

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON WITH GARRISON KEILLOR

SUBJECT: GARRISON KEILLOR, HOST OF A PRAIRIE HOME COMPANION, WILL DISCUSS A CURRENT-EVENTS-RELATED SPEECH TITLED "FIFTEEN THINGS THAT NEED TO HAPPEN TOMORROW."

MODERATOR: JOHN HUGHES, PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

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JOHN HUGHES: (Sounds gavel.) Welcome to the National Press Club. My name is John Hughes. I'm an editor for Bloomberg First Word, the breaking news desk here in Washington, and I am the President of the Club. And just for today, I also want to mention I am a native Minnesotan. [applause] So our guest today is Minnesota's Garrison Keillor, the greatest American storyteller and host of the long-running radio show, A Prairie Home Companion.

I want to introduce our head table. Each person should stand briefly as names are announced. From the audience's right, Sam Husseini, Communications Director at the Institute for Public Accuracy. Laura Litvan, Reporter for Bloomberg News. Al Eisele, a Minnesota native, former Washington Correspondent for Knight Ridder Newspapers, Editor at Large for the Hill, and former Press Secretary for Vice-President Walter Mondale. Martha Craver, Associate Editor for the Kiplinger Letter. Alan Bjerga, a Minnesotan, an Agriculture Reporter for Bloomberg News, and a former National Press Club President. Tamika Smith, Anchor for National Public Radio's WAMU. Alison Fitzgerald, Managing Editor of Politics and Finance at the Center for Public Integrity, and a National Press Club Board Member.

Skipping over our speaker for a moment-- [laughter]-- Angela Greiling Keane, a Minnesotan, a White House Correspondence for Bloomberg News, a former National Press Club President, and the Speakers Committee member who organized today's Lunch. Thank you, Angela. Menachem Wecker, a freelance reporter who covers art,

religion and education. Elizabeth Jia, a multimedia reporter/producer for CBS affiliate WUSA, Channel 9. Firdous Al Faruque, Medical Reporter for the Gray Sheet. And Devon Henry, a native Minnesotan, and Energy and Environment Reporter for the Hill.

[applause]

I want to welcome our CSPAN and Public Radio audiences. And remind you that you can also follow the action on Twitter. Use the hashtag NPCLunch. Remember, the public attends our lunches. Applause is not evidence of a lack of journalistic objectivity.

Well Garrison Keillor is a storyteller, author, humorist and radio personality. He's best known as the voice on the radio program he created 40 years ago. A Prairie Home Companion is now heard by more than four million listeners each week. The program, as we know, is set in Lake Wobegon, a fictional town in Minnesota. This is the place where "children are above average, men are good looking, and women are strong."

As a humorist, Keillor is often compared with Mark Twain and Will Rogers. Like Mr. Rogers, Keillor has made multiple visits here to the National Press Club. He spoke here in 1986 and 1987, and he spoke again in 1994. After 21 years, we are so glad that he's back again. And clearly, he was waiting until Minnesotans were more in charge of the place before he was going to come back. [laughter]

Keillor is in the nation's capital for performances at Wolftrap today and tomorrow. And this summer he hits the road for A Prairie Home Companion's America the Beautiful. This is a tour of 30 cities in 36 days. His latest book, *The Keillor Reader*, just came out in soft cover. And on July 4th, A Prairie Home Companion will celebrate its 41st anniversary with a live outdoor broadcast in St. Paul at McAllister College. That was the location of the first broadcast of A Prairie Home Companion on July 6th, 1974.

Keillor is active in Democratic politics. So he may have a thought or two about that subject. He's going to talk with us about "15 Things That Need to Happen Tomorrow." Ladies and gentlemen, please give a warm National Press Club welcome to Garrison Keillor.

[applause]

GARRISON KEILLOR: Thank you very much. John, you were much too kind. Don't make that mistake again. [laughter] You'll be held to account for it. It's an honor to be here with you, and such a great honor, that I have gone to the lengths of writing out a speech, which I never, ever do. Reminds me too much of being in college.

"15 Things That Need to Change Right Away" is the revised title of my speech. [laughter] I came up with this because I was thinking about another speech I gave, which also was a great honor. I was invited to give the Baccalaureate Address at Princeton University. I was up in Princeton earlier this week. And it all came back to me much too clearly.

So I wrote this speech. I thought I should say something inspiring to these young graduates, and something about, you know, “Life is adversity. And, you know, it’s in struggle that we come to understand ourselves.” And then I thought, “No, I should make it funny.” And so I worked on that. And I had a story in there about the first outhouse tipping that I experienced in Minnesota, which I was very much involved in as a victim. [laughter]

And-- But you can change these things around, you know. And so I was going to do that. And then I wasn’t sure that Princeton graduates would know what an outhouse was. [laughter] So I revised that, and wound up, in Princeton, with this speech in my pocket. And it was an academic procession through-- through the campus, through these, you know, silent, you know, awe-struck crowds.

