

World Class Podcast

Sean Penn on Ukraine's Superpower

January 31, 2024

This transcript has been edited for clarity.

McFaul: You're listening to World Class from the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University. We bring you in depth expertise on international affairs from Stanford's campus straight to you.

I'm your host, Michael McFaul, the director of the Freeman Spogli Institute.

Today I'm excited to share with you a conversation I had with actor Sean Penn. While you may know him from films like "Mystic River," "Thin Red Line," and "Milk," he's also worked behind the camera as a director. As Russia was preparing its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Sean Penn was in Ukraine filming the documentary that would become "Superpower," a unique look at the days leading up to and immediately following the outbreak of war.

Mr. Penn joined me at Stanford for a special screening and discussion of the film, where he shared what it was like to be an accidental witness to history, and the inspiration he continues to take from President Zelenskyy, Ukrainians, and their fight for freedom.

Natalia Antelava, editor-in-chief of Coda Story and a John S. Knight Journalism fellow here at Stanford, moderated the conversation.

Here's Sean Penn.

[BEGIN EVENT AUDIO]

Antelava: Sean, why Ukraine? So, I'm very glad that that's the topic you've taken, because for me it's very existential. I come from a country that is not going to exist if Ukraine does not win the war. But why Ukraine, for you?

Penn: It was an accident. I described some of this in the film, so I don't want to be redundant. Billy Smith and I had started a documentary. I had made a couple of trips to Syria, and in one of them had gotten access to Assad. And there are filmmakers and documentarians — I think immediately if someone like Matthew Heineman — who are capable of a certain kind of documentary that I would never have I would never bring "value added" in the same way. My kind of skill set to the degree I have one is in personalization and interpretation. I wouldn't call

it journalism or even straight documentary, but like something more of a person is interested in listening and curious and has some access that I can share with other people.

And so, what's fundamental in that is that I be trusting and trustworthy, and trusted and trustworthy. I had begun that with Assad with him knowing and with me being very clear that I was going to come in with a blank slate. He's very talented at saying the things one wants to hear, and ultimately the gatekeepers would crunch that freedom. And when I realized that that was not going to be available, I didn't think I had anything to offer, and we backed out of that one.

So then we moved on to something else, we started doing a series of other things, but then Billy came to me with this thing. He had met a significant friend of President Zelenskyy's at a time when I would say that what I knew was very little about the Orange Revolution and way too little about Maidan and annexation of Crimea. And I knew that I shared that minimal knowledge with most Americans.

And so the loud things I knew was that the President had that unfortunate phone call with President Trump, and that he was a comic actor-turned-president, and we thought we'd follow this kind of interesting story that would have been a lighthearted take. And it was just an accident of timing that it led into this story.

Then, as you saw in the film . . . I think if I'm going to answer this with any brevity, which I will now do . . . it's a function of this feeling that I think is pervasive, not only in commentary in the news cycles, but in all of our lives and all of our consciousness and all of our children's consciousness that unity is an elusive thing for us in a country called the United States of America. And that it isn't the luxury; it's human need. And to be in Ukraine, and to feel that kind of unity was big medicine. And then, in any way that we would accuse ourselves of principles, I aspire to the idea that mine aligned with theirs, and I found it familiar to whatever the best of me might be. And that's why Ukraine.

Anteleva: I found watching the film more much more recently, in the last few days, was almost chilling compared to just six months ago. When I saw it before for the first time, it felt like it was a different era. It feels like the tide has gone down and things have really changed. The optimism about the counter offensive and just a general sort of hope for Ukraine's victory now seems to be in a very different place. How is that for you?

Penn: Well, it's funny. As you know, I had this conversation with some journalists earlier today, and I hadn't done any kind of public speaking about the film for several months and was distracted with my day job on something.

And I didn't realize just how deeply discouraged I was. I would say that I find myself believing in many Americans. I find myself increasingly embracing of anyone who commits to service. And if that person happens to be more conservative than I, that I'm more interested in people who commit to service, in general, than I am to people who are like-minded with me.

I would like to promote the idea that it's a good thing for America to admit that it has no fucking idea what it is right now. And that it has no entitled inheritance of the best of its aspiration and that it has to reactivate anew, or it won't exist in any way that matters.

