

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB NEWSMAKER LUNCHEON WITH ACTOR MORGAN FREEMAN

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MR. ZREMSKI: Good afternoon, and welcome to the National Press Club. My name is Jerry Zremski, and I'm the Washington bureau chief for the Buffalo News and president of the National Press Club.

I'd like to welcome our club members and our guests who are here with us today, as well as the audience that's watching 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 as much time for 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 and not necessarily from the working press.

I would like now to introduce our head table guests, and ask them to stand briefly when their names are called.

From your right, Paul McKellips, global outreach officer, war correspondent, Public Affairs GO Team in Iraq at the U.S. State Department and new member; Andrew Schneider, associate editor with Kiplinger Washington Editors; Robert Yune (sp), director of political research for CNN's political unit; Eleanor Clift, contributing editor for Newsweek Magazine; Donna Lee (sp) of PLAN!T NOW and a guest of Mr. Freeman; Bob Schieffer, CBS Washington News correspondent and the

moderator of CBS' "Face the Nation"; Raymond Offenheiser, president of Oxfam America and a guest of the speaker.

Skipping over the podium, Angela Greiling Keane, a reporter for Bloomberg News and chair of the National Press Club Speaker's Committee. Skipping over our guest for just one moment, Melissa Charbonneau of the NPC Speaker's Committee, vice chair of CBN News, White House correspondent and a member of the Speaker's Committee who organized today's luncheon; Clark Bunting, president of Discovery Studios and Discovery Communications Inc.; Denise Goodwin Pace, president of the Halo Group and guest of Mr. Freeman; Sheila Johnson, CEO of Salamander Hospitality, global ambassador for care, president and managing partner of the Washington Misfits and co-founder of BET Television; Greta Van Susteren, host of "On the Record" for Fox News Network; and Marilyn Thompson, reporter from The New York Times. (Applause.)

Picture it: a massive comet hurling toward the Earth threatening to destroy life on our planet; then a reassuring voice calms the nation.

That was the voice of the president of the United States in "Deep Impact" and the voice of our guest speaker today, Morgan Freeman. It's the same voice that moved audiences in "Driving Miss Daisy," the voice that narrated "The March of the Penguins" across Antarctica and, in "Evan Almighty," the voice of God himself. (Laughter.)

Whatever the role, Morgan Freeman has proved that he's box office gold. Moreover, his performances have been described by the Los Angeles Times as majestic, marked by an air of authority, with a defining sense of moral grace. Most notably, Freeman, a three-time Oscar nominee, won an Academy Award for his touching portrayal of an ex-boxer in Clint Eastwood's "Million-Dollar Baby." (Laughter, off-mike talk.)

It's the truth. It says right here. (Chuckles.)

Tonight the Oscar winner hits the red carpet again to premiere his latest release, the "The Bucket List." Freeman stars with Jack Nicholson in the story of two cancer patients from different worlds who make their last journey together. Proceeds from the premiere screening will benefit the Grenada Relief Fund, a charity Freeman founded to help rebuild the Caribbean island state devastated by Hurricane Ivan in 2004. It's a cause for which Freeman has also turned author, writing a book, "Morgan and Friends," chock full of Caribbean stories and recipes from Freeman and famous fellow actors.

Freeman also worked to raise funds to revitalize the Mississippi Delta after Hurricane Katrina devastated the part of America where he grew up. Freeman still has a home in Clarksdale, Mississippi, along with a thriving restaurant called Madidi's, and a blues club called Ground Zero, down in the land where the blues began.

Next year Freeman will star as South African President Nelson Mandela in "The Human Factor." And even though he has endorsed Barack Obama for president, Freeman is not here to talk about politics or presidents. He's here to discuss a problem that's far more real than

that comet from "Deep Impact": the storms that endanger lives from the Caribbean to the Carolinas almost every year. What's more, he will tell us about an expanded effort to assist the victims of these storms.

Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in welcoming Morgan Freeman to the National Press Club. (Applause.)

MR. FREEMAN: Thank you all very much for your warm reception.

I don't know if I should spend much time correcting some of the misapprehensions about me and my background. (Chuckles.) Just a little bit, though.

I do not live in Clarksdale, Mississippi. I live in Charleston, Mississippi -- much smaller place. (Laughter.)

But I am here to talk to you a little bit about this problem that we have in a lot of areas of the world, particularly in this hemisphere. I don't need to remind anybody of Hurricane Katrina, Hurricane Ivan, Hurricane Andrew, or any other catastrophe that hit the Caribbean and the Gulf Coast and the East Coast of this country.

The problem that seems to arise that we don't pay enough attention to is the complacency that -- do I have to get closer to the mike for you? -- okay -- (laughter) -- is the complacency that sets in not long after a hurricane has come, done its damage and gone on.

It's just like lightning, we feel like. If you get hit with lightning once, forget about it. You don't have to worry about it anymore. It's not true with hurricanes. They're going to come fairly often and they're going to do incredible damage.

