

# Interview with James Thompson

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Interview # 15: March 30, 2015

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Monday, March 30, 2015. This is Mark DePue, the director of oral history at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today I'm in Chicago, sitting across the table from Gov. Jim Thompson. Good afternoon, Governor.

Thompson: Hello Mark, how are you doing?

DePue: Good. It has been way too long since we had our last session. Today is the fifteenth session.

Thompson: Yes, my memory has probably collapsed since then.

DePue: The last two sessions, I had a good time—

Thompson: I'll bet you did!

DePue: —hearing your stories about Adlai Stevenson.

Thompson: (laughs) They're all true too.

DePue: And occasionally, you see the Stevenson name getting in the press. But I wanted to start today with how you got recently mentioned in the press, retiring from Winston & Strawn.

Thompson: Oh, yeah.

- DePue: So what does that mean? Because I've gotten the impression, Governor, that you haven't been actively in the docket for a while anyway.
- Thompson: Well, that's true. I have been focusing my efforts at the law firm on mentoring young associates in the litigation practice. And to me that's very important, and I think it's very important to the firm. But a slight correction—I have not retired. I don't retire until January 31st of next year.
- DePue: So did I hear that wrong, or did the press report that wrong?
- Thompson: No, it's easy to miss the deadline, I think. And sometimes the stories didn't include it, or didn't put it very high in the story. So I'm there for the rest of the year, and then I'm there for two more years as a consultant. Not as a lawyer, but as a consultant, consulting with the managing partner on non-legal cases.
- DePue: Does that mean that you still get to keep your primo corner-office spot?
- Thompson: Yes. All that stuff—the office, the car, the staff—for three more years.
- DePue: So John Frier will still continue to work for you?
- Thompson: John's there until the end of this year. But it's time to get John a real job, so I'm going to work on that.
- DePue: He's been working for you how long?
- Thompson: Fifteen years in a one-year job.
- DePue: My understanding is that he thought that was a real job.
- Thompson: (laughs) Yeah, I'm sure he did. It's a great job, probably the best job in the state. But it's time for that boy to hit the real world.
- DePue: He's no longer a boy, he's a young man now.
- Thompson: Well, he's getting old.
- DePue: (laughs) That's a nice segue to how I wanted to start with you today. We just got done, last time we met, talking about the 1982 election. By that time, that was your third election. And once you finished that term, you were going to have ten years in office; you'd already had six. How would you characterize your relationship with the news media in 1983, after you get out of the election?
- Thompson: Excellent. I had some detractors in the news media, but I had some fair-minded reporters and columnists as well. I've been in public life for a long, long time—almost fifty-six years. And I have to say, over fifty-six years I have, with rare exception, been fairly treated by the media. And I've enjoyed

my relationship with the media, especially in the early days as a prosecutor. I had great media relations as a young governor, or a gubernatorial candidate running for the first time; a lot of the young reporters who covered that political campaign were friends of mine. Now, the longer you stay, maybe the harder it is; because the longer you stay, the more things you do. And you can be criticized for some of the things you do, because nobody in public life is going to have a trouble-free record for fifty-six years. But looking at that entire time, from the time I began as a young prosecutor until today, I think I would have to say I have been fairly treated by the media.

DePue: Did you get some of the major newspapers to endorse your campaign in '82?

Thompson: Yes. In my first campaign, I had every newspaper in the state except two. In the second campaign, I think I had every newspaper in the state. In the third campaign, we might have had some small fallout, but I can't remember who it would be. And the same with the fourth campaign.

DePue: So in '82, both the *Sun-Times* and *Tribune* came out and endorsed you?

Thompson: Right.

DePue: It doesn't seem to carry as much weight today, but in '82, did those endorsements matter?

Thompson: I think they did. In 2015, I think the endorsement of a gubernatorial candidate by a newspaper does not hold the power it did twenty, thirty years ago, when more people read newspapers and more people paid attention to the editorial page. But the last statistic I ever heard, and the one that stuck with me, is that only 3 percent of newspaper readers read the editorial page, 3 percent. So if they write an endorsement editorial in the closing days of the campaign and only 3 percent of the people read it, it's not going to do you much good. The real power of a newspaper editorial comes from its repetition by the campaign. There's always a commercial that goes up on television that says, in essence, "Jim Thompson's been endorsed for reelection by"—and they do a rolling screen of all the newspapers that have endorsed you.

Now, all of that together on a rolling-screen commercial is pretty powerful, I think. And it's made more powerful by the fact that your opponent, who didn't get any endorsements, can't answer it. Cannot answer it. What's he going to say, newspaper editorials don't mean much? He's not going to say that. So he's not going to say anything. That's the power of the endorsement. But that's the only power that I could see.

DePue: I'm going to mention one name to see if you have a memory of this individual, and that's Roger Simon, who I believe was writing for *Chicago Sun-Times*.

Thompson: Yeah. Sure, I know Roger Simon.

DePue: Not one of your supporters?

Thompson: He didn't like me, plain and simple. And I'll tell you why. There was an earlier time when I did a budget cut that he took offense to. I think it was in the mental health area; I'm not clear, but I think that's right. And ever since that, he would write as critical or even nasty columns as he could. He was at the *Sun-Times* in Chicago until he got fired, and then he went off. And now he is the chief political correspondent for *Politico*, the website thing. He went other places in between that. But he's never been a fan of mine, and I understand that. Not much I can do about it.

DePue: Do you remember any of the specific articles or incidents or issues that he was taking on?

Thompson: Oh, sure. He didn't like the mansion expenses, and he would write his articles about "Thompson's living royally while people are hurting" on and on and on. You have to live with stuff like that. It may offend you, but what's the point of letting that upset you, when other reporters are writing favorable pieces?

DePue: Can you recall any other reporters who were consistently negative about you or your administration?

Thompson: Not really. The guys in Springfield—Mike Lawrence, for example—who knew government thoroughly always wrote very fair columns. Mike Royko wrote fair columns, defended me; Steve Neal of the *Sun-Times*, the same way; Bob Wiedrich of the *Tribune*, same way. I'd have to say that they greatly outnumbered the Roger Simons of the world.

DePue: It doesn't seem to be as prevalent today, but back in the heyday when you were running for office, lots of political cartoons.

Thompson: Oh, yeah.

DePue: How did you fare in the political cartoons?

Thompson: Oh, I did okay. I always enjoyed them. There was a downstate cartoonist by the name of Campbell who did a lot of cartoons in my first campaign.<sup>1</sup> He was really good and really funny. He would poke Mike Howlett, and he would poke the Chicago Democrats, and he would poke me. But I treasured those cartoons; in fact, I collected them. That's back in the days when if you asked a cartoonist to give you his original drawing, they would do it. Today, of course, absolutely not, or they'd sell it. I must have ten or twelve Campbell cartoons framed; some of them are hanging in the house in Michigan, in the hallway. That was my first experience with cartoonists, and I really enjoyed

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Campbell (May 16, 1943–July 12, 2002) was a talented cartoonist from Monmouth who ran the Campbell Cartoon Service and served as the editorial cartoonist for the *Quad-City Times*. A car accident later in 1979 left him paralyzed, ending his drawing career. "William Campbell Jr.," *Quad-City Times*, July 15, 2002.

those. You could get some mean-spirited cartoons, I suppose, but I really don't recall any. There were cartoons that disagreed with you or poked fun at you or criticized you, but they weren't mean. If they were, I don't recall them.

DePue: Here's one of them. This is MacNelly at the *Chicago Tribune*, who was probably one of the most famous cartoonists.

Thompson: Oh, yeah.

DePue: And that's going back to the 1982 election. What I wanted to ask you here is—

Thompson: (laughs) Boy, that was true!

DePue: Yeah, it's a horserace.

Thompson: I'm carrying the horse.

DePue: You're carrying the horse. And the name of the horse?

Thompson: Economy. Yeah, there's no question. That correctly represents the state of affairs in the '82 race.<sup>2</sup>

DePue: What particular feature did they seem to overemphasize whenever they drew you?

Thompson: Oh, I probably had put on a little weight. Big Jim wasn't for nothing, you know. But then I would go on a diet. Ordinarily, if I was running for election, I'd be down. The reporters would say, "Are you going to run again? You're on a diet."

DePue: I've seen some others that seem to emphasize the jowls, if I can put it that way.

Thompson: Yeah, right. They were there. What can I say? As I aged, I got them, like a lot of other people.

DePue: They're always searching for something. For Governor Edgar—I can't remember his name now, but he always had a price tag hanging off his hair.<sup>3</sup> (Thompson laughs) I don't know if you remember that or not.

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<sup>2</sup> See James Thompson, interview by Mark DePue, December 18, 2014, for this cartoon and a discussion of the 1982 campaign.

<sup>3</sup> *State Journal-Register* cartoonist Mike Thompson usually drew Edgar with a price tag in his hair. Thompson explains why he created the price tag in Mike Cramer, "Poison Pen Pals," *Illinois Issues* (August 1994), 15. Jim Edgar, interview by Mark DePue, November 17, 2009, Volume III: 573.

Thompson: No! Well, that was a prominent feature of Jim. He had great hair, I've got to say. I'm jealous!

DePue: (laughs) He's not the only Illinois governor since then who had great hair. Although Governor Blagojevich now is rumored to have—

Thompson: Gray hair.

DePue: Instead of that deep black hair.

Thompson: Oh, gosh. I wouldn't be surprised if he's got gray hair. I'd have gray hair or white hair if I went through what he went through.

DePue: What were your emotions after you got past the election?

Thompson: The '82 election?

DePue: Yeah.

Thompson: It was a mixed bag, I guess. Great relief, because the vote count was so small election night; I mean, the official count was 5,074 out of more than three million votes cast. And if you ignore a couple of early races when the state was very small, back in the early 1800s, that was the lowest margin ever for a governor's race. I proudly claim it; to have won by any margin in 1982 was a significant achievement. Then in 1986, it bounced back up again. I've got the largest record in history, I've got the smallest record in history, and that's fine with me.

DePue: This is something of a teaser, but 1983 was not necessarily your easiest year to govern. But before we get to 1983, I did want to go back and clean up a few loose ends about 1982 that did not necessarily relate to the election campaign.

Thompson: Okay.

DePue: The first one relates very much to the budget problems that I think almost every state was facing at the time. July of 1982, you made some strong arguments about some of the issues and problems with Medicaid. Just to jog your memory a little bit here, you said that it was a lousy system and should be scrapped. And this is your quote, "The rules force the poor into highly priced institutions where they don't really want to be. If we started from ground zero, we could provide medical care to the poor at a lower cost. We could achieve it without the headache, heartaches, and money we put into it now. I think we ought to put together a decent program and take it to President Reagan."

Thompson: I think there were probably a number of governors back then that would have agreed with me. I wasn't the only governor in the country that was disappointed by Medicaid, and how it operated and how much it cost.

Medicaid dollars were up there on a par with educational dollars. When your budget was in trouble and you turned to the biggest items in the budget, it was education and Medicaid. There was a fair amount of fraud in Medicaid. And if you fast-forward to today, when the states were offered a deal by Obama, under Obamacare, to expand Medicaid in their states to allow more people into Medicaid, there was a fairly sizeable number of states who said no.

Now, they said no for a couple of reasons. One, obviously, was that the Obamacare plan picked up 100 percent of the Medicaid expansion costs for a couple of years, and then the federal aid dropped off. The states would have been stuck with an expanded program that they had to pay for. Others opposed it simply because they opposed Obamacare. But there's still not a lot of sentiment today among the governors—particularly the conservative ones, and there are a lot of conservative ones—for Medicaid, for the program. So I'm not surprised that that was my reaction back then. Obviously, nothing happened in response to it. Medicaid continued to grow in terms of the number of people that were in it. That's an obvious conclusion of a recession. And the costs continued to increase. That's just the natural way of things; as the economy moves on, things get more expensive each year. And that's certainly true today in Illinois.

DePue: Were they changing—"they" being the Congress or the federal level—changing some of the mandates that would also be expanding Medicaid during this time?

Thompson: You could get what they call Medicaid waivers. Governors would ask the federal government for a waiver of certain aspects of Medicaid, or relief from some of the mandates of Medicaid. And sometimes the feds would give you a waiver, and sometimes they wouldn't.

DePue: Was that your responsibility, the governor's office, to go after those waivers?

Thompson: Absolutely.

DePue: And how aggressive were you on that?

Thompson: I don't think we ever reached the point on Medicaid where we asked for a waiver. Other states did. Remember, even in the throes of a recession in '82, '83, compared to most other states, we're still a wealthy state. I mean, compared to a Mississippi, we're a wealthy state. And we can do a lot of things, even in tough times, that other states can't do.

DePue: When I do get to 1983, I certainly want to ask you more about the resources the state of Illinois had, because my understanding is in '82, '83, Illinois wasn't taxing as heavily as, let's say, a New York or a California.

Thompson: Yeah, true. Absolutely true. I don't think we should be punished for that. I don't think Illinoisans would say, "Hey, we're just dying to get up there with California and New York."

DePue: Were there other programs that were putting more and more pressure on the state budget over time?

Thompson: Public aid, which is a component of the state's programs for the poor. It's the other side of the coin from Medicaid, just different services. One is medical care, and one is income support. So that grows in a recession. And you have less and less to deal with the demands of education from kindergarten through the university system. And of course, it's the first place you go, after Medicaid, to find the dollars to balance the state budget if you don't have additional revenues, or even if you do.

DePue: So again, I want to postpone most of this discussion until 1983, because that's the strategy I've taken in putting the interview together. I think it's probably July 1, 1982, Central Management Services [CMS] was created.

Thompson: Mm-hmm.

DePue: Tell me about what led to the decision to create this new administrative bureaucracy for the state.

Thompson: As best as I can remember, it was an attempt to centralize a lot of the decisions regarding the operation and financing of the various units of state government under the control of the governor. One agency to coordinate purchases, to oversee how things ran under the different cabinet agency budgets—it just made more sense. In effect, it copied what the federal government had done earlier in creating the GSA, the General Services Administration, that I first encountered when I was U.S. attorney.

DePue: From your perspective, do you think it's worked the way it was designed?

Thompson: Yeah, I think so. I think so. State government today is so big, so diverse that the task of letting each department under the control of the governor maintain its own purchasing and other administrative and fiscal decisions would be kind of a difficult thing to follow and to control. So the governor, with the appointment of the director of CMS, has somebody he can turn to and say, "Fix this."

DePue: Next one, thirty some years removed, I can understand why you might not remember much about it, but in October 1982 there was a Tylenol poisoning scare.

Thompson: Oh, yeah, sure. I remember that largely because it was the big national news story of the day. Anytime consumer health is threatened, particularly through the delivery of a poison in a consumer good that most Americans buy, like

Tylenol—and the same would have been true of aspirin, it would have been true if it had been the delivery of food—that’s a big national story. And it focused on Illinois. So the manhunt, directed out of Illinois through the attorney general’s office, was a big deal—big story out of the state, big story in the state—and it became a big issue in the race for attorney general, Fahner versus Hartigan. And I remember Neil telling me, as an aside during the campaign, that he was absolutely convinced that we knew who the Tylenol killer was, and we were holding it until Election Day; then we would have Fahner triumphantly announce it, and Fahner would win reelection. (laughs) We’re not that smart or that good, I’ve got to say. And that’s what I told Neil. And it didn’t happen. Still officially unsolved to this day. It’s not why Fahner lost.<sup>4</sup>

DePue: Why did Fahner lose?

Thompson: I don’t know. Hartigan is a better ballot name than Fahner, especially when Fahner put his full name in there, Tyrone. I don’t know what that caused, but I’m sure it had something to do with it. Ty didn’t come out of politics, he came out of law enforcement. And Hartigan was a tough opponent.

DePue: Gosh, isn’t that where you came out of too?

Thompson: Yes, that is true. But I’m sure Ty would be the first to tell you he wasn’t really a natural campaigner.

DePue: Another public health issue tied to the early 1980s is the AIDS epidemic.

Thompson: Yeah.

DePue: What was the administration’s approach to fighting the AIDS epidemic?

Thompson: I think it was largely a reliance on the federal government, as many states did. States didn’t understand AIDS, though I’m sure the director of public health had some understanding.<sup>5</sup> And the states didn’t have the research and financial wherewithal that the federal government had. The federal government, at the beginning, wasn’t that savvy either, and didn’t pay very much attention to the campaign. Once the National Institutes of Health got into it, once more pharmaceutical discoveries were made and drugs came out that made it a controllable disease rather than a death warrant, once the public education campaign on safe sex got really established—that’s when the tide began to turn. But at the beginning, very few people knew what it was or how it occurred. It was called a “gay disease.” But the states didn’t really have any

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<sup>4</sup> For an account of events during this scare, see Tyrone Fahner, May 5, 2015, and Bernard Turnock, April 16, 2014, 39-45. Both interviews by Mike Czaplicki.

<sup>5</sup> For Illinois’ response to AIDS, see Turnock, April 22, 2014, 88-92; Jeffrey Miller, July 7, 2015. Both interviews by Mike Czaplicki.

resources to deal with it, other than educational attempts. Not until the drugs came along could you really mount a campaign against the disease.

DePue: Do you remember issuing any public statements to try to tamp down the fear that was prevalent in the public at the time?

Thompson: No. If I did, I don't remember them.

DePue: Do you recall if there was any legislation that you would have passed at the time?

Thompson: I don't recall that.

DePue: The next one you might recall because it's the one time the governor can show he's doing something, and that's disaster.

Thompson: Oh, the governor can always show he's doing something.

DePue: The flood of 1982 in December along the Mississippi and the Illinois Rivers. Do you recall that one?

Thompson: Oh, we had lots of floods, yes.

DePue: Does that stick out in any way, though?

Thompson: They're both big rivers, especially the Mississippi. And so the bigger the river, the more damage that's going to occur, obviously because the volume of water is greater. And the closeness of agricultural fields and the closeness of small towns and villages on the Illinois; even the bridges and the other structures that line the river are involved.

The state has some assets to deploy. The National Guard can keep order when disaster strikes, and prevent looting, for example. The National Guard can help with sandbagging. I think we even had prisoners doing some sandbagging. And people will turn out to help their neighbor in a flood. All the people who live along the river are similarly affected, so it's not hard to drive community support for those kinds of things—filling sandbags, deploying them on the banks of the river to the extent that it impedes the river's rise. And then declaring a state of emergency, asking the president to declare a natural disaster area, which unleashes the power of the federal government and the FEMA workers. Getting the insurance companies involved early, if people have flood insurance; a lot of times, they don't.

On some of the smaller rivers—the Illinois maybe, and the Kankakee sticks in my recollection—people will return to live on the river again and again, even though they've gone through two, three, four floods in their lifetime. I mean, they're not called "river rats" for no reason. And that's an affectionate name. They just want to live by the river, and they're willing to

expose themselves to the occasional disaster, the occasional flood. They'll get in their rowboats and float around, or they'll climb up to the top of their house and drink beer. I've seen this. (laughs) And it's a cultural thing. Now, obviously, there are dangers in floods. But it's engrained in some people that, by God, their daddies lived by the river, and they're going to live by the river. And they come back again and again. It's very hard to persuade people not to live in flood-prone areas.

DePue: Do you recall if the state had any legislation to try to discourage that?

Thompson: I don't recall.

DePue: Flood insurance is essentially federally supported, so it makes it not as much of an Illinois issue.

Thompson: That's correct. And the federal government, in addition to supplying the insurance, has in recent times been more strict about denying flood insurance to people who live in flood plains. The federal government is not about to pay off again and again and again and again. But they were colorful events, for sure. It was my obligation as governor to be first on the scene, to be in the boat, to be in the rain gear, to help with the sandbags, and to assure local officials that help was coming.



It's the same thing with a tornado, which is even more deadly, I think. It's the governor's job to show up at natural disasters. You are the face of the state.

You are the representative of all the people. And if some of those people are hurting, it's your job to be there and try and ameliorate the hurt.<sup>6</sup>

DePue: Anything else in 1982 that we haven't addressed? Again, the main focus is the election.

Thompson: Yeah, but wasn't it in the post-election legislative session where the legislature gave me those sweeping budget powers?

DePue: To include the authority to cut 2 percent from the state budget due to the budget shortfalls.

Thompson: They gave me the power and left town, is what they did. Then Neil Hartigan sued me, saying that it was unconstitutional and I shouldn't have that power.

DePue: Sued you?

Thompson: Yeah, as governor.

DePue: Why? Because you had bargained to get that power?

Thompson: No, no. He thought it was unconstitutional for one man, the governor, to be able to have that much power over the state budget. The act which gave me the power, I was the last word. Ordinarily, when you cut the budget, it goes back to the legislature; they're the last word. It's their job.

DePue: But the legislature gave you the power.

Thompson: They gave me the power because they didn't want to do it. They didn't want to go back to their constituents and say, "We cut mental health, we cut public aid, we cut Medicaid, we cut children's aid, senior's aid," all that. But yeah, we'll let the governor do it, sure.

DePue: Well, isn't his issue with the legislature and not with the governor's administration?

Thompson: Yeah, but I had the power, so he had to sue me. And I had to have my own attorney as a special assistant attorney general to defend me. But I had a great lawyer.

DePue: Okay, wait a minute here. The attorney general sues you, and the special assistant to the attorney general defends you?

Thompson: If the attorney general sues me, I, as governor, am entitled to defend. And since only the attorney general can defend the governor, he has to appoint

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<sup>6</sup> Undated photo in Boxed Photos, Thompson Office Files.

someone as a special assistant to the attorney general and put him way out here so he's not under the AG's control.

DePue: Somebody who wasn't, at that time, part of the attorney general's office?

Thompson: Right, it's always a private attorney.

DePue: Who did he select?

Thompson: It's who I selected. You can't have the other side in a lawsuit select your lawyer, *no*.

DePue: That's what I was curious about.

