

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON WITH KEN BURNS

SUBJECT: NATIONAL PARKS; AMERICA'S BEST IDEA

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ALAN BJERGA: (Sounds gavel.) Good afternoon, and welcome to the National Press Club. My name is Alan Bjerga. I'm a reporter of Bloomberg News, and the current Vice President of the National Press Club. We're the world's leading professional organization for journalists and committed to fostering a free press worldwide. For more information about the National Press Club, please visit our website at www.press.org. And on behalf of our 3,500 members worldwide, I'd like to welcome our speaker and our guests in the audience today. I'd also like to welcome those who are watching at home on C-SPAN.

We're looking forward to today's speech, and afterwards I'll ask as many questions from the audience as time permits. Please hold your applause during the speech so that we have time for as many questions as possible. For our broadcast audience, I'd like to explain that if you hear applause, it may be from the guests and members of the general public who attend our luncheons, not necessarily the journalists.

I'd now like to introduce our head table guests and ask them to stand briefly when their names are called. John Lockwood, a National Park Service ranger for 25 years, and a member of the National Press Club; Eleanor Clift of *Newsweek* magazine; Sylvia Smith of the *Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette* and former President of the National Press Club; Matt Spangler of the Bureau of Land Management; Paula Kerger, President and CEO of PBS and a guest of the speaker; Angela Greiling Keane, reporter for Bloomberg News and Chair of the National Press Club Speaker's Committee.

Skipping over our guest, we have Gil Klein, former NPC President and author of the Club's centennial history. He arranged today's luncheon. Sharon Rockefeller, the CEO of WETA Public Television; Llewellyn King, who is the producer and host of "White House Chronicle" on PBS; Rick Dunham, Bureau Chief of Hearst Newspapers in Washington, D.C.; and Dave Cook of the *Christian Science Monitor*. (Applause)

For decades, Ken Burns has been a leading documentary filmmaker who combines lyric prose and a thorough understanding of American history in works that have informed and have enlightened public television audiences. Burns has appeared at the National Press Club numerous times. He first spoke here in 1990 after his series "The Civil War," which the *Washington Post* called "heroic television," helped renew interest in historical documentaries. We're looking forward today to discussing his latest project, a twelve hour, six-part documentary called, "The National Parks: America's Best Idea."

It began airing last night on public television stations across the country, locally on WETA, Burns's partner in the project. The National Park series combines Burns's storytelling abilities with photographs of the parks brought into everyone's home in high definition television. But the series isn't simply about beauty, it is a story of an American idea: that scenic land should be set aside and protected not for royalty and the wealthy, but for the enjoyment of all citizens. It is the story of the visionaries, the explorers, the writers, the photographers, and even the politicians who struggled to make this democratic ideal happen. Please, everyone, join us in a warm Press Club welcome for Mr. Ken Burns. (Applause)

MR. BURNS: Thank you so much. I have been asked by the officials at PBS to issue a warning that if those of you have HD large format television screen and 5.1 surround sound to please wear a raincoat while you're watching the series because the spray from Yosemite Falls will go into your living room and we are not responsible for any water damage there. (Laughter)

I want to thank the Press Club for having me back. It's been many, many times and I'm always thrilled to be here. I'd like to particularly thank PBS, the greatest network on Earth and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting for their support. And also to WETA, the production partners for 25-plus years and my dear friend, Sharon Rockefeller. I should have said Paula Kerger at PBS has been just the great pillar of support for the projects over the last several years that we've attempted to do, and I don't think I would be standing here before you without these two extraordinary women.

We also benefit from the kindness of our underwriters; in this case for this program, the Bank of America and General Electric, the Haas, Jr. Fund, the National Park Foundation, the Park Foundation, the Arthur Vining Davis Frustration, the Pew Charitable Trusts, Peter J. Sharp and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Again, because I am here and you see me is in large measure to their very generous support, not only for this production, but for many others.

This represents an extraordinary collaboration between PBS, the Public Broadcasting Service, and the NPS, the National Park Service. And I'd like to thank that those representatives of the Park Service who are here today, particularly the Undersecretary of the Interior, Tom Strickland; and the acting Park Service Director, Dan Wenk, and all the extraordinary public servants, the rangers who helped us from the gates of the arctic in northern Alaska to the Dry Tortugas of the Florida Keys, from Hawaii volcanoes to Acadia in Maine. They've been just tremendous servants, and I'd like to thank them.

We also have been celebrating over the last several days our public land. And there's been an enormous outpouring of support all across the country in more than 200 of the 391 sites of the National Park Service. Citizens have been turning out by the hundreds and by the thousands to celebrate not just the initiation of this film, but our love of these public lands, these treasured landscapes, as Secretary of the Interior, Ken Salazar, who's been a great champion of this project, would say. And it's just been an amazing outpouring in a country that is often so distracted by the now that there are so many millions of our citizens willing to commit to these public lands in such a meaningful way.

We, in turn, tried to express some sort of thanks to the National Park Service for their service to us. And so we are turning over to them, as of today, all of our research material. That is to say, the full transcripts and the full images of all the interviews that we took in the course of this, the database of nearly 12,000 individual images culled from hundreds and hundreds of archives around the country, and indeed the world, rights to which we don't possess, but I think will be an important database for the Park Service and historians and researchers for decades to come.

