

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON WITH KEN BURNS

SUBJECT: FILMMAKER KEN BURNS WILL DISCUSS HIS NEW PBS DOCUMENTARY SERIES  
THE ROOSEVELTS: AN INTIMATE HISTORY

MODERATOR: MYRON BELKIND, PRESIDENT, NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

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**MYRON BELKIND:** (Sounds gavel.) Good afternoon, and welcome. My name  
is Myron Belkind. I'm an adjunct professor at the George Washington University School  
of Media and Public Affairs, a former International Bureau Chief with the Associated  
Press, and the 107<sup>th</sup> president of the National Press Club. The National Press Club is the  
world's leading professional organization for journalists committed to our profession's  
future through our programming with events such as this, while 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).

On behalf of our members worldwide, I'd like to welcome our speaker and those  
of you attending today's event. Our head table include guests of our speaker, as well as  
working journalists who are club members. And so, if you hear applause from the  
audience, I'd note that members of the general public are attending, so it's not necessarily  
evidence of a lack of journalistic objectivity.

I'd also like to welcome our C-SPAN and Public Radio audiences. You can follow  
the action on Twitter using the hashtag #NPCLunch. After our guest's speech concludes,  
we'll have a question and answer period. I will ask as many as time permits.

Now, it is time to introduce our head table guests. I'd ask each of you to stand  
briefly as your name is announced. Please hold your applause until I complete  
announcing everybody at the head table.

From your right, Gil Klein, journalism professor, American Universities, Washington Semester Program, a past NPC President and Chair of the Club's History and Heritage Committee. Janice Law, former print journalist and criminal court judge and founder of the American Women Writers National Museum. Ambassador Selwa "Lucky" Roosevelt, the United States Chief of Protocol from 1982 to 1989, who married Archie Roosevelt, Junior, the grandson of Theodore Roosevelt, in 1950. Andrea Stone, freelance journalist. Chuck Raasch, Washington correspondent for the St. Louis Post Dispatch. Geoffrey Ward, writer/historian who has collaborated with Ken since his Civil War series. He has won seven Emmy Awards. Donna Leinwand Lege, a reporter for US Today, a past President of the NPC, and Vice-Chair of the NPC Speakers Committee.

Skipping over our speaker for a moment, Nick Apostolides, Deputy Director, US Capitol Visitors Center and a Speakers Committee member who co-organized today's event with Amy Henderson. Thank you Amy, and thank you Nick. Paula Kerger, President and CEO of PBS, and guest of the speaker. Mark Hamrick, Washington Bureau Chief of Bank Rate, past NPC President, and Chair of the Club's Broadcast Committee. Elaine King, professor of art history and theory and museum studies at the Carnegie Mellon University and a freelance art critic for numerous publications. Glen Marcus, independent television news and documentary producer. A round of applause for our head table.

[applause]

For more than 30 years, Ken Burns' documentaries have presented the stories of the American Experience, with drama and flair. His topics have ranged from the Brooklyn Bridge to baseball, from Mark Twain to Jazz, from Prohibition to the National Parks. Remarkably, his works never become outdated. As we commemorate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Civil War, his PBS series on that war remains as relevant today as it was when it debuted in 1950.

Burns captures the historic moments of American life, with deep dives into archival materials, like personal letters, diaries, and newspapers. His use of still photographs have been revolutionary. He has called photographs, "The DNA of everything" he has done. And his evocative, slow scans have transformed his subjects into a cinematic experience. The slow-moving, the slow-motion scanning technique is now even called "The Ken Burns Effect."

His new seven-part PBS series, *The Roosevelts* premiered last night. And I have reliable information that the ratings were extremely high, and that they are soaring. The series will be broadcast every night this week. In this film, he focuses on the towering but flawed figures who, before they were history, were family. He was able to draw on newsreel footage, radio broadcasts, and personal documents, notably a trove of newly discovered letters between FDR and his cousin Daisy, as well as on an enormous volume of photographs. Ultimately, nearly 2,400 stills were used in this series.

Burns has always rejected using the voice of God approach to narration, relying, instead, on contemporary voices to bring his subjects' words to life. In *The Roosevelts* you will hear some of our-- some of America's greatest actors, including Paul Giamatti as Theodore, Edward Herman as Franklin, and Meryl Streep as Eleanor.

Ken Burns is also a frequent guest at this podium, because, like his films, he never becomes outdated. [laughter] Please join me in welcoming the documentarian and Press Club member, Ken Burns.

[applause]

**KEN BURNS:** Thank you all very much for coming. I'm so happy to be back at the Press Club. It's really been a home base for many, many of our long, arduous, promotional tours for the film. And today is no exception. I do feel compelled to edit Myron, just one little bit. He had the Civil War series coming out in 1950. I was negative three years old then. [laughter] And though I was already working with stills, I had not yet perfected what we call the "Ken Burns Effect" quite then.

I also feel, now that you've brought up the Civil War, Myron, that I reminded you, 24 years ago, in 1990, when we came with the Civil War, that I reminded you what William Tecumseh Sherman felt about newspapermen. He hated newspapermen so much that he was sure, if they killed them all, there would be news from hell before breakfast. [laughter]

And, of course, unfortunately, you do not escape unscathed with *The Roosevelts* though all three, Eleanor, who held twice-weekly news conferences with women only, the first time a first lady did that, and Franklin, who, because he had been an editor of the *Harvard Crimson*, felt that that had made him a newspaperman himself, and loved to develop and cherished the development of personal relationships with the newspapermen that he crowded in-- men that crowded in 998 times for news conferences during his Presidency.

