

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON WITH TOBY KEITH

SUBJECT: TOBY KEITH, NAMED BY FORBES MAGAZINE AS THE NATION'S HIGHEST-EARNING COUNTRY MUSIC STAR, WILL SPEAK AT A NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON ON APRIL 21, 2009 ON THE EVE OF HIS EIGHTH USO TOUR TO ENTERTAIN MILITARY TROOPS IN IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN.

MODERATOR: DONNA LEINWAND, PRESIDENT, NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

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**DONNA LEINWAND:** (Sounds gavel.) Good afternoon and welcome to the National Press Club for our speakers luncheon. My name is Donna Leinwand. I'm a reporter for *USA Today* and president of the National Press Club.

We're the world's leading professional organization for journalists. And on behalf of our 3,500 members worldwide, I'd like to welcome our speaker and our guests in the audience today. I'd also like to welcome those of you who are watching on C-Span.

We're celebrating our 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, and we've rededicated ourselves to a commitment to the future of journalism through informative programming, journalism education, and fostering a free press worldwide. For more information about the National Press Club, please visit our website at [www.press.org](http://www.press.org).

We're looking forward to today's speech, and afterwards, I will ask as many questions from the audience as time permits. Please hold your applause during the speech so that we have time for as many questions as possible.

For our broadcast audience, I'd like to explain that if you hear applause, it may be from the guests and members of the general public who attend our luncheons, and not necessarily from the working press.

I'd now like to introduce our head table guests and ask them to stand briefly when their names are called. From you're right, David McIntyre, president, tri-West Health Care alliance and USO board member; Jim Michaels, *USA Today* Pentagon correspondent; Andrea McCarren, television reporter; Jeff Dufour, "Yeas and Nays" columnist for *The Washington Examiner*; Curt Motley, Mr. Keith's agent; Linda Kramer, *Glamour* magazine Washington editor, and mother of a Marine currently in Liberia; Sloan Gibson, president and CEO of the USO and a guest of the speaker.

Skipping over the podium, Angela Greiling-Keane, Bloomberg News and chair of the NPC Speakers Committee. Skipping over our guest, Andrea Stone, *USA Today* national correspondent and the Speakers Committee member who organized today's event. Thank you very much, Andrea.

Marilou Donahue, producer of *Artistically Speaking*; Phil Budahn, Department of Veterans Affairs, director of media relations; John Fales, also known as Sgt. Shaft, of *The Washington Times*; TK Kimbrell, Toby's manager; and finally, Elaine Shock, Toby's publicist. (Applause.)

Named by *Forbes* magazine as the nation's highest earning country music star, Mr. Toby Keith and his trademark *chapeau* are known from Oklahoma to Kabul. He has sold more than 25 million albums in this decade alone with hits that include, "Should Have Been a Cowboy", "American Soldier", and "Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue".

On the business side, he's had major endorsement deals with Ford trucks, a chain of restaurants named after his song, "I Love This Bar", and his own record label. Outspoken about his country and those who volunteer to defend it, Mr. Keith has taken some hits, whether it was from the lead singer of the Dixie Chicks or more seriously from mortar fire in Kandahar, Afghanistan, during his USO tour there last year. Mr. Keith has often been at the center of controversy.

A self-described Democrat who supported George W. Bush, but liked all three major candidates in last year's presidential election, Mr. Keith may be hard to pin down politically. But he's never wavered when it came to support for the troops. As he told *People* magazine last year, "If I ever did anything wrong, it was just in support of our troops." Please join me in welcoming to the National Press Club, Mr. Toby Keith. (Applause.)

**MR. TOBY KEITH:** Thank you. Thank you very much. I'm honored to be here with the Press Club. We're launching our seventh campaign for our two-week stay in the Middle East. I don't really have my itinerary yet, but tonight we're leaving for, I think, Afghanistan and Iraq. I'm not sure about that, but-- (Applause.)

First of all, you can thank me for being here because that's your chicken fried steak lunch you got. And it might be the first time in the history of the Press Club that you got a chicken fried steak. But as you can tell, the saga continues about the green beans. They just can't quite get it, can they?

It's an honor to be here. As we embark on our seventh USO tour, we've done over a hundred shows in the last seven years, six years in the Middle East and in Afghanistan. And we also did Kosovo and Bosnia back in the day also, so. It's a labor of love for us as we go. And I want to take this opportunity. It's great timing...(inaudible) in D.C. that the National Press Club invited us to be here because it gives me a chance to go on-record and say some things since the press is here.

First of all, I got here today thinking for the last week that I might be getting ambushed here. But in the pre-meeting upstairs, or next door awhile ago, there's enough military in here that I think we have the perimeter secured. So we're in good shape. But I'll take you all on. I don't care. Bring it, baby.

After 9-1-1-- My father was a veteran who was injured during his service, and came back a proud veteran. He taught his children at an early age to respect veterans and people who are willing to-- or even that were drafted. You can't just say 'willing'. There are great volunteers today, but there's been many men and women drafted into our Armed Forces that were very vigilant and stood for everything that this country stands for. You know, when you live in this country and make the kind of money that entertainers make, and live free, that's a great thing. But even living on the bad end of this country and being poor, you still live free in this country. (Applause.)