And that's significantly about what could be called “cautionary,” or otherwise “cowardly,” lack of bold support for Ukraine. The kind of will for silly ideas like we can't walk and chew gum at the same time because there's a renewed crisis in Gaza and Israel. There's no reason why we shouldn't be able to expect of ourselves as a country and of our leadership [sic] should be able to approach these things with the lessons learned, rather than repeat the mistakes made.

Antelava: Are you disappointed? You sound disappointed. Are you disappointed in the Biden administration?

Penn: I am what I call obligated optimist, because I have two children. And because I am in such an incredibly fortunate position to be able to wake up in the morning and see how magical and beautiful the world is without having to duck most of the time or to worry about . . .

Antelava: You're ducking the question, though. Are you disappointed in the administration?

Penn: Am I disappointed in this administration?

Antelava: Yes, and what it's done for Ukraine?

Penn: I want to say this this way. All things being equal, or predictable, I'm going to vote for President Biden. And I'm not sure it matters who wins, at the same time. I think I want a world where no matter what party is represented, that if Afghanistan happens, that president is removed. And instead I live in a world where I'm going to fucking vote for him, and I am discouraged by that.

Antelava: Hmm.

Penn: I'll get happier and funnier.

Antelava: Michael, I'd love to bring you in.

McFaul: I don't actually want to go in. They all want to listen to Sean! Keep going! Keep asking him questions!

Antelava: He's also ducking! Everyone's ducking!

Penn: No, no.

Anteleva: Circling back to Ukraine for a second here. And again, suddenly things are looking grim; Zelenskyy is suddenly not the poster boy that he was just a few months ago.

The Middle East has changed the equation; the aid is not coming fast enough. Have we missed the boat? Is it still possible to save Ukraine?

McFaul: Well, first of all, I just want to say thank you, Sean, for making this film. Before you guys got here, I said to this audience — we're talking about Biden and what Biden should do and what Biden shouldn't do — and I implored everybody here, just do something yourself.

Right? We're a free country. We can do things. We here at Stanford are doing things. By the way, I'd never seen the film until tonight; you had half a dozen people in your film that were fellows of ours here. I didn't know that, but our faculty know that. So, thank you! You found all the smartest people in Ukraine.

You did that, and I just want to say thank you for that because showing this film is going to make people think about these harder topics.

Penn: And to that, I was, in the above the line group, the least valuable player in casting that group. It was actually my partners like Billy and others who guided me, because I really came from a blank slate. Early on, I say in the film that now it was time for me to do what I do and listen to smart people.

And thank you for all your years of service and providing a sane analysis that us surfers from Malibu can understand.

McFaul: Well, let me take I want to take a stab at your question. Because I also dodged your question by just praising Sean.

Is it a tougher time? I give a lot of talks on Ukraine right? Two hundred, I think, in the last two years. And I go to conferences all the time. As I said before, I was in Ukraine in September, and just four days ago was in Vilnius, Lithuania, at a conference with the leaders of that part of the world.

You got a great quote in your film; I can't remember who said it but . . . oh yeah it was Yermak! . . . who said, "You guys got to realize," — he was talking to you, but I want you all to hear this — "if we don't stop them here, then it's next Moldova, and then it's next, Lithuania, etc., Poland."

And I'm just telling you folks: I just came from Lithuania four days ago with the leadership of that country and foreign ministers from that region. And that's exactly what they said. And the imagery you have here . . . we don't know what moment in history we are, folks. Lots of analogies in Vilnius were from the 1930s, as you invoked in your film. But we don't know what year it is in that.

And I would just remind you, to state the obvious, that if they don't win there, we have all these problems everywhere. And thank you for capturing that in the film.

The second thing I want to say is: as all your Ukrainians in this film said, and then they say to me every day, it's not like they have a choice to fight or not. We have a choice to pass the assistance bill, or not, for the implications we talked about. But they will continue to fight. They'll continue to fight; they fought before us, as you showed brilliantly when you showed those Molotov cocktail. That was before the HIMARs got there. That was before the Patriots got there. That was before the F-16s and the M-1 tanks. And if we withdraw that stuff, they're still going to fight.

So, we need to remember that. It just means that more Ukrainians are going to die because we pulled back. That's first thing to remember. They're not stopping, and you captured that brilliantly in this film.

