Interview with Lee Thomas
April 19, 2012
Chapter#1: Lee Thomas' Unusual Arrival at EPA

Kerry Clough: Welcome Lee. Lee M. Thomas, was the 6th Administrator of EPA. Some would say he was the 5th, if you don't count Ruckelshaus twice. But, he comes from an amazing background of public service. When the White House first tapped him to come over and work at EPA he was a senior manager at the Federal Emergency Management Administration and in March of 2000, 18, 1982 as I recall, getting these decades straight.

Lee Thomas: 83

Kerry Clough: … 1983 he was asked to come over to EPA, it was in a bit of trouble at the time, with a team of other senior folks from around the agency and help Administrator Ruckelshaus put the agency into a good situation again. And so you came over and you did that for a couple of months and then the President nominated you to be Assistant Administrator for the Office of Solid Waste and Emergency Response and you accepted that. The Senate confirmed you, and you served in that post as Assistant Administrator for two years while Administrator Ruckelshaus was the Administrator. Then when Bill Ruckelshaus decided that he had done what he needed to do, he convinced, as we understand it, the President that you were the man to follow him. And President Reagan had the good sense to agree with that, and you were then nominated and confirmed by the Senate and served four years, a full four-year term, and left EPA in a very good position in January of 1989. And so welcome and thank you for being the first in this hopefully august series of oral interviews.

Lee Thomas: Well, thank you, I'm looking forward to the interview.

Kerry Clough: Our first question is, you brought your lovely wife, Dorothy, with you today, from Florida, so would you tell us a little bit about, are you living there now? And what have you been doing since you left EPA?

Lee Thomas: Gosh, we've been doing a lot. After I left EPA, I ended up managing an environmental engineering company with offices around the U.S. and out of the U.S. for about 5 years. I was then recruited and went into Georgia Pacific, a large forest products company. I went in managing their engineering environmental programs and a variety of other programs over a 13 year career with them. I managed all of their different businesses at one time or another and for the last several years was President and Chief Operating Officer.

I then retired for about a year and took a job as CEO of Rayonier, another forest products company, a large timber company, with headquarters in Jacksonville. So I had been in Atlanta, Dorothy and I had been in Atlanta for a long time. We moved to Jacksonville, and that was five years ago. I retired, just now as a matter of fact, and Dorothy and I now live in Jacksonville, and I'm beginning to enjoy retirement. I will actually retire as Chairman of the Board in May of this year, so next month, and retire as CEO in January. So, I've had a great nearly 25 years in business since I've left EPA after 20 years in Government, the last 6 of which were with EPA.

Helga Butler: Wonderful. We want to reach back before all of that and ask you how did you get interested in public service?

Lee Thomas: You know, I think probably it was pretty natural for me. Both of my parents were always very active in the community. My father, I remember, was Chairman of the School Board. He was the Mayor of our town for 12 years. I was actually elected and served on the Town Council of the town. My mother was then Mayor of the town for 12 years. So, it was kind of a natural part of our family to be active as far as public service community service. And, I actually began my career as a juvenile probation officer. I worked in the adult prison system, I worked in criminal justice for many years. I ended up working for 3 governors in South Carolina, 2 Democrats and a Republican, responsible for criminal justice and planning and operations and ultimately public safety, which included criminal justice but also emergency management. It was the emergency management that brought me to Washington. I came to FEMA with the Reagan administration through a good friend of mine in California who recommended that they consider me for the job because of my field experience. And, I was there for about 18 months. I was the Associate Director of FEMA and then I was the Acting Deputy of FEMA. And it was that position I was in when the White House asked me to come over to EPA on a 90-day detail, and I was there for 6 years.

[Laughter]

Helga Butler: Others have done that.

Lee Thomas: Funny how that works out.

Kerry Clough: I think you brought one of my old colleagues along with you, Jack Mcgraw from FEMA.

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Lee Thomas: You know, Jack, what a great guy, Terrific. Jack was working with me at FEMA. he was one of the senior managers in the disaster assistance program which I had responsibility for. No, I actually came to EPA before Bill Ruckelshaus. I came with a group of 4 people, 3 other Assistant Administrators came with me, and we came over with the charge from the White House to help get EPA get back on track, and to help Anne Burford do that, who was Administrator. But it was only a few weeks before she resigned. I was the Acting Assistant Administrator for Solid Waste Emergency Response, the job that Rita Lavelle had had. Rita had left the agency at that point. And so when Anne resigned, John Hernandez who was the Deputy, was actually named the Acting Administrator for a brief period of time. Then John left, and I was named the Acting Deputy Administrator and Lever Standig was named the Acting Administrator. Well, Lee indicated he was leaving on vacation, so I remember that next week I was the Acting Administrator, Acting Deputy, and Acting Assistant Administrator and I still was holding 2 jobs at FEMA. And people said you're Reagan's answer to the budget crisis. Just have a guy fill a number of jobs. It was a wild time.

But fortunately the White House was able to convince Bill Ruckelshaus to come back to the agency. So after a couple of months of the 4 of us really working together to try to help get the agency back on track, we worked with Bill in terms of a plan to do that. He was then confirmed as Administrator again, and he asked me to stay as Assistant Administrator, and that's what I did. I worked for him for about 18 months until he felt things were in good shape; we were at the end of Reagan's first term and that's when I became Administrator.