And-- And all of these people with gorgeous academic robes and multi-colored hoods and sashes and so on, from their having gotten a PhD at Oxford or Cambridge or, you know, Dubai or-- [laughter]-- the University of Phoenix or wherever. [laughter] And there I was, in this plain black robe, which seemed to say, “Vocational School.” [laughter]

So I made my way into the great Gothic chapel there. And I’ve got this introduction, even more fulsome than John’s, which sounded so much like a eulogy. [laughter] And then I made my way up to the pulpit. You have to cross over the nave, and you have to climb this steep stairway, two-part stairway, up to the pulpit, which is up against a wall, a stone wall.

The applause lasted about halfway up. [laughter] And so the first thing that the audience heard from me was heavy breathing. [laughter] And I launched into this speech, which was funny. I mean it was conceptually funny. [laughter] And there was-- And there was nothing. People looked sort of studious, and their eyes were closed, some of them. And there was a little bit of laughter way off in the corner, but not much.

And-- And it dawned on me, about three minutes into this 20-minute speech, that my voice was bouncing around in all of this Gothic grandeur. And I could hear things I had said 15 or 20 seconds before. [laughter] So that the people who were sitting out in front of me could not hear a single word I was-- They would hear a few words, but now whole sentences.

And I cut about 10 minutes out of the speech by eliminating pages four and five. [laughter] And shot to the end. And there was grateful applause. And I came down and through the crowd, and to a reception. And people walked up to me and said, “Good job.” [laughter] Nothing specific. [laughter] “Good job,” you know, as you would say to a child who had had a bowel movement. [laughter] And you know, not that I disagree with that fourth point that you-- that you made, which I hadn’t made.

And it dawned on me, I thought at this reception and in the long, painful ride back home to Minnesota, that as I looked back on my career in broadcasting, nobody had ever complimented me on a specific thing. Nobody had ever quoted back to me some brilliant thing I had ever said. It was always general, “We like your show. It really relaxes our children.” [laughter] “We listen to it late at night.”

And it occurred to me that perhaps I had spent 40 years in radio as a sort of comforting baritone presence. And that nobody heard anything in particular that I had said. I'm willing to accept that. [laughter] I'm a Christian. We want to be of service. [laughter] But today, I want to give a speech that's a little more specific, so that you'll find things to disagree about.

It's inspired by the feeling that I had when President Obama announced back in December that the administration is going to pursue an opening to Cuba. This was thrilling to me. It was like spring coming to Minnesota in mid-June. It was-- It was-- It was like-- It was like when the plane finally begins to move. You've been sitting on the tarmac for hours, perhaps days. You've lost track. You've heard one explanation after another, “Weather related.” “Air traffic control.” “A flashing light in the cockpit.” “One pilot is depressed.” I don't know what. [laughter]

And then finally, you begin to move. And you feel incredulity. That's how I felt when the President announced that, and things started to move forward. Somebody in Washington was recognizing reality. And this, to the rest of us, is just astonishing. I was a college kid when this blockade of Cuba went into effect. I was a poet. I was writing poems in all lower case letters. [laughter] And now, I am on Social Security. [laughter] Now people address me as “Sir.” People-- People say, “Would you like to use the stairs? Or would you like to take the elevator?”

All of this time has gone by. And to see the government move on this is astonishing. Something happened. Something was done. And now you hear about a ferry service that's going to open up between Miami, Key West and Havana. The Minnesota Orchestra has gone on tour to Cuba. They were thrilled. They came back ecstatic. These are musicians. They never get ecstatic. [laughter] And things are-- Things are happening. It's just so, so utterly astonishing. The President recognizing reality.

I felt the same way when he announced that he was going to take Executive action to protect five million undocumented workers from deportation. Nobody was ever talking about deporting these people, because they work. We need them. They're part of our economy. Perhaps 11 million undocumented workers, nobody was talking about, about shipping them out. The work, the paperwork, just astonishing to think of what it would take. And nobody wants to send them away. So why not recognize them and give them some-- some stability in our country, so that-- so that people cannot pay them 85 cents an hour and have them work 85-hour weeks? Why not? This was astonishing. Somebody in Washington recognizing reality.

