

San Francisco Chronicle

sfgate.com

TUESDAY, AUGUST 1, 2006

415-777-1111 46¢ plus t

NEW ROLE: PARIIAH?

Jewish groups, PR experts say Gibson hasn't handled his arrest and its aftermath well

By now, Mel Gibson is officially a public relations train wreck.

The actor touched all the politically incorrect bases when he was arrested driving down the Pacific Coast Highway early Friday morning. He reportedly had a bottle of tequila on the car seat next to him, tested over the legal blood-alcohol limit, insulted a female deputy with sexual remarks, was belligerent with arresting officers, and allegedly broke a phone in jail.

C.W. Nevius

And that wasn't the worst of it. Seemingly out of nowhere, Gibson came up with an anti-Semitic rant, telling the officers, among other things, that "the Jews are responsible for all the wars in the world."

Around the country, media relations experts called up Gibson's story on their computers and shook their heads in disbelief.

"When I saw it this morning, I couldn't believe it," said Dick Lippin, president and founder of Hollywood media consulting firm the Lippin Group. "With the events going on in the world now, all the shooting and killing, the timing could not have been worse."

"The worst kind of statement at the worst possible time," said Ian Mitroff, director of the University of Southern California Center for Crisis management. "This is certainly not business as usual."

At first there were reports that Gibson either hadn't said those things, or that they had mysteriously been taken from the police account. But an official report was issued Monday that substantiated claims that he "made anti-Semitic remarks and threatened a deputy."

So much for it being a "misunderstanding." Gibson went immediately into full public relations damage control, issuing a long and emotional apology. He called his actions "despicable," adding that he said things that he does

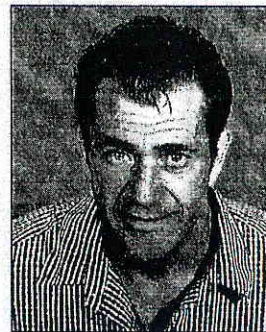
Daily developments

The latest on the drunken-driving arrest of Mel Gibson:

► Police confirmed reports of Gibson's anti-Semitic tirade to officers after they stopped him for speeding early Friday, including his comment that "the Jews are responsible for all the wars in the world."

► On Monday, the Walt Disney Co. said it was dropping plans for a miniseries on the Holocaust that would be produced in collaboration with Gibson.

► Gibson is scheduled to be arraigned in court Sept. 28.



The booking photograph of actor Mel Gibson.

SFGate.com

Read and comment on C.W. Nevius' blog at sfgate.com.

"not believe to be true and which are despicable."

However, he did not address the anti-Semitic remarks specifically. That has made all the difference. By Monday, he was getting slammed by Jewish groups, and there were reports that his support in Hollywood was fading badly.

"He didn't address the Jewish issue, which I think was a big mistake," says Lydia Graham, president of Graham & Associates Inc., a San Francisco public relations firm. "This way he kind of comes across like: I made a mistake, so what?"

As several crisis management experts say, either Gibson didn't realize his remarks were going to be such a big deal — in which case he isn't very savvy — or he intentionally talked around them. Neither is a very appealing prospect.

"He's either a moron or a hypocrite," says Michael Fineman, whose San Francisco firm, Fineman PR, has handled such media crises as the 1996 recall of tainted Odwalla fruit juice. "It is almost as if he is still at the point where he refuses to recognize it."

The problem is Gibson's histo-

ry. His 2004 film "The Passion of the Christ" was slammed for an anti-Semitic viewpoint, and his father has attacked the Jewish religion and expressed doubt that the Holocaust took place.

Gibson's apology "might have been OK," Fineman says, "if it hadn't been for his history."

But at this point, there is absolutely no chance that the controversy is going to go away. For starters, a tentative arraignment date has been set for Sept. 28.

"If you don't answer the questions, they just keep coming up," says Margaret Torme of the San Francisco firm Torme Lauricella. "He's successfully made this into more than a one-day story."

Jewish groups are lining up to say that his apology doesn't go far enough, there are calls for him to revisit the issue and give a public statement, and the premise he seemed to be advancing — that he was so tipsy he didn't know what he was saying — isn't playing well.

"This wasn't a radio wave that randomly passed through his head," says Jack Glaser, a assistant professor at Cal's Goldman School of Public Policy, who stud-

ies hate crimes and prejudice. "People seem to keep a lid on their prejudice, but in a crisis it bubbles up. He lets his guard down, and all of a sudden you see it."

So what now? Well, nearly everyone agrees that for Gibson to have any chance at career rehabilitation, he is going to have to make a powerful statement. Not just an apology, but some kind of a direct action.

"Words are not going to be the way out at this point," says Graham. "He is going to have to work with the Jewish community and prove that he is not anti-Semitic. Dragging himself out of this hole is going to be a long process."

Not everyone agrees. Christine Boehkle, CEO and founder of Connecting Point PR in San Francisco, says she thinks at this point there is no point in revisiting the anti-Semitic remarks, because "the more you repeat something, the more you fan the flames." Now that he's apologized, she would advise him to lay low and let this blow over.

"I would frankly be very surprised if we are talking about this in a month," Boehkle says. "There may be part of society that will never forgive him, but the general population is just too jaded."

Maybe so. But Lippin reminds us that Hollywood is a small town. Gibson may have enough money "to last the lifetime of 2,000 people," but he's still got a movie, "Apocalypto," coming out, and Lippin expects him to be peppered with questions from the media. And he won't be able to duck the issue then.

"In some ways," Lippin says, "his whole career is going to be a function of how he handles those questions."

C.W. Nevius' column appears regularly in the Chronicle. His blog C.W. Nevius.blog and "News Wrap" podcast can be found at SFGate.com. E-mail him at cwnevius@sfnchronicle.com.