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## The Accidental Activist

By [ZOE HELLER](#)



Paolo Pellegrin CAUSE CÉLÈBRE — Sean Penn surveys the conditions in Haiti and coordinates with his relief organization.

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On a hot morning in January, at the Pétionville Internally Displaced Person camp in suburban Port-au-Prince, Haiti, a four-wheel dirt bike pulled up outside the tent hospital, bearing an elderly woman with a deep gash in her cheek. While a group of medics assisted the patient inside, Sean Penn ambled over from under a tree where he had been having a meeting with one of his camp workers. He walked with a slightly bowlegged cowboy gait, a walkie-talkie crackling at his waistband, a cigarette dangling from his mouth. Having glanced into the tent and ascertained that the situation was in hand, he turned his rather dour gaze on a newly arrived reporter.

Penn has never had conventional movie-star looks, but he does have the arguably superior gift of a magnificently interesting face. When he is in grooming mode, he tends to shellac his hair into a high, rather splendid, Little Richard-style pompadour, but today, as on most days in Haiti, the hair had been allowed to collapse into a dusty quiff. With his big, arrow-shaped nose and his heavy eyelids hanging at half-mast, he emanated the slightly sinister allure of a fairground carnny. “You ready to see the camp?” he muttered.

The Pétionville camp, which Penn’s aid group, J/P Haitian Relief Organization (J/P HRO), has been running since last March, sits on the golf course of a former country club. (Some of the old staff can

still be found lurking in the clubhouse, gazing out at the devastation like Alpatych, the loyal retainer in “War and Peace,” after the army has laid waste to his master’s estate.)

Since the first homeless Haitians started arriving here in the days following the quake, the camp has grown into a vast tent city of 50,000. It now has a school, a market, two hospitals, a movie theater, countless salons de beaute and its own red-light district. As Penn led the way along the former golf-cart trails, past women lathering themselves up over basins of water and men playing dominos, he delivered a lecture on the issues facing post-earthquake Haiti. It was a rapid-fire, digressive monologue, studded with the acronyms of the aid world — P.A.H.O., W.H.O., C.R.S., O.C.H.A. — and ranging over a broad number of topics: the merits of the controversial cholera vaccine, the report from the Organization of American States on the November elections, the damaging effects of UV rays on tent tarps, the complex but fundamentally noble character of President René Préval, the relative merits of guns over fire extinguishers as defensive weapons. (Penn sometimes carries a Glock, but the fire extinguisher, he claims, is a far more efficient tool for crowd control.)

After about 45 minutes, we reached the western edge of the camp and began climbing a series of steep slopes. Penn broke off from what he was saying and turned to point out the view. Before us lay the patchwork sprawl of the camp, the battered cityscape of Port-au-Prince and, in the smoggy distance, mountains and ocean. “Look at that!” he said. “It’s beautiful, right? Right? That’s the thing! You get the air cleaned up in this city, and it’d be extraordinary. And the whole country’s like this — more so, even. That’s why I never have a doubt — nee-e-ver have a doubt — that this country can be successful. It’s too tangible, too containable to not do it. And the change is going to come of this earthquake.”



Anton Corbijn LONE WOLF — Penn in Los Angeles on Jan. 23.

WHEN Penn first showed up in Port-au-Prince in January of last year, with a DC-4 full of medics and emergency supplies, and a \$1 million pledge of support from the Bosnian-born philanthropist and entrepreneur Diana Jenkins, the reaction was decidedly skeptical. With his long history of prickliness and pugnacity, Penn has never been a beloved celebrity. His growing interest in political activism and “citizen journalism” over the last decade — his sympathetic interviews with Hugo Chávez and Raúl Castro, his passionate protests against the Iraq war — have tended to depress his Q ratings still further, fixing him in the minds of many Americans as a tiresome pinko bloviator.

“Everyone was telling me, ‘He’s just in it for the photo op,’ ” recalls David Perez, an American philanthropist who was involved in the earliest Haitian relief efforts, and who later went to work as chief operating officer for J/P HRO. “The people on the board of my charity didn’t like the things Sean had said about Iraq and whatever, so they were telling me to stay away from him. Sophia Martelly [the wife of Haiti’s current presidential candidate Michel Martelly] told me that he had turned up at the airport with a film crew.” Tellingly, the same unfounded claim — that Penn had brought cameramen with him to document his derring-do — had been made in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. (To this day, there are people who swear Penn had his own D.P. with him in his rowboat.)