And so my speech today, “15 Numbered-- 15 Numbered Things That Need to Happen, That Need to Happen Tomorrow.” Washington has such a reputation for inaction and blockade and dysfunction that some small symbolic thing, I think, would be - would be a good first move. And I think that it’s time to finally name the streets downtown that only have initial letters. [laughter] I just-- Everybody else names their streets. And why not? I think that they should be named for philosophers, just to give the city some tone, you know, some class. [laughter]

Only suggestions. But Emerson, Franklin, Girton, Hagel, Henry James, Kierkegaard, for K Street. How about that? [laughter] Martin Luther, Machiavelli, of course. [laughter] And-- And so on. Number two. See how quickly this speech moves along here? [laughter] Number two, I think we need to relax with the flag pins. I’m not looking at anybody right now. [laughter] It just seems to me that it’s become a requirement for anybody running for public office in America to put a little flag pin on their lapel. It’s become required that the President end every speech with “God bless America,” just so people won’t question whether or not he loves his country. And I just think it’s a bad way to go.

This is a free country, it really is. I mean it’s trying to be. And parts of it certainly are. And there should not be any requirement that we wear a badge or symbol in this-- in this country. This is not Germany in the 1930s, when you were required to wear an armband, and it had to-- the swastika had to be the right size. And-- And you had to say, “Sieg Heil,” and pronounce it correctly. And your right arm had to be at the correct angle. Let’s just not go too far. I looked at Senator John McCain’s website. And there are pictures of him there, and he has no flag pin in his label. So if he doesn’t need to wear one, then neither do you. [laughter]

I think we should put out a “cease and desist” order on the announcements still heard in airports in this country, to “notify authorities if a person or persons unknown to you come up and ask you to carry something aboard the aircraft.” [laughter] Nobody has ever done this. [laughter] Nobody. Nobody. Nobody ever will do this. This is-- This is fiction. And it’s-- And it’s not-- it’s not harmful to anybody to have fiction. But it gives young people the sense that authorities are not in touch with reality. [laughter] And there's enough evidence of that already without adding-- [laughter]-- without adding to that.

I also think that we can continue the movement in this country to remove some of those fortifications, the barriers, the-- the flower pots and so forth, that were put up in public places to defend against somebody driving a truck loaded with explosives. They don’t really have a good purpose. They’re more symbolic than anything else. And symbolic security is dangerous. And engineers have told us that, in the case of most of these barriers, if a truck loaded with explosives pulled up alongside and was detonated, these barriers would be splintered, and they would become flying missiles. And we don’t need any more of that.

Number four. I think we should stop making dimes, nickels and pennies. [laughter] I just think it's time. I see young people dropping small change in parking lots. I can't speak for you, but I no longer bend over to pick up a dime. [laughter] I just-- I don't-- I don't go there. The fundraiser for polio used to be called The March of Dimes. But dimes don't march anymore. They just, they don't. They're not worth enough. We used to say, "A penny for your thoughts." We don't say that anymore, because it-- because it would be insulting. [laughter] So, I think if we leave the current supply of small change in circulation, it'll gradually, you know, dissipate and disappear. And these coins will, in time, become more valuable. So let's, let's just try that.

Number five, we need to change the seating arrangement in the House and the Senate, and mix Democrats and Republicans in the chambers so that members don't have to reach across the aisle, they can just turn to the person next to them, and hold out their hand if they-- if they-- if they wish. School teachers know that when cliques or gangs form in a public school, you separate them. You don't let them all sit together. And we need to do this in Congress. No more red on one side, blue on the other. We should go for a checkerboard effect here. [laughter] And seat them by seniority, with the old ones way in the back and the young ones-- [laughter] -- down front, just so they-- so they get the idea. [laughter]

Number six, it just makes no sense that people who work hard cannot support themselves, let alone supporting a family. This is just part of the social compact in our country, that if you work hard, and you keep your nose clean, you're going to be okay. But you cannot do this on the minimum wage as it exists right now, unless your apartment is the backseat of your car, and your car is up on blocks, and you-- and you live on pet food. It just cannot be done. Los Angeles did something about that this week. And the rest of us should do something about it tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow. The way to do it is to do it.

Number seven. Here is an item for which there will be no applause in this room, not that there was any before. [laughter] Radio and television frequencies are a public resource, just like public grazing lands out in Wyoming. And they never should have been sold. They should have been leased. Maybe it's too late. But, when a frequency is sold one party to another, there ought to be a flip tax of 50 percent of appreciated value that goes into the public coffers. Radio and TV spectrums are public property. And they should be required, radio and TV stations, to provide commercial time without charge to political candidates.

And it's time to bring back the Fairness Doctrine, which required stations to present a range of opinion on controversial issues. It didn't inhibit anybody, the Fairness Doctrine. It just meant that when top 40 stations applied for renewal of license, they had to file reports from the FCC that, at four a.m. on Sunday they played something from the League of Women Voters. [laughter] And that's all they had to do. Just, it was a ritual. It was a meaningless ritual. But it-- But it symbolized the fact that the station, the frequency is public property, and that they had public responsibility.

