

SEAN PENN, INTELLIGENCE DANGLE

The press is outraged that Sean Penn gave Chapo Guzmán editorial veto over the Rolling Stone story he published about their interview.

Disclosure: Some names have had to be changed, locations not named, and an understanding was brokered with the subject that this piece would be submitted for the subject's approval before publication. The subject did not ask for any changes.

Though the press is outraged based on the assumption that what they're reading is journalism. Note that Penn (or whoever wrote this paragraph) didn't name Chapo? Why should we assume "the subject" is Guzmán and not some American three letter agency that set up this meeting?

Because it sure looks like the latter provides a better explanation for this story. It reads better as retroactive cover, published to protect Penn and the woman who, he explains, set up the meeting between him and Guzmán, Kate del Castillo, than it does as any real journalism.

Consider these details. Two men whose real names Penn doesn't provide – one of whom Penn met with amid Enrique Peña Nieto's security forces at a hotel in New York just before they made the final decision to take this trip – set up the meeting, playing both the role of Hollywood producer and key broker. The one he met in EPN's hotel, Espinoza ("espinosa" translates as "spiny"), wears a "surgical corset" for his back (get it? spiny?) that somehow gets through Chapo's extensive security unchecked.

Espinoza had recently undergone back surgery. He stretched, readjusted his surgical corset, exposing it. It dawns on me that one of our greeters might

mistake the corset for a device that contains a wire, a chip, a tracker. With all their eyes on him, Espinoza methodically adjusts the Velcro toward his belly, slowly looks up, sharing his trademark smile with the suspicious eyes around him. Then, “Cirugia de espalda [back surgery],” he says. Situation defused.

Right after arriving in Chapo’s presence on what would be October 2, 2015, Espinoza goes by himself to a bungalow, purportedly to take a nap. Penn and his party stay overnight with the cartel boss. Immediately upon their departure, according to Penn’s sources, who apparently have better information than all the reporters who work this beat did last October, Mexican authorities started a siege on Chapo that was publicly explained by claiming they had geolocated the cell phone of one of his men but isn’t that a remarkable coinkydink that it actually happened immediately after Espinoza and his spiny back device showed up?

Note carefully how Penn describes searching his phone immediately after being reunited with it on what would be October 4 and not yet knowing about the siege that was going on.

In the backseat, my L.A.-based assistant had left a manila envelope with my cellphone in it. I turn on the phone to the explosion of a two-day backlog of e-mails and text messages. Ignoring them, I hit my browser for updates. What I didn’t know, and what was not yet being reported, was that from the time the weather cleared, a military siege on Sinaloa was imminent.

[snip]

According to media reports that didn’t come until days later [ed: here are two examples], a cellphone among his crew had been tracked. From the time the

military and the DEA moved in on them, the reports of what happened are conflicted. *A source familiar with the cartel informed me on October 3rd that the initial siege had begun.* That source and another on the ground in Sinaloa reported that over the next several days, two military helicopters were shot down and Mexican marine ground troops laid siege to several ranch properties.

[snip]

El Chapo's own account would later be shared with me, through a BBM exchange he had with Kate. "On October 6th, there was an operation....Two helicopters and 6 BlackHawks began a confrontation upon their arrival. The marines dispersed throughout the farms. The families had to escape and abandon their homes with the fear of being killed. We still don't know how many dead in total." When asked about the reports of his own injuries, Chapo responded, "Not like they said. I only hurt my leg a little bit." [my emphasis]

What curious grammar describing Penn's source's remarkable knowledge. "A source familiar with the cartel informed me on October 3rd that the initial siege had begun." Did his source inform him on October 3rd, as this passage literally claims? (The second facilitator in the story, whom Penn calls El Alto, stuck around after they emerged from the jungle on October 3.) The muddled structure of this passage would certainly allow for that, or it might mean his source informed him that on October 3 the siege began.

Curiously, when Penn provided his bona fides to Chapo – which for the cartel boss, largely rested on the actor's relationship with Hugo Chávez – he didn't mention that he had a relationship with people who would be privy to otherwise unavailable information about what

really went down in October, though he did admit he has “many relationships inside the United States government.”

I tell him, up front, that I had a family member who worked with the Drug Enforcement Agency, that through my work in Haiti (I’m CEO of J/P HRO, a nongovernmental organization based in Port-au-Prince) I had many relationships inside the United States government. I assure him that those relationships were by no means related to my interest in him.

Elsewhere in the story Penn claims he is telling the truth, but keeping information compartmentalized.

I take no pride in keeping secrets that may be perceived as protecting criminals, nor do I have any gloating arrogance at posing for selfies with unknowing security men. But I’m in my rhythm. Everything I say to everyone must be true. As true as it is compartmentalized.

Perhaps the most interesting detail is that when Chapo asked Penn to come back in 8 days for a return visit that never took place, Penn responded by asking for a photo – for Rolling Stone. Except that he arranged it so that it would be usable for facial recognition.

I say I can. I ask to take a photograph together so that I could verify to my editors at Rolling Stone that the planned meeting had taken place.

[snip]

I explain that, for authentication purposes, it would be best if we are shaking hands, looking into the camera, but not smiling. He obliges. The picture is taken on Alfredo’s cellphone. It

would be sent to me at a later date.

Who knows? Maybe Rolling Stone uses sophisticated facial recognition software in the wake of their UVA rape story disaster?

What's perhaps funniest is this passage, which has attracted the most attention (and figures prominently in the NYT's AI story on Penn's tale, which actually appeared before the tale itself in Rolling Stone and isn't behind NYT's paywall).