We've also produced, with the help of the Haas, Jr. Fund, six other films; one, a 45 minute film that emphasizes the uniquely diverse story of the national parks but also five other contemporary films that I think will draw new visitors to the parks. We still have some populations in our country that do not yet feel the ownership of the national parks and it has been our commitment, indeed our mandate, to try to reach them, to show them heroes of the national parks that look and sound like them. And so we're very happy to present to the Park Service and to the Department of Interior, the fruits of our labors in addition to sharing with our fellow citizens our ten year labor of love on this. And we're very excited to do that, and so grateful for all the help you gave us, there at three a.m. with a ranger standing next to us as we took a shot of dawn. It was very, very special, thank you.

“One learns,” the naturalist John Muir said, “One learns that the world, though made, is yet being made. That this is still the morning of creation.” This documentary film series, and our companion book, grew out of experiences and emotions and attitudes formed and shaped by more than three decades of trying to get to the heart of a deceptively simple question: who are we? That is to say, who are those strange and complicated people who like to call themselves Americans? What can an investigation of the past tell us about not only where we have been as a people, but where we are and where we might be going.

The various films we have made over the last 30-plus years have often tried to explore the central issue of race in America, the great sin and stain of slavery and its ennobling as well as the deviling consequences. In works on the Statue of Liberty, the Civil War, baseball, jazz, Thomas Jefferson, Mark Twain, and the first African-American heavyweight champion, Jack Johnson, among others.

But we have also been drawn inexorably to a question of space. That is, the way in which the sheer physicality of this great continent has molded us as a people, for better and for worse. From films on the history of the American West, that strange and dangerous intersection of cultures where so much of our national character and mythology has emerged. To the Lewis and Clark expedition and its own decidedly bittersweet lessons. From a lighthearted look at the first cross country automobile trip made a century after Meriwether Lewis and William Clark made theirs. To the wonderful and unforgiving landscape that would inspire a young Samuel Clemens to take on the central themes of both race and space that his complicated young nation seemed unable to avoid. We, too, have been captivated and directed by a sense of possibility and promise in the magnificence of our land.

That interest has reached its apotheosis for us in the story of our national parks. For in the narrative of their creation, in the evolution of their clean and stunningly influential ideal, we have been able to engage and join themes that transcend the political or military or social elements that have traditionally passed for American history. And have been able at times, I believe, to touch on or at least glimpse the intimate, indeed spiritual, things that bind us and that complicated past together.

We have found in our lifelong love and curiosity for the still wild places of America an animating spirit that has renewed our passion as filmmakers and writers, historians and friends. And there is no person more central to this enterprise than my best friend, Dayton Duncan, who is the author and the producer of this film, the person who brought this to my attention, who every day served as the general of this project and should be standing here with me as an equal coauthor of this effort. And so would you please acknowledge Dayton's central role? (Applause)

In every gesture and breath I speak, I hope for him today, and that you know I stand here supported by his extraordinary words and kindness and friendship in all of this. And we cannot imagine a better subject to continue to pursue the questions that have propelled us for so long.

It is not as if the National Parks haven't been done before, they have. But it was our intention to make a documentary film series and then a book on the history of the parks. This would not be a tour guide, a travelogue filled with pretty pictures of wildlife or spectacular natural scenery, though our series and book, in the end, would have some of both. Nor would this be a list of which inn or lodge to stay at when on vacation. We were most interested in following the individuals and the ideas that have created this

uniquely American thing called the National Parks, an invention we now take for granted like the air that we breathe, the water we drink.

We were principally drawn to the fact that for the first time in human history land, great sections of our natural landscape, were set aside not for kings or noblemen or the very rich, as Alan mentioned, but for everyone and for all time. We like the fact that we Americans had invented such a wonderful thing, that this idea, like our articulation of universal political freedom in the Declaration of Interdependence should be so widely admired and copied throughout the rest of the world. In fact, we came to believe with every fiber of our being that the parks are nothing less than the Declaration of independence applied to the landscape. Three decades of continually brushing up against this amazing and surprisingly little known story, during the course of producing our other projects, getting to know historical figures who were important to the evolution of that park idea. Spending time out in these transformative and restorative places only heightened our interest in the subject.

Ten years ago, therefore, we committed to making a documentary film about our national parks. Over the many years it has taken to complete this project, we have found in the story of the parks, quite simply, a reminder of our best selves, a connection to the most primitive impulses we human beings have, and an appreciation of the value of common wealth that these parks represent on both a spiritual, as well as material level.

During the course of our investigation, we began to gain a new, intimate awareness of the flabbergasting and nearly incalculable geological forces at work and on display in the parks. "One of the things I think we witness when we go to the parks," the historian William Cronon told us in an interview for our film, "is the immensity and the intimacy of time. On the one hand, we experience the immensity of time, which is the creation itself. It is universe unfolding before us. And yet it is also," he went on, "time shared with the people that we visit these places with." We remember when our parents took us for the first time, and then we as parents passing them on to our children, a kind of intimate transmission from generation to generation to generation of the love of place, the love of nation, that the national parks are meant to stand for.