Number eight. Our U.S. Seventh Fleet has been sent off to support Japan in its defense of the Senkaku Islands in the South China Sea, which are also claimed by China, the Senkaku Islands which are, at last word, unpopulated. Nobody lives out there. Which makes all of this rather meaningless. We should not expect men or women to die defending rock outcroppings in the middle of large bodies of water. Let the nature conservancy go out there and defend that. Let Greenpeace send some people in boats. But not-- not our Seventh Fleet.

Number nine. The drought in California is simply meant to show people that you cannot have a nice green lawn on a desert. It just, it doesn't work. In Minnesota we don't have giant space heaters in our backyards to make it possible for us to sit in our backyards in February and barbecue. We just don't expect that. [laughter] So people in Southern California have to learn how to love gravel. That's all. [laughter] And they have to think twice about-- about what they are growing for export. They are major exporters of almonds and alfalfa and avocados, all heavy water-use crops. And those are just the ones that begin with the letter A. There are a lot more. [laughter] California is exporting their precious water in the form of produce. And so the rest of us may need to accept that, for certain periods of the year, we will need to eat frozen strawberries and not fresh strawberries. That shouldn't be so hard.

Number ten. Thanks to Alaska and Texas and North Dakota, our country is close to being energy-independent. And for this reason, we need to take a deep breath and we need to back away from the Middle East. These tribes of the Middle East, the European colonizers around the time of World War I, packed into nation states, are not happy with each other. They need to sort that out themselves. There is not much that we can do to assist that. And what we have spent in Iraq and Afghanistan so far, does not appear to have brought progress. And it could have gone a long way towards-- towards repairing our crumbling infrastructure in this country. You can call this "isolationism." [applause] You can call it "iced tea," whatever. But the President's policy of "don't do stupid stuff," or "cause no harm" is a sensible idea.

Number 11. Rational conservation still has a long way to go in this country. And we need to practice more of it. In Minnesota, we send electricity that is generated by coal, we send it to North Dakota to run their oil pumps, which create tons of natural gas, which they simply flare off as a byproduct instead of using it to generate their own electricity. Wrong, wrong, wrong. The era of coal-fired power plants is over. So why not bring this gently to an end? And it's time to think again about nuclear power, which was cheap and efficient. There were accidents, yes, Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, Japan. But we can learn from these things. Hollywood made some very scary movies about meltdowns. But they also made scary movies about flesh-eating zombies. [laughter] And we don't lock up ugly people who talk slow. [laughter]

Number 12. Music and theatre are businesses, as much as football or casino gambling. And we should use tax, increment financing and enterprise zones to include the arts, which would bring cities, the inner cities back to life, and bring some soul back to the people who live in them.

Number 13. The country is moving rapidly in the direction of accepting gay people as people, as people, period. And the government needs to come along with that. Sexual preference is a characteristic. It isn't the key to somebody's identity. People are more complicated than that. I have a friend who came out as gay 20-some years ago, and it was very dramatic. And he carried the banner of gay liberation. And he fought for the right of gay people to adopt children. And then gradually, he settled into 15 years of a close, loving relationship with another man. And having won the right to adopt, he was then free to decide that he didn't want to. That he was happy being an uncle. And he did not want to have the burden of children.

Number 14. How am I doing on time? Am I okay? Do you want me to hurry up?

JOHN HUGHES: No.

GARRISON KEILLOR: Do you want me to cut this short? Do you want me to expand my-- [laughter] Do you want me to read from the appendix, the footnotes? [applause] Number 14. Let's give the word "diversity" a rest. Just a year's moratorium. Just put it aside. [laughter] We are diverse. We are one of the most diverse nations on God's green earth. And it's-- And it's one of the shining virtues of this-- of this country. But the word "diversity" has been adopted by a bunch of bean counters and a bunch of social engineers, all of them amateurs.

The League of American Orchestras, for example, has set diversity as a goal. And I'm quoting now. "The inclusion and involvement of a broad representation of our community reflecting its true makeup, including race, ethnicity and cultural background, gender, sexual orientation, age, socioeconomic status, disabilities, education and religion." In other words, it's not enough to play Mozart beautifully. [laughter] You also have to make sure that your audience includes the right proportion of elderly, disabled, gay, Asian men who earn less than \$30,000 dollars a year. [laughter]

But minority persons are not trophies, they are people. They have their own tastes, their own predilections. And what makes Mozart worth playing, worth listening to, is what happens in people's hearts. Subsidized concert tickets, yes. More school concerts, yes, yes, yes. Counting the number of Hispanics at the philharmonic concert, I just don't think so.