But Theodore was equally adept at manipulating the press, and making them feel like they were friends, and ushering them into his private world, though he did have a special purgatory for those people who displeased him with his writing, he called the Anayus [sic] Club, right, Ananias Club, excuse me, Ananias Club, which is, of course, from the ancient liar who was instantaneously stricken down from having told a lie. And if you were compelled to the Ananias Club, you were not in Theodore Roosevelt's good graces. So I'm sure that's not true of anyone here.

He did kind of walk it back a little bit. He'd often confide to the reporter that the reason why he criticized them so heavily had less to do with their writing than with the SOB who owned the paper. And he was merely taking it out on the messenger.

First of all, I do not come here without the assistance of hundreds of people. Those of you who had a chance to watch last night's film, there was a credit sequence

that went on for many, many minutes, that thanked, quite correctly, hundreds of people. First of all, because this is public television, we are dependent not on our sponsors, but our underwriters. There is a huge and very important difference between them. And I would just like to take a moment to thank the Bank of America, which has been our sole corporate sponsor since 2006, and has planned to be involved through 2020. They have been an enlightened corporation that has helped us. I'm also grateful to PBS itself, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, for major funding. I also am grateful to the National Endowment for the Humanities.

I began this business an awfully long time ago in the late '70s. And I had the great good fortune to work with its Chairman, Joe Duffy, who turned up today, not like a bad penny, but as a welcome old friend. And it's great to have Joe here. Thank you, Joe, for all the support you and subsequent chairmen, there must be about a dozen, now, since you, that have been supporting our work.

We also have the sustained support of the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations, individual contributions, significant individual contributions from Jack Taylor and Rosalyn Walter. And we also enjoy the support of a new organization, a nonprofit, called the Better Angels Society. And John and Jessica Fullerton, and Joan Newhouse Newton, and the Gulkin Family, and Bonnie and Tom McCluskey, and the File Foundation, have all contributed to our film. And I would literally simply not be here without their support. Nor would I be here without the support for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and for my longtime production partners for almost 35 years, of WETA, which is the Washington, D.C. based public television affiliate and its head, Sharon Rockefeller. And they have been our production partners for that long.

I am also extremely grateful to our network. I think the best in the business, you know. We live in a place in which we are saturated, buried in information, a little bit more on that later. But we also enjoy one home where we know, reliably, whether it's our children or delving into issues of science or nature, whether it is about public affairs or artistic performance, whether it is public affairs or history, we have the best place on the dial. And that's PBS.

And I am so honored that my President, Paul Kerger, is here today. Whatever you like about what we do, it's them. And the pick that they set for me.

These films are also not made by a single person. Writers have that, and reporters, for the most part, who are now not having to blog and do video posts and all of that, have that luxury of working alone. But I also have what I think is even the greater luxury of participating in an extraordinarily collaborative medium. And there are many people responsible for this film, editors and producers, Paul Barnes and Pam Balcum, all the extraordinary archives that helped us collect the more than 25,000 still photographs that went into the 23, 2400, that made it into the final film. Same two for the archives that found the extraordinary, in some case, never before seen, still photographs-- moving pictures. All the sites from Campobello Island, down to Warm Springs, where the

Roosevelts made their home, most of them United States Park Service sites that opened their doors and let us film at ungodly hours.

But the most significant person involved in this project has been my longtime collaborator, collaborator 32 years, Geoffrey Ward, who is here, I'm also to say happily, with his wife Diane. And we have just been making films together for an awfully long time, beginning not, again, Myron, editing your text, with the Civil War, but we began when he was an advisor on a film we made on the celibate religious sect the Shakers. And then our next film that came out in 1985, five years before the Civil War, on the turbulent life of the southern demagogue Huey Long.

We have been making history together. And we have been talking together for almost all of those 32 years, about making a film or a film series on one or more of the Roosevelts. Geoff, himself, has written two extraordinarily great books on the Roosevelts, on Franklin Roosevelt's early life. One of them is called *Before the Trumpet*, which takes him from his birth to his marriage to Eleanor. And the second, which is one of the greatest biographies I have ever read, and please run to your note pads to jot this down, *A First Class Temperament*, that takes Franklin Roosevelt from his honeymoon to his election as governor of New York. It is a remarkable story. And it is a remarkable story about an extremely complicated human being, overcoming one of the most devastating illnesses that you could imagine, and still managing to become President of the United States, part of the story that we want to tell.

So now that I have completely buried the lead, I will be rescued by Myron, who was absolutely correct to say that, for the last seven years, Geoff and I and our team have been producing a seven-part, 14-hour series on the history of Theodore, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt. PBS began broadcasting this series nationally in an unprecedented fashion last night, where they showed the first episode, and then showed the first episode again at 10 o'clock. And each subsequent night, will show another episode until this coming Saturday, the 20<sup>th</sup>. We believe it's the first time, short of a national tragedy, when a single network has shown-- taken up an entire primetime, and then some-- it goes from eight until midnight, an hour out of primetime, for one single show. And we're very happy with public television's confidence in the work we've done.