Walking quietly and awestruck within a grove of huge sequoia trees that like sentinels have borne silent witness to this immense passage of time, standing next to the rim of an unfathomably deep cavern, or in the spray and roar of a thousand foot waterfall. Gazing in wonder at the nighttime roost of tens of thousands of birds in a place dismissed once as a dismal swamp. Walking in a cathedral of stone more impressive than any made by man. Stepping gingerly around geysers and fumaroles and boiling and spitting mud pots in God's laboratory. Watching clouds clear off the crown of the most massive mountain on our continent, we have come to want to know more about that intimate transmission Cronon spoke of. Our film series and our book is our attempt at an answer.

For nearly seven years, we have made trip after trip from our home in New Hampshire out into the national parks looking, scouting, filming, interviewing, asking, delving into their origins and mythology, recovering their long-neglected stories and

archives, searching for some sign or guidepost that would illuminate our way. Getting to know the remarkable people who continue to protect this fragile inheritance.

In the course of our work, we were awakened daily by the life-changing power these saved and sacred places exert. Stumbling among the ruins of Chaco Canyon in New Mexico and Mesa Verde in Colorado, we breathe the dry air of the civilization that vanished hundreds of years ago. Yet, in the eerily silent ruins, the warren of now-deserted rooms and kivas and passageways of a once-flourishing culture, we came to know the fragility of our own existence.

In the crisp air, the pines and maples and in the thunder of the surf at Acadia in Maine, we found an unusual, sustaining tranquility and reveled in the contradiction that much of that place had been saved by the son of the richest, and some said most hated, man in America. In northwestern Montana, and later on a mountain near Seattle, we hiked up to living, but now threatened and disappearing glaciers, while still marveling at the floral Elysium, the riot and jumble of brightly colored wildflowers joyously blooming on the alpine slopes. It was hard to leave these protected places, and the grief that fell over some of us as the built world reclaimed its supremacy was palpable and long-lasting.

In Hawaii, the hellish landscape of Haleakala and Hawaii volcanoes provided us a glimpse back, it seemed, into the moment of creation itself while the colorful windswept canyons of southern Utah were mesmerizing, sometimes forbidding museums of patient erosion.

Down in the grandest canyon on Earth in northern Arizona, we braved the chilly rapids of a still insistent and dangerous Colorado River and wondered, again, at the layers of history, grand geological history, that river has revealed to travelers over the eons. Back on its south rim, we felt the atomic insignificance of our own lives, the sense of one's smallness in the larger scheme of things that the view from the canyon's edge continually promotes. And in the inscrutable, contradictory ways of our national parks we felt bigger in that knowledge.

Like privileged visitors to some sacred shrine or cloistered monastery, Alaska took us in and permitted us moments with mountains and fjords and tundra, brown bear, elk and moose, whale and seal and puffin we will never forget. We saw lots of wolves, too.

In northwestern Wyoming, we found a kind of second home among the wildlife and wild eruptions of the many stunning otherworldly thermal features; fell silent at an overlook that afforded a view of the inspirational multi-hued canyon of the Yellowstone and had the sense there that the forces which had created the Earth were still operating just below the brittle, sometimes hollow-sounding ground we were walking on, a cosmic laboratory of startling beauty and majesty.

We've come back to this place again and again, at every season, at every time of day and night. And from every vantage, we have struggled and strained to catch a view of

the primeval, to reconnect ourselves to the natural world that was our home. As Dayton Duncan likes to say, at the beginnings of our dimmest memories of a species. At one glorious moment, a magnificent bison walked out of a cloud of steam and into our shot, a refugee, a cautionary emissary from some prehistoric age, a creature only recently saved from extinction because we had the foresight to permanently set aside this wild place as a national park.

And in this Sierra Nevada of California, we found our sanctuary and our church. If the genius of America has been to liberate humankind by permitting its citizens to govern themselves, it has also helped to free them in another, perhaps more important way, by permitting its believers to workshop God as they saw fit. Where our European ancestors required a formalized, dogmatic devotion in cathedrals made by men, we Americans would more easily find God or science or art, if that is your way, in Nature. And on the western slopes of those same Sierras where the Awanichi Indians once made their home, is a valley of incomparable, transcendent beauty that the white man who first discovered it called Yosemite. It is the first great natural park in history and it contains towering waterfalls and thundering cataracts, polished granite rocks of unusual and unique architecture. Majestic trees of almost supernatural size, dense forest and alpine meadows, bald eagles and hermit thrushes, deer and black bear.

But an inventory of its treasures does not come close to describing its power. In Yosemite, the whole is always greater than the sum of its parts and we as filmmakers and writers, cinematographers and editors, have struggled these many years to comprehend the nearly cosmic calculus that continually recommends that special valley to us.

Final accounting will not come, of course. Our arithmetic will always fail. The glories of Yosemite, indeed all the national parks, will be impossible to articulate with any precision by us mere mortals.

Interestingly, these mortals, those mortals, have been in many ways big and small the glue that holds the story of the national parks together. It was people, after all, who failed to find the words to express the emotions they felt in these places, but who nonetheless moved fearlessly into that unknowing. It was people who in fits and starts and up against powerful and relentless opposition, first tried to set aside these parks. It was people who saw the danger to wildlife and scenery and rescued some threatened species from extinction. It was people who drew up the laws and fought the bureaucratic fights to create an agency charged with overseeing these spectacular parts. And it was, and still is, people who have dedicated their lives to the ongoing work of protecting, expanding and now restoring the best idea we've ever had.

