

'We'll have blood on our hands'

Former Hollywood bad boy Sean Penn is the latest celebrity to join the protest against the threat of an American attack on Iraq. Rory McCarthy meets him in Baghdad

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It is a cold Baghdad winter morning and a small group of earnest American peace activists are gathered under a canvas tent at an Iraqi government water treatment plant. The al-Wafba factory was bombed during the Gulf war in 1991 destroying the city's sanitation systems, they explain. To bomb it again in a new conflict with Iraq would be a war crime, they insist. To make their point they hold up emotive black-and-white posters of despairing Iraqi children.

Watching from among the crowd of journalists and television crews is the newest visitor in town. Sean Penn looks uneasy. He is dressed in a stained pair of Timberland boots and an old black bomber jacket and is half trying to shelter behind his Aviator sunglasses. He drags nervously on an endless supply of American Spirit cigarettes as he wanders through the largely derelict water treatment plant, a camera hanging around his neck. One of the activists offers him a poster but Penn refuses to pose with it for the cameras. Hollywood's reformed bad boy can't decide whether he's now a tourist in a war zone or the latest celebrity peacenik.

His intentions sound reasonable enough. "My trip is to personally record the human face of the Iraqi people so that their blood, along with that of American soldiers, would not be invisible on my own hands," Penn says. "I'm just doing what I feel like I'm obligated to do." Dozens of Hollywood celebrities have started a wave of protest against US threats of war in Iraq but Penn is the only one among them brave enough to fly into Saddam Hussein's realm. In doing so, he violates a US law which bans American citizens, besides journalists, from entering Iraq and risks fines of at least \$10,000 (£6,000) and a potential jail term. More worryingly, perhaps, he also risks becoming the target of America's powerful conservative forces, the sort who trumpet Fox News as the voice of reason.

In the 1990s, Joan Baez and Bianca Jagger turned up in Bosnia and Richard Gere appeared in Macedonia. Heads rarely turn if these are mere charity fundraising visits. But when the stars embark on anti-war protests they enter a minefield. At its heart Hollywood is a deeply conservative institution and frequently cruel to those who are seen to cross the line between humanitarian concern and "unpatriotic" behaviour.

Jane Fonda spent much of her career trying to apologise for what many saw as a treasonable visit to North Vietnam in 1972. Most of her infamous Hanoi radio broadcasts seem innocuous in today's terms. She spoke of how the Vietnamese had spent hundreds of years resisting colonial rulers and how the US bombing of civilian targets only strengthened the resolve of the Vietcong. She described US ambitions as "imperialist" and advised Richard Nixon to read up on Vietnamese history.

During his three-day tour of Baghdad, arranged by the Institute for Public Accuracy in Washington, Penn watches his words. He is careful to stop short of criticising George Bush and US policy towards Iraq. Folks at home, he says, have a "raw nerve towards an American who has a view expressing it on foreign soil, a view that conflicts with that of many other American people."

But he has made his protest against a war abundantly clear, not just by becoming the first Hollywood celebrity to fly to Baghdad. In October he paid \$56,000 to place an advertisement in the Washington Post. It contained an open letter to Bush in which Penn accused the US president of trying to suffocate the debate over the Iraq crisis. He decried a cycle of foreign policy where "bombing is answered by bombing, mutilation by mutilation, killing by killing".

"Sacrificing American soldiers or innocent civilians in an unprecedented pre-emptive attack on a separate sovereign nation may well prove itself a most temporary medicine," he wrote.

So, irreverent as ever, he broke the law and came to Baghdad to see the world's next war zone for himself. The Iraqi regime welcomed him with open arms. He was taken round a children's hospital and spent several hours talking to doctors about how 12 years of UN sanctions have wiped out their supplies of medicines and equipment. He met officials from Unicef who, in a ground-breaking report in 1999, said the sanctions had caused the deaths of 500,000 Iraqi children. He toured several schools which Unicef is helping to rebuild and he saw others that have yet to be helped. Most are badly run down, an appalling state for a country which before the Gulf war was enjoying \$14bn in annual revenue from oil alone. Then he met with Tariq Aziz, Iraq's powerful deputy prime minister and the most eloquent apologist for Saddam's brutality and military ambitions. In between meetings Penn snapped photos of the Tigris River for his daughter Dylan, 11, who is working on a school project about Mesopotamia.

Later, slouched in a leather armchair in a suite in Baghdad's five-star al-Rashid Hotel, Penn drags on another cigarette as he struggles to voice his impressions. His hair is unkempt, jetlag accentuates the deep lines around his eyes and he seems angry at what he has seen. "I don't think it's a political statement to acknowledge that the sanctions have been devastating," he says.

But for a man who at the age of 42 has matured into one of Hollywood's finer actors and more considered directors, he is surprisingly shy. His words tumble out in convoluted sentences and inelegantly disguise what are often compelling conclusions. "In America, it seems to me that with the journalistic media saturation of our consciousness I have not had the skills to interpret as full a picture as I would need to, versus the human impression I get by coming here." In other words, and not surprisingly for a man who has had a rough ride in the press and has, on occasion, punched photographers, he doesn't think much of America's mainstream media. He is particularly angry they didn't give much space to a 20,000-strong anti-war march in Washington earlier this year.

He suggests that the US administration hasn't thought through how Iraq's competing tribes and religious sects could be united once Saddam is unseated. Washington, too, has been wrong in holding back the evidence it claims to have that Saddam still holds weapons of mass destruction and the hints of his widely-doubted links with al-Qaida. He wonders, too, what change has come over America since September 11.

"We also have to say to ourselves: 'Should we do that?' What America are our soldiers returning home to? What is the redefinition of our principles that justifies this action by our country, despite concerns we may have about the nature in which this country [Iraq] is governed?" He is troubled by the question of what patriotism now means in the US. He describes himself as a patriot and emphatically not a pacifist. ("I am not sure whether or not I am ashamed to say it, but I am not a pacifist.") He talks about how the words of the US constitution fit in today's world. "What's the difference between uranium, plutonium and a .38 handgun in the decision to be able to possess arms in the United States?"

The war in Afghanistan appears to have been no more than the "temporary medicine" that he fears a conflict in Iraq would also be. "We have to try to rise to the occasion where war is not part of our human nature, where killing is something we can get past as a species."

After the attacks of September 11 he cancelled a major feature film he was directing. Instead, he produced a short film, 11 minutes and nine seconds long, part of 11 '09 '01, a collection of 11 films by 11 directors of different nationalities. His film shows an elderly widower laying out his dead wife's dress in his own private grief as an unnoticed television in the corner carries live reports of the World Trade Centre attacks. "I felt that loss had been co-opted in the media both by politics and nationalism and I felt that there was a personal story of loss that was universal," he says.

Shooting an emotive, questioning film in the US is one thing. Flying off to meet officials from a despised regime that has treated its people with brutality and UN resolutions with contempt is quite different. Penn knows full well what awaits him. He says celebrities are too often dismissed as "something less than a citizen who has a right, maybe even an obligation, to speak about their own experiences."

"There is going to be very credible and valid criticism. But there will, I believe, be enormous support as well," he says. "A war is not inevitable. If there is a war or continued sanctions against Iraq the blood of Americans and Iraqis alike will be on our hands."