

Blacklist excludes antiwar celebrities from Oscar Awards broadcast

David Walsh
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The Academy Awards ceremony scheduled for March 23 has become a major focus of a McCarthyite-style campaign of witch-hunting and blacklisting aimed at silencing antiwar views. The event will be held as US cruise missiles and bombs are falling on the population of Baghdad and other cities. The organizers of the event in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences are working furiously to limit as far as possible the expression of oppositional views.

Political censorship at the Oscar Awards is only one aspect of a growing wave of attacks by the political and media establishment, spearheaded by extreme right-wing elements, on antiwar artists and performers. Among the more prominent targets of the political witch-hunters are the actors Martin Sheen and Sean Penn and the country music group, Dixie Chicks. [See the March 12 article "Actor Martin Sheen attacked for antiwar views"]

The three-woman Dixie Chicks, who have won numerous awards and sold tens of millions of records since coming to prominence three years ago, have come under fierce right-wing fire due to the comments of member Natalie Maines. During a recent concert in London, Maines, a Texas native, told the audience, "Just so you know, we're ashamed the president of the United States is from Texas." (See "Right-wing campaign against US country music group").

These attacks, often launched in response to relatively mild criticisms of American policy, reflect extreme nervousness within the ruling elite in the face of widespread opposition to the Iraq war, as well as anger over an unraveling economy and the Bush administration's assault on democratic rights. The position of the government is so tenuous that it becomes imperative to depict opposition to the war as an aberration in an otherwise pervasive mood of

"national unity."

The degree of venom and hysteria in the right-wing media is in inverse proportion to the ability of such forces to muster rational arguments for the Iraqi war. The lies and pretexts of the Bush administration have been exposed one after the other. Having lost even the cover of United Nations sanction, it stands exposed before the world as an international outlaw regime. Under these conditions, intimidating and suppressing opposition at home becomes an urgent political necessity.

The producer of the Academy Awards ceremony, Gil Cates, has made clear that presenters who might be expected to express opposition to Bush's policies will be excluded. He recently said, "I'm asking them to present best animated feature. I'm not asking them to talk about anything other than that, and if they wanted to talk about anything else, I wouldn't ask them to present the award."

Cates noted that he was unable to prevent award winners from speaking about any issue they cared to discuss, although he felt it was "inappropriate."

Edinburgh's *the Scotsman* ran a blunt headline, "Oscars blacklist stars in bid to prevent peace protest speeches." The piece asserts that Academy Awards organizers have drawn up "a blacklist of people who will not be allowed a platform to air antiwar views. Meryl Streep, Sean Penn, Vanessa Redgrave, George Clooney, Dustin Hoffman and Spike Lee are among those who will not be speaking, amid fears they could turn the ceremony into an antiwar rally." Susan Sarandon, Tim Robbins and Edward Norton are also on the list, the newspaper reports.

"In a move denounced by some as a return to McCarthyism, star presenters have been ordered to stick to scripts, while winners, who the producers have

no control over, could find their acceptance speeches cut if they say anything much more than a brief thank you,” the *Scotsman* observes.

The article further notes that “producers do not want to upset advertisers who have paid more than £50 million for adverts.”

Salma Hayek, the star of *Frida* and nominated for a best actress award, is the only presenter known to hold antiwar views. Michael Moore, the longtime left-liberal critic of the American corporate establishment, has the possibility of winning an award for best documentary with his *Bowling for Columbine*. At the recent Writers Guild of America awards in Los Angeles he won loud applause for commenting: “What I see is a country that does not like what’s going on. Let’s all commit ourselves to Bush removal in 2004.”

Predictably, little has been made in the American media of the flagrant political censorship planned by the Academy Awards ceremony organizers. Nor has there been an outcry in Hollywood, even from those victimized by this policy.

Despite all the breast-beating that has gone on about the anticommunist blacklist organized in the 1950s and all the promises that such a thing would never be repeated, the American film industry slips back into suppressing dissent and punishing dissenters as easily as though it were putting on a comfortable pair of slippers. There is no reason whatsoever to believe that a substantial constituency for democratic rights exists in movie studio offices. On the contrary, the intuitive reaction of the wealthy clique in Hollywood to Washington’s drive for world domination is acquiescence, submission and conformism.

There are questions about whether the Academy Awards will be broadcast or held at all. Organizers first announced plans, in Cates’s words, “to prepare a more sober pre-show and a scaled-back arrivals sequence.” He continued: “The traditional splashy red carpet arrivals line will be truncated, the portions of the arrivals press line that existed last year on Hollywood Boulevard will be eliminated and guests arriving by limousine will exit their cars on Hollywood Boulevard and enter the Kodak Theatre directly through the arrivals arch.”

Extraordinary security measures were announced to counter the supposed “terrorist” threat. Several streets around the Kodak Theatre, the site of the awards

ceremony, will be sealed off. Traffic will be barred from famed Hollywood Boulevard. In addition, the Los Angeles Police Department will post SWAT teams and officers from the “Homeland Security Bureau” at and around the theater. Airspace over Hollywood will be shut down during the ceremony to ensure no airborne threat.

The ABC television network, which is due to televise the ceremony, issued a statement March 18: “If there are world events that warrant coverage on the night of the Academy Awards, ABC News will bring them to the American audience with the full support of the Academy.”

ABC, a unit of Walt Disney Co., is worried about one of its most lucrative telecasts. As Mark Weinraub of *Reuters* notes, “The network fetched between \$1.3 million and \$1.45 million for a 30-second advertisement from a range of companies that include American Express Co. and PepsiCo Inc.”



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