You did not, however, have to object to Penn’s politics, or question his motives, to have some doubts about how useful he could be in Haiti. He had come with no medical expertise and no experience with N.G.O.’s. He did not speak Creole or French. He had two legal cases pending against him (a federal case relating to his embargo-breaking trips to Cuba and a criminal case relating to a violent run-in with a paparazzo), and he was going through a divorce from his wife of 14 years, Robin Wright. To make matters more complicated, his philanthropic partnership with Jenkins began to disintegrate almost as soon as he landed. “Let’s say that I didn’t come here with an agreement to share decisions,” he says now. “I came here to make the impact as I saw fit to do it. That deal changed within the first week. We went through a little shy of half of her commitment, and then we decided to part ways.”

Over a year later, Penn is still in Haiti and his initial ragtag group of medics and fixers has grown into a team of 15 international workers, 235 Haitians and hundreds of rotating medical volunteers. In addition to coordinating sanitation, lighting, water and security for the Pétionville camp, J/P HRO runs two primary care facilities, a women’s health center, a cholera isolation unit and a 24-hour emergency room. It has pioneered a rubble removal program that has become a model for other N.G.O.’s, and it has developed one of the most effective emergency response systems in the country, using state-of-the-art bio-surveillance techniques and helicopters to reach cholera-stricken communities in remote areas.

The story of the last 14 months in Haiti has been, by and large, a disheartening one. Less than half of the \$5.8 billion pledged for recovery has been dispersed (and much of that has gone toward debt relief). Rubble still fills the streets of Port-au-Prince. Of the 1.5 million Haitians left homeless by the quake, half still live in camps. But in an international relief effort characterized largely by paralysis and dysfunction, J/P HRO stands out as one of the rare success stories. By begging and borrowing, schmoozing and shouting, Penn has managed to build one of the most efficient aid outfits working in Haiti today.

In doing so, he has gained some unlikely fans. The commanders of the United States Army’s 82nd Airborne Division who were using the Pétionville Country Club as their operational base when Penn first turned up there had their initial doubts about fraternizing with a bolshie movie star, but they have since become ardent J/P HRO boosters. “What surprised me the most about Sean,” says Lt. Gen. P. K. “Ken” Keen, military deputy commander of the U.S. Southern Command, “was how he went about learning the humanitarian assistance business. There was no ‘how-to’ book for that.

You want to get stuff through the transportation networks? You want to get stuff out of the warehouses? You want to collaborate with the U.N.? How do you do all that? He was always willing to listen, learn and work with everyone.”

Brad Horwitz, the founder and C.E.O. of the communications company Comcel, Haiti’s largest U.S. investor, has provided J/P HRO with logistical support and all manner of resources over the last year. “Sean’s politics and mine are completely opposed,” he says. “His go left. Mine go right. But politics are kind of irrelevant in this. Comcel can only pick so many horses to back, and J/P HRO have shown real staying power. He’s been very good at figuring out and managing relationships. He’s also been extraordinarily efficient in using the resources he gets. I know if I provide J/P HRO with stuff, it won’t get wasted.”

Perhaps most telling of all is the respect that Penn has earned from seasoned aid workers. Dr. Louise Ivers, who is chief of mission for Partners in Health, Haiti, says of Penn: “His newness to this work has actually helped him in some ways. He doesn’t have misconceptions about what works and what doesn’t. He sees a problem, he talks to people, and he figures out solutions. As clichéd as it sounds, I think he really gives a damn about the Haitian people.”

“I’ve known Sean for more than 25 years, and I’m stunned,” says the musician David Baerwald. “He’s always had a tremendous desire to help people. But who knew he had this bizarre skill set? I mean, he may actually be better at this than acting.”

When Penn entered the shabby villa that serves as J/P HRO’s operations center and staff residence, a line of people were waiting to talk to him. A man sitting at a bank of computers in the living room had a jubilant announcement to make about a new cholera grant. A mechanic needed him to know that the walkie-talkies were running out of juice. A woman emerged from the kitchen with news that “Anderson Cooper 360” couldn’t do a taped interview that day and would need to do it live. And so on.



Paolo Pellegrin BATTLE STATIONS — Penn and his staff first worked out of tents. A rundown rented house now serves as their base of operations.