And I'd like to spend a few more minutes, before the good part, where I have a chance to have an exchange with you, to tell you a little bit about what we are trying to do. Those of you who saw last night saw the table-setting episode, in which we set in motion what is the most complicated and intertwined and interbraided narrative that I think that I've ever undertaken. I certainly think that Geoff thinks so as well, even though we have tackled, together, a history of the Civil War, baseball, jazz, the Second World War, and are working right now on a history of the war in Vietnam.

We were drawn to doing all three, in part because of that avalanche of information that I mentioned to you earlier. We live in a media culture in which we think we know everything. We have lots of information and almost no understanding. We are drowning. And one of the default positions of this excess of information is, we tend to

form superficial, conventional wisdom about the subjects we think we know about, either those happening today, or those that took place in the past.

And so, it seems that, for almost the entire history of this country since the Roosevelts, we have been compelled to focus either on Theodore, and there is a lot of books, and very good books and films on him, or Franklin, and a lot of good books. And Geoff has written two of them. And Franklin and Eleanor, and a little bit less on Eleanor. But no one has put it together as the complicated family drama that it is. I guess this has to do with the fact that, in that superficial glance, we look at Theodore and say "Republican." And we look at Franklin and Eleanor and say "Democrat." And we think that we can segregate them in their own individual silos.

It is interesting, as individuals, and certainly Franklin and Eleanor as a pair, it is exponentially more interesting if you have the opportunity to get to know them in concert. And that's what we try to do. It is a complicated Russian novel of a story that has not only these three primary characters, but dozens of secondary and tertiary characters. And, of course, a world that they compelled, and a world that compelled them, that is dealing with the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, coming out of the Civil War, the gilded age, the age of monopolies and trusts, World War I, the roaring '20s and jazz age, the Great Depression, the Second World War, the greatest cataclysm in human history, and the Cold War, from when Theodore Roosevelt was born in 1858, when our series began, to when Eleanor dies in 1962, when our series ends this coming Saturday night, we are dealing with a century, 104 years, an American century in a place and a time where so much of the modern world was created. And these three people are as responsible for that world as anybody that I know.

We say, and we say with absolute conviction and confidence, in the opening of our film, which you might have seen last night, that no other family has touched as many Americans as the Roosevelts. And that is true. You only need to stop and think about the world we live in. If you've ever flown out of LaGuardia Airport, you're in something that Franklin Roosevelt did, or went through the Lincoln Tunnel, or took a drive on the Skyline Drive, or the Blue Ridge Parkway, or rode The Elevated in Chicago, expected in the Tennessee Valley to see lights come on when you turned on a light switch, or, in the Northwest, or the Southwest.

You have traveled over thousands of bridges build during their era. You have seen or attended thousands of high schools. You have driven on miles and miles of roads that they originally blazed in this country. And, more importantly, you will enjoy or you are enjoying cashing a Social Security check. You like the idea that our government takes its soldiers and pays for their college education with the GI bill. I'm sure you're thrilled that your children do not work in mines seven days a week, 14 hours a day, that there are such concepts as a minimum wage and livable hours. I think you are certain that big monopolies ought to be at least regulated, if not broken up. I think you enjoy visiting our National Parks and National Forests and other sanctuaries of the beautiful wildness that our country still has preserved-- preserved, in large part, thankfully thanks to these two extraordinary Presidents, Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt.

Their legacy, this is only a small, small portion of their legacy. They of course raise questions that are not always positive. And I do not, in any way, want to suggest to you that the film we've made is in some ways a valentine to these three human beings, that it is in some ways hagiography, hero worship. In fact, we are interested in telling a complicated portrait of their great strengths, but also their great weaknesses and flaws. And my goodness, ladies and gentlemen, they are on vivid display with these three characters. And, more importantly, they're deep wounds. And that's, I think, where the subtitle of our film comes in. This is the Roosevelts in intimate history.

Now, having said that, I feel qualified in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to have to warn you that this is not tabloid history. We are interested in getting to know them. We often debate in our films the tensions between a top-down history and bottom-up history. And this has been, for many years, the dynamic and the argument within history. Is it only top-down? Is it only about famous people, wars and generals and Presidents? Or is it also about so-called ordinary people, women, minorities, labor, people like you and me, for whom the real history of America is written?

We believe that it is a mixture of the two. And even in a film like this, we try to engage a top-down alongside a bottom-up history to tell something more complicated, more nuanced, with undertow, etcetera. But this is also an inside-out history. I don't mean to suggest that this is in some ways filled with psycho-babble. But we're curious about where these three people came from. After all, it is a family drama. We want to understand about their parents. We want to understand about their childhoods. We want to understand about their spouses and their children and their lives within their families. And we feel that, by understanding it, particularly for these three ordinary people-- and ladies and gentlemen, biography has been a constituent building block of almost every film we've worked on. It is hugely important to understand the world they created. And that is essentially the world we have inherited, at least in a political and social fashion in the United States. It is hugely important to understand where they came from.

And just stop to consider, for a moment, that the topicalness of their story. The central question of Theodore's time, the central question of Franklin and Eleanor's time, is the central question of our time. What is the role of government? What can a citizen expect from his or her government? What is the tension between pragmatism and ideology? What is the nature of leadership? How does character form leadership? How does adversity in life create character, which in turn forms that leadership? These are the questions we ask, the means testing we apply to our own leaders today. And they are as relevant now as they were back in the time, and vice-versa.

