

Sean Penn's *Times* statement: patriotism and the struggle against US militarism

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Film actor and director Sean Penn published a full-page statement in the May 30 *New York Times* opposing Bush administration policy and calling for a revival of democracy in America. His essay has undoubtedly struck a chord with a great many people [<http://www.seanpenn.com/kilroy.pdf>]. It touches upon concerns—so rarely articulated in the media—of broad layers of the population, such as the corporate domination of the Bush government, the assault on free speech, and the use of lies to justify a militaristic and predatory foreign policy, most clearly exposed by the absence of “weapons of mass destruction” in Iraq.

Penn, with more than 20 years in films, three Academy Award nominations and three directorial efforts to his credit, attempts in his somewhat idiosyncratic manner to link his deep feelings for his children and his late father to wider issues, including the future of American society and the meaning of patriotism.

As Penn notes, his October 2002 public letter to George W. Bush in the *Washington Post* taking issue with his Iraq policy was followed “by a tidal wave of media misrepresentation, and even accusations of treason.” All the more admirable his decision to visit Baghdad in December and report on a country that “was the most decimated, starved, diseased and polluted place I had ever witnessed.”

Writing of the post-war situation, Penn observes: “If military intervention in Iraq has been a grave misjudgment, it has been one resulting in thousands upon thousands of deaths, and done so without any credible evidence of imminent threat to the United States. Our flag has been waving, it seems, in servicing a regime change significantly benefiting US corporations.”

In the most powerful passage of the *Times* statement, Penn names names and corporations, “We see Bechtel. We see Halliburton. We see Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Powell, Rice, Perle, Ashcroft, Murdoch, many more. We see no WMDs. We see dead young Americans. We see no WMDs. We see dead Iraqi civilians. We see no WMDs. We see chaos in the Baghdad streets. But no WMDs.”

Penn has elsewhere warned about the return of “the dark era of Hollywood blacklisting.” The most recent media and industry attacks on the actor come on the heels of the corporate boycott of the Dixie Chicks, the exclusion of Tim Robbins from a Baseball Hall of Fame ceremony, the attempt to prevent anti-war performers from making comments at the Academy Awards, the efforts by NBC executives to silence Martin Sheen and the general attempt by the media to whip up hostility toward any public figure who dares question the motives or policies of the Bush administration.

Having said that, the *Times* statement expresses confused or mistaken ideas that will not contribute to bringing about what Penn wishes to see—the establishment of a just and genuinely democratic society.

One of the central issues Penn touches on is American patriotism. He returns to this theme several times, musing that the US flag reflects “sacrifice and heroism” and adding, “I am an American and I fear that I, and our people are on the verge of losing our flag.” The thought of the

flag reminds him of the funeral of his father—blacklisted director Leo Penn, a veteran of World War II—in 1998, during which a military honor guard presented his mother with a folded American flag.

He writes: “Yet, now here we are, just those five short years have passed, and that same flag that took me so long to love, respect, and protect, threatens to become a haunting banner of murder, greed, and treason against our principles, honored history, Constitution, and our own mothers and fathers. To become a vulgar billboard, advertising our disloyalty to ourselves and our allies.”

The question of patriotism is a complex one, which only underlines an essential fact: there is no way to approach seriously the critical political issues raised in Penn’s *Times* statement without a thoroughgoing study of history. No artist or politician can survive without intuition, but intuition alone is an unreliable guide in art or politics.

Patriotism means different things to different people in America. In the final analysis, this is a reflection of the fact that there are really two, mutually irreconcilable, “Americas”—that of the working people and that of the ruling elite.

To the mass of the working population, the only social force that retains a serious commitment to democratic principles, patriotism and the flag are associated, if only semi-consciously, with the traditions of the American Revolution, Lincoln and the sacrifices of the Civil War, the great labor struggles of the 1930s, and the gains of the mass struggle for democratic rights in the 1950s and 1960s. For working people in general, “love of country” is believed to be bound up with a striving for equality, a sympathy for the underdog and a democratic spirit.

The political and media establishment, whose members either openly reject democratic traditions or merely pay lip service to them, seeks to exploit these widely-held sentiments. The present-day ruling elite in the US would have the population believe that it embodies the democratic ideals of the past, when it actually represents the repudiation of these traditions. The official appeal to patriotism is aimed at lining the American people up behind its worst enemies in the ruling circles, in the name of the “national interest” and “national security.”

A deep-felt empathy for what is best in American life and history cannot obscure certain elementary facts. Penn’s suggestion that the US is “threatened” with being overtaken by reactionary elements, that we are “on the verge of losing our flag,” is a misstatement of the historical case. The United States became an imperialist power more than one hundred years ago, certainly by the time of the Spanish-American War in 1898, when it grabbed the Philippines, Guam and Puerto Rico and established de facto control over Cuba.

The US was a leading and ultimately the dominant imperialist power of the twentieth century. America’s entrance into World War I marked a new stage in its emergence as a great and predatory power. Nor did it intervene in the Second World War for humanitarian reasons, although a hatred of fascism animated the generation that volunteered to fight against Hitler and Mussolini. Indeed, a considerable portion of the US ruling

class, like Henry Ford and George W. Bush's grandfather, Prescott Bush, either politically supported fascist rule or entered into profitable commercial relationships with fascist regimes.

American imperialism's crimes against peoples around the world, including its own population, are innumerable, from the bloody suppression of the Filipino people in 1899-1901 to the three million deaths and vast destruction it caused in Southeast Asia in the 1960s and 1970s, to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis as a result of two wars and murderous sanctions from 1991 to 2003. The US has helped install and has supported brutal military dictatorships throughout Central America and Latin America, and remains the chief sponsor of the suppression of the Palestinian people by Israel.