Thompson: I selected Sam Skinner.

DePue: And what was the result of the lawsuit?

Thompson: The Supreme Court threw out Hartigan's suit, and I cut the budget.

DePue: So this one must have moved very quickly.

Thompson: Very quickly.

DePue: Within a month?

Thompson: He filed suit in Cook County circuit court. The trial judge held that it was unconstitutional, and I appealed. And the trial judge had entered an injunction preventing me from cutting the budget. The Supreme Court, while the appeal was pending, gave me the authority to cut most of it, holding back only about \$50 million on mental health, I think, or maybe some part of Medicaid. But when I won the case in the Supreme Court of Illinois, that ban dropped away. So I had the undoubted power in the early months of '83 to cut the budget by myself, and let me tell you, that was a really tough job.

We were in the midst of the worst recession since the thirties. And there were so many competing interests and so few dollars, I would be in the mansion with my budget people, with my policy people, until midnight or 1:00 in the morning, weighing whether we should cut this or cut that. One time they presented me with the issue of whether we cut funds from the program that buried poor, dead people or cut funds from Medicaid that cured sick people. That was the choice that was presented to me. And I decided to bury the poor, dead people. There was no other way for them to be taken care of. It was stuff like that. It wasn't a lot of fun, that was for sure. But it had to be done because the resources of the state were so sparse and the need was so great. And this is before any consideration of a tax increase was out there.

- DePue: You have to fix the hole that's in the budget for the current fiscal year, then turn right around and start planning for the fiscal year 1984, correct?
- Thompson: Correct. Just like Governor Rauner. Only his numbers are bigger.
- DePue: And Governor Rauner did get some of the same kind of powers just within the last week, did he not?
- Thompson: No. He did a deal with the legislature, where they did an agreed budget. He gets to cut 2.5 percent from his agencies. His agencies.
- DePue: Which is the vast majority of the state government.
- Thompson: Yeah. And he got a \$1.3 billion Band-Aid for this year's state budget by getting a sweep of state funds just short of \$1 billion, I think.
- DePue: I think it might have been more than that.
- Thompson: Maybe it was. Maybe it was \$1.3 billion in a sweep, and then \$300 million in the 2 percent cuts. I guess that's it. So he had some revenue. The vast majority of his plan was revenue that was sitting there in these dedicated funds. I didn't have that.
- DePue: Since we're in this neighborhood, Governor, (Thompson laughs) and for those who might be listening or reading this fifty years from now, a very quick explanation of what went on here in the last year and a half or so: Gov. Pat Quinn was hoping to be re-elected, and his last budget was based on the assumption that the income tax increase would continue.
- Thompson: Look, his last budget was a total fraud. Just a fraud. It was a six-month budget designed to get him past Election Day, and to get the legislature past election day. They both participated in this fraudulent budget; six months' worth of funds, but then his agencies spent as though they had a year's worth of funds. So you knew by the time the sixth month was up, state government would be broke. It was deliberate, no question about it. Nobody defends that budget. It's a fraud. And it left his successor—he thought it would be him, but it wasn't him—it left Rauner with a \$1.6 billion hole. Next year, he's got about a \$7 billion hole. That's going to be really tough. That's a big chunk.
- DePue: Since we're talking about the budget and the state of the economy, you just mentioned yourself it was the deepest recession since the Great Depression. To start the discussion for 1983, I want to take a snapshot of where the economy was. Inflation was 3.2 percent in 1983, and that surprised me. But that's a result of Paul Volcker's very aggressive policy on tight money, and I'll pick that up here in just a little bit.<sup>7</sup> That's much better than it had been in

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Volcker was chair of the Federal Reserve.

the '80, '81, '82 timeframe. Unemployment nationally was 9.7 percent, and 11.7 percent for Illinois at the beginning of 1983.

Thompson: Mm-hmm. Do you know what interest rates were?

DePue: Interest rates at that time were 13.24 percent, down from the high of 16.63 percent in '81. That was Paul Volcker's way of pushing down the inflation rate.

Thompson: All I remember is that the closer we got to Election Day in '82, the worse the statistics were, whether the statistics were unemployment, or interest rates, or the decline in revenue.

DePue: Or the increase in Medicaid, maybe?

Thompson: Yeah. You'd pick your economic statistic in the last three months of 1982, going to the election, and it was horrible. That's why no other governor in the Midwest ran for reelection, Republican or Democratic. They all quit. There was only one dummy out there! (laughs)

DePue: And that's why the cartoon of you carrying the horse on your back.

Thompson: You got it! That was pretty smart.

DePue: I don't want to get too far beyond the discussion about unemployment without asking why Illinois' rate was two percentage points higher than the national average.

Thompson: Because Illinois's economy was much more tied to manufacturing than many other states; Illinois's economy was much more tied to exporting than many other states. While the diversity of our economy surely helps us, when you have a big chunk of your economy tied to manufacturing jobs which are the first to go, when people aren't making any sales, that's what happens.

DePue: The ones that were getting hit are companies like John Deere, Caterpillar, International Harvester?

Thompson: Yeah, sure. Because that's a double hit if the farm economy is down, as it was. Farmers are not buying equipment, so Deere and Caterpillar get hit more than a factory, maybe, that's making a product that's needed daily. Farmers can put off equipment purchases and go with their older equipment a lot longer than a lot of other factories can, or a lot of other sections of the economy can do.

DePue: Was John Block already working for President Reagan by this time?<sup>8</sup>

Thompson: Yeah, he was.

DePue: I wonder if you can reflect a little bit about what the underlying problem was in the agriculture community, especially with the credit crisis that they had.

Thompson: The farm economy depends on a number of variables. Sure, everybody's got to eat every day. But the farm economy is especially, especially dependent on credit, whereas many other sectors of manufacturing are not necessarily that dependent on credit. The farm economy also has got a great deal to do with the ability to export. If other countries in the world are facing the same kind of recessionary forces that the U.S. is, they're not buying as much grain as they had previously. So there's a double whammy in agriculture, which is really export-focused. It works for so many years to build up the export side of the business, and then bam, when recession hits, it becomes a burden rather than a blessing. Of course, agriculture affects greatly the local economy all through the state. If the farmers aren't buying new equipment, they're not buying a lot of things. So manufacturing in other areas goes down, and your unemployment goes up.

I used to get the statistics every morning through September, October, right up to Election Day—everything was going the wrong way. I had a loan from my bank, because the governor's job didn't pay that much and I was maintaining a house in Chicago as well as a mansion in Springfield. The interest on my loan, which was a variable interest loan, kept going up. And I recall getting off the plane at Meigs in Chicago, and there was a call from my banker. I went to the phone booth and called him back, and he said, "Well, I'm sorry to say, but I have to raise the interest on your loan." I said, "To what?" And he said, "Thirteen percent." I thought I would fall down. Thirteen percent! Wow!

So I knew what was happening to everybody else out there. And you could see it in the faces of the trade unionists—the plumbers, the carpenters, the printers, you name it. Their membership was really hit hard. Some unions had 50 percent unemployment. They were just being decimated. But you know what? They voted for me in that squeaker election. Chicago labor voted for me.

DePue: Did you get the farm vote too?

Thompson: And I got the farm vote too. Chicago labor and Chicago ethnic communities and downstate Republicans saved me in '82.

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<sup>8</sup> Thompson's first director of agriculture, who left state government to become President Reagan's secretary of agriculture in 1981.

- DePue: Was this the same time period that there were farm foreclosures?
- Thompson: Sure.
- DePue: Bankruptcies?
- Thompson: Sure.
- DePue: Another part of the pain and anguish in those farm communities, then.
- Thompson: Yeah. But people knew that I understood the pain they were going through, and that I was doing everything possible to help them. You'll recall that I said I took the recession and made it one of my rallying points with my re-election slogan, "A tough leader for tough times," and there was no sugar-coating it or glossing it over. It was right out in front. I decided, If you can't beat 'em, join 'em. You can't pretend to people that these bad things are not happening, and you cannot conduct yourself in a way that doesn't show you're fighting with everything you've got to help them. And I was.
- DePue: I'm glad you took some time for the two of us to discuss the national economy, because that was part of the election campaign that we really didn't have time to flesh out last time, and it's extremely important.
- Thompson: It was awful.
- DePue: Do you remember anything about the inauguration in 1983? This is your third now, so maybe they start kind of blending together?
- Thompson: Yeah, sure they do. I guess you remember more about your first than your second or third, that's natural. Samantha was four plus, and was a big part of our lives. Other than that, I think the inaugural was pretty much like the first two. You did the same things—the same balls and affairs and parties, and swearing in, and inaugural speech—that you had before. Those are pretty much set by rote.
- DePue: The beginning of any administration, there is going to be some changeover. And it looks like one of the things that changed, I'm not sure exactly this timeframe, but you lost Art Quern.
- Thompson: Yeah. Well, here's a guy who I got from Nelson Rockefeller, so he had been in public service before he came to me. And then he was, what, six years with me?
- DePue: As the chief of staff?
- Thompson: No, he started as public aid director. In the middle of that period, he moved to chief of staff. So he had been in government in Illinois for another six years. At some point, for financial and personal reasons, you've got to go to the

private sector. He had kids, and they were growing up. So it's not surprising that guys like Quern would go.

DePue: How would you describe his management style? I mean, that's a critical position in any administration.

Thompson: I thought he was superb. He was very smart. He liked people; he got along with people. He knew how to navigate the bureaucracy. He knew how to navigate the legislature, along with John E. Washburn, the legislative aide. Another smart guy. He understood the code agencies and how to work with them, since he had been a director of a big agency.

DePue: What do you mean by "code agency"?

Thompson: Like Public Aid or Revenue—a cabinet agency is a code agency. So he was terrific, and I think most people regarded him as terrific. He was a square shooter, and people liked him.

DePue: Did you make any attempt to try to convince him to stick around?

Thompson: I couldn't. You know, that's not fair. It just isn't. I have never, ever tried to talk people out of leaving government service, because that's unfair; because that's a selfish act on my part. I'm pitting my need for the person against the person's need to do something else, and that's not fair. I've never done it. When people are ready to go, they know. And when they tell you, all you can do is say, "I'm really sorry to lose you; yours will be hard shoes to fill. But I understand why you're doing it, and I wish you great success." That's all you can do.

DePue: If I can characterize it this way, Governor, you seem to take great pride in your bag men, I think that's the term you call them—

Thompson: Yeah, sure.

DePue: —spending some time with you and then moving on and becoming successful.

Thompson: Right. Look at my only failure, Fifteen-year Frier. And by God, I'm going to do something about that. (laughter)

DePue: So who do you turn to, then, looking for a new chief of staff?

Thompson: Jim Reilly. I think he started as an alderman in Jacksonville? I think that's right.

DePue: I think it's Jacksonville, right.

- Thompson: Alderman in Jacksonville. Actually, that's how Greg Baise started.<sup>9</sup>
- DePue: I think he came into the legislature about the same time as Jim Edgar did.
- Thompson: Yeah. I thought Jim Reilly was a very smart guy who was well-regarded in the General Assembly. And of course, when I can poach somebody from there, I do it. I did it with Edgar, and I did it with Reilly. Didn't he run legislative relations in there somewhere?
- DePue: I should know the answer to that. I don't recall.
- Thompson: I don't think he came directly from the legislature to chief of staff. I think he was somewhere in the administration.<sup>10</sup> He became Quern's successor because while they were culturally very different—Art Quern, Mr. Smooth from Nelson Rockefeller's staff, and Jim Reilly who was the alderman in Jacksonville—they were both smart and they both understood how government operated. And they knew how to work the levers of power. So even though it was a different person in that office, the talent that I got from both guys was the same.
- DePue: You've piqued my curiosity. How would you describe Reilly's personality and his management style?
- Thompson: I think he was a little more excitable than Quern. And he came from the legislature. Quern came from the bureaucracy. So that was a difference. The guys who come from the legislature have a distinct style that's honed in the legislature and the legislative process. But that doesn't necessarily burden them. In fact, it can be an advantage if what you're doing at that period of time depends a lot on legislative achievement, legislative dealings. And Reilly was very good about that, obviously.
- DePue: So was he dealing a lot with the legislature or primarily with the rest of your staff?
- Thompson: He dealt with the rest of the staff, sure. But even though you had a legislative representative, if you've got a chief of staff who came from the legislature, you're certainly going to employ them along with the others. I think he was on Appropriations when he was in the legislature. I'll bet he was. And if you're on the Appropriations Committee in the legislature, you soon learn a lot about the government agencies. You're reviewing their budgets, so you get to know heads of departments because they come up and testify before you in the appropriations process. So he had some good experience. And since the early

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<sup>9</sup> Reilly served as Jacksonville's city attorney for two years prior to his successful run for the Illinois House in 1976. Baise won the race to fill a vacancy on the Jacksonville city council in 1975. Jim Reilly, August 10, 2009; Gregory Baise, August 6, 2013. Both interviews by Mark DePue.

<sup>10</sup> Thompson hired Reilly as his chief counsel in 1983, with the understanding that Reilly would be chief of staff once Quern left. Reilly, August 10, 2009.

'83 period, that legislative period in '83 was really important, having a guy like Jim in the chief of staff position was really important.

DePue: I'm going to be blunt, Governor.

Thompson: Go ahead.

DePue: Are the stories about him throwing telephones true?

Thompson: What stories about throwing telephones?

DePue: I've heard stories that when he got—you mention he got excitable sometimes.

Thompson: He was a little excitable, yeah.

DePue: So you can't verify those—

Thompson: I have no knowledge of throwing telephones.

DePue: Are there any of those stories that you—

Thompson: I've only heard that about Hillary Clinton. But it was a lamp.

DePue: (laughs) Was she throwing it at Bill?

Thompson: Mm-hmm.

DePue: Any stories either about Art Quern or Jim Reilly?

Thompson: Not really. Art Quern's wife was very active in the philanthropic community of Springfield. She did a lot of community work. Great lady. Later became a pastor, after he died.

DePue: He died fairly young, did he not?

Thompson: He did.

DePue: Do you recall the circumstances?

Thompson: Yeah. He was flying in a small plane. And as the plane went down the runway, the wind picked it up and flipped it over. Everybody aboard was killed, so... It was a tragic, tragic accident.<sup>11</sup>

DePue: You mentioned this other name, Greg Baise. Tell me about Greg. I think he came on as your patronage chief at that time.

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<sup>11</sup> Quern was killed October 30, 1996, when the corporate jet he was traveling on crashed while taking off from Palwaukee Municipal Airport. Only fifty-four at the time of his death, he was chairman of the Illinois Board of Higher Education and chairman of Aon Risk Services Companies. *New York Times*, November 1, 1996.

Thompson: He might have at that time.

DePue: Now, he'd been around for a while, and I know he was a—

Thompson: He was a bag boy.

DePue: He was a bag man, yeah.

Thompson: Not a bag man, bag boy.

DePue: Bag boy. I have to get my terminology straight!

Thompson: Yeah, please. Greg started out as the travel aide. And then he followed one of the two paths that others in that position follow; they either go back to school to get an advanced degree—become a lawyer or an MBA after they do their tour with me—or they go on up into government. And Greg followed what later became a well-worn path for those who stayed in government. Greg went from travel aide to scheduler, from scheduler to the patronage chief—God bless 'em, they were legal then—to director of transportation. He stepped down from that to run Reagan's campaign for reelection in Illinois, and came back and ran the Department of Transportation again. He stepped down to run my last campaign, then he went into the private sector.

DePue: And he's been basically in the same job in the private sector since, has he not?

Thompson: Yes, president of the Manufacturers' Association. Just an excellent, excellent guy.

DePue: I can verify that he certainly enjoyed his time working with you, Governor.

Thompson: Oh, I'm sure he did. (laughs)

DePue: We have already talked extensively about the Cutback Amendment. But it's 1983 that the impact of the Cutback Amendment is going to be felt; it's then that the House is going to be cut back by one-third. I want to get your reflections on that and what that meant in the future, working with the legislature.

Thompson: Thank you, Pat Quinn. I can't say that it had a profound effect on Illinois politics. I think that would be overstating it, but it did have quite an impact in the legislature. Under the old system there were three representatives per district, two from the majority party and one from the minority party in that district; so downstate it would have been two Republicans and one Democrat and vice versa in Chicago.

The difficulty came in Chicago, because in some Chicago legislative districts, the lone Republican member of the triumvirate was a real Republican. And because they could be re-elected more easily, because they

might have only had 200 or 300 votes for them in some of those river wards or into the black wards, you got some really good Republican representatives from Chicago: Art Telcser, who was in leadership with Ryan; Pete Peters, who was in leadership with Ryan; and a number of others. Shoot, you had the Speaker of the House from DuPage County, a Democrat. Guys like Peters and Telcser were really good allies for George. They were his smart guys, and they could cut good deals. They were really valuable legislators. But you also had guys, Republicans from Chicago, who were just the right arm of the Democratic ward committeemen. I mean, they were pretend Republicans. Get elected as a Republican; when the time came to vote for Speaker of the House they'd vote Republican, and that was their last Republican vote for the rest of their term. They were Democrats. So you had three, which wasn't the way the system was supposed to work.

DePue: As I recall, even Richard J. Daley started that way.

Thompson: Yeah. He started as a Republican. He did. So you lost the good Republicans from Chicago, and some good downstate Democrats. At the same time, you got rid of the fakers, because the Democrats didn't have to do that anymore; they had their two members. That was primarily, I guess, the impact. But it was the beginning of—how do I phrase this—it was the beginning of outside forces impacting the legislature. It spawned the Pat Quinns of the world. People who had causes that they lobbied for that may or may not have been enacted into law, but they were out there raising these issues, getting citizens together to sign petitions, and things of that sort. So it was a time of some disturbance on what I would call the regular order, and it had an impact on the legislature. And the Citizens Utility Board came out of that. That was another Quinn thing; he began his political career as, some would say, an outside agitator. I wouldn't use that language, but it unleashed feelings of populism, in the old-fashioned sense, into the political process in Illinois.

DePue: I want to make sure I understand where you're coming from. Do you see that as a positive or a negative thing, to have populism as a force that has a greater influence on what the legislature's doing?

Thompson: To the extent that it got citizens involved, it was a good thing, I think. Some of the causes may have gone a little too far, but hey, that's politics. In the sense that it got citizens to be more aware of the government and what it was doing, and to adopt causes and push the legislature and the executive branch, and the enactment of those causes, it was a good thing.

DePue: Do you think the legislature was easier or harder to work with, to craft and get legislation passed, because of the impact of the Cutback Amendment?

Thompson: I don't know. In my fourteen years, I never found the legislature hard to work with. Maybe I was lucky. Maybe it depended on the leadership at that time. Maybe it depended on the issues of that time, although I had some big issues

in the legislature in those fourteen years. But I always got along well with the legislature, even though for most of those fourteen years they were Democratic. I think I only asked for one thing I didn't get eventually. It might have taken me some time to get what I wanted—the gasoline tax increase that I got in '83 took me six years to get, and RTA [Regional Transit Authority] reform took a long time to get—but I got it. The only thing that I asked for that I didn't get was a World's Fair in Chicago in 1992.

DePue: That was something that was being discussed in '84. I was going to ask you about that when we get to that timeframe.

Thompson: Madigan appointed a commission to review it, chaired by Adlai. And they reported back that we shouldn't do it, and he killed it. Now, obviously he told the commission what to do, but that's the only thing that I've asked for that I didn't get.

DePue: One of the things that people have said in terms of criticizing the Cutback Amendment is that it gave the Four Tops more power; it seemed to consolidate more power.<sup>12</sup> Would you agree with that assessment?

Thompson: Oh, I think that's hard to say, I really do. I think the reason that the Four Tops got more power was because they controlled the money. I don't think it had much to do with the Cutback Amendment. When the leadership, both majority and minority, started leadership funds in addition to their own campaign fund, and then doled out from the leadership fund to the members, that's when they got the power.

DePue: Do you recall roughly when that occurred? Was that during your tenure?

Thompson: Yeah, probably.

DePue: We probably should mention here also, in 1981 and 1982, the Illinois House is controlled by the Republicans by the thinnest of margins, and George Ryan is the Speaker during that timeframe.

Thompson: Correct.

DePue: In 1983 and for the rest of your administration, both the House and the Senate are going to be solidly on the Democratic side of the ledger.

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<sup>12</sup> Four Tops is a nickname for the party leaders in the House and Senate. Cumulative voting and the Cutback Amendment are touched on in several of the *Illinois Statecraft* interviews. See David Gilbert, interview by Mark DePue, March 27, 2014; Jim Fletcher, interview by Mike Czaplicki, March 9, 2015; Robert Mandeville, interview by Mike Czaplicki, February 20, 2014, 203-204; and the following interviews conducted by Mark DePue for the Gov. Jim Edgar Oral History Project: Jim Edgar, June 9, 2009, Volume I: 257-262; Mike Lawrence, March 4, 2009, 53-54; Mike McCormick, July 8, 2010; Al Grosboll, June 4, 2009; Kirk Dillard, September 29, 2009; Jim Reilly, August 10, 2009; Mark Boozell, August 18, 2009.

Thompson: Right. Which was okay. (laughs)

DePue: You didn't see that as a problem?

Thompson: It wasn't a problem for me, I don't think. And not because I'm a Democrat; I'm not, I'm a Republican. But I got along well with the Democratic leaders and the Democratic members. I went out of my way to work with them and to tend to their needs, and it paid off. So I might have had some of my programs modified by the Democrats in the legislature, but that was okay. We got most of what I asked for, so that was all right. And if I didn't get that kind of cooperation, I had enough Republican votes to sustain a veto.

DePue: One of the main arguments to do the Cutback Amendment was it would be a cost-saving measure. How successful was it in that respect?

Thompson: In the scheme of things, I don't think that was that important.

DePue: Do you think that was just an argument that was advanced to convince the public?

Thompson: Yeah.

