

Baseball Hall of Fame cancels film ceremony in attack on antiwar performers

By Peter Daniels
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In a new attempt to intimidate opponents of the war on Iraq, the Major League Baseball Hall of Fame has abruptly canceled a planned ceremony marking the 15th anniversary of the film *Bull Durham* because Susan Sarandon and Tim Robbins, who starred in the film and were scheduled to participate in the April 26-27 celebration, have made statements opposing the war.

Hall of Fame President Dale Petroskey, a former assistant press secretary in the Reagan administration, wrote to Robbins and Sarandon: “We believe your very public criticism of President Bush at this important—and sensitive—time in our nation’s history helps undermine the U.S. position, which ultimately could put our troops in even more danger. As an institution, we stand behind our President and our troops in this conflict.”

Robbins replied, writing: “To suggest that my criticism of the President put the troops in danger is absurd.... You invoke patriotism and use words like ‘freedom’ in an attempt to intimidate and bully. In doing so, you dishonor the words ‘patriotism’ and ‘freedom’ and dishonor the men and women who have fought wars to keep this nation a place where one can freely express their opinions without fear of reprisal or punishment.”

In an indication of the lengths to which these elements are prepared to go to whip up chauvinist and nationalist hysteria, Petroskey even claimed that Sarandon had endangered the troops by flashing a peace sign to cameras at the Academy Awards on March 30. In fact she had, in the face of threats and warnings from the producers of the Oscars telecast, made no mention of the war in her appearance, but even the “V” sign was apparently going too far.

The attack on Robbins and Sarandon was criticized by Ron Shelton, the director of the film, who said: “I

can’t believe that this country has come to the point where people of disparate political opinions can’t gather together to celebrate something we can all agree on—baseball and films.” Also denouncing the action was the well-known writer on baseball, Roger Kahn, the author of “The Boys of Summer.”

Even Kevin Costner, who played the lead in the film and who is a supporter of the Republicans, issued a statement in defense of his co-stars. “I think Tim and Susan’s courage is the type of courage that makes our democracy work,” said Costner.

The attack on Robbins and Sarandon is the latest in a series of similar incidents. A United Way event featuring Sarandon was also cancelled last month. Numerous figures in the entertainment industry have been attacked and threatened in recent weeks.

Last week the veteran television producer Ed Gernon was dropped from his post as a leading producer of the forthcoming CBS television miniseries, *Hitler: The Rise of Evil*, scheduled for broadcast next month.

Gernon’s crime was apparently to give an interview to *TV Guide* in which he made very mild but nevertheless pointed political comments that were quickly judged to have gone over the line. The rise of Hitler was worth study in the US, said Gernon, because “it basically boils down to an entire nation gripped by fear, who ultimately chose to give up their civil rights and plunged the whole world into war. I can’t think of a better time to examine this history.”

CBS issued a statement saying that Gernon’s comments were “insensitive and downright wrong. His personal opinions are not shared by CBS and misrepresent the network’s motivation for broadcasting this film.” This statement was apparently the signal for the Toronto-based Atlantis Alliance, CBS’s most important outside supplier of shows, to dismiss Gernon.

The Dixie Chicks singing group continues to face boycott calls and physical threats, weeks after Natalie Maines, the lead singer of the Texas trio, told a London audience, “Just so you know, we’re ashamed the president of the United States is from Texas.” Radio stations have banned Dixie Chicks albums from playlists, and one station organized a protest at which a tractor smashed CDs, tapes and videos of the Dixie Chicks. Members of the group say they have received hate mail and threats. One of the group’s members reported that another member “had the front gate of her ranch smashed in. We have to have security when we get back to the States. It puts my well-being in jeopardy.”

The Pearl Jam rock group denounced media reports that a mass walkout had taken place at its April 1 show in Denver, the opening of its first North American tour in three years. A reporter from the Scripps Howard News Service claimed that angry fans walked out after lead singer Eddie Vedder attacked Bush. “There were close to 12,000 people at the April 1 Denver show. It’s possible two dozen left during the encore, but it was not noticeable amongst the 11,976 who were loudly applauding and enjoying the evening’s music,” the band said in a statement.

The various efforts, in the name of “supporting our troops,” to demonize even liberal critics of the Bush administration are being encouraged if not orchestrated at the highest levels of the government and the corporate elite. Media conglomerates are either openly and proudly involved in whipping up super-patriotic chauvinism, as in the case of Rupert Murdoch’s television empire and Clear Channel Communications, which owns 1,200 radio stations across the country, or somewhat more “carefully” carrying out the same policy, as in the case of CNN and the major broadcast networks.

The attacks on artists and performers must also be seen in light of the demonstrations of millions which took place across the country in the weeks leading up to the attack on Iraq. The mass protests were followed by a variety of police attacks and harassment, including the use of rubber bullets against demonstrators in San Francisco and arbitrary and illegal arrests in recent protests in Chicago and New York. The ruling establishment is clearly attempting to silence mass opposition through a combination of media

intimidation, propaganda and police repression.

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