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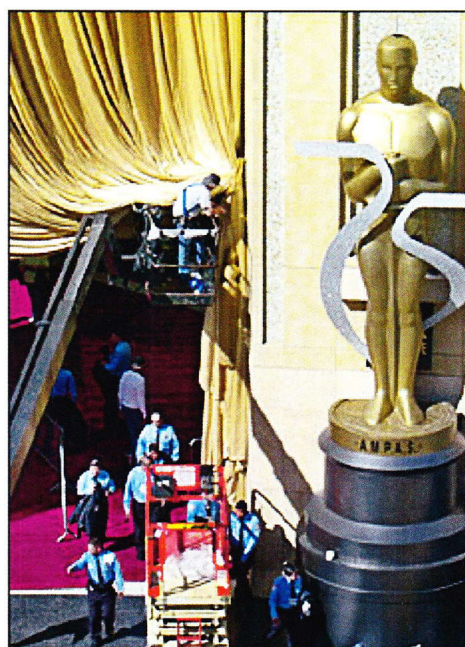
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Oscars 2003

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Ric Francis / AP Photo

With the global climate changing by the hour, plans for Sunday's Oscars seem uncertain

Embedded in L.A.

No red carpet. No on-camera interviews. No Will Smith. Will Sunday's Oscars even happen?

By **B. J. Sigismund**
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March 20 — This year, there's a lot less tinsel in Tinseltown. Hollywood's answer to the bombs now dropping in Iraq seems to be to tone down all Oscar-related events. Sunday's ceremony is still on—for now. But will it happen? Should it?

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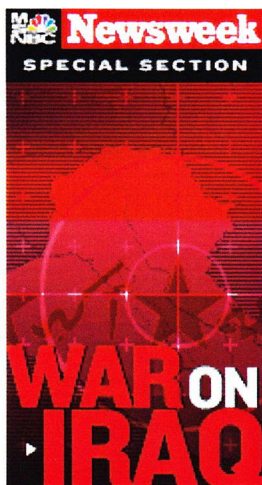
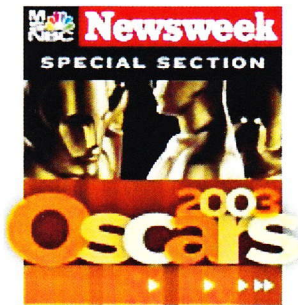
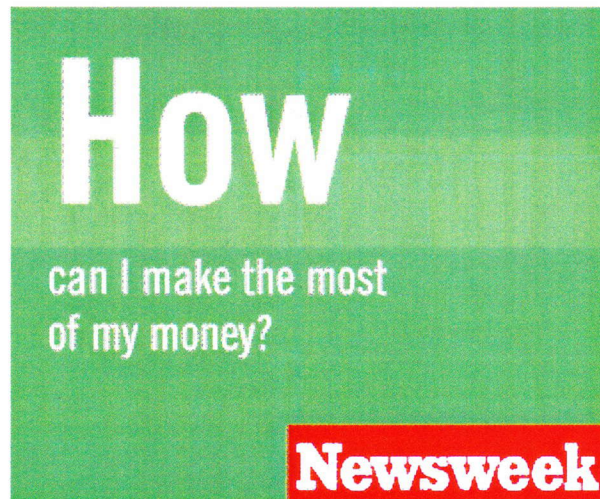
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WITH THE GLOBAL climate changing by the hour, people in L.A. are uncertain. Will Smith, a scheduled presenter, has backed out of the ceremony. “He felt uncomfortable in attending and respectfully asked to be excused,” his publicist told the media. Rumors flew Wednesday that Cate Blanchett had dropped out as well (those murmurings were apparently false). But don’t be surprised if others follow Smith’s lead—especially if there’s even a hint of any domestic terrorism before the event. “It’s such an obvious target,” said one industry source. Security at the awards will be the tightest in history, with reportedly more than 1,000 personnel involved—including the National Guard. For the first time, closed-circuit cameras will monitor the entire Kodak Theatre and all streets around the site.

The Academy is proceeding as if the event’s going to happen, but it’s watching the headlines carefully. Several possibilities have been floated: the awards could be outright cancelled, with statues handed out at a smaller ceremony in the future. A postponement is less likely, due to the logistics involved in getting 3,000 guests and 500 media members into town. It’s also foreseeable that the awards could happen on Sunday evening, but not be televised by ABC. (Already, the network has announced that the annual Oscar-night Barbara Walters special will be postponed.)

The Academy’s first concession to the Oscar attendees’ heightened anxiety was rolling up the red carpet, an unprecedented occurrence that was announced Tuesday night. Event producer Gil Cates told the press that nominees and presenters had been calling Academy headquarters and asking if they could enter the Kodak Theatre from the back. At the outset of a battle in Iraq, Cates said, these celebrities were

uncomfortable having “to face a business-as-usual phalanx of interviewers and photographers.” But you have to wonder if there wasn’t another reason for their worries: at the moment, no celebrity wants to be asked about the war.