Second: yes, it's not as positive as the moments of the counter offensive a year ago. And I remember giving talks and momentum seemed on our side. At events we had here and in Europe, it seemed like this was inevitable that this was moving in the right direction. The mood now is different because the facts on the ground are different.

And in my own view, we made mistakes. I've said this 1000 times; we've made mistakes by not going all in in the beginning. I wrote a piece a year ago saying no more incrementalism; incrementalism is going to lead to deadlock, deadlock and stalemate is then going to lose the interest of Americans because you know what? Americans like winners. We don't we don't like to stalemate stuff, right? And tragically, that's exactly where we're at.

Having said that, because the Ukrainians can't quit and are going to fight no matter what, so we've got to get in that fight with them in a better way.

First and foremost, we need to pass the assistance bill. Second, bigger and better sanctions. Third, keep in the fight. But also remember: this this notion that the Ukrainians are losing right now? I want to disabuse you of that. That is a ridiculous comment that many people on TV are making right now.

Think about this: if you met with Mr. Putin — I've actually met with Putin many times. I saw you in 2001; you met with him, too. So, think about this: remember what his goals were, folks. He said them: we're going to decapitate — he called it “de-Nazify” Ukraine. Has he done that? No, they're still there. They're still fighting. He said, demilitarize Ukraine. Has he done that? No. Ukraine's more militarized today than ever before. Unite the Slavs: that's what he say in that speech that you quoted, right? Because Ukrainians — and I know that a lot of Ukrainians here — are “just Russians with accents.”

And so that's the message: “We're going to unite all Ukrainians and all the Slavs.” And has he done that? No!

Even his smaller goal . . . remember, he used to call it the “special military operation.” Then he had to call it the “special military operation zashchitu Donbassa” or “in the defense of Donbas” to take those four territories to make them part of Russia. That's what all the Russian maps say today. Have they done that? No.

In 2023, do you know how much territory they took? I don't know . . . Ambassador Pifer, do you know? 2%?

Pifer [from audience]: 100 kilometers.

McFaul: 100 kilometers! And what did they have to do to do that? 315,000 casualties? Countless tanks lost. Billions of dollars spent. That's victory? I don't see it that way.

I think the defense of the territory over the last 12 months was victory and it was our — not you — our collective in the West framing of this thing. I don't know who invented this word “counter offensive” and then said, “We need a counter offensive in Place X.” I know it wasn't President Zelensky; I know that for a fact.

And then we all watch these maps as if we're watching some football game and it's the third down and eight and if they don't get a first down now, the game's over. That was a really bad framing of the situation. By the way: In wars, there's not one counter offensive, tragically. There are counter *offensives*.

And so, I just want to push back a little on this idea that Ukraine is losing. You can look at it from the way I just described it, and it feels like they are doing much better than anybody two years ago predicted.

Antelava: No one thought that the country would still exist days before the invasion happened, obviously. And there is another way of looking at it, too, which is apart from Ukraine and what's happening globally. Putin has played the Global South card really, really well. He the narrative,

McFaul: Kind of. Kind of. I don't know. Kind of.

Antelava: Hm m m m m.

McFaul: I want to get back to Sean Penn.

Penn: And I was going to say what he said!

Antelava: Difficult to moderate this.

Sean, what do you think? There is no question that the administration could be doing more. But where I see a clearly missed opportunity is when I talk to people across the U.S., in the U.S.,

people don't make the connection between their lives and the importance of that war. It may be obvious to someone like you, or you, and me, but most people that I talk to do not make . . .

McFaul: The opinion polls don't support . . .

Antelava: They feel the Middle East and Israel and Gaza deeply, but they do not relate to the war in Ukraine in the same . . .

Penn: Yeah, but you can track that directly to Putin's visit to Tehran. This was not just about buying drones. This is this is what started World War I, with merchant ships being fired upon in Yemen. This is what happened October 7. All of it is interconnected. There's no question.

It seems completely naive to me, and it should be talked about more, because I've talked to people who know a lot more than I do about this. And when I suggest this, generally there is a consensus on it, that Putin is at direct war today with the United States. And he is using proxies which you know, are headquartered in Tehran. And that's where we are. And to blind ourselves to that is ludicrous.