That's through people going and making sure that the laws of this land are protected, and that our freedoms are protected. You can't have it both ways. You can't stand on the First Amendment and try to 'x' out the Second Amendment. They're all there. We all have to live by them. That's what our country is founded on, so.

I'm not a political guy. I never have been. It really freaks people out when they find out that I'm a Democrat. It really does, because they've read so much lies and stuff in the press that they just assume that I'm a right wing loco, you know? It's simply not true. This isn't a pity party for me. And I'm not up here,

going to defend myself. I stand firm on whatever I've done in the past. I'm not sorry I wrote the song. I'm not sorry I'm patriotic. And I never apologize for any of that...ever. (Applause.)

The polarization that happens in this country is boiling to the point to where I feel like living in middle America that it feels like a civil war to me. There's so much hate on both ends that it's hard to get anything accomplished in this country. Even though I come from a family that's never had one Republican on my family tree — ever — they still know right from wrong and they still defend their country. And they still understand the sacrifices that are made by people that go do these things.

And what I see that's unfair about our media today is everybody's selling headlines so much that once you read-- Half the time when you read the story, it never matches up to the magnitude of what the headline is that drew you in in the beginning anyway. And so if somebody prints a headline about me and slams me, and the retraction comes later, it'll be back on page 45. That's not a big headline. So by being this lightning rod, if you will, of patriotism, it also gives me all the checkmarks in the right-hand column, extreme right-hand column with all the left.

However, I have so many disagreements with the extreme right. There's great Democrats. There's great Republicans. There's great Independent Americans in this country that all get along and can argue and disagree and agree over issues. But those extreme ends seem to create all the noise. They're poison. And that is what needs to come to a stop. And I don't know how, with the Internet the way it is today, I don't know how, with everybody competing for a diluted-- There's not just one or two places we go get our trusted news anymore.

I want somebody just to report me the news. I was involved in a deal where there was four people that were quoted by a guy saying that I-- that something happened. It was a headline about me. Three of the four people that were there, including me, said it didn't happen. Even the guy that this guy was glorifying, was(?) supposed(?) to dress me down, said he don't recall it happening, especially to Toby Keith. The publication said, "We're sticking by the story and running with it." And it's ridiculous. There's no way I can defend that. I'm a celebrity. There's a million of those out there. And I can't begin to defend those things, and I'm not going to try.

Now if I ever cross paths with this guy, I might-- You know, I might tap him on the shoulder and have a little chat with him. But when you say, you know, "Do you wear your country's uniform, boy? You ever been paid for this? You ever done that? You ever shot anybody? You ever drew a check," well, I don't answer those questions. I happen to be wearing what I wear on my USO tour. And

this is issued to me by the military. So in one way or the other, I have wore our country's uniform.

Now, that will be taken out of context somewhere tomorrow. I'm not confusing that with going door-to-door, trying to draw gunfire. And that's the way our guys fight. We go into bad places. We don't just blow the whole place up; we go door-to-door, looking for bad guys. We draw fire, and then we fire back. We don't go in and fire. That's not the rules of engagement for the American military. That's a tough order to have to deal with every day. And you can't know these things until you go to the forward operating bases where I go and see what goes on every day. So as I've gone to seven USO tours, we do two forward operating bases. They're called FOBs. Sometimes there will only be 25 guys. They'll be guarding a smugglers route. That place has been hit three times this week. We have to be escorted in by Apache attack helicopters by the best, the best pilots. The guys on the ground do their job so good, that's why I go. I feel secure when I'm in there.

And it took me a hundred shows in the forward operating zone to learn to trust how good our guys really are and what they sacrifice. Now, these are volunteers that our elected officials chose to send to Afghanistan. So after 9-1-1, I wrote a song called "Courtesy Red, White and Blue" knowing that our military was asking a bunch of volunteers to go in and find justice for the people that died on 9-1-1. If you read my song word for word, and don't apply your agenda to it, either way, that's all it says. It just says, "I want you to win. I don't want you to die. I want you to go win and find the people responsible for 9-1-1."

That has been taken out of context. It has surpassed over 25 million album sales. It has surpassed 25 number one hits. It has surpassed sold out concert number one ticket seller years. It has surpassed all that because it is so agenda-poisoned. And there's no way to stop it. Everybody's trying to compete for the headlines, were trying to sell headlines. And it's poisoning America. And it's pushing us to where there's so much hate from both sides, that there's no way we can continue and get along someday. It may not be in my lifetime, but if it continues running like it does, there will be people die in this country over their political agenda. It's just getting ridiculous.

I've never been a political guy. I've got checkmarks all over the place. My lefty friends think I'm a Nazi and my righty friends think I'm a hippie, so. Anybody that knows me personally knows I'm just a normal guy that goes out and fishes, raises racehorses, raises his kids. I dedicate two weeks every year to the USO, which is-- Contrary to what you hear on the news sometimes, they're the best organization. And they've been doing it longer than anybody. And they provide more for anybody than just entertainment. They send every kind of care

package in the world to our guys on the frontline. And the USO is the grandest organization designed to do that very function that there's ever been. (Applause.)