Number 15, John. I'm coming towards the end. There are some big changes that we cannot make yet. Simplifying the tax code would put too many accountants out of work. [laughter] And it'd just be so hard to retrain those people. [laughter] Fixing the healthcare system as a practical, non-ideological matter, it can't be done until younger people get older, and people my age die off, which poor healthcare will hasten the process. [laughter] Same with climate change and environmental disaster. We have to come closer to the cliff before we can get anything done here. Electing a woman President might be nice, but she won't take office until 2017.

We can, however, put the face of a woman on the \$20 dollar bill. And that's my last suggestion. [applause] I would be so easy to do. The Department of the Treasury, just over the way, as you walk by there on your way to your parking lot, just yell up to somebody. [laughter] "Get rid of Andrew Jackson! [laughter] Not worth remembering anyway." Harriet Tubman has been proposed. I would accept that in a minute. I myself would vote for Emily Dickinson, because in this way, you cover women, English majors, Unitarians and possibly, we think, lesbians, though I'm not-- we're not absolutely sure. [laughter] We don't have proof of that yet.

All of these things, 15 things can be done expeditiously. And what a different world this would be if we would take action here. A few weeks ago, the *New York Times* printed a big investigative story on nail salons in New York City, where they employ mostly immigrant people, mostly Asian women. Many of them don't speak English, probably undocumented, we're not sure. They need to bribe somebody in order to get a job in many of these salons. They are paid less than the minimum wage. The salon keeps a proportion of the tips that they receive. And they are exposed to horrific chemicals, which, with long-range health consequences.

It was a horror that this is happening in Manhattan, the most liberal city in America, was just astonishing. And it changed people's behavior. The governor of New York, two days afterward, announced a crack-down, whatever that may mean, on nail salons. But it provoked every single woman in Brooklyn and the Upper West Side of Manhattan, to ask some pointed questions the next time they walked into a nail salon. It was progress. And it was done in a matter of days.

It was like a throwback to the old days of campaigning journalism, when Upton Sinclair wrote a big exposé of slaughterhouses and brought about, in a remarkable short time, the Pure Food and Drug Act. Let's do it again. That concludes my speech. I thank you all for listening. I'm now going to go back to being a comforting voice on the radio. [laughter] [applause] And talking about a small town. Thank you.

[applause]

JOHN HUGHES: Thank you so much. I have so many questions about that radio program. But since we're talking about current affairs, I just want to ask one question about current affairs before we leave that. We're talking so much about that 2016 race already, Hillary Clinton on the Democratic side and Bernie Sanders, and now maybe O'Malley gets in. He's going to announce, I guess. And then, on the Republican side, we've got more than a dozen or more. How do you see the race? And how do you like hearing about it this early, before 2016 election?

GARRISON KEILLOR: We're just waiting for Donald Trump, that's all. [laughter] We're waiting for Donald Trump to come in, and PeeWee Herman, I hope, [laughter] on the-- on the Republican side. And-- And fill out that-- fill out that buzz. Democrats are kind of lacking for-- for drama. I just don't think a guy from Vermont is going to-- is going to do this. So we're-- we're looking at Hillary and, at the same time,

trying not to look too hard. [laughter] I like her. I like her myself. I sat next to her on a dais at the-- at the White House Correspondence Dinner. And she-- And she talked to me for about five minutes. And then she had a big Republican mozumbo[?][on the other side of her. And she talked to him for about an hour and 10 minutes. Exactly the right thing for a political woman to do. I was proud of her. She made the-- She made the right choice. She detected that I was a supporter, and she didn't waste time on me. [laughter] [applause]

JOHN HUGHES: Mentioned in the introduction, the 41st anniversary of your radio program is coming up. Why do you think that it's been so successful now in its-- beginning in its fifth decade?

GARRISON KEILLOR: We don't know what success is in radio. The listenership numbers, you know, are fictional. You know, we toss dice. And I have no idea that there are four million listeners. I doubt that very much. When you subtract from that four million the number of incarcerated felons and-- [laughter] -- whose wardens, you know, set their radio dial, and-- and then the number of people in memory units, I mean-- [laughter] -- and, you know, parents of small children who-- you know, who are not good sleepers, you know, it's not all that many-- not all that many people. You just don't think about it. I don't think about it at all. And I'm sorry you made me think about it. [laughter]

JOHN HUGHES: You often write your program, from what I understand, the day before. So very quickly. And what-- where do you get the inspiration for your scripts that make the stories so modern, but still retain the essence of the show's folksy charm?