Kerry Clough: Could you tell us a little bit more about what kind of instructions you got from the White House when you first went over there to act, and when they offered you the job as Assistant Administratorand put forward your name to the Senate?

Lee Thomas: Well, really, I was dealing with Craig Fuller, who was Assistant to the President for, basically, cabinet affairs, all the cabinet agencies. A great guy. I had, when I was at FEMA, been responsible and chaired a task force called the Times Beach Task Force. That's how I first became familiar with EPA -- matter of fact, that was my only familiarity with EPA. And so, we dealt with Times Beach, I actually ended up working with Rita Lavelle on it before she left. I interacted a little bit with Anne Burford on it, I had some really interesting interactions there. That's another whole chapter.

But, Craig Fuller was my point person when we were dealing with Times Beach. And so, a couple of weeks after we had concluded Times Beach, he called and said they were sending a team, he wanted me to go. I was very reluctant, frankly, about doing that, because really I didn't have any environmental background.

And he said, "Well, they were looking for management support, management assistance. "And by the way, I should report at 8:00 the next morning. [laughter]And he said, "Look, Lee, what you need to do is you need to get over there. We've got three other guys going with you, and y'all need to try to help get this agency back on track. "He said, "It is clearly off track, and you need to get over there and go to work."

OK. So I went, and in relatively short order I called back to Craig Fuller, probably within a week. I said, "Look, Craig, I'm down here, Assistant Administrator, I'd really like some help. These are great people, but can I have several people from the agency? "And I was able to get Jack McGraw -- I meant from FEMA -- Jack McGraw, Jim Macrus, Craig Anneer, those three guys I got to come over on detail. Every one of them said, absolutely. And every one of them ended up staying at EPA, and became great employees at EPA, every one of them.

So that's how I got there, that was the direction I got, and frankly that's the direction I took. I can tell you, though, when I became Assistant Administrator on an acting basis, what I did is I immediately turned to the career people, and I can tell you Bill Hedeman, Gene Lucero, John Skinner, Mike Cook -- those were the guys who immediately sat down with me and began to, basically, educate me on what these programs were all about.

I needed to get educated quick. There were six Congressional committees that were investigating the Superfund program at that point in time. We had a New York Times reporter, and actually in the office next to mine we had two FBI agents, who were in the middle of an

investigation the Justice Department was doing as to whether there had been a shredding issue at the agency.

So it was just a -- it was a -- it was chaos, and so we went - I went to work with the career people in the programs. How do we get the programs on the track that they need to be on? And that's what we worked on. And how do we respond to Congress, answer the questions they've got, and how do we do that fully? And we went to work on that, and I think we made real progress in that 18 month period of time.

Helga Butler: Speaking of career people, I wanted to add the note that one of the reasons why you became Administrator was because Bill Ruckelshaus thought you were the absolute best manager he had ever met. And a lot of career people felt that way too. You wouldn't have brought that up, but I think we owe it to you to say that, that you were greatly admired in the agency, not only in the past but still.

Lee Thomas: Well, I really appreciate that. I will have to return the compliment to Bill, though. He's one of the best people I ever worked for. I learned a lot from him, and I would call him "Mr. Integrity". He was a person where you always knew where he stood. He was fair, he was honest, he was trustworthy. He was a great leader.

Helga Butler: Same to you.

Lee Thomas: Well, thank you.

Kerry Clough: Let's shift now to when Bill Ruckelshaus was leaving, and I had mentioned in the introduction that he had convinced President Reagan to appoint you. But, he did a great job. I mean all of us who were career at the agency--I started in
public affairs as in intern right down the hall from him in his first rendition as Administrator--were always proud of the decisions he always made, and we were equally proud of all those decisions you made. But when he was ready to go he concluded the

ship called EPA had been righted. And when he was about ready to submit his resignation, that's when he went over to convince the President to appoint you as the Administrator. What sort of guidance or instructions did you get from the President or senior members of the White House as you were nominated for and then confirmed by the Senate to be Administrator?

Lee Thomas: Well it was interesting. Bill has asked me to come up to his office and told me he had been over to the White House and he had told the President he was resigning, and the effective date, and he said the President had asked him to give him a list of several names as Administrator. And he said "So I gave him 4 names" he said "but I told him he ought to appoint you". And I said "Well Bill that's a tremendous compliment" I said "and that's also a big surprise" and I said "The only bigger surprise would be if he did appoint me".

But sure enough, a couple days later I got a call from Jim Baker who was Chief of Staff for the President at that time. He asked me to come over to the White House. He said, "You know, Bill Ruckelshaus has recommended you to become Administrator, and I need to know whether that's something you're interested in doing." And I said, "Well I am interested in doing it, so let's talk about it" So I went over, and we talked about it. And I talked about the kind of things I thought were really important. At that point in time, there was a big issue about whether the agency's budget was going to be cut severely, As a matter of fact, there were rumors that's why Ruckelshaus was resigning, which it wasn't. But I told him. We talked about that, and I told him how important I thought it was that that might happen. I also told him how important I thought it was that major policy issues and we were in the middle Superfund reauthorization. I said that it's really important that I have the ability to talk to the President about major policy issues and get clear support on the things I think are important. I talked to him about people Ruckelshaus had brought in a great team of people. I told him I thought it was really important that we maintain a good team of people. I wanted to work with White House personnel, but I didn't want to get run over by White House personnel. So we talked about those kinds of things. And he said "I think all those things are very reasonable".

