

# In PBS interview, actor Sean Penn praises Martelly, downplays Duvalier and dismisses Aristide

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Last week, the PBS television interview program *Tavis Smiley* featured two half-hour evenings with Hollywood actor Sean Penn, a leading force in humanitarian relief work in Haiti since the Jan. 12, 2010 earthquake. Subtitled by the program as an ‘Actor/Humanitarian,’ Penn strongly defended the new neo-colonial order established in Haiti through the foreign-sponsored exclusion election of 2010/11 and the foreign-led, post-quake “*reconstruction*” plan spearheaded by Bill Clinton.

Penn made no mention of the foreign military occupation force increasingly denounced by Haitians, the United Nations Mission to Stabilize Haiti (MINUSTAH). (Just this week, UN soldiers in Port-au-Prince and Gonaïves were once again accused of sexual abuse of Haitian minors, a recurring phenomenon for which none have been brought to justice.)

Most notable was Penn’s strong praise for Haitian President Michel Martelly, whom he lauded for “decisive leadership” and making “great strides,” although he never named any Martelly programs that so impressed him. “For us that were there on the ground, it was really clear that [Martelly] was the candidate that [the Haitian people] were looking to have be their president,” Penn said, claiming the population enjoyed an “enormous morale boost in a kind of historical (*sic*) way when they were able to challenge the status quo” by electing Martelly.

It apparently does not trouble Sean Penn that less than 25% of the Haitian electorate took part in the vote. Many Haitians shunned the foreign-imposed, fraud-filled and violence-marred ‘selection’ that excluded the Fanmi Lavalas party of former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, as all elections have done since the 2004 coup d’etat against him.

Mr. Penn also defended the Organization of American States (OAS) after it brazenly and shamelessly meddled in Haiti’s sovereign electoral process to bump out of the second round the candidate of former President René Préval’s party in favor of Martelly. Mr. Penn called the OAS’s take-over of the election a “look-over” and applauded U.S. and OAS threats against Haiti’s government and electoral council as benignly “able to ultimately influence what I think was the legitimate inclusion of candidate Martelly who then became President Martelly.” (The Cuban government accurately dubs the OAS Washington’s ‘Ministry of Colonial Affairs.’)

It would truly be “historic” if the U.S. contributed to promoting democracy and “challenging the status quo” in Latin America, but this is hardly what took place.

Most shockingly, Penn called for “reconciliation” with former dictator Jean-Claude ‘Baby Doc’ Duvalier, who returned to Haiti last January. Haitian citizens and human rights groups are working earnestly to have the former tyrant placed on trial for crimes against humanity and embezzling hundreds of millions of dollars from the Haitian treasury during his 15 year reign.

Today, Mr. Penn said, “there is a sense of truth and reconciliation that is not formalized but it is understood and accepted.” He went further in saying, “there is an inherent loyalty in Haiti society that forgives a lot... It’s really not for us, Americans, to make that judgement about whether a culture is willing to reintegrate people.”

Mr. Penn infers this forgiveness because in a posh Pétionville restaurant recently, he saw that Duvalier was not “accosted” by patrons while the former ‘President for Life’ dined. Could the composition of the bourgeois restaurant’s clientele or Duvalier’s impressive security detail have anything to do with the lack of flack he receives during his regular but unauthorized outings from supposed house arrest imposed by an investigating judge one year ago? (Last week, the judge warned Duvalier about his brazen disregard of the court limitations placed on his movements.)

Program host Tavis Smiley, to his credit, did not want “to put Duvalier and Aristide in the same sentence,” because, “one is a dictator, the other is democratically elected.” But then he proceeded to liken them, saying “both of them get run out of the country... With regard to Aristide, depending where one comes down, he is run out by the Haitian people or he is run out and escorted out by the U.S. government.” One would have hoped for a little less agnosticism from Tavis Smiley, who has been speaking across the U.S. with progressive professor Cornell West.

In response, Mr. Penn argued, “As for a political threat, I think it’s very understood that Duvalier represents none,” later specifying that, “as a presidential candidate [he] does not pose a threat,” as if that were ever in question.

Perhaps the best reply to Mr. Penn comes from a Jan. 23 open letter to President Martelly by about two dozen Duvalier regime victims and Haitian human rights groups who, “note with concern and indignation, after one year, Jean-Claude Duvalier is not worried at all, even though he is being prosecuted by the state and complaints from victims. The co-authors and accomplices of his crimes are not worried. The case has not progressed satisfactorily in terms of the need for justice. We object in the most formal manner against this tendency to banalize his dictatorship and disregard the legitimate claims for justice by people who have suffered and continue to suffer in silence in the face of the arrogance and threats of those for whom the law is just a joke... Mr. President, the state authorities cannot continue to play Pontius Pilate.”