Some people in the news media last year were saying that the USO wasn't doing their job. And I jumped up and went straight to the top and started fighting with them right off the bat. The reason that USO can't get more people to go in there is because it's a hell zone. It's a war zone. It's hard to convince somebody who's making movies or making recordings to stop what they're doing here in Disneyland and go sit in the middle of a war zone. You know? I've never shot anybody, but I've been shot at, several times. I've raced other Marines and soldiers to a bunker when the sirens go off. I mean, I know how it feels on my little world, my little 14 days that I'm over there. But can you imagine being over there 18 months? It's a long time to have to live on the edge. And then everybody expect 'em just to come back here.

And you have to support these guys. If you see one of them in an airport, drop your agenda and just go over and thank him for at least making sure that you can say what you want to say. (Applause.)

The USO works diligently. We don't just talk the talk. In my world, we walk the walk. Once 9-1-1 happened, my agent, Curt Motley, my promoter, Brian O'Connell, who's one of the bigwigs of Live Nation, my assistant, my band, everybody as a group effort decided that we were going to go donate our time to the military. Curt Motley has now for years been a board member for the USO. He's worked hand-in-hand on a daily basis, not only on my behalf, but on trying to get other artists over there, and has been completely responsible for picking up the traffic of entertainers that go over. It's just difficult to get people to go because of an agenda or because they're afraid to go to a war zone.

And I understand those things. So we try to go, the forward operating bases, set examples for them, show them, you know, just because you make a lot of money, here I go and set the example. You don't have to go that. Just go over here to Walter Reed Hospital, or go by a base or go to the Green Zone where it's safe. I would take my son, my 12 year-old son, to the Green Zone in Baghdad. And that was a war that not everybody agreed with. I didn't understand it.

But at the same time, we had people in there that our elected officials sent in. And I'll go support them. I supported Kosovo and Bosnia. I went in, didn't support the war, but I supported the troops. I went in and spent my time, did my time in there also. Wherever the next conflict starts, nobody in this room is powerful enough to stop it or start it, including myself. But we have people that are volunteers and are making sure that it doesn't go on right here in D.C. or in Oklahoma or California and Hollywood. So as long as those people are willing to go out and take care of it out on the perimeter for us, the least we can do is walk

up and pat them on the back, shake their hand, say, "Good job." You know what I mean? (Applause.)

Back on "Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue", that song, word for word, has nothing to do with Kosovo and Bosnia. It has nothing to do with Iraq. It has nothing to do with North Korea or Iran. It tells you in there, word for word. We got sucker punched on that day. And, you know, these guys are coming in to serve justice on you. You will be found and you will not do this to our country again. Everybody that I know-- There are good Republicans and Democrats and Independents, all want for the same thing. If there's a big blue button we could all push and say-- that says 'peace' on it, we would all push it.

But we all just have different ways of pursuing that and what our ideas are of how to handle that. But as Americans, everybody should agree at least that we need a military, and that they do a great job for us, and that we need to support them every day. (Applause.)

I'm going to shut up yapping, because I want to take a bunch of questions and see what we got in here. But in closing, I want to thank the National Press Club. I want to thank the USO. And I want to thank my staff for going on another great USO tour overseas. And I want to thank our military that are enlisted, that are present, and the veterans. And thank you all for having me. (Applause.)

**MS. LEINWAND:** So you've done, I guess a dozen USO tours now, half a dozen--

**MR. KEITH:** Seven years.

**MS. LEINWAND:** Seven years. What keeps you coming back? Why do you keep doing it?

**MR. KEITH:** Well, I've developed so many friendships and relationships from National Security Advisor-- I mean, I knew right off the bat that I was not going to be a hypocrite with all the hate Bush or the hate Clinton stuff that went on in the last 16 years. When you got a Commander-in-Chief, you have to give him a chance, whether you agree with him or not. Our American citizens voted our Commander-in-Chief in. And the first thing he did was hire one of my best friends and dearest friends, General James Jones, as his National Security Advisor. (Applause.)

Right off the bat, he got a big brownie point from me because I can't imagine anybody who would have won that presidency not picking James Jones in the National Security Advisor position. I think he ought to run for President someday. He's a great guy. But he was the reason that I released "Courtesy of the

Red, White, and Blue”. And when I saw those Marines go out of there with their-- They were leaving from, I think, Constitution Hall. Am I right, Sarah? Yeah? Constitution Hall, I played for couple thousand Marines.

And I’d written “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue” so on my USO trips, I would have something to play for the military. And General was commandant of the Marine Corps at the time. He came up and he said, “Brother, you’ve got,” you know, “.so many Marines in here.” I don’t remember, six, seven hundred or whatever. And he said, “There’s not an unclenched fist or a dry eye.” He said, “Everybody in the military needs to hear that song. It’s the greatest military song I’ve ever heard.