He said "So let's go in and talk to the President about it." So I went in with him, and it turned out both the President and the Vice President were there, and Jim told him we had a good discussion about it. I did want to move forward and become Administrator if the President wanted to do that, and we talked about the things I had talked about. The President said that that sounded like the right direction to him and the key from his point of view is that I would manage the agency exactly like Bill Ruckelshaus. And the Vice President was very supportive. So we left, and Jim said "All right, come on back to the office now, he said, "I'm going to pull

everybody together". So he brought in all the key people there in the White house Ed Meese, Fuller, Darman, Harrington from White House personnel, all the key people, and he said, "The President has decided to nominate Lee as the Administrator. He's going to do that in the morning." He said "Now, Lee tell all these guys what you and I talked about that the President agreed to". So I went back through my litany of things that were important that the President agreed to. It was quite a discussion when we got to the thing about people, but it was a clear understanding there. As a matter of fact that was when we had a good understanding about Jim Barnes being the Deputy, and, so sure enough, the next day they nominated me as Administrator and, as a matter of fact, I was Acting Administrator there from some time after Thanksgiving until I was actually confirmed the first part of the year in 85.

Kerry Clough: Another extremely interesting assignment from my end and Helga's, end if you'd comment on it, that the President gave you. In April of 1986 Chernobyl blew up and there was massive radiation exposure and it was drifting around the planet. The American public was scared, I guess the best way to put it. The President as we understand it asked you to take that on for the American public to look at the issue, keep track of what was going on and if needed put in place remedial measures to keep the American public safe. So this was put on top of your responsibility as EPA Administrator and you'd only been in the Administrator's job for 1 year and 2 months at that time. Could you tell us a bit more about that, your reflections and recollections of dealing with that extremely scary, emotional period in American history?

Lee Thomas: I remember it very, very well. I remember when it happened; I remember talking with people in the White House that morning. EPA had a radiation office. I talked about our capability, I talked about the relationship we had with the Soviet Union. We had a joint working relationship with the Soviet Union; I said if it's anything we can do here, you need to let us know. The President was actually out of town. He was in Japan for a major summit meeting and the Vice President was also out of town. So, anyway that was the discussion that morning. We were having a Regional Administrators meeting, one of our typical Regional Administrator meetings off site in West Virginia, and I got a call that afternoon, late that afternoon from the White House saying "Look ,this whole thing is a lot more serious than we realized, clearly there are being questions asked now about all the US dependants in Europe, military personnel, tourists, air traffic and what are we supposed to do? You're in charge and we've scheduled a press conference for 11 am tomorrow morning so you can explain what this is all about."

I remember I headed back from West Virginia. I remember I had a staff meeting in the office at 11:00 that night with a key group of people and really the relationships that I developed at FEMA as well as relationships that I had at EPA came to bear and we put together a team with a senior person from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) that I'd known well from my FEMA days, we had one of the senior people from NOAA for atmospheric chemistry on the team, had head of our radiation office on the team--a number of key people on the team. We got together early that morning. I talked to all of them about what the issue was, had someone from the Department of Energy who is responsible for facilities in some of our energy plants that related to this. The person from the NRC actually had visited Chernobyl and had been in the plant.

So anyway, we pulled together a team. We basically had the press conference at 11:00, it was in the State Department briefing room I remember it, and we laid out basically what this situation was, what the reactor was, what we knew, we also were able to, with the CIA who was on the team, reposition assets so we could actually look at what exactly was going on, we were able to monitor the population, so really brought all the resources together quickly. I think we answered a lot of questions right off the bat at that first press conference and then we had a press conference everyday and put out press information I think for 10 days--actually a written document--and so all of a sudden we were able to have, basically, the press begin to come to us for the data, for the information, for the facts as opposed to interviewing the man on the street. I think for one, it was very beneficial in terms to understanding what was going on, I think it allowed us to stay on top of the situation and to make proper decisions about our dependants in Europe. A couple things that came out of it:

(1) It was probably the most sobering experience I've had and I've been involved in a lot of different things but to know that this cloud of radiation basically was going to circle the earth in about 7 days, and it was going to show up on our West Coast and there was not one single thing any of us could do about it, and sure enough that's exactly what happened. We've got monitoring stations all across this country that monitor milk, water and air. Sure enough we picked up on it as soon as it came to the US and monitored it as it went across the US--very small levels not anything that would have any impact on health but it gave you such a sense of what kind of impact any kind of radioactive event such as war would have. It was very sobering to realize once it started there was nothing mankind could do about it in terms of the impact.

(2) A second thing that came out of it was I had been to Moscow with a delegation; we had 40 different joint projects with the Soviet Union, I knew Uri Israel who was my counterpart in the Soviet Union who had been there for years. I tried to fax him, telephone him, and send overnight letters to him offering any assistance from the United States and asking for any information back so that we could in fact get better data. I was not able to get a single response until 6 months later when he was coming to the United States with a delegation to review our projects when he said "one of the things we would like on the agenda is a response to your request for information about Chernobyl." Anyway, it was so typical.