The other part of this though, with the United States, and with all kinds of special interest groups — and this is something to look at that Laurence Tribe has brought to sunlight. This goes back to what we can do, and what we can do while we illuminate a better idea related to something I know far less about which is Gaza and Israel.

We talk about “follow the money.” But we usually talk about following money when we're looking for corruption in authority. And we should also look at follow the money when we're looking at our own corruption. And in our own corruption, we get hammered with, you know, whether it's through taxation or where American dollars are going. Fuck American dollars.

There are \$30 billion in frozen Russian assets today in American control. That \$30 billion would likely trigger in our allies in NATO and the EU, \$300 billion dollars that the President can put into support without the assistance program, now.

I sat at a lunch one day in Cannes, France. I had a person very close to me in my life who had grown up in an in a town that was in the Soviet era of Ukraine, Kinshasa, and who pre-criminal Russian invasion in 2022 was very pro-Putin, pro-Russian, identified as Russian. They don't today, like so much of the East is also not identifying that wat after 2014.

There were a lot of Russians also living in Cannes. And their children went to school together, so she had girlfriends who were pro-Russian Russians living in France. And so, I was asked to a lunch and asked to maybe not talk politics.

McFaul: Haha!

Penn: And I was doing my best.

Antelava: Yeah. How did that go?

Penn: Externally, just fine. Internally, the story is that there was a young girl, the daughter of one of these pro-Russian Ukrainians who I knew was dating an arms dealer, and I was breathing to get through. And then the young girl, the daughter, innocent to all this . . . but this is where I think being sober understands that even innocents have to pay some price.

And she was talking about whether she was going to go to Stanford or to Harvard. And I knew that her mother worked for the energy company most closely tied to Putin and the Kremlin. And I thought, “Why the fuck is America letting her go to school here? The sanctions are not tough enough. None of it's tough enough.”

I’ll admit this if it provokes a conversation. I can tell you I don't know this person personally. But I have a lot of faith in the amount of conversations I've had with people who do. I think that we were all told to write our Congress person. I say write Jake Sullivan, I think he's the whisperer that President Biden trusts far too much. And his caution is cowardice. And it is the reason we're behind the ball on this as much as anything.

[to McFaul] I'm sorry. [to audience] I don't represent anyone else's position.

McFaul: And I don't represent the Biden administration, but I do know Jake Sullivan, yes.

Penn: Like I say, I will vote for President Biden because the options seemingly is going to be an obscenity that I can't even numb my own brain to, to concede to. But we do have opportunities, and \$300 billion ain't nothing to sneeze at.

McFaul: Yeah.

Antelava: That's very concrete. What else can be done now to turn things around? I mean, the universities thing is actually, if you care to comment about that, really interesting. Because obviously that has continued to be an avenue.

McFaul: I want to I want to say one thing again from the film that I think is important, especially for us academics, because most of the time we analyze things.

You had one of the soldiers that you asked, “What do you think of Zelenskyy?” And he said, “You know, we made mistakes and I have my opinions about him. But we got to win the war first. And then we'll sort it out later.”

And that's a message I want everybody to think about. There'll be a time for historians to judge the mistakes that were made. I've written about them; I'm easy to find search my name you can find the things where I have from the get-go said, “More weapons, faster. Better weapons,

faster,” literally since the beginning of the war, literally on the phone with Jake Sullivan the night the war started. The night you were in Kyiv, I was talking to him.

And more and better sanctions. And this is real, by the way, this money that you're talking about is. We have our piece of it, but there's \$360 billion of it around the world. If we move first — there's legislation pending right now — it will break through. President Zelenskyy just said it at Davos. This is I think a win-win-win.

And by the way, I do a lot of speaking to Americans about Ukraine. And that's why I was nodding when you said when I hear Americans . . . that's not true. The polls show most Americans support aid to Ukraine. And I don't just go to Cambridge and Palo Alto; I go to Montana. I go to Texas. And crowds like this show up. We might think that Americans really don't care, but when I go to these places, I'm struck by the opposite. Now, I know there's a selection, right, between people that come to my talks and the 99% of the other people in Tulsa, Oklahoma who are not coming. I get it. But I think we don't we got to keep pushing.

