to deal with on the other end, who are also exploiting their own people that way.

And the 4-year-olds, who is somewhere -- you know, it is in their consciousness that they might be bombed at any time, and there's a level of emotional destruction that's going on.

KING: What do they say about their leader?

PENN: Well, you know, I think that my trip -- I don't speak Arabic and I didn't presume to be a journalist either. I went, again, as a citizen, and that was going to mean to me what it meant moment by moment.

You know, of course, there is incredible propaganda there. There's also incredible fear there. One has to understand that the food rations they're given by their government are so precious that dissent is so costly, and so it's very, very difficult to go there as a -- you know, in three days and be able to voice a responsible opinion on what they really feel.

My guess -- I will afford myself the common sense this way -- is, you know, that they'd probably be a lot better off, whether they know it or not, without this guy. Yes, of course.

KING: But there's no opposition in the country?

PENN: Well, you know...

KING: Put (ph) down.

PENN: No, there's a -- I mean, there's a manipulated opposition by Saddam Hussein that he's put together out of his own intelligence police to give an air of some kind of democratization.

But all of these indictments against Iraq are -- you know, have great validity, and this is the -- you know, we know they've used chemical weapons in the past, we know all of these things.

But this country also has to know that in the cases of, for example, sarin gas and several of these kinds of compounds that they're talking about, these things are effectively neutralized out of five years of shelf life.

And all of the sanctions, all of these kinds of things that they're talking about, in terms of the technology of what's available -- again, when I go back to why the weapons inspectors, given the opportunity and the support and the information by the United States and others, have every chance in the world of finding this, the fact is all of these things leave enormous amount of trace evidence, from the smuggling trails of the equipment necessary, to the particle matter and the chemical matter that's necessary to develop them.

KING: Anyone ever try to talk you out of going?

PENN: I made a point of not telling anybody I was going.

KING: Did your wife support you?

PENN: The joke I made that she had her fingers crossed I wasn't sure in what direction. That's a married man joke.

KING: But did she say, "OK"?

PENN: She was very supportive, yes.

KING: She didn't say, 'Don't go'?

PENN: No.

KING: Because you have children and you never know when you're going into...

PENN: Well, I went because I have children.

KING: We'll be right back with more of Sean Penn. Don't go away.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP, "THE THIN RED LINE")

PENN: What difference do you think you can make, one single man in all this madness?

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: (UNINTELLIGIBLE) won't be for nothing.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

KING: We're back with Sean Penn. Should more actors speak up?

PENN: You know, I have been so reluctant all my life in this area.

KING: Is this the first time you've taken a major stand on a...

PENN: Well, it's the first time we're facing what we're facing right now, I think.

KING: You haven't supported candidates in the past, have you?

PENN: Here and there, but not so much. It's something that, you know, I've tried to do as much as I felt that I was being responsible to it and not just doing it on a fly-by-night basis.

KING: Should they?

PENN: I think that, you know, this is nary I -- you know, I guess I have an opinion. I think that at this point in time -- and by the way there are many ways to voice your position, but it has to be considered, and to just disregard the obligation by saying, 'I'm not political, I don't believe in politics', that this isn't a political issue.

This is a human issue right now. And I think that it's -- that it is morally reprehensible for people not to do what they will be productive in doing, in terms of adding to the best outcome of this situation.

KING: So, in other words, you're saying to your fellows, 'If you have a thought, express it'.

PENN: I think it has to happen now. I think it has to happen, yes.

KING: Your father, the great Leo Penn, a great director, expressed his thoughts and got black-listed in the horror of McCarthyism, which I was a kid and witnessed.

You didn't witness it, did you?

PENN: No.

KING: I witnessed it. So, that was a narrowing, if you spoke out you were in trouble.

PENN: Yes, when they...

KING: But you grew up with the remnants of that, didn't you?

PENN: Well, what I grew up with is the example of a great father who was a great man and a patriot, who was not embittered by that time, but felt it was, you know, an unfortunate incident of some kind of mass intoxication in this country.