Kerry Clough: Before we go to the next question I just wanted to tell you the reason why we wanted to ask these questions. All of us at EPA of course lived through that and understood the issue to some degree. I was just a citizen out there in Denver at the time, the way you handled this was so gratifying from being a EPA employee but also as a citizen. You didn't white wash

anything, you told the truth, you didn't tell the public that everything was peachy which would've been the easy way out. You told them the truth and that to myself and my friends and my family gave us trust in the government, so thank you, Lee, I appreciate it.

Lee Thomas: You're welcome. It was quiet of an experience. I'm glad it went well.

Kerry Clough: It did.

Helga Butler: The next question is not one quite as dramatic as the Chernobyl one, but nevertheless important to the agency, and that's Superfund and its reauthorization that you alluded to earlier, briefly. And we want to hear a little bit more about that. You were central in the development of the administration's position, and in fact you were given a seat at the Congressional conference, working out the different versions between the House and the Senate. And that was an unprecedented -- almost unprecedented -- position to be in, being from the Executive Branch. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

Lee Thomas: Well, Superfund obviously was a program I was responsible for, as Assistant Administrator, and a very complex, complicated, controversial program. But we had basically gotten the Superfund program, I felt, on track in terms of actually doing what it was we were charged to do: identifying sites, determining whether they needed immediate action, longer term action, working on the enforcement actions that were required. And so we were now at a point where we were beginning to look at the reauthorization. And that was when I was Assistant Administrator.

So when I moved on up to Administrator, I continued to lead the reauthorization effort. And it actually went on over a course of several years, a couple of years. We put together a team. A great example of the kind of teams that I thought were so effective, between political appointees, career people in the agency working together as one team on Superfund. It also included people from the Justice Department. We had the Justice Department, and EPA working together in a joint team on reauthorization.

And we had key components of reauthorization that was important to us. Joint and several responsibility, key elements of that law that we felt were critical. Because of the controversy, because of the history, but also because of the breadth of the law itself, there were numerous committees, both on the House side and the Senate side that were involved.

And so you had not only Energy and Commerce, you had Public Works, you had Senate

Environment. You also had committees like the Judiciary Committee, The Armed Services Committee. You had numerous committees in the House and Senate that all had a piece of the action, as far as this jurisdiction is concerned. So they all had hearings, they all made decisions. I was very actively involved on the house side with John Dingell, worked actively with John Dingell and a number of others -- Guy Molinari, any number of other members of the House. Worked actively on the Senate side with Bob Stafford and John Chaffee and George Mitchell. So it was a lengthy process, and myself, Linda Fisher, Elaine Stanley, Gene Lucero, any number of other people were actively involved on a team that interacted through this whole process.

And as we gradually made progress through each of the committees, we ultimately ended up with a conference committee, that had quite a bit of work to do, because there was quite a bit of difference between the House and Senate versions. And I can remember some of the conference committees -- you had, like, 60 members, who were there in a conference committee. And I remember one time, we had this gigantic room, with all these chairs for Senators and Congressmen. In the middle of the room there was one little table with one chair. And so we got there, and John Dingell was chairing this, and he said," Lee, we want you in that chair in the middle."And I said " Right out there by myself, huh?" He said, "Yeah, you've got to be the lightning rod."

So, it actually worked out, and we ended up with a very strong bill, and a number of new provisions in it -- some of which I didn't think would have much impact, but had tremendous impact. Like the information provisions, that you would provide mission information -- which at the time I thought, "Is this really going to have any impact? I think it's had tremendous impact, as far as industry is concerned. So, there were a lot of provisions in that, it was a long process, but it was one I thought was quite successful. It was also quite controversial within the administration. I remember going to -- we had probably at least two or three full cabinet meetings. And there was quite a bit of discussion about the elements of reauthorization. I got great support from Ed Meese, and ultimately great support from President Reagan for reauthorization. And so the administration, clearly -- I was representing an administration that was fully on board with authorizing a very strong law. So I think that's why I got to play the kind of role I got to play.

Chapter #4: Stratospheric ozone and Climate Change

Kerry Clough: Stratospheric ozone and the Montreal Protocol: Another one of the great successes during your tenure. Stratospheric ozone became a very serious, recognized issue because it had the potential for causing untold increase in skin cancers and other ecological problems in addition to human health. You were at the middle of it. You worked internationally, and resulted in the Montreal Protocol signed in 1987. And it's worked. The causes of the stratospheric ozone depletion, the aerosols, have been regulated; many of them are removed from commerce. And the holes over the poles are closing, and we are not seeing this huge increase in human skin cancers. Great success! Could you talk a little bit about how you got there? And I'm going to then ask you a follow-on question regarding climate change, which I think is related.