So yes, we made mistakes. Yes, we should have sent the HIMARs earlier. Yes, we should have sent the F-16s earlier. I wrote the paper about the assets you're talking about — our group with your colleague, Andriy Yermak. We run a working group. We wrote our paper in October 2022 saying to release these assets. Is it frustrating to me that we're still debating this? Absolutely. You can hear it in my voice. But we can't stop. So, let's figure out later who was guilty and who wasn't in terms of what's happened before, but there's no going back. We have to do that now.

And right now, it's the assistance package. The assistance package has to get passed. So, you can write Jake Sullivan, but I want you to write everybody and anybody else. Write to your members of Congress. They need to feel that pressure.

I just was speaking to somebody on Capitol Hill yesterday and he said, “Mike, up here, they're not feeling that Americans care.” That that to your point, right? “They're not feeling it. Make them feel it.”

Second, the money is absolutely critical to free this up. That's a way that we don't have to pay. This is Putin's money. And this is the argument I make: imagine an American politician — I just made this argument and Vilnius, too — imagine a Polish politician, or imagine even a German politician getting up in front of their electorate and saying, “You know those \$300 billion that we froze from Putin? I'm now going to give it back.”

Who is going to make that speech? Who is going to explain to the American taxpayer, who's going to explain to my mom in Montana — I was just talking to her about it when I was there — that, “No mom, you got to pay for the reconstruction of Ukraine. But the money that we froze for Putin, we're going to give it back.” Nobody's going to make that speech. That speech is never going to happen.

And so rather than arguing with the lawyers about how we can't do this — and I always say, if the law doesn't allow you to do it, then the law needs to be fixed; the law is broken! Fix the law. — don't tell me we can't do it. Because there's no way that we're going to give that money back. So, let's give it to Ukraine now, so that they can do the things that they need to do now. So those are the two big things.

And now I'm done. It's all Sean.

Anteleva: I want to open it up to the audience. We have 15 minutes, so I want to open it up. I would be very grateful if you can make these questions and make them short and not comments. Thank you.

Question Asker #1: Hi, Sean, thanks for coming. Was there a story not shown in the film that you would like to share with the audience that moved you?

Penn: So, you saw where Andriy Pilshchikov and I went to see Top Gun together. For he had become, after that, what I consider a close friend. And I'd sent him an encrypted message, "Hey, what's happening?" And always it was, "Call you back, going wheels up. Call you back going wheels up." Because it was constant.

So, when we're sitting and we're watching Maverick that night, there's the scene where Tom Cruise's character is in training over the California desert and has to eject. And he lands, he's in his flight suit; he's cutting away from the chute and sweating. And he makes his way to a diner in the middle of nowhere. And everybody in the diner is looking at this crazy, dirty soldier standing there, and Andriy leaned over to me and said, "That's why I always take my wallet."

The looking long on this includes, to me . . . it's not so much the things that we shot that I didn't include that moved me. It was the things that came of the relationships. Andriy's mother — her name is Liliya — and I think she will come to be known as the "Mother of the Ukrainian Air Force." She's an extraordinary university professor, speaks very good English . . . and when I showed her the film in Kyiv, she came with his former squadron mates, many of them I'd met, and one of them — the reason that we blurred the face of callsign "Moonfish" — they were were in Washington D.C. two years ago to lobby the United States for F-16s. Moonfish is the squadron leader of the first Ukrainian F-16 squadron. He's that thing that makes it very personal.

You know, I'm not here as an unbiased . . . I wasn't unbiased when I made the film . . . let me put it this way. I founded an organization called CORE. I would have, as it turns out, ended up in Ukraine with the without this movie, because we respond globally, in particularly to refugee and internally displaced crises. And we would have been there for that.

My organization is a humanitarian organization. And it can be said fairly that 80% — especially of our small donors — you could say that they fairly fall into what we call the "tree hugger" kind

of peacenik. 80% of the messages I got when it came over the wire that I was in Kyiv during the invasion they went to know how to help get weapons. This is where weapons are humanitarian.

And it's the people. And selfishly, it's the medicine of unity that they offer. And what's really important in this — and Zelenskyy talks about it in the film — he took a risk, arming civilians. And that is a risk. And what the soldier in the trenches said at the end, amplifies that risk.