And our film is essentially an exploration of their lives, inner and outer, the way they shape this country, and to try to deal on the fault line of that. Now we live in an age, that same media culture, whose default position is also to lament the absence of heroes. We're constantly saying, "Oh," and doing a film like this, and promoting a film like this has brought out myriad comments that we just don't make heroes anymore. But let's just remember that we are expecting, in this superficiality of our media culture today, we are,

for some reason, expecting perfection in our leaders. And, when we find they aren't perfect, we turn away from them and say, "There just aren't leaders."

But let us examine the very nature of the word "hero." It is, we get, from the Greeks. And the Greeks, in no way, defined it as perfection. In fact, they understood heroism to be a very complex negotiation, sometimes a war between a person's obvious strengths and their equal and, perhaps, not so obvious weaknesses. And it is that negotiation, it is that war sometimes, and with these three people, it is indeed a war, that defines heroism. Achilles had his heel and his hubris to go along with all of his strengths and fine characteristics.

And maybe what I hope, in some ways, and people ask what do we want from the series. And we just say, "We want you to enjoy what we think is a rip-snorting good story." We might also want us to reexamine the way in which we apply that superficiality to the people of today, so that we might gain a little bit more tolerance, perhaps a little bit more civility in our conversations. Everything will not be just black and white. Now *The Roosevelts* provokes that in some people. But what we try to do is offer a nuanced portrait.

Let's consider the oldest of them for just one second. Theodore Roosevelt, born in 1858, was a sickly asthmatic child. He overheard, in childhood, as you might have learned last night, that he was not destined to live. He heard a doctor telling his parents that he was going to die very early on. He struggled all his life to remake his body, to turn it into, as his father said, "Get action, be sane." And all his life, Theodore Roosevelt worked as hard as he could to make and remake his body. He never escaped the asthma that afflicted him as a child. But he did remake his body, and he became somebody.

But his branch of the family, the Oyster Bay branch, was also susceptible to a good deal of depression, susceptible to alcoholism, susceptible to mental illness. And he felt all his life that he had to be in action, not just to escape the specific gravity of his physical ailments, but to escape the dark gloom that seemed to overtake him when he wasn't in a constant frantic rush. He once said, "Black Care rarely sits behind a rider whose pace is fast enough. Black Care rarely sits behind a rider whose pace is fast enough." That tells you, it's a wonderful 19<sup>th</sup> century way of saying something very understandable in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, which is, you can outrun your demons.

And Theodore Roosevelt spent his entire life, not for a moment hesitating, trying to outrun his demons. If you look at the oldest photograph you can think of in your mind of an ancient Theodore Roosevelt, he looks to be about 85 years old. He died at age 60. I am 61. It is an amazing life dedicated to this, escaping the specific gravity. And, he also had to overcompensate for a deep flaw his wonderful father, a man he adored more than anyone else in life had. His mother was an unreconstructed southerner and insisted that her husband not fight in the Civil War. He did what many wealthy people did in that time, as he bought a substitute, paid someone else to fight for him. And this was a flaw which ate at Theodore Roosevelt, and made him, I feel we should also say, despite all of



his great habits-- and, may I say, this evening, Episode 2, his Presidency, you will get to meet Theodore Roosevelt in all his wonderful glory. All of the great things.

You know, he always thought that, if you didn't have a crisis on your hand as a President, you couldn't be judged a great President. He is the sterling example of that. As David McCullough says in our film, many people thought he was the crisis. [laughter] And perhaps we were lucky that we didn't have a major crisis on his watch. But his Presidency is a model of engagement with its citizens.

And you know, the United States was in a period not dissimilar to now, when there was a huge disparity between the wealthiest and the poorest. The middle class was disappearing, was under assault. And Theodore Roosevelt rode to the rescue. He understood that government had to be an agent, a player in a complex dynamic between industry that was unchecked and between the worker that was not getting a square or a fair deal. And he did that all his life. And I invite you to revel in all of the great strengths and delights of getting to know Theodore Roosevelt. Of the three, he's definitely the person that you go out and have a beer with or drive across the country with. And I engage you to spend this week driving across the country with Theodore Roosevelt.

But he did have this thing. he thought war was a good thing. he was reckless that day on San Juan Hill. He was disappointed he didn't get a disfiguring wound. He was very proud of the fact that his regimen had suffered the worst casualties, to the horror of the United States Army. And, to the horror of the United States Army, he lobbied, something you never do, to win something you never do, you're honored with the Congressional Medal of Honor. And so we need to look at Theodore Roosevelt. And, as you will see in our Episode 3, which is tomorrow night, Tuesday, he pushes his four sons as close to World War I and to combat and danger with the most horrible tragic consequences you can remember. That will make you want to weigh very carefully. And I would urge you not to make a final judgment. Weigh very carefully these twin polls of one of the most extraordinary Presidents, Theodore Roosevelt.

Franklin, we know his story, we think, pretty well. He was stricken with infantile paralysis, polio, at age 39. Up to that point, he had been the pampered only son of his older father James and his much younger wife Sarah Delano. They pampered him, instilled in him, thank goodness, all the confidence and optimism that any child has ever had. But he was essentially a very lonely child, and a little bit too thin, a little bit too ambitious, a little bit too charming, as he tried to hit-- hit all the marks, all the footsteps of his more famous fifth cousin, Theodore, as he too tried to emulate his preposterous and unprepared for trajectory to the Presidency.

