

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON WITH KAREEM ABDUL-JABBAR

SUBJECT: GETTING THE CONVERSATION GOING ON RACE AND EQUALITY

MODERATOR: THOMAS BURR, PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

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**THOMAS BURR:** (Sounds gavel.) Good afternoon, and welcome to the National Press Club. My name is Thomas Burr; I'm the Washington correspondent for the *Salt Lake Tribune* and the 109<sup>th</sup> President of the National Press Club. Our guest today is the legendary NBA player, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. I would like to welcome our Public Radio and C-SPAN audiences, and I want to remind you that you can follow the action live on Twitter using the hashtag NPCLive. That's NPCLive.

Now it's time to introduce our head table guests. I'd ask that each of you stand briefly as your name is announced. Please hold your applause until I have finished introducing the entire head table. From your right, Del Quentin Wilber, Washington correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times* who covers the Justice Department; Wes Lowry, national reporter at the *Washington Post*; Margaret Richardson of Global Policy Develop for airbnb; Bruce Johnson, reporter and anchor at WUSA-TV; John Hughes, editor for Bloomberg News First Word D.C., and the 108<sup>th</sup> President of the National Press Club; Eric Holder, the former Attorney General of the United States.

Skipping over our speaker for just a moment, Alison Kodjak, health policy correspondent for NPR, Chairman of the Press Club's Board of Governors, and the NPC Speakers Committee member who organized today's luncheon. Thank you, Alison. Deborah Morales, founder and Chief Executive Officer of Iconomy, LLC, the international consulting firm representing our speaker and his long-time manager; Claire McNear, staff writer at *The Ringer*; Michael Fletcher, senior writer at ESPN's "The

Undeafed;” and Jamaal Abdul-Alim, senior staff writer for Diverse Issues in Higher Education. Thank you all. (Applause)

It's not often at our podium we have someone who is a major celebrity, a star athlete and an accomplished journalist. Today, we do. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar is known to most of the world as one of the greatest basketball players of all time. He led UCLA to three consecutive championships and then burst into the NBA in 1969. With his trademark skyhook, he dominated the league, winning six championships and being named an all star 19 of his 20 years as a player. And even though he hasn't played in nearly 30 years, at least professionally, he remains the NBA's all time leading scorer. And that would have been enough for us to invite him to speak here today, but it wasn't enough for him. Since he left basketball, Abdul-Jabbar has become a best-selling author of more than a dozen books that ranged from a World War II history to a graphic novel about Sherlock Holmes brother, Mycroft.

His latest work is *Writings on the Wall: Searching for a New Equality Beyond Black and White*. He writes regularly for the *Washington Post* and *Time Magazine* and recently wrote an article praising San Francisco 49ers quarterback, Colin Kaepernick, who publicly protests violence against black men by taking a knee at games during the national anthem.

Through his writing, Abdul-Jabbar, who converted to Islam when he was 24 years old, has become a leading thinker and activist for the rights of African Americans and Muslims in the United States. And through his Skyhook Foundation, he's working to improve the lives of low income kids by bringing educational opportunities into their communities. And if all this weren't enough, let's not forget the he also appeared in several films including the 1980 comedy "Airplane." Abdul-Jabbar says he wants his new book to start a dialogue about social injustices in America. We hope this luncheon here today will be part of that conversation. Ladies and gentlemen, please give a warm National Press Club welcome to the tallest man ever to stand behind this podium, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. (Applause)

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you very much. And thank you for that great introduction. I guess a lot of people are curious to know why I wrote this book. Usually, they expect me to write about hoops or one of my other favorite subjects that go through my fevered brain. But I had to do this book because it was very important to me because of what I've seen going on in our country. And it's interesting that I got a chance to talk with my good friend, Eric Holder, here about some of these issues because it's something that has affected our nation for such a long time and we're just now at the point where we can talk about these things and try to find a solution.

And that's really my motivation, a solution. I have several suggestions in the book about how we can deal with some of the issues that I talk about. I talk about all types of things; race, aging, a little bit about hoops, and just how we've gotten to a point where we can't speak to each other. And I've been inspired by the founding fathers and the way that

they were able to come to a consensus and figure out how to leave us with a document that enabled us to have this great nation that we have.

And we have to keep this in mind because unless you can listen with an open mind, or express yourself without bitterness, you can't have a communication. You can't have that dialogue. And that's the one thing that we need. We have too many people talking past each other and giving in to all of their emotional issues and the things that drive them crazy. But they don't have the ability to listen to the other side as to what their issues are and the things that drive them crazy.