DePue: That it was really more about the anger about those legislative pay raises back in '78?

Thompson: Part of it, yeah. The legislature has never been anybody's favorite (DePue laughs) among the citizenry. So it was pretty easy, I think, to sell cutback. You could make up all sorts of excuses, and they did. But I just don't think it had the effect that people ascribed to it, other than the things that I mentioned about the legislators from Chicago, that people ascribed to it. I could be wrong, but that's my notion.

DePue: I'm going to shift gears on you here now, Governor, and talk about the personal side of life. Let me start with putting it this way here: You'd been living in Springfield for essentially six years by this time. Was the family comfortable with the reality of living in Springfield in the goldfish bowl atmosphere that you might have had?

Thompson: I think they were. Jayne's a tough lady. Samantha was still very young. She enjoyed the mansion. She didn't want to leave! (laughs) She and her dogs running around a whole block of yard, and her running around the whole house, going to the secretarial pool and playing—she loved the mansion, so that wasn't any problem. At six years in, Samantha was about ready to go to school. She went to nursery school in Springfield at the Baptist church across the street, but she was going to get ready for a grade school career. And as she got older, I thought it would have been tougher to be the governor's daughter in Springfield. It's basically, as I've said before, a company town, and I was the boss.

Samantha would have to go out there in public and be with other kids as she grew older, and you didn't know what the other kids' families thought or said, or what their fathers or mothers did. I just thought it would be somewhat difficult. That was issue number one. Number two was, I didn't know how long I would be governor. And I think it's tougher to take a kid out of school in the middle of a grade school career and transfer them from Springfield to Chicago. So we made the decision to move back to Chicago as a home base, and let Samantha start school in Chicago. And she was in a great school. It was a Chicago public school. It was before magnet schools, but it was one of those schools where they had great teachers and a very tough principal. She ran that school like the army. Samantha did very well there, as did all the other kids who went to that school.

It was a financial burden for me to be paying house expenses instead of living free in the mansion. And I spent more time traveling, and so did Jayne and Samantha when they would come down to Springfield for something that was important for them to be there. But I think I managed to do it all right, because when the legislature was in session, I was there; I didn't fly home every night like Blagojevich, I was there; I didn't spend most of my time in Chicago like Quinn, I was there. And the mansion was used to bring people together, to get legislation passed, to get stuff done, and to get agreements made, say, between labor and business. So that part of it went all right, I think. And we were active enough in Springfield, so I don't remember much prejudice from the fact that we started Samantha in school in Chicago.

DePue: What neighborhood did you settle in?

Thompson: We were on Fullerton Avenue, which is the house that we had kept when Jayne and I went to Springfield. When Samantha got older, that got to be too small. There was a garden apartment on the first floor, and there was a duplex above it. The bedrooms were on the third floor. There was only one bathroom, it had two doors, and I had a five-year-old. I said, "Ah, this ain't gonna work." So we eventually ended up in Uptown. That was a brave move.<sup>13</sup>

DePue: For those of us who aren't from Chicago—

Thompson: Uptown was kind of the Wild West. The troopers put a trailer on the street to the side of our house, and the neighbors were thrilled because they thought maybe law and order would prevail in the neighborhood. (DePue laughs) The real estate section of the *Tribune* would sometimes stick in their ads, "Close to the lake, close to parks, close to the governor's house," which I guess represented security of some kind. Across the alley from our backyard, there was a big apartment building; it was full of dope dealers and prostitutes and everything else, and they eventually got chased out. I remember one of our troopers chasing one of the dope dealers right down the street. We had some

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<sup>13</sup> The Thompsons moved from 554 West Fullerton Avenue to the 800 block of West Hutchinson Street.

wicker furniture stolen off our front porch, but I think that was more trooper negligence, because the house had a fence and a gate around it. Yet they somehow managed to get over the gate and grab the wicker furniture and take off. At any rate, it was uptown, and it was a tough neighborhood. It's better now. And there were some lovely old mansions on that street by famous Chicago architects, huge houses. But to the south and north of there, it was kind of tough.

DePue: Where was Samantha going to school?

Thompson: She went to Hawthorne Scholastic Academy, which was a Chicago public school. If it was later in time, they would call it a magnet school. I don't think they called it a magnet school then. The kids came from more than the boundaries, I believe. It was one of the schools that led to the magnet school proposition in Chicago. She got on the bus to school, so the troopers got on the bus to school. The troopers were in the classroom, and...

DePue: I was just going to ask, was she less of the governor's daughter in Chicago than she would have been in Springfield?

Thompson: To some extent. Now, she'll claim the opposite, you know? And I don't believe everything she says.

DePue: How would you describe her personality this stage of her life?

Thompson: Same as it's always been. (laughs) Smart, tough kid, clever. She was a good student, always has been a good student, and very verbal, very creative in writing and art. I forget what grade she was in—maybe she was in the sixth or seventh grade, maybe the fifth grade—but she did an architectural monograph on one of the big houses on the street done by George Washington Maher, who was a famous Chicago architect.<sup>14</sup> She went down and interviewed the people in that house and looked up the history of the house. She did all right in that school. Made lifelong friends, who she still has. Even though Samantha's lived all over the world, her best friend is a Chicagoan whom she met in first grade.

DePue: Would it be appropriate to say she was precocious at that age?

Thompson: Oh, sure. It would be mandatory. (laughter)

DePue: Any stories that you can share with us today, Governor?

Thompson: I can remember long nights at the kitchen table, her mother and Samantha doing the Russian report, or some other report. Gosh, but it all got done. Jayne was an outstanding parent in terms of seeing Samantha through growing up,

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<sup>14</sup> The 600 through 900 blocks of Thompson's street, which featured several homes designed by Maher, were landmarked as the Hutchinson Street District in 1977.

and seeing her through school, and taking part in school activities. When Samantha got into high school, Jayne was very active in the yearly auction to raise funds. She was the chairman one year and raised a record amount. She went to every field hockey trip. And half the time, the kids in Samantha's class would end up in our apartment instead of going to parties, which was good because that's when they were starting the smoking and the marijuana, and the drinking and all that stuff. That just didn't happen with her. She and her friends would much rather be in the kitchen with her mother baking chocolate chip cookies than out doing something crazy.

DePue: Was she into sports at all?

Thompson: Not really. I used to watch her in field hockey, and I had to refrain from laughing. I mean, this poor kid was running up and down the field chasing the ball, getting nowhere near it. (laughs) No, I wouldn't say sports was in her league.

DePue: I'm assuming Jayne was able to make the parent-teacher conferences. Was that something you were able to do occasionally?

Thompson: You betcha. Oftentimes, I went to the parent-teacher conferences because my wife was too busy doing something. So Mike Madigan and I would be on the bleachers in the classroom for parent-teacher conferences, because both our wives were too busy sometimes.

DePue: So he had children there as well. Was Lisa there at the time?

Thompson: He had a daughter, Tiffany. I went to her wedding. When she got married, her husband was the executive director of the RTA. It was Lisa, the oldest; then Tiffany, Nicole, and one son, Andrew. But Mike and I were sometimes the designated hostages. So I've known the Madigan family since Samantha started high school. What age do they start high school, fourteen?

DePue: Fourteen.

Thompson: She's thirty-seven, so that's twenty-three years.

DePue: You're out of office about that time. She was born in '78. It would have been roughly the '92 timeframe.

Thompson: Yeah.

DePue: Where did she go to high school?

Thompson: She went to Chicago Latin.

DePue: I know she just got married in November.

Thompson: Yes.

DePue: Where is the couple living now?

Thompson: London. Her husband is a lawyer, a Greek Canadian who went to New York University—I think he also had time at Columbia—and then was an associate at Skadden Arps in New York. He was there for, I think, seven years—the last associate in his class to be at the firm, everybody else had fled. Then he got a job with British American Tobacco in London as a trade lawyer. So when they got married, Samantha moved to London, where she’s just finished setting up a new apartment. They moved into his one-bedroom apartment that he had been living in, in London, and then they recently found their first house together. But this one was unfurnished, so Samantha’s been scouring London for furniture.

DePue: If she’s anything like her dad, she’s enjoying it.

Thompson: Oh, she did a great job. She did a great job. I mean, this kid—“Dad, I have my dealers, and I’ve got the auction house, and I have furniture stores.” Oh my God, I don’t think Tommy knows yet what’s hit him!

DePue: I take it he might be a little more—frugal might be the wrong word, but—

Thompson: No, frugal is the right word with him. This kid, when he was single, working at Skadden Arps and living in a fifth-floor walk-up apartment in New York, put away a lot of money. My wife is so thrilled to have him as a son-in-law. Finally, thank God, somebody in the family on her side. So they’re doing fine.

DePue: Let’s talk about Jayne.

Thompson: Yeah, let’s talk about Jayne.

DePue: While you guys were living in Springfield, but also once you made the move up to Chicago, she was working. Can you tell me more about where she was working in Springfield?

Thompson: She was working at a law firm. When we first got married, she was an assistant attorney general. And when I was elected governor, she switched from the Chicago office to the Springfield office of the attorney general. But after a while, it became clear to me, and I think clear to her, that there might be conflicts between my position as governor and Bill Scott’s position as attorney general, which would be natural. So we both decided that probably she should leave there, which she did. She went to Brown, Hay & Stephens, after a long search for a law firm in Springfield that had no state business. That was very important to her.

DePue: That couldn’t have been an easy search.

- Thompson: That was not an easy search. But they were a civil law firm, and they didn't do things that brought them into contact with the state of Illinois, as hard as that is to believe. So that was her Springfield job. And it was a new thing for her, because it put her in a field that she had never done before, civil law. She had been a prosecutor in Chicago.
- DePue: Was she more inclined to like the prosecution side of the ledger?
- Thompson: Oh, yeah. She was a great criminal lawyer, great prosecutor.
- DePue: How about when she came up to Chicago?
- Thompson: Oh gosh, I'm trying to remember now what jobs she's had. She went to a defense law firm that did criminal cases, Silets & Martin.
- DePue: That was in Chicago?
- Thompson: Yeah, Harvey Silets was the founder of that firm. He did a lot of tax work with the federal government. Rob Martin, who today is a famous Chicago defense lawyer, was his junior partner. So she was there for a while. For a while, she worked for Citizens for Thompson.
- DePue: During the election campaigns?
- Thompson: Yeah. She also worked for National Louis University in Chicago as a fundraiser. And getting beyond the gubernatorial years, as a headhunter. She did that for a while, became very good at that. Then she turned to public relations and did very good at that, and started her own firm. She still has that.
- DePue: You've already said many times that she is a very accomplished lawyer in her own right.
- Thompson: Oh, yeah.
- DePue: Was it frustrating for her sometimes that she kind of has to step back from that to a certain extent because of your role?
- Thompson: Oh, absolutely. I think all political spouses live in the shadow, whether they're male or female. It just is a natural phenomenon, and there's really nothing they can do about it. Now, in the case of the Clintons, Hillary has managed to carve out her own career in politics; but while he was president, she was second fiddle. That's just the way of the world, and it's a shame, because I've known a lot of accomplished first ladies who had to either give up their careers, or sideline their careers, or try to operate their careers under the shadow of the officeholder. And as much as you're partners, and we politicians like to say, "We share everything," that's not true.

Let's just take the governor; when things are good, the governor gets the credit and is the prom prince and all of that. When things are bad, that's when the family steps up to take their share. It's just—it happens. And that's really not fair. There's both maybe a monetary loss in the sidelining of a career, and there's surely a personal loss when you've worked so hard for something—as Jayne did, for example, to become a lawyer—to lose that, or be forced out into some other occupation and to have to suffer the downsides when they come. It's a hard role, it really is. I mean, she's done it magnificently, but it's tough, I think. And it's not very fair.

DePue: I think you would agree with this, you were an enthusiastic campaigner.

Thompson: Absolutely, I loved it.

DePue: And good at campaigning.

Thompson: Yeah, I loved it.

DePue: Was Jayne an enthusiastic campaigner?

Thompson: Absolutely. Absolutely. Samantha was an enthusiastic campaigner, once she got to be old enough to understand it. She had the bullhorn that she took away from Skilbeck, she had the roll of paper stickers—she was great. She was a great campaigner. And she could handle the press. You listen to Samantha interviews... And Jayne was a great campaigner. Jayne did well with the press, and Jayne did well with the groups, and the Republican women, and the parades, and door-to-door campaigning. There are pictures of her doing that that bring back a lot of good memories. She once did Spanish language commercials for cable broadcasting stations, because she's a fluent Spanish speaker. So yeah, she was good.

DePue: I know you're aware that Mike Czaplicki has already interviewed Samantha (Thompson laughs) about the experiences. I'm going to butcher this quote, but essentially, Samantha, at one point in the interview, said that while you were good at not taking all of the things that you heard, especially from the press or other comments, personally, she and her mother tended to remember these things.<sup>15</sup>

Thompson: Oh yeah, the two of them; those two have memories that go way, way back, oh, yes. And they have them to this day, when I've forgotten about something. Those two have never forgotten a thing.

DePue: Governor, you've impressed me that you've got quite an excellent memory. But maybe you put some of this stuff behind you.

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<sup>15</sup> Samantha said her mother “remembers who said what.” Samantha Thompson, interview by Mike Czaplicki, April 4, 2014.

Thompson: Yeah. I mean, what's the point? I don't own a newspaper. I'm not going to be able to change what a newspaper's already written, so what's the point?

DePue: As they say, you don't buy ink by the barrel, huh?

Thompson: Yeah. Or as they say, maybe it was my turn in the barrel.

DePue: A couple of other questions about Jayne. I think it might have been in the '82 campaign, there was some discussion about her desire to have a federal judgeship.

Thompson: Yeah. She applied, and Senator Percy was amenable to it. Then the press got on her, and she wasn't being judged on her merit, she was being judged as the wife of the governor, who therefore was not entitled to be a federal judge. And she eventually withdrew her candidacy. It was a very sad day, because she would have been an able, able judge. She just has that kind of temperament, you know? A judicial temperament. And she was, of course, very smart. She would have been a remarkable federal judge. And as I say, Percy was willing to do it. But the press was just going to have none of it. That's one of the things that I most resented about some of the press. It wasn't against me; I mean, those resentments are long forgotten. But they really did a number on her. And it led to Ilana Rovner becoming a federal district judge, and then court of appeals judge; it started Ilana on a judicial career, because she took the spot.

DePue: What was she doing prior to that time?

Thompson: Jayne?

DePue: No, Ilana Rovner.

Thompson: She was an assistant U.S. attorney under me, and then she was my deputy governor and deputy counsel in Chicago, a longtime family friend.

DePue: Federal judgeship is one thing, it's an appointed position. Did Jayne ever consider a state judgeship, which means she'd have to be running for that office?

Thompson: No.

DePue: Was that because it would require her to run, and—

Thompson: Well, it would require her to be a Democrat, first of all. (laughter) That's the first hurdle. She might have gotten past that, she might have gotten slated, but she had no desire to run.

DePue: Early 1983, you've already had six years; you finish off this tour, you're going to have ten years. But I'm sure you're not surprised that immediately,

the press starts to speculate about, Would he run again? What's his future after 1986?

Thompson: Oh God, yes.

DePue: What were your thoughts at that time?

Thompson: I thought that was a lot of nothingness, a lot of craziness. You just get elected, and at the first press conference after your election, they've already got you running for president, or going to the cabinet, or blah-blah-blah-blah-blah. Then it becomes your desire, not theirs, and it's just a bunch of garbage. I never had any desire to go to Washington as a senator. As a presidential candidate? Oh yeah, sure. But I didn't have any desire to run for the Senate, and I didn't have any desire to be in the president's cabinet. I didn't know whether I was going to run for a fourth term. Who knew? You can't speculate that far ahead, four years. It's crazy. I didn't think about that.

DePue: I would assume that in the depths of a recession, you had plenty to keep your mind active anyway.

Thompson: Oh, yes. (laughs) And then the challenges of the third term, yeah, sure.

DePue: Governor, I think this is probably a good place for us to stop today. We're just shy of two hours. But next time, I want to talk about that very difficult budget year of 1983, and take some quality time to do that one.

Thompson: Sure, and my temporary tax increase.

DePue: Thank you very much.

(end of interview #15)

## Interview with James Thompson

# IST-A-L-2013-054.16

Interview # 16: March 31, 2015

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Tuesday, March 31, 2015. I am once again in the beautiful apartment of Gov. Jim Thompson in downtown Chicago, Illinois, overlooking Lake Michigan. But Governor, we might be challenged today in this apartment, because I've been hearing this tap-tap-tapping above us here all morning.<sup>16</sup>



Thompson: (laughs) Hopefully it's not going to bother us. I woke up this morning and you couldn't see out the window.

DePue: Oh, really?

Thompson: The fog was just really intense. It's cleared up now, but this morning I couldn't see the building across the street.

DePue: And Governor, it doesn't feel like spring outside this morning.

Thompson: I'm sure it isn't. We're going to Michigan tomorrow for a week. And despite the forecast that says rain every day, (laughs) we don't care. We're just going. We'll build a fire. We'll read. We'll watch television; we'll go to the movies; we'll go out to eat. My wife has chores planned I'm sure, and—

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<sup>16</sup> The view from Thompson's living room on the thirty-fourth floor of 57 E. Delaware Place. Photo by Mike Czaplicki, January 29, 2014.

DePue: A honey-do list for you?

Thompson: Yeah. Well, it's mostly a honey-do list for herself. Whatever, though, it's just fun to get away. No obligation.

DePue: Before we started, you mentioned that you are going to have some visitors this afternoon. I believe the Illinois Information Service video crew is coming in.

Thompson: Correct.

DePue: Why are they coming here?

Thompson: I got a request from Mrs. Rauner's chief of staff to do an interview with IIS as part of a package they want to put together supporting the renovation of the mansion and supporting the fundraising which will pay for that renovation.<sup>17</sup> I was supposed to do it last week at a meeting of the Mansion Association, but I didn't get to Springfield. So I said, "Come on up here and we'll do it." Today is the day.

DePue: And does that mean to a certain extent they're going to go with private funds and Rauner's own funds to—

Thompson: Yes. I think they're using no public funds. I think it would be very difficult in political terms to be using state money now for the renovation of the mansion, as much as it's needed because the mansion is a public facility owned by the people of Illinois. When you're facing a \$7 billion budget deficit for next year, the optics just won't be good. And it's not a quarrel that the governor needs.

DePue: In previous conversations, we have mentioned that there was something like over \$3 million already dedicated, and it just was something that Quinn didn't want to release.

Thompson: That's right. Look, Governor Blagojevich neglected the mansion. Governor Quinn refused to stop the deterioration of the mansion because he was running for reelection. He didn't want to be spending money on the mansion because he thought that would be misinterpreted by the public. So now we've got a mansion that the roof is leaking, the elevator is out, and you can't hold meetings. It's just not habitable. And it's up to the Rauners to reverse that.

DePue: Today, Governor, we're going to talk about the budget. Yesterday, we did discuss the state of the national economy and the state economy, and it was very tough times. And obviously, that's an important way to start the conversation about the '83 budget. From what I have determined in some

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<sup>17</sup> Diana Rauner, wife of Gov. Bruce Rauner.

public records, the 1983 beginning budget balance was \$309 million in the hole?<sup>18</sup>

Thompson: Perilous.

DePue: And for '84, it was looking like it would grow to just shy of a \$357 million budget deficit.

Thompson: If nothing was done, right.

DePue: So that gets us into the discussion. Now yesterday, you also talked about the legislature giving you what some would say were extraordinary powers to fix the budget hole that you had for fiscal year 1983.

Thompson: I would say it was extraordinary. To my recollection, the legislature had never done that with any previous governor, because that's their prerogative to decide how money is to be spent. I don't know whether this issue ever arose in previous budgets, but my guess is that legislators in the past would have been very, very loath to give up any of their powers from the legislative branch to the executive branch. I mean, that doesn't come easily. But this was a difficult budget situation in the middle of the worst recession since the Great Depression. And legislators sometimes find it very difficult to make cuts. They all respond quickly and immediately to constituent pressures to spend, whether it's from the education lobby, or the hospital lobby, or the nursing home lobby, or the senior citizens' lobby, or you name it. And they figured, Okay, let Thompson take the heat. So they gave me the power and I used it.

DePue: That power, though, as I understand, dealt only with fiscal year '83.

Thompson: Correct.

DePue: Which was, what, six months left to go?

Thompson: Right.

DePue: Why was that necessary? Because the revenue projections at the beginning of the fiscal year were a little bit rosier than they ended up being?

Thompson: It's not a question of rosy. These were, in a very real sense, calamitous times. And with an ongoing recession, which we certainly had all through '82—I mean, it was the biggest issue in the campaign—it's almost impossible to project revenues accurately. You might have one projection at the beginning

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<sup>18</sup> DePue is drawing on figures reported by the Illinois comptroller. The "beginning budgetary balance" attempted to isolate a fiscal year's true ending balance by subtracting lapse warrants issued between July 1 and August 31 from the cash balance on June 30, the end of the fiscal year. Thompson's budget director rejected this concept as "not useful to the people who are managing the finances" and focused on the June 30 cash balance, which stood at \$187 million on June 30, 1982. At the end of the 1983 fiscal year, it had dropped to \$110 million. Robert Mandeville, interview by Mike Czaplicki, February 10, 2014, 98-102.

of the fiscal year, and six months down the road as things get worse instead of better, you have to revise your revenue projections. So it's not a question of over-estimating, it's a question of economic situation that keeps going down, keeps getting away from you.<sup>19</sup>

DePue: Right after you've gotten this extraordinary power, now you've got a new fiscal year you've got to start budgeting for in 1984. You were just re-elected, but as I understand, your budget proposal was \$13.9 billion. And to put that into context, your first year, in 1977, it was \$9.9 billion, so that's significant increase from 1977. But the fiscal year 1982 budget proposal that you had made was \$14.9 billion. So 1984 was a full \$1 billion less than the budget you proposed two years before.