Lee Thomas: Well, stratospheric ozone was something that I would say we worked on for probably three years during my time, that resulted in the Montreal Protocol, and has subsequently been improved over time. And has worked. I first got involved in it and it was actually an effort that was underway in the policy office. Really looking at this issue. I first got involved in it - I didn't even really know what it was, it was a small part of a budget issue that came up - it was before I was even Administrator. It was when I was Acting Administrator before I had been confirmed, and it had been - the money for the work had been struck for the budget by OMB and their passback , and so I appealed it. And again, I remember talking to Fred Khedouri over at OMB, and Fred and I were able to work through it and so the money was put back in. And so I remember the policy, I was - coming up and talking to me about it, explaining it, kind of my first knowledge of the issue.

Well obviously it became more and more of an issue as it was developed, and I would say that you have to look back over those three years and say, "How did we get to the point that we actually concluded this international treaty?" And it's a great example to me of a number of things:

(1) I think science. I think that we really worked hard to develop good scientific information. And we actually had great support from NOAA and NASA. A guy named Bill Watson from NASA was a great scientist who participated with us on it. And ultimately we ended up doing an overall risk assessment sponsored not only by EPA but by UNEP, United Nations Environment Program. Mostafa Tolba who was head of UNEP at the time was a great leader on this. We had a number of conferences with scientists who came together, so I think ultimately science played a great role, and NOAA played a major role as far as policy within the administration, and I think it played a major role as far as the international community is concerned.

(2) The second thing is, international cooperation. Particularly I would say personal relationships and relationships that EPA had. We had a great bilateral relationships with the

Soviet Union. We had a great bilateral program with China. We had a great program with the Netherlands. So any number of other country we had worked actively with, and we had develop over time good personal relations. Personal relations - I knew most of the environmental ministers in a number of the other countries that were important, particularly some of the European ministers.

(3) And I think finally it was the structure that we felt needed to be put in place as the negotiations for a protocol proceeded. There was a lot of discussion about, "Well, the next step in this protocol would be to try to freeze emissions of the offending chemicals, the CFCs, and HCFCs , at current day's level." And that was where Europe was coming from. I remember sitting with John Hoffman and any number of other great guys in EPA who had worked this issue, and we said, "Really, the overall approach we need to take is phase-out of these offending chemicals. We don't need to freeze them, we need to phase them out. So why don't we take an approach that says our goal is to phase them out. And step one is to commit to at least a fifty percent reduction. And then let's recognize that there is uncertainty here. There is uncertainty. We are developing better science. We are developing better technology. We are developing a better understanding of the economic impact of what we are going to do. So let's build in a review process that as that addition information comes in, we can take that into account to determine, do we tighten it further than the fifty percent, do we go all the way to phase-out, how quickly do we do that? Are there things we are not taking into account today that we should?" So we ended up really proposing and working on a protocol that built that flexibility in.

But I will tell you where the fifty percent and phase-out came from. It came really from discussions. We were having discussions with NGO groups, we were having discussions with industry groups, and it really came to me from my discussions with industry groups. I became convinced they clearly had substitutes that they could develop. But they needed to have a clear sense that there was going to be a market for them. And that if you committed to a phase-out, at least that fifty percent, they would know there was going to be a market. And all of a sudden you would see the money go behind getting those substitutes into the marketplace. And in fact, that's what worked. That is what really worked. We got that first commitment in there and sure enough, in came the substitutes.

So anyway I would say it was a great team effort. There was an awful lot of work by a lot of people internationally, UNEP played a great role in it. The negotiations in Montreal were not easy. It wasn't going up and signing a document. We worked late into the evening trying to work through major issues. I remember when we broke one evening we were totally at odds. A small group was trying to get to a final conclusion. The US was on this side, and the European Union was on that side, not agreeing on basically a major step on phase-out. And we broke about midnight or one o'clock, and I remember we had an idea after we broke, and said, you know, "Maybe we could try something here." So we ended up finding Laurens Jan

Brinkhorst who was the senior person from the European Union negotiator, at a bar, having a beer. And so he and I had a beer together, and we ended up coming to conclusion on how we both could support a provision. And he said he would need to go back and talk to his country members - which he always said, that was the way he negotiated. And I said, "Well I will have to go back and check with the people back in the White House on this." And I said, "If it appears you are prepared and I am prepared, we will meet at eight o'clock in the morning, and go in, and we will both support this." So we both met at eight o'clock the next morning, we supported it, and we were able to get through that major impasse and move forward. So, there was a lot of discussion. For instance, with developing countries - the same issues you have on climate change, which is, "Hey wait a minute, all you guys have benefited from refrigeration. We are just starting." So we ended up having a ten year phase-in for them. They didn't have to really start the phase-out for ten years. So those kinds of negotiations went on, and ultimately ended up in a protocol that was signed, has in fact stood the test of time, and has in fact resulted in a dramatic change in the offending chemicals.

Kerry Clough: And opened up markets that weren't there before.

Lee Thomas: Absolutely.

Kerry Cough: On climate change, I want to ask you if you will dwell a little bit more on that. I may be wrong, but it looks like there are some similarities to the stratospheric ozone issue to climate change where what is causing the problem is invisible, doesn't seem to hurt you directly, unlike water or air pollution, that people could see and smell and taste and recognize quickly that there was a problem there. But with climate change, there has been a little progress, but really not a lot. Certainly not in the realm of what was accomplished with your leadership on stratospheric ozone.