So we at the Grenada Relief Fund, which has now segued into an entity we are calling Planet Now, is we're trying to convince people that that complacency is dangerous, that we must plan for these catastrophes. We must keep people on their toes. We must somehow keep aware that these phenomena are not here today, gone tomorrow. They're here, here, here.

So that's it for my speechmaking. (Laughter.)

I'll tell you this little anecdote. I was at a function like this once with Charlton Heston, and we sat and had dinner. And all through dinner, I noticed that Charlton had these five-by-seven cards. And he would sit and eat a while. And then suddenly he would scribble and eat a little, scribble again.

I said, gosh, what are you -- he got up and spoke for about 40 minutes from these cards. How can an actor do that? I need a script. (Laughter.) And the problem you have today is that I don't have a script. (Laughter.)

Oh, you saw me. I got all these papers. I've got a lot of information, but you don't want me to sit up here reading that, do you? (Laughter.) Thank you. So I think we will just go to the meaty

part of this, for the Q&A. Does that work all right with everybody?
(Applause.) Okay.

It's interesting for an itinerant actor such as myself to be here at the National Press Club. This is big time, you know. So I'm going to ask one favor of all of you. I see the questions are coming up here. Don't ask me anything I don't know. (Laughter.)

Okay.

MR. ZREMSKI: Ready?

MR. FREEMAN: Yeah, ready as I'll ever be.

MR. ZREMSKI: Okay, thank you very much.

We have a few questions about your work and lots of questions about the movies and we're going to start with questions about your work. There are many worthy causes to choose and to work for. Tell us why you decided that this was where you wanted to concentrate your efforts?

MR. FREEMAN: Honesty's one of my worst faults. I was lassoed into forming the Grenada Relief Fund when -- I've spent a lot of time on the island of Grenada. I have this beautiful 44-foot ketch that I sail around the Caribbean, and I spent a lot of time in Grenada. And after Ivan hit, a good friend of mine called me and said, "We need help." So those are the times when you have to step up. You can't just say, "Gee, I wish I could do something." You've got to do something.

So what I did was, I called my publicist -- sitting right over there, Donna Lee, who also happens to be my sister-in-law, so she can't say no when I say something -- (laughter) -- and I told her that my friend had called and asked, can we do anything. And I said, "What can we do?" And Donna said what she always says when I put a problem in her lap, "Let me see what I can do." So out of that came the Grenada Relief Fund and that segued into help for the Katrina victims and has now segued into Planet Now, and that's the genesis of it.

MR. ZREMSKI: Tell us about Planet Now and how it kind of has grown beyond just Grenada?

MR. FREEMAN: Well, obviously we have formed the Grenada Relief Fund for a specific; that was to help rebuild the island of Grenada. But as the time went on and we were doing this, of course we had these other problems come through the Caribbean. And they hit the Caribbean, they hit the Gulf Coast, they hit over in the western part of the Gulf of Mexico, and there's just complete devastation all over the place. And we can't -- we couldn't very well just hold ourselves to that one little island, so it was decided through the board that we would broaden our scope, not as a relief effort, but more as an information-dispensing outfit.

This is how we got to be Planet Now. That there are enough relief agencies to do that, but no one seems to be trying to prepare people to prepare themselves for these catastrophes, and that's

largely how we got to this. And, you know, we got the attention of outfits like Oxfam and -- (inaudible word) -- awards and all these things.

So we, you know -- did I answer the question? (Laughter.) Thank you. I get to rambling. (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: That's quite all right.

What sort of goals do you see for Planet Now? Where do you see Planet Now, say, in five years?

MR. FREEMAN: I don't know. I think there's no telling. I mean, if we are successful in our efforts to build this information-dispensing entity, there's no telling what we might turn into, who else's attention we might get. What happens, I think, with a lot of efforts like this is you sort of blossom. You become -- you get fingers going out in different areas all aimed at the same general problem, and that is having people who are generally in harm's way in these -- look at the Bay of Bengal, in India, you know? It's like that happens about once every four years there, the ocean (walks ?) up and scrapes 4(,000) or 5,000 people off, and it seems they don't -- they just go right back and build again.

So, who knows. We may become worldwide. But there's no way of knowing. I don't know. That's one of those I asked you not to ask me. (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: I didn't know that. (Laughs.)

Tell us about your personal experiences after Katrina as someone who does own a home in the Gulf and who obviously knows the Gulf region very, very well. What you saw, how you reacted to the government response and so on.

MR. FREEMAN: Well, I wasn't there. I was somewhere working when the hurricane hit, so --I live in northwest Mississippi, up in the delta, so we're almost immune to every kind of disaster except lightning. Our natural disaster in the delta is lightning. You would think it would be tornadoes, but where I live, close to the foothills, somehow we don't get tornadoes, we get lightning.

