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Sean Penn Accepts 'First Amendment Award' -- Hits Media, Calls for Impeachment

By E&P Staff

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NEW YORK Sean Penn, the actor and occasional foreign correspondent for the San Francisco Chronicle, hit the media and called for impeachment of the president in receiving the 2006 Christopher Reeve First Amendment Award from The Creative Coalition Monday night in New York City.

Presented since 1997, the First Amendment Award recognizes "individuals who are dedicated to the sanctity of the first amendment and its free speech provision." Other Creative Coalition honorees last night included Branford Marsalis, Harvey Keitel, Heather Graham and Marcia Gay Harden.

In his remarks, Penn listed more than a dozen serious issues facing the country, and commented, "We depend largely for information on these issues from media industries, driven by the bottom line to such an extent that the public interest becomes uninteresting."

Turning to his views of President Bush, Penn said, "Now, there's been a lot of talk lately on Capitol Hill about how impeachment should be 'off the table.' We're told that it's time to look ahead - not back..."

"Can you imagine how far that argument would go for the defense at an arraignment on charges of grand larceny, or large-scale distribution of methamphetamines? How about the arranging of a contract killing on a pregnant mother? 'Indictment should be off the table.' Or 'Let's look forward, not backward.' Or 'We can't afford another failed defendant.'"

"Our country has a legal system, not of men and women, but of laws. Why then are we so willing to put inconvenient provisions of the U.S. constitution and federal law 'off the table?'"

Penn said he admired New York Times columnist Frank Rich but disagreed with his position that pursuing impeachment now would be "decadent."

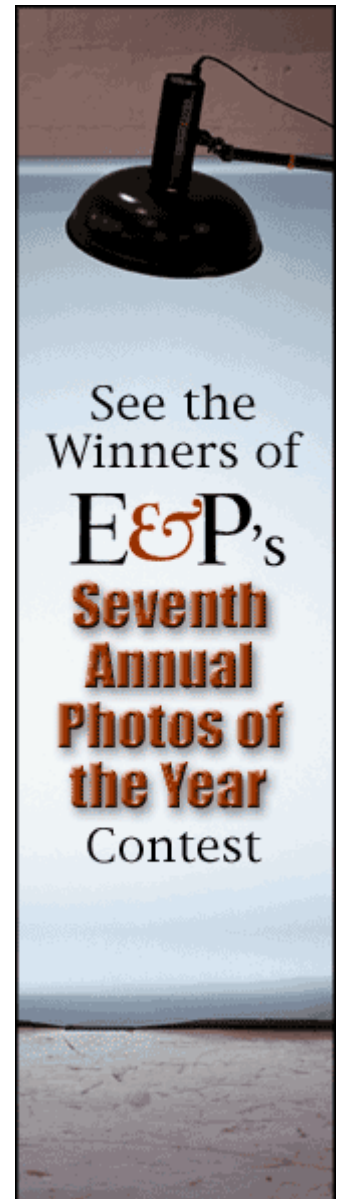
In his prepared remarks, he also lamented how the U.S. public was allegedly tricked into backing the Iraq invasion and derided those media figures who did that, describing Rush Limbaugh as "high as a kite on OxyContin," Bill O'Reilly as "factually impaired," and Sean Hannity as "simply a whore to the cause of his pimps - Murdoch and Ailes?" He

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then rapped former Rep. Mark Foley, Sen. Joe Lieberman and even singer Toby Keith.

With that, he imagined listeners thinking, "Oh, there goes Sean...he had to go and name-call. They say he can't help himself." But he asked: "Or, did I name-call? Maybe I just quickly summed up seven or eight little truths. Oh, no, you're right - I name-called. I said, 'putz.' I take it back. Or, do I? Did I say whore? Pimp? These are questions. But, the real and great questions of conscience and accountability would not loom so ominously -- unanswered or evaded at such tremendous cost -- without our day-to-day failure to insist on genuine accountability.

"Of course we'd prefer some easy ways to get there. But no easy ways exist. Not a new Congress. Not Barack Obama. And, not John McCain."

More excerpts from his prepared speech, first posted at Huffingtonpost.com, follow.

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The most effective forms of de facto censorship are pre-emptive. Systemically, we are encouraged to keep our heads down, out of the line of fire - to avoid the danger, god forbid, that someone in the White House, on Capitol Hill, or a media blow-hard might take a shot at us.

But, as a practical matter, most of the limits on creative expression and other forms of free speech come from self-censorship, where the mechanism of corporate clout offers carrots and brandishes sticks. We avoid a conflict before the conflict materializes. We reach for the carrots and stay out of range of sticks.

Decades ago, Fred Friendly called it a "positive veto" - corporations putting big money behind shows that they want to establish and perpetuate. Whether in journalism or drama, creative efforts that don't gain a financial "positive veto" are dismissible, then dismissed. We may not call that "censorship." But whatever we call it, the effects of a "positive veto" system are severe. They impose practical limits on efforts to bring the most important realities to public attention sooner rather than later...

We're beginning to see more revealing images of this war. But it's later now, isn't it? What we have to pay attention to are the results of these "practical limits." One, is that wars become much easier to launch than to halt....

I'm sure many people who I met in Baghdad, both in my trips prior to and during the occupation, now similarly cannot just look forward. With lives so entirely shattered by a violence of occupation - an ongoing U.S. war effort and the civil war that it has catalyzed. All on the back of a crumbled infrastructure, following eleven years of devastating U.N. sanctions...

Let's give the whistle-blowers cover, let's get the subpoenas out there, and then, one by one, put this administration under oath. And then, if the crimes of "Treason, bribery, or other high crimes and misdemeanors" are proven, do as Article 2, Section 4 of the United States Constitution provides, and remove "the President, Vice President and...civil officers of the United States" from office. If the Justice Department then sees fit to bunk them up with Jeff Skilling, so be it....

Christopher Reeve promised to get out of that chair. Well, I don't know about you, but it feels like he's up now and I wouldn't be standing here if it weren't on his shoulders. Let it be for something.

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