For much of 2010, Penn and his staff slept in and worked out of tents. They moved to these new headquarters after their encampment was destroyed in a storm last September, but their living conditions are still far from lavish. Most of the staff camp in the garden, and Penn's bedroom, while it does boast a ceiling, has the dimensions — and ambience — of a walk-in closet. Penn prides himself on running a lean operation. J/P HRO's overhead is a modest 3.2 percent of donor funds. Permanent international staff routinely work 18-hour days.

When accepting a humanitarian award in Los Angeles last October, Penn summed up his managerial style as “vitriol” and “bossiness.” His staff does not rush to disagree with the characterization. Lauren Raczak, J/P HRO's political affairs officer, laughed merrily when I asked her if Penn was a demanding boss. “He's like our big dysfunctional grandpa. The other day I said how pleased I was that there'd been no violence in the camp during the elections, and he started shouting, ‘That's not good enough!’ He meant I was setting my standards too low. That kind of sucked. I really didn't like him at that moment. But I respect him, I see how much he cares about this thing, so I put up with the temper tantrums.”

Penn claims to be calmer now than he was. “For the first six months, I was country director of this thing, and I was basically pretending I knew what the hell I was doing — yelling a lot and getting things done with blackmail. Now I've got a lot of really experienced, great people around me, and they can do the same things, cutting through stuff just as fast, but in slightly more, uh, legitimate ways.”

It's fair to say, however, that his standard M.O. remains pretty ferocious. Much of the way he conducts himself as a leader has been defined by his intense opposition to “the gigantic boys' network” of the other N.G.O.'s and his impatience with their bureaucratic procedures.

In moments of great displeasure, Penn's lip actually curls and his eyelids droop so low that he begins to look stoned on his own contempt. One afternoon, on a trip out to Delmas 32, the neighborhood in which J/P HRO initiated its rubble removal program, he fulminated against the complacent, lazy and otherwise obstructive practices of the N.G.O. world: at the preciousness of groups like Médecins Sans Frontières, which refuse on principle to work with the military, “even though the military is the single most effective organization that's been here to date!”; at the pompous blustering in aid-group cluster meetings, “where everyone's trying to show how much they know, but no one's just reporting their actions, their problems and, you know, figuring out who can help”; at the feebleness of charities that drop out of tough camp management work on the grounds that camps are not “sustainable” projects. “Sustainability! It's the ultimate cliché — and the ultimate excuse for N.G.O.'s that just want to move on to the next trendy, fundable job.”

When we reached Delmas 32, he proudly pointed out the streets that had, until recently, been 12 feet high with debris. “This was a devastated area with some gang problems, it was an area that needed to be kissed, but U.N. ops had refused even to inspect it, for ‘security reasons.’ We just came in, talked to the people, and after that, it was butter. By the time the U.N. got around to saying they had a plan for this area, we had already done it.” He grimaced and wiped his dusty hands on his pants. “I once said to Charles Bukowski, ‘You're so irreverent toward your public, why do you even value sharing stuff? Why do you even write? Is it just that you get off at being so great at it?’ He said, ‘No, it was not that I was so great. It was that the rest was so bad. Somebody had to do it decently.’ And I thought, That's me! That's me with acting, with film. And that's me with this thing now. Some people have said, ‘The danger of Sean Penn is that he makes it look as if anyone can do this.’ And my answer to them is, ‘No, I just make it look like you can't.’ ”

At moments like these, it has to be said, Penn sounds perilously like the dotty narcissist that is his caricature. They don't occur often, his little bursts of bloviation. Nine-tenths of the time, he is sane

and charming and capable of conversing on any number of subjects in an eminently reasonable manner. But every now and then, it seems, the bombastic devil in him cuts loose. He will express the hope on CBS's "Sunday Morning" that all his critics "die screaming of rectal cancer." He will demand that one of his particular enemies at U.N.-Habitat "be impeached and gotten the hell out of Haiti." He will take it upon himself to denounce Wyclef Jean's presidential candidacy on CNN, prompting Jean to publicly accuse him of drug use. He will predict in self-dramatizing fashion that he will "end up shot in the back of the head, but it won't be by a Haitian, it will be by another N.G.O."

Penn rarely admits to any regret about his more excessive statements. He hasn't burned bridges with anyone who really matters to him or to the organization, he says. In any case, diplomacy is overrated.

