

# Sean Penn only the latest celebrity to wade into politics

By Jerry Shwartz  
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From the moment Sean Penn arrived in Baghdad, eager to advance the cause of peace, he was doomed — a dead man talking.

He was a celebrity, like so many other celebrities who have wandered into the treacherous waters of politics or international relations. So he walked gingerly — he was there, he said, "to learn and not to teach." He avoided reporters. And he was careful not to say or do anything that would cause a meltdown at home.

So the Iraqis did it for him.

Penn "confirmed that Iraq is completely clear of weapons of mass destruction and the United Nations must adopt a positive stance toward Iraq," the official Iraqi News Service reported.

Before Penn could deny it, the New York Post had published its top 10 reasons Penn would be a great U.N. arms inspector (No. 2: "After 'Shanghai Surprise,' Penn certainly knows what a bomb looks like."). Craig Kilborn of the CBS "Late, Late Show" also scorned Penn's peace efforts.

"Hey, isn't that Bono's job?" Kilborn asked.

No. Bono is the one who flew to Africa with the since-ousted treasury secretary, Paul O'Neill, promoting the fight against hunger. Not to be confused with the late Sonny Bono, who was elected to Congress because he sang next to Cher (who called radio stations during the 2000 presidential campaign to support Al Gore).

Sometimes, it seems there are more actors on soapboxes than in soap operas.

Tim Robbins and Susan Sarandon, Edward James Olmos, the various Baldwin brothers, Ted Nugent, Tom Selleck, Woody Harrelson, Angelina Jolie, Ben Affleck, Warren Beatty — the list of politically active celebrities is long and ever-growing.

Jesse Ventura started out administering sleeper holds and ended up Minnesota's governor; Bill Bradley started out shooting jumpers and ended up in the Senate; Ronald Reagan started out co-starring with a chimpanzee, and ended up in the White House.

Charlton Heston started out parting the Red Sea, moved on to marching with Martin Luther King, and ended up waving a musket over his head for the National Rifle Association.

"Celebrities often have assumed political roles, but it's becoming more frequent all the time," says Darrell West, director of the Center for Public Policy and American Institutions at Brown University and co-author of the book "Celebrity Politics."

West says celebrity politics is almost inevitable. Anyone with an opinion and a platform is likely to speak out, and political groups are eager to help them.



Actor Sean Penn walks past a portrait of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein during his visit to a children's hospital in Baghdad on Dec. 13. Penn joined a long line of celebrities who have wandered into the treacherous waters of politics.

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Do they know more than the average nonentity? Probably not. "You just have to hope that they have smart people advising them," West says.

Mostly, celebrities are good at attracting attention. "It's harder to gauge their policy impact," says West, though someone like Christopher Reeve clearly has had success in persuading legislatures to spend money on research to treat paralysis.

Most of the time, West says, notables know enough not to generate bad publicity for their causes and themselves. But occasionally, they fail.

An early example is Charles Lindbergh, whose solo flight across the Atlantic made him one of the most famous — and admired — people in the world.

But Lindbergh visited Germany in 1939 and came away convinced the Nazi military machine was invincible. He helped create America First, which argued the United States should stay out of the war in Europe.

Lindbergh's reputation took a nosedive. "Hitler wrote to Lindy, said 'Do your very worst,' So Lindy started an outfit that he called America First," sang Woody Guthrie.

The most famous example of ritual celebrity disembowelment was that of Jane Fonda, who went to North Vietnam in 1972, at the height of the Vietnam war, and posed in an anti-aircraft gun. Thirty years later, despite her apologies, she is still widely ridiculed as "Hanoi Jane."

(Sean Penn obviously gave her story much thought. "I don't imagine I'll be apologizing as she did at some far point in the future," he told The New York Times before his trip to Iraq. Lot of good it did him.)

Others have suffered lesser debacles. In October, fervent Democrat Barbra Streisand was excoriated for a performance at a party fund-raiser. She had read a quote — "Beware the leader who bangs the drums of war," it began — and attributed it to Shakespeare, falsely.

In fact, a poll by the Hollywood Reporter earlier this year found that Jane Fonda, Alec Baldwin and Streisand were the celebrities least admired for their political views.

The flip side were those most admired for their politics: Bono, Oprah Winfrey and Arnold Schwarzenegger, who this year successfully promoted a California proposition that dedicated more than a half-billion dollars to before- and after-school programs.

In an online forum in 2000, actor William Baldwin — Alec's brother — said everyone, celebrity and non-celebrity alike, should "use the voice you're given. ... You use the tools you have; you use the resources you have, the power you have, the influence."

But Baldwin knows that the effectiveness of his voice is a function of the box office.

"First and foremost, I'm an actor," he says. "Ironically, what fuels my access and influence as an activist is my success as an actor and my level of celebrity. ... If I have a hit movie, it gives my show business career a shot in the arm, and it gives my advocacy career a correlating shot in the arm."