In fact, the Oscars may be nearly politics-free this year, which is somewhat ironic since it’s long been a legendary platform for opinionated presenters. “It would be incorrect in my view and inappropriate for [presenters] to make any changes to what they have agreed to say,” producer Cates has said. He even had special words about presenter Susan Sarandon, who’s made political statements at past Oscars and who has spoken against the war in Iraq in recent months. He’s certain “she won’t even try” to change her prewritten script. Winners, says Cates, have 45 seconds to say what they like, “within the bounds of good taste,” he added.

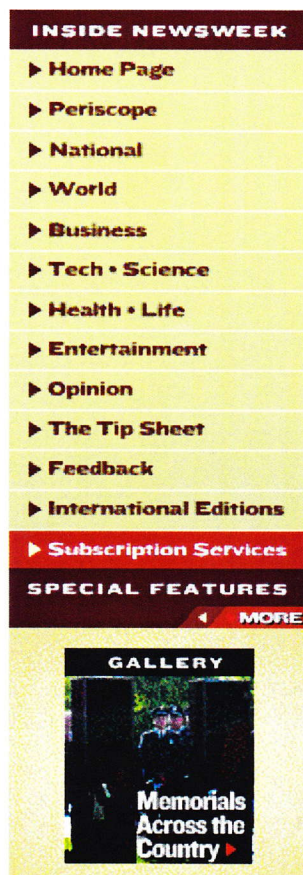
The Sarandon situation illustrates a larger truth in show business at the moment. While a dozen or so high-profile celebrities spoke out against a war in Iraq in the last few months, in recent weeks it’s become somewhat riskier to do so. Last week, Dixie Chicks lead singer Natalie Maines said at a London concert that she was “ashamed the president of the United States is from Texas.” Her words angered a lot of music listeners, especially in the group’s core country audience. Some former fans publicly stomped on Dixie Chicks CDs, an image widely broadcast by television. Airplay decreased by 20 percent across the country. Maines later apologized publicly to Bush and respun her statement. “I feel that whoever holds that office should be treated with the utmost respect,” she told the press. “I just want to see every possible alternative exhausted before children and American soldiers’ lives are lost. I love my country. I am a proud American.”

Susan Sarandon addresses a peace rally last October. Overall, Hollywood’s antiwar cries have grown a lot quieter recently.



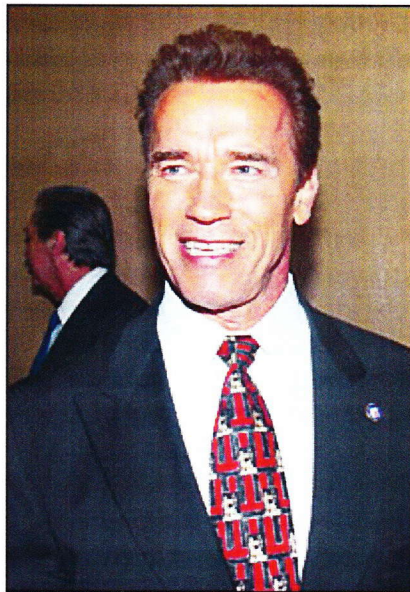
Brian Snyder / Reuters

Other left-leaning celebrities probably want to



avoid a similar mess. If there's antiwar sentiment in Hollywood at the moment, it certainly wasn't on display at yesterday's publicist guild luncheon at the Beverly Hilton. The annual gathering awards the best PR in the business. Speakers included Rita Wilson, Nia Vardalos, Jerry Bruckheimer, David Caruso, Bob Barker and Martin Scorsese. Over the two hours of awards and presentations celebrating the art and craft of movies and TV, not a single word of protest was uttered at the podium. At the end of the event, Arnold Schwarzenegger received a Lifetime Achievement Award. The longtime Republican (and aspiring politician) didn't once address the looming deadline for war.

Arnold Schwarzenegger arrives at the annual Publicists' Awards. Over the two hours of presentations at Wednesday's guild luncheon, not a single word of protest was uttered at the podium.



Jim Ruymen / Reuters

Producers for the remaining showbiz events of the week are monitoring the country's mood, and like those putting together the Oscars, paying careful attention to tone. Vanity Fair's post-Oscar party at Morton's has eliminated the arrivals area. The E! Channel's preshow coverage with Joan and Melissa Rivers

will continue, but with a far less catty attitude. On Oscar night, the traditional Governors Ball won't admit photographers or any other press.

One such event, a Women's Wear Daily party called "Dripping in Diamonds," went on as scheduled last night but with similar changes. The *paparazzi*—who'd planned to take pictures of presumed guests Britney Spears, Queen Latifah, Ben Stiller and Keanu Reeves—were told not even to show up. Newspaper and magazine reporters had their invitations withdrawn. "We're just going to eat the food and then go home and like the rest of the world, watch CNN," said a guest. If it's going to be that kind of week, why bother with the Oscars at all?

Oscars 2003

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