The Gunman, Sean Penn's attack on WikiLeaks and related matters

David Walsh
15 April 2015

Directed by Pierre Morel, the French-born filmmaker responsible for *Taken* (2008), *The Gunman* is another action film, this time featuring Sean Penn. Penn plays Jim Terrier, whom we first see in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2006 working as a mercenary. One of a team of four, Terrier draws the "short straw" and is assigned by the team's liaison, Felix (Javier Bardem), the task of assassinating the country's minister in charge of mining, whose policies threaten the multinational firm that hired the mercenaries.

The deed done, Terrier hurriedly leaves the country, at the same time abandoning his lover, Annie (Jasmine Trinca), a medical aid worker at a local clinic. The assassination ignites a wave of political violence and chaos in the DRC.

Eight years later, having given up the sort of dirty work he formerly did, Terrier is back in the Congo as an aid worker himself. When several men attempt to kill him, Terrier is convinced it has something to do with the 2006 operation and goes in search of his former team members, in London, Barcelona and elsewhere. En route, he comes across Annie and Felix, now her husband, whose ferocious jealousy caused him to assign the assassination job to Terrier eight years previously.

Mayhem ensues along Terrier's route, as various attempts are made to do away with him. *The Gunman* is peppered at intervals with shoot-outs, explosions and hand-to-hand combat. Terrier, "former Special Forces," performs nearly superhuman feats, even though he is increasingly afflicted by post-concussion brain damage and wounded more than once.

This is not a good film. It is largely a clichéd scaffolding for certain violent set pieces, which are interesting as formal exercises of a kind, but have no long-lasting emotional or any other kind of impact, except to further inure audiences to killing and brutality. Like the lead figures in other ultraviolent American films at present, as long as Penn looks troubled by the corpses for which he is responsible, anything goes.

His performance lacks spontaneity and any *genuine* sense of inner turmoil, although Penn winces and moans through much of *The Gunman*, possibly to encourage the viewer to forget that his character's history is a filthy one, as are his associates. One such, for example, Terrier's English friend Stan (Ray Winstone), is enlisted to help obtain an apartment and other necessities for the American mercenary in Barcelona without the latter's presence coming to the attention of the authorities. Stan does so, as he explains, through old pals from the Spanish Legion, i.e., the elite military unit that fought to bring Franco's fascism to power in the Civil War and has participated in every bloody colonial operation of Spanish imperialism.

The circumstances of Terrier's relationship with Annie make no real sense, nor is there any particular chemistry between Penn and Trinca. (One feels *The Gunman*'s writers, among them, Penn, have so little regard for the audience they hardly bother to provide plausible explanations for their characters' behavior.) Although Terrier fled the Congo because he committed a serious crime, there is no reason why he could not have contacted Annie in the intervening years, unless we are to conclude he was racked with guilt. But then, as soon as he meets her again in Spain, they take up where they left off.

The dramatic turning point of the film *ought to occur* when Terrier has to tell Annie why he left her behind in desperate straits—that he murdered the government minister for money. Since her work is dedicated to preserving life and she seems in general opposed to political violence, this should, at the very least, provoke a crisis in their relations.

Instead, after looking appalled for a few seconds, she carries on with Penn's character and no more is said about it. In other words, the demands of the action formula take precedence over any shred of psychological realism. At that point, if not before, one washes one's hands of the work.

A number of talented performers are largely wasted here, including Penn, Winstone, Bardem, Mark Rylance and Idris Elba.

Morel's *The Gunman*, in passing, raises the issue of "humanitarian intervention" in crisis-ridden regions such as Central Africa. The film includes news coverage of the unspeakable situation in the DRC, where civil wars have led to the deaths of several million civilians since 1998.

Aside from a few perfunctory references to the operations of ruthless transnational corporations, necessary for the plot to unfold, the conditions are treated by the filmmakers as though they were entirely the product of internal conflicts. Virtually no mention is made of the role of imperialism, although the Congo was subjected to horrific colonial rule at the hands of Belgium from the 1870s to 1960 and is currently the scene of struggles among the various imperialist powers over the country's vast natural resources, worth an estimated $24 trillion.

Taken at face value, the film represents a further argument for great power intervention in "failed states" such as the Congo. Penn, who has been heavily involved in Haitian disaster relief, according to the Associated Press, not only jumped "at the chance to bring on some of his friends as consultants, he also took some time to focus and refine the bones of the script, taking what he knows about NGOs and military tactics and applying it to the story."