Now what happened to us in Katrina was, to all intents and purposes, nothing. We got 50 mile-an-hour winds, blew a few leaves off the trees and stuff like that. So my knowledge of what happened on the Gulf Coast is the same that -- yours. I got it through pictures. I never went down there because I don't go to disasters. I don't go to train wrecks and car wrecks and accidents. I can't handle it.

That's the best answer I can give on that one.

MR. ZREMSKI: How did you react to what you saw on television in pictures after Katrina and after the government response was so slow and lagging? What did you think about what it said about America?

MR. FREEMAN: Not sure I should stand here at the National Press

Club and say all of that. (Laughs, laughter.)

We all know what happened in New Orleans after Katrina -- four or five days just to get water to those people. So, you know, naturally, you would ask yourself why. It's one of our major cities with an incredible history just let down by the federal government. We say it's not our fault, but it is their fault.

So like everybody else, what's going on?

MR. ZREMSKI: Is PLAN!T NOW focused only on Caribbean storms, and will you coordinate with other international organizations to help countries such as Bangladesh, which you mentioned?

MR. FREEMAN: I'm in no position to say that. I am not a planner or a, really, a spokesperson for PLAN!T NOW. I'm more of a focus puller. Let me make that clear to you right here right now. My job is primarily to pull focus. PLAN!T NOW wants somebody to talk about them; it's the aim of come over here so they'll look this way.

As I said before, however, I think it is possible that because we -- you know, informational dispersal -- is that a good way to put that, all you writers? -- is a lot easier now than it ever was what with the Internet and all. So it's quite possible that we will become global in our efforts to get people involved and interested in planning it now, which is what PLAN!T NOW really means: Get yourself ready.

MR. ZREMSKI: What should we know about the unique challenges faced by people in poverty when disasters such as these strike?

MR. FREEMAN: I think the biggest thing that affects people in poverty is that they cannot build substantial housing, and they cannot build in areas where it is safest. They have to go where they can afford to go, and I think that's basically where the problem -- there was another thing -- (inaudible) -- can't build substantial housing.

Anybody here ever watch NASCAR? (No audible response.) Why do I ask that?

They travel around the track at anywhere from 180 to 203 miles an hour and crash and walk away. The reason they walk away is that those cars come apart, cushion the blow and the frame holds them together. These guys almost always -- 90 percent, 95 percent of the time, they'll walk away from the most horrendous crashes you'll see.

These -- let's call them substandard housing that poor people will build in these areas in the Caribbean and along the Gulf Coast and the Gulf of Mexico -- I think it kind of serves the same problem. You go find a ditch, the house blows away, you come back, you find the material, you nail it back up again. And that's a poor way of seeing it. Sometimes you'll build standard housing, it costs a little more money, and if it blows away, you're in trouble, because you can't rebuild it. That's why I think poor people would have the most problems.

MR. ZREMSKI: What should individuals who live in the Gulf or the Caribbean be doing to prepare themselves, given the possibility of more storms in the future?

MR. FREEMAN: In the U.S., along the coasts, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, where these hurricanes come through, the first thing people do is go out into the garage and get their half-inch plywood and nail it up. That's preparedness of a sort, and I think that sort of thing is what we need to get people involved in. Now if you've got a house that's -- the whole thing is going to blow away, I don't know what to say. I think it's the same thing as living in a tornado corridor in a trailer. They're notorious. So what are you going to do? Nobody has an answer. Me either.

MR. ZREMSKI: How concerned are you that global warming could make hurricanes worse?

MR. FREEMAN: That is the question. I'm very concerned. I follow Al Gore around by the -- hold on to his coattails in this argument. It is not a communist plot. (Laughter.) It is not somebody's foolish theory. It is real. We are -- we're doing this. The population of the planet Earth doubles every few years, right?

It's exponential. And as the planet's population -- human population, because every other population is declining as a result -- we're killing everything on the planet and turning it into food for humans -- everything. We're cutting down the rain forests because we want to plant and grow food for humans. We're killing all the animals because we need the space that they live in to grow food and build houses for humans.

We, humans, great minds, have this incredible technology that runs on coal and oil. The by-product of this, of course, is carbon dioxide in the air. Carbon dioxide and sulfur oxide are killers. Sulfur oxide, when it comes down out of the sky, is acid. It's sulfuric acid. There goes the rain forest. And this carbon dioxide -- I mean, I'm not telling you anything. You know, it's like -- but we're doing it. The problem is us. And global warming is a reality, R-E-A-L-I-T-Y. No joking here.

The problem we have is that in our lifetime it is not going to be a whole big thing, you know, gee, but if you've got grandchildren, they'll know. And yes, our weather is changing, and it will continue to change. It cannot help itself.

So I think we should spread the word. It's not a joke. Global warming is a reality. Otherwise, the polar cap wouldn't be melting, would it?

MR. ZREMSKI: Has your Hollywood acclaim increased the pressure you feel to do good or get involved in these sorts of efforts?

