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Al Revere

An interview with accidental movie star Al Gore

BY *DAVID ROBERTS*

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Al Gore is on the campaign trail again, and he actually seems to be enjoying it.

For those who remember his ponderous, consultant-driven bid for president, the idea of Gore enjoying anything about campaigning may seem far-fetched. But this time, the campaign's not about him; it's about the issue that has been his consuming intellectual passion for nearly a quarter century: what he calls the "climate crisis." It's a perfect union of dedicated wonk and intractable problem.

In the years since his dramatic "loss" in 2000, he has, largely under the media radar, been practicing a form of retail politics: traveling the globe with a computer slideshow on global warming, educating small crowds, trying to boost the public profile of the problem through sheer force of door-to-door persistence.

At one of those presentations, Hollywood producer [Laurie David](#) was in the audience. Galvanized, she recruited a team of producers, filmmakers, and philanthropists, and together they persuaded Gore to star in a documentary based on his climate slideshow. *Deadwood* producer Davis Guggenheim was brought on to direct, and the movie was done in little over a year.

Now, as anticipation builds for the May 24 wide release of *An Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore is squarely back in the public eye. Despite denials from Gore's camp, rumors of a 2008 presidential run are [rampant](#). *Grist* met with Gore during his recent stay in Seattle and found him hale, jovial, and relaxed -- a man invigorated.



Like Brad Pitt, but wonkier.

Photo: Eric Neitzel/WireImage.

Q. You're well known, particularly since 2000, for guarding your privacy. But this movie is quite personal. Was that the producers' idea or yours?

A. It was definitely not my idea.

Q. Were you reluctant about it?

A. I was reluctant about it. And I would not have suggested that or wanted that.

But after we were into the production of the movie, the director, Davis Guggenheim, had earned my trust, because I had seen enough to gain a tremendous respect for his skill and sensitivity. And he said that one of the huge differences between a live stage performance and a movie is that when you're in the same room with a live person who's on stage speaking -- even if it's me [laughs] -- there's an element of dramatic tension and human connection that keeps your attention. And in a movie, that element is just not present.

He explained to me that you have to create that element on screen, by supplying a narrative thread that allows the audience to make a connection with one or more characters. He said, "You've got to be that character."

So we talked about it, and as I say, by then he had earned such a high level of trust from me that he convinced me. And he was a very skillful interviewer. What you hear in those biographical segments is literally 1 percent of the interviews he did. I began to suspect that his basic technique involved getting me so exhausted that I didn't care what I said anymore. [Laughs.]

Q. Maybe the DVD extras will come with 10 extra hours of interview.

A. They will not. I will have enough residual control to prevent that. [Laughs.]

Q. The marketing for the movie -- the [trailer](#) and the [poster](#) -- are completely over the top. "The scariest movie you'll ever see!" But the movie itself is quiet and methodical, and quite hopeful at the end. Did you deliberately choose those respective strategies?

A. It's a great trailer, very effective. But the people who make the trailer are completely different from the people who make the movie. I think they've done a terrific job on the movie, and I think a different group did a terrific job on the trailer.

The purpose of a trailer is very different from the purpose of a movie. I talked with Steven Spielberg, who saw the movie and loved it, and saw the trailer and loved it. And I asked him pretty much the same question you're asking me. He said, "Al, you've got to know this: the purpose of a trailer is to grab an audience by the throat and wrestle them into the seat." [Laughs.] They've got two minutes instead of 92 minutes, and they want to get people in to see the movie.

Q. Did you have direct control over the editing of the movie? Or did you leave it in the hands of the creative team?

A. It was a collaborative process. I want to be careful in answering, because I don't want to step on the creative role that the moviemakers played. It's their vision. It's their movie, particularly Davis Guggenheim's. But at every step he asked me, what about leaving this in or



A man, a slide, a mission.
Photo: © 2006 Paramount Classics.

taking this out? We had a mutual agreement on every aspect of that; there was not a single point where we had any serious disagreement at all.

Q. There's a lot of debate right now over the best way to communicate about global warming and get people motivated. Do you scare people or give them hope? What's the right mix?

A. I think the answer to that depends on where your audience's head is. In the United States of America, unfortunately we still live in a bubble of unreality. And the Category 5 denial is an enormous obstacle to *any* discussion of solutions. **Nobody is interested in solutions if they don't think there's a problem. Given that starting point, I believe it is appropriate to have an over-representation of factual presentations on how dangerous it is, as a predicate for opening up the audience to listen to what the solutions are, and how hopeful it is that we are going to solve this crisis.**

Over time that mix will change. As the country comes to more accept the reality of the crisis, there's going to be much more receptivity to a full-blown discussion of the solutions.

Q. Let's turn briefly to some proposed solutions. Nuclear power is making a big resurgence now, rebranded as a solution to climate change. What do you think?

A. I doubt nuclear power will play a much larger role than it does now.

Q. Won't, or shouldn't?

A. Won't. There are serious problems that have to be solved, and they are not limited to the long-term waste-storage issue and the vulnerability-to-terrorist-attack issue. Let's assume for the sake of argument that both of those problems can be solved.

We still have other issues. For eight years in the White House, every weapons-proliferation problem we dealt with was connected to a civilian reactor program. And if we ever got to the point where we wanted to use nuclear reactors to back out a lot of coal -- which is the real issue: coal -- then we'd have to put them in so many places we'd run that proliferation risk right off the reasonability scale. And we'd run short of uranium, unless they went to a breeder cycle or something like it, which would increase the risk of weapons-grade material being available.

When energy prices go up, the difficulty of projecting demand also goes up -- uncertainty goes up. So utility executives naturally want to place their bets for future generating capacity on smaller increments that are available more quickly, to give themselves flexibility. Nuclear reactors are the *biggest* increments, that cost the *most* money, and take the *most* time to build.

In any case, if they can design a new generation [of reactors] that's manifestly safer, more flexible, etc., it may play some role, but I don't think it will play a big role.

Q. How about the other big, new contender, ethanol?

A. *Cellulosic* ethanol. Different from corn-based ethanol. I think it is going to be a huge new

source of energy, particularly for the transportation sector. You're going to see it all over the place. You're going to see a lot more flex-fuel vehicles. You're going to see new processes that utilize waste as the source of energy, so there's no petroleum consumed in the process -- that makes the energy balance uniformly positive, so you can regrow it and it does become, in a real sense, renewable. You may also begin to see a new generation of fuel cells that run on cellulosic ethanol, where you can grow your own electricity. I think it's going to play a huge role.

Q. James Hansen [says we have 10 years](#) before there are irreversible changes [because of the climate crisis]. Two and a half years of those 10 ...

A. We can't spot the problem two and a half years. We've got to concentrate on changing the country's mind even during this president's term.

Q. Yes. But whoever is president *next* has four of the remaining seven years. Whoever it is will have history-changing effects, pro or con. I don't see any candidate in either party who shows signs of having internalized the scope and severity of the problem.

All of which you surely realize is leading to the inevitable question: Do you not feel some obligation to jump into the race?

A. I'm not planning to be a candidate again. I appreciate the way you asked the question, I really do, but I'm not planning to be a candidate again.

Q. You know I had to make you say it.

David Roberts is staff writer for Grist.

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