It's only when he could not take another step that this extraordinary empathy entered into him and was producing-- and he became what we would say is the greatest President of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and arguably-- and for a Lincoln man, not difficult anymore to say, but has come up to parity, in my eyes, as arguably the greatest President in American history. He is infuriatingly opaque and manipulative. And we need to take Franklin Roosevelt and balance those scales in the same turn. And I invite you to watch

as he and Eleanor, in this episode tonight, and then in the next one, begin to transit away from Theodore Roosevelt, who dies at the end of our third episode. And then, the 4 through 7 is really largely about Franklin and Eleanor and the world that they inhabit, as well as the ghost of Theodore, who is watching over everything, magnificently, and never fails to make an appearance of some kind in each one of those subsequent episodes past his death.

I am saving perhaps the best for last. Eleanor Roosevelt, though not a President, as we say in the film, was the most consequential first lady in American history, and arguably the most important woman in American history. She is, as Geoff Ward likes to say, a miracle of the human spirit. She should not have escaped her childhood. Her father, the President Theodore Roosevelt's brother Elliot, was a hopeless alcoholic. He was also mentally ill. He died very young. She spent her whole life idolizing him unnecessarily, I think.

Her mother was this exquisite beauty but very remote and hypercondriacle, and was disappointed in her daughter's looks, and called her own daughter "granny." Both parents were dead by the time Eleanor was ten years old. She and a younger brother, for whom she'd always feel responsible, who died in her arms in the throes of delirium tremens, many years later, were sent off to grim and pious relatives, where there was an abusive nurse and two more alcoholic uncles. She was absolutely terrified of everything.

But out of these experiences, she began to notice that, if she was useful to other people, she could be loved. And she decided to translate that problem, that fear into action. Every day, she got up, and she faced her fears. It's an amazing thing. I've got four daughters that I am so proud of. My second daughter was terrified of the vacuum cleaner. Whenever it was roaring, she had to be out of the room, or asleep, or you know, out of the house. But one day, when Lilly was a year and a half/two years old, she walked into the room where the monster was roaring, and walked over, and sat down on it. [laughter] And in our family, sitting on the vacuum cleaner is our idea of what you do in life. You move forward, and you face the thing that worries you the most. And Eleanor Roosevelt sat on a vacuum cleaner every single day of her life.

We made a film on the National Parks. And it was said of Theodore Roosevelt, by Steward Udall in that film, that he had distance in his eyes, that he could maybe see around the horizon and understand what was going to happen in the future. I believe all three of these remarkable people had distance in their eyes. And no one more so than Eleanor. Liberated from having to [00:34:03] constituencies as her favorite uncle and her husband did, she could see all the coming issues of race, of poverty, of women, of children, of labor, of absolutely everything that is on the front page of our discussions today. And she was right on every single one of those issues, a testament indeed to the human spirit.

So these are our three Roosevelts, flawed, wonderful, deeply wounded, who all basically reduced their philosophy into one spectacularly simple equation. We all do well when we all do well. It is very fashionable today, ladies and gentlemen, to blame the

United States government on absolutely everything. It has now somehow become something other. But we are only to blame, either by not voting, or by voting for the wrong people, for however that government is. And, if you don't like it, stop bitching and moaning and complaining, and do something about it. That's what the Roosevelts did. And Theodore Roosevelt said, "The government is us. You and me." Thank you.

[applause]

**MR. BELKIND:** We have enough questions to go for two hours. So please, I apologize in advance. So I think we'll do a rapid fire. I'll try to ask it if you could give questions and answers as succinct as you can, that would be great.

**MR. BURNS:** I have brief nine-part answers on all of them.

**MR. BELKIND:** Sure. Seven parts. TR and FDR were strikingly different personalities, with TR being boisterous and brilliant and childlike, FDR being charming and manipulative and elusive. Which of these figures did you find harder to grasp, and why?

**MR. BURNS:** That's interesting. All the adjectives describing Theodore are all positive. And two or three out of them for Franklin are negative. So there's a little bit of a thumb on the scale that we didn't feel comfortable doing. They're both equally disturbing and equally magnificent. I mean Franklin Roosevelt is the much better President and the much better, in some ways, human being, I think. But you will be infuriated by his manipulateness and opacity and, at least early on, his sort of over-weening ambition.

But they're all complicated people. William Shakespeare was described by John Keats as having negative capability, the ability to hold intention these things, when the rest of us want to make a judgment, good or bad, yes or no, red state or blue state, gay or straight, whatever it is, we have to superimpose on the other. And the best figures in our lives and in our drama, our art, our literature, is where we have held the very complicated facets of a human being intention. And I think that's what we try to do in this series.

**MR. BELKIND:** Most historians rank FDR just after Lincoln and Washington on the list of great Presidents, with Teddy not far behind. That being the case, why does it seem that the Roosevelts have faded in the public's view, compared to, say, Reagan and JFK?

**MR. BURNS:** Well, when you live in a media culture and a consumer culture that is focused on this all-consuming, and thereby disposable moment, blissfully unaware of the historical tides that brought us here, or the tides that will take us away, it's very understandable that we'll forget our past. But each one of those Presidents that you mentioned, JFK and particularly Ronald Reagan, whose great hero was Franklin Roosevelt, you'll begin to understand how they shaped, particularly Franklin Roosevelt shaped the world we live in today. And it may be just the myopia of our existence that we

don't have distance in our eyes, backwards or forwards, to understand the centrality of the Roosevelts to this present moment.