So that's what my book is about. I've been getting a great response to it, and I'm very thankful for that because we need to continue to do the work that that's been left to us. Dr. King, Dr. Martin Luther King, said that we had work to do and he really defined it before he left us. All of the issues having to do with economic inequalities and the denial of a political and civil rights to different segments of our society. This has been a problem for us since the origin of our republic, but we're just now getting to the point where we can talk about it.

So my book is here to encourage us to start this conversation. You mentioned Colin Kaepernick. I had a chance to talk to him before he did something really crazy, and I think he handled it the right way and he is now as much of an inspiration as he was annoying people with what they thought was his disrespect for our country. But that's not how he feels. He wants to make our country a better place for the same reasons that I do. And he's going to get there. He's going to do what he feels is necessary to get people to start thinking about these things.

And I'm really happy to see that the movement is spreading throughout some of the other professional sports leagues, the NFL, definitely, and the NBA is getting in there. If you saw the ESPN awards, LeBron and Dwyane Wade and Carmelo Anthony and Chris Paul all had something to say about the same issues that Colin Kaepernick is talking about. And they're doing it in a way that invites discussion and a reasonable conversation as opposed to making people angry. And that's what I wanted. I'm very happy to see that's how it's worked out.

So, that's what you have in your hands, if you have copies of my book, that's what you'll be reading about. And I hope you enjoy it, I hope you get something from it, and I hope you can encourage some of the people that you know to speak their mind on these subjects and let's get to work on solving these problems. And I want to thank you all for your attention. (Applause)

**MR. BURR:** Thank you, sir. Let's continue that conversation. Dr. Martin Luther King spoke in this room in 1962, obviously trying to work on the civil rights movement to get the federal government's help. It's been a long time since then, but we're still dealing with a lot of racial issues. How do we move forward in this conversation? How do we do it? Is it neighbor to neighbor, is it encouraging events like this? How do we get this conversation going?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** Well, I think it absolutely has to be neighbor to neighbor. And for people in minority communities, sometimes they don't understand who their neighbors are. One of the things I'm hoping for is that people in minority communities, instead of talking about the police, that they get to start talking about our police. When they can do that, that means that a bridge has been built, going from one side to the other. And when the police departments and various law enforcement agencies get to the point, instead of talking about 'those people' and they start talking about the people that we serve and protect, then that's another foothold for a bridge. And those bridges can connect.

And I think that that's what we want to get to, where we get the people who need to be talking to each other to start that conversation.

**MR. BURR:** So, I think what you're telling us, if I understand it correctly, is we've got to stop the us versus them mentality that appears out there. And following that question, it helps to understand and know somebody better, right? To start this conversation it has to be a sit down and "I understand what my friend here thinks, and we both can have that conversation together," right?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** It's got to be about us. It can't be about my side and their side. It's got to be about us because we're all fellow citizens. You may have your own political point of view, but the people that you see every day and in the communities where you live, they are your fellow citizens and you have to have a means to communicate with them to get to solve problems. So it starts with the first conversation and it ends when the problems are solved.

**MR. BURR:** This is a good question from the audience. How do you have an honest conversation about race when everyone is afraid of saying something wrong that will make them look like they're ignorant of some sort?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** Well, I think we can't be afraid of being seen as ignorant because ignorance is what's driving all of this. People are not dealing with the facts, they're dealing with stereotypes. Tamir Rice is dead today because of the stereotypes that the police officials in Cleveland, Ohio, had about young black men. He was a 12 year old kid standing in the park playing like 12 year old kids play, and he ends up dead because the cop just got out of the car and he had heard that there was a threatening black person in the park, so he shot the first person he saw out there.

This is horrible, and we can't continue to have these things happening. But, the mindset that the police install sometimes, sometimes, in their officers really lends to this problem perpetuating itself. So police officials need to think about a different way to train their officers so that they don't overreact to innocent circumstances so tragically.

**MR. BURR:** Following on that question, does it help to have police in the community and not just driving by in a car? Cops used to walk the beat and get to know

their neighbors and understand that. Does that help to actually have the community police officers in the communities, knowing who the residents are there?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** I think that is the essence of what we want to eventually get to, is that the police officers know the people in the communities that they police and understand that they're people, they are not statistics. They are not Willie Horton, okay? They are people who have problems just like any other group of people and police are there to protect and serve these people. And when they understand their job in that context, a whole lot of good things get done.