They include an energetic and idealistic young president, a man with a nearly unquenchable thirst for knowledge of the natural world who would do more for parks and conservation than any other politician of his day by emphasizing the essential democracy at the heart of the park impulse. And by insisting that these locations be saved for our children and our children's children. "We are not building this country of ours for a day," he once said. "It is to last through the ages."

But they also include a young boy from Kansas, who after reading in the newspaper that had wrapped his lunch about an exquisite lake out west, would dedicate the next 31 years of his life to saving one of the most beautiful spots in the country. They include a restless housewife from Lincoln, Nebraska, who with her photographer husband would tour the national parks each summer in their car, creating a loving scrapbook and a journal of startling poignancy and artistry, filled with timeless memories, the unforgettable places, the childless couple had adopted.

They include a brilliant Hispanic biologist who would do more than anyone else to turn the Park Service's attention towards the preservation of wildlife and the correct stewardship of the many species that call the parks their home.

They include two tireless and enterprising brothers who in the first decades of the 20th century made photographing and filming the grandest canyon on Earth their life's work. Who brought back some of the finest pictures ever made of that region, and who also made a living taking photographs of the equally awestruck tourists who rode mules down into the canyon.

They include a fisherman's guide, the son of a slave, living on a small key off the coast of Miami who refused to sell his land to developers who had plans to despoil his beloved paradise. And then happily turned his island over to the people of the United States who had themselves decided, in their wisdom, to preserve forever his pristine sanctuary.

Over the course of our film, you will meet several dozen other people, most of them unsung or unfamiliar who found in the parks salvation of one kind or another. They included a talented, but troubled, alcoholic who fell in love with the wild woods of western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee, rehabilitated himself in the isolation of nature and then sacrificed everything to see the region transformed into a park.

He was aided, in turn, by an equally dedicated Japanese immigrant who would, with his camera, help insure the preservation of the wilderness that was so close to, and so threatened by, the major population centers of the east. They include a family of Colorado cowboys, Quakers, who turned themselves into archeologists and helped save the dwindling, and often vandalized relics of ancient American cultures. And the Minnesota boy who stepped off a train in Alaska, at the nation's highest peak and became one of the fiercest protectors of the predators nearly everyone else wanted eradicated.

They include the millionaire businessman with seemingly limitless enthusiasm for the expansion of parkland in America who would spearhead the creation the National Park Service and then benefit from its calming and peaceful resources, as perhaps no one else has. And his young assistant, who would be forced to take over during his boss's mysterious absences and who would also help an invalid, paraplegic President expand the very notion of what a national park could be.

They include an iconoclastic crusader from Florida, a woman with her own unique relationship to the swamp at her doorstep who would help lead the fight to save that swamp from a relentless tide of development and commercial exploitation.

And they also include a Scottish born wanderer who walked clear across California and into the Awanichi's magical valley in the middle of the high Sierras and was utterly transformed, finding in nature's exquisite lessons an alternative to the harsh religious discipline of his father. And who would articulate his new creed of nature in writing so transcendent that millions of Americans are still beguiled and inspired by the rapture flowing from his work.

For John Muir, Yosemite, indeed any wild place, revealed a design and an intelligence more permanent, more valuable than anything made by man. And man would be wise to submit to that natural world. He was certain, too, that a genuine and authentic relationship with nature would help to forge a special kinship between all lovers of the mountains. And this kinship in turn required us, each of us within ourselves, to work, to become better people. For this new human evolution to take place, Muir insisted that we had to, all of us, we had to go out into nature. "But by going out," he said, "we were really going in."

This is the journey, the journey of self discovery that we can all make as we embrace our co ownership of these national parks, these spectacular crown jewels. This is still John Muir, wrote so assuredly, "This is still the morning of creation." Thank you for your attention. (Applause)

MR. BJERGA: And thank you very much for your words today, Mr. Burns. Please, a reminder to our audience that if anyone has any questions, please bring them up towards here. We have a good amount of time and we thank you for the time you're spending answering our questions today.

Having watched your first installment of the series last night, something that was very striking was how these national parks are often a matter of great pride in a region once they're established. The battle to actually establish the parks is very different from what actually ends up being there. Could you talk a little bit about what seems to be a central conflict there between the process of creation and the feelings that one gets after that battle is fought?

MR. BURNS: Well, all I can say is stay tuned and fasten your seat belts because you're in for a bumpy ride. It makes the creation of Yosemite and Yellowstone look rather easy in comparison to some of the other parks. You know, it is human nature, and particularly American nature, to develop. This is where we got manifest destiny from, and so Americans look at a stream and think dam. They look at a stand of timber and think board feet. They look at a beautiful canyon and wonder what mineral wealth can be extracted. So the amount of energy to sort of rearrange that equation, to make the river flow backwards, is a tough one.

And beginning tonight, our second episode, that will become even more pronounced because though most of the parks are created by the designation of federal land to be set aside, they nevertheless run up against those extractive and acquisitive interests that are hugely a part of our country. And they make for very interesting battles that are, as you suggest, nearly always resolved in favor of the parks. So, the many, many year battle, many decade-long battle to create perhaps the most self evident park, the Grand Canyon, that spans a couple of our episodes, you'd think that if you were going to set aside a park and you'd already established a few of them, the Grand Canyon would be the next one you'd add. But it took decades, literally, to convince Americans because of the local resistance in Arizona. It is now called the Grand Canyon State and it's on their license plate. They enjoy it.