And, in researching this assignment, I found an EPA journal of November 1985 that - one of the questions to you - this is an interview of Lee Thomas: "Do you see any major new environmental issues looming on the horizon?" And part of your answer was, in typical Lee Thomas fashion, "Only a simpleton would deny the possibility of some general planetary catastrophe," and you listed things such as nuclear winter, a runaway greenhouse effect, or some other mass biological 'dieback' or some such thing. But - and this is a quote directly from you, I assume, "sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof." You concluded this perceptive answer. But back in 85 you were listing greenhouse effects as a potential very serious issue that you were obviously already thinking about. Would you elaborate on that? But more importantly, how could we get from here to there? Like you got us from here to there on stratospheric ozone?

Lee Thomas: Boy I have wrestled with that question. Because I was asked that question

even before I left the Administrator's position, as we finished stratospheric ozone. And you know some of the chemicals that we dealt with have a warming effect as well, so there was some affect there. I guess as I look at global warming - and I have worked on it some since I left EPA, just in policy discussions:

(1) It is a far more complex issue. It has far greater economic impact in terms of the solutions. But it also has the potential of being a far greater environmental threat as well. I guess my sense is, if we were going to think about, how do we approach that problem - which I have thought a lot about, I would probably approach it in a similar fashion. I would do everything I could to continue to ensure that the science was the best science possible--that in fact I didn't try to make more out of the science than was there. I would try to be as factual as possible about what we know, what we don't know. But I learned about the precautionary principle when I was at EPA, and I am a real believer in it. And I think that, you think about that when you think about climate change. And I think the science in this case - at least to me, suggests it was an issue we need to deal with. But science would be a key part in my plan going forward.

(2) A second part of it would be, how do I frame a series of solutions that may well be a step-by-step approach, an incremental approach, with the flexibility built in that I was talking about on ozone depletion. Where we were trying to start a process with the ability to modify as we went along, with the full knowledge that this may not be everything that needs to be done, but it is where we need to start. And we know that technology is going to improve. We know that the science will improve, we know our understanding of economic impact will improve, and we are going to overtly talk about those things on a periodic basis and determine what is the next step. And then I think I would really work hard on how do I address the international aspects of this; how do I really bring together the kind of coalition, if you will, that we were able to bring together in Montreal. There was a small group of countries that drove that. There were countries who helped other countries understand. We sent a delegation of scientists to other countries to help them understand. In some cases we were pretty strong in our approach to get some countries to come to the table. I can remember talking about the fact that if we didn't get an international agreement, I was going to work as hard as I could to get a domestic agreement, and as a part of that domestic agreement I was going to work hard to try to restrict the import of any product that had CFCs in it. Now, I don't think i could have probably prevailed, but I sure as heck - I know Japan sure came to the table after that.

So I think the climate change issue is a very difficult issue to deal with, but a very important issue to deal with. Putting an overall strategy together as to how do we deal with it, I think the awesome lessons learned from stratospheric ozone - but I think it's much more difficult. I think you have to think about - I mean, think about stratospheric ozone. We dealt with that during the Carter administration, we dealt with it all in the Reagan administration, we

concluded it with the Montreal Protocol. So we dealt with it over a long period of time to get to that. It took us three years of negotiations to get that protocol. So we have been dealing with the greenhouse issue for quite a long period of time as well. We had a Kyoto agreement. We tried and we haven't been successful in getting an overall protocol. Progress has been made, but, you know, it is something we have to work over time, and how do you build a coalition to get it done is, I think, what we got to work on.

I do think a real complicating factor on the greenhouse issue is the polarization of science. On the one hand, from my point of view, the science seems overwhelming that there is an issue; that in fact we've got steadily increasing build up of CO_2, we know we have got methane - significant increases. We know we have got multiple sources around the world, we know we've got industrialization around the world that's going to continue to increase these emissions. The science seems to be relatively clear cut from my point of view, that this is a significant issue and going to be a significant issue. On the other hand, I have chaired panels - I chaired one panel with the PHD scientist from MIT who is a clear skeptic on the subject. And I said just what I got through saying. And he said why he was a skeptic; basically, that this is normal atmospheric change, that the climate over time does change, you are looking at a snippet. And a very convincing skeptic, which makes this difficult.

I can tell you on stratospheric ozone there were skeptics as well. There were science skeptics who said, "This is not a problem, this is not going to be a problem." Now, they were not able to develop the kind of, I think, the megaphone that the skeptics have developed on global warming. But I think it has to be - that, to me, has to be dealt with as directly as you possibly can. I think the scientists have to step up, have to participate in the debate, have to in fact talk about why the skeptic's position is not correct from their point of view. We have to have that dialogue. I know that on stratospheric ozone I had [Dr.] Watson you know. I had a key scientist there who was prepared to travel, and who was very articulate. I think you got to have that discussion, and we got to have that debate. I don't know any other way to deal with it.

Chapter #5: Management Style and Core Values

Helga Butler: This has been a fascinating discussion of major issues and moments in your tenure, but we also want to take a look at why so many people admire you, not just for your thinking, but also for your management style. Can you tell us about what your philosophy is, why people think you were so great and still are great. And, what are the sort of the core values that you think are important? Remember, we hope that we will also have EPA managers listening to this. Not just retired Alumni, but also maybe in other federal agencies. Can you talk a little bit more about the mundane side of being an Administrator?