**MR. BURR:** You talked about Colin Kaepernick's protest during the playing of the national anthem, and that's extended now to some other professional, college and even high school athletes. Do you believe this is a good thing, and what do you believe they should do to push for more tangible solutions to the problems they're drawing attention to?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** Well, the only way you can do that is to get involved in the political process. I'm quoting President Obama the several times I've seen him, and he says don't get mad, vote. So we have to participate. We have to have people from minority communities that are willing to run for public office and become lawyers and district attorneys and police officers or serve on a police commission. People from minority communities have to be involved that way. If they can't be involved that way, bad things are going to continue to happen.

When they are involved that way, their voice is heard and their community gets the type of service that they should get from the police department.

**MR. BURR:** Question from the audience as well. Why don't more athletes do what you did, what Colin Kaepernick did? Is there too much pressure to not speak out, too much fear about not speaking out?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** There's a lot of fear for especially professional athletes. They think they're going to ruin their brand. And we have the great and shining example of Muhammad Ali, who was willing to sacrifice three of his primary years as the world heavyweight champion because of the fact that we were fighting an unjust and illegal war in Vietnam and he had to make the choice. He made the right choice, people didn't agree with him at first but within a couple of years, both the American public and the Supreme Court agreed with him and we did the right thing with regard to Vietnam. But it took some sacrifice and it took somebody with the courage to stand up. And this is what we have to deal with now. The issues are that vital and our country is sorely in need of people with that type of courage and vision.

**MR. BURR:** Let's follow on that just a second, because you talked about Muhammad Ali, who lost his title and probably millions of dollars doing what he did. You yourself may have lost some endorsements for speaking out. Do you believe over

time this has changed, become easier for athletes and stars to speak out because there's less of a price to pay?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** Well, I don't know if there's less of a price to pay, but I think the athletes are starting to see that their value and what they can achieve on the positive side is worth the risk. So, my good friend, Michael Jordan, has decided to commit and he's given some money to the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and to some of the police organizations in North Carolina. And I don't know if you remember, several years ago he just wanted to be-- to opt out of it saying that Republicans buy tennis shoes also. Well, they're still buying his tennis shoes and he's able to involve himself politically. So it's not as bad as it sounds, you know? You just have to have the courage to make a stand.

**MR. BURR:** We've been talking a lot about celebrities, but let's talk a little bit about ordinary people. What does it take to get some people like the neighbor to neighbor conversations that you're talking about to get out of their comfort zone and actually engage in those conversations? What can we do to have them step out where they may not feel comfortable?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** Geez, I'm the wrong person to answer that because I don't have any choice. I feel that I have to do it. But other people, they might have some issues, something that you have to discuss. But if you care about your community and you're going to be silent, I think that's the coward's way out and like to see more Americans with the guts to speak their minds and find out what actually is going on and try to help activate some real remedies.

**MR. BURR:** Got a lot of questions flowing up here for-- let's go to the election for just a few minutes. (Laughter) I thought that was the reaction I was going to get. How has the current presidential election affected race relations in the United States and the ability of people with different beliefs to understand each other?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** Well, I think the current election has really pulled the scar off of the racial divide in America. Mr. Trump has said a number of things that really are disappointing from an American presidential candidate with regard to race and the value of various communities. What he has to say about Muslims and people coming into our country as immigrants, he mentions Mexicans. But, some of the things he has to say are just reprehensible and have really coarsened the dialogue here in our country. I think it's really unfortunate.

But that's who the Republicans chose, so we have to deal with that issue and we have to elect the right person. So I urge all of you to vote and vote your conscience. I won't tell you who to vote for, but I hope you care enough about our country to do the right thing.

**MR. BURR:** Here's another question from the audience. Noting Mr. Trump has-- his campaign has brought out a lot of people speaking out in ways maybe they didn't

before. And the question from the audience is how do you engage with people who may hold some bigoted or racist views?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** Well, the only way that you can engage with people like that is to point out how some of the policies that they are advocating, how they affect people, how they affect real people, not in theory but in reality. I'm thinking of some of-- all right, let's take the stop and frisk laws. Those really have only served the purpose of making the lives of people of-- of minority people in various communities miserable because these people are stopped dozens of times for no other reason than they live in a high crime community. And the police have made it easier on themselves just to stop anybody for no good reason. Probable cause really doesn't seem to enter into their thought process. And that's wrong.

And there has to be a way that policing does not have to involve the cops just overstepping the boundaries and just saying, "Well, you live in this neighborhood, you're a person of color, we have to check you out." That's not what the constitution says and it's illegal, it's wrong and we have to find a better way of policing than to indulge in that.

**MR. BURR:** Have you ever yourself had a personal experience with police officers that you found troubling?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** Oh, yeah. I used to drive on the New Jersey turnpike and I stopped, got my car tossed a couple of times.

