

France Takes Away its Oscar from Harvey Weinstein

by Michael Curtis

Chevalier of French Legion of Honor



How long has this been going on? Once one could speak with sardonic reference about Hollywood, labelled that screwy, ballyhoey, superconey Hollywood. Now, it is the source of multiple allegations of harassment, sexual abuse, rape, and discrimination. The celestial universe with stars that are cloudy rather than bright and are far from being angels until recently suffered from an Ostrich effect, oblivious or inattentive to behavior, akin to playing the piano in a bordello. The stars in the Hollywood firmament remained strangely unaware of what has long been apparent to even casual observers, the disgraceful behavior of their theatrical colleagues toward both women and men.

Revelations of unexpected behavior are often highly disconcerting. Would-be revolutionaries must have been puzzled that their idol and icon, Che Guevera, on his death in 1967

was found to be wearing two very expensive Rolex watches. The elite Hollywood club, for the most part ideologically leftwing conformist, pretends to be experiencing a similar puzzlement, while the show goes on. Allegations of unbecoming behavior in Hollywood, as elsewhere, is now evident, though the conspiracy of silence remains.

A prime example is Alec Baldwin, the self made dramatic personality with strong leftwing views on every subject who adores his creator. After learning that 300 women claimed that his friend the film director James Toback has abused or harrassed them, Baldwin explained he never knew any details of what Toback did that was an assault in nature or criminally accountable. By contrast, Baldwin is more articulate, assured and knowledgeable about political opponents: he has called President Donald Trump a "sexual predator " and asserts that all kinds of evidence show that Trump has behaved that way. A less political figure, the actress Uma Thurman has confined her comment on Harvey Weinstein to an enigmatic contribution that, "when I'm ready, I'll say what I have to say."

Paradoxially, when Roman Polanski was arrested in Switzerland in 2009 for unlawful sex acts with a 13 year old girl in 1977, about 100 film people supported him and called for his release. Among them was Harvey Weinstein who called his arrest a "terrible mistake."

What should society and representative organizations do about the alleged sexual offenders? The offenders of course may be faced with possible criminal charges or legal action. Or they may apologize in some form, and , genuinely or otherwise, seek help, "treatment," whatever that means, or rehabilitation.

France once again has shown the right way to deal with the issue. President Emmanuel Macron has expressed concern about the allegations of sexual misconduct, especially about Harvey Weinstein, and is interested in overhauling the Legion

d'honneur system to deal with it and similar issues. One suggestion is reducing the number of people awarded the Legion d'honneur, France's highest decoration in five grades. This distinction was created by Napoleon Bonaparte in May 1802 to reward people, based on merit, not social status.

According to the Legion's Code, awards are given by the President in consultation with the National Order of the Legion d'honneur, for "outstanding merit in the service of the nation in a civilian or military capacity." There is no exact or exhaustive list of what constitutes "outstanding merit" or the quality of services or the nature of actions by the individual. Foreigners receive the honor for rendering service to France in cultural or economic activity or support for issues in which France is interested. There is no financial benefit, or material reward associated with the award, but all recognize its meaningfulness, and recipients are proud to have gained it.

The president of France has the prerogative to award the honor as he sees fit. It can and has been used for diplomatic reasons or reciprocity as one means to buttress French foreign policy. This has been done, sometimes controversially, in awards to Russian President Vladimir Putin, who got the highest honor the Grand Croix in 2006, Romanian President Nicolae Ceausescu, Tunisian President Zine Ben Ali, former President of Gabon, Ali Bongo , and former crown prince of Saudi Arabia, Muhammad bin Nayef.

The pantheon of foreign honorees is formidable, ranging from the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon in 2016 for his efforts on behalf of the Paris climate change proposals, to U.S. movie stars and celebrities, among them Barbra Streisand, Clint Eastwood, Kirk Douglas, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Miles Davis, Toni Morrison, and the four brave people, three American and one British who were give awards for subduing a gunman on a high speed train going to Paris.

What is given by the French President can be taken away. The Legion award can now be withdrawn from a foreigner who was sentenced for a crime or to a prison term of at least one year, or if the individual has committed acts or behaved in such a way that was dishonorable or damaging, or does not have good character or has been guilty of abuses of human rights.

A number of notorious cases have come up in recent years. One concerned the celebrated cyclist champion Lance Armstrong who won seven rounds of the Tour de France and was awarded the Legion in 2005. It was withdrawn in 2014 because of accusations of the use of dope in his career. Another in 2012 was John Galliano, the fashion designer, because of his conviction for a drunken outbreak of antisemitism in the streets in Paris the previous year.

A third is the case of Panama dictator, Manuel Noriega who got the award in 1987, but who was extradited in 2010 from the U.S. to France to serve a prison sentence for money laundering and drug dealing. Another case involved Bob Dylan who was deemed unworthy and was criticized for his pot drug taking, and anti-war protests. Curiously, the award went to Paul McCartney, who was not immune from cannabis. But Dylan, prominent opponent of the Vietnam war and internationally known for *Blowin' in the Wind*, and thus considered culturally important made it in 2013.

The number of actresses who were or claimed to have been sexually harassed by Harvey Weinstein mounts daily. Among them are four French actresses. President Macron has been quick to act declaring Weinstein guilty of "unbecoming behavior." He has started the technical legal process to strip Weinstein of the award of the Legion he received in 2012.

Now it is up to authorities in the U.S. to deal with Weinstein and others in similar fashion. Formal legal charges may be brought. But in the meantime there are other alternatives. It is true that his membership of various organizations, the

Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, and the Producers Guild of America have been revoked. There is no comparable Legion of Honor in the U.S, but the prized jewel in the film world is the Hollywood Oscar. The least compensation that world can make for its alleged transgressions is, as in the case of France, to strip Weinstein and similar offenders, of its highest honor. The Hollywood world is not full of angels, but it now knows it can get along without Weinstein very well.