GARRISON KEILLOR: Folksy charm? Did you just say-- ? [laughter] All right. All right. Well, I mean, inspiration is fear of public humiliation, is a powerful-- is a powerful motivator. And it starts to-- it starts to build. Here we are, we're around noon on Friday. And I have to do a show on Saturday, a broadcast. And, you know, it starts to get on your mind right around this time, and even more so this afternoon. And-- And then, Saturday morning, it gets very intense.

But the beautiful thing is that I have all these other people, you know, who are much better organized than I. And they-- And they do the heavy lifting. Sarah Bellum is my brilliant writer. [laughter] And what she has done for me over the years is just-- is just-- is great. We miss Natalie Dressed. [laughter] But Sarah Bellum is still-- still there.

Folksy charm? [laughter] Come on over here, and I'm going to put my arms around you, son. [laughter]

JOHN HUGHES: We talk about the dwindling attention span in journalism for stories. And so many of us are tweeting things out now. As someone known, when performing, for speaking slowly and deliberately and focusing as much on the artful manner of telling the story as on the content of the story, what do you think about this era

that we're in now, of speed and small bits of information? And is the art of storytelling going to endure?

GARRISON KEILLOR: Spitting out small bits of information is not a good way to earn a living. It's just, it's not-- it's not a good life. The American people are readers. They are curious people. They want to know things. And so they are waiting, the readers, especially the ones who are-- who are my age, are waiting to hear from you younger people about the world, and how you see it. And don't try to do this in 140 words. It's just not the right-- not the right way.

I went to a speech on Wednesday, Robert Caro, the great biographer of Lyndon Baines Johnson stood up and gave a talk, off the cuff, about the research that he had done on Lyndon Baines Johnson's experience of the assassination in Dallas on November 22nd, 1963. And he research that he did, here was a journalist talking about his research. And he had an enormous audience absolutely spellbound for about 45 minutes. No, we want to know. We want to know these things. So don't hold back.

Anything that is crucial, that is important in this country, somebody will write a book about it. And why shouldn't you be the one?

JOHN HUGHES: This questioner notes that, in your book, *Homegrown Democrat*, you ended by inviting readers who spot you in a café to approach and say hello. How many did that? [laughter]

GARRISON KEILLOR: Well, usually they said, you know, "I like your show. Good job." [laughter] You know. "Our kids grew up on your-- on your show. They were-- They were restless, and they were insomniacs. And we found that you know, when we got your Lake Wobegon monologues on long-playing CDs, and put them next to their beds, that-- that everything changed." That's what they say, actually. [laughter]

JOHN HUGHES: A few people want to know what you think of that guy Douglas Mark Hughes, no relation, who flew the gyrocopter onto the Capitol lawn to protest money in politics.

GARRISON KEILLOR: Protest money in politics? Where has he been for the last 150 years? [laughter] Goodness, it's a little-- it's a little late for that. Is that really the reason that he gave? I think he just was one more guy wanting to play with toys. [laughter] No, I took it-- I took it to mean that they should demilitarize Pennsylvania Avenue. And-- And put it back in its original shape. I think heavy traffic would have discouraged a guy from-- from flying anything, you know, taxis getting out of control, you know, would have scared the bejesus out of him. No, I think they ought to take away those barriers and let's just drive by the White House and wave as we go.

JOHN HUGHES: Did *National Geographic* get it right when they located Lake Wobegon? And, in addition to that, it's really a diversity question. The City of St. Cloud has seen a surge of Somali immigrants in recent years. Have you considered introducing

any new characters in A Prairie Home Companion to reflect the changing demographics of Lake Wobegon?

GARRISON KEILLOR: No, we do have one of the largest populations of Somalis in the country, is there in Minnesota, a large settlement in South Minneapolis. They have their own shopping mall. And you-- And you walk in there, and you see middle-aged women in long, black robes, and their daughters in cutoffs and low rider jeans, and jewelry in their belly buttons. The population has not decided, I think the Somali have not decided if they are here to stay. They've been here for decades. And-- But they still believe, somehow, that there will be a return to their disastrously war-torn country. In the meantime they're doing the best they can.

And we have many listeners among the Somalis to our shows. I don't know if I should introduce a Somali character, and what he or she would do in Lake Wobegon. I could have a Somali woman who would come as an intern to the Lutheran church. That would be interesting. [laughter] That would be interesting, a conversion, and a young woman who was in training to become a pastor. That's a possibility.

But we have all these listeners, because-- because they can learn English from listening to A Prairie Home Companion. We don't make references to politics on the show. We don't-- We don't make obscure pop references, and all pop references are obscure now. And we talk slowly. And we pronounce our-- our words, and talk in whole sentences. Back to you, John. [laughter]

JOHN HUGHES: A questioner wants your opinion on liberalism. Do you see contradictions from LBJ to today, proclaiming progress, but also increasingly presiding over more economic inequality?