MR. FREEMAN: No, it hasn't increased the pressure to do good. It has increased -- well, in a matter of speaking, it has. Because a lot more people come to you and say, we need you to do this; we need you to do this; we need you to do this; we need you to do this. Of

course, everybody's pet project is important, so you just have to try and choose the ones that you think you can handle, speaking for myself.

MR. ZREMSKI: Are there other causes that you're involved in?

MR. FREEMAN: No. (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Would you perhaps want to introduce Ray and have him talk a little bit about, you know, Oxfam's involvement in this? (Laughter.)

(Cross talk.)

RAYMOND OFFENHEISER: Very briefly I'm Ray Offenheiser. I'm the president of Oxfam America, which is the American affiliate of the Oxfam international family. And for those of you who may know Oxfam, we are one of the largest international humanitarian relief organizations in the world. We're present in Darfur now, with 400 staff on the ground as we meet today, serving some 400,000 people in some 13 refugee camps. And we're in many of the other areas where major emergencies have occurred, including Mississippi and Louisiana.

We're delighted today to join Morgan and join Planet Now in a partnership as Morgan launches this important initiative. And I think we're particularly delighted with the fact that Morgan is going to apply his considerable presence and voice to this cause. We're an organization that's worked on the ground in many of these places for literally decades, working with displaced populations, refugee populations, victims of natural disasters.

And admittedly this is lonely work. And as, I think, as Morgan has said, once the cameras go off and the klieg lights are shut down, the emergency doesn't exist anymore. And for the population, for example, in the tsunami areas that were hit three years ago, more or less, around this time, they're still rebuilding. This is a -- you know, their lives have been disrupted in extraordinary ways.

The issue, I think, that Morgan wants to represent, the idea that preparedness is wise and prudent and the way forward, is something

that our organizations and many others -- I think there's a board member of CARE here with us; CARE has also represented to international bodies like the U.N. -- is a critically important issue.

This issue is suddenly getting traction, but I think the presence of PLAN!T NOW and Morgan's voice will add considerable strength and force to that.

And maybe just an anecdote to give you some sense of the fact that this -- we really can make a difference through preparedness in ways that we oftentimes can't if we only act after the fact. I was living in Bangladesh in 1991, and you may recall there was a major hurricane hit the coast of Bangladesh at that time killing 100 -- almost 200,000 people and, you know, massive numbers of livestock, and there was a massive loss of property. At that particular time, many

donors like Oxfam, the U.S. government and other agencies got together and worked with the Bangladeshi government and with civil society organizations there to try to figure out how they could set up early warning systems, how they could build shelters on the coast to protect the population, how they could move people away from vulnerable areas, particularly the poor population.

Well, subsequently, there have been a number of storms that have hit the Bangladesh coast only as recently as a couple of weeks ago, but the numbers of casualties have never hit 200,000. In the last set of storms they've hit 24, 25, 200, but this is because now there's a system of preparedness in place, early warning systems, places where people can go, and as an awareness that we can actually save lives and property by getting ready early.

So we really welcome Morgan's voice on this. We think his advocacy and the advocacy of PLAN!T NOW can make an extraordinary difference. So I just wanted to kind of give some plaudits to the work that PLAN!T NOW is about to launch. (Applause.)

MR. FREEMAN: That's the way you make a speech.

MR. ZREMSKI: Okay. We also have many, many questions about your acting career, as would be no surprise.

MR. FREEMAN: That's something I know about.

MR. ZREMSKI: (Laughs, laughter.) Okay. Well, what advice would you give to aspiring actors?

MR. FREEMAN: Act. (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: (Laughs.)

Your new movie, "The Bucket List," will be premiered tonight. Tell us a little bit about it and tell us what it was like to work with Jack Nicholson.

MR. FREEMAN: Last part first, working with Jack Nicholson was on my bucket list. He's one of the people whose work and whose personhood I've venerated for many, many years and always wanted to have a chance to work with, and so it's a debate plus for me to happen to have that opportunity.

"The Bucket List" is an interesting little story about -- big story -- about two men from diverse walks of life who meet in a hospital, both have terminal cancer, and over a period of time they become friends and decide that -- what the heck, let's go out with a bang. They get out of the hospital, and they go see the world.

They do things together, lots of things. (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: You've worked with some of the great stars of our time. Which of the stars that you've worked with have been especially memorable to work with, and why?

MR. FREEMAN: All of them. (Laughter.) I'm a child of the

movies. I grew up as a kid -- I wanted to be in the movies. I started to say I wanted to be a movie star, but I -- somewhere along the way that segued into just wanting to be a working actor -- (chuckles) -- instead of wanting to be a movie star; that's way out there in the ether somewhere. But wanting to be in the movies, wanting to be like these people who I just -- their lives were magical to me. Spencer Tracy, Humphrey Bogart, Gary Cooper, anybody you can name who was coming up in the '40s, '50s and '60s and '70s. I didn't get into the movies until the '80s. I mean, in a big way. I was doing a little bit. Anybody who was in a movie was great to me. Anybody.