And so my first relationship before I went in the Middle East was with General-- I know I’m not being very succinct, but-- was with General James Jones. Then I met Rusty Frutiger, General Frutiger over there. He climbed in every helicopter I got in and was my escort everywhere I went for years. And so those are kind of relationships-- And then, you know, meeting people — and so many of the people that I’ve met, had lunch and stuff with, would die, would perish a week later. I would have lunch, and my host would be a young sergeant. And I would move on to Afghanistan. And Sarah, who works for the General James office now, was my USO host. And she would say, “You remember Sullivan at Camp Cooke,” or Fallujah. “He got killed by,” you know, “. . .a roadside attack.”

And so, you know, then you meet their families out on the road. I’ve come back and played Oregon where First Lieutenant Eric McCrae’s parents came to the show. And I flew with his coffin out of Baghdad one time. And it was one of the most disturbing flights or moments of my life. We were loaded on a C-17 and they brought a flag-draped coffin up. And it was the remains of First Lieutenant Eric McCrae. His parents have not missed-- You know, they’ve been to four shows. Every time I go to Oregon, his whole family comes out. And we try to treat them and thank them and feel sorry for their loss.

But you make so many relationships, it becomes a family. And one more thing, before you ask the next question. I’m just going to take over here. (Sounds gavel.) There’s been some hatemongers report that I get paid to go over there. The USO, from the Marines from General Jones down, the Army, General Pace, Petraeus, any of them will tell you, I’ve never made one red cent. There are people that go and shoot TV shows over there in the Green Zone, get paid a half a million or a million, come back and show that they’ve been in the military zone. I try to get very little press from it. I don’t go out, promote it. That’s why not very many people know I’ve done a hundred shows over there. And by the time we get back, it will have-- be well on our way to 125 or something. But never one time have I taken one penny. Now, next question. (Applause.)



**MS. LEINWAND:** Why is the Easy Money Band joining you on your Middle East when in the past years it's been just you and Scotty Emerick? Is it due to increased stability in the region, bigger audiences?

**MR. KEITH:** They have joined me before. But they picked three or four places. We did a big Memorial Day in Germany. It's one of the greatest shows I've ever been involved with. We did a wonderful show in Baghdad in the Green Zone. It's hard to haul an entire band and all their equipment in Black Hawk helicopters. But this year, since we're predominantly going to be in one country, they are going to set up with some of the bigger bases and allow us to really throw the big dog daddy at 'em.

**MS. LEINWAND:** How would you compare military audiences to civilian audiences?

**MR. KEITH:** Well, it's different everywhere you go. The first time I landed in Baghdad, most of the time, it's just rowdy and they're drinking near beer. You know? We're one of the countries that don't allow our fighting men to have a day off over there and drink, whereas the Australians and the British all have pubs and throw down. But our guys aren't allowed to. So they at least show up with their near beer. And it's usually a big, loud party.

But that being said, I've also been in places like-- One of the first time I land in Baghdad, they whisked me right away to Fallujah when that was a brand new word on the tip of everybody's tongue. We were just learning the word Fallujah. And the Marines and the Army had just taken it. And I got there at midnight and went down into an old bunker. And it was bombed out. It was still black. You could still smell the smoke. And the Marines came in and laid on the floor, about 500 of them. And it was difficult to entertain, because they were so beat up and give out and tired. Yet they were actually laying on their packs. They were laying on their humps, on their sides, watching. There was no chairs in there. So it varies. But most the time, it's just a party.

**MS. LEINWAND:** Speaking of Fallujah, this tour doesn't include Iraq. Why not?

**MR. KEITH:** Well, I think the war that nobody thought we belonged in or that we could win or overcome, our guys overcame. And the military and the USO both have agreed, there's really no use to go to Iraq.

**MS. LEINWAND:** You mentioned that you have never been in the military. Why didn't you enlist when you were younger?

**MR. KEITH:** Well, one reason because my dad had me a job waiting when I turned 18. I was a songwriter on the side and had a band going. But my dad had a job waiting for me in an oilfield that would have paid me more money than even if I'd had went to college. So, you know, everybody ran from the draft, if you didn't want to go, the Army. And luckily for me, I came at a time when there was no draft. But that's why I tip my hat so hard to the people that do serve.

**MS. LEINWAND:** You mentioned polarization among the American people. Do you feel that as an entertainer, you have the ability to influence the American population enough to decrease the current polarization? And how would you do that?

**MR. KEITH:** No. I don't have enough power. First of all, I'm not a activist as far as other than supporting the troops. I don't have any other time that I put into anything other than my children's charity or-- I don't know what else I would do. But I'm not an activist as far as-- I'm just not a very political person. I just know that from my point of view, the hate that I see from both sides is really polarized.

Like, if you read a review of my concert somewhere, which I learned back in the '90s to never read your own press-- Because if somebody's writing a review on you, you're not that good, or you're not that bad, ever. But once and awhile, my manager or my booking agent, Curt, will read one, or my promoter, and say, you know, "This guy really took it to you." But when you read it or they tell you about it, it's all agenda. It's not about whether you can sing or write, or the place is sold out or was a big party. They take you down with their agenda. It's implied in there, the whole time. You can see. They give themselves away.