**MR. BURR:** Can you tell us a little more about that?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** Well, I don't know, there must be a number of black men in here who've had that similar experience on the New Jersey turnpike. I didn't get arrested, they didn't write me a ticket. They just wanted to see what was in my trunk. I guess they thought I had a canon in there or something. But it happened to me a couple of times on the New Jersey turnpike.

**MR. BURR:** Let's go back to the election for just a minute. It's laid bare, as we just discussed, a lot of racism and religious bigotry. There's been a lot of commentary about that. As a black man and a Muslim, how are you dealing with the vitriol and what would you tell younger men and women that are facing such bigotry?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** Well, I would tell anybody that's dealing with that type of bigotry that you have to confront it or you have to take people that want to react to you in a biased and illegal way. You have to hold them accountable and complain to the correct authorities that you've been discriminated against. That's the only way that people finally see the light and understand what they're doing is wrong.

And it takes courage. I've been asked this by a number of Muslims who are frustrated and statistics have said that hate crimes against Muslim Americans have increased at over 80 percent since the Trump campaign started vilifying Muslims to the

degree that they have. So, there's a problem there and we have to deal with it. But Muslims have to have the courage to stand up for their own civil and political rights and make sure that people who unjustly try to vilify them are dealt with. That's the only way of dealing with it.

**MR. BURR:** Back to Mr. Trump, he told urban voters recently, "What do you have to lose" in supporting him because he insists governing Democrats are to blame for failures in crime, poverty and education. Do you believe he's right in any form? Have Democrats failed in at least part?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** All statistics that are available say that violent crime is at its lowest level in America in like the past 60 years, and continuing to decrease. So, you know, what Mr. Trump is trying to say is a fiction. And when you realize that it's a fiction, you get an idea of what motivates him. So, we have to go on and react to the facts and not what somebody wants people to believe because he's running for office. I don't think that's going to do our nation any good.

**MR. BURR:** Since we're on the Trump subject, you've obviously spoken, and even today, about his hateful words on immigrants, African Americans, Muslims. What's your reaction and your take on the issue now with women saying they were assaulted by Mr. Trump?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** Well, I just find it odd that Mr. Trump, for years, bragged about assaulting women and now when these women materialize and say, "Yes, you did assault us," he's calling them liars. I wonder who's telling the lie here. I don't think it's the women.

**MR. BURR:** With a long, sad record of racism, African Americans were considered deplorables by ruling politicians at various times in the United States history. Democrats in modern times reached out to African Americans to include them in the party. What can Democrats now do to reach out to a group of Americans Hillary Clinton mislabeled at one point the deplorables?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** Well, you have to understand that even though they might be doing or saying things that are deplorable, they are your fellow citizens and they have to be made aware of the pain that they're causing for no good reason. If they have issues that need to be dealt with, they need to discuss them in a way that enables all of the solutions that are at hand to be applied to it, and not to engage in distortions and lies about who and what is the problem.

**MR. BURR:** Polls show the country is more racially polarized than it has been in a long time. But you have a black man in the White House, you have a black woman serving as the nation's top law enforcement officer. In the military, you have a black man as the link between the president and the nuclear button. Culturally, black actors and music stars are some of the most popular and highest paid celebrities on the planet. How do you reconcile the difference between that?



**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** The difference between what?

**MR. BURR:** The fact that we consider our country very racially polarized and yet some of the top elected leaders in the country, top serving officials are black and many stars are?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** Well, I think the fact that so many people of color have started to move up the ladder into the middle class and some of them have become wealthy, I think that has alarmed certain people and made them feel that something's wrong with that picture. But there's nothing wrong with that picture, that's just the natural progression of people who heretofore had not had the opportunity to become educated and have the access to jobs and the powerful positions that they're in. This is something new and a lot of people are finding it hard to accept. But our country seems to be doing all right. I don't think there's been any problem there, it's just there's a--

I mentioned Michael Jordan earlier. There was a TV commercial that was used in that campaign that Michael refused to become involved in. And it showed a person's hands handling money and the person's hands, they were black hands. And the whole idea of it was that there was something wrong with the picture, that black hands were handling the money. Nothing was said, no words were mentioned about race. But it was very obvious, the fact that black hands are now at the controls. That seemed to alarm people in North Carolina and they voted according to their fears.

So I think that just the access that more people of color have to better jobs and positions of power really has created a problem for some people who want to react in a racist way.

**MR. BURR:** This question is a question from the audience. This person remembers a time when the high number of murders in urban areas were taken for granted and didn't seem to get as much attention that the lower levels of urban crime get today. Do you think that's a sign of progress?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** Geez, I don't know about that. I'm pretty ignorant on that, I don't study police statistics that closely unless I'm researching an article or something.

