

Actor on a Mission for Peace

Star Visits Baghdad in Hope of Staving Off a U.S. Attack

[Note the mention of the **Not in Our Name Statement** in this article-- Artists Network]

By Peter Baker
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BAGHDAD, Iraq, Dec. 15 -- Sean Penn would be the first to admit he's no pacifist. On-screen, he's played a sadistic soldier and a vicious murderer; off-screen, a paparazzi-punching pugilist. Yet, here was the brooding, bruising actor in the Iraqi capital today, cast against type as America's latest leading peace activist.

While other Hollywood celebrities sign letters, Penn decided to come to Baghdad to see for himself how Iraqis live and to contemplate ways of stopping a looming war he considers immoral. As U.N. inspectors fanned out across Baghdad searching for anthrax and sarin gas, Penn inspected hospitals and schools and streets in poor neighborhoods.

The 42-year-old Oscar-nominated actor may not be a household name here, but his fame was enough to secure meetings with senior Iraqi officials, and some everyday Iraqis turned their heads as he walked by. The movie they mentioned most? "Casualties of War."

Penn came, he said, out of a sense of duty as a U.S. citizen responsible for his country's conduct. "Somewhere along the line, the actions of this government are the actions of me," he said in a room at the Al-Rashid Hotel this afternoon, puffing on a cigarette and nursing an orange soda.

"And if there's going to be blood on my hands, I'm not willing to have it be invisible. I wanted to come to Iraq and see Iraqi faces -- children, adults, diplomats, anybody that implies -- and go home with some impressions that will not let me off the hook. . . . It's not abstract anymore."

During an interview and a separate news conference, Penn offered no particular criticism of Saddam Hussein's government. Instead, he challenged President Bush to put up or shut up by disclosing any evidence of weapons of mass destruction held by Iraq. Although he said he was not here to criticize the U.S. president, he predicted that Bush's political career would be destroyed if he went to war.

The actor's three-day visit, which ended late tonight, has drawn sharp criticism from those in the United States who find it distasteful for prominent Americans to do anything that could play into Hussein's hands.

Penn was careful to say he was not supporting Iraq, but that distinction could be lost in the pictures of him touring what many consider an enemy capital.

Penn said he came without consulting studio executives or PR mavens and brushed off any concern that he could become the "Hanoi Jane" Fonda of his era. "I worry more about an 18-year-old soldier who comes over here a patriot and goes back home dead," he said. "It's irrelevant if I come back and people dismiss me."

Penn's visit is the latest manifestation of a long struggle between Hollywood and Washington over issues of war and peace dating back to Fonda's visits to Hanoi during the Vietnam War. While largely quiet during President Bill Clinton's bombing of Baghdad in 1998 or his battle to liberate Kosovo in 1999, the entertainment elite has been gearing up in opposition to any U.S. war with Iraq.

A group of celebrities, including Susan Sarandon, Gore Vidal and Oliver Stone, recently signed a "statement of conscience" drafted by a group calling itself "Not in Our Name" asking Americans "to resist the injustices done by our government." In an opinion piece in the Los Angeles Times this month, Robert Redford questioned Bush's claims to patriotism in the confrontation with Iraq, saying, "The Bush White House talks tough on military matters in the Middle East while remaining silent about the long-term problems posed by U.S. dependence on fossil fuels."

Perhaps incongruously, Penn has become one of the most visible in the give-peace-a-chance chorus. In October, he took out a \$56,000 ad in The Washington Post styled in the form of an open letter to Bush in which he wrote, "I beg you, help save America before yours is a legacy of shame and horror."

Penn has played a succession of unsympathetic characters over the years, from the sergeant who kidnaps, rapes and kills a Vietnamese girl in "Casualties of War" to the brazen, brutal cop in "Colors" to the death-row inmate ministered to by Sarandon in "Dead Man Walking." During his since-ended marriage to Madonna, he made use of his fists to demonstrate his unhappiness with prying photographers.

Now married to actress Robin Wright Penn, he said his role as father of two children forced him to get involved in the Iraq debate. "I just came to a point of implosion in my frustration in some of what I was witnessing," he said in the interview.

The ad drew an invitation to visit Iraq from Norman Solomon, head of the Institute for Public Accuracy, a self-described progressive research organization. Accompanied by Solomon, Penn visited a water treatment facility bombed during the Persian Gulf War of 1991, met with Iraqis on the street and sat down with top officials, including Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz.

As he prepared to leave for Memphis, where he is shooting a movie, Penn was circumspect in describing his impressions of Iraq, saying he needed time to digest them. "The first thing I'm going to do is let the experience find its own organic place," he said.

With his hair falling in his face and a cigarette hanging from his mouth, the bad-boy actor acknowledged he hasn't always been able to turn the other cheek. "I'm not a pacifist," he said. "I'm not sure whether I'm ashamed to say that, but I'm not a pacifist."

But he added, "I hope this war does not happen."

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