GARRISON KEILLOR: Hmm. Wow, that's-- that's a powerful, complicated sentence. I'm not sure I could diagram that-- that sentence. Yes, of course, there have been changes since then. And-- And defeats. But we don't have people running successfully for public office against Social Security and Medicare. And-- And so that says a lot right there. You can always run against Washington. I mean, you know, welcome to the club. But-- But they don't get very specific about their plans for-- for entitlement programs. They talk about them sort of vaguely. And so-- And so the things that LBJ and his cohorts and others since have set up, seem fairly durable to me.

[applause]

JOHN HUGHES: Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future of public radio? And why?

GARRISON KEILLOR: Oh, I'm very optimistic about it. It has become an important news medium, especially in rural parts of the west, the Midwest, it's become very, very important, as-- as newspapering, you know, has been up and down and mostly down, public radio stations have come forward to cover local politics in-- with some,

with some care. We started out as sort of an alternative medium. And we now, in many parts of the country, maybe most, are finding ourselves in-- in the mainstream.

Public radio does one thing that even its harshest critics, and there are many, cannot deny. And that is that, with very few exceptions, very few, it gives uninterrupted broadcast time to people running for public office in this country. It gives you, the listener, a chance to hear them at some-- at some length, and not in little tiny quotes. So for that alone.

JOHN HUGHES: I have several questions asking about your future. Now I read, in the introduction, the aggressive schedule that you're keeping. So obviously, no signs of slowing down. But I also understand that the *Prairie Home Companion Show* will keep going in your mind, whether long after you keep going.

GARRISON KEILLOR: It will keep going in my mind, John, you say? [laughter] In my imagination? [laughter] No, it-- It's-- You know, it bumbles along from-- from week to week. And we make as long-term plans as anybody else does in broadcasting. It also depends on stations. And you know, to the extent of their-- of their interest and their ability to pay our extortionate, you know, fees and rates and so forth. And-- And send baked goods, you know, to us, and other-- other prizes, keys to the city and so forth, and honorary degrees. [laughter]

But no, I'm sort of in a-- in a euphoric period. And-- And when you reach your early 70s, John, I hope that-- I hope you experience the same things. You feel this sort of bounding, bounding optimism. Either that, or the medications. [laughter] So no, I feel just fine. And thank you for your concern. [laughter]

JOHN HUGHES: One of your greatest stories on *Prairie Home Companion* was *The Prophet*, which you told during the 1991 Persian Gulf War. What would a prophet tell us now?

GARRISON KEILLOR: I'm not in the prophecy business. And I sort of regret that monologue. I've been trying to forget it, now, for years and years and years. It was one of my ill-advised ventures into-- into political commentary. And-- And so I've almost erased it from my mind, John.

JOHN HUGHES: All right.

GARRISON KEILLOR: You just brought back a little tiny bit of it. That's P-R-O-P-H-E-T, right?

JOHN HUGHES: Yes.

GARRISON KEILLOR: Yes, right, right. [laughter] No, I have-- I have-- I have no idea. I've been-- I've been around and seen a lot of young people in the last, in the last month, actually. I went to my old high school in Anoka, Minnesota. I went to

Princeton. And I went to talk to some students up at Harvard. I did a show at Mennonite College in Indiana, Goshen. And being around people that age is just so inspiring. They're just so keen. And they're so bright. And they have social skills that we never had back in the day. You know, we were little scared, you know, perspiring people, afraid, you know, to look other people in the eye. And they are not. And they're funny. And they're engaged in dozens of things.

So our replacements have arrived. [laughter] They are here. And, you know, we just have to come to a graceful point where we can step aside for them, as I am now stepping aside for you, John. [laughter]

JOHN HUGHES: Many questions about any writers or broadcasters or storytellers or musicians that you enjoy, any upcoming people that you follow?

GARRISON KEILLOR: Which was this, past or future?

JOHN HUGHES: Currently.

GARRISON KEILLOR: Oh currently?

JOHN HUGHES: Yeah, musicians, storytellers, authors.

GARRISON KEILLOR: Uh-huh. Well, I always love to hang out with people from Texas, because Texas is like a foreign country to me. And so, whenever I'm with people-- We just lost a great Texas musician, Johnny Gimble, who was the greatest storyteller I think I ever-- I ever met. He was a barber in the-- in the army. And just his stories about barbering alone, let alone his stories about Bob Wills and Willie Nelson and Lyle Lovett and all the rest, he was a great, great man.