**MR. BURR:** Then let's talk about guns for just a second. There's a lot of talk about people buying more guns in the last several years, more powerful weapons and then there's the other side of that that you talked about a little bit, some trigger happiness from some police officers. What can we do in this country about the gun problem?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** Well, I just think that keeping guns out of the hands of people who shouldn't have them, crazy people or people who are on terrorist watch lists, I think that has been pretty adequate. It's the loopholes that have allowed too many guns to end up in the hands of wrong people and we have to keep that. I'm not against the second

amendment, I just think that we have to have a reasonable means of monitoring who gets guns and apply the adequate measures to make sure that people who shouldn't have guns don't get their hands on them.

**MR. BURR:** Another question submitted today. The questioner notes there are plenty of minorities who are actually voting for Trump. And you're talking about bringing people together and having a conversation. Is it divisive for you to talk about Mr. Trump in the way he does when there are minorities supporting him?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** No, I have to speak to the truth that I see. If they have a truth that they see that supersedes this, I'd like to hear about it. But it doesn't bother me. Some people have a different take on the reality around them, so it's not much you can do about that except explain your take on reality and see what makes sense.

**MR. BURR:** On that note, there are concerns out there about reverse racism. The questioner notes there are plenty of minorities who vilified white people. Can you talk about the validity of the concern about reverse racism in this country?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** I don't know what they're talking about, reverse racism? There are very few people of color that have any kind of power that would enable them to have a reverse racism program in effect. I don't know what they can do. It doesn't seem to be reality to me.

**MR. BURR:** All right, let's switch gears and talk about you for a second. You've made a very successful transition from a spectacular sports career to a successful post-sports life. Not all athletes have been so successful at that. Was there something specific in your personality that allows you to move on from sports to reinvent your public self?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** Well, you know, actually it happened before I became a basketball player. I was into writing when I was in grade school and it's something that I pursued ever since that time. 1964 was the year between my junior and senior year in high school and I was involved in a mentoring program that had a journalism component to it and I got into journalism at that point and I've enjoyed it ever since then. It was something that I always wanted to do. UCLA did not have a journalism department, but the English department served my purposes pretty well.

**MR. BURR:** Well, since we're here at the National Press Club, I appreciate that sentiment. Can you talk to us a little bit about maybe a difficult time in your life and what you did to persevere to overcome a challenge you may have had?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** Well, I think just trying to figure out what to do with my life when I was at a point there, I was playing for the Milwaukee Bucks and I had to make a professional decision as to where I would continue my career. And I had to choose between staying in Milwaukee and moving on. And it was pretty easy. You give it some serious thought and you have to understand what's in your best interests and my

best interests lie in moving to Los Angeles. So I did that and I haven't had any regrets about it.

**MR. BURR:** Well, that's the next question, actually. In all of your life, though, do you have something that you regret that you would love to do over again?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** Geez, I should have stayed with the piano lessons. (Laughter) There's a whole lot of people out there that didn't want to take their piano lessons. I wanted to play baseball. That didn't work out, but basketball loomed up. So, I ended up playing basketball and I had to give up Brahms and Beethoven but it's okay.

**MR. BURR:** There's still time, right?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** No, there's no time left. (Laughter)

**MR. BURR:** You mentioned this a little bit, but talk to us a little bit more about what inspired you to become a writer and how old were you when you got interested, and after your sports career, why you picked up the topics you picked up in writing?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** Well, I became interested in writing just because in my household, my dad was an avid reader and I more or less had to get with the program because he wasn't going to talk to me. I'd ask him a question, and he'd hand me a book. I was like, "Oh, come on, why don't you just answer?" Finally, I got to the point where I could do the research and I started going on my own to reading all the things that interested me. And that was a very broad array of things.

As all of you who have kids know, it's amazing, the things that they can come up with that they want to know about. I must have presented quite a problem to my dad. But that's how it started and I just kept learning about things that interested me and I started writing about them after time.

**MR. BURR:** I know as a writer myself I face these, but can you talk about some of the challenges you faced in writing the latest book? And what surprised you about the process of this book specifically?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** Well, I think that getting into the depth and detail that you need to in order to explain something really requires a lot of research. And I was very fortunate to work with my co-author, Raymond Obstfeld. He's incredible. He makes my job so much easier. But that's what it takes. You have to be able to understand all that you can about any given subject and faithfully deal with it in what you write. And if you can't do that, what you write ends up being shallow. So I try to avoid that and try to get to as much depth as I can and explain the issues in a way that people can see both sides of the subject. And at that point, we can have a discourse, we can have a discussion. And that's crucial.