MR. ZREMSKI: How has the business changed in the years that you've been in it?

MR. FREEMAN: I think what we've seen is a growing attention to diversity in entertainment -- movies and television. Now when you look at it, you see more of a cross-section of what America's racial make up is. We'll call it racial. Scientists say there is no such thing, but I think for the purposes of this discussion, we can use it. Now when you look on television and in movies, you pretty much see everybody, and that is a big change. And it has happened over the last 30 years.

MR. ZREMSKI: The whole media landscape's changing very quickly. And some part of the media landscape are being infected by the Internet more than others. Do you have any worries about the future of the movie industry?

MR. FREEMAN: No, I don't have any worries at all about the future of the movie industry. There are people in positions of concern who are concerned about what's going to happen with the Internet and its encroach on movie distribution, but we pretty much take that as a given. It's going to happen; it's just a matter of us being prepared to deal with it.

It's just a matter of us being prepared to deal with it.

MR. ZREMSKI: Do you think Hollywood's major studio execs have an ideological bias or slant or may be closed to certain viewpoints, or are they open to a diversity of political views?

MR. FREEMAN: Yes. (Laughter.) Of course. Everybody has some sort of ideological slant, political viewpoint, and are open to other points of view. The main thing about the entertainment industry is that it must -- must -- try and appeal to the larger audience. So you can't be too narrow in your thinking.

MR. ZREMSKI: Who do you consider to be the most important influences on you as an actor?

MR. FREEMAN: Who?

MR. ZREMSKI: Yeah.

MR. FREEMAN: Do I consider to be the most important influence on me as an actor?

MR. ZREMSKI: Yes.

MR. FREEMAN: I think probably Sidney Poitier. (Pause.) Did anybody say, "Why?" (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Why?

MR. FREEMAN: I spoke earlier about the diversity that you see in entertainment now, and that diversity didn't exist before Sidney ascended to what we will call stardom. And the very fact that he got there was enough for me to believe that I could get there. So, you know, it's not an easy road to travel. Getting into, I guess, any profession takes a lot of dedication -- writing, being a doctor, whatever. Getting into the movies, though, I think you're going to have to really get down and slog. So those times when you feel like, "I can't get up another time to go to an audition," there's Sidney. I told him one time, at a function, that he was the star I guided my ship by, my ship of life. (Inaudible.) (Laughter, applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Why aren't there more prominent roles for African-Americans on the big screen and TV? And how do we change that?

MR. FREEMAN: I know who asked that. Are you watching the movies? You know what the biggest movie out today is, over the weekend? What was it?

AUDIENCE MEMBERS: "I Am Legend."

MR. FREEMAN: Huh?

AUDIENCE MEMBERS: "I Am Legend."

MR. FREEMAN: Who's starring in that?

AUDIENCE MEMBERS: (Off mike.)

MR. FREEMAN: Who?

AUDIENCE MEMBERS: Will Smith!

MR. FREEMAN: And how would we define him in terms of that? Is he one of those hyphenated Americans you were referring to? (Laughter.) Yes or no? Yes, he is.

I don't think we have a worry there.

MR. ZREMSKI: What movie was the most fun for you to do?

MR. FREEMAN: What would be the most fun for me to do?

MR. ZREMSKI: What ones that you've done have been the most fun?

MR. FREEMAN: Oh, gosh. I'm working on one now that is a lot of fun.

It's -- you can't say what's the most fun. Every time you get a job

-- (laughter, applause).

MR. ZREMSKI: (Laughs.) You've worked with a lot of different directors, including Clint Eastwood. What does -- what's different from one movie to the next, depending on the director? And what is Clint Eastwood like to work with?

MR. FREEMAN: Clint Eastwood is a dream. Ask anybody who's ever worked with him and they'll tell you. He's probably the benchmark of directors.

Directors differ in a lot of ways: in preparedness, in speed, in how they interact with actors. What sets Clint apart from a lot of directors is that he's lightning-fast. He will do two takes and move on.

His interaction with actors is almost nil. In other words, he hires an actor on the understanding that he can -- (chuckles) -- you know what you're doing, so he doesn't have to tell you a lot. It's like, you know, you don't hire a top lawyer and then say, "Now here's what I want you to do." (Laughter.)

But you know, you're working with some of the top directors, the best directors, to me -- and I'm one who likes the hands-off approach to -- as far as directing -- directors go. And all actors are like all other people: we differ in what we need, how we'll respond to things and what we want in terms of guidance or -- I don't want any guidance. Show me what you're going to do, where you put -- the camera's going to be over here? Okay. So I'm going to -- you want me at an angle like this, or do you want more profile, this kind of stuff -- you know, (I have plans ?).