Thompson: Right. Which shows you the severe nature of the recession. It was really hard to look at your budget projections and see them slide by over \$1 billion during the course of the year, but that's what happened.

DePue: Going into that budget, what were your priorities, and what was the administration willing to cut in the budget that you were going to present to the legislature?

Thompson: In the '84?

DePue: Yeah, in the '84 budget.

Thompson: I think we took everything down as far as we could, which means you begin with education; you begin with the most expensive part of human services. You try and hold your own agencies, the governor's agencies, to the minimum that you need to run the state. It's a very, very tough kind of budget to present. I don't remember whether it was this year or another year, but I think there was talk about a doomsday budget. The state needed fiscal reality, and the legislature needed fiscal reality, because things really weren't getting any better very fast as we went into '83. But it was not my last word on spending or revenues, it was the legislature's last word on spending and revenues, and I tried to lay out what I thought was required.

DePue: In your annual budget address, which is what, normally in February?

Thompson: Yeah, February or early March.

DePue: Did you recommend the tax increases?

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<sup>19</sup> The Budget Bureau's average estimating error during the Thompson Administration was 2.71 percent, with the largest errors occurring from fiscal years 1982 to 1985. In fiscal year 1983, the error was 4.47 percent. On estimating revenue, see Mandeville, interview by Mike Czaplicki, December 12, 2013, 65-66, and February 20, 2014, 208-211.

Thompson: I think I did. I don't recall whether I recommended both the sales tax increase and the income tax increase. I might have recommended both. We ended up with both. It was time. We had had no significant tax increases in my administration, as I recall. The state had gotten bigger, and more people needed more services. It was time.

DePue: I want to discuss these tax increases one at a time.

Thompson: Sure.

DePue: Let's start with the income tax surcharge. Surcharge meaning?

Thompson: Temporary.

DePue: And temporary for what length of time?

Thompson: I believe it was two years.

DePue: Of course, Ogilvie was famous, or infamous if you will, for establishing the income tax in the first place. And normally his loss to Walker in 1972 is credited to that decision.

Thompson: Well, partially.

DePue: Partially.

Thompson: Yeah, there were other issues that Ogilvie faced, especially downstate. He let his EPA banish leaf burning in the fall. He had the state police raid downstate establishments which had slot machines. There were a number of these small annoyance factors, together with the income tax.

DePue: But the raise that you're recommending was from 2.5 to 3 percent for individual income tax.

Thompson: Right. You've got to remember, even though we had a state income tax, 2.5 percent was probably the lowest state income tax in the nation. I can't think of another state that had an income tax as low as 2.5 percent.

DePue: Of course, there were many states that had no income tax.

Thompson: Right. And they got along with sales taxes or they got along with local property taxes; or they had resources, like the states that had oil, for example, or coal. But among the states that had income taxes, Illinois was definitely a very low tax state. So we thought the bump from 2.5 to 3 percent still left us either among the lowest in the country or probably still the lowest in the country. And some states had graduated income taxes which took the rate much higher.

DePue: The corporate tax rate went from 4 percent to 4.8 percent.

Thompson: Right.

DePue: Was that an easier or a harder sell to make?

Thompson: The thing the business community always wanted, which they got enshrined in the constitution, was a ratio between the personal income tax and the corporate income tax. Otherwise, in a tough economic time like this, the pressure would have been, Hmm, raise the business income tax. Businesses have all the money; raise theirs, leave the personal alone. And when the business community won that battle in the constitutional convention, they were protected, they thought. So I didn't get as much opposition, as I recall, from the business community as I did from the individual community. Businesses have all kinds of ways of reducing their taxable income. And there's always a question of what taxable income Illinois businesses have, particularly those that sell worldwide, that are taxable in Illinois. Individuals don't have that kind of ability to lower their taxable revenue. I don't recall that much opposition from the business community.

The other thing is, business communities, more than individuals, appreciate and want the things that taxes pay for. Individual citizens find it very hard to understand where their taxes are going or what benefit they're getting from their taxes, especially if, for example, they have no children in public school, or if they don't need the state police. There are a lot of services that the state offers that don't apply to them. So it's very hard for a lot of people to see where their money is going and why it's beneficial to them. Whereas businesses understand things like infrastructure improvements—highways, waterways—things to bring their raw materials in and see their finished products out, and the farmers see the grain in and out. The business community has a greater understanding of the value of government services than individuals do.

DePue: I guess I'm still curious whether or not this was part of the dialogue in the early 1980s, that by having income tax on businesses, you're driving businesses out of the state.

Thompson: You might make that argument if there were states with lower business income taxes than ours, but I didn't know of any. I mean, even on the business side our taxes were low, and as I say, businesses have the ability to shrink their income for taxable purposes. Look at today, even; once in a while, you'll read stories about big Illinois companies paying **no** Illinois business taxes. Yeah, they pay federal taxes, but somehow they escape the Illinois income tax. So the business community, I think, takes a much more sanguine view of taxes than individuals do. Businesses care about the infrastructure; they care about having trained workers; they care about having cultural attractions in

the state. If you look at the things which move a lot of business location decisions, you'd be surprised at how often taxes are not a part of the equation.

DePue: All of this that you've been talking about sounds like your sales pitch to industries, trying to entice them to come to Illinois.

Thompson: Oh, sure. Absolutely, but when I made those sales pitches, I didn't talk about taxes. (DePue laughs) I took for granted that their business tax people understood what the state of Illinois business taxes were, and what the CEO and the board and their staffs wanted to know were other things, depending on the kind of business they were. How would the state accommodate their needs? When I went to Japan to visit Mitsubishi Corporation to sell them on the idea of a plant in downstate Illinois to manufacture the Mitsubishi motor car—which eventually turned out to be a joint Mitsubishi-Chrysler plant—I don't recall ever talking about taxes. What I talked about was transportation.

The location we had in mind was in Normal. I got down on the floor of the office of the CEO of Mitsubishi—very undignified, very un-Japanese-like—with a roadmap of the state of Illinois, and I pointed out the interstate highways that would run near their proposed plant site. And I talked them into accepting union workers, UAW; first Japanese auto plant in the United States, maybe still the only one, to have UAW workers. They had **never** done that before, Japanese auto manufacturers. Yet I persuaded them that these UAW workers would be highly-trained, highly capable, and were just as interested as Mitsubishi was in producing a good product in the state of Illinois, so that they would have good labor relations even though there was a union. We also would have a school begun so the kids of the Japanese officials who came to the state to run the plant could go to a Japanese-American school. Those kinds of things were important. I don't think we ever discussed taxes.

DePue: You mentioned the role of transportation hub that played into that argument. Can you address just a little bit Illinois' unique position when it comes to transportation?

Thompson: I used to repeatedly insist during the whole fourteen years I was governor that Illinois, as I would phrase it, was the transportation center of the world. Now, at first blush, that sounds sort of crazy. The world? Maybe the United States? No, I said the world, because the American economy was the largest economy in the world. So if Illinois was the transportation center of America, it was the transportation center of the world by virtue of America's economic position in the world economy.

We have such a diverse and strong transportation system: we're the crossroads for the north, south, east, and west interstates; we're bounded on the west by the Mississippi River, which just has a tremendous amount of barge traffic down to the Gulf; and we even have the Illinois River down the center of our state, joining the Mississippi at the end of our state, that carries a

tremendous amount of barge traffic. At the time, O'Hare Airport was the world's busiest airport, and still is right up there. One of the reasons that companies like Boeing came to Illinois after my tenure was because Chicago had an international airport; you could be near Chicago and get anywhere in the world. Railroad expansion to the west, which began under President Lincoln, continued throughout our history. And Illinois is the recipient, I still believe today, of more railroad lines than any other place in the nation; they end up here, or they cross here. You've got truck traffic and automobile traffic on the state highway system. And while it's an expensive proposition because we're a freeze-thaw state, whose roads have to be kept in constant repair because of winter damage, they're good highways. And to the extent that they've been supplemented by toll roads that pay for themselves, they're good highways. The toll road system has been continuously expanded. So by air, by highways, by water—what am I leaving out?

DePue: Pipelines.

Thompson: Pipelines, we're it. And that's the pitch I used to make to Congress, that we had the transportation center of America, and therefore, it was the obligation of the federal government to give us more transportation funds than any other place in the nation. That was my argument, and it was true. And the federal government responded. Oh, I left out mass transit. Increasingly important in the Chicago metropolitan area—downstate as well, but not to the extent of the Chicago metropolitan area—to get people to work and back every day, even though it didn't cross state lines. So you can make a pretty good pitch for Illinois being “the place.”

DePue: One other thing we haven't mentioned yet is the link to the Great Lakes.

Thompson: Right.

DePue: With that river system that you've already talked about, is there a connection with the Illinois River to the Great Lakes?

Thompson: Yeah, there is. But we don't have, certainly not in the present day, the port facilities that surrounding states in the Great Lakes region have. So our Great Lakes commerce is smaller than the state of Wisconsin or the state of Minnesota, or Michigan, or Ohio. It is what it is. We're so overpowering in every other aspect of it. The Great Lakes to us mean drinking water, which many areas of the country don't have in as easy a fashion as Illinois does. Look at the extended drought in California these last ten years or so, with no signs of letting up. And they have to make just really hard decisions about how much water to release for farming in arid areas, when their state economy is so dependent on that farming. New York City gets its water from reservoirs upstate, and if they're not full, there is difficulty. So we're blessed with Great Lakes water for purposes other than shipping. If we didn't have this virtually unlimited water supply, and good water supply, we wouldn't be as an

attractive a state as we are. So even though we're not number one in lake transportation, we are number one in water. And compared to what other communities have to go through, they're not talking about building desalinization plants in the state of Illinois. We have our water. And it's a big, big selling point.

DePue: It probably should be mentioned also that for the downstate area that doesn't rely on Great Lakes water, the farming community does not rely on ground water for irrigation in large extent, is that correct?

Thompson: Right.

DePue: Let's go back to the income tax increase. Why the decision just to do a temporary increase?

Thompson: Because that's what we could pass. Look, who was my chief sponsor of the income tax increase?

DePue: I suspect it was Democratic leaders in the House and the Senate.

Thompson: No. It was Pate Philip in the Senate. Now, do you know how hard it was (DePue laughs) for me to talk Pate Philip into sponsoring—*sponsoring*—a tax increase? I mean, there was blood on the floor!

DePue: But most of the votes were coming from Democrats to pass—

Thompson: Sure, most of the votes did come from Democrats. But in terms of introducing it and putting the Senate Republican leadership on the bill because it was coming from a Republican governor, Pate was a hero. Of course, Phil Rock supported it eventually, and of course Madigan supported it. And then Rock made sure it got out of committee and onto the floor, and all of that. I don't remember whether the roll call was managed or not, but it doesn't make any difference. A lot of other forces, besides me, had to do with the kind of increase it was and what the length of it was. So it became temporary. And when the time came two years later, I said it was temporary, it's gone.

DePue: It sounds like, though, in 1983, when you're proposing it, you would have been okay with a permanent increase.

Thompson: Oh, yeah. Absolutely. But I wasn't able to get that. So I had to take a temporary. And it worked, because we increased the sales tax by a penny at the same time, and that was permanent.

DePue: Well, I have that as occurring in the 1984 calendar year. That's not—

Thompson: I don't know, I thought it was at the same time, because the revenues coming from the sales tax increase, which was permanent, allowed me to let the income tax go. So we'll have to check that, but I think that's right.<sup>20</sup>

DePue: Yeah, I've it going from 4 to 5 percent in 1984, but we'll double check that.

Thompson: And we got a gas tax increase, something that hadn't been done for a long, long time.

DePue: You had mentioned yesterday and I had read that that was something that you were seeking long before 1983.

Thompson: Absolutely. I was seeking that from the very beginning of my administration, and it took me six years.

DePue: Why were you pushing that so hard?

Thompson: Because you needed it for the roads. The legislature has always been, in my mind, foolish about letting long periods of time go between gas tax increases. Years. The same way the toll road used to be about letting tolls up here go a long time without increases, until the needs of the toll road system just screamed out for an increase. Here's what happens in the gas tax; it's happening today. More people drive cars each year, so there is more traffic on the roads, and thus, more damage to the roads, let alone the winter damage. As cars get more technologically advanced, their mileage increases. People are getting more miles per gallon of gasoline than they were before, so more people are driving more cars and getting greater miles. But the gasoline tax revenue, which is a gallonage tax, doesn't keep up with the need for the roads. And if you go year by year by year without a tax increase, that just builds up. It took me six years to get the gasoline tax increase because of this reluctance of the General Assembly to do it, but the needs finally screamed out that, hey, you can't sustain this any longer.

DePue: How about the tollways? Weren't some of the Chicago-area tollways built with the sales pitch, or the assumption that they wouldn't always be tollways?

Thompson: I don't know, I didn't start the tollways. Ogilvie started the tollways, and I'm not responsible for the sales pitch. (DePue laughs) But the plain fact is, you build tollways, they're built by a bonding mechanism. You sell bonds, you have to pay the interest on the bonds with the tolls you collect. Toll roads wear out just like state highways do, therefore they have maintenance needs. There's a staff of people maintaining the toll roads, and they've got to be mended, repaired, upgraded, what have you. How they ever got the notion that

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<sup>20</sup> Both men are correct. Income and sales taxes were in the package Thompson signed into law July 1, 1983, the start of the 1984 fiscal year. The temporary increase in the corporate and personal income tax rates was retroactive to January 1, 1983, and expired June 30, 1984. The permanent sales tax increase didn't take effect until January 1, 1984.

you could someday drive free on the tollways when no state gasoline tax money was going to the toll roads, only tolls, I do not know. It's impossible. It's one of those things like, the lottery will aid the schools, and there will be a great increase in school spending. It didn't happen because the legislature, the minute they got the lottery dollars, cut the state aid to the schools and let the lotteries fill in the difference. It didn't go for an increase. It went to the difference between what they were willing to appropriate from the general funds before and what they did after. But the toll road business about they'll pay for themselves, and they'll be free...It's just crazy.

DePue: Did the gasoline tax, then, go to maintain the interstate system and state highways and county and local roads?

Thompson: The interstate system is federal. The federal government pays a large share of the interstate system. So it went to state highways, and part of it went to local roads, city and county roads, because those are a shared responsibility in the state of Illinois.

DePue: You mentioned just a little bit earlier that Pate Philip ended up sponsoring the surcharge increase.

Thompson: He was thrilled.

DePue: Yeah, what did it take to convince him to do that?

Thompson: (laughs) Despite some media reports to the contrary, Pate and I had a very good relationship. I tried to accommodate all the things that he needed personally as a legislator, and as a leader of the Senate Republican caucus. And to the extent I could help him do that, he owed me. I mean, that was in my mind, and it certainly was in his mind, because that's the way he operated with his caucus. But we also had a really good personal relationship. And I made sure of that. If I needed something from Pate Philip, I went to his office. I didn't call him down. If he wanted to have a drink at 11:00 in the morning, I had one with him in his office.

In fact, it got to be a routine, where other legislators would be jealous of that, and then I had to have (DePue laughs) a drink with Phil, a drink with Pate and a drink with Lee. Thank God Madigan was not in that group; there I got offered an apple. But you develop friendships. I mean, when the legislative session was extended into June or July, I'd call up Pate and say, "Let's go over to Detroit, Illinois, and have a buffalo sandwich on white bread with onions." So we'd go out to the airport, get in the helicopter, and fly over to Detroit, Illinois, which was on the Illinois River. There was a tavern over there where Pate knew the bartender. We would have buffalo and onion sandwiches on white bread, have a couple of beers, then we'd go outside and lie under this tree and listen to the Cubs games, getting some relief from the Capitol.

I remember doing that once with Pate, and what's right next to us? It's the CIE, Central Illinois Expressway, I had to build from Quincy to Springfield so that western Illinois, Forgottonia, would be forgotten no longer. We're lying there, looking around at the highway and listening to the Cubs game, and I'm not seeing a lot of cars on the CIE, right? I said to Pate, "Goddammit, I built this highway because they just insisted that they need to get out of western Illinois to go someplace else, and I don't see anybody leaving!" So I walked over, and I laid down on the highway. The troopers were apoplectic, finally dragged me off.

But that was the kind of relationship I had with Pate. That same bartender from the tavern in Detroit, Illinois, was also a barbecue guy. Pate and I would have him over to the mansion, and we'd throw a big party and barbecue from Pate's friend. Sometimes I'd go over to the Lincoln Towers and get in Pate's poker game at night. It's stuff like that. And Pate's brother was on the toll road board. I took care of Pate, as any governor should take care of his leader, and that was reciprocated. And I would do Lee Daniels in another way. He had different issues.

Phil Rock was a great friend and a great leader for me, and so was Madigan. Madigan was much more reserved, but when you made a deal with Madigan and he gave his word, it was done.<sup>21</sup> It just got done, whereas Rock was a more—I guess I would call it a sentimental relationship. I mean, I held a fundraiser to pay off Rock's campaign debt, because he had foolishly, against my advice, mortgaged his house to help pay for his race for the Senate. I had told him, "You'll be a terrible candidate; you'll hate it. And for God's sake, don't put your own money into a campaign. You're giving yourself, that's all you should give. Somebody else should finance it." He didn't listen to me and mortgaged his house, and he had a debt that was going to be very difficult to pay off. So Pate and I held a fundraiser in Oak Park, Rock's home town, for Rock to pay off his mortgage. And we did. That's the kind of political atmosphere that existed back in late '77 and through the eighties into the early nineties. There was not the polarization that there is today. There was not the personal enmity there is today. There was not the screaming arguments there are today. And Illinois benefitted from that.

DePue: What's different today?

Thompson: You got a different governor. You've had a different governor for the last twenty-four years. The parties have become more polarized. There's such a huge amount of money in legislative and gubernatorial races, but particularly in legislative races, and it finances these godawful thirty-second commercials that take a technical vote on a bill and turn it into something that it's not. The negative campaigning is much, much greater today than it was back then. I

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<sup>21</sup> For another perspective on Madigan's reliability, see Jim Edgar, interview by Mark DePue, June 10, 2009, Volume II: 289-293.

only ran one negative ad in my whole career, and it really wasn't negative; it was the truth. But you can't do that today. I mean, it's just awful. So it's no wonder that there are far fewer personal relationships across political parties today than there were back then. I think I told you the story of legislators I had prosecuted when I was U.S. attorney becoming some of my strongest supporters when they were still there and I was governor. Think that would happen today?

DePue: I don't recall you saying that, but that might have been a year or so ago when we had that conversation.

Thompson: It's true.

DePue: The other thing, listening to you talk about the four leaders, which in Illinois we always refer to as the "Four Tops," we discussed yesterday a little bit about the impact of the Cutback Amendment. Did you find after the Cutback Amendment went into effect that your negotiations focused more on the Four Tops?

Thompson: Not really. You don't negotiate, really, with the leaders' leaders, you negotiate with the leaders. So the size of the legislature really didn't make that much difference.

DePue: One other tax I wanted you to ask you about, and I confess ignorance here, the franchise tax went up from 0.05 percent to 0.1 percent.

Thompson: You've got me too. My guess is the franchise tax was sort of a semi-income tax, but how, I don't remember.

DePue: Now I don't feel quite as ignorant.

Thompson: (laughs) I don't think it was a big component of the budget.

DePue: No, I don't think so, either. In pushing for all these tax increases, were you renegeing on a campaign pledge you'd made in '82?

Thompson: No.

DePue: On the issue of are you willing to raise taxes, were both you and Stevenson saying that you would consider it?

Thompson: I might have said I didn't see the need for them then. But I never made a flat promise about the taxes in '82. I know that's a story out there, but it's not true.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Thompson said, "I don't see the need for one in this next budget year, and I take one budget year at a time." On this point, see Mandeville, interview by Mike Czaplicki, February 20, 2014, 246-250, and Philip O'Connor, interview by Mike Czaplicki.

DePue: It didn't take but just a few days after the election that the legislature gave you some extraordinary powers to revise the budget for the fiscal year '83, anyway.

Thompson: Right. It just shows you how fluid the situation was.

DePue: How were the tax increases received by the general public?

Thompson: I think there was more excitement in the press than there was in the general public. And there's a big difference between the press and the general public, although the press doesn't completely understand the difference.

DePue: Yesterday, we talked about a couple of people in the press, and getting ready today, I ran across articles from two of the people you had talked about yesterday. So I want to start by reading from a February 17th column by Mike Lawrence, who you mentioned you thought highly of.

Thompson: Good guy. Yes, I do.

DePue: "Despite the endorsements to support the rhetoric, the cheers, the boos for one candidate or another, so long as I am governor of the state of Illinois, I will continue to seek the support of organized labor." He's obviously quoting you.

Thompson: Mm-hmm.

DePue: "And come back to you again and again and again and again,' Thompson promised delegates to the AFL-CIO convention in October." Would that have been in Florida? Or is that the state convention?

Thompson: That's the state convention.

DePue: "He," being you, "He was bold. He was irrepressible. He was undaunted and undeterred, the jeers subsided; the cheers became more audible. He had met the enmity, and at the very least, won begrudging respect." And then farther down in the article, "Bravely, Thompson had shaped a \$2 billion tax increase package to halt a recession wax-slide of social services and education funding. 'To do less,' he claims, 'would have been an affront to Illinois's traditional civility in dealing with the young, the feeble, the ill, and the poor.'" And he goes on in this vein for a pretty lengthy column. Any response to that?

Thompson: Absolutely right. All true. From a very well-respected, smart reporter.

DePue: Now I get to ask your response to this next article written by Roger Simon—

Thompson: Oh, boy.