"Well, but the line about rectal cancer, Sean. That was a bit — "

"Yeah, yeah, that was maybe not the wisest choice of words at the time. I mean, if you actually watch it and don't read it, I was joking. It was clear that I was making a joke."

In many ways, Penn seems to relish the animosity that his intemperate style inspires. He is deeply invested, to be sure, in the notion of being a good man. All the poetry and prose that he is fondest of quoting tends to celebrate the same romantic ideal of swashbuckling benevolence. ("You can have a barter system," he told me at one point, "you can have advanced capitalism, you can read Ayn Rand or Joseph Stiglitz. I don't care, because I don't understand it anyway. What I do understand is that if your neighbor is screwed, you've got to help him.") Yet, for all his sentimental attachment to the idea of being a heroic altruist, he is, it seems, equally attached to the idea of being a hostile outsider — to hating the world and having it hate him back. He is not, he will sternly insist, a good person. "I'm not. I mean" — he lowers his voice, as if to impart a secret — "I'm really not. I have great



Paolo Pellegrin THE ROAD NOT TAKEN — Being warm and sweet is not Penn's forte, but his efforts may end up doing a lot of good in the world.

moments when I feel very connected and loving toward humankind, but I never have a good moment toward human beings. Unless someone shares my angst, I don't even know who they are and then we're just angst sharers. That's the way it is. I love humankind; I don't like humans. I don't get along with people very well. I never did."

Penn's combination of hostility and principled fraternal feeling makes for a very odd, angry sort of philanthropy. It is probably not a sort that is massively appealing to the American public. As a rule, we prefer it when our celebrity philanthropists make us feel warm and sweet about giving, and being warm and sweet is not Penn's forte. Still, it would be a pity if the spikiness of Penn's manners were allowed to obscure the worth of his deeds. He is never going to have the creamy charm of a George Clooney or the unflappable good spirits of a Brad Pitt. But it is quite possible that he will end up doing more palpable good in the world than either of those admirable men.

"If I wasn't here, I know what I would be doing, and it's probably got to do with designs on women," he told me shortly before I left Haiti. "Probably it would be reduced to that. Or surfing. Or seeing my kids smile. That's about it. I don't really care about anything else. But you sit here in a situation like this, and you feel part of the history of the world. The world is out of its mind with stupidity and the worship of stupidity. You're either willing to be part of all time, or you're going to limit yourself to being part of the current time. And then you end up flying from L.A. to Chicago to celebrate yourself being the sexiest man of the year on People magazine's cover. And, you know, O.K. — we should have relief work for that person."

In February, I met Penn one more time, as he was passing through New York on his way to a fundraising tour in Europe. He was looking rough. He had attended a Haiti benefit the previous evening, and it had ended up being what he called "kind of a rugged night." His hotel room was a smoky mess, and he was in a dark, hungover mood. His hair was standing up, like the splayed pages of a book. He was sporting a little Mephistophelean beard that made him look like Matthew Poncelet in "Dead Man Walking."

He talked about running into Wyclef Jean, how President Préval had brokered a peace agreement between them. "Haiti is a foxhole, and we're all in it," he shrugged. "I find the things that he said loathsome, and were we operating in a different area, I might hold a grudge. But under circumstances like these, it seems so meaningless." He paused, gave a crooked smile. "Besides, he didn't get his presidential run, and that was my only investment."

He ordered a cheeseburger and lit a cigarette. "When dealing with something like this, an organization in which you're playing a leadership role, you get pulled in a lot of directions. People's natures define themselves and become spiritually burdensome, so you can have an awful lot of hostility toward people. I like to squint my eyes and see them as a big group. When I see their faces in the crowd, I'm not good with it."

But surely not all the faces in the crowd were spiritually burdensome to him? Surely there were some people it gladdened his heart to see?

He thought for a moment. "Yes," he said. "There are. They're usually under 5 years old."

*This post has been revised to reflect the following correction:*

***Correction: March 26, 2011***

*The cover article this weekend about the actor Sean Penn and his charitable efforts in Haiti refers incorrectly to his relief group. It is known legally as J/P Haitian Relief Organization, not Jenkins/*

*Penn Haitian Relief Organization. (When the group first came together, the J referred to Diana Jenkins, a philanthropist and entrepreneur, a co-founder.)*