Meanwhile, with regard to Aristide, Mr. Penn said he hopes the former president “will have a productive contribution to make **outside of politics**” [author’s emphasis].

“In Haiti, he’s a little bit history,” said Mr. Penn of Aristide, echoing many U.S. State Department statements. He then back-tracked a little saying Aristide “has an influence” and his Lavalas Party “a particularly strong influence in Haiti.” But then he quickly turned the interview

back to President Martelly, who he praised for “quick learning,” and for being “extremely shrewd and just practical” in dealing with the former presidents.

“Haiti is not the kind of country that can afford to do the kind of righteous accountability that we have a high responsibility to in our own government, and one that we very rarely fulfill,” Mr. Penn said.

In the interview’s second instalment, Mr. Penn effusively praised Bill Clinton as “without a doubt the most significant foreign player in Haiti” who is “the great hope of partners of Haiti.”

“When people are critical of President Clinton in this, I think what they have to understand is that most of the billions of dollars that were raised, that they complain has not yet been spent, would not have been in existence if President Clinton had not been there to encourage raising those funds,” Mr. Penn argued.

At the same time, the actor boldly and accurately asserted that “Haiti would have been better off today had there never been a single NGO there in these last 30 years,” that the NGOs have been “a primarily destructive force.”

Unfortunately, Sean Penn is as smitten with Clinton as he is with Martelly. So he concludes that NGOs are now doing a good job and “beginning to align in a way” that is effective, “largely because of the leadership of President Clinton.” In short, Clinton and his deputy Cheryl Mills have reformed the NGO world and contributed mightily to the “miracle of what has happened in only two years.”

Mr. Penn’s pro-U.S. and pro-Martelly positions will not surprise those who read his lengthy response to Janet Reitman’s devastating exposé of the NGO community in *Rolling Stone* last September. In that letter to the magazine, the indisputably talented actor explains how he had to adopt an anti-“rich guy” posture when addressing “a group of pro-Aristide, anti-foreign ‘community leaders’” in the IDP camp he helped set up on the grounds of Haiti’s sole country club.

He also called Duvalier’s January 2011 return “anti-climactic” and a “distraction,” much like Aristide’s “inflammatory” March 2011 return.

Mr. Penn lashed out at Reitman for “dismiss[ing] Martelly as a right-wing militarist in the pocket of the private sector and the United States government,” which is “an assertion entrenched in the lust for endless struggle and the imposition of American norms with no practical regard for a Haitian context.”

He also supports Martelly’s push for “a new Haitian military” (in reality, a resurrection of the old coup-making army) because it will supposedly replace the “foreign faces, helmets, weapons and APCs of United Nations peacekeepers,” although he salutes their “exceptional work.” (A study last year prepared by Robert Muggah, a director of the Small Arms Survey, and others reported near-universal opposition among Haitians to Martelly’s planned army.)

Mr. Penn then denounces Haiti’s parliamentarians for their “sabotage techniques” (i.e. opposition to Martelly’s first two ultra-conservative PM nominees), charging they are “glued together by the

threat tactics of a former Fanmi Lavalas party president, whose untimely return was principally facilitated and encouraged by forces outside of Haiti.” (Apparently, Mr. Penn did not read *Haiti Liberté’s* WikiLeaks-based articles on how the U.S., France, Canada and the Vatican all sought to thwart Aristide’s return and how thousands of Haitians turned out to greet him.)

Mr. Penn rails against the Lavalas “demagogues” and their call for “romantic reparations over tangible repair” and the fact that they “so vilify the families of the bourgeoisie that the human construct of progress has been reduced to a protectionist pissing contest.”

Sadly, Mr. Penn appears to be lending his progressive credentials (which include commendable support for the governments of Cuba and Venezuela) to bolster a rightist, demagogic critique against NGOs made by Martelly, his entourage, and his international celebrity supporters, including the former Governor General of Canada, Michaëlle Jean (see this author’s story on the latter on Rabble.ca).

The right-wing’s critique of NGOs is distinguished by how it ignores and covers up any explanation of the origin of the ‘Republic of NGOs’ in Haiti. Penn *et al* treat *the NGOs alone* as the problem and conveniently ignore *the political masters* behind the scenes. “Suspicion and cynicism toward U.S. policy in Haiti have shameful historic validity, but it is a new day,” Penn concluded in his letter to the *Rolling Stone*.

It is no accident that the NGOs have become so prominent in Haiti. They have been deliberately used by the imperial powers to weaken and undermine the political sovereignty of the Haitian people. They have been financed and promoted to deliver services, replacing a role that properly belongs to the sovereign government.

The true allies of the Haitian people, including many international organizations and NGOs, are those who recognize the nefarious intervention of imperialism for what it is and act to counter it in words or in deeds. Sean Penn, regrettably, lends his celebrity and humanitarian spirit to the wrong side of this equation during this crucial chapter in Haiti’s history.

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