DePue: —appeared April 27, 1983. So now the red meat is on the table, you've made your budget proposal, it's already been started to be discussed, and it's going to be a couple months before it's all resolved. The column is titled, "Big Jim a Royal Pain in the Budget." "I have been asked to submit ideas to the Illinois House Appropriations I Committee for cutting the Shah of Springfield's personal budget. Every year, the Shah, also known as Jim Thompson, presents a whopping bill to the legislature for his mansion, his food, his servants, et cetera. This year, however, the state is in a financial crisis. I know that because the Shah told us so—right after his reelection. We all must sacrifice, he says. The elderly, the sick, the mentally ill, and the schoolchildren must sacrifice. And the taxpayers must sacrifice by paying billions more in taxes."

"But Tuesday, I learned the Shah is asking us to bleed while he's barely willing to sweat. Our governor wants a 7.6 percent increase to his food budget, bringing it to \$33,580, or \$92 per day, for a family of three. He's also asking for one more butler, bringing his total number of butlers to three. In fact, the governor already maintains a staff of sixteen at his mansion: two butlers, three cooks, an administrative assistant, a conservator, a fiscal clerk, a housekeeper, a laundress, three maintenance men, an operations manager and two secretaries. He also has fifty-six bodyguards at his disposal. This is justified. The way he spends our money he needs all the protection he can get. In Thompson's first full fiscal year as governor, the cost of the mansion and his office was \$1.9 million. This year he is requesting more than \$3.7 million." And then he says, after looking at your income tax forms, "The Thompsons gave \$360 in cash to charity." And then further down, "So how would I cut the governor's budget? With a meat axe. We don't need to maintain the palace for him for 365 days a year. I'm sure we could rent Thompson and his family a very nice home in Springfield for much less than it costs to maintain his current abode." I've only read the highlights of that column.

Thompson: Yeah, absolutely. I think we discussed Roger Simon yesterday, and the reasons for his personal enmity to me. Let's start with the—how many body guards?

DePue: Fifty-six.

Thompson: That's a security detail that operates in Springfield and in Chicago on a twenty-four-hour-a-day schedule. Three shifts, plus the road crew when I travel, so that's number one; they're not all standing, circling me, all fifty-six people on the mansion lawn. Secondly, if they weren't on my security detail, they would be somewhere else on the state police. They wouldn't disappear. So in that sense, they cost *nothing* to move from other state police functions to the security detail. I don't think our food bill was for three people, which was really two adults and an infant. The mansion food bill also fed the staff and the state police, both of whom used the food facilities in the mansion; it fed guests of the mansion. So he's not playing fair with the idea of the food

budget all goes to Jayne and Jim and Samantha. He knows all this, or he knew all that. He doesn't write about this anymore; he knew all that. But because he wanted to make a point, he used this hyperbole to make his point. What was the state budget that year, how many billions?

DePue: Again, you proposed \$13.9 billion.

Thompson: All right, what percentage of \$13.9 billion is \$3 million for the mansion?

DePue: It would be a small—

Thompson: Infinitesimal.

DePue: Let me put it to you this way, Governor. In the past when we've talked about the mansion, you clearly were not bashful about using the mansion for entertainment purposes—for bringing legislators together, for bringing lobbyists in, for bringing political supporters and opponents together. Doesn't that give you a political advantage in using it that way, and you're doing that on the tax dollar?

Thompson: It gives me a governmental advantage. If I solved the Chicago school crisis by bringing everybody into the mansion, it may give me a political advantage, sure, why not? Good government is good politics; somebody said that, I think. But if you solve the Chicago school crisis, that's what you're supposed to do, right? And that's the way we did it. The mansion is more important for solving governmental challenges than it is for any other purpose. Sure, the governor could live in a house in Springfield. Isn't Governor Rauner doing that now while they're waiting to restore the mansion? What does he lose? He loses the advantage of the mansion to solve issues.

How do you think business and labor came together to get unemployment comp reform and worker's comp reform in Illinois while I was governor? I took the labor people on my trade missions, where before only business leaders were taken; I put them together on foreign trade missions, and they came back friends. So when we went to the mansion to solve these issues, we were advantaged. That's what the mansion's for. It has no other real purpose. Yeah, you can hold political events there, and when you do, the governor's political fund pays for it. So that's not an issue. Yeah, you have visiting guests, but that's part of the function of the mansion. And I was deliberate in using the mansion to bring people together to solve problems—to bring the legislative leaders in to talk about the budget or talk about something else, to bring the legislators in at night—it was all deliberate, and it was all governmental, not political. I mean, what political advantage do I get by bringing Democratic legislators to the mansion? That's not a political event. That's so we both get the chance to talk about the issues facing the state in surroundings that are different from the Capitol. And it makes a big difference. So the notion that this is all for the entertainment of the Thompson

family—hey, we lived above the store. (DePue laughs) We didn't live on the grand floors. I took the mansion as I found it. Been there since 1840-something. Not my invention. What was I going to do, close it? I mean, it's just crazy.

DePue: Did you get much pushback or heat from the legislature? Or is this primarily something that you're hearing from the press, and especially Simon?

Thompson: Yeah, the latter. The legislators never complained about the mansion or its budget, ever, just as I'd never complained about the legislators' Capitol or their offices, or their redoing of the Capitol. It was just crazy.

DePue: How about your response to his claim that your tax returns showed that you'd only had \$360 to charity that year?

Thompson: That may have been true.

DePue: Were you concerned at all about the optics of that?

Thompson: No. Because it was pretty clear, from what people saw of me, that I spent a great deal of time out and around the state at charitable activities and functions.

DePue: We've already talked a little bit about the nature of the negotiations that year with the legislature on the budget. Were you getting a lot of pushback from the size of the budget going in, \$13.9 billion, \$1 billion less than just two years before? I mean, at the same time as you've already talked about, Medicaid is going up, and there's more demand for welfare payments.

Thompson: Sure. There's always pushback. Only the governor—and presumably the legislature, but mostly the governor—is bound by the requirement for a balanced budget. Everybody else is free to spend more money than we have, whether it's the legislature or it's the interest groups. That's a longtime traditional sport in the state of Illinois; in fact, it's a longtime traditional sport in almost every state and the federal government. I refused to spend money we didn't have. And I'm the person who can say no. Everybody else doesn't have to say no, except at the end if they accept my budget after I vetoed out spending, or they haven't appropriated where I've said, No, I'm not in favor of that. We finally come to terms. But at the beginning of the process, it's the governor saying no.

DePue: How about protests? Do you recall if there were lots of public protests that year?

Thompson: Oh, I'm sure there were, although the only real public protests I remember from the fourteen years was over ERA [Equal Rights Amendment].

DePue: How effective were protests like that? Did they influence either you or the legislature?

Thompson: Didn't influence me. I remember one year when protesters, I forget what group they were from, were marching in front of my house on Fullerton Avenue, carrying coffins. That really impressed my daughter.<sup>23</sup> But look, you can't give in to that. If you gave into that kind of thing, you couldn't function as a governor. Did I understand what they were protesting? Yes. Had I previously made attempts to sit down with people like that and talk? Yes. I was probably the most accessible governor in the history of the state. I spent a lot of time doing that. Hell, half the time I was in Springfield, I worked with my office door open to the corridor, and people would stand there and say, "Hey Governor, come over; I want to tell you something." Over I would go. So I understood what they were doing and saying. But you can't give in to every demand, because the people who are demanding aren't giving any thought to the other people who are demanding. But I have to.

DePue: Take a snapshot, if you will, on the legislative year. You make your budget proposal February, maybe early March. But the end of the fiscal year and the end of the negotiation period is, in your timeframe, the end of May.

Thompson: End of May.

DePue: And then if you go into June, you go into supermajority?

Thompson: Yeah.

DePue: So when were the budgets typically passed in that time frame?

Thompson: Before the supermajority, (laughs) because the majority party in the legislature knew damned well that if they went past the deadline, they'd have to appease the minority party. And they weren't about to do that.

DePue: The way it's oftentimes portrayed today is that there's an awful lot of posturing in those earlier months, and then suddenly, people get serious and sit down.

Thompson: Absolutely, sure. Look, posturing is part of politics. We all understand that. People in the legislature, even governors, want to look good in the eyes of the people who sent them there. And to the legislators, it's more local. It's easier to bring pressure on a legislator because they come from districts with not so many people, compared to statewide that a governor has to respond to. So yeah, posturing is part of it, and I did understand that at the time. I didn't get excited when people jumped up and down on something.

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<sup>23</sup> Samantha Thompson, interview by Mike Czaplicki, April 4, 2014.

DePue: I'm going to ask you an unfair question now.

Thompson: Oh, sure.

DePue: And try to remember the specifics for that particular year, because from most accounts, that was probably your toughest year for negotiations. You started off with a \$13.9 billion budget proposal. The actual appropriation that year was \$16.52 billion, a big increase.

Thompson: Big increase.

DePue: I'll show you this document that Mike Czaplicki put together, but I believe what's in blue there might even be Dr. Bob's scribbling.<sup>24</sup> (Thompson laughs) So that's a huge increase over your proposal. And my understanding of that \$16.516 billion is, that's after you had applied some line item vetoes or amendatory vetoes?

Thompson: Yeah. But by that time, the economy was starting to get a little better, just a tiny bit better. And we had these new revenues. So first I had to fill the holes, and then after I filled the holes, whatever the deficit was that year, I had to spend part of the new tax revenues responding to the requests of the people who voted for the taxes. Not unusual.

DePue: And all of those tax increases are going to go into effect July 1, 1983?

Thompson: Oh, yeah. There was no time for delay, that's for sure.

DePue: Do you remember any more of the specifics of the negotiation back and forth, why that big increase was occurring?

Thompson: Because I was asking a Democratic legislature to pass a tax increase for a Republican governor.

DePue: Was the plus-up from your budget more on Medicaid and public aid, or was it education?

Thompson: Both. Let's take a quick break.

(pause in recording)

DePue: Governor, we're back at it, after a quick break.

Thompson: Good.

DePue: One thing we haven't talked about yet, and it's an issue that has to be factored into the budget every year, is pension payments. And it's an issue that's really raising its ugly head in the last five to ten years in Illinois. The current

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<sup>24</sup> Nickname for Thompson's budget director, Dr. Robert Mandeville.

estimate says that the state of Illinois is in the arrears for pension systems, something like \$111 billion, which seems insurmountable. Back in the early eighties, it wasn't something that was discussed as much. There are five public pension systems that the state is required to pay into, as well as the individuals who are in those sectors. I asked the Legislative Research Unit to come up with what the shortfall, if any, was for each one of these years. And what they report is that every single year from 1977 on—and I suspect even before that—there was a serious shortfall in terms of what was statutorily required from the state to pay versus what the state, the legislature, and the budget actually paid.

Taking a snapshot in that 1984 budget, for the SURS System, State University Retirement System, the payment was 26.7 percent of what was mandated by statute. The Teacher Retirement System was quite a bit healthier, 43.8 percent. But always part of that equation is that the teachers had opted out of Social Security, so they relied entirely on that pension system. The SERS, that's the system that I'm in as a state employee, 39.8 percent. The jurists were supported a little bit more handsomely, 54.5 percent. And then the General Assembly Retirement System at 91.3 percent.

Thompson: (laughs) Surprise, surprise.

DePue: And this was consistent from year to year. It was going up and down, but it was generally consistent in that respect. Why were you willing to allow these pension systems to be so significantly underfunded?

Thompson: Does it say how I found them in '77?

DePue: No, I should have asked the question of how it was before that timeframe.

Thompson: Yeah. I think there are two considerations here. One, and I take my share of responsibility for this, the state had gotten in the habit of underfunding the pension systems to balance the state budget. Both the governor and the legislature were responsible for that, and we ought to get our share of the blame. But one of the reasons why it was easier to do then was because you had so many people working to keep up the funds and not that many retired. Whereas today, state employment ranks are way down from those days, and people are living longer today than they did thirty-five years ago. So the expenses of the pension fund are higher and higher every year.

DePue: Was the state payroll increasing during these early years? It certainly would have been in the Department of Corrections.

Thompson: Yeah, it probably was, because I used to brag that when I left office, state government was doing three times as much as it did when I became governor, yet we were taking less of Illinois citizens' income in taxes. That was one of my achievements. So obviously, the state payroll had gone up, new agencies

were created, and departments like Corrections expanded rapidly because people were demanding tough law enforcements, which meant more prisons, which meant more guards and managers. I could be wrong on this, but I think it was easier to do an underfunding of the pension systems in the seventies and eighties because of those demographics than it is today. And a lot of states did it. I mean, that's not an excuse, but it shows you what the general attitude of state government was in this.

DePue: Today, most people would say that Illinois' budget shortfall, working out the percentages, is more severe than any other state.

Thompson: I think that's right. Our pension obligations today are greater than any other state. We're at the bottom.

DePue: You just mentioned that you share some of the blame. Do you have strong regrets about not taking better care of the pension system?

Thompson: I'd say there were regrets. Not strong regrets, because I had to balance at the time the legislators' desire to do it and the other demands of the state budget.

DePue: Do you recall the nature of conversations you would have had with Dr. Mandeville about this issue?<sup>25</sup>

Thompson: No, not really.

DePue: Never the philosophy of how he approached it?

Thompson: No, because it was, I think, a very accepted practice at the time, so it didn't arise between the governor and the legislature.

DePue: How about the labor unions themselves? The public sector unions? Were they protesting? Were they pushing back?

Thompson: Not that I recall, because I had given them so many other things.

DePue: Let me jump ahead in the timeline here. It looks like it was in the veto session, on November 2, 1983, that you signed legislation giving the public sector unions' collective bargaining rights.

Thompson: Right. I did.

DePue: And we've talked a little bit about that before. Prior to that time, it had been an executive order under Walker, and then you continued that.

Thompson: Right.

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<sup>25</sup> Mandeville, interview by Mike Czaplicki, February 20, 2014, 239-245.

- DePue: Did you have to do your own executive order to continue that?
- Thompson: I don't recall how I continued it between '77 and '83, but I'm sure I did. More likely, I didn't change his executive order.
- DePue: And we've talked about your support of labor unions and your support for collective bargaining rights a little bit before.<sup>26</sup> But I wanted to bring the subject up again in conjunction with the shortfall of the pension payments. Doesn't giving them collective bargaining rights put even more pressure down the road on the pension system if you don't start funding it adequately?
- Thompson: It made the unions more powerful, which gave them a greater voice on that issue. But I don't recall their ever using it while I was governor. It was just sort of an accepted practice.
- DePue: When you say "using it," what do you mean?
- Thompson: Using that voice to object to the underfunding. Pensions were being paid. That wasn't an issue. They got greater collective bargaining rights, so they were focused on other things.
- DePue: Well, the issue would come to the forefront whenever there were negotiations for a new contract. I don't have any specifics on this, Governor, but do you recall negotiations with the teachers union or SEIU or any of the other public sector unions during your administration? The nature of the negotiations?
- Thompson: Not really. I don't think they were that contentious.
- DePue: One of the critiques that I've heard about collective bargaining rights, especially for the teachers union, was that when this legislation went through, the state already had a mandate that students had to attend school a specific number of days per year. So if the teachers went on strike, the teachers wouldn't have to suffer any loss in pay, because they'd still be paid based on that number of days they were required to teach.
- Thompson: That's certainly true. On the other hand, the students didn't suffer any loss of education, because the days were made up.
- DePue: Part of that critique, though, was that superintendents and all of these hundreds of school districts around the state who were faced with negotiating with teachers knew that to a certain extent, the teachers had a leg up on them. However hard you're trying to negotiate, you were going to be in a losing position on this, so that they tended to—maybe this is a strong word—cave in negotiating with teachers.

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<sup>26</sup> James Thompson, interview by Mark DePue, August 28, 2014.

Thompson: No, I don't think so. Look, when teachers prior to '83 had no right to collective bargaining, let's put it that way, and I gave them the right to collectively bargain, they certainly got a leg up. What they got was parity with the systems, which were organized school systems. Now they were organized. So I don't think it's quite accurate to say that they got a leg up.

And you've got to remember this too: one of the reasons I gave teachers the right to collectively bargain was because I thought it would cut down the number of strikes, and it did. When the teachers had no collective bargaining rights, there were far more unlawful strikes against school districts, which resulted in negotiations and giving up by one side or another, than there were after collective bargaining. Today, there are very few strikes. They've gotten used to the system of collective bargaining. Before, there were just all kinds of wildcat strikes. So in that sense, it worked. And that was one of the reasons why I did it. And because I also thought that it was not fair to put teachers into a process, collective bargaining, when they had no right to organize themselves to achieve that. And also, because I had promised my Aunt Jay, who was a public schoolteacher for fifty years, to take care of the teachers. As she put it, "Jim, the only thing I ask is you take care of the teachers." And I said, "Yes, Aunt Jay."

DePue: Is she the one who saved all these scrapbooks?

Thompson: Oh, yeah.

DePue: Did this apply to Chicago Teachers Union as well? The public sector unions for the city?

Thompson: They might have already had collective bargaining. They might have already had recognition. I don't remember. If they didn't, it certainly applied to them. But I think they already had it in Chicago.

DePue: But the Chicago teachers' pension system is separate from the five that we talked about.

Thompson: It is.

DePue: At the national level, you did court the AFL-CIO as well, and we've talked about that a little bit before. But here is a quote from an AFL-CIO spokesman: "He's distinctive and unusual because he's one of the few left in the Republican Party with whom we can really deal, when once there were many." And then the president of the union, Robert Gibson, stated, "He's the best damned governor we've ever had on labor issues."

Thompson: There you go.

DePue: "He hasn't shown any anti-labor bias."

- Thompson: It's true. He was my buddy, Bob Gibson. A dear friend.
- DePue: You and I have already talked about that memorable day when the labor unions were in Springfield because Ryan was pushing a right-to-work bill—
- Thompson: Well, he was going to let it on the floor. He wasn't pushing it.
- DePue: He was going to let it on the floor. And that was the day that you invited everybody over to the mansion for beer.
- Thompson: Right.
- DePue: So it's a closed system; if you're going to be a teacher, if you're going to be a public sector employee, you're going to be in the union, period. And now they've got collective bargaining rights.
- Thompson: Or the private sector.
- DePue: The private sector, right. Let's jump to the present day and talk about the new governor, Governor Rauner, and his attempt to go after the public sector to try to fix the pension problem—this is probably how he would say it, you might have a different view—that we currently have. If he was to come to you, what advice would you give him on all of this?
- Thompson: But I don't see what right to work has to do with the pension issue. The pension issue is an issue because the legislature and the governor, over years, have not put enough money into the system to fully fund it. It's got nothing to do with right to work, as I understand it.
- DePue: If I can try to get inside the mind of Governor Rauner—maybe this is dangerous, but—
- Thompson: (laughs) I'm sure it is!
- DePue: But he would say, and supporters of right to work would say, that you're taking money from public sector employees, which goes into the coffers for the union and ends up supporting the campaigns for the candidates that the unions support. The unions then make sweetheart deals with the candidates afterwards.
- Thompson: Yeah, and I've got to say this wasn't an issue in my time. I didn't think much about it because we always had fair, honest, and conciliatory negotiations with public employee labor unions that were representing employees under my administration. But lately, far removed from that time, I've begun to worry about the notion that large campaign contributions from public employee unions are going to those who will end up negotiating those unions' contracts. If that were true in the private sector, they'd all be in jail under the federal law. It's not true under the law for public employees to do that.

It's a difficult issue, because as the Supreme Court has ruled recently, contributions are speech.<sup>27</sup> And I think it would be very difficult, very difficult, maybe impossible under those circumstances, to restrict the contributions that public employee unions are allowed to make to those with whom they will later bargain. On the other hand, I think it's probably constitutional to say we won't allow any more than X-number of dollars to go to candidates in the state, just across-the-board limitations on donations. That's probably constitutional when it applies to everybody. If you just apply that to public employee unions, I think you'd raise a free speech issue.

Far more difficult for labor unions, I think, in both the public and private sector is the future of Supreme Court rulings on right to work or agency shop, or fair share. That's where the focus is these days. It's clear that employees in union contracts can't be forced to join the union. So there has developed the fair share doctrine, where you can't force me to pay union dues, it's a violation of my free speech rights. But you can force me to pay a fair share to cover the cost of what the union does for me: negotiating contracts, things of that sort, not political contributions by the union.

DePue: Resolving personnel issues.

Thompson: Yeah. But Governor Rauner is not alone in his attack on those provisions. I think there may be a budding majority in the Supreme Court of the United States to upset fair share. The grounds that are usually asserted in support of this are that you cannot really distinguish between the negotiating posture of the union and the political posture of the union; that they're just so intertwined. So it's a violation of free speech to force anybody to support the union in any fashion. So then you'll have what they call "free riders," and then union membership will decline pretty drastically, because if you can get all the advantages of a union without paying for it, hey, people are great at taking things that don't cost any money. And there may be a fifth vote for that up in the Supreme Court. I don't know. The last time this issue arose, where the Supreme Court upheld fair share, if you read Justice Alito's majority opinion for it, you come to think that perhaps he, if forced to the test of whether this violates the First Amendment or not, might go the other way.

DePue: Are you sure it was Judge Alito? I didn't think that the case got to the Supreme Court before Alito was on the court.

Thompson: There were earlier cases, yes. But the latest case is one that Alito wrote, and he said, "Okay, under these prior precedents, we have to sustain this." But if

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<sup>27</sup> Thompson is referring to *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* 558 U.S. 310 (2010), which built on the principle established in *Buckley v. Valeo* 424 U.S. 1 (1976) that contributions were a form of speech.

you read his language in that opinion, you're thinking, Boy, the next time this comes up, it's not going to happen.

DePue: The reason this is relevant, from what I've already stated, one of the first things that new Governor Rauner did was to decide that he's going to sign an executive order to withhold the fair share portion of union fees—just recently made the decision that it's coming out of gross pay, and not even out of net pay.

Thompson: Yeah, but there's litigation over this.