KING: Well, was it?

Do you have a definition of patriotism?

PENN: Well, it's the absence of betrayal. It's doing the best you can. And it's not giving up a belief in the courage of this country and the potential of this country. And it's -- if it's on a piece of paper, it's in the United States Constitution.

KING: Anything about Iraq that turns you off? Didn't like, aspect, I mean other than their leader?

PENN: Yes.

KING: I mean poverty is obvious. Anything that -- you know, that, 'Boy, that's a -- wouldn't want to be here.'

PENN: Well, you know, I don't -- I think that I was so overwhelmed emotionally by the sadness of what you see that, you know, I didn't find a broker to look for a condo.

(LAUGHTER)

But no, it's not a place -- you know, there's a lot repellent about it. And a lot of what is repellent about it these sanctions are responsible for.

You know, here we've got four emergencies right now, real emergencies. They'll say, 'Well, why aren't you helping in this kind of issue, or this or women's issues or this is?' We've got our families, we've got North Korea, we've got an entire continent either starving or dying of disease in Africa, and we've got Iraq and we've got the environment.

There's 500,000 gallons of raw sewage a day going into the Tigris river as a result of the '91 bombings of Baghdad. The infrastructure has been entirely destroyed.

So, you know, is it pleasant to go into a place where all the water is highly polluted and disease everywhere? No.

KING: What -- we were faced then with they brought it on themselves. We didn't invade Kuwait...

PENN: Well, they brought it on themselves. What they brought on themselves, it turns out, is a heightened support of their leader on the basis of it was American bombs that dropped and maintained that devastation through sanctions.

We have an opportunity now, and this is what I think we have to focus on. There's an incredible opportunity, and there is a groundswell in the streets of Iraq this way, I do believe, because of my conversations with the journalists who know more than I do.

This is like the bully in the school yard just got punched in the nose. That's very different than the '92 inspections, you know, after the '91 bombings. At that time, it was a careful thing where a guy who had propagandized his defeat into a victory. You know about that. That was how it was sold to the people, as a victory. There are monuments to the victory over the United States in this war in Baghdad.

Here the people are aware that these inspectors are going into his palaces. This is the bully getting punched in the nose. This has a possibility of a very positive effect. And as long as we don't -- really don't have evidence of imminent threat, and we have inspectors in there, let's see what the Iraqis do about their situation.

But there's not much that they're going to be able to do when they're teachers are making \$3 an hour and their kids are 60 to a classroom with broken windows, and they're coming to school with no food in their stomachs, not learning anything because of that – there's a direct correlation between nutrition and education that's not being paid attention to.

And it's that generation, whether we go in or not, that our kids are going to be dealing with.

KING: Back with our remaining moments with Sean Penn right after these words.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

KING: Touching some other bases, were you -- was it difficult for you to do this? For example, you were never the kind of guy that likes to go out and promote movies. I remember the last time you were on, it was just how to get you here. But you don't like -- you generally – you're not a someone who craves the spotlight. Was this difficult for you?

PENN: Well, this is – you're making it not as difficult as possible.

(LAUGHTER)

You know, it's a – it's a nerve-wracking thing. For me, it's...

KING: You've been camera shy, right, and press shy?

PENN: Yes, but I'm more shy of the shame I'll feel when my kids grow up and see I didn't say anything.

KING: Were you disappointed that you weren't known there, or it didn't matter?

(LAUGHTER)

PENN: No, this is a common misperception of the -- what would be considered the inherent narcissism of the motion picture business. I don't care how many actors get on here and say, you know, 'If so and so says they don't want to be famous,' they're lying.

Well, no. That's just not true. You know, you want the opportunity to share what you can share. But famous is a funny word anyway, you know? How does it apply and what does it get you? You know, it's not good to be famous if famous is something that is debunked on its own definition by those who want to attack you.

KING: Have you gotten accustomed to the tabloids and all of the things that have hit you in life?