And that sort of struggle has been replicated throughout the story of the national parks, that there is initial local resistance and then a kind of begrudging acquiescence, and then a sudden realization that this has so burnished the image of that place, has been such a spectacular boon to economic development, that is such a source of not just local but national pride, that the parks get embraced after the dust of what is often a very contentious battle has settled.

MR. BJERGA: You also see a lot in installment one of discussion of the contrast with Niagara Falls and the development that took place around there. It seems like there are several letters of people saying, "Please do not let place X become the next Niagara." Do you see any parts of America right now that you may see as sort of a Niagaraization (sic) of the area?

MR. BURNS: I don't think we have enough time to itemize all of those places, and perhaps setting aside the national parks, we might talk about the places that haven't yet had that. You know, the parks are borne out of a strange set of bedfellows and strange circumstances, not the least of which is a kind of mid-19th century sort of inferiority complex. Europeans are continually belittling us, that we don't have the palaces, we don't have the formal parks, we don't have the cathedrals that Europe does. That we have taken the only obvious east coast, or relatively east coast, natural wonder, Niagara Falls, and turned it into this sort of huckster's paradise where people on both sides of the Falls can expect to be swindled by the people there trying to make an extra buck.

And this has become part of our national, natural shame. And in many ways, the parks are borne out of a sense of let's not create another national park. Is there a way to set aside these places?

But I think, as I hope my remarks suggest, that the original impulse is not the conservation one that we normally attribute in our history. That will come later. But it is that spiritual one, the sense of possibility in these places. That we have inherited a Garden of Eden that Thomas Jefferson thought would take hundreds of generations to fill up, but we had done so in less than five. And we ran this very palpable danger of running out of these places. Nothing to be able to reflect and say, "This is ours, this is what makes us so special." When we sing "My Country 'Tis of Thee," we are not talking about

metropolitan skyscrapers or trade statistics. We are talking about this land. And there was a danger that it would all be gone.

And not just the land, but the species, the bison. Perhaps the most powerful symbol of our country would be extinct. It would be a stuffed animal in a museum similar to a woolly mammoth had we not set aside Yellowstone National Park, then strengthened the poor laws that existed that protected the animals within them and permitted the handful of bison, remaining bison, to flourish and come back. Without the national parks, we would be talking about an animal like the dodo bird or the passenger pigeon, gone.

MR. BJERGA: What would be your pick for the next national park?

MR. BURNS: Well, particularly documentary filmmakers and amateur historians do not presume to make policy, particularly in front of the Undersecretary of the Interior and the Acting Director of the Park Service. However-- (Laughter) there are many. First of all, I think our main task right now is restoration. We have a backlog of billions of dollars in maintenance that will bring the physical structure, the human physical structure of our national parks back up to snuff. This is not a partisan issue. These parks are beloved by Republicans and Democrats and independents all across the country, and I think we have some unanimity on all of that. We need to get to work. And as we approach the centennial of the existence of the National Park Service in 2016, we have an opportunity now to spend the next seven years working tirelessly to make sure we can do those restorative efforts within the parks.

But, there are existing monuments that do not yet enjoy the full protection of a national park that could be elevated to full park status. There are places, forests, often still part of the Agriculture Department. They crop national forests that gird and surround existing parks that we might be able to use to expand the borders of existing parkland to more naturally take into account the grazing and migratory patterns of some of the large animals, what the park service calls in its governmental euphemism, "the charismatic mega fauna." (Laughter)

I personally would love to see Grand Staircase Escalante and Dinosaur National Monument elevated from monument status to park status. Dinosaur is in the upper left-hand corner of Colorado and eastern Utah and is a simply spectacularly beautiful place. And if that was made into a park and was Grand Staircase Escalante, Utah would have bragging rights to one of the greatest string, as they almost already do, of natural national parks in existence. You would go from Dinosaur to Arches and Canyonlands and Capitol Reef and Grand Staircase and Bryce and Zion, and you'd be hard put, even in Alaska and California, to come up with a more spectacular array of parks. But, you're just listening to one humble citizen.

MR. BJERGA: Well, and a citizen who has, throughout his work, has shown a certain sense of place. And, of course, the place you're in right now is Washington, D.C., which is home to a lot of exotic animals of its own. And I guess I'm wondering what would your message be, what sort of impact, being in Washington, D.C., would you like

your film to have on these particular animals who help determine the fate of the national park system?

MR. BURNS: That's a good question, and I think that Dayton and I felt that as we worked for ten years, that our main job was to tell a good story. That's our obligation, really. We would hope that once people had spent some time looking at the story that we'd taken a decade to put together, to intertwine and inter-braid the 50 or 60 characters that you meet set against the backdrop of what we think are the most spectacular places on Earth, that that might galvanize you, understanding not only the rich heritage that we have, the sense of co ownership, but also the powerful emotions, the personal powerful emotions that are generated by individuals and families as they go out in these parks, that people will do just that. They will start to go and visit them.

And I think when people visit them more, they'll create problems for the Park Service of how to deal with that influx. And there's always the worry of loving the parks to death. In fact, we have a chapter in our last episode called "Loved to Death." But these are good problems for a democracy to have. The worst problem would be a lack of constituents, and then the parks would fall prey to those acquisitive and extractive interests that want to add that dam, that want to cut down those trees, that want to mine that canyon.