DePue: Yeah. As you've been talking about here, in conjunction with this, he's putting forward a case that he intends to go all the way up to the U.S. Supreme Court. I don't know how long that would take.

Thompson: So far, he's been ruled against in the state courts, the circuit court downstate saying he can't do that. And he filed a federal lawsuit.

DePue: I know the attorney general and the comptroller's office say, "Wait a minute, you can't do that."

Thompson: Yeah, that's what they say. They're going to say you can't do that under state and federal law, and they're also going to question his standing to do that, which is a different issue. But that lawsuit has been sought to be joined by four state employees, who are fair share participants who don't want to pay fair share. So even if Governor Rauner's suit is thrown out, four state employees do have standing to bring a lawsuit to object to paying fair share. There's another case in California that's gone much further in terms of its trek through the courts. And that may get to the Supreme Court of the United States before any Illinois case. So we'll see what happens with this.

DePue: Governor, I appreciate your willingness to talk about current events, even though the focus is on your administration, because it's the overriding issue fiscally for Illinois in the last few years. And again, the pension system shortfall is part of why I think this is such an interesting and important conversation today.

Thompson: Yeah. The only thing I can't do is comment on Governor Rauner's policy or programs, because I've never done that with any of my successors.

DePue: Fair enough. Any other comments about that subject?

Thompson: No, it's a really tough subject. Tough problems have come about by the way it was treated in the past.

DePue: Any reflection during your time of which one of the public sector unions carried more clout? One of the things we haven't talked about is police and firefighters. Are they truly a separate category?

- Thompson: Yeah, they are, because their demands are minimal, their numbers are minimal, compared to other government employees.
- DePue: The argument also comes into play that you don't want either one of those to have the right to strike.
- Thompson: Right, you can't. You can't give public safety workers the right to strike. You can't do it. And nobody's ever done it. And the numbers, in terms of the responsibility of state government, if you eliminate state police, we don't really have any state firemen; that's a municipal issue. Whereas however many state employees there are now, thirty thousand, twenty-five thousand—the number keeps declining—are the issue for governors and legislators.
- DePue: From everything that we know now, but especially from your timeframe, did the constitutional convention in 1970 get it right that we needed to protect public sector pensions, that they could not be diminished?
- Thompson: I think if I were drawing the constitution, I would have worded it differently. I think it goes too far. I think the primary protection you need is a constitutional provision to say, "You can't take away what people already have." If I've got a pension account built up through my contributions and the government's contributions, you can't take that away; that's ours, and it's untouchable. But it's been interpreted—and maybe it was meant to be interpreted, the Supreme Court will tell us—so that any new program that's adopted... Take the 3 percent pension increase every year, 3 percent compounded, which has led to this crisis in pensions, just that alone; forget living longer and requiring more money. Once that's introduced into the system, you can't take it back. Anything's that's introduced into the system becomes a permanent fixture for employees who are working at the time. And that's what's led to this.
- I think that goes too far, because it does not allow for changes in tough financial times. The pensions are now, what, a quarter of the budget? That's astounding. And partially due to the fault of the unfunded system, but not entirely. You cannot have a functional state government with pensions 25 percent of the budget, and growing because of demographics, it's going to crowd everything else out. And the only solution to that would be a constitutional amendment to change the provision because you can't raise taxes high enough.
- DePue: I've heard no mention of a constitutional amendment. The hope is that the Illinois Supreme Court has to judge whether or not this legislation that passed under the Quinn administration is constitutional.
- Thompson: Yeah, and if you watched the argument, which I did in the Illinois Supreme Court, you had the four Democrats sitting silently, and you had at least one Republican justice, maybe two, seemingly pretty hostile to the notion that a

legislature could do that. Justice Thomas was right on their case.<sup>28</sup> And the four Democrats didn't say boo.

DePue: Are there three Republicans currently?

Thompson: There are. All three Republican justices asked questions, and Thomas was, it sounded like, pretty hostile to the idea. He said, "Isn't this the government's fault for not making the contributions?" And the argument was based on the notion that the state had police powers that would support the overriding of the constitutional argument, if the fiscal situation was grave enough. As I've said in other places, that's a very slippery slope. What's the end to that? You can say, okay, we'll only use this once in today's grave fiscal crisis. But that argument can be extended. And you know lawyers, they'll extend stuff. Legislators will extend stuff. So I don't think the Supreme Court is going to buy that argument. They might prefer to rewrite what they think the constitution means, despite the legislative history in the convention.

DePue: Really put you on the spot here.

Thompson: Yeah.

DePue: What do you think those four Democrats on the court are thinking as they silently listen to the arguments? Are they sympathetic to the legislation?

Thompson: I don't have a clue. (DePue laughs) I really don't. The only one I think you could maybe tell would be Anne Burke, because she dissented in the earlier case, which involved the medical part of the pension, I think. And that was a 6-1 decision.

DePue: Against?

Thompson: Against.

DePue: Governor, let's move beyond budget issues.

Thompson: Oh, goodness! Thank God. (DePue laughs)

DePue: I thought you might have that reaction. Chicago, in 1983, had a mayoral election. I believe this is Harold Washington running for the first time, and you and I had mentioned this before, against Bernie Epton.

Thompson: Yeah.

DePue: A Republican.

Thompson: Republican city council member, yes.

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<sup>28</sup> Justice Robert Thomas.

DePue: Any reflections on that race? Dare you voice an opinion while you're a sitting governor on how that should go?

Thompson: I think I pretty much stayed out of that. I didn't like the racial tone of the campaign; "Epton before it's too late," everybody knew what that meant. Before the blacks take over, that's what it meant. So I pretty much stayed out of that.

DePue: What was giving Washington the opportunity? Jane Byrne was mayor prior to that time. Did she elect not to run, or did she—

Thompson: She was defeated.

DePue: She was defeated in the primary?

Thompson: Correct. There was a three-way split in the vote between Washington and Daley and Byrne. And it allowed Washington to win. So he was the Democratic candidate.

DePue: How would you characterize your relationship with Byrne?

Thompson: Oh, Jane Byrne? Fine. Two things: when she was mayor, I did one of my biggest deals ever with her on how to use the Crosstown Expressway funds. The Congress had appropriated money to the city of Chicago for building the Crosstown Expressway. And when I ran for governor in my first campaign, I came out against the Crosstown Expressway and it never got built. And the money was sitting there, something like, I don't know, two to \$3 billion.

DePue: I think we have talked about this a little bit.

Thompson: Yeah. And we were warned that if you don't do something, the money's going back. So Jane Byrne and I sat down and we did a deal where we split the money—half for the city and half for the Collar Counties and suburbs. And Jane Byrne was criticized for being "hoodwinked" by the governor, out-negotiated by the governor, when it was clear that we both got something out of that. If we hadn't done it, we would have got nothing out of that, and the money would have gone back to Washington. So I thought it was a good deal, she thought it was a good deal. And on other stuff, she was helpful to me. Times when Madigan and I didn't agree and he was pushing something in the House and I was against it, I could call her up and she'd have her guys in the House, Democrats in the House that were more loyal to her than they were to Madigan, put a halt to it. So I would say our relationship was good.

DePue: Washington wins the election on April 2, 1983. I think he probably trounced Epton, there wasn't much of a race there.

Thompson: Oh, yeah. Right. Right.

DePue: How would you—

Thompson: But Epton came closer than a lot of Republicans had in the past.<sup>29</sup> Certainly against Daley.

DePue: So did that cast a racial cloud over the election going in for Washington?

Thompson: Somewhat. But more than race, it was about power. You know?

DePue: Because the Daley people were truly on the outs by that time?

Thompson: The councilmen who were part of the old machine didn't like that result because Washington took power away from them. You had council wars; the white council members, so there was a racial element to it, and the ethnic council members formed this bloc to subvert Washington's program. And that played out for a long time, until the mayor died.

DePue: And unexpectedly so as well.

Thompson: Yeah. And the council and the mayor never really made peace.

DePue: What was your relationship with Washington like?

Thompson: It was okay. (laughs) It began in a very different way. When I was U.S. attorney, I had prosecuted him for failure to file income tax returns, which was a federal misdemeanor, not a felony. And there was no allegation that he hadn't paid his taxes, he just didn't file. His taxes were paid through the holdbacks by the employer.

DePue: Withholding?

Thompson: Withholding, yeah.

DePue: So it might have even been the case that the government owed him money.

Thompson: You never know. But he hadn't filed them, and as we later learned, he had never filed them. Ever.

DePue: What was his defense for that?

Thompson: He didn't have any. So he pleaded guilty because he was up in front of old-time Du Page Democrat federal judge J. Sam Perry, who was the sweetest, most lenient judge in the entire federal building. And he was going to give Harold probation. I was the U.S. attorney, and when I learned this, I went up

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<sup>29</sup> The race was close. Epton actually won more wards than Washington (28–22), but Washington turned out more voters to win by 48,250 votes. Paul Green, "Chicago Election: the Numbers and the Implications," *Illinois Issues* (August 1983). On the involvement of Thompson's first campaign manager with the Epton campaign, see Jim Fletcher, interview by Mike Czaplicki, April 27, 2015.

to the courtroom and argued for jail time. I said, "Judge, not only hasn't he filed for the years that we put in the indictment, but he's never filed, ever, ever. And he's a public official." Well, J. Sam didn't think much of that argument, he gave him probation. That's how I began with Harold Washington.

Then when he was in the legislature when I became governor, we got along okay. In fact, he and I and David Shapiro, the Republican Senate leader, sponsored the Illinois Human Rights Act. Shapiro and Washington were co-sponsors at my request. We passed the Illinois Human Rights Act, first in the history of the state. So we were allies on that very important issue. We had a couple of dust-ups over appointments by me that required a mayor's approval, which he didn't want to give. I said, "That's okay, because they're in the job now, they'll stay in the job until their successor is appointed, and I'm not going to appoint anybody else. So, have at it, Mayor." And the next time that he made an appointment that required my approval, I refused to give it. (DePue laughs) We finally settled that. But apart from something like that, I didn't have any issues with Washington. And I gave one of the eulogies at his funeral.

DePue: Do you recall, I think this would have been early on in his administration, his request or his hope to get state support for the RTA? It worked itself out so that the RTA got \$100 million per year in subsidies from the state?

Thompson: But wasn't that part of RTA reform which I had been insisting on?

DePue: It probably was.

Thompson: I refused to deal with that until we got reform of the RTA. And we got that in '83, as I recall; '83 was a very productive session, as it turned out, even though the focus was mostly budget.

DePue: July of '83, I'm assuming it was July, the governor's planning office was created. Was that something that you were pushing for? Does that ring a bell to you?<sup>30</sup>

Thompson: Not really.

DePue: From day one, Paula Wolff was the policy person, and I would think that was central to any kind of an overarching planning process.

Thompson: It was.

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<sup>30</sup> On the role of this office, which was not part of the program staff, see Jeffrey Miller, interview by Mike Czaplicki, June 24, 2015.

- DePue: How about something the secretary of state, Jim Edgar, was pushing: you signed the legislation on September first toughening the penalties on drunk driving?
- Thompson: Mm-hmm. Yeah, not only was that a big issue for Jim, but there were a number of well-organized groups in the state in support of tougher drunk driving laws; MADD, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, was a very powerful lobby. And I was happy to do that.
- DePue: Did you get any pushback about that one?
- Thompson: Not really. Who's going to argue in favor of drunk driving?
- DePue: Tavern owners, which you knew a few around the state.
- Thompson: Yeah, but the onus of the bill was on the driver, right?
- DePue: This was not at the time, it's going to come later, that the drunk driving limit is changed from 1 to .08, I guess?
- Thompson: Yeah, but again, that has nothing to do with the tavern keepers.
- DePue: Governor, we've been at it close to two hours here, but I'll leave it up to you. I want to get into 1984 a little bit.
- Thompson: A great year! Go ahead.
- DePue: Do you want to plow forward a little bit?
- Thompson: Sure! It was a great year, as I recall.
- DePue: Let's start with this. Part of Reagan's agenda coming into office was to deregulate a lot of the various sectors of the American economy. And this one in particular, the deregulation of the telephone system, it was January 1st that AT&T in Illinois was divested. Can you give us a couple comments on that?
- Thompson: I'm not sure what that had to do with Reagan. Wasn't that the result of an antitrust decision in the courts? I think that's right. Wasn't the Bell system broken down into state Bells?
- DePue: Yes. I thought it was in part the deregulation as well, but you could be right.
- Thompson: No, I think it's the antitrust.
- DePue: How about the impact on the state, then? Because that's a major sector of Illinois' economy at the time. I know a lot of people who go all the way back to Illinois Bell and remember that as the good old days.

Thompson: Well, we had Illinois Bell after that. We just didn't have the giant AT&T after that. I don't think it had that much impact on Illinois. We still had the phones.

DePue: It would have required some kind of state legislation, didn't it?

Thompson: I'm sure it did, some kind of implementing legislation. But the equipment didn't change. So for the average person, the billings changed and the policies changed, and who was making the decisions changed, but the phones didn't change.

DePue: Now, you started this discussion about 1984, "a good year!"

Thompson: (laughs) It was about time, wasn't it?

DePue: Had some tough years. Why do you say that '84 was a good year for you?

Thompson: Wasn't that the year of Build Illinois?

DePue: Yeah, that was the year I think it was proposed.

Thompson: Yeah, and passed. Yeah, that was a good year.

DePue: And was part of that because of the economy on the upswing?

Thompson: Right.

DePue: Look at the budget again, because now you're proposing a \$16.7 billion budget.

Thompson: Yeah.

DePue: What allowed you to do that at that time? Was it the—

Thompson: And the legislature upped me by another billion. (laughs) See what I mean?

DePue: But that was consistent all the way through, wasn't it?

Thompson: They're just big spenders. I was the prudent one. The answer is the revenues were there, and the needs of the people were growing. So you had a budget increase.

DePue: Part of that increase in the budget that you're proposing was \$61 million more to education.

Thompson: Right. Which I'm sure they thought was far too little.

DePue: I'm sure they did.

Thompson: I'm sure they did.

DePue: In terms of how you approached the education budget, where was your priority? Your emphasis? Was it at primary and secondary? Was it in higher education?

Thompson: My personal bias was always in higher education.

DePue: Why?

Thompson: Because it cost less than elementary and secondary, (laughter) and so they were easier to please. Look, these are practical things. Where am I going to get the biggest bang for my buck? Or bucks, as the case may be.

DePue: Did you think you garnered more political support from all those college professors and the kids going off to college?

Thompson: No, that had nothing to do with it. College professors are not the greatest body of political supporters in the world. They have other issues. I just thought that—you take a university like Illinois, our land-grant institution. They were doing extraordinary things. In technology, hell, the Internet basically came out of Illinois and the University of Illinois—

DePue: I thought that was Al Gore. (laughs)

Thompson: No, I'm sorry to tell you it was not Al Gore. We did extraordinary things at the University of Illinois in a whole bunch of areas—agriculture, technology. And we had a great system of community colleges that were training workers for advanced jobs, especially those using technology in either factories or service industries. And the higher education institutions were more rational about their budget requests. I mean, they were right up there with everybody else for their share of the budget, but they were all rational about it; whereas elementary and secondary was just this great, big spending operation. I used to see cartoons of elementary and secondary, and they were the big fish with their jaws wide open for the dollars. It was a different culture, it was a different public appetite.

DePue: We'd been talking before about the Con-Con's position on pensions and not reducing pension payments. I believe one of the other issues that emerged from the constitutional convention was this provision or guidance that the state would pay for 50 percent of education for all of these districts. And I don't have the figures, Governor, but I think it was significantly less than 50 percent, even in your administration.

Thompson: Right, right, because as the Supreme Court had ruled, that was guidance only, not mandatory; it didn't compel us to spend 50 percent. Obviously, the state educational formulas were more helpful for the poor districts than they were for the wealthy districts. If we had had the same guidance provision on pensions, we'd have been a lot better off. (laughs) But we didn't, they did mandatory on pensions. But that's just my personal bias. As a governor, I tried

to respond to the requests of both aspects of education, the elementary and secondary, and the higher education. It was just easier, politically, to deal with higher education.

DePue: How about what seemed to be a perennial issue, or at least it occurred several times in the next couple of decades, and that was Chicago's school system and the Chicago school budget in a state of crisis? Do you recall any specifics in '83, '84?

Thompson: As I say, we had a time, I think it was in this era, '84 or so, where the Chicago schools got into crisis, and I just reached out and seized the issue and ran them all into the mansion and locked them up.

DePue: And again, I think we have talked about it, but a couple of years before this time.

Thompson: Maybe. But it took me bringing the teachers and the school board and the legislators and the bankers from New York together in the mansion for three days to get this solved. It seemed like Chicago public schools were perennially in crisis because they were a separate system and the state didn't run them.

DePue: And the mayor really didn't have a lot of direct control over that himself.

Thompson: Right. Certainly over the spending side.

DePue: It was the school superintendent that was the driving force there?

Thompson: Right.

DePue: Was that an elected position or an appointed position?

Thompson: Appointed.

DePue: Appointed by the mayor?

Thompson: Yeah.

DePue: Were you generally supportive of head-start types of programs? Did the state play any role in that as well, or was that strictly federal?

Thompson: No, that was really federal.

DePue: And one of the things I read for 1984 was that you were still trying to hold the line on public aid, on welfare programs.

Thompson: We had just sort of climbed out of a recession. Public aid was still a big budget item. And there's only so much you can do with that, given the other demands of the budget. Wasn't any animus on my part against public aid or

the notion of public aid spending, it just had to take its appropriate place in the budget.

DePue: I want to ask a few questions, then, about your attempts to promote the state of Illinois, especially in terms of foreign trips. I'm not sure if you were involved in these, I think you probably were. The Department of Commerce and Community Affairs had sponsored trips to Australia, China, and Japan in 1983. Were you part of the trips?

Thompson: No. I never went to Australia. And if I went on a trip, it was sponsored by me. Now, the planning and so forth involved the Department of Commerce and Community Affairs, obviously. But the Department did a number of foreign trade things that I was not part of.

DePue: I do believe, though, in February of 1984, you took a fairly extensive trip to Europe for fourteen days, a couple weeks that you were overseas.

Thompson: Yeah.

DePue: Twelve days, maybe.

Thompson: Correct.

DePue: Your intent of going to Europe at that time?

Thompson: To get business for Illinois, either European investment in the state, or having Europe be the end product of our export efforts. It was a pretty extensive trip. We were all over Europe. I think Samantha was on that trip. And again, labor leaders and business guys were on that trip—that was always my pattern.

Pate Philip was on the trip, I know, because he put my daughter up to harassing me on that trip. I had a press conference in London, and I'm just going through my statements at the press conference, when all of a sudden, I see this hand raised from the audience. And it's my daughter. She's now, what, six years old? She says, "Governor, you just said X, but your press release says Y. Can you explain that difference?" I'm looking at her, and she's sitting next to Pate, who has obviously put her up to this. So I had to answer her, like it was a reporter, and I answered like I would have answered a reporter. Precocious, yes. (DePue laughs) Yeah, yeah, yeah, precocious. I talked to her this morning from London. And I said, "You know, we were doing this oral history yesterday, and Mark was quoting things from your interview. You said I got over criticisms, and you and your mother had long memories." She said, "Yes, and it's still true." (laughter) And her mother's nodding from the other side of the room, yeah. So yeah, she spoke her own mind.

DePue: My guess on that press conference though, that was something of an icebreaker, and the press was eating that up.

Thompson: Oh, yeah. They were very taken with that, especially the British press, which had never seen anything like that. They were very proper with their prime ministers.

DePue: What other countries did you visit during that trip?

Thompson: I believe we were in Hungary, and we were in the Soviet Union, St. Petersburg and Moscow.

DePue: I would guess for Russia, it's grain sales.

Thompson: Right.

DePue: And Hungary maybe the same thing?

Thompson: Right.

DePue: But how about some of the Western European countries? I believe you were in France, and Mitterrand? Did you meet Mitterrand?<sup>31</sup>

Thompson: I did meet Mitterrand, yeah. And I met Mitterrand when he was over visiting Reagan, so I've met Mitterrand twice. In Western Europe, we were looking for investment into Illinois. The largest investment at that time into Illinois and the United States generally came from Western Europe, not from Asia. That later changed, and today it's somewhat less Japanese than it was during my time and more Chinese—but it's also Canadian, and still British—investment in the U.S. World economies have become so interrelated and so interdependent than it's far different than it was thirty years ago. Everything you do in the economy now has a relationship somewhere across the world. There's no avoiding it. American companies have gone and built facilities all across the world. They make sales all across the world. So sometimes it was an effort to boost Illinois sales in those places. It was certainly true in Japan and China.

DePue: What was the rationale for opening up foreign trade offices? You opened up quite a few.

Thompson: I did. When I came in, there were three. When I left there were thirteen. My friend, Governor Edgar, closed a couple.<sup>32</sup> But they were valuable to Illinois businesses that wanted to be in those markets. They could not only provide advice on the ground in those countries, but they could also facilitate the offices of the U.S. State Department and the Commerce Department in those countries, so that you could get the economic programs that both the state government and the federal government were offering. They were just boots on the ground for Illinois industry. And they were so cheap. I mean, if you

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<sup>31</sup> François Mitterrand was president of France from 1981 to 1995.

<sup>32</sup> On the foreign trade offices, also see James Thompson, interview by Mark DePue, August 29, 2014.

compared the costs of our foreign trade offices, which were essentially two guys, rent, and office furniture, versus the size of the business that Illinois companies were enabled to do, it was an infinitesimal part of the state budget. But it was a big deal.

We had never had offices in Mexico or Canada. They were in Europe or Asia. I opened offices in Mexico and Canada because we did a huge amount of business with those countries, and because I thought if Illinois businesses can learn how to do business in foreign countries close to us on our borders, they can gradually learn how to do business in Asia and Europe. And I think that proved to be true. I thought the trade offices and the trade missions were very valuable. So I did a lot of them.