So it's really difficult to figure out how you could pull those two sides together when you got somebody that doesn't know you who's going to write that same review every time you come to his town. And the people that were at the show are reading it going, "This doesn't make sense." And the people who weren't there weren't enough of a fan to even come to your show, so. You know? So, you know, if they say, "Toby Keith sucks," and you were there, you go, "Well, that's why I didn't go," you know? And if you were there, you're going, "What is this guy doing? This guy wasn't at the same show I was."

Our show is really-- is more done like a-- I mean, I'll compare it to a magic show at Vegas, like our friend Lance Burton. He goes out every night and does a magic act. If he blows his magic act, then everybody's going to go, you know, "You're not that good of a magician." He nails it every night. Now, he can see little intricate things that he could fix or that he didn't quite nail. But the audience never notices. We do the same exact show on tour every night. These are very professional people.

So unless I have a cold, that's the only thing dictates how good or bad we are, okay? So unless I've got a vocal problem, which I very seldom ever do-- So if the crowd's rockin', and it's sold out, and it's the same show we did last night, the same show before, we never have-- we never-- very, very-- get very far off of the center line. So when the building, head of the building comes and says, "Wow, this was, like, seventh game at the World Series out here tonight. This place was nuts," and then the next day you get up and read a review that says everybody sat on their hands the whole night-- "And even his 'Red, White, and Blue' song and his soldier's song didn't even get 'em going. So he resorted to putting sports teams up on the"-- You know what I mean? It's, like, "Dude, you're giving yourself away here, pal." You know?

But there's no way to pull the two together, that I'm powerful enough to do. It's going to take a greater power than me. I'm just telling you like it is.

**MS. LEINWAND:** What's been your experience with how accurately the press covers your views on public policy issues?

**MR. KEITH:** I've covered that. It's so much out of context that one line in one song outweighs one of the most successful songwriters and performers of the last 20 years. I mean, I've been very successful. I embrace-- I learned years ago, I couldn't fight the hate, because you just can't stop hate. I mean, there's no way.

So what I did is I got smart about it and I just embraced it. So what I do is, I save millions of dollars on publicity by finding out where these haters exist. And so when I'm putting an album out, I go to their forums and give them some reason to hate, and throw my album on top of it. And they all go to work for me. Real easy. Am I right? My publicist is right down on the end, Elaine. And she says, "You're the best at it that I've ever seen." And she's worked with everybody.

But I'll go on Stephen Colbert and put an album on there. And I know who's watching. I know that bunch. And I'll lay a big CD on there and say, "Here it is." And then I'll do a song, "Red, White, and Blue" or "Hang 'Em High" or something, and get all the bloggers going with their sick hate. But in every one of their columns, it'll say, "He's got a new album out."

**MS. LEINWAND:** You've been to Iraq and Afghanistan half a dozen times in the past few years. What have you seen there that you don't think the media is reporting?

**MR. KEITH:** There's a thousand stories, and I don't have enough time to talk about. But I've got a very eloquently written letter from a major in Iraq

that-- They were building schools and a reporter came in and spent three days with him. He took him around and showed how the community-- where the community was, how it's developed, how the school system's working, how the hospital's operating, how the locals have taken to having the military there, and understanding that they're going to leave them with it.

And the whole story that the woman came back and wrote was so opposite of everything that happened, that he felt compelled to write this newspaper publication a letter. And I've got a copy of it that he gave me when I was over there. There's so many things that-- Just like I was telling you earlier, all of the people who don't support the military or war in any-- I mean, I've talked with people who don't even believe we need a military. I mean, it doesn't make sense to me. I know the difference between right and wrong, but I just wonder sometimes if a guy like John Wayne or Bob Hope would even be able to exist in Hollywood today.

But I've talked to people while doing movies and stuff who literally don't even think-- They think we should just open our borders and get rid of our military. They just don't think that we even need protection at all. And so when I see-- When you're talking to these people, and then I go see what we're trying to accomplish over there, they think that we're just going in, just bombing everybody and kill everybody big enough to die, and take over and press, you know, our way of life on everybody.

These radicals and extreme people want all Western civilization, Christians and Jews, they want us dead. And when everybody figures that out, then we'll understand that we can either back up and just protect our perimeter and just stay right here, or we can go out, try to help the world. But something has to happen. You can't just allow these people to come in here and press their will on us. (Applause.)

And not every time, it's a war. Not every time it's our war. The world's going to have to step up and they will. The world will find out, if you allow this extremism to grow. The world will find out how bloody they can be and how serious they are about their agenda. And it gets really difficult sometimes to watch us have to be the leaders in that. But sometimes I really wish we would just back up and just sit right here and watch the world do what they're going to do also. Because we're not getting much help. Our guys have to lead the way most of the time.

**MS. LEINWAND:** Your father once said, "The higher you fly your flag, the bigger a target you are." Can you give me some examples in your life when that has proven true?