And so I think our just really fervent wish would be that more people, more families, would go out. That we could convince those populations, often African-American, often Hispanic American, others that do not yet feel that ownership of the national parks, that the history is on their side. That there are heroes, as I said before, that look and sound like them. That they are welcomed, that they own the parks as much as anyone. And that's the simple democratic equation here, that it doesn't matter whether you came on the *Mayflower* or arrived yesterday, whether you are a billionaire or your mother is a maid, these parks are yours. And you stand in them equal to everyone else.

So I think the film attempts to celebrate that amidst the images of this complex history and that we would hope it would just be, could be, a galvanic moment for the parks just as the Civil War series was for some of the battlefield parks after that series aired in 1990.

MR. BJERGA: What is your reaction to efforts to allow firearms in national parks?

MR. BURNS: Once again, I speak only as a public citizen. I personally think it's foolish. One of the interesting stories we tell in this film, and in others, is the way in which sometimes in our contemporary argument over guns, we forget the real purpose of the Second Amendment. In this film, particularly, the African-American buffalo soldiers, the celebrated cavalymen who were, as most people do not know, the first park protectors at Yosemite and Sequoia National Parks, at one time checked the guns of the people coming in and the wildlife made a comeback. One imagines that, therefore by extension, all species are threatened in a national park. All species of all kinds by the

presence of those firearms, that there's nothing to be gained in a place in which hunting is not permitted by allowing them in there. And that I think it has become just a part of grandstanding, contemporary politics that has no place in the national park. But again, I speak as a citizen.

MR. BJERGA: Several questions have to deal with the art and craft of filmmaking toward you. And one question that came up a couple of times is you are defining historical and cultural icons through some of your work. And a lot of people are experiencing this work and really having it defined to them by a film by Ken Burns. What sort of responsibility do you have as a filmmaker when you are putting forth these images that can have such a powerful impact on people?

MR. BURNS: Well, I think we try very hard to be aware of that. But more importantly, we're trying to be true to our own craft and our own sense of storytelling. The more important question is that we've been defined by these places. It's not so much that we're defining them, we've been defined by these places; the Brooklyn Bridge, the institution of jazz and baseball, the Civil War. Some extraordinary human beings, the national parks. And so we as American citizens practicing this active citizenship, we think with our craft of writing and filmmaking, hope not so much to set in stone some sort of standard for these icons, but encourage the questioning. That question, "Who are we?" is never answered. It's only deepened for us personally and we hope is passed on to the people who see the film.

So there's no sort of sense on our part that we have made the first or the last word on these things, but merely as citizens been able to contribute our own enthusiasm in the best sense of that word for the aspects of American history that we find valuable. Each generation rediscovers and reexamines that part of the past it finds useful. And I think all of the times, because of the blessings of working with public television, with PBS, that we've been able to make the films to celebrate the stuff that we've been drawn to. It hasn't been based on what a client wants us to do. It hasn't been based on whatever the particular historical fashion of the moment it is. It hasn't been based on what is just fashionable or controversial. We have actually been able to explore important aspects of American history without any sense that they were the definitive portrait, but a way of engaging a national conversation that permits us all to further deepen our understanding because we spend in our media culture, no insult implied, a great deal of time on the surface of things. And what history permits is a triangulation and a perspective that I think adds depth and meaning and profundity, not just to those past events, but to this present moment. That we would all be well, journalists and citizens alike, to heed.

MR. BJERGA: A two-part question. First, if you could talk a little bit about the filmmakers who have influenced your work, both of commentary and narrative? And secondly, given that you have a platform here, the documentary filmmaker, who are some lesser known documentary filmmakers out there who maybe we might want to check out?

MR. BURNS: That's a really good question. You know, I originally wanted to be a filmmaker of the feature Hollywood kind when I decided at age 13 or 14 that that's

what I wanted to do. And so, in many cases, a lot of my heroes are those feature filmmakers. And it's very interesting, this is not apples and oranges. The same Aristotelian laws, the same poetics apply to stories told in a documentary fashion based on fact, and those told in a fiction circumstance based on things that are made up. The laws of good storytelling apply.

“Honey, how was your day?” does not begin, “I backed the car slowly down the driveway, avoiding the garbage can at the corner and proceeded to the stop sign, put on my blinker and turned right.” You never say that unless you have a car accident at that moment. The essence of storytelling applies the laws applied to documentary as well as feature. So a lot of my heroes are the familiar heroes of our feature films around the globe. Obviously, Chaplin and Keaton and Hitchcock and Ford and Scorsese and others, but also Kurosawa and Buñuel and many, many-- too many to name.

What's so great about documentary is it's not some one, narrow band. Actually, I think it's the feature films that are. The documentary represents such a great, great spectrum of things; Frederick Weisman who has championed cinema vérité for decade after decade after decade. Errol Morris, who produces exquisite, stylized movies, is one of my heroes. I think we notice the way in which the whole landscape of documentary in the last 20 years has been changed and transformed the rest of our environment. And I would just invite you to come up to our studios in Walpole, New Hampshire, to see lots of young, talented filmmakers who are trying to make a go of it.

MR. BJERGA: What time of year is that invitation? (Laughter)

MR. BURNS: Well, you know, I'm away on the road an awful lot, so I'd hope to be able to introduce you personally. But you'll just have to take potluck if I'm not there.

