

WHY I CARE

Sean Penn Shines a Light on the War in Ukraine: 'It's Been Hell'

The actor hopes his documentary *Superpower* draws attention to the crisis

When Sean Penn, 63, set out to make a documentary about Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy in 2022, he had no idea the turn it would take. His idea was to follow the unlikely rise of an actor-comedian turned politician, but instead, three days into shooting, Russia invaded Ukraine and Zelenskyy suddenly became a wartime president—and Penn a wartime journalist. *Superpower* (now streaming on Paramount+) explores how Zelenskyy, 45, has guided his country through crisis but also reminds audiences that the death and destruction continue, even as other news often draws the spotlight. “They’re very much in a fight,” Penn says of the conflict. “It’s almost two years in, and it’s been hell.”

Why is it so important to help remind Americans this war is still raging?

I think we’ve got to wake up, *really* wake up, because I believe we will get involved in this war one way or another, just because of the global economic ramifications. I also think we should seize the

opportunity to support their freedom, self-defense and territorial integrity. Their path back is the path we’ve always advertised: freedom.

What did you witness in Ukraine that moved you?

I went to the primary military hospital in Kyiv, and a young soldier [had been wounded]. He had a pit in his head the size of my fist. His wife was like, “This is our new normal.” They handle things with such courage. How can we not [help]?

You tend to run toward places in crisis, like aiding after Hurricane Katrina and the Haiti earthquake. Why?

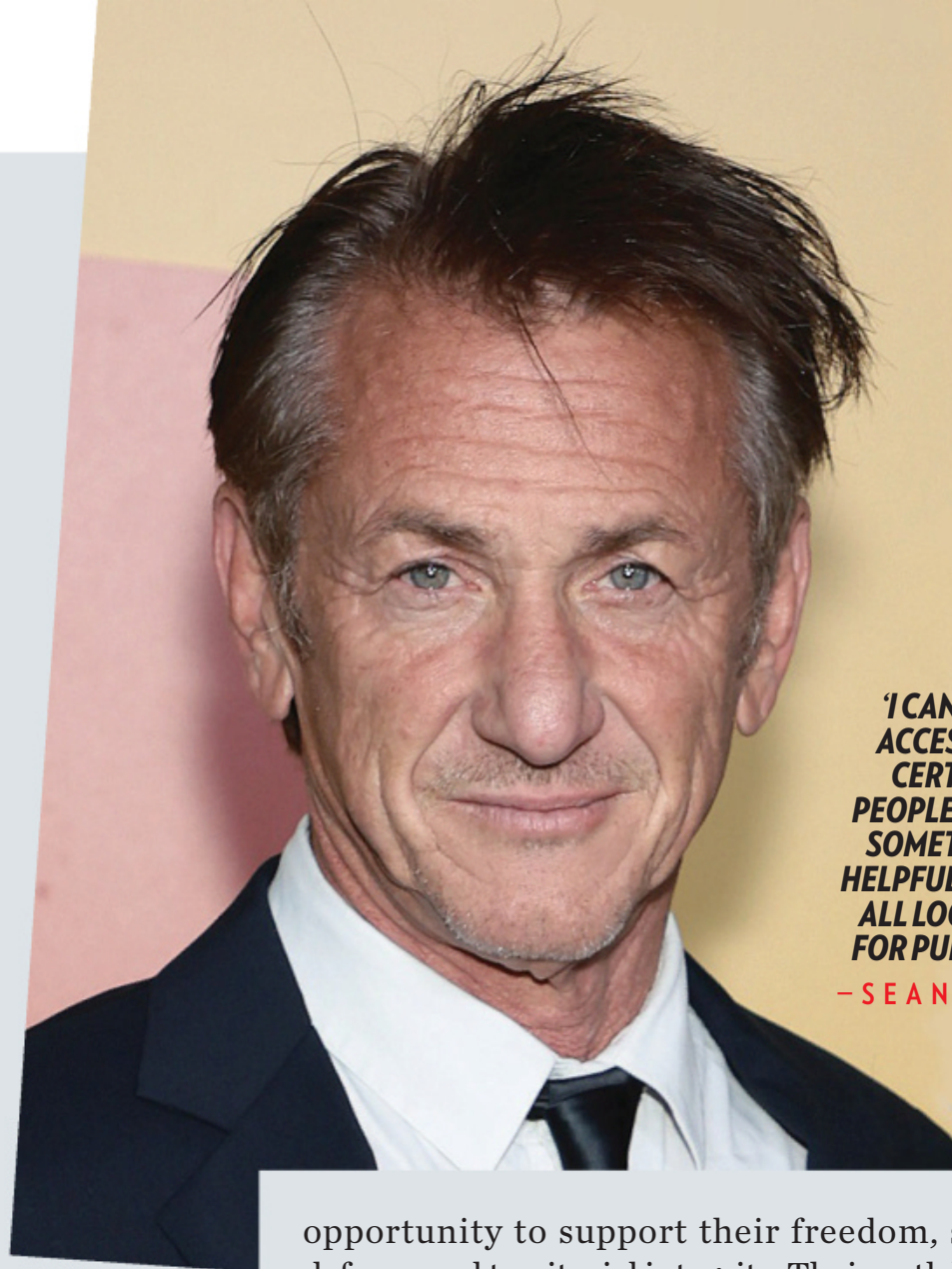
I don’t like to advertise this part of me, but I care. I care a lot. But it’s often in the sense that I love humanity, but I hate humans! [Laughs.] So give me a project with the former. I also like problem-solving. But I’m discovering what my value can be. I can share by showing what I see, and then people can form their own impressions. I can be a tour guide.

Do you consider Zelenskyy a friend?

I’d love to call him my friend, and I certainly look forward to the end of this war and getting to know him in a different way.

— GILLIAN TELLING

‘I CAN GET ACCESS TO CERTAIN PEOPLE TO DO SOMETHING HELPFUL. WE’RE ALL LOOKING FOR PURPOSE’
— SEAN PENN



Up Close and Personal



Honored Guest
Penn with Oksana Markarova, the Ukrainian ambassador to the U.S., at a *Superpower* screening in Washington, D.C., on Sept. 14.

Born Leader

“He has a real command,” Penn says of President Zelenskyy. “He impresses very impressive people.”