Penn's views and activities are worth considering, especially in the light of his recent disgraceful comments about Julian Assange of WikiLeaks and NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden. In the course of doing publicity for *The Gunman*, according to the *Sydney Morning*

© World Socialist Web Site

Herald, Penn suggested that Assange, in particular, should be "brought to account."

After describing Daniel Ellsberg, who released the Pentagon Papers on the Vietnam War, as "a responsible curator," Penn went on, "Then you have Edward Snowden by his own words saying, 'Gee I don't really know what should go out, what shouldn't go out. I'll let these journalists have it and let them decide our national security interests…' If we're not going to protect national security then we're not going to get anywhere by protecting whistleblowers. We've got to find a way to do both."

Penn denounced Assange in even stronger terms, suggesting that he should be prosecuted for the security information he has helped release, "with the damage to diplomacy and the likelihood that there was life loss as a result of some of those things… A lot of very important relationships are going to take a long time to retrieve. The people lose in a situation like that." He added, "You can't have these wholesale exposures going on."

What is Penn talking about? When did heappoint himself guardian of American capitalism's "national security" and its secret diplomatic "relationships," and why? This is the language of the ultra-right, or perhaps of top Obama administration officials, which largely amounts to the same thing except for tactical nuances. Assange and Snowden have lifted the lid off some of the crimes of the American ruling elite and its advanced preparations for a police state, for which they have been abused and persecuted. Now Penn, Hollywood's "bad boy," joins in the assault.

There is a certain irony in his comments in view of the fact that the actor's father, Leo Penn, was blacklisted in the 1950s for publicly coming to the defense of the Hollywood Ten—left-wing writers and directors witch-hunted by the House Un-American Activities Committee, although Leo Penn was apparently never a Communist Party member himself.

The irony, however, may not go that deep. Whether Leo Penn's views ever extended beyond social reformism, which included support for Franklin D. Roosevelt, is not clear. In any event, Sean Penn has made a name for himself in the past as something of a maverick in Hollywood, issuing open letters to oppose the Bush administration's drive to war against Iraq, traveling to Iran, meeting with Raul Castro and declaring his friendship and support for Venezuela's Hugo Chavez.

Given the current state of almost universal conformism and quiescence in the entertainment industry, Penn's willingness to stick his neck out on several occasions has made him unusual and given him a certain credibility. But his political commentary, even the most radical, has always been characterized by confusion as much as anything else.

In May 2003, Penn published a full-page statement in the *New York Times* in which he denounced George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld and the rest of the war criminals. He also, however, launched into appeals to patriotism that smacked of considerable disorientation. For example, he wrote, "I am an American and I fear that I and our people are on the verge of losing our flag."

At the time, we commented in the WSWS: "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…

"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."

But the question of the working class and the fight for socialism is precisely what never enters into any of Penn's comments or, one assumes, thinking. He makes off the cuff remarks, some of them quite trenchant, but they are not guided by any coherent understanding of history and social life. He has his political "likes" and "dislikes," as it were, and seems satisfied with that.

And, inevitably, in the US, such confusion renders him vulnerable to the siren song of the Democratic Party. For all his "extremism," Penn has made clear his strong backing for Barack Obama, even in the face of critical comments over drone strikes from fellow performers such as Matt Damon.

In 2012, in an interview with CNN's Piers Morgan, Penn asserted that "we have an incumbent president who can be extremely positive for this country, and that as long as the people get involved, and support, and push the agenda of the president, as well as criticize it where necessary…I support the president…" Penn went on to discuss how Obama could become "an even greater president."

The actor's involvement in operations like Haitian relief, which will have no impact on the mass poverty and misery in that country, has no doubt brought him into closer contact with governmental or quasi-governmental circles in Washington and elsewhere.

At the same time, his comments have taken on a more pronounced and unpleasant nationalist coloring. When the North Korean regime was accused (falsely) of hacking into Sony's emails in response to *The Interview* late last year, and the studio briefly canceled showings of the film, Penn emailed a journalist: "It's not the first time culture has been threatened by foreign interests and corporate caution… This week, the distributors who wouldn't show *The Interview* and Sony have sent ISIS a commanding invitation. I believe ISIS will accept the invitation. Pandora's box is officially open."

This overall evolution helps account for his haughty, semi-official tone in regard to Snowden and Assange. It also helps account, at least in part, for his unconvincing reinvention of himself as an action hero in *The Gunman* on behalf of imperialist "humanitarian intervention."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site