PENN: Well, you know, I'll say that I have -- when I -- when I want to giggle, I might turn on, you know, somebody as self-satisfied as Bill O'Reilly for just a moment, just to pretend that he means what he says.

KING: You think he doesn't?

PENN: I don't believe that the man's operating on his conscience. I don't think he's necessarily a bad man, but if he -- you know, he was a gossip reporter for "Inside Edition" who's decided -- which, for me, says he probably wanted to be an actor. So these generally are the things that the...

KING: Do you get pained, though, when you see tabloids with, you know, when they -- 'Sean Penn was with this person last night?'

PENN: You know, it's...

KING: It goes with the territory?

PENN: It's there and I don't -- and very, very difficult to argue in protection of, you know, those of us who have so much opportunity when there are more important things to think about.

KING: Why do you like acting?

PENN: Well, that's a presumption that I do. I love watching it.

KING: Is it true that you might stop?

PENN: Well, you know...

KING: And just direct?

PENN: I would like to -- I would like to do that, but right now, you know...

KING: You'd like to be just a director someday?

PENN: Probably, yes. Yes, I just don't find myself very prolific when it comes to the writing of the scripts I would do. So once a year -- once every five years I would get something I want to do.

KING: So why are you doing something you're not crazy about?

PENN: Well, I'm probably crazy about it, but it also drives me crazy. But I think right now, as I look to the future, it's a different conversation, because the future, for me, right now, is very much occupied with the other things that we're talking about.

KING: So you intend that this is going to be more a part of your life than playing Harry Jones in 'Desert Storm II' tomorrow?

PENN: You know, I don't -- I don't think I'll be playing that role, but I...

KING: You played a bad army guy once.

PENN: Yes, I did. Yes.

KING: And what was it called?

PENN: "Casualties of War."

KING: "Casualties of War," with Michael J. Fox. That was a hell of a movie, and you were the villain.

PENN: Yes.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP, "CASUALTIES OF WAR")

PENN: And you? You I don't know about.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

KING: So you may leave acting, you may just do directing. But we expect to hear from you a lot more on issues of national...

PENN: I'm going to do whatever...

KING: ... importance?

PENN: I'm going to do whatever I feel I can do that will be productive, whether that's in movies or anything else.

KING: So whatever comes along that you feel hits you the right way you're going to go with it?

PENN: Yes.

KING: Would you go to North Korea?

PENN: If I felt there was a productive reason to go, I think, is one answer to it. Am I curious to go to North Korea? Yes.

KING: All right, what do you think is going to happen with Iraq? Do you have a projection, prediction?

PENN: Well, one has to -- again, if you think...

KING: The interim report's in.

PENN: Well, paying attention to history, we can say you have to follow the money trail. I don't think that ultimately it's going to be good business to go in.

I think that in the short term it may be, and so I'm wondering how long and short term the agenda is of the establishment.

You know, we spent -- it was -- the cost of the Gulf War was \$82 billion, of which the United States carried \$18 billion of that...

KING: You mean billion?

PENN: Billion. In this case, we're talking about \$200 billion. I wonder who's going to pay for that? It's going to be you and me and everybody watching this show. And then what will be the costs afterwards?

I would like to believe that this is a masterful game of chicken, but I think that...

KING: Some people think that.

PENN: Yes, well, the problem with that is that if you're not committed to the game of chicken -- which in this case I don't believe Saddam Hussein is going to roll over -- if you're committed to the game of chicken and you back out of it, then you're the paper tiger that Osama bin Laden says you are.

Which is, you know, part of the debate that I think is also in the counterpart side of most of my feelings. All of this stuff has to come into the discussion.

KING: Sean, it's always good seeing you.

PENN: Thank you very much.

KING: Thank you for coming forward.

PENN: You bet.

KING: Sean Penn, on this special edition of LARRY KING WEEKEND. We'll be back again tomorrow night with another outstanding program we hope you'll enjoy.

Stay tuned for more of coverage around the world on CNN. And for Sean Penn and yours truly in Los Angeles, good night.

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