DePue: A couple of other things I wanted to ask you about for 1984, and then I think I'm going to ask your indulgence and allow me to do a little bit more homework on Build Illinois before we get back together.

Thompson: Yeah, we should do that.

DePue: One of things I want to finish with, then, is the passage of a revised sex crimes law that would have probably been in effect in July, which redefined rape, included broader definitions for sexual assault and abuse. Does that ring any bells at all?

Thompson: Not really, but to the extent that state government could help victims of sex crimes, I was for it, because there were a lot of taboos and bugaboos intertwined with those laws, and the victims often didn't get a fair shake.

DePue: At this stage of your administration, you're two years beyond the last gasp of ERA, which ended in June of 1982. But was the women's lobby, if there was such a thing, still something to be reckoned with? That they had clout?

Thompson: I don't think I would characterize it as a "woman's lobby," first because women in Illinois were split on the issue of ERA. And that was one of the reasons why it was so hard to get it out of the legislature, because legislators would go home and their wives and mothers would be against it, particularly in the ethnic communities, Italians. They didn't want that. They didn't believe in it. So you had a segment of the women who were for ERA, but you also had a segment of the women who were against ERA. On other issues, you might define the women's lobby, if there is such a term, more broadly. I mean, there were things that I think a lot of women were united on. But I don't think there was a "women's lobby," as such. It was very discrete as the issues were discrete. And it might have been regional, it might have been local; it might not necessarily have been statewide. So I think you can't really talk about a women's lobby without defining the issue.

DePue: And it was July that your initiative went into effect to support an upgrading of state parks, recreational areas, hatcheries, and historic parks to the tune of \$100 million. And this is a sign that maybe the economy is improving.

Thompson: It is. It's easy to cut those things when the budget is in terrible shape, because you have to have priorities. And when a budget is in terrible shape, the human service needs come first. I mean, it just is right. But when you have a better economy, you really need to make improvements in the recreational system that you have, whether it's for hunting or fishing or forest preserves or parks and things of that sort.

So you do it in two ways. You upgrade the facilities you have, and you get new facilities. You buy more land out of the private sector and turn it into state parks or conservancy areas. Sometimes you do it with partners; the Nature Conservancy, for example, will go into partnership with the state in raising funds for the purchase of land, which then is converted to a conservancy. Or you might do it in conjunction with local government, counties or cities, to acquire land for parks, local parks. But that's often a neglected area of state government. And that was one of my pet areas, that and the museums and historic preservation. Every governor has his private pet areas that he's going to look out for in the budget. Or I should say most every governor, not all of them.

DePue: And that was being supported by a sales tax increase on soft drinks, does that sound right?

Thompson: It could be.

DePue: And one final area for you to respond to, and that's the creation of the Department of the Lottery. Now, there had been a lottery before that time.

Thompson: There was. The lottery came into effect under Governor Walker.

DePue: And there had been gambling, as you know better than almost anybody, because what ended up sending Gov. Otto Kerner to jail was the horse racing.

Thompson: Horse racing, yeah.

DePue: I wanted to take this opportunity, though, to ask you your philosophical opinion about gambling, especially gambling as a revenue source. Earlier today you talked about the way that it didn't necessarily work to support education the way it was being proposed.

Thompson: Right.

DePue: How would you describe your own philosophy towards that?

Thompson: I guess I would say I'm not opposed to it, which means I would support it. I think it's been criminal that Chicago has not been allowed to have a casino all these years. Just this idea of a Chicago casino has gone back at least ten or fifteen years, and nothing's ever been done. And billions have been lost for both the state and Chicago government because of it. I've never opposed the idea of gambling, because I regard it as a voluntary tax; people choose to do it for their own pleasure, and in the hopes of winning something they don't have. That's their choice. And the state benefits, or the city benefits. So I've never been opposed to it.

I introduced the riverboats because they were a new idea and a new source. I had to write the legislation in the first instance to require the boats to sail up and down the river. I think it was after my time that they were allowed to dock, and now we have casinos that have nothing to do with the river. I had to sell it as a romantic notion of the nineteenth century to get it out of the legislature. I've never been on a riverboat. I don't gamble. The only time I've ever gambled is when I've been in Vegas for other reasons, and I'd get \$20 worth of nickels, and when they were gone, they were gone.

DePue: What's your response to those who criticize gambling because it preys on the weaknesses of those who can least afford to gamble, and who seem to be the ones who most gamble?<sup>33</sup>

Thompson: I think that's a little bit hyperbolic. I think the number of people who gamble who shouldn't gamble because they have a weakness that takes them beyond prudence is so very small. I'm much more concerned about the people whose weakness leads them to drink and drive, or whose weakness gets them into the area of drug addiction, than I would be about gambling.

DePue: Any final comments for today, Governor?

Thompson: No, I think we've been pretty good!

DePue: We've moved along.

Thompson: We have moved along. We're up to 1984, we only have seven years to go.

DePue: And then a long and productive career after you are no longer governor.

Thompson: (laughs) Oh God, okay. Seven plus.

DePue: So next time it's Build Illinois, it's the Educational Reform Act of 1985, it's the creation of IHPA in 1985, and onward.

Thompson: Onward.

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<sup>33</sup> See Robert Mandeville, interview by Mike Czaplicki, February 10, 2014, 108.

DePue: Thank you, Governor.

Thompson: I loved Build Illinois!

(end of interview #16)

## Interview with James Thompson

# IST-A-L-2013-054.17

Interview # 17: June 9, 2015

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Good morning. Today is June 9, 2015. It is a Tuesday. My name is Mark DePue, director of oral history of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Governor, I think this might be our seventeenth session.

Thompson: (laughs) And I’m still alive. Imagine that!

DePue: Thirty-two hours, and we’ve got a long way to go.

Thompson: Oh, gosh!

DePue: But I’m obviously here with Gov. Jim Thompson, in your beautiful summer home in Buchanan, Michigan.

Thompson: Yes.

DePue: It’s a nice, cool day, looking over the lake—at least you are. We have to talk about 1985 today, but there’s a little bit of housecleaning with 1984 that I want to finish up with. And even before that, just in the news in the last couple

of weeks, I suspect you were as surprised as most people to hear about these allegations that dealt with former the Speaker of the House, Dennis Hastert.

Thompson: I wasn't surprised, I was shocked. I'm absolutely shocked. I've known Denny since he was a state representative in the House. And when he decided to run for Congress, the Republican House leaders asked me to campaign for a day with him in his district. I remember taking him through the shopping mall in Aurora. So we campaigned for three or four hours. And then he went to Washington, and I didn't see him very often until he became Speaker. And then for a variety of reasons, I saw him fairly often. In fact, he appointed me, as a member of the 9/11 Commission.

I got this phone call, "Speaker Hastert would like to talk to you." He was calling from the plane over the Atlantic coming back from Europe, and he told me about the 9/11 Commission and asked me to serve. I said, "Of course I'll serve." After we had started with that and our funding was running out, I was one of the commission members—there was another one too, a Democrat I guess, since we did everything in a bipartisan fashion—who went to the Speaker to ask that he support additional funding and additional time for the commission to report. And after some back and forth between the Speaker and Senator McCain over on the Senate side—neither of those guys are shrinking violets—we got it done.

I had spent a fair amount of time with him earlier, when I was working on George H.W. Bush's reelection in 1992. And I was part of a group of maybe ten, twelve guys that met almost weekly with the Speaker in his office, planning that campaign. So it's fair to say that I've known Speaker Hastert for a long, long time. When this story came out, I, like I guess all of his friends, was totally shocked, because it's so at odds with what his personality is. He was the coach. He was an amiable, nice guy. Boy, I don't know. And if you read the newspaper stories today of what people in Yorkville say, they still can't believe it. So I guess we'll see this afternoon, at least preliminarily, what it all comes out to be.

DePue: Yeah, I think they're awaiting his plea here.

Thompson: Yeah, his arraignment is at 2:15, something like that, the afternoon session before Judge Durkin. It's very strange.

DePue: The other piece of unfinished business in 1984 was at the national level. Certainly you remember the 1984 presidential election. Did you have a chance to meet Reagan personally during that election year? Did he come to Illinois to campaign?

Thompson: I was the chairman of his campaign in Illinois, so he better have come! (laughs) Yes, he did. He came to Illinois frequently because we were, back then at least, a swing state. And we had been a swing state in presidential

elections for almost sixty years. The rule was, whoever won Illinois won the nation. That was true for sixty years. Then we became, with the election of Governor Blagojevich and thereafter, a very blue state, both in terms of presidential politics and in terms of gubernatorial politics, legislative politics, and congressional politics. So our designation as a swing state drifted east to Ohio, and not quite as regularly, but still in the category, to Florida. Yeah, I spent a lot of time with President Reagan.

The first time I ever met him was in the campaign of '80, when he flew into Meigs Field. He had always been represented in Illinois by Don Totten, a member of the Senate who was much more conservative than I, and who was more wired into the Reagan campaign at that time, 1980, than I. But I met Reagan at Meigs Airport when he flew in, and we got to talking. I liked him immediately, and I think he liked me. And I remembered that he, in his Hollywood days, had been a member of the Screen Actors Guild, which is a labor union. So I asked him if he was still a member of the Screen Actors Guild, and he said yes, and he pulled out his union card. I said, "You know, in Illinois, it might be useful to display that once in a while as you campaign, because they are going to paint you as this right-wing Republican. And there is a significant blue-collar conservative Democratic vote in this state, largely populated by the trade unions." You know, the carpenters and the plumbers and the electrical workers, pipefitters—you name it. And so he did. I saw him do it a number of times; he dragged that card out, "I know about the working man, I'm a union member." (Thompson laughs)

DePue: But in 1980, and you and I have talked about this already, I think it's fair to say you did not see yourself as a Reagan Republican, by any means.

Thompson: Well, you know, I was never anybody else's Republican. I wasn't a Reagan Republican, I wasn't a Bush Republican, I wasn't a—you name it. I was my own man. And you would have to be, to be a candidate in Illinois. Now, in the campaign, they tried to hang Reagan on me, "He's Reagan's campaign manager, when Reagan"—

DePue: In the '86 campaign for re-election?

Thompson: No, in the '82 campaign. It was just part of the political games.

DePue: Did you have any qualms at all about representing him in his campaign in '84?

Thompson: Not at all. Not at all. I took the leadership of that campaign. I think I asked Greg Baise to be the campaign manager, to come out of my cabinet and to assume that post. And we were very, very strong for President Reagan, and we carried him. Carried him twice.

DePue: What did you think of his opponent, Walter Mondale, in that race?

Thompson: I liked Mondale. He was a seasoned Democrat, happy warrior type, smart guy, experienced. But the nation wasn't ready for that, I think, because the nation saw in Reagan, both elections, somebody they trusted, somebody who appealed to them. A lot of people will say that at base, or at heart, elections are a popularity contest. And in some respects, they are. Yeah, there are grave issues in elections, and there are world events and state events that swirl around elections, but with rare exception, you've got to like a guy to vote for him. You've got to identify with him. And I think a lot of people felt comfortable, felt safe with Reagan. I mean, I have, on a number of occasions, called him "the nation's grandfather," and he was, in the way he conducted himself a lot.

They saw he could be tough when he needed to be. The air controllers' strike—I mean, that made a big, big impression on the country. And his dealings with the Soviets—strong guy. And yet he was a pragmatic guy. His so-called ideology has been stolen by later politicians who announce that they're Reaganites, or we're going to have a return to Reagan, or whatever. If they read history—and I don't have to read it because I was there—he was a very pragmatic guy. You could make a reasonable pitch to Ronald Reagan and get him to agree with you. So yeah, that was a campaign that I was a big part of.

DePue: You got somebody knocking at your door, Governor.

(pause in recording)

Thompson: Yeah, mice in the garage this morning. These animals, they are fighting day and night to take back their property! (laughter) They used to have free rein out here, there was nothing here except land and trees and the lake. And they're determined to come back.

DePue: I take it there's not a cat in the garage.

Thompson: There's no cat in the garage. I wish there was a cat in the garage.

DePue: Getting back to Reagan, I wondered if you went to the convention that year. That would have been Dallas in August.

Thompson: Yes.

DePue: Any memories about the convention?

Thompson: Was that the convention where I spoke?<sup>34</sup> Or was that a Bush convention? Now I'm unclear about which convention that was. I know I was there.

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<sup>34</sup> Thompson was slated to speak at 7:30 Central Time on Wednesday, August 22, the night delegates formally nominated Reagan. "Tentative Program of G.O.P. Convention," *New York Times*, August 19, 1984. His

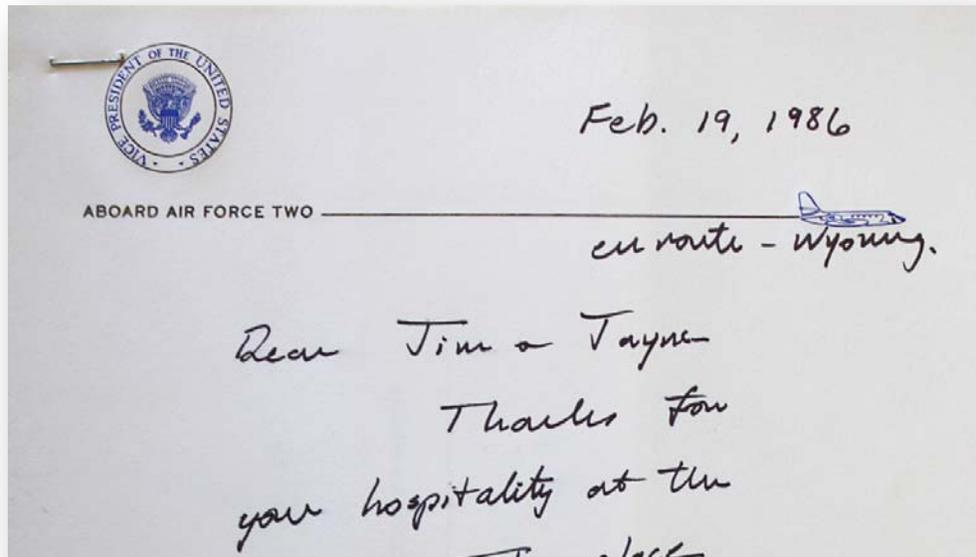
- DePue: A successful governor, a popular governor of a big northern, industrial state, at the time was there any talk about you being part of Reagan's realigned cabinet?
- Thompson: No.
- DePue: Were you interested in any position like that?
- Thompson: No. The political press, both national and state, but especially state, would with regularity after a presidential election try to move me on. (laughs) I mean, they were just bound and determined they were going to explore every possible place I could go; president's cabinet, new president or a reelected president, "Well, he could be attorney general," or he could do this or that. I'd answer their question patiently and say, "No, I don't want to do that. I'm the governor of Illinois. I want to be the governor of Illinois, that's why I ran. And I have no interest in the president's cabinet." But that never stops them.
- DePue: The other speculation would have been, Okay, let's talk about four years from now, who are the likely Republicans to take over the reins of Reagan.
- Thompson: Yes, and we had that too. But in that case, we had a vice president, George Bush I, who was the clear favorite for the election. And frankly, all the Republican governors who might have been looked at as possible candidates, including me, were great, dear friends of Vice President Bush. And we supported him from the get-go. There was never any question, at least not in my mind, and certainly not in the minds of the other Republican governors of my age that I knew, that we would do anything but support Bush.
- DePue: How would you describe the relationship you had with Bush? And already by this time, you're describing it as one of friendship. How did that happen?
- Thompson: You'd see a lot of Vice President Bush, simply because I'm sure at a very early time he was thinking about being a candidate since Reagan was limited to two terms under the Constitution. So he was out and about frequently; he was in Illinois.
- DePue: I would think in the 1980 election when he was in the primary. That was a close primary for a while.
- Thompson: It was. I was the chairman of the Bush campaign in Illinois, the first one. It was just clear to us from the beginning that he was going to be the candidate, and we were all for him.

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introduction begins at the 10:21 mark of C-SPAN's coverage of the convention's third day, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?124549-1/republican-national-convention-day-3>. Thompson also introduced George H.W. Bush prior to his acceptance speech at the 1988 convention, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?3848-1/george-hw-bush-1988-acceptance-speech>

DePue: How would you describe George H.W. Bush?

Thompson: A great man. A really great man. A fine president. One of the nicest, humblest guys you ever met. He would come to an event in your state, he'd get on the plane to go back to Washington, and while he was on the plane, he'd be writing a myriad of thank you notes to everybody that he had met on that occasion.<sup>35</sup> And I've got a satchel full of them. Reagan was the same way,



actually. Samantha has got notes from President Reagan if she saw him on the visit, and she has got notes that he wrote while he was at a speaker's table with me. But Bush was famous for his courtesy in doing that. He was also willing to do a lot of the political stuff—at least with me—that he otherwise didn't really like. I'm not sure Bush was all that hot on campaigns, but he

liked to govern. But when he was in Illinois, by God, he campaigned. I had him out to a Fourth of July parade when he was vice president, and we marched—and I mean marched—in two separate intersecting parades from one city to another without a pause, drinking beer along the way.

DePue: He was drinking beer along with you?

Thompson: You bet he was. And got hell from the Baptists that next week too (DePue laughs), who saw him on television drinking beer with me. He had called me one day in a saloon in East Peoria, which is where I was drinking beer, and he said, "What are you doing the Fourth of July?" I said, "I'm marching in the Blue Island Parade." He said, "Maybe I'll come out there and march with

<sup>35</sup> One of the letters George H.W. Bush wrote to Thompson from Air Force Two. Thompson Office Files.

you.” I said, “Have at it. Come on out.” And we had a great time. Just a great time. At Kennebunkport, when Jayne and I arrived late one night for a weekend, it was Vice President Bush who jumped up, opened the door, got our chair, and hung up our coats. An extraordinary man, just a wonderful, wonderful man, and I thought a great president.

DePue: You mentioned his letter writing, and it’s interesting, this morning there’s a report on the news about Barbara’s ninetieth birthday yesterday—

Thompson: Oh, wow.

DePue: —and they included a love letter that he had written to her back during the war.

Thompson: Yeah.

DePue: And I think only Harry Truman might be as well known—and Adams—for writing letters as a president.

Thompson: Right, he was remarkable. He was old school; he was, as my mother used to say, “raised right.” He still is!

DePue: Moving on and getting back to Illinois and your career, one of the things that I wanted to talk to you about was what I think maybe your staff called the Thompson Follies. And did that generally occur around Christmastime?

Thompson: What was the Thompson Follies?

DePue: An opportunity to celebrate and lampoon you and other people in the administration.

Thompson: Oh yeah, yes, yes, yes. See, what a nice guy I was; I let my employees come to the mansion, be fed and watered, and then sat through a show which satirized me. Now, I can’t imagine many other governors putting themselves through that, especially when they had, in those days, to sit through press lampooning with the press parties every year from the Legislative Correspondents Association. But if you had a recording of those events in the mansion, you would hear this loud, long laughter, and it was from me. I mean, I had a great time. These were my guys. And they did a good job of pinning it on me. So yeah, we had the Follies.

DePue: I wanted to ask you to read this. This is a song; oftentimes people were singing in these. I won’t tell you where we got this script.

Thompson: Oh, I’m sure.

DePue: You probably can figure it out anyway.

Thompson: Yeah, I can figure out where you got it.

DePue: I wondered if you could read the chorus to this particular song, which is sung to “Camelot.” You don’t have to sing, but if you’d like to read that for us.

IT SHOULD BE KNOWN TO EVERY CITIZEN	(point finger out)
THAT HERE OFFICIALDOM DOES CARRY ON	(point finger down)
TO LEGISLATE, DELIBERATE, ADMINISTER	(podium pound)
HOW SINISTER	(moustache twirl)
SANGAMON, SANGAMON	(open hands)
I KNOW IT GIVES A PERSON PAUSE	(physical pause)
BUT IN SANGAMON, SANGAMON	
THEY SCREW UP ALL THE LAWS	(slap forehead)

Thompson: “There is a place in central Illinois where laws are made to bring the people joy, where harmony and honesty abound, in Sangamon. It should be known to every citizen that here officialdom does carry on to legislate, deliberate, administer, how sinister. Sangamon, Sangamon; I know it gives a person pause, but in Sangamon, Sangamon, they screw up all the laws. At no time does the people’s will get done, thank God the public never catches on. In short, there’s simply not a more deceitful spot, for out and out skullduggery, than here in Sangamon!” Oh, yeah. Not true, of course, at least in my administration!<sup>36</sup>

DePue: Thank you for slipping into a little bit of song in there, because you can’t hardly avoid doing that when you read that, I’m sure.

Thompson: (laughs) Yeah.

DePue: That was fun. Is that usually around Christmastime?

<sup>36</sup> Pictured: A portion of the script Thompson is reading. Thompson’s staff performed “Sangamon” at the “Fletcher Follies,” which were held at the governor’s mansion on September 17, 1979, to send off deputy governor Jim Fletcher as he embarked on a private sector career. For discussion of these events, see Fletcher, interview by Mike Czaplicki, February 24, 2015; Robert Mandeville, interview by Mike Czaplicki, February 11, 2014, 166-170; Joan Walters, interview by Mark DePue, August 13, 2009; David Gilbert, interview by Mark DePue, March 27, 2014.

Thompson: Yes.

DePue: I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about one other tradition of your administration, the use of t-shirts.

Thompson: Oh, yeah. We were big on t-shirts. We had campaign t-shirts, obviously. We'd have special event t-shirts. And people would give me t-shirts; when I showed up at an event, they'd have t-shirts usually talking about themselves and their event and their town and their region, and stuff like that. And at one time, I think we counted, and I had about a thousand t-shirts.

DePue: Different?