**MR. KEITH:** Well, you know, there's a lot of people that support the military. And you have to be a big name to get the haters to come get you. So, I mean, I know-- You know, I go into Hollywood, and I see, working on a movie or a project or something, or doing a TV show. And I'll run into other entertainers. And they'll pull me aside. And just as much as the right bashes Hollywood, there's a lot of people in Hollywood that'll pull you aside and go, "Hey man," you know, "I support the troops, too. I just can't do it vocally. I just can't do it out loud."

So it's just the activists and the people who want to stand up and protest that make the noise that give Hollywood a bad name. But there's a lot of people there who support it. There's a lot of people in my business who won't speak up, in country music who won't speak up against the war, because they don't want that to be pushed onto them, like the other side. So it's back and forth, back and forth. But it's mainly a big name. And when you--

You know, my dad said, "When you get up the flagpole far enough where everybody can see your rear end," he said, "...that's when they come get you." So they only get the big famous guys, you know what I mean? They only come get the head target, you know, the head honcho. So I'll accept that, because I learned to embrace it, like I said. I learned to embrace it. And you can't stop it. So I let them believe what they want to believe. Most of the time, it's wrong.

**MS. LEINWAND:** Do you think the U.S. is doing a good enough job taking care of its recent veterans? Why or why not?

**MR. KEITH:** Well, they're trying. I get emails every day from people raising money for the veterans. So I don't know if our government will ever do a good enough job. And none of us could ever repay a veteran for his time spent over there. But I do know that the public and a lot of the citizens here in the U.S. have got thousands of organizations that are doing lots of charity work to try to raise money for our veterans. I wish the government would do more, but I know the public is busting their hump.

**MS. LEINWAND:** What do you think about the officials who say young soldiers coming back from combat zones are dangerous?

**MR. KEITH:** Well, they are dangerous. Make no mistake about it. They are. But they're not dangerous to this society. We've been bringing veterans back home for years and years and years and years. And they'll single one or two out that goes, you know, off on a binge sometimes and gets on a clock tower somewhere. But, you know, there's so many of them come back and mix right in, and become great citizens. They're really sound, solid-- And you can't beat the

training and the respect and the adult that comes back, when you send a boy over there, as a grown man. They do a great job of that. (Applause.)

**MS. LEINWAND:** Okay, we've determined that you're a Democrat. But our audiences asks, would you ever consider running for a political office? Specifically someone wants to know, will you run for Governor of Oklahoma in 2018 or possibly sooner?

**MR. KEITH:** Well, I'm not political, so I couldn't do that. Number two is, I couldn't deal with all the lies. I couldn't shake your hand and walk over there, five feet, and say something bad about you. To me, that's all politics are. Politicians are-- They kill me. The reason I don't vote straight ticket, the reason I've been a Democrat is because my family was. You can't vote straight ticket. You have to vote for somebody that you think can make this country or your surroundings a better place to live, and that can advance us to a better spot.

And hate, hate, hate-- You know, I would be accused with my song of being a hater or a warmonger. But I don't hate Americans. And I don't hate, hate, hate. My agenda is not to hate. And being a politician would mean to have to get along with too many people. So no.

**MS. LEINWAND:** Moving from politics to music, can you tell us about the first song you ever wrote and how it came to you?

**MR. KEITH:** I don't even remember the first song I wrote at all. I was a teenager and my grandmother had a supper club, and had given me a guitar that one of her players in her band had recommended her get me for my birthday, so. I started somewhere between eight and fourteen, trying to write songs. And they must have been so bad, I can't remember them.

But I remember I wrote about 500 songs before I finally wrote one that somebody went, "You wrote that?" And then they got closer and closer together. I wish I could remember a title. But it was probably something like, "She Broke My Heart and I Broke Her Jaw" or something-- (Laughter.) --one of those.

**MS. LEINWAND:** Did you ever think--

**MR. KEITH:** I'm only kidding, ladies. We're on C-Span. Be careful.

**MS. LEINWAND:** Did you ever think you'd get this famous? When did it occur to you that you'd become a celebrity?

**MR. KEITH:** I still struggle with that every day because in my hometown, you know, I'm just-- I play a little golf, raise my racehorses and

coach my son's football team, so. You know, when I come out into the world, whether it's Canada, Mexico, Europe, wherever, or all over the U.S., anywhere that I'm recognized. So it's really uncomfortable for me when I'm sitting in a restaurant, thinking that I'm all by myself, and I look up and there's ten people watching me eat. It's never been real comfortable for me.

But it's great to wake up every day and know that that's my job. And as a songwriter, to be that successful, it's-- I don't know. I've got the best job in the world. I wouldn't trade places with anybody.

**MS. LEINWAND:** Okay, so one of your big breaks came through a flight attendant. Can you tell us that story? And have you ever written a song in praise of flight attendants?

**MR. KEITH:** There's a lot to this story. No, there's not. I had a huge fan when I was playing regional. Her name was Laurie Payne(?). And she would come sit and watch our band play. She knew every song that I'd written. And we were having to do cover songs because we were playing nightclubs. And I wasn't a major signed-- signed with a major recording company yet. And she would come and sit and watch us play.

