

Beyond Nuclear Press Conference

National Press Club  
Washington, D.C.

Speakers:

**JAMES CROMWELL**, Actor  
**MANUEL PINO**, Acoma Pueblo, New Mexico

February 26, 2009

- - -

**CROMWELL:** I should first explain why I am here, since I have no bona fides in this issue whatsoever except an interest in and commitment to seeing if I can help to make a difference.

In 1971 and '72, I hitchhiked around the world for 18 months, 8 months in Africa. I went through the Sahara Desert on a date truck, hanging on for dear life, while the Touareg people rode towards the front of the truck, and I was fascinated by them. In Tamanrasset, I got to know a few of them a great deal better and spent some time with a Touareg family and had a wonderful tea ceremony and learned about the culture and about this incredible group of people and their relationship to the desert, their traditions, and how miraculous that culture was.

Then in 1994, I was in Australia making a picture which actually made my career, which was about a pig called "Babe," and traveled a little around Australia, went north to the Barrier Reef on a little two-week period that I had, and I always regretted that I didn't get to the central part of Australia, so that when I did "Babe II," I did travel to Alice Springs, and I did walk around Uluru because I respected what it stood for and the signs that requested that white people not climb it since it was sacred and did my own version of a walk-about and learned what I could without being intrusive about the extraordinary history and culture of the aboriginal people in Australia for whom I have a great affection.

Because of that film, I got my career. I got a nomination for the award that everybody goes after and became somewhat of a celebrity and was asked, therefore, to do certain things in animal rights and other issues, one issue of which was that I was involved with the Lakota people on the Pine Ridge Reservation to protect their culture and their language, an Indian reservation much like the Indian reservations in New Mexico and elsewhere throughout the United States, where there is 65-percent unemployment, 85 percent of the people ill-housed, very little health care, complete disregard by the Federal Government as to the conditions that these people exist under, what is done to their land, their water, the people themselves, and was appalled and became involved with the Lakota and by extension all indigenous people in America whom I believe hold the answer to what ails us because they understand what it is to live on this earth and leave no footprint, and that we -- if we want to solve some of the problems

that we are dealing with right now, in fact, most of the problems, we could learn from indigenous people all over the world because they lived on this planet with balance.

I now understand, looking at this room, why exactly I am here. If I do have any celebrity -- and I have a little -- I plan to use it, but, more importantly, I know a lot of people in Hollywood, and I have entree to a lot of places. And I am going to make it my very last effort to try to engage that community to address this issue, so that the next time this press conference is held, there will be somebody else up here like Brad Pitt or Tom Hanks, and this room will be full, so that people will hear this message.

All we have to do, the world over, but especially in this country, as we are sublimely ignorant of not only the entire world but the effect of this industry on our Native people and on our country, all the American people have to do is understand that this is not a localized issue. It doesn't end on a reservation. It doesn't end with native people. It doesn't exist somewhere else in the world. It is ultimately going to affect us all.

I was talking this morning and learned that the nuclear plant in Bashir is about to go online or very soon, and that there is a very good chance that the Israelis may decide that they don't want that to happen. That could be the spark that sets off -- well, God knows what it would set off, and that involves the same families that have lost children in the war in Iraq for another resource which we abuse and have become habituated to. And if we don't take responsibility for this, we are liable to get ourselves in an even larger mess going after something that will cause irreparably more harm if that is believable than our addiction to oil has caused.

So I am going to do everything possible to make sure that this message gets across to as many people as possible, and that the next time we have one of these things, it is standing room only.

Thank you.

**PINO:** [Speaking non-English language.]

Good afternoon. I have greeted you in my traditional language. I am from Acoma Pueblo in New Mexico. I guess depending on what archeologist you listen to or anthropologist, we have the distinction of being the oldest, continuous, and habited village in North America. Through our oral traditions and our history, my people know we have been there since time immemorial.

We also live at Acoma and our sister, Pueblo, to the east, Laguna Pueblo, in the heart of what is known as the Grants Mineral Belt. The Grants Mineral Belt was the most intensive mined area for uranium in the United States from the late '40s to the early 1990s.

In the Grants Mineral Belt was housed the Jackpile Mine, which you see up on the slide before you, within 2,000 feet of the Village of Puguat, where over 3,000 residents live today.

As you can see from the slide there, the Jackpile mine was in operation for 30 years, from 1952 to 1982. This was a 24-hour-a-day, 365-day-per-year operation.

Currently, today, there are cancer clusters in this community of both mining and non-mining populations. The open pit mine at Jackpile laid dormant without being reclaimed by any governmental entity, the State of New Mexico, the Federal Government, the Tribal Government itself, for over eight years.

For eight years, in that time period, radioactive contaminants, the overburden from the open pit mining process were blowing all over creation. They got into the food chain, as many traditional Tribal people continued to graze their livestock downwind from the mine, and our weather patterns on most days during this time of the year, March through May, the wind can blow in excess of 60 miles an hour on the high plateaus and mesas of North Central New Mexico where the mine was situated.

So this became an issue that, you know, impacted, as Mr. Cromwell said, innocent animals, livestock, both domestic animals and wild animals in this process. We suffered all types of adverse environmental impacts, impacts to the air, impacts to the water, impacts to the soils.