**MR. BURR:** All right, this is actually a personal question from me. How do you get past writer's block, because we all face that sometimes?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** Gee, sometimes it takes-- you have to take a day off. Lot of times, just giving yourself a rest and leaving the subject alone so that you can come back to it with a fresh vantage point, sometimes that can do it. Sometimes it doesn't. But I think most writers, if they do their research the way they should, they usually get over their-- whatever's blocking them or whatever issue is causing the stumbling block. They can usually get past that.

**MR. BURR:** I would like my editors to take note that Kareem Abdul-Jabbar says I can take tomorrow off. (Laughter) Let me talk to you about this. What are some of the books that you've read in your life that have had the greatest impact on you?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** Oh, okay. *The Souls of Black Folks*, W. E. B. Dubois, James Baldwin's essays, the one with *The Fire Next Time* in it, the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Those would be good.

**MR. BURR:** That's a good list. You're also a fan of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Sherlock Holmes. Can you talk to us a little bit about why you got involved in that and how you wrote the graphic novel, I believe?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** Well, I used to watch the Sherlock Holmes Theater on television. It was the Sherlock Holmes movies that Basil Rathbone made. And up until I had to read *The Redheaded League* in high school, I thought Sherlock Holmes was a real person. I didn't find out he was a fictional character until I was a sophomore in high school, which is pretty embarrassing. But that's how it went down.

And then when I started my professional career, someone gave me a complete compilation of all of Arthur Conan Doyle stories, and that's the first time that I read them. It was my rookie year in the NBA, and because we traveled so much, I started reading crime fiction and I graduated from Arthur Conan Doyle to Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, Martin Cruz Smith, Robert B. Parker, Elmore Leonard, Walter Mosley, other people like that. It just kept on going and I just enjoyed it. It's great reading on the road and some of the writings are really profound. I would recommend everybody read some of Walter Mosley's novels about Easy Rawlins, his main character and private eye. It's fascinating and it really speaks to a lot of the things that happen in our country, but from a fictional standpoint. But he makes his points very, very clearly. I think he's an incredible author and he's really inspired me.

**MR. BURR:** Let me ask another inspiration question. Who are the people in your formative years that you believe inspired you?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** In my formative years? Well, I would have to say Jackie Robinson and Dr. King, Malcolm X, Duke Snyder.

**MR. BURR:** And this morning, I believe you were at an event at the U. S. Chamber of Commerce or had some meetings there. Can you talk to us more about why you were at the U. S. Chamber of Commerce today?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** Why I was at the U. S. Chamber of Commerce? Basically, to just explain to some people about business opportunities, both here in America and overseas.

**MR. BURR:** I didn't know the answer to that question before I asked, so it's good to know. Another good question from the audience, do you believe NBA players play defense as aggressively today as they did back when you played, or is scoring as high as it is for some other reason?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** NBA players can't play as aggressively as they played in the era that I played because they've changed the rules. They kind of dumbed them down a little bit so you can't be physical and play defense. So it makes it easier to score. I think the fans have enjoyed that. But it was different, especially before the three-point shot.

**MR. BURR:** All right, so this is a tough question. Someone in the audience wants to know are we Americans yet, in the words? What are the pillars that hold or support a definition of what Americans are? Instead of being black, white, Muslim, whatever label we want to have, are we now Americans?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** We are Americans when we pledge allegiance to the United States of America. That makes us an American. I had the pleasure of introducing Mr. Khan at the Democratic convention, and I was totally shocked at his knowledge and embrace of Thomas Jefferson. It blew me away. And I think this is something our constitution is still the most dynamic document that's ever been created, and it's something that we should be proud of and use a lot more often in solving our problems. But, Mr. Khan understood that and had no problem with his son dying for our nation. And it really made me feel good to have a Muslim of his character and knowledge to represent American Muslims in the way that he did. And it shut a lot of people up, including somebody that has a lot of blond hair. (Laughter)

**MR. BURR:** I don't know who you're referring to. This is for the Press Club again. Where do you get your news from? Is it online, TV, do you subscribe to newspapers and what do you prefer-- how do you ingest your news as a consumer?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** I get my information from all the sources that you just mentioned. I read, I watch TV, and I just take it where I find it.

**MR. BURR:** Maybe you could talk to us a little bit about foreign affairs. What's your take on how America is doing in the world, how America's perceived in the world, how America is treating other countries?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** Geez, that's hard for me to understand because I don't spend enough time overseas to get a real finger on the pulse of what you just asked me. That's very difficult. I wouldn't attempt to do that. I have no idea.