The "Stars and Stripes" does not signify today what it stood for in 1776 or 1861. Tens of millions around the globe see it, with justification, as an emblem of their oppression and misery.

US foreign policy is inseparably bound up with domestic policy, and both express the class interests of a financial oligarchy, whose monopoly of wealth and power is rooted in the existing economic system—capitalism.

In 1951 James P. Cannon, the leader of US Trotskyism at the time, addressed the question of the relationship of America's past to its present. Explaining his attitude to American Independence Day, he wrote: "The representatives in Congress assembled 175 years ago were the great initiators. When they said: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident,' they started something that opened up a new era of promise for all mankind. That's what I am ready to celebrate any time the bands begin to play—the start and the promise. But nobody can sell me the Fourth of July speeches which represent the start as the finish and the promise as the fulfillment. I quit believing in them a long time ago. As soon as I grew old enough to look around and see what was going on in the country—all the inequality and injustice still remaining—the beneficiaries of privilege, claiming the heritage of our first revolution, struck me as imposters."

The present administration concentrates within itself the most brutal and despicable elements of the ruling stratum, but the Bush crowd has not appeared out of nowhere. It has been called "from the deep," so to speak, by the historic crisis of American capitalism.

The US ruling elite seeks to overcome the loss of international economic hegemony by deploying its military superiority to "organize the globe" under its dominion. The conquest of Iraq is only the beginning. Whatever the tactical disagreements, every wing of the political establishment, liberal to ultra-right, Democrat and Republican, is essentially agreed upon the necessity and legitimacy of this desperate project.

Diffuse "patriotic" sentiments will prove to be an unreliable basis for opposing this. Such sentiments are regularly played on by the establishment to paralyze public resistance to all manner of filthy things. After all, a significant percentage of those in the US who supported the recent invasion believed, or wished to believe, that America was "democratizing" and "liberating" Iraq.

Patriotism, in so far as it involves an identification with the national state, inevitably leads down the well-beaten path to the Democratic Party, or "third party" pressure groups on the Democrats. Penn writes that he is not "a Democrat, not a Republican, not a Green, not aligned with any party." After excepting Senators Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts and Robert Byrd of West Virginia and Representatives Barbara Lee of California and Dennis Kucinich of Ohio, he accuses the "Democratic leadership" as a whole of being "entirely complicit" in the Bush war drive, adding that this "has been an obscene and cowardly betrayal of their constituencies."

However, Penn's "exceptions" prove the rule. The differences between these Democratic Party politicians and Bush officials were and remain purely tactical. They disagree on the best means of upholding the interests of American capitalism.

Kennedy, Byrd, Lee and Kucinich, like an entire layer of liberal pundits

and establishment figures, reasoned that the administration's policy of ignoring the UN and picking a fight with European allies cut across long-term American economic and security interests. All of them have supported the Bush administration's so-called "war on terrorism"—the basic political and propaganda framework for military aggression abroad and political repression at home. None of them has exposed US policy toward Iraq—not just in the recent war, but for more than a decade—for what it is: a recrudescence of the most naked forms of imperialism.

The comments of Byrd, who made a number of stinging attacks on the Bush administration and its policies in Iraq, reveal the underlying consensus that, in the final analysis, unites Bush and his liberal critics: "Calling heads of state pygmies, labeling whole countries as evil, denigrating powerful European allies as irrelevant—these types of crude insensitivities can do our great nation no good. We may have massive military might, but we cannot fight a global war on terrorism alone. We need the cooperation and friendship of our time-honored allies as well as the newer found friends whom we can attract with our wealth."

What is the Democratic Party's real "constituency"? It is a big business party, financed by and beholden to huge corporate and financial interests. It has not "betrayed" these interests, it has resolutely served them. If, in a more prosperous period, the Democrats were able to mediate class conflicts and, by introducing certain measures of social reform, pass themselves off as the party of the "little man," those days are long gone.

The Democrats' hands are dripping with Iraqi blood. Penn himself acknowledges the role played by the Clinton administration in Iraq—imposing sanctions and carrying out continuous bombings.

The danger exists that in citing his "patriotism," Penn is accommodating himself, perhaps unwittingly, to the contemporary media-political atmosphere in the US, dominated by right-wing and neo-fascist elements. There is no appeasing such people, nor any need to. The critical question is the clarification of the working population on basic historical and political issues.

We Marxists take as one of our starting-points the rejection of nationalism in favor of a higher principle, internationalism, the solidarity of the peoples of the world. This does not reflect any contempt for the revolutionary-democratic traditions in the US or any other nation, but is the only basis for defending them and preserving their universal core. The great divide in the world is not between nations and peoples, but between social classes. Economic inequality is the most pressing social problem in America today.

Penn's statement in the *Times* has the character of a heartfelt, but isolated flare sent up into a dark sky. There is a social force, however, capable of resisting and defeating American capitalism's brutal policies and ambitions—the American and international working class.

The central problem facing workers in the US is the need to break from the political dominance of the ruling elite, maintained above all through the Democratic Party. The greatest betrayal of the trade unions has been their role in tying working people to the liberal rump of the political establishment. The political self-determination and independence of the working class, established through the building of a mass socialist party, is a prerequisite for a successful struggle against militarism, social reaction and attacks on democratic rights.

These are issues that Penn and others seriously opposed to the reactionary policies of the Bush administration need to consider.



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