

US actor Sean Penn visits Baghdad

David Walsh
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American film actor Sean Penn completed a three-day visit to Baghdad December 15 during which he spoke out against the threat of US attacks on Iraq. The 42-year-old Penn earlier this year took out a full-page advertisement in the *Washington Post* calling on George W. Bush to halt his administration's war drive.

On his arrival in Baghdad Penn commented that he was there "to pursue a deeper understanding of this frightening conflict." The actor expressed the hope that "all Americans will embrace information available to them outside the conventional channels" and called his visit to Iraq "a natural extension of my obligation (at least attempt) to find my own voice on matters of conscience."

Penn's visit was organized by the Institute for Public Accuracy (IPA), an American group of liberal policy analysts, with offices in San Francisco and Washington.

During his stay in Baghdad Penn toured a children's hospital, where some of the victims of US sanctions policies are treated. The film actor refused to permit journalists to accompany him on his tour of the hospital, saying he needed to visit privately with the children. He also wandered around Baghdad streets without an Iraqi guide and had meetings with Deputy Prime Minister Tareq Aziz and Health Minister Umeed Madhat Mubarak.

Penn issued a statement to the press at a news conference December 15. It reads: "I am a citizen of the United States of America. I believe in the Constitution of the United States, and the American people. Ours is a government designed to function 'of'- 'by'-and-'for' the people. I am one of those people, and a privileged one.

"I am privileged in particular to raise my children in a country of high standards in health, welfare, and safety. I am also privileged to have lived a life under our Constitution that has allowed me to dream and prosper. In response to these privileges I feel, both as an

American and as a human being, the obligation to accept some level of personal accountability for the policies of my government, both those I support and any that I may not. Simply put, if there is a war or continued sanctions against Iraq, the blood of Americans and Iraqis alike will be on our hands.

"My trip here 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. I sit with you here today in the hopes that any of us present may contribute in any way to a peaceful resolution to the conflict at hand."

The US media, determined to maintain the image of a nation unified behind Bush, barely covered Penn's trip. At the December 15 press conference he was asked if his visit might expose him to the charge that he lacked patriotism. Penn indicated he would be happy to debate anyone who made such accusations.

The film actor told the press that he had been touched by the warmth of ordinary Iraqis despite the sufferings of their daily lives. "I do find it very moving," he said, "you know, the strength of a smile in those circumstances, and the smiles that I saw were abundant." Penn declined to criticize the Bush administration while on Iraqi soil.

In his October 19 *Washington Post* advertisement, an open letter to George W. Bush, Penn criticized the administration for its "intolerance of debate ('with us or against us'), marginalization of ... critics, the promoting of fear through unsubstantiated rhetoric, manipulation of a quick comfort media." He appealed to Bush directly: "I beg you, help save America before yours is a legacy of shame and horror." Penn argued that "sacrificing American soldiers or innocent civilians in an unprecedeted preemptive attack on a separate sovereign nation ... may well prove itself a most temporary medicine."

On December 10 a group of film actors and other

entertainers held a press conference in Los Angeles to launch “Artists United to Win Without War,” a group opposed to US policy in Iraq. The group issued an open letter to Bush urging the government to avoid military action.

The declaration criticizes the Bush administration in the most timid language, and urges the disarming of Iraq through “legal diplomatic means.” It continues, “We are patriotic Americans who share the belief that Saddam Hussein cannot be allowed to possess weapons of mass destruction. We support rigorous U.N. weapons inspections to assure Iraq’s effective disarmament.” And further: “However, a preemptive military invasion of Iraq will harm American national interests. Such a war will increase human suffering, arouse animosity toward our country, increase the likelihood of terrorist attacks, damage the economy, and undermine our moral standing in the world.”

Martin Sheen, Mike Farrell and Tony Shalhoub were among those who spoke to the press December 10. Shalhoub commented, “This notion of preemptive war is setting a precedent ... and we must ask ourselves, where does this end? Where is the next preemptive strike?”

Others signing the letter included Academy Award winners Kim Basinger, Helen Hunt, Olympia Dukakis, Susan Sarandon and director Jonathan Demme. Other names included Gillian Anderson and David Duchovny of *X-Files* fame, *West Wing* cast members Sheen, Janel Moloney, Bradley Whitford and Lily Tomlin, *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* actors Marg Helgenberger and Robert David Hall and *Ocean’s Eleven* cast members Matt Damon, Don Cheadle, Elliott Gould and Carl Reiner.

Actors Jessica Lange, Ethan Hawke, Samuel L. Jackson, Jane Kaczmarek, Laurence Fishburne, Alfre Woodard, Danny Glover, Noah Wyle and Téa Leoni also added their names to the list, along with musicians such as R.E.M.’s Michael Stipe, Peter Buck and Mike Mills, Bonnie Raitt and Peter Yarrow. The letter was signed as well by retired admiral Eugene Carroll Jr. and former US ambassador to Iraq Edward Peck.

According to the *Los Angeles Times*, the open letter originated in a “teach-in” organized by Farrell and director-producer Robert Greenwald in October at the home of a Democratic Party fundraiser, Stanley Sheinbaum. Speakers included Scott Ritter, the former

UN weapons inspector, and David Cortright, a professor in peace studies at Notre Dame. Among the 50 attendees were Warren Beatty and wife Annette Bening, along with Democratic politicians Tom Hayden and Gary Hart.



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