**MR. BURR:** Another question from the audience. You apparently passed on going to Israel several years ago. Desmond Tutu has called Israeli's treatment of Palestinians apartheid. Do you think the U. S. needs to stop arming Israel and do you support the boycott investment sanctions movement against Israel by the South African anti-apartheid?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** I would just say that the occupation stinks. That's the only thing that stinks over there. The Israeli state is a model of democracy and transparency. But, I think the occupation stinks. It's got to end, I hope it ends soon.

**MR. BURR:** Another question in foreign affairs. Do you condemn the Saudi bombing of Yemen? Should the U. S. cut off weapons going to Saudi Arabia?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** I don't know enough about that to have an accurate opinion. So I'm not going to answer that question.

**MR. BURR:** Apparently in the audience, we have a few fans of the movie "Airplane." The audience questioner said, "It was the funniest sports cameo ever," which is a pretty nice tribute. Do you believe there's any role in humor or comedy that can add to the discussion of race in America?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** I think sometimes, humor can overcome certain obstacles because when you're laughing, your guard is down. And maybe that's a time when you can accept some thoughts or a different point of view that you heretofore were not going to accept. So I think humor is something that serves us well in that sense because when we lose our sense of humor, we lose a very important part of our humanity and it makes it impossible for us to communicate.

**MR. BURR:** So what do you think is more fun, acting in "Airplane," or playing the NBA finals?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** Geez, I'd rather be doing some acting, something you can do sitting down is always better.

**MR. BURR:** Is there anything forthcoming in the acting world for you?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** No.

**MR. BURR:** On basketball for a second, if you could assemble a starting five with players from today or in the past, who would they be?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** I wouldn't attempt to do that. (Laughter)

**MR. BURR:** Might offend too many people?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** No, it's impossible. You can't compare people from different eras. How would Shaquille have done against Willett? Well, unless they go out there and play the game, we won't know.

**MR. BURR:** We have a chair for you, too, if you'd like to sit down. That's up to you. And there's a lot of standing here. We've only got about 15 minutes left, but try to get through a few more here. Is there a single basketball game that stands out in your mind, your favorite basketball game during your time?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** Well, I think the best college game I saw was Princeton versus the University of Michigan at the holiday festival in 1964. Bill Bradley scored 46 points, I believe, and fouled out. And Cazzie Russell's team was able to dominate at the end of the game and win that game. But that was probably the best game that I had seen, best college game, that I had ever seen. As a spectator, I'd put that one out there.

**MR. BURR:** There you go. What do you see as the biggest barriers to higher education for students who are from low income families, and what obligation, if any, does the government have, or pro athletes have or celebrities have, to help in this regard?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** Well, I think poverty is the biggest barrier because poverty makes it impossible for poor kids to have the time and resources to become first rate students. They are usually involved in the struggle just to survive, to keep a roof over their heads and food in the pantry. And they miss out on getting the type of education that opens up doors for them to ascend into the middle class.

So I think, really, poverty has a very profound effect on how effective our educational system can be.

**MR. BURR:** And talk to me for a minute about why super star athletes, celebrities should be involved. What kind of responsibility do you believe they have to get involved and what would the benefits of getting involved be?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** I can only speak for myself on that subject. I can't say what other people should be doing. I can only relate to what I feel is correct and that's why I pursue the things that I pursue. But there's no template that fits everybody.

**MR. BURR:** Another question from the audience. Do you believe our country will ever live up to its motto, *E Pluribus Unum*, which is out of many, one?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** Well, I think it is a worthy goal for us to try to have citizenship for everyone be the same. It's a worthy goal. We haven't gotten there, it's very difficult given the disparity in the accumulation of wealth in various communities. But

it's worth trying for and the fact that Americans of various stripes do have the opportunity to make it all the way into the top echelons of socioeconomic success is-- I think that really validates what America is all about.

**MR. BURR:** I'm not sure of the answer of this one yet, either, but have you seen the new African American Museum of Culture and History?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** No, I haven't had a chance to get over there yet. I would like to. I've read a number of the reviews on it and it's supposed to be a very spectacular place.

**MR. BURR:** Since you haven't been over there, what are you looking forward to most in going over there to see? What do you think would help the most for racial discussions in America?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** Geez, I couldn't tell you that until I go over there, but hopefully it would show the reality of the black experience in America. Black Americans have contributed so much to what makes America great and we're not always recognized for it. So I hope that that's what's happening over there at that museum and black Americans are given credit for some of the incredible things that they have done to contribute to American life.