MR. BJERGA: Share with our audience here, both on C-SPAN and here at the National Press Club, what was the most painful scene in this documentary that you had to leave on the cutting room floor? And why did you let it go?

MR. BURNS: I have ice water running through my veins. There is no scene that's on the cutting room floor that for me I agonized about. The question, though, that you have asked should have been directed at Dayton Duncan, the writer. (Laughter) And he just assured me that the question didn't come from him. What happens invariably is our cutting room floor is not filled with bad scenes, but in fact wonderful scenes. That if we could pick them up and show them to you, you'd think that we had lost our minds. “Why isn't that in the final film?” But for some strange alchemy, for some strange reason, it just didn't fit. You remember the movie “Amadeus,” too many notes. And we end up this long, incredibly painful process of having to pull something out that looks great, even where it is, but somehow destabilize the film a half an hour down the line. And it often takes a great deal of courage, not just on this filmmaker's part, but certainly on our writer's part, to accept with graciousness and magnanimity the many amputations of his work that take place.

Fortunately for us, and in this case Alfred A. Knopf has published a marvelous book which permits Dayton at least the chance to resurrect some scenes that might have hit the cutting room floor, allowing us to expand stories, the necessities of this film medium require us to pare down. They get to be extended on the printed page. And also to include many stories that we weren't able to include in the series itself. So, our friendship remains intact.

MR. BJERGA: Here's another question from the audience, and please, keep your cards coming. Another filmmaker who has a film out right now is documentarian Michael Moore. Could you contrast your work with his?

MR. BURNS: I couldn't imagine two filmmakers that are more different. I try to keep myself out of the film. It is, in fact, important that every one of his films have him in there. He's a physical presence in every single film and that's so important to his work. He is involved in sort of direct and obvious political advocacy. I have, and my films reflect, a certain wide range of views not just political, but otherwise, that we try to keep hidden or buried, we want the story to tell it.

But having said that, it takes a great deal of effort and energy to make a film. And those people who actually finish a film are to be commended, as much as our critical establishment would like to judge with the harshest sort of language the work that's done, it's incredibly difficult to make a film. And the last time I checked, and it's so appropriate that we are here at the Press Club, the First Amendment has really governed our ability. And so a lot of people come up to me and ask me this question on the road, as if somewhere there should be some check on someone, like a Michael Moore, who wears their opinions on their sleeve. And then I say, "This runs counter to the First Amendment," and that we are so grateful that we have the Michael Moores and everyone else screaming and yelling and whispering and singing all the various opinions that we have.

MR. BJERGA: In your film, in your approach toward representing Native American perspectives and the folks who are working and living their lives in these parks a millennium before they were established, what is the challenge of capturing the diversity of Native American experience in the diversity of the parks, given that there were so many different cultures?

MR. BURNS: That's an excellent question, Alan. You know, it is so easy to jump from the geological description to the sort of present European history of these parks. And as you notice, earlier I put the word "discovered" next to Yosemite, with reason. Because we tend to leap over that because of this dark, dark past that we have in which this Garden of Eden that we inherited was actually taken from, in the case of the continental United States, 300 other nations, 300 other peoples, many of them with separate and distinct languages as different from English as Polish. And that we have conveniently ignored a lot of that.

And we made an effort, Dayton and I made an effort in this film particularly, as well as other films, our history of the west to highlight the Native American presence, to not leapfrog over their involvement in this. Every single one of the parks is, in many cases, a hunting ground or a sacred place or just home for Native peoples. And so our film, you will hear, if you are able to let it wash over you and accumulate the six straight nights that PBS is broadcasting it, or perhaps on your own with the DVDs, I think you will allow washing over you the names of the Indian tribes that were there.

We have a marvelous-- The Indian tribes that are in each place. And we have Gerard Baker, a dear friend of ours, who is a Mandan-Hidasta Indian from North Dakota who grew up on the reservation who is now, in the greatest of all ironies, the superintendent of Mt. Rushmore National Memorial. Is that what it is, memorial? Interpreting not just the recent history of the carving into the sacred Black Hills, sacred for so many different Native peoples, the busts of four American presidents, but also the much longer and complicated Native American history of that place. And, of course, the even more complicated intersection of the white appropriation of the Black Hills from the Native peoples.

And I think that's part of the glory of our National Park Service. We have been willing to expand the ideas from saving natural scenery to saving archeological sites to complex habitats to historical sites that show that political, military and social history, to the symbols of our country like the Statue of Liberty, the Lincoln Memorial, Mt. Rushmore. But also places of shame, places of our more complicated past; slave cabins that reveal the efforts of the people who made the comfortable life of a slave owner, a plantation owner, possible. We've saved Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, still a working inner city high school, is also a unit of the National Park Service.

So is Manzanar, where Japanese-American citizens were shamelessly interned during the Second World War. So, is Washita and Sand Creek on the Great Plains, sites of the massacre of Native peoples by American cavalrymen. So is Shanksville, Pennsylvania, the heroic actions of the people on United 93. So is Oklahoma City, where 163 chairs commemorate the men, women and children killed in a senseless act of domestic terrorism.