Lee Thomas: First, thank you very much for that compliment. It's kind of embarrassing really.

Helga Butler: It's OK...

Lee Thomas: But, I can tell you a little bit about what I believe is important as far as leadership and management is concerned. And it has served me well in the organizations I have led both in government and in business. And it is several things: one, a real belief in core values. And in the businesses I run, over the last few years, I have spent more time talking about them, and I've spent more time making sure that each organization develops them and understands them well and lives by them. And I can tell you the four that I think are critical. And it's not just for leadership, it's for an organization.

First, is integrity. Integrity first. People really have to know that what you say is what you mean, that they can trust you, that you're honest, that you're fair in your decisions. So integrity is critical to a leader and to an organization.

Second, is a commitment to excellence. Excellence in everything you do. Whether it's the businesses that I ran that made a product and we were committed to quality in those products. Whether it is the services that were provided, services in an agency like EPA, a commitment to excellence. That your customers, the people you serve, know that they're going to get the best service from you, or the best product from you. So a commitment to excellence. And it's not just external, it's internal. So that if you're providing support, if you're an accountant who's providing support inside a company or inside an agency, excellence in what you do is just as important as it is to the person who is developing a product to sell on the outside, so a commitment to excellence.

The third is a recognition that people are the foundation of success of any organization. The people in the organization are why the organization is successful. And your commitment to those people is, has got to be paramount. So whether it is recruiting the right people, training the right people, recognizing and rewarding people for the work that they do, great succession

planning, spending the time to communicate with people so that they not only, you not only get their input, they understand what it is we're trying to do, the decisions you make, why you made that decision. So, people. Spending time on people and with people, in your organization.

And finally, the fourth value that I think is critical is accountability. Understanding your authority at every level of the organization and embracing the responsibility that goes with that authority. So, I've got to make a decision. I'm a site manager for a superfund site. I'm the decision maker. I understand I have the authority. I'm going to make those decisions. But I understanding also that I'm accountable for the decisions I make. So, I'm the Administrator of EPA, I have tremendous authority. As a matter of fact, I used to say, "More authority than a good man needs, and definitely more authority than a bad man should have." (Laughs)

But clearly understanding the authority I had, accepting the responsibility for exercising that authority and being accountable for exercising that, knowing that there were going to be a lot of people who didn't like the decision I made. As a matter of fact, I remember Gene Lucero, when I first came into the agency was running the enforcement group in the Office Of Solid Waste And Emergency Response, and Gene said "Now Lee, one of the things you are going to find is you've got to make a lot of decisions down here." and he said "The environmentalists are not going to like what you do, and the industry guys are not going to like what you do, and you'll find some of the EPA people are not going to like what you do." he said. (Laughs) "So you you've got to be sure that you understand the decision you're making and feel comfortable with it." And I thought that was great advice. And I would say that's great advice you can give to just about anybody who understands their authority and takes on responsibility and is accountable for what is done. So those kinds of core values are critical, I think, to leadership, management of any organization and for the organization as a whole.

The other thing I would say is, it's always served me quite well, is get involved. Understand whether it's a business you're running, whether it's an organization in government you are responsible for. Understand the details, understand how that organization works, understand who makes the decisions. So if you're making policy or you're setting direction you know what it means down in the trenches, you know what it means out in the field, you know what it means over in the mill. So understand the details but be prepared to step back and take a look at the broad picture as well. Be prepared to delegate, but in fact, understand what you are delegating. So, those are the kind of things I think have served me well, probably a lot of other things, maybe I'll put it in a book one day. (laughs)

Kerry Clough: You Should, We'd all buy it.

Kerry Clough: When you Google Lee M.Thomas, what always comes up is the "Unfinished Business report." We all read it, we thought it was an extremely useful thing for us at EPA. You commissioned that analysis as the Administrator. What led you to ask for it? Were you surprised by the results that came out of it and do you believe that we have a mismatch between resources spent and allocated and risk reduction?

Lee Thomas: That was a report that was done largely by senior career staff in EPA. Dick Morgenstern had a key part in saying, "This is something we really ought to look at." A number of other people were involved in it. It made a lot of sense to me, as I had worked across all the programs, and no, I wasn't too surprised.

I must tell you that I think we have allocated resources not on a risk based approach often times, but at times more of an emotional approach. For instance, the Superfund program. The Superfund program, an important program, I think we've done good work across the country, but from a risk point of view, it just doesn't measure up, compared to some of the other risks. When you think of health risk and environmental risk and yet look at the amount of money we've put there, versus the amount of money we've put into some of our other programs.

You think about some of what we deal with over in the TSCA program or the FIFRA program and the risk associated with that or you think about some of the risks associated with the Drinking Water program or any of a number of other programs. Or ones we just talked about earlier, things like stratospheric ozone or climate change or those where, frankly, for years we put very little resources and very little effort to deal with some of those risks.

So, Unfinished Business was an effort to say, can we order from a risk point of view how we want to tackle these environmental problems. I don't think it's had a big impact. I think it had a big impact in terms of more understanding that there is a broader set of risks that we weren't addressing properly. I don't think it's had a big impact in terms of major reshuffling of resources. It was more of a "Well, we'll give more resources to this program" than "we'll give less resources to this program." Probably more like that.