My head is swimming, labeling TracPhones (burners), one per contact, one per day, destroy, burn, buy, balancing levels of encryption, mirroring through Blackphones, anonymous e-mail addresses, unsent messages accessed in draft form. It's a clandestine horror show for the single most technologically illiterate man left standing.

While Penn describes his discussions with Kate as being encrypted, Kate is the one who conducted negotiations with Chapo's people, using a blackberry. Moreover, what Penn describes here doesn't seem to match what he describes of communications with the cartel. So who was he using this operational security with?

Then there are the parts of the story that don't cohere, not because Penn is an egotistical buffoon, but because they simply don't make sense. Remember, the story is that Chapo is so narcissistic that he compromised his considerable operational security to reach out to some film people.

Penn is a film person, but as was decided before Chapo escaped from prison, there was no way they were going to be able to make a film (though somehow Penn managed to bring a knapsack with him to meet the drug lord, but it didn't even contain a pen or paper). So instead the idea was to write a magazine article.

When Chapo's men don't show up to pick up Penn after 8 days (the siege in Sinaloa was still going strong), Penn kept pushing Kate to recontact Chapo under the premise that someone in his camp would translate Penn's English language questions (for some reason Kate, who translated for Penn when he was in Mexico, didn't translate them...), and Chapo would film himself answering them.

Penn attributes the delay to Chapo Guzmán's humility (!!!!!), rather than what had to have been legitimate concern that this lefty actor had visited immediately before a massive manhunt started in October.

Without being present, I could neither control the questioning nor prod for elaborations to his responses. In addition, every question sent first had to be translated into Spanish. Remarkably, while Chapo has access to hundreds of soldiers and associates at all times, apparently not one speaks English.

At the end of each day that passed without receipt of the video, Kate would reassure me that it was only one more day away. But each night, El Chapo contacted her with more delays and apparent doubts. Not about my inquiries, but seemingly about how to make a tape of himself. "Kate, let me get this straight. The guy runs a multibillion-dollar business with a network of at least 50 countries, and there's not one fucker down there in the jungle with him who speaks a word of friggin' English? Now tonight, you're telling me his BBM went on the blink, that he's got hardly any access to a goddamn computer?! Are you saying he doesn't have the technical capability to make a self-video and smuggle it into the United States?"

I ask myself, How in the fuck does anyone run a business that way?! I go

Full-Trump-Gringo on Kate, battering her daily by phone, text and encrypted email. In the end, the delay had nothing to do with technical incompetence. Big surprise. Whatever villainy is attributable to this man, and his indisputable street genius, he is also a humble, rural Mexican, whose perception of his place in the world offers a window into an extraordinary riddle of cultural disparity. It became evident that the peasant-farmer-turned-billionaire-drug-lord seemed to be overwhelmed and somewhat bewildered at the notion that he may be of interest to the world beyond the mountains. And the day-after-day delays might reveal an insecurity in him, like an awkward teenager bashful to go unguided before the camera. Or had all of this been an orchestrated performance?

Right. Chapo Guzmán is bashful, and bewildered that he might be of interest to the entire world. And as it turns out the answers to the question – which Rolling Stone published as a verbatim transcription – are less insightful than details (such as that Chapo drew fake pesos when he was a kid) Penn must have gotten during the hours he spent with the drug lord in October. Penn had his story, but insisted on this video (remember, they had decided months earlier they weren't doing an actual film!) so someone in Chapo's camp would once again send video to him.

In short, it's a load of horse shit that is entirely inconsistent with Chapo's assent to do the meeting in the first place.

But it makes a nice cover story, even if it doesn't amount to journalism. And journalists are so obsessed with the ethics of this non-journalism they're not noticing all the other details that don't make sense.

Update: There's something else stupid about

assuming Rolling Stone let Chapo approve this.

He's in prison!

So either, they had the article ready to go, but held it until such a time he got caught (as if they knew he was about to be caught). Or they went to Altiplano, where Chapo is being held, to ask for his approval.

Or, they got approval from someone else entirely.

Update: The Rolling Stone spoke with NYT (you know, the newspaper that reported on RS' story before they did) to defend their article. They do seem to suggest Chapo is the one who got final say.

As for giving Mr. Guzmán final approval over the article, Mr. Wenner said: "I don't think it was a meaningful thing in the first place. We have let people in the past approve their quotes in interviews."

Mr. Guzmán, he said, did not speak English and seemed to have little interest in editing Mr. Penn's work. "In this case, it was a small thing to do in exchange for what we got," Mr. Wenner said.

Logistically, that would be made possibly by RS sitting on the story several weeks.

A lawyer for the magazine, and its managing editor, Jason Fine, were eventually brought in to help with the editing process. Work on the article was completed about two weeks ago, Mr. Wenner said, but because of Rolling Stone's production cycle, those involved were subjected to an excruciating wait for the next issue, during which time Mr. Guzmán was captured.

So we're to believe the timing here was just an

unbelievable coinkydink. And that it took RS from Thanksgiving, when – according to the new details in NYT – Penn got his video, until January, so almost as long to edit as it took to convince a top drug lord to shoot a video of himself. There were 3 issues of RS released between the time Penn would have gotten that video and the release it will go in. Though of course, if they had given Chapo final say, it would mean they contacted him just before Mexico closed in. The story spins out of control every time you try to make it make sense.

But the funniest part of the story is this: RS fact-checked it by conducting interviews with eyewitnesses.

Of Mr. Penn's article, which was subject to follow-up interviews with eyewitnesses for fact-checking, Mr. Wenner said, "It's not a vindication but a restatement of how good we are, how strong we are."

Unless RS was interviewing Chapo's men, again (as they were being rounded up), then those eyewitnesses would be limited to del Castillo or ... Spiny and El Alto, whose names RS hasn't even shared.