Well, she graduated from college at New Mexico State, and she moved to Dallas and took a job as a flight attendant for American Airlines. From there, she moved to Nashville when they opened an American Airlines hub up in Nashville. I'd never been to Nashville. And finally, four or five years later, I hadn't seen her in awhile. And I went to Nashville to take six or eight of my best songs that I'd written in the last five or six years to Capitol Records for a meeting that I had to get my first-- try to get a recording contract.

And I get there and they turn me down. They said, "Eh, you're not all that." Right? In fact, the guy told me, said, "Why don't you go back to Oklahoma and get back in the workshop and work on your writing. Because these songs aren't going to cut it."

And so I went to dinner that night at a steakhouse and ran into her. And she says, "All I've got's these two old recordings of yours. Have you got any new stuff?" And I had four or five things that I was passing around town. So I ran out the truck, got one. I gave it to her.

About two months later, she was on a flight with Harold Shedd, the vice president of Mercury Records at the time, who discovered Alabama, K.T. Oslin, The Headhunters, Cyrus, Shania Twain. And he was on a flight with her. And she said, "Are you Harold Shedd?" And she gave him my recordings. And he gets a million of those. And he got out on his boat in the Gulf of Mexico, I think, and

got far enough out that he didn't have any radio signal. He plugged my CD in, had her number on it, come back in, called her up and said, "Who is this guy?" And that's how I got my recording deal through American Airline flight attendant. (Applause.)

**MS. LEINWAND:** What kept you going in the early days of your career when your record labels were constantly changing, and people were criticizing your songs?

**MR. KEITH:** Just knowing that the truth's on your side. You know, I knew I was-- I pray a lot. And a lot of the things I do in my life involve my relationship with my Creator. And I just knew I was in the place I was supposed to be. And I knew that I could write songs as well as anybody. I knew I'd put my hours and my time and my years in to establishing myself as a writer, singer/songwriter. And I just got to a point where I wasn't going to let a president of a label-- At the time, the label I was at had come up through the mailroom. And he couldn't make a D chord, play the piano, sing, write, nothing. And he was telling me what I needed to record and when to do it.

And there were other producers in town that did come up through the studios and through the musician side. You know, Tony Brown played with Elvis. James Stroud was a studio drummer that played on a lot of R&B stuff back in the '60s and '70s. And those kind of guys were producing hits on people, and wanting to produce me. And I was locked down over at Mercury. So, I mean, I went to war with them. And I just said, you know, "I'm not going to do the kind of music you want me to do." And luckily I got out of there. That was 25 million albums ago.

**MS. LEINWAND:** How does audience interaction affect your performances? What do you think of the elaborate signs your fans make to grab your attention?

**MR. KEITH:** We won't talk about some of them. But every night, from the tailgate-- We play amphitheatres, which hold about twenty, twenty-five thousand people. And at some point during the day, they tailgate, just like they do at football games. The bikers will come in and take the hill. And the cowboys and cowgirls will come in, flip their tailgates down. They'll be cooking burgers and-- It looks like a football game. And they start tailgating in the afternoon.

So you know when you hit the stage that night what you're dealing with. You know? So I don't give them what they want; I give them what they need. But it does affect your show from night to night on how loud the audience is. However, in a professional environment, when you're getting paid to deliver a hard ticket date like we do, even if the crowd isn't quite there, you still go-- you



know, you still step on the gas and you-- I look at it like, hey, they ain't quite as good as last night's crowd. I'm going to try to work all night long for two hours to get them where they needed to go-- where we got last night. So it just becomes a challenge to me. But if they're off the hook and they're fighting and getting arrested and all that, I'm happy.

**MS. LEINWAND:** Was "How Do You Like Me Now?" autobiographical?

**MR. KEITH:** No. I co-wrote that with another guy. And it wasn't-- It was fun. I mean, we both got our stabs in our girlfriends. But none of mine was ever the valedictorian, so it can't be about mine.

**MS. LEINWAND:** You're involved in so many businesses. Is there something you haven't done that you'd like to try?

**MR. KEITH:** If I was to quit everything I'm doing-- I get such a joy out of coaching my son's football team. If I was going to go do something the rest of my life, and quit everything else I'm doing, I would go coach football somewhere. That's what I would do.

**MS. LEINWAND:** And where do you see yourself in ten years?

**MR. KEITH:** Why, standing at the National Press Club, doing this all over again. (Applause.)

**MS. LEINWAND:** All right. You can come on back.

**MR. KEITH:** I don't have any goals in the music business left to accomplish. I was black-balled by the awards shows years ago. I don't live in Nashville. So again, I'm not political. And that's what you've got to be. I don't shake hands well with people that don't like me, so. I've accomplished every songwriting award, every quadruple, you know, platinum albums, all that stuff, number one ticket seller. I've done everything in the music business I can do. So the only goal you have left at this point is to keep-- I enjoy writing songs, so to keep, just longevity, just seeing how long that you can compete with-- You get another newcomer every year that wants to knock you off the perch. But you gotta come get it. I ain't givin' it to you. You gotta come get it, baby.