**MR. BELKIND:** The Roosevelts lived in years when public figures could preserve a modicum of privacy in their personal lives. How did this affect your research, and ultimately your ability to create an intimate portrait?

**MR. BURNS:** Well, you know, they wrote a lot. They are hugely important. And so they have been written a lot about. And we tend to romanticize, as simpler, those earlier days, simpler, like the 1930s, when the greatest economic dislocation in the history of the world happened, simpler, like the 1940s, when the greatest cataclysm in history happened. Franklin Roosevelt was the most accessible President ever. He had 998 news conferences. Those reporters who may have turned off their newsreel cameras, just as he went into the process of standing up or sitting down, and the arduous sweat dripping, painful process, which we would not do today, we'd be grasping for every single moment of it to feed the hungry maw, nevertheless knew exactly what it cost him to stand up, to sit down, understood even more intimately what was going on in the dynamics of his administration, and in the pressing issues of the world.

We now have a Presidency surrounded by a gigantic moat, a bubble we call it, that does not permit, we think, him or her to understand us. But, in fact, it's the other way around. We don't understand him, and so default, again, to that conventional wisdom. I think we know as much about the Roosevelts. We also know a lot, a good deal with their private life. And that's been extremely helpful, especially with regard to the letters of Daisy Suckley, who you mentioned later, that have given dimension to what has been often a one-dimensional portrait of Franklin Roosevelt's very complex personality.

**MR. BELKIND:** FDR and Eleanor each drew on a wide circle of friends and supporters, both professionally and personally. What did they draw from one another?

**MR. BURNS:** Well, as much as our tabloid sensibility wants to accentuate their differences, this is one of the most remarkable, if not the most remarkable partnership that I've ever come across in my life. She was his conscience, the conscience of his administration. He was the pragmatic politician who knew how to get it done. He betrayed her with an affair when he was assistant secretary of the Navy in the 19-teens during World War I. Had an affair with her social secretary. And that, in some ways, became a liberating moment for Eleanor Roosevelt. And I think it's important to understand that sometimes, out of this adversity, sometimes great things. It gave her, already, a spectacular social conscience, a kind of goad, and allowed her, permitted her to go out, however angry or wounded she was, out into the world, and do the kinds of things she did, become the kind of woman she did.

But they never lost sight of each other. They knew where each other was. And, in good times and bad, when they were mad at each other, and when they weren't, they were working together. And how fortunate for the rest of us, the thing that they were working on was us. That is to say, they had translated their problems and their adversities, and

figured out, as Geoff says in the opening of the film, that it would be helpful-- and Theodore is the same-- it would be helpful if we taught other people how they might be able to escape the things that afflicted them.

**MR. BELKIND:** We have a question. What did your research reveal about Eleanor's alleged extramarital relationships?

**MR. BURNS:** Nothing. She had spectacularly close-- we would call them intimate and passionate friendships with a number of women, some of whom were committed to one another. Beyond that, we don't know anything. But I would also remind you that the film details not only these relationships, and their tenderness and genuineness, but also her just absolute passionate relationships with three men other than her husband, though not sexual, that were in her life. In fact, at the end of her life, she was living with another man who she said, "I have loved more than anyone else." I invite you to stay tuned to Episode 7 to find out what that is. [laughter]

**MR. BELKIND:** I'm glad we asked the question. And thank you for your answer. Some press media related questions. FDR was famously accessible to the press, carefully cultivating his media image at press conferences and over martinis. Could you talk more about his relationship with the press and how it shaped its historical image?

**MR. BURNS:** Well, that's a really good question. And he was famously accessible, as I described. I don't think it's shaped his historical image. In fact, the image that comes down to me is this one that I was describing a little bit earlier, a sense of how kind of naïve earlier times were, where they turned off the camera, that the Secret Service would turn off your camera, or confiscate your film. Or it was just a gentlemen's agreement that we wouldn't cover the degree that their President was afflicted with polio.

There's discretion, but it is in no means naïve. They knew, as Franklin Roosevelt knew, as his advisors knew, that to see this process-- and ladies and gentlemen, there were many, many audiences when all of this was on full display for this audience. So, if it was a secret, it was a secret held by hundreds of thousands of Americans who got to meet the President, or see the President, or hear the President, up close and in person.

But this is a sort of a red herring about him. They knew about it, and didn't think it was necessary. They understood that if people pitied him, as you would do if you saw and understood the full dimension-- and Geoff and I are as proud of that part of this storytelling as anything, to tell the full dimensions of what polio meant. Most people say, "He got polio. And here is what the press didn't show," and leave it at that. It's really important. And a good deal of our fourth episode, the 1920s, is dealing with what it took for this human being, still a human being, to actually figure out how to go from being paralyzed for the rest of his life, to being President of the United States. And it is a hell of a story. But they understood that, if they pitied him, that was political poison, and everything was over.

**MR. BELKIND:** How important was radio for FDR's leadership? I know you'll say it's important. But if you could elaborate on that, please Ken?

**MR. BURNS:** Jonathan Altar has a wonderful, wonderful passage in our film that, about the time he's delivering the first of his fireside chats. And, you know, Theodore was a master at using the press, and using the bully pulpit, and using the great moral office that both men felt the Presidency had to become, to communicate to citizens about what they thought their country needed. And they were really good at campaigning for that.