I told myself, I told myself 20 years ago, I was going to go down to Dripping Springs, Texas, and I was going to sit there and get Johnny Gimble to talk to me. And I was going to write his biography. And I didn't do it. And I will regret that for the rest of my-- rest of my days.

Musicians are wonderful storytellers, because they-- because they don't have much money. And they have to travel around and make their way by the grace of other people. They have to learn to live on the hospitality and the kindness of strangers, just as Tennessee Williams said. And-- And this-- And this makes them beautiful storytellers. We really need to let them talk more on *A Prairie Home Companion*. Thank you for reminding me. I'll try to do that, try to do that in the future.

JOHN HUGHES: I've got two interesting questions from the audience. And I'll let you decide which one you want to answer. One question is, what is the meaning of life? [laughter] The other question is, we read *Wobegon Boy* and *Main Street* in class, as representative of small town America. How do you compare your Minnesota with *Main Street* by Sinclair Lewis?

GARRISON KEILLOR: What was the meaning of Sinclair Lewis's life? [laughter] [applause] Well, he was a lot funnier writer than people give him credit for. If you go back and read *Main Street*, I think you'll see that, story of Carol Kennecott and her-- and her discomfort in Gopher Prairie, Minnesota. Sinclair Lewis was a great American writer. I read him in junior high school. I read *Dodsworth*, and I read *Babbitt*. *Babbitt* was my favorite of all of his-- of all of his books. He was a satirist, and so they didn't care for him in Minnesota. [laughter] And-- And he lived uncomfortably in St. Paul for brief periods of time. He had a lot of personal troubles.

But his-- But his view of small town America was so colored by his own experience. He grew up the doctor's son in Sauk Centre, Minnesota. And he was-- And he was ungainly. He was not physically well coordinated. And he-- And he suffered a very bad facial complexion as a result of small pox scars. And so he was an outcast. He was a terrible-- He suffered terribly in his-- in his childhood.

I did not. I grew up among sanctified brethren. And we felt that we were the chosen people. We looked down on Lutherans as being worldly and loose. [laughter] And we believed that when the Second Coming occurred, that Jesus would bring a special car, just for us. [laughter] And so it's an entirely different upbringing. I led an upbringing of privilege, privilege.

JOHN HUGHES: Before I ask the last question, I just have a little bit of housekeeping. The National Press Club is the world's leading professional organization for journalists. And we fight for a free press, worldwide. To learn more about us, visit Press.org. And to donate to our nonprofit Journalism Institute, visit Press.org/Institute. And I want to remind you about a couple upcoming programs.

Stephen Inskeep, Co-Host of NPR's Morning Edition, will talk about his book *Jacksonland: President Andrew Jackson, Cherokee Chief Ross, and a Great American Land Grab*. That is next Thursday here at the Club. And they may also talk about Jackson, whether he'll be on the \$20 dollar bill. And on June 1st, more than a dozen journalists who have been fined, detained or jailed for their support of the First Amendment, will appear together at a Press Club event. That is on June 1st.

I would now like to present Mr. Keillor with our traditional National Press Club mug. [laughter] [applause] Now we just have a little bit of time. One time when you were here in the past, you sang a song. And I'm wondering if you would be interested in singing a song again. [applause]

GARRISON KEILLOR: I will if they will. That's-- That's the only deal. No, this is going to be my 16th point in my-- in my speech, that every-- that every morning, in every public school in America, all of the children should face the teacher, and they should all sing this song.

[singing *My Country 'Tis of Thee*]

[applause]

JOHN HUGHES: Mr. Keillor, since you picked a short song, we actually have a couple minutes. [laughter] I have a better-- I have a better finale. One of the questioners asked why you always wear red socks. And in addition, I'm told you always wear a red tie. So maybe you could tell us why the red socks, why the red tie.

GARRISON KEILLOR: I had a red-- a pair of red socks once. And I put them on for a show. And people commented on it. Nobody had ever commented on my wearing black or brown socks. [laughter] And when you are in the business of standing up in front of people, you notice these things. And I'm sorry, John, it's not a longer answer, but that's-- but that's the truth. [laughter]

JOHN HUGHES: Could we give a nice round of applause. [applause] We hope that you don't wait 21 more years before you come back and see us. And we thank you so much for being here today. We can't always guarantee that Minnesotans will be in charge. But we will always extend a warm welcome to you, no matter who is running the National Press Club. I'd also like to thank our National Press Club staff for putting together this program. And that includes our Journalism Institute and our Broadcast Center. And if you would like a copy of today's program, or again, to learn more about the National Press Club, go to that website, Press.org. Thank you. We are adjourned. (gavel)

[applause]

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