Did I answer the question, or I just started rumbling -- rambling? (Laughter.) Sometimes I can't tell. (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: I think he answered the question, but let me ask a follow-up. What directors take sort of an opposite approach to Clint Eastwood and much more hands-on in terms of dealing with the actors?

MR. FREEMAN: No comment. (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Why did I kind of expect that answer? (Chuckles.)

Of all the actors and actresses who are out there today, just talk about ones that you particularly admire, that you think are particularly talented. You've got plenty of time, so take your time.

MR. FREEMAN: (Laughs.) Gosh. I could answer that, but I need a list so I could write them down and read them off. Where do you start? Name any actor that we would call one of -- amongst our leading actors today -- name any one, and you could say: Okay, that one tops the list.

Now, I think George Clooney and Brad Pitt and Matt Damon, Clint Eastwood, Sean Penn, just any name, they're -- all have a special gift and flair. I won't leave out Will Smith. I won't leave out Don Cheadle. The world's full of them. I mean, we just -- everywhere.

So it's an impossible job to name a few. Meryl Streep. Marcia Gay Harden. Jessica Lange. Gina Rollins (sp). Here you go again, you know. That list is -- you don't see them very much anymore. I mean, Hollywood seems to believe in youth amongst women and age amongst men. That's a strangeness. (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: What is the favorite character that you've played over the years?

MR. FREEMAN: Leo Smalls, Jr. was his name. His sobriquet -- sobriquet was "Fast Black." The picture was "Street Smart." It was the role that sort of catapulted me into Hollywood's plane of view. Like, they said, "Who is that guy?" (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Do you have a particular fondness for uplifting, inspiring characters? And do you actively seek roles such as that?

MR. FREEMAN: I'm going to say no. But if you look at my filmography, obviously the answer is yes.

I get sent scripts and asked to look at parts that fit a certain mold. People don't want me to be a -- don't want me to be a bad guy, people don't want me to die -- (laughter) -- they don't want me to get hurt. (Laughs.)

I did a movie once and my character was a bad guy. And of course, you know, the way you make movies, you tell stories, crime doesn't pay. So the bad guy dies. So my bad guy died at the end of the movie.

The studio made the mistake of running a test, and then they reshot the end. (Laughter.) Bad guy didn't die. (Laughter.) The bad guy was a thief, and he got away with some money. (Laughter.) I was just like, does that work, folks? No, you know. We got to keep telling kids crime doesn't pay.

MR. ZREMSKI: I guess this makes you a Hollywood immortal, then.

MR. FREEMAN: Yes.

MR. ZREMSKI: Yes? (Laughter, laughs.)

How do you pick the roles that you end up with? What particularly appeals to you in a script that you look at and say, yeah, that's one for me?

MR. FREEMAN: You know, I'm going to be brutally honest in answering that question. There are about four or five things that will run through you.

First, you read the script. If the script interests you, it's like reading a book.

If a book interests you, you go from page one to page end. Same with a script. If it doesn't interest you, along about page 60, you throw it away. That's story.

Then there's character. When I read "The Shawshank Redemption," I was thoroughly engrossed in the story. But I got the great character, (this ?) good.

Then there is the director. Who's going to be directing? Who's -- who are you going to have to work with? Some directors, if you work with them and you know they're a bit of a turn off because they're up your nose and they shoot too long. I mean, it just takes too much time. I don't have that kind of time. I'm 70 already. (Laughter.)

And then, who are you going to be working with? Now, most actors I love. There -- I can't think of any actors that I would say -- I'm not going to do that. But there are some situations that I would try to avoid. I suppose I should also talk to the fact that if they say, "a lot of money," I'm a bit beyond intrigued. (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Are there any historical roles or other types of roles that you'd like to see yourself playing some day?

MR. FREEMAN: Absolutely. Absolutely.

My favorite, and the one I've been working on for 15 years now, if you want to know, is an United States deputy marshal who was active in the 1800s with Isaac Parker. Anybody know about Isaac Parker? Isaac Parker was a federal judge sent to the frontier -- that was Ft. Smith, Arkansas --in about 1875. His mandate was to make the west safe for settlers. That meant he had to get rid of all of the bad guys who had gone into Oklahoma -- Indian territory -- to escape the law. And the federal government -- this is now, we're talking Manifest Destiny time -- said we needed to clean that up. Isaac Parker went to Ft. Smith, Arkansas. He hired about 225 deputies -- red, black, and white. Their mandate: Go into Indian territory -- and they would sometimes wouldn't have a warrant, but sometimes they would have just John Doe warrants, but they would get the bad guys and bring them back. Isaac Parker, if you will remember, was called the Hanging Judge.

This character that I want to play, his name was Bass Reeves, and he was one of Isaac Parker's most notorious deputy marshals. He died in 1927 in Muskogee, Oklahoma. He was with law enforcement from about 1875 or 1874 until just before his death in 1927. He was -- joined the police force in Muskogee.