We also have disproportionately suffered from the impacts to our human health. Former miners on the Navajo Nation alone have filed 3,000 claims under the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act, that initially when passed in 1990 only covered three populations: underground miners, atomic veterans, and those populations that lived downwind from test sites like the Nevada test site in the deserts of Nevada.

So, in 1990, we began this long tedious process of lobbying Congress to include all working populations because, in our health studies and our communities, we found that it was not only underground miners who were impacted by this legacy. We found that millers that worked in the mills or truck drivers, which by the early 1970s were females who assumed employment in the uranium mining industry, people that crushed the ore, people that loaded the ore.

So, in 2000, we were successful in getting Congress' ear to amend the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act to include all working populations.

There is still a flaw with the Act because the Act, as it currently exists today, only compensates uranium miners who were employed before 1972. Again, our health studies indicate that workers that worked after 1972 are just as much impacted by these health issues.

We have in these former mining populations every form of cancer that you can think of, from cancer of the brain to cancer of the colon and anywhere in between and the anatomy.

We also have cancer clusters of non-mining populations, like the victims that live in the Village of Puguat, close to the Jackpile Mine. These people are victims, and many didn't earn one cent from the uranium industry.

The 24 million tons that were mined from Jackpile in its 30-year history went to one source, the Department of Defense and the United States to make weapons of mass destruction during the cold war.

Yet, you know, in the previous administration, we seemed to hear that the United States can be this military police of the world and determine who can and who cannot have nuclear weapons. Yet, we had a stockpile that could blow up the world, you know, 50 times over.

It's kind of in our traditional base knowledge. We believe as Acoma Pueblo people that to destroy the land is to destroy the people, and many times, these mining working populations were former veterans, and the industry told them, "Well, you are doing this for your country," so those types of issues, underlying issues.

You know, in the Grants Mineral Belt, we also had the Homestake Mill which between the years of 1950 and 1980 was the world's largest producing mill in a production capacity basis.

We also had the world's deepest uranium mining shaft that went into our sacred mountain, Mount Taylor, "Kaweshtima" as we call it. It is also one of the four sacred mountains of the Navajo Nation.

Currently, today, we are petitioning the State of New Mexico and the Federal Government to designate that mountain as traditional cultural property, an issue that has divided our community, that divided the non-Indian and Indian community. The non-Indian community feels that we are using this sacred site designation to stop jobs, to stop the economy, because there are still populations in the Grants Mineral Belt that want uranium mining.

And these corporations are very good at creating situations of economic blackmail. They come into these economically depressed communities like Grants, New Mexico, where the unemployment rate is around 65 percent, and, of course, in this economic despair time, right, people are desperate to do anything for jobs, even mine uranium again. So it's been a lifelong commitment of community education, community empowerment to call attention to these issues.

Also, in the Mineral Belt, we had the second worst nuclear accident in the Church Rock Spill, which is 1979, after Three Mile Island, is considered the second worst nuclear accident in the United States, where over 1,100 tons of radioactive mill waste and 90 million gallons of contaminated nuclear liquid was emitted into the Puerco River, which we have found trace materials of that spill in 1979 reaching the Little Colorado River, which eventually flows into the Colorado River, which is a major drinking water source for at least seven major States in the Western United States.

So these are the legacy issues that continue today, and we hear, especially in the last eight years, that nuclear power is the answer to climate change and global warming. Yet, in the United States and in many parts of the world, we have not found a safe place to deposit nuclear waste, you know, and it is almost backward thinking.

We live in these contaminated communities on a daily basis. We know what it is to see our relatives sick and dying of cancer.

I have my father, uncles, aunts, cousins, that all at one time worked in the uranium mines. You can talk to almost every Tribal member in my community, and they have at least one member who at one time or another worked in the uranium mining and milling industry.

So it's with these issues that we are victims of environmental racism, environmental injustice. Contamination to the water, as you can see in the slide up on the screen, there were two major tributaries that flowed right through the heart of the Jackpile Mine that eventually reached the Rio Grande River.

So I am only scratching the surface. I could lecture you here for probably two hours on this legacy, you know, maybe beyond that, but I have been empowered to be a spokesperson for my people. I can say that the Navajo Nation supports me in these issues that I am presenting to you here today. In fact, all of our Tribes, Laguna, Acoma, the Navajo Nation, have all passed resolutions or laws saying no more uranium mining on our lands, and it is the health issue that has been the catalyst in passing this Tribal legislation.

The difficulty becomes will the Federal Government of the United States recognize these laws, or will they ignore them like 500 treaties that they've broken previously in the history of our country?

Also, I would like to close with the fact that in September of 2007, in the international governmental arena that we have approached, the nation states of the world have passed the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and some of the most powerful articles of that declaration address sovereignty over our aboriginal lands, free and prior and informed consent before energy development takes place on our land, self-determination over the decision-making process of developing natural resources into the future.

When the vote came down at the United Nations in New York in September of 2007, four nations opposed the declaration led by the United States, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia, four of the nations that have the most significant population of indigenous peoples in the world, and all four of them have significant impacts in regards to the nuclear fuel chain.

I leave you with this thought as my elders have told us. Leave uranium in the ground. To destroy the land is to destroy the people.

[Speaking in non-English language.]

---