**MS. LEINWAND:** You've gotten some good and bad publicity in your various public positions, for example, the Pikesville incident and the squabble with *Rolling Stone*. What compels you to fight these battles yourself instead of issuing statements through your publicist?

**MR. KEITH:** Because my publicist is a liberal. No. I don't mean a Democrat, I mean a liberal. The two incidents that you mentioned were direct hits. I mean, they were right in my face. They weren't-- Most of the time, I let that stuff go. I just write it off as hate. But sometimes you just have to be a-- you have to man-up-- you know?-- and just do your thing.

If I'm in an audience of peers and somebody challenges me, and uses my peers to try to get them to go against me, and I make a statement that says, "This isn't true," and by the end of the night-- and the press has already ran with it and made their own version up and stories-- Especially something like *The Tennessean* that ran on the *Rolling Stone* article, he never checked one fact. I've known him for years. He not only has access to me, he has access to my band. He's in Nashville. He knows my drummer's wife. He knows my booking agent. He knows my promoter. He knows my publicist. None of these other people at the award show in Vegas had that kind of access.

But he took a story and didn't check any facts out of *The Stone* and ran with it and made a mockery of me. And then that night, when all the rebuttals started to come in, going-- everybody's going, "No, that didn't happen," he said, "I wish I wouldn't have went with the story."

So I dressed him down a little bit. That's just-- He was there. It was a deal like this, and he was right there, so.

**MS. LEINWAND:** All right, we are almost out of time. But before asking the last question, we have some business to take care of. First of all, let me remind our members of future speakers. On May 11th, Jeff Idelson, president of the National Baseball Hall of Fame, with special guest, former Oriole, Brooks Robinson, will be here. We also have, on May 15th, John Rowe, chairman and CEO of the Exelon Corporation. And on May 21st, Transportation Secretary, Ray LaHood. And May 28th, we have Mary Tyler Moore, actress and spokesperson for the Juvenile Diabetes Association.

The National Press Club would also like to offer a special thank you to Mr. Keith for his donation of an autographed guitar for the 12th annual National Press Club 5K Run Walk and Auction. This year's race will take place on September 12, 2009. For more information on this event, please visit our website at [www.press.org](http://www.press.org), or email, [5K@press.org](mailto:5K@press.org).

And second, I would like to present our guest with the traditional NPC mug.

**MR. KEITH:** All right. (Applause.) Thank you.

**MS. LEINWAND:** We got one more question for you. So someone in our audience asks, what's the hardest thing about being Toby Keith?

**MR. KEITH:** Well, it'd just be the publicity that comes with the political stuff. It's really difficult to talk about your music when every single interview you do-- You know, if you're releasing a movie or you're releasing an album, you hate to be disrespectful. I'm not a disrespectful guy. And you hate to be disrespectful. But every interview starts off with something political, every time. It's always something to do with the military or it's something to do with-- The Iraq war was the big one, you know?

And it just gets difficult to go about your life. And you go, "Well, you know what? You should have shut up, not said anything. You shouldn't have sang your song." But again, I'll take that heat. This isn't a pity party for me. I'll deal with it. I embrace it. And I can take it. I will never, ever apologize for being patriotic, no matter what. (Applause.)

**MS. LEINWAND:** We have a special request from the audience. Will you please do a shout-out to the 314th Public Affairs Operations Center in Iraq, an Army Reserve unit out of Birmingham, Alabama? They are moving the combined press information center to Camp Prosperity, and they are watching you online at this moment.

**MR. KEITH:** Yo, shout-out to the PA-OC 314th in Alabama. God speed. (Applause.)

**MS. LEINWAND:** And one more request — somebody is asking you for a couple of bars of the "Red, White, and Blue" song.

**MR. KEITH:** See what I mean? It always ends up with "Red, White, and Blue" song, every time, man. No, I don't want to sing today.

**AUDIENCE:** ...(inaudible)

**MR. KEITH:** What's that?

**AUDIENCE:** ...(inaudible)

**MR. KEITH:** Oh, she's batting her eye.

**MS. LEINWAND:** Nope, no song. All right. Okay. Well, thank you very much for coming today.

**MR. KEITH:** We're on C-Span.

**MS. LEINWAND:** We are. You can't sing on C-Span.

**MR. KEITH:** You can't sing on C-Span.

**MS. LEINWAND:** I'd like to thank you all for coming today. I'd also like to thank the National Press Club staff members, Melinda Cooke, Pat Nelson, JoAnn Booz and Howard Rothman for organizing today's lunch. Also thanks to the NPC Library for its research.

The video archive of today's lunch is provided by the National Press Club's Broadcast Information Center. Our events are available for free download on iTunes, as well as on our website. Non-members may purchase transcripts, audio and video cassettes by calling 202.662.7598 or emailing us at, [archives@Press.org](mailto:archives@Press.org).

For more information about the Press Club, please go to our website at [www.press.org](http://www.press.org).

Thank you and we are adjourned. (Gavel sounds.)

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