**MR. BURR:** And now we're back to more basketball questions because they keep coming in. Who was the most difficult center you had to play against during your career?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** Geez, that's-- not very many people gave me a hard time there, so-- (Laughter) I think the guys that it was most difficult for me to guard were people who could shoot the ball well. You know, centers who could shoot the ball well from 18, 20 feet because that brought me out from where I played my best defense. So, I'd say someone like Dan Issel or somebody like that, Dave Cowens, Bob McAdoo who could hit jumpers from 20 feet, that made my job a little bit harder.

**MR. BURR:** It's been a while since you were a professional playing, but what do you think-- how is media and TV treatment of the NBA changed since you played? And I extend that question to the players as well, how the media covers players these days?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** Well, I think the popularity of basketball has made it impossible for the media that covers the game to be vicious or small minded about what they're covering because the game is so popular now. So I think they do a good job, and I think both the league and the media people who cover the league are-- I think they're doing a great job.

**MR. BURR:** All right, so the question now is how strong was Wilt? I assume it's Wilt Chamberlain. How strong of a competitor was he and what kind of relationship did you have with him?



**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** I got to meet Wilt when I was in grade school. He was like a hero to me and I ended up having to play against him. He was a very imposing man physically. He weighed over 300 pounds and was very powerful and gifted athlete. To give you some example, when Wilt was in college, he played NCAA basketball, but he also was on the track team where he participated in the shot put, the high jump and the quarter mile. That's a pretty intense athletic regimen and he was competitive in all of those disciplines. So he was a formidable athlete and any accolades you see about him probably don't give him as much credit as he is due.

**MR. BURR:** Next question, how can NBA players make the transition like you did to a different type of career? What is the key to your success and what advice would you give somebody who's leaving a professional sports team to do something different?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** Well, the key to my success was the fact that I wanted to go to college, and when I got to college, I made sure that I got my degree. I prepared for a life after basketball before I got into the NBA. So, NBA players who haven't done that preparation are going to have a problem. But some of them have and those are the ones that usually are successful.

**MR. BURR:** All right, question from the audience. How do you keep in shape personally, because walking, some daily exercise, and what's your regime? Do you talk about a certain kind of food you avoid or use, diet?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** I just try to get enough sleep, a reasonable amount of exercise, and not to eat the wrong things and not to become a fat person. And if you can do that, you might live a little bit longer.

**MR. BURR:** We're nearing the end here, but let me ask you since we're talking about the issue still about your book, what is the kind of model you see for the discussion of racial issues in this country? What's a good example that you've seen or would like to see in the country?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** What I would like to see would be-- I would like to see police agencies reach out to community agencies and vice versa. And people living in a certain community reaching out to the police in that community and telling them we need to talk, we need to get to know you, and the police going along with that program because that makes the most sense. I think when those things start happening, all of this is going to change.

**MR. BURR:** We're getting down to it, I'm going to ask the final question. Quick before I do, a couple of quick reminders. The National Press Club is the world's leading professional organization for journalists and we fight for a free press worldwide. For more information about the club, please visit our website at [Press.org](http://Press.org). That's [Press.org](http://Press.org). Also like to remind you about some upcoming programs. On Wednesday, Secretary of Education, John B. King, will join us. On November 21, Gina McCarthy, the

administrator of the United States Environmental Protection Agency will speak from this podium. On November 30<sup>th</sup>, we host the general manager of the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, Paul Wiedenfeld.

On December 2<sup>nd</sup>, we have James Murren, the CEO and Chairman of MGM. And a note for anyone who'd like to get their book signed by Mr. Abdul-Jabbar, please exit to my left, your right, and we'll be signing books right out that way. Well, he'll be signing books, I won't be signing books.

Lastly, I'd like to present, before the last question, our guest with the traditional National Press Club mug. (Applause)

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** Thank you.

**MR. BURR:** So my last question to you, sir, do you still play basketball these days? And have you ever been offered to play a game against President Barack Obama, or would you accept if he did?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** I've never been offered to play against President Obama, but I'd be happy to give him some pointers.

**MR. BURR:** That's great. Is there anything else you'd like to add, sir?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** What was the first part of the question?

**MR. BURR:** Do you still play basketball?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** I don't still play, no. I just try to stay in shape. I jump rope and I lift weights sometimes and sometimes I do various workouts, some yoga, just keep it simple. I try and stay one step ahead of the grim reaper there.

**MR. BURR:** And to clarify, you said you would coach President Obama if he asked?

**MR. ABDUL-JABBAR:** Of course.

**MR. BURR:** That's great. Thank you very much for being here, sir. Thanks to the journalism staff. (Applause) Thank you ladies and gentlemen. Again, if you'd like to have a book signed, please exit over here to your left-- to my left, your right.

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