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Fast Times on a Baghdad High

Sean Penn offers himself as an Iraqi propaganda tool.

By Roger D. Carstens

At 38 years of age, I am six-foot-one, 195 lbs, have a ripped chest, striated thighs, and a washboard stomach. Combined with my Greek heritage and rugged, dark looks, I consider myself a serious contender for the role of Polynikes in the upcoming film treatment of Steven Pressfield's book *Gates of Fire*. Or perhaps as a competitor to Leonardo DiCaprio for the role of Alexander the Great in a soon-to-be-made movie of the same title. But despite my prodigiously attractive features and boundless on-screen presence, I have confined myself to the realm of military and national-security affairs. As a special-forces major (or Green Beret, as we are often called), I will refuse the opportunity to step over into the world of celluloid and ignite a fire in the hearts of women everywhere, from Hollywood to Broadway.

Now if I could only convince Sean Penn to stay on his side of the fence.

Sean, as you most assuredly know, recently returned from Baghdad after a three-day personal fact-finding mission. It seems that he was distrustful of the foreign-policy perspectives being offered by the various news media and international/national decision-makers. By visiting Iraq, Penn apparently sought to obtain the "ground truth" about the veracity of Iraq's claims of being WMD-free — and to "pursue a deeper understanding of the conflict." Must be nice to have the free time and funding to sport about second guessing everyone from Great Britain to Human Rights Watch to Jon Stewart from *The Daily Show*. Perhaps this is the start of an exciting new industry: "matters of conscience" tourism?

Now, look: I am all about learning about strategy, policy, and the regional implications of war against Iraq. I just think that the wrong place to do that is *in* Baghdad. Being led about by duplicitous Iraqi authorities will not bring one to a series of satisfactory conclusions about the use and efficacy of diplomacy and military force.

In visiting Iraq, was Penn allowed to visit the torture cells, where countless prisoners spent their last painful moments on earth? Was he brought to the sites where young girls were raped before their fathers as a form of political punishment and intimidation? Was he flown to the Kurdish villages, where thousands perished in Saddam's chemical attacks against his own citizens? Of course not. In truth and fact, Penn's sanitized trip was devoid of the things that he really needed to see.

Penn stated that he went to Iraq to "see Iraqi faces ... and go home with some impressions that will not let me off the hook." While Penn visited the Al-Mansour Children's Hospital and saw the smiling faces of the children within, he was not shown the faces of Iraqis contorted in death following murder at the hands of Saddam Hussein's henchmen. Talk about impressions that would never let you off the hook...

The point here is that there are better ways to become more knowledgeable about international affairs than to visit the monster's lair. As a start, I recommend reading alternative news sources. I start off every morning reading the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* to get one side of the equation, and the *Washington Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* to get the other. I end the day with *USA Today* and counter it with the National Review Online. And get this: It is cheaper than a ticket to Iraq!

Or perhaps you could digest documents from organizations like the United Nations, the Central Intelligence Agency, the International Atomic Energy Agency, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International.

You might even hire someone brilliantly schooled in International Affairs and Strategy — oh, someone like me — to get you up to speed on the ethical and political quagmire before you. It might allow you to unpackage the issues and develop a basis from which to develop well-founded opinions.

Or if you simply must fly around to verify, then go to London and interview both dissidents and Iraqi supporters, but do not waste time by visiting Saddam's Little Shop of Horrors.

For by visiting Iraq, you come perilously close to being used as a propaganda tool by a dictator who has oppressed his people and has verifiably raped and murdered his own citizens. How much different is that from an actor visiting a 1938 Germany and declaring his opposition to war against Hitler? Or visiting a murderous Stalin or Mao and giving them a clean bill of health? At a certain point, you find yourself allied with those whose dreams of power sail down a river flowing with the blood of their victims — victims who are more often than not their own people.

I am not denying Penn's right as a citizen to voice his opposition to a possible war. Nor am I questioning his legitimate search for answers. My point is that there is a better way to grapple with these issues than by naively playing into a murderous dictator's hands. By doing so, you may be contributing to the oppression of a tortured people.

Speaking at the completion of his tour, Penn stated that, "if there is a war or continued sanctions against Iraq, the blood of Americans and Iraqis alike will be on our hands." No, Penn, not quite. The blood of the Iraqis already runs thick on the hands of their own leader.

If I may say so, there seems to be no one who is willing to say to Penn, "Sean — what in the hell are you doing? Did you really think that you were going to learn anything by going there? And do you really think that was such a wise thing to do?" Allow me then, to be that person. Or if not, then please forward all scripts to the e-mail address below.