



Leadins

BY LAUREN PAIGE KENNEDY

# Man

To play the president under siege, actor **Aaron Eckhart** emotes strength of character in the new action flick "Olympus Has Fallen."

**P**resident of the United States, action hero?

Well, yes, if you're Aaron Eckhart, who stars as the dashing rugged leader of the free world in "Olympus Has Fallen," opening in late March nationwide. In the film, directed by Antoine Fuqua of "Training Day" fame, the president, his secretary of defense and the vice president are taken hostage at the White House after it's invaded by terrorists, explains the actor, who is best known for his roles as a jaded D.C. tobacco lobbyist in "Thank You for Smoking" and as a biker with a heart of gold in Oscar-nominated "Erin Brockovich."

His take on the commander in chief? For starters, the dude doesn't wear Mom jeans. "He's a younger president with a military background," says Eckhart, 44, who's an avid surfer, road cyclist and newly trained pilot. "Very physical, so he could get in the mix of it with Gerard Butler." Butler is Eckhart's "Olympus" co-star and the producer of the film, which in Hollywood circles has been dubbed "Die Hard" at the White House.

In true Tinseltown fashion, "Olympus" is going head to head with another action flick with a nearly identical premise: "White House Down," starring the ubiquitous Channing Tatum as a policeman (and Secret Service wannabe) protecting the president during a similar attack. But "Olympus" is enjoying a strategic earlier release in hopes of wooing audiences first. Which film will fans embrace?

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Eckhart good-naturedly refuses to take the bait: "I'm just a gun for hire," he laughs. "I do my job, do my work and try not to get fired." He does, however, take the work seriously, even for the popcorn-laden, gritty thrill ride "Olympus" is sure to be.

To prepare for his portrayal as the nation's top executive, "I wanted the president to have as much honor as he could," Eckhart tells *Washington Flyer*. "I didn't base [my performance] on anybody. I based it on how I would hope the president would react under these circumstances. And I tried to remember what the office is all about: representing America and its people in a crisis, having the big picture in mind, having the U.S. in mind. My primary goal was to add reverence and honor to the office."

The movie takes a (seriously destructive) tour of the nation's capital, with all the requisite explosions action aficionados so enjoy and demand. But Washington tourists, take heart: Our national monuments are, in fact, still standing,

"We built the White House on sets in Shreveport, Louisiana, plus all the interiors and exteriors that are blown up. This was not the sort of movie you can actually make in D.C.," the actor jokes. "You've got the military, terrorists, lots of explosions ... it might not have gone down too well!"

Even though "Olympus" locations weren't shot in the District, Eckhart has spent his fair share of time in the capital city. "For me, Washington represents what it means to be an American—the history of America. That's what I'm most attracted to. It makes me proud to be an American to see the Vietnam Wall, to see the White House and the monuments. I especially enjoy visiting in the fall—that's the time when I'm most drawn to the city."

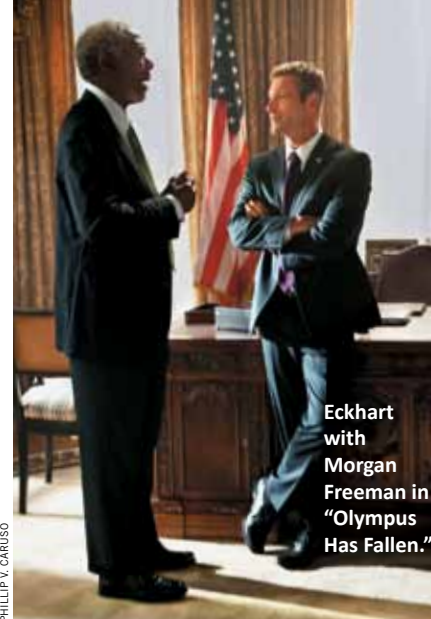
Does he follow politics? A born and raised (if self-described "lapsed") Mormon, Eckhart paid close attention to the recent presidential election, as well as to the rise and fall of Republican nominee and devout Mormon, Mitt Romney. But don't expect him to share his views on politics, or on religion, either. "I'm an actor," he answers simply. "And I don't think political insiders care much for what I have to say." He is, however, more than pleased to plug the charity he supports, emergency first-responders *Americare* (*americare.org*). "They've done a lot of good work with Haiti, and [the 2011] tsunami in Japan, and in the northeast this year with Hurricane Sandy," he explains.

Still, he'd rather focus on his craft, and there is much to discuss. Eckhart has acted opposite a Who's Who of Hollywood heavyweights,

including Julia Roberts, Sean Penn, Gary Oldman, Renee Zellweger, Johnny Depp, Nicole Kidman, Gwyneth Paltrow, Hilary Swank, Cate Blanchett and Ben Affleck—and that's the short list. So, if casting were his sole decision for his next project, with whom would he next appear?

"As an actor, you want to go back to what Spencer Tracy did with Katherine Hepburn on film," he says. "Find that one woman who you can make several movies with. I think the actor I would most like to work with is Angela Jolie or Kate Winslet, someone who's really great and takes her craft seriously and strives to be the best. And I'd love to do a comedy!"

His personal goals couldn't be less grand in scale. Rather than aiming to be the biggest boldfaced name off-set, this leading man is happiest traveling quietly between his homes in Los Angeles and Santa Barbara, Calif., where he spends ample time at the beach and in the waves hanging ten as "an old man surfer," or escaping to his retreat in Montana, far from the



Eckhart with Morgan Freeman in "Olympus Has Fallen."

PHILIP V. CARUSO

prying eyes of the paparazzi.

"I'm a passionate street photographer," he says. "I like to capture people who are not aware. That, to me, is the most exciting thing that one can look at. I'm not interested in models posing and all that—that's beautiful, don't get me wrong—but what I'm interested in capturing is unconscious life."

He's had plenty of opportunity to study a wide range of people safely from behind his lens, and in many different climes. A citizen of the world, Eckhart was born in California, but spent his teen years in England and Australia; he's lived in Hawaii, Utah, France and New York City, too. His roles have sent him to far-flung locations across the globe, and it's a way of life he's resigned himself to, even if he's still not entirely comfortable living as a nomad.

"I feel like I don't have a home," he says when asked where "home" is. "As a kid, I never enjoyed the circus, and I feel like the irony of life is that I joined the circus. If I get a call today and that call takes me to South Africa or Eastern Europe, then I'll be on a plane tomorrow. That's just my life."

Speaking of planes, Eckhart has fallen in love with them. "Maybe it's a midlife crisis," he laughs, "but I really wanted to learn how to fly. I have a place in Montana, and I want to fly to Montana. I like the solitude of it, I like the machinery, and I like the accomplishment of doing it. One percent of all people can fly, and less than that actually do it."

So as he works toward earning his solo pilot certificate—he's nearly there—at a small airport north of Los Angeles, does he dream of the destinations he has yet to explore?

"Definitely," he says. "I've never made it to South America, or Machu Picchu in Peru! Brazil, Argentina! I've been everywhere else, really. Maybe I'll try to go and do that." And then—ever the reflective actor—he adds: "And I guess knowing my own soul. I'll try to get to that place, too." 🌍