

Actor Martin Sheen attacked for antiwar views

David Walsh
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Actor Martin Sheen, currently starring in the television series “The West Wing”—about a fictional US president and his administration—has come under attack for his widely publicized opposition to the impending US attack on Iraq. Sheen has become the target of a hate-mail campaign organized by right-wing forces, and has been warned by NBC executives to tone down his comments. The actor has told the press that he fears for his personal safety.

Sheen, a devout Catholic and a pacifist, has taken part in numerous anti-war demonstrations and recently helped lead a “Virtual March on Washington” that flooded the White House with tens of thousands of emails opposing an attack on Iraq.

Sheen, 62, told a press conference, “As the dogs of war slouch towards Baghdad, we need to be reminded that as many as two million refugees could become a reality ... this is from the United Nations ... as well as half a million fatalities, that is, deaths or injury from the war.”

The veteran actor (*Badlands*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Gettysburg*) has been singled out by right-wing talk-show hosts such as Rush Limbaugh and Internet web sites for attack. GJJargon.com, for instance, refers to Sheen as a “moron” and antiwar celebrities in general as “Taliban” and calls for a boycott of “anti-American entertainers.” Probush.com places Sheen on its “Traitor List”. One anti-abortion campaigner has started a “Citizens Against Celebrity Pundits” web site.

Sheen told the *LA Times* that pro-war elements had demanded that NBC fire him from “The West Wing.” The program’s staff, he indicated, had been “100 percent supportive,” but top network executives had “let it be known they’re very uncomfortable with where I’m at” on the war issue. Executives have reportedly told Sheen that they fear his views will cost

them advertising revenue.

In an NBC survey on the eve of the 2000 presidential election, the fictional president played by Sheen polled more votes than George W. Bush and Al Gore combined.

At another Los Angeles press conference Sheen commented about network executives, “They knew who I was when I was hired—we’re all working for the same defense contractor.” (NBC is owned by electronics giant General Electric, one of the largest defense contractors in the world.)

Sheen also reacted angrily when a publicist tried to stop journalists from asking questions about his antiwar stance. “Everyone here has the right to ask what they want. This is a public forum, I assume, or is it not? I will not have words put in my mouth or be told what people can or cannot ask me. That is exactly what I’m fighting against right now.”

An NBC spokeswoman, Rebecca Marks, denied Sheen’s comments, asserting that she knows of “no concern among top management at NBC regarding Mr. Sheen’s stand against the war or fear that it could impact the show.”

In response to the ultra-right’s campaign against antiwar celebrities, the Screen Actors Guild (SAG), the film actors union, issued a statement March 3 defending free speech and warning about the emergence of a new McCarthyism. The statement read, in part: “Some have recently suggested that well-known individuals who express ‘unacceptable’ views should be punished by losing their right to work. This shocking development suggests that the lessons of history have, for some, fallen on deaf ears.”

The statement notes that 50 years ago “Most of America” averted its eyes “as the House Committee on Un-American Activities persecuted citizens, destroyed

careers, ruined lives and gave rise to the notorious 'blacklist'. During this shameful period, our own industry prostrated itself before smear campaigns and witch hunters rather than standing on the principles articulated in the nation's fundamental documents."

SAG concludes, "[W]e deplore the idea that those in the public eye should suffer professionally for having the courage to give voice to their views. Even a hint of the blacklist must never again be tolerated in this nation."



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