But, as Altar says in our film, every politician had, up until that point, talked like this when communicating with their citizens. And Franklin Roosevelt could talk like this. He could lean into the mic, and he could explain to you about the banking system. He could tell you what the bankers had done wrong. He could tell you what the whole principle of banking was. He could tell you that hoarding had become a very unfashionable pastime. And he really hoped that the next day, Monday morning, when the banks quit their bank holiday, his cheery tone, his cheery name for it, that you might put your money back in the bank.

And the run that had been expected the next morning didn't happen. People put their money back in, just as their President told them to do. And a lot of it had to do with the way he spoke to them, just like this, in the intimacy of their homes, leaning in, which is what happens when you lower a voice. And you create an intimacy. It's not manipulative, it's smart, it's good, it's right, and it worked. As it was said, after that speech, eight days after he was inaugurated, that he had saved capitalism in eight days. And there's good evidence that that's exactly what he did.

**MR. BELKIND:** Why didn't the political opposition use FDR's polio against him?

**MR. BURNS:** Well, I'm not sure they used that against him. The principal argument against him was that he was a traitor to his class, and he was a socialist and a communist. And I'm sure, if they were convinced he wasn't born in this country, they'd go after that as well. [laughter] But you know, there was concern that he was not up to the task. Roosevelt had hired a journalist. Let me repeat that again. Roosevelt hired a journalist to write a report on his health. And that journalist in turn, with the urging of the Roosevelt campaign, hired three independent doctors who all attested to his health, though one of the doctors was a Republican and said he couldn't guarantee above the head. [laughter]

But then, as a result of that article, Roosevelt and his team felt compelled never to comment again. They would say, "It is not a story." And, as much as people tried to bring it up, and it became less the polio and more his physical health, as he visibly decayed in front of his fellow countrymen and women, that became an issue. And it certainly was an issue with the third term, and a huge issue at the fourth term. But people weren't willing to throw the captain over in the middle of the Second World War.

**MR. BELKIND:** Was it wrong for the press, the journalists, to cover up FDR's disability?

**MR. BURNS:** I don't think so. And I think my argument would be-- and Geoff and I have talked a lot about this-- that I'm not sure that Franklin Roosevelt could get out of the Iowa Caucuses today. That is to say that we would be focusing on the extent of his illness. We would be distracted by these superficial things and not the content of his character or the content of his programs. And we would be distracted by that, certain, many commentators would say, that he couldn't possibly be able to have the stamina to get us through any crises. And this is the man who handled the two greatest crises since the Civil War, the Depression and the Second World War.

**MR. BELKIND:** Just a slight elaboration. How do you think FDR would have fared in today's media and political environment?

**MR. BURNS:** Well, you know, I say I don't think. But then, again, having Franklin Roosevelt after something, it's hard to imagine. We did have a Democratic Senator from Georgia, Max Cleland, who was a triple amputee from the Vietnam War. We're doing a series on the Vietnam War, and we've interviewed him. And he made it to a fairly high level of political office, the United States Senate. And so I would never say never on Franklin Roosevelt.

I feel the same way about Theodore. You know, he was irresistibly himself. And people loved him even for his Coke bottle glasses and his Harvard accent, his upper crust, stuffy accent, and nasally voice, and rotund characteristics. They loved him because he didn't try to be something else other than he was. But he was hot and excitable. And that may have jarred with the cool medium of television. And he might have had ten Howard Dean moments a day. [laughter] And maybe not gotten out of Iowa. But look. I don't put it past any three of these Roosevelts of just being handed the ball and being able to run downfield to the end zone.

**MR. BELKIND:** Who were the voices selected for Theodore, Franklin and Eleanor?

**MR. BURNS:** Well, you know, we have a remarkable supporting cast. And one more edit, and this is it, Myron, that we do like third person narrators. Geoffrey Ward has been my collaborator who writes that third person narration all of his life. And we are very, very proud of that. And we believe that, in the beginning was the word, and that the word is not the enemy of images, and that they can coexist. And so our films are very much written, and very much written in the third person, and read spectacularly after being written so spectacularly by Geoff, by Peter Coyote.

But, we did want to temper that voice of God, which by itself, sometimes is just a voice telling you what you know, which is like homework, rather than a voice that's sharing with you a process of discovery, which we would like. And so we have, for the

last 35 years, tempered those-- that third person voice with a chorus of first person voices, reading diaries and letters and journals.

We've had-- Theodore Roosevelt has passed through our films a number of times. And we've had various actors reading him, and wanted very much to try one of the finest actors of our day in Paul Giamatti. And I think you'll agree after last night, and certainly as you will see in the next couple evenings, he is just spectacular. His agent wrote me today and said, "Good casting." [laughter] And it may have been him. And we agree wholeheartedly whomever that was.

Ed Herman has played Franklin Roosevelt, has got that Hudson Valley lockjaw down perfectly, and has played him in the stage and the small screen and large screen, for many, many years, and has really taken him in. And then, most fortunately, we were able to get a little known actor named Meryl Streep to do Eleanor Roosevelt. And it was a transformative thing. And I want you guys all to remember that name, S-T-R-E-E-P. [laughter] I believe she's really going places. I think she has a future. And she's going to be terrific. And we just feel lucky that we were able to get her early on, before she broke out, where she'd work for SAG scale, and we'd be able to do it. No, she is obviously the greatest actor of this or any other generation. And her gift to us is incalculable, immeasurable. And we don't have the words to thank her for what she brought to our production.