MR. ZREMSKI: As I mentioned, you're set to play Nelson Mandela in "The Human Factor." How does it feel to play this legend? And how do you prepare for that role?

MR. FREEMAN: It's a little intimidating to think of playing a living person. I've done it and pulled it off, knock wood.

I've met Madiba -- that's his tribal nickname; everybody calls him that who knows him -- a number of times. When I first met him, it was after he said that, you know, he wrote a book called "Long Walk to Freedom" and was talking about making a movie from that book. And he

was asked by the press, so, if your book becomes a movie, who do you want to play you? And he said, Morgan Freeman. Well, that, you know -- (laughter).

So I got to meet him not long after that. And I said to him, in order to do this, I need access; I want to be able to hold your hand. And he said, deal, we'll do it. So over the years, every time we've been even in the same orbit, close together, we've pulled closer so that we could hold hands, and we've done it for what, now, 15 years, I guess. It takes that long to get a movie made -- (off mike) -- really.

So I'm not going to do "Long Walk to Freedom." As you said, we're going to do "The Human Factor," which is the story of how he manipulated events in 1995 during the Rugby World Cup in South Africa -- wonderful story.

MR. ZREMSKI: When Ben Vereen spoke here, a year or so ago, he said that he still takes acting classes and is always working to improve his craft. Do you do anything similar to keep working at sharpening your skills?

MR. FREEMAN: The way I learned to act is the way I study it right now. I steal blatantly from other actors. (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Such as?

MR. FREEMAN: I used to be slewfooted as a kid. I walked duckfoot. It was family trait. And then I saw Gary Cooper in "Dallas" and said, that's the way I want to walk.

So now if you see me walk, I walk my feet parallel. That's one thing.

Victor Mature, as an actor, he had two really telling facial motions that told you that he had become aware of something or that something someone said had touched him. One was to cock his eyebrow, and the other one was to snap his scalp. So I'd sit in the mirror for hours -- (laughter) -- trying to learn how to move my scalp and cock one eyebrow -- things like that. (Laughter.)

Oh, I'll tell you one more. Spencer Tracy -- this was something I learned. Spencer Tracy -- I don't know if you ever watched Spencer Tracy this way -- you don't if you're not an actor -- but Spencer Tracy -- (demonstrates walk) -- often walked up to someone he's going to talk to like that, and then talks. Well, Spencer's going through his mark. (Demonstrates.) I do that. (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Do you have any plans to do a film or would you consider doing a film that kind of focuses on the type of natural disasters that you're here talking about today?

MR. FREEMAN: No, I have no plans to do anything like that. Back to my description of my profession, itinerant actor, meaning if it comes my way, and interests me, I do it, but I don't write. And I've found that it's very frustrating to try to commission. (Chuckling.) So if one comes along, yea.

MR. ZREMSKI: You formed your own production company to make more inspiring movies. For filmmakers without your clout, how hard is it to get their work produced and distributed?

MR. FREEMAN: Ha, ha, ha! (Laughter.)

Clout. I don't have any clout. I have fans. That does not translate to clout.

Will Smith has clout. Clint Eastwood has clout. Clint Eastwood probably has more clout than the normal human being.

Now let me just tell you this about Clint Eastwood and clout. We did "Unforgiven," Best Picture. And he went on -- he made so many movies, great movies over the years. And he did -- he went to a studio and said, "I want to do this book, 'Mystic River.'" And they said -- (imitates negative mutterings) -- so he went out and he drummed up more support and he made "Mystic River," Best Picture.

Then he went back, same company, and said, "I want to do this little boxing movie." It was called "Million Dollar Baby." And when -- (chuckles) -- "Naah, Clint, thanks, we don't want it." So he went out and drummed up enough support and made "Mystic River" -- I mean, "Million Dollar Baby."

Well, we all know what happened there, see.

So clout is -- I don't know how you would define it. If Clint doesn't have it, who does?

MR. ZREMSKI: But if you're just starting out in the business, if you're an independent filmmaker --

MR. FREEMAN: Forget about it. (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: (Laughs.)

Forget about what?

MR. FREEMAN: Clout. (Laughter.) You know, you don't go in and say I got this movie -- you know who did that? Sylvester Stallone. And I'm telling you he's going to go down in history as one of the only, if not very few, who managed to pull that off.

MR. ZREMSKI: Okay. We do have a couple of political questions here. (Laughs.) Will you be joining Barack Obama on the campaign trail and tell us why you support him?

MR. FREEMAN: I will not be joining anyone on the campaign trail, it's not what I do. I'm an actor, not a politician. (Inaudible) -- get involved in politics. I'll go to the polls and I'll vote for him. (Laughter, scattered applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Any particular reason you support him?

MR. FREEMAN: Any particular reason I support him?

MR. ZREMSKI: Yes.