Our national parks have come to not just represent this geological past, but our very complex ethnographic, cultural, political, military thing. And I think we have to, in some ways, applaud ourselves. I know no other country on Earth that takes the more difficult aspects of that past and puts them up in the same light that we would put the Statue of Liberty in and says that a great country can be even greater by acknowledging the reality of its complicated past.

MR. BJERGA: During your talk today, you've frequently spoken of the spiritual dimension of the parks. How did working on this project affect you spiritually?

MR. BURNS: Well, I think that's true. As I said before, the initial impulse was often spiritual or religious. Certainly, when people went into Yosemite, the first white

people, they were struck always by the sense of possibility following an Emersonian sense that you could find God more easily in nature than in works created by man.

And I think that the parks continue to perform a kind of open heart surgery on those of us who visit them and those of us who have the willingness to submit themselves to the kind of surrender, John Muir called it unconditional surrender, to wild nature. That we are delivered with ourselves or with our families, with moments that are transformative. I think the greatest surprise for Dayton and me in this project has been that every single one of those 50 or 60 people that we focus on, the historical figures, had some moment in their lives when the parks transformed them utterly. Call it religious, spiritual, whatever you want to call it.

The people that we interviewed to help us understand that story told us about these people, but then felt compelled to tell us their own personal stories. Why they became a historian, what was their most satisfying moment. Stuart Udall, a former Interior Secretary, brought us to tears describing a moment in the Doll House, a part of the Canyonlands National Park, a park he was able to create. And you realize that people were talking about the power and glory of the present world.

Muir would always say, "This is now. Everything is happening now. Everything is happening now." And everything in our civilized, built environment convinces us that it's before and later. It's what we want, what we haven't gotten yet. And the great thing about the parks is they open us up. So what we found is that inevitably Dayton and I, in our own ways, together and with our families, have had experiences that we will treasure for the rest of our lives. And it is our sincerest wish that our fellow citizens would have the opportunity to experience the glories of nature. Nature is never wrong. Civilization quite often is wrong. There is nothing untrue about nature. Nature never gets it wrong. And I think that the series, without sort of overtly pointing arrows or neon signs at that, is an attempt to celebrate that truth and that moment of being that is eternal.

That each one of the parks, at different times for different people, at different moments for different people, at different places for different people, can perform that kind of open heart surgery and expose us in certainly a vulnerable way, but make us feel connected to everyone else. Which is, of course, what we all hope for. We all want to be loved and belong, and I can't think of places that are more about love and belonging than our national parks.

MR. BJERGA: We are almost out of time. But before we ask the final question, there are a couple of important matters to take care of. First of all a reminder of future speakers. On October 5th, Mark K. Shriver, the Chairman of the National Commission on Children and Disasters, and Vice President for Save the Children; and Craig Fugate, Administer of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, will preview a report to President Barack Obama and Congress that proposes new strategies to meet the needs of children affected by disasters.

On October 8th, we're having John Potter, the Postmaster General of the United States Postal Service. And on November 13th, Chick-fil-A founder and chairman, Truett Cathy, and Chick-fil-A President and CEO, Dan Cathy, will be talking about their company's sales growth despite the struggling economy.

Second, I'd like to present our guest with his burgeoning collection of our traditional National Press Club mug. (Applause)

MR. BURNS: Thank you very much.

MR. BJERGA: So I guess our final question today, Mr. Burns, and you've alluded to this earlier, when you were a child, you really didn't dream of historical documentary filmmaking, you dreamed of doing big, feature films. And I guess the question would be you've been doing this documentary thing for about 20 years. Why don't you stretch yourself? Why not have Ken Burns do a film with ninjas in it, or maybe a couple of cops, making a lawless town turn straight? I'm just wondering if Ken Burns were to do that Hollywood feature film, what film would he be doing?

MR. BURNS: Well, you know, I went to Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts, intent on being that feature filmmaker. And my teachers were social documentary still photographers, a man named Jerome Liebling and a woman named Elaine Mays. And they reminded me quite correctly that there's much more drama in what is and what was than in anything the human imagination can dream of. We are working on an update of our 1994 series "Baseball: A 10th Inning," that will inevitably deal with all the spectacular action my beloved Boston Red Sox winning the World Series, but also steroids and strikes and money and all those sorts of issues.

We are working on a history of prohibition. We have just begun editing that, a three-part six hour series that will be out in early 2011. And it is filled with cops and I don't know if I can help you on the ninjas. And we are also working on a long series on the history of the Roosevelts, Theodore, Franklin and Eleanor. They're rarely sort of put together as a family struggled. Dayton and I are heading out to the panhandles of Oklahoma and Texas to record the memories of the last witnesses to the dust bowl, that horrific, manmade ecological catastrophe superimposed on the greatest economic catastrophe in the history of the world before they pass from the scene.

And I'm working on a short modern history on the story of the Central Park jogger case where five black and Hispanic boys were convicted and later had their convictions vacated for a rape that many people think they did not commit, a celebrated, lurid, headline-filled story in April of 1989. So God willing and funding willing, keep watching PBS. We'll be able to do those things, but no ninjas.

MR. BJERGA: Well, regardless, thank you for coming today. (Applause) Also like to thank National Press Club staff members Melinda Cooke, Pat Nelson, Joann Booz and Howard Rothman for organizing today's lunch. And thanks to the NPC library for its research. For more information about the Press Club, please go to our website at

www.press.org. Our events are available for free download on iTunes, as well as on our website.

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