**MR. BELKIND:** A few personal questions. Don't worry. [laughter] Did you get good grades in history as a young person? [laughter]

**MR. BURNS:** Yes I did, actually. And I was-- It was the farthest thing from my mind of what I was going to do. I knew, from age 12, I wanted to be a filmmaker. That was it. And, you know, the fact that I did well in history-- I remember bumping into somebody from junior high who said, "You were so good in the world history class. We all knew you were going to be a historian." And I don't even remember that. I remember the history class. I remember liking it. But I don't remember ever giving the impression that that was where I was headed. I was headed to be a filmmaker. But I was fortunate enough to bump into history very early on. And I'm completely untrained and untutored except by the genius of my dear friend Geoff Ward, and all the other advisors we employ to do this. The last time I took an American history course was 11<sup>th</sup> grade, you know, where they make you take it.

**MR. BELKIND:** How do you juggle so many projects at once? And how do you select your projects? And do you take requests? I apologize for a three parter. But you can answer it that way.

**MR. BURNS:** You mean like sing a song right now? [laughter] I'm not a very good singer. I don't think you'd want to take requests. We are working, besides promoting the Roosevelts, which is itself a full-time job, we have five films in production. And they're all in various stages of production. So it's not juggling, it's just timing and management. It's like planes landing. This one has already landed and is



taxiing up to the gate. And we have a couple on final approach, a history of cancer called “The Emperor of all Maladies,” which will be out next spring, of which I'm serving as executive producer and cowriter on, and sort of senior creative consultant.

But I am producing and directing and writing with my daughter and son-in-law, Sarah Burns and David McMahon, a two-part history of the life of Jackie Robinson, the whole life, not just 1947. Geoff and I, as I mentioned before, are in the middle, actually more than halfway through editing with our colleague Sarah Botstein. And, most importantly, Lynn Novick, a 10-part, 18-plus hour history of the war in Vietnam, which will be out in 2017, early 2017.

And then, we are already shooting a massive series called “I Can't Stop Loving You,” about the history of country music. And we're also begun shooting early stages, a biography of Ernest Hemingway. We have four or five films that are threatening to sort of go from development and ideas into production. Once they do, we'll start talking to you about them. And I'm already in discussions with PBS to talk about what the 2020s look like. And it's very clear, Geoff and I sort of feel that, if we were given 1,000 years to live, we would not run out of topics on American history.

**MR. BELKIND:** You have a new app that draws from your many documentaries. You describe it as not a collection of your films, but as an entirely new way of looking at American history. Can you tell us a little more?

**MR. BURNS:** Well, that sounds like it was written by somebody in PR. So we have an app, it's called the Ken Burns app. And what it's attempting to do is sort of take moments, little tiny scenes, from all of the films. And it's up there, 25, 26, 27, whatever it is, and sort of curate them among the themes that I have seen take place, the recurring themes that I've seen take place in American history, on innovation, on art, on politics, on war, on hard times, and on race.

And we've just added a new thing on leadership. And we'll continue to add them as we continue to add films. It's a way to access all the films. At any point, anybody can jump and go look at them, from PBS.org. Or you can go to iTunes or Netflix if it's available there and get the films. But this was a way to curate these themes from many, many different films, and show the way American history, the warp and wolf of American history is related. I don't think they're cycles to history. I don't think we're condemned to repeat what we don't remember, as sort of lovely as that statement is.

I do think human nature remains the same and superimposes itself on the randomness of events. And it becomes the historian, indeed the amateur historian's responsibility to try to perceive some of those patterns, and to reflect them back. And the app is just a way to curate in a much more manageable way. The magazine *Wired* decided it would take three and a half, five and a half days to watch all of our films back to back. That's not including the Roosevelts. So we're into the fourth day, sixth day. And this is a way to sort of get samples of these themes.

**MR. BELKIND:** Thank you. We are almost out of time. And I would just like to make a few two-point/part conclusion. First of all, I'd like to remind you about our upcoming events and speakers. This Wednesday, September 17<sup>th</sup>, John Stumpf, President and CEO of Wells Fargo. This Friday, September 19<sup>th</sup>, Larry Merlo, President and CEO of CVS Corporation. And on September 23<sup>rd</sup>, former Senator, Jim Webb of Virginia.

Second, I'd like to present our guest with the traditional National Press Club mug to add to your collection.

**MR. BURNS:** I now have this complete set.

**MR. BELKIND:** And your new National Press Club membership card.

**MR. BURNS:** Thank you. That's great. [applause]

**MR. BELKIND:** And the last question, with 45 seconds left, have you ever considered doing a documentary on the Palins? And if so, where would you begin?

[laughter]

**MR. BURNS:** So this is a very important question. I think I would begin in Russia so that I can have the best-- [laughter]-- The best view of the Palins that one could possibly have. And this would be another dynamic American family. In fact, I just read a recent news report in which there were punches thrown at a party. And so we know it's not going to be lacking for drama in any way. [laughter]

**MR. BELKIND:** Thank you, Ken. [applause] Thank you all for coming today. [gavel] We are adjourned.

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