MR. FREEMAN: I read "The Audacity of Hope," and I found that for a person who's going to be in American politics it's very inspiring, very assuring. Now I know in an American politics you can go in with all the high-minded ideas in the world, but in order to survive you have to play a different kind of game. My prayer is that we can get this young man in.

You might remember JFK and why that's a -- why that's such a legacy; brought the country in to do high-minded things: VISTA, Peace Corps. And we were happy about him. I think we could do that if we get somebody in who's got the same kind of thinking, and that's Barack. He's got that kind of thinking going. We as a people are good people, and given the chance we can do good things.

MR. ZREMSKI: Now there's a rumor in Washington that you might be interested in Trent Lott's Senate seat. I take it by what you said a moment ago that rumor is not true?

MR. FREEMAN: Hmm. (Laughter.) No, no, no. I have never had any political ambitions.

For one thing, politicians don't make enough money. (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: What about the news media disappoints you? (Laughter.)

MR. FREEMAN: Well, we have different media: magazines, television, Internet, print. You can choose your source, and one of them ought to please you. Watching television, I find, is distracting, disturbing. I mean, there was so much going on in the world that you could talk about that would interest me, and it's not these children who are screwing up because they got too much money. (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: There's been a lot of concern, I think, expressed by people such as Bill Cosby and Sheila Johnson about media images of African Americans stemming from some of what's written in rap music. I'm wondering what you think about that.

MR. FREEMAN: I don't think so. I think everybody has a right, if they can get to the media, to express themselves however they want to. The great thing about television and all of that is the on-off button. (Laughter, applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Tell us your sense of race relations in America today.

MR. FREEMAN: My sense: I don't do race. (Laughter, applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Well, you do do activism on the issue of the disasters in the Gulf and the Caribbean, and we have one more question about that.

If people are interested in getting more information about what you're doing, how can they do that? And, you know, if you want to call somebody up to answer that, that's fine too.

MR. FREEMAN: Well, I think I should call Donna up to answer that. There is a website for a PLAN!T NOW, planitnow.org. Most of the information concerning PLAN!T NOW is there, but Donna can give you the chapter and verse?

MS. DONNA LEE: Thank you. I'm going to introduce you to Denise Goodwin Pace who is a representative from Halo -- the Halo Group -- which is just -- they've been angels to us in every endeavor when we got started with this.

Denise? She can talk to you about the website.

MS. DENISE PACE: Just briefly. You can find more information -- and we're hoping as we go forward, when the website launches in February, there will be lots of information for people who are trying to prepare for events. We know that we can't prevent natural events, but we can do something to mitigate the disasters that sometimes follow from lack of preparation. And that's what this website will be about.

It's communicating what we can do to prepare. We'll have simple tools. There'll be sharing of information from people who have been affected and people who are at risk for being affected. And it's a communications device. And we're so thankful that Morgan Freeman, who is one of the great communicators of our time, is the voice drawing attention to this organization and to its mission.

Thank you. (Applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: We're almost out of time, but before I ask the last question, I've just got a couple of other important matters to tend to.

First of all, let me remind our audience of our upcoming speakers. Tomorrow, the 19th, Mike Leavitt, the U.S. secretary of Health and Human Services will be here. On January 7th, Nancy Nord, the acting director of the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission will be joining us. And on January 10th, Margaret Spellings, the U.S. secretary of Education will be joining us.

Next, we have some traditions at the Nation Press Club -- (laughter) -- including the presentation of a plaque.

MR. FREEMAN: Oh, look at this! (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: It fails compared to the Oscar, I'm sure, but -- and of course, the National Press Club mug.

MR. FREEMAN: Oh my God -- oh, of course. (Applause.) Thank you.

MR. ZREMSKI: And the last question comes from someone in the

audience who --

MR. FREEMAN: I hope it's a goody. (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Oh, I think so. Someone in the audience asks, I appreciate your being in the presence of God Almighty.

MR. FREEMAN: Say that again?

MR. ZREMSKI: I appreciate being in the presence of God Almighty -- i.e., from "Evan Almighty." When you played God, how did you prepare? (Laughter.)

MR. FREEMAN: Let me correct another misapprehension here. I am an itinerant actor. I do not identify with the characters I play. (Laughter.) When they say, "Cut," they're gone.

How do you prepare to play God? Acting is believing. (Laughter, applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Thank you very much. Appreciate it.

(Applause.)

Thank you, Mr. Freeman. Thank you for joining us today.

I'd like to thank all of you for joining us today as well. I'd also like to thank National Press Club staff members Melinda, Jo Anne Booze, Pat Nelson and Howard Rothman for organizing today's lunch. Also thanks to the NPC Library for its research.

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One last note. Mr. Freeman's going to be having to leave here pretty quickly right after the lunch, so if you could just hold your seats for a moment or two while he's getting ready to depart, that would be great.

Thank you very much. We're adjourned.

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