We need to with Ukraine, be looking long. What does peacetime Ukraine look like? How do we at once arm them, help them win this fucking thing, and help them sustain positive evolution in peacetime? Because we've been so bad at exporting democracy. This is our opportunity, because we don't need to export it here; they got it. They own it. They have it as much as we do in their hearts.

Antelava: Just to jump in very quickly on one point: you said earlier that you weren't sure whether it would matter who would win the election here, making a point about the United States. But what about Ukraine? If Trump wins, what about Ukraine? What will it mean if Trump wins the election?

Penn: Trump has always been the second phase of the problem. He's always been the symptom. He's not capable of being more than a symptom. He's not capable of anything horrible. We are capable of something horrible, and we announce him King every time we do it.

We already have the answer. It's in this room. It's in this country. It's in this electorate. It's in our knowledge of civics, and it's in our lack of knowledge of civics. It's in our lack of care, and it's in our care. And there there's so much care, and there's so much lack of care. We don't know where we're going land.

But in the physics of this, it's predetermined who's going to win the next election. And so, it's upon us to just decide to make Jake Sullivan better, to make Joe Biden better, to make our community better, to wake up and say we're lucky ass motherfuckers to be alive in this country at this time. But we can lose it.

And I mean, that's what I do. I'm 63 years old, and it's kind of a last stand moment. This is the autumn of my patriarchy and I want it to be a good ride. I want it to be fun, because we owe it to keep the example that possibility alive to people who are out there dying and suffering in the cold. And that's it.

Question Asker #2: First, I just want to say thank you again, for the film. You wanted to make a difference and you hoped it would make a difference, and I believe it did. It does.

So, my question is: given all that you've experienced and witnessed in Ukraine, would you be able to, could you be able to stomach playing one evil little man, Vladimir Putin, in a major motion picture?

Penn: I think if you did it right, it wouldn't be interesting. Because I think he's uninteresting.

There's not enough humanity to tell an interesting story about. He's a minor figure in our species. He is a major figure in our disease.

Question Asker #3: There's a quote from a documentary that I really like, and it says something like, "Because Zelenskyy had a background in acting, when he was on camera, he was actually better able to be himself because it wasn't worried about having to act." Did you feel the same way when you were making this?

Penn: No. Here's one thing I think is generally true, at least in my own experience, or my observation of actors.

If anyone saw Eddie Murphy in the Nutty Professor, they know that there's no performance by an actor ever better. But because it's comedic, it's not even considered on a level with, you know, Olivier, De Niro, the great performances . . . Daniel Day.

I should have been more specific, maybe, because there's a certain artifice that adults tend to have. If you think about the history of movies and you think about you know, when somebody's casting a child actor, either they're magic or it's a failure. And when they're magic, it's incredible. But because there's sort of neurosis and ego and all of the trappings of not being a child, dramatic actors can get away with things that comedic actors can't get away. And so I think I should have been talking specifically about that.

And there's another thing — this is not specific to your question, but it's another thing to understand about Zelenskyy — which is probably why he was so effective politically in the campaign, and I think why he will continue to be despite some disillusion; he knows that country inside and out. He's traveled and played the clubs in all those villages. He has stumped before he was stumping, and has listened. Because he's got a great humility to him.

So, I think that, yeah, a comic actor who's actually pulling him hours like that? Pretty unstoppable.

Question Asker #4: Sean, thanks for showing us the movie. It's been great. I'm wondering: do you think that Zelenskyy has seen any clips from *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*? And have you ever thought about or fantasized about what it will be like after the war? To just be fun and be funny with him rather than be so serious?

Penn: Yeah. I mean, I said in the movie that I look forward to a time where I could meet with him in a peaceful Ukraine. I mean, "Yes," is the answer; of course I would like to have that moment. I feel very grateful for the time that I have had with him with his countrymen and women. It's been a real gift of an accident in my life to be able to have that happen.

Ambassador McFaul in doesn't know, though I've mentioned it to him a little bit earlier today, but that people like him and Ambassador Pifer are the people who, in my original awareness have helped me keep my sanity.

I want to tail into something, because it turns out that very articulate people can also be very knowledgeable.

McFaul: [laughing] Not always!