It was quite threatening to some people--particularly, some of the constituent groups outside the agency. I remember getting some critical comments from some environmental organizations that felt like I was shortchanging some of the programs that they were

particularly focused on. I thought it was an important document. I still think it's important. I know there was a follow-on document as a matter of fact. BIll Reilly was active as far as looking at the same kind of issues. I still think it's an important issue for the agency and for the country.

Helga Butler: We've looked at a lot of issues during this discussion and moments and your management style. Looking back over your tenure, what do you think is your greatest accomplishment and then also maybe a little more challenging question, if you could do it over again is there something you would do differently?

Lee Thomas: Probably, the greatest accomplishment, I'd say [was] working with Bill Ruckelshaus to get the agency back on track. I'd have to say that was very rewarding to be able to do that. Then, I'd say some of the environmental issues that I've worked on that we've talked about, the Superfund reauthorization, getting the Superfund on track and getting it reauthorized and the progress that's been made there. Working on reauthorization of the Resource Conservation Recovery Act, a major direction. Implementing the underground storage tank program. Montreal Protocol that we talked about. reauthorizing safe drinking water, Clean Water Act. All these pieces of legislation, working through that and setting the course for the next five year or next ten years to really continue to make progress.

Then finally, I'd have to say, one of the things I felt good about, was working with Jim Barns and others in the agency to try to strengthen the agency. Whether it was the SES candidate program, whether it was SES mobility, whether it was working on how do we try to build a stronger information system. Putting together an interactive process between state environmental managers and EPA, really strengthening the institution itself.

I used to tell the political appointees that would come into the agency, I said "Look you're going to be here for awhile and you really need to think about two things while you're here. One is how are you going to make decisions for the programs you're responsible for." We'd talk about that and how I felt they needed to be made. I'd say, "The second thing is how you contribute to the strength of this agency after you're gone." I'd say, "This agency is far more important for the future in this country that just your short tenure here." And so, I feel we made some progress on that.

I frankly, would like to see us make some more progress on that today. But those are the kind of things I look back on. I can tell you 21 years in government, 23 years in business, the six years at EPA is the highlight of my career.

Kerry Clough: Looking ahead now, how have the nature of the issues and challenges facing EPA changed, in your view, since you were Administrator. What are the implications of that change and then, if you had a magic wand, what would you do about it?

Lee Thomas: Well, I think, if anything, the issues have become more complex. We've talked about climate change. I think, more controversial, if that's the case, although they seemed awful controversial when I was there. Maybe more controversial because we're dealing with smaller and smaller increments. We've reduced a heck of a lot of pollution in this country. Matter of fact, we probably don't talk enough about the progress we've made. So, as you get to those smaller and smaller increments and they seem to cost more and more, they become more and more controversial. So how do we deal with those and the controversy associated with that, I think is more of a challenge today than it was when I was there.

Probably the polarization in Washington. If anything, when I came to Washington and worked in the Reagan administration I can remember working on the Senate side with Bob Stafford and Lloyd Benson, a Democrat and Republican, hand in hand. I can remember a piece that Pat Moynahan put into the Congressional Record about me when I left, one of the greatest complements I got. John Chaffee, working with John Dingell, working with both sides of the isle on issues out of a conservative Reagan Administration, but we were able to work on it.

I have the sense now that there is such polarization that it's very difficult to do that, that the Administrator today would have a far greater challenge than I had because of this partisanship, if you will. So, that, I think, is much more of a challenge today, or appears to be. Clearly, I'm out of Washington and so my perspective is probably from a distance as opposed to what really is happening in the city, but at least that's a perspective of why I think it would be difficult.

Kerry Clough: Before we conclude….

Lee Thomas: By the way, the magic wand?

Kerry Clough: Yes?

Lee Thomas: I don't believe in them.

[laughter]

Lee Thomas: I think it's simple. I think it's just hard work. I think it's good management. I think it is the kind of values I talked about. I think it is making good sound incremental progress every day, that a stronger agency everyday.

Kerry Clough: And that's how you administered the agency.

Lee Thomas: That's my belief.

Kerry Clough: I recall making sure that when papers were sent from Denver, hopefully they were good enough for Lee Thomas' eyes.

Before we conclude, and we thank you for the time you spent with us, would you mind looking straight at the camera and offering some guidance, advice, to the current folks at EPA, who many of them will get to see this, not just the alumni who will get to speak with you this evening. I believe the current managers and staff would like to hear from you.

Lee Thomas: I think the EPA is an incredibly important agency for our future and our children's future. The work you do, therefore, is incredibly important. You should be proud of the agency you work for. You should embrace the values that I talked about in terms of how you carry out your work. I want to see us build a brand of EPA that is well respected across this country. As the agency that is indeed protecting the environment, that is doing that in a way that is sound in terms of science, in terms of good decisions that are made, fairness, honesty. I think that's the kind of approach that you can carry out. You're the people in this agency that in fact will build that brand. It is critical that you do that. I commend you for your work. I always pay attention to everything the EPA is doing and think back on all the people I worked with. Just great people in this agency committed to its mission. So, thank you for what you're doing.

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