Penn: And not very knowledgeable people can also be very human people. And they both been like rock stars to me in my quiet little world of watching too much Fox and CNN and Al Jazeera and BBC, and, you know, thinking I want to be a sniper and fix all of this

But yeah, I would love to see a time that . . . oh! What I was going to go to is that you're one of the things that worldwide is getting talked about a lot more, both very progressively, most significantly, but also sometimes to a fault, where it becomes kind of “victimization porn,” but mental illness is a thing.

If we are not recognizing mental illness in ourselves and in America today, any one of us, then we are mentally ill. We better be a little bit sick with what's going on. And one of the things related to Ukraine that we should all remember whether being Republican or Democrat . . . those flags were flying. Those Ukrainian flags were flying all over this country. And Fox and CNN were agreeing on one thing. And that's what we told the young people. That's what we told them again, that their country is, the way I was told in the 1960s. The way I was told until we greeted 18-year-old kids and called them “baby killers,” because we were anti-war. And we should have been an anti-war, because it was wrong war. But that can't now pull the rug out from those whose orientation was service. Whether that was a male rite of passage, or it was a patriotism, or it was what daddy wanted and daddy did it, it doesn't matter. They're 18.

Two years ago, we promised the eighteen-year-olds in this country that we all believe in something together. I would argue that anyone in this room — and this has nothing to do with not paying attention to the murders in Chicago, to the horrors going on at the border, which is a problem nobody's given a good solution to on either side — if we don't take again, the opportunity that is Ukraine, in the end, everything good we ever aspired to here is the fight that they're fighting. Every vulnerability that they are going to be subjected to in wartime or in peacetime is our vulnerability.

We made a promise to the young generation of a unity — finally a unity. That's where the flags were flying out of the out of the headquarters of Fox News and CNN alike. If we don't follow through on that, if anyone in this room — including me tomorrow as much as anybody, and by the way, a lot of people in this room, I know, have been much more significant to this and sacrificed a lot more than I have — but if I have a value here, it is to remind us that if we don't get on the ball tomorrow, then what we did yesterday doesn't mean anything. And we may as well let our kids know that we do not love them, because you cannot love your kids and

promise them a unity that we could build again, and not give it to him or do everything you can to make that happen.

Because if we don't, that will create an expansion of the mental health disorders that we have. Because if you don't stand for something, you're going to fall for anything. And young people don't want to fall for anything. And they're going to tell us to go fuck ourselves if we don't stand by something. And this is the closest thing that we can get to consensus on because it's so unambiguous. It's so criminal.

Keep in mind that if there were only one issue, if the only news report we had hadn't said about Ukraine or the Russian buildup, if we hadn't seen this war and all its destruction. If all we heard tonight, suddenly, was that the Russians had kidnapped 25,000 Ukrainian children, and they were screwing them to hate their parents and their country. Would we not react? We'd better.

And, so, that's what I think we have to do.

Anteleva: We'll take one more question.

Question Asker #5: The timing of this film is just brilliant. Your involvement, your interest in Ukraine goes back a lot of years. What was the strategy behind your decision to stop filming now as opposed to six months ago? Or six months from now? The war is still going on; was there some thought process with finishing the film now for release?

Penn: Yeah, this kind of goes back to when I mentioned filmmakers like Matthew Heineman. They're dedicated strength is documentary filmmaking, and they have networks of shooters they work with.

It turns out that my day job facilitates — and I don't mean financially for me, personally, but to the degree I'm for those who liked the film — that therefore I'm good at this kind of filmmaking. It relies on me being reasonably continuing relevant in the other job I have.

And so, I looked at this a certain point, and I wanted to have it finish faster. There was never going to be anything keeping me from making another film. But I wanted this out before the election, is the answer and with enough time . . . and this is another thing.

If I can ask you all a favor, it would be to write a company called Fifth Element, and another one called Vice, and ask them to do as Netflix did when I requested Ted Sarandos to release, for free on YouTube, *Winter on Fire* for everybody in the world to be able to see for free every day.

That's what I'd like to see happen with this film and then we'll go back and make another one. So, if you want to write those guys, I would welcome that.

Anteleva: Unfortunately, our time is up. Thank you so much everyone for coming, and thank you, Michael, for hosting.

[END EVENT AUDIO]

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