Thompson: A thousand different t-shirts. So I got this great idea. I don't know why I got this great idea. I said, "Let's put them out on the mansion lawn, we'll take a picture, and we'll get it in *People* magazine." So we started lining them out on the mansion lawn, (laughs) and they blew all over the place, and we decided, eh, that wasn't really a good idea. So they're in a warehouse somewhere on the South Side of Chicago, in boxes, these t-shirts, along with the shovels from groundbreaking in fourteen years.

I never paid any attention to where the shovels went after you broke ground, you know? Somebody would always come up and take your shovel away. After a couple of years, I thought, Where is my shovel going? So I asked the guy who stuck out his hand to take the shovel, and he said, "Oh, did you want the shovel?" I said, "Yeah, I'll take the shovel," and put it on the helicopter, on the plane, and took it back to Springfield. There were maybe four or five of them displayed in the Capitol office, where I had all kinds of stuff displayed. And then it just became a habit. The travel aide would pick up the shovel and bring it back. So there's some shovels up there. I think my wife finally made me stop taking shovels, because I had them down in the mansion office, and God knows where.

DePue: You were collecting enough other stuff, huh?

Thompson: Yeah, right. (laughs)

DePue: Are the shovels in the same warehouse, Governor?

Thompson: I think so. There's a few of them, anyway.

DePue: What are you going to do with all of these t-shirts and these shovels?

Thompson: I don't know.

DePue: I have a suggestion for you.

Thompson: Here's the first thing I have to do. I have to find the warehouse. I'm not sure exactly where it is. It's been years since I've been there. But Edgar's stuff was in there too. So I've got to find out from Edgar, where is this warehouse?

DePue: I think it ought to be the kind of thing that gets archived someplace.

Thompson: Oh, God. You want shovels?

DePue: Shovels and t-shirts. I'd have to ask about it, but—

Thompson: Which reminds me, I've got four big boxes of photos that are in my office in Chicago that I've got to go through and get rid of. So they're going to come to you too.

DePue: Very good. I think it's finally time to get to 1985.

Thompson: Oh, thank God!

DePue: And this was a busy year. There's a lot to talk about here, Governor. And let's start with something fun, Reagan's inauguration. Do you remember that?

Thompson: Vaguely.

DePue: I saw a comment someplace that you were hoping to be able to dance with Nancy.

Thompson: I don't know where that came from. I saw that too. And I don't have a clue where that's from. I think somebody made that up.

DePue: But the same article mentioned that you did have a chance to kiss her.

Thompson: Yes.

DePue: I suspect kiss her on the cheek.

Thompson: Yeah. Well, she always kissed me every time I saw her before that, so it was my turn.

DePue: What did you think of Nancy?

Thompson: I liked Nancy.

DePue: The press was not kind to Nancy.

Thompson: No, they weren't. And at the beginning of the administration, she didn't help very much in maintaining relations with the press. I don't know what it was. And it wasn't until she made fun of herself at the Gridiron Dinner, singing that song to "Second Hand Rose," making fun of her clothes shopping and collections, that they started sort of to warm up with her. But then every once

in a while some story would come out, the fortune teller story and the others. The press generally liked Reagan because he was genial. She was more reserved, she was different. I mean, they were different personalities. But I liked her, and she liked me. And we did stuff together.

DePue: You start off January also with signing a piece of legislation requiring people in Illinois, citizens of Illinois, to wear seatbelts.

Thompson: Yeah. Boy, today nobody would blink an eye at that. Today, 99.9 percent of the people automatically buckle up. They've been persuaded that it saves lives, and they want to save their life. And unless they're drunk or stupid, they do that. But boy, at the time, it was a hot item. Very controversial. People looked at it as a government intrusion on their lives.

One time I was in southern Illinois where the opposition was the hottest. I was at the Giant City State Park Lodge, and I think we were there either for an occasion or it was Sunday chicken dinner. As I generally did, I walked through the kitchen to say "hi" to the workers in the kitchen. And this old lady was washing dishes in there. She must have been, God, eighty, eighty-five years old. I walked up to her, and she said, "You're the one!" I said, "I'm the one, what?" "You're the one with that goddamned seatbelt law! I'll never vote for you," and she just went on and on and on. So I said, "Well, thank you very much; I hope you'll reconsider." [I] got out of there, and the restaurant manager, who was a dear friend of mine, was apologizing for her. I said, "Why? She's entitled to her opinion." But boy, that was typical down there. They didn't like this intrusion.

Same thing with legislation requiring motorcycle drivers to wear helmets, which still hasn't passed. Same feeling. But yeah, I signed it, and it's one of the best things I ever did, I think. And it's the law today, and it's the law everywhere. Finally, I believe it was required by federal law, as most of those driving things are. You either follow the federal law or you lose your highway funds. And I can't remember now whether it was because of the federal law that I signed the state one, or I signed the state one apart from the federal law. But I remember it was really controversial, and I got a lot of complaints and letters and stuff like that about it. I'll never forget the lady in the kitchen in southern Illinois. And she had to be eighty-five, if she was a day.

DePue: God bless her, she had strong opinions at eighty-five.

Thompson: Yes, she did. Well, they all do down there, southern Illinois, western Illinois...land of strong opinions.

DePue: Before we get into the meat of the year, the press seemed to make a lot of noise about you becoming the longest serving governor, that you'd been

elected three times already. And in 1985, early in the year, you passed that milestone; you were now the longest serving governor of Illinois.

Thompson: Yeah. It was a big deal. I don't know whether I mentioned this before or not, but we had this rule in Illinois for a long time: governors were entitled to two terms, good or bad. Even if you were unpopular after the first term, you got reelected. But you couldn't get a third term, no matter how good you were. That was just the rule in Illinois. And the rule broke with Ogilvie on the second term, and then it broke with Walker on the second term. And I was re-elected to a second term, and then a third term. Since I had two four-year terms and one two-year term, I passed the mark set by Governor Oglesby at the turn of the century. He was elected governor one term, then reelected. After thirty days he was elected to the Senate, so he had four years and thirty days. When he came back from the Senate, he was re-elected governor, so he had eight years and thirty days. So I passed his record. And then when I was re-elected the fourth time, I sort of put it out there; it'll be a while before somebody does fourteen, I guess. Other states, Iowa, Michigan, Ohio... Ohio is not consecutive, but Michigan and Iowa were consecutive sixteen-year governors. And God bless the governor of Iowa, who did sixteen years. He's back again! He's going to do twenty.

DePue: Terry Branstad.

Thompson: Or maybe twenty-four, I don't know. (laughs)

DePue: Wasn't he governor during the time when you were?

Thompson: He was, indeed.

DePue: The news media needed to go out and gauge people's opinions about this milestone, and I'm going to read you just a couple of them here.

Thompson: If they're from Peoria, I know what they'll say.

DePue: This is an Associated Press article.

Thompson: Let me take it back. If they're from a saloon in Peoria, I know what they'll say.

DePue: These are prominent people, though.

Thompson: Oh prominent people, okay.

DePue: Gov. Dan Walker, "I'm a great admirer of his campaign style, because he said he copied mine."

Thompson: There you go, Dan. (laughs)

- DePue: And Governor Stratton, “His personal integrity is above reproach.”
- Thompson: Pretty nice.
- DePue: Yeah, the kind of thing you’d like to hear.
- Thompson: Yeah.
- DePue: And a fellow Republican governor. Michael Howlett said, “His strongest point is his public relations. He’s had the longest-running honeymoon with the media in the world.”
- Thompson: (laughs) That’s Mike!
- DePue: And I’m not sure how to pronounce his name, Tom Roeser.
- Thompson: Roeser, yeah.
- DePue: President of the City Club of Chicago, “I think the five-thousand-vote margin in 1982 show people don’t know what the hell he stands for anymore.”
- Thompson: Yeah, okay, Tom.
- DePue: Here’s a question for you, and maybe this will come up when we get to the ‘86 election as well, that five-thousand-vote margin by that time had kind of been blown out of the water with a hundred thousand fraudulent votes.
- Thompson: Right.
- DePue: But that wasn’t mentioned much.
- Thompson: No. Eighty people went to the penitentiary for that little number in Chicago—
- DePue: Oops.
- Thompson: ...producing a hundred thousand fraudulent Democratic votes for Adlai. But the official margin was 5,074, which was the lowest election margin in modern times. You had to go back to the early 1800s when we were a very small state with a very small population, certainly a very small voting population, to find anything like that margin. But you know, except for my races and maybe Edgar’s, gubernatorial elections in Illinois are decided by a fairly slim margin, a hundred thousand votes, and that would be it. That was certainly true this last time with Rauner.
- DePue: Quinn and Brady were close, as well.
- Thompson: And Brady was very, very close. Thirty thousand votes. And you go back a ways in Illinois history, and it was not unusual to have a victory margin of 150,000 votes; that was it, because we were such a swing state, a back and

forth state, between Republican and Democrat. So I have the largest margin in the history of Illinois and the smallest margin in the history of Illinois, and I'm proud of both of them.

DePue: One more quote here, and this is from a downstate Democrat, Vince Demuzio.

Thompson: Ah, Vince.

DePue: "Every time they buckle up, they think of Jim Thompson."

Thompson: (laughs) That gives you a little taste of what they thought about this law in southern Illinois, right? Carlinville, there he goes.

DePue: Now let's get to some serious business here, the budget for fiscal year 1986. That's going to be an election year, but obviously you give your recommendations in the budget address and the state of the state address at the beginning of 1985. Your recommendation was \$18.732 billion.

Thompson: Sounds about right.

DePue: That's up from \$16.7 billion in '85; and what's really significant, the '84 budget recommendation was \$13.9 billion.

Thompson: Mm-hmm.

DePue: Why such a huge increase?

Thompson: The temporary tax was '83, so that fueled additional revenues, and the improving economy fueled additional revenues. And people were looking to increase spending because it had been really rough in the early eighties.

DePue: There were some recommended tax increases as well that you were proposing: a 5 percent tax on interstate phone calls.

Thompson: Mm-hmm.

DePue: Five percent tax on used car sales.

Thompson: Yes!

DePue: And we'll get to that with Build Illinois, I believe.

Thompson: Right.

DePue: An eight-cent increase in cigarettes, and I think there was a corresponding decrease on federal taxes for cigarettes, but usually fairly safe to talk about sin taxes.

Thompson: That's always the first refuge of a legislator, and I suppose a governor too. When you're talking about cents on the dollar, which is what cigarette and liquor and utility taxes are, a lot of times—especially utility tax—you don't even see it. You get your phone bill, you see the amount that's due. You're not looking down in the weeds for the federal tax and the state tax and the local tax and the phone company charges, and all these mysterious items that are on phone bills. So it's fairly safe, fairly easy to do that every once in a while. It used to be true of gasoline taxes too, and then that became sort of toxic. I mean, it took me from '77 to '83, six years, to get a gasoline tax increase. But since we had come off the temporary income tax increase and the sales tax and the large taxes from a couple of years before, those were sort of what I would call ordinary tax increases. Didn't stir up much controversy.

DePue: Once you get a little bit farther into 1985, you delivered your required speeches to the legislature, and then apparently you got out of town for a while. You remember a trip to Paris to hear the Chicago Symphony Orchestra?

Thompson: I do. It was a great trip. The state of Illinois had contributed, I think, a quarter of \$1 million to the cost of the trip as part of economic development. This was a big deal for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, a big deal for the state of Illinois; and delivering the Chicago Symphony Orchestra to Paris, it spoke well of our state. We used it as an economic development pitch, and it was just a weekend trip. It was not an easy trip; you fly over, spend two days or a day and a half in Paris, and fly back. But Jayne had never been to Paris. She and I were invited on the trip by the orchestra, and we went.

We landed, and I had a friend in Paris, a young guy who had been an aide to President Giscard d'Estaing. He arranged for us to get into the Eiffel Tower at 7:00 or 7:30 in the morning. We took the elevator up to the top, Jayne and I, and went to the very top, which was Monsieur Eiffel's apartment at the top of the Eiffel Tower. We were up there, he threw open the window, and I said to Jayne, "Honey, this is Paris," with a grand sweep of my arm. I thought, Boy, is this hot stuff. Just great. And she was very much taken with it, and so was I. Then we came down and we spent a day in meetings, and then the concert with the orchestra. After the concert, there was a dinner sponsored by Madame Taittinger of the Champagne family. And then the next day, we got back on the airplane and flew home. So it was a great trip.

DePue: I read someplace that you met François Mitterrand.

Thompson: Yes. The president.

DePue: Now, Governor, you're in Paris. You love antiques. Did you do any antiquing?

Thompson: No.

DePue: Really?

Thompson: No.

DePue: Didn't have time for that?

Thompson: Didn't have time. (laughs) this was a cultural trip.

DePue: And whose dime were you going on? You personally?

Thompson: State of Illinois.

DePue: The big trip—and I believe this was March 7th through twenty-third, a long time away from the state—was your trip to Hong Kong, China, and Japan. So which came first?

Thompson: I think it was Hong Kong, then China, then Japan. And is that the trip I took with the CEO of—what's that company? It starts with a B.

DePue: Governor, according to this brochure I've got, named the "Illinois Mission: Trade and Investment," March 1985, Hong Kong, China, and Japan, you took 160 people altogether.

Thompson: Oh that one, yeah. That was the largest delegation ever to go to China. It was larger than Nixon's trip to China. We met with Premier Zhao and took a picture in front of the Forbidden City. And the group was so large that they had to put the members of the delegation up on two risers that were sort of kitty-corner to each other, with Zhao and me in the middle. And it was St. Patrick's Day. So we pinned a shamrock on Premier Zhao and called him—just once—Premier O'Zhao. (laughter) See, I was this young, smart-aleck governor back then. That night, we had a great dinner in Beijing with corned beef and cabbage flown in from Butch McGuire's on Division Street in Chicago. And green beer. It was a hell of a dinner.

DePue: You didn't have that bird's nest soup they always talk about?

Thompson: No, I didn't have bird's nest soup. I mean, I thought China was great and I went there a number of times, but I kept a cautious eye on the menu. I didn't want bear paw, and I didn't want bird's nest soup. I didn't even know what bird's nest soup was. And I didn't want sea slugs. (laughs) So when those came to the table, I picked up my glass and said, "I must toast other tables," and off I went. I kept my eye on the table, and when the offending food was gone, I came back.

DePue: What was the purpose of having such a large delegation going to China in the first place?

Thompson: Illinois was the first state to establish a trade office in mainland China. Everybody else took the safe route and did Taiwan. And I eventually did Taiwan too. The Chinese are a culture that, and this is a popular understanding, where face was very important to them. But they also are a culture where they remember who their friends are, and they remember for a very long time. If I go to China today, they will remember that I was the first governor to come to China and establish a foreign trade office and have commercial relationships while everybody else was in Taiwan.

DePue: It's easy to forget that this is roughly ten years after President Nixon basically opened any kind of relations with Communist China.

Thompson: Correct. And it pays off. Years later, I was at Winston and went to China to help get our licenses to practice, open offices in China, which normally would have taken five years—especially since we wanted two offices at once, Beijing and Shanghai. Meeting with the Ministry of Justice, they certainly remembered who their friend was. And we got the licenses pretty quickly.

It's really important to understand the culture of a country, not only for the purposes of a visit, but for the purposes of doing business and strengthening relationships between people. So that visit to China with Premier Zhao was later repaid when the president of China came to Chicago and we held a dinner at the Art Institute. The president of China, in his speech, went on about the visit that we'd made earlier and the fact that he was here to repay that visit. And it was a big deal then for the president of China to come to Chicago, I think the first time ever. It just was an example of how you needed to do business, if you were a state that dealt with the world in terms of commerce, export, import. It was a big deal.

DePue: What did you see as the products that Illinois had to provide to the world?

Thompson: Hogs, especially to China. The Agriculture Department and I shipped a shipment of hogs to China, and it was a big deal at that time for us to send hogs to China in an official capacity. This wasn't some private farmer doing his ordinary trading.

DePue: And these, I assume, weren't just hogs to slaughter, but these are hogs to be breeding?

Thompson: Yeah, these were breed hogs, led by a big hog the Chinese named Big Jim. Oh, God! (laughs) That was terrific. I made speech after speech about Big Jim in China doing his duty! And when Big Jim died, the Chinese were afraid to tell me. For a long while, they kept sending reports that Big Jim was doing his duty, but Big Jim had passed on.

DePue: Oh, well.

Thompson: Oh, well. (laughs)

DePue: Then to Japan?

Thompson: Yeah.

DePue: I wonder if you can compare and contrast doing business in China versus Japan, because here you've got a major industrial country by the time you got there.

Thompson: Right. And one that the United States and the state of Illinois had a great deal to do with. But whereas the majority of your dealings with China were export dealings from Illinois to China, in Japan the majority of the dealings were exports from Japan to the U.S. and the encouragement of Japanese investment in the U.S. We wanted Japanese factories, we wanted Japanese businesses to come to Illinois, and they did.

China, the relationship and the culture were different than Japan. In China, they were very formal. And most of the events were very formally staged. You met with a government official in China, and you were sitting in one easy chair and he was sitting in this other easy chair, and there's a table in between with flowers, and there was a translator behind each chair. You've seen pictures of that with presidents going to China, and others going to China. That's how they would stage government meetings, and they would stage business meetings like that as well. Whereas in Japan, while it was still a very strong culture, with a lot of bowing and so-so, and tea and formal talks at the business table, it was going from morning until evening from one place of business or one government office to another: to a place of business, to a factory, to a meeting of business leaders, to a lunch, to the afternoon business, business, business, to the dinner with all the Japanese—back then, anyway—Japanese entertainment; Geisha, very elaborate dinners, chopsticks, multi-course.

And by the time you were through with the business day in Japan, you were tired. I mean, I can remember doing a full day in the morning, then the big lunch; and you're working through translators, so every speech and conversation would go three or four sentences, then you'd stop and they'd translate, and that's sort of stressful without you realizing it. Then you'd be in the car in the afternoon, going to your afternoon round of businesses, and the sun would be coming through the car window, and you'd be going, Ahh, oh! And you'd be out at the next one.

Of course, they did have one custom in Japan that I thought was really cool. You'd pull up to a factory, and all the employees would be out in the driveway applauding. (DePue laughs) I said, "Can we bring this back to Springfield? The governor pulls up in the morning and all the workers are out," and they said no. But it was a very formalistic meeting culture. And you

never quite were sure whether they were agreeing with you or not, because they kept saying “yes” to everything.

DePue: I have heard that one of the traditions of that culture is they don't like to say no, so they'll find lots and lots of elaborate ways to not say no, but—

Thompson: To say nothing. Right.

DePue: Yeah.

Thompson: So you're never quite sure what you accomplished during that meeting. You talk about it with your staff after you get out and you're preparing for the next meeting, and then you get the backchannel reports from your Japanese advisors. By that time, we had offices in Tokyo and Osaka. They were run by Japanese, and they'd let you know how you did and what they were really thinking, because they'd get reports. But it was a very different business culture than you'd get in the United States or in Europe.

DePue: Was the Mitsubishi plant a matter of discussion there?

Thompson: Oh, yeah. I will never forget, I went to the office of the CEO of Mitsubishi, the big boss, Number One. And it started off as a typical formal business meeting. I was there to sell him on bringing his auto plant to Illinois. Three or four other states were in the hunt. In the middle of the discussion, I did something very un-Japanese-like; I pulled out a map of Illinois, the kind you get in the filling station, a travel map. I spread it out on the floor of his office, I got down on my hands and knees, and I pointed out 66, coming down from Chicago. Our site was in Normal. And I'm sure he was perplexed at why this big American guy was crawling around on the floor of his office. I don't think he had ever participated in a meeting like that, and neither had I.

I also took another risk. Japanese generally were very averse to American unions. Yes, they had unions in Japan, but they were very different than American unions. They were much closer to management, much more cooperative with management. Things were decided a lot by consensus between the management and their unions. But they had heard stories about American unions—strikes and tough negotiations and tough talk. And I think it's still true today that Mitsubishi is the only Japanese auto plant in the United States that's union. But it was a risky thing back then. And I was at pains to assure them that I had the full support of the unions back home, both in building the plant and union employees at the plant. And remember, this was a joint project of Chrysler and Mitsubishi. Their partner was Lee Iacocca, and obviously, Chrysler was a union plant. So it was pretty clear that the UAW was going to make sure that this was a union plant as well, despite its 50 percent Japanese ownership. I sort of paved the way for that, and I had been at pains to take labor leaders with me on these foreign trade missions; I took

business guys and labor guys. I was the first governor to do that, and it paid off.

So they came. And it is a union plant. And they've never had very many issues in that time since, and that's been thirty years, something like that? But I remember that meeting in the CEO's office, because my staff, I think, was flabbergasted. What's he doing? He's crawling on his floor.

DePue: You mentioned Route 66. I think the Japanese then were consumers of American culture. Were they familiar with the impact of Route 66?

Thompson: The Japanese might have been, but I'm not sure the CEO was. (laughter)

DePue: How about gifts? Did you take gifts, did you receive gifts?

Thompson: Oh yeah, I always took gifts. I did. But what I took was—

DePue: It's tough to out-gift the Oriental culture, I think.

Thompson: As long as you have one, it's not a big deal what it is. I always took Illinois arts and crafts. Those were my gifts. So before a foreign trade mission, I'd show up in the Illinois arts and crafts store in the Thompson Center in Chicago, and into the gift shop, and they'd say, "Oh, you're going on a trip?" I'd say, "Yes. I need twenty or twenty-five pieces." I'd pick out the vases and boxes and things like that, which were all from Illinois craftsmen from around the state of Illinois. Each one of them was wrapped, and they had a card inside saying what it was, and who made it, where in Illinois. And those were what I gave on official visits, not only in Japan and China, but in Europe as well.

Generally, the Japanese gifts were things like that. They were Japanese crafts, whether they were vases or boxes. They might have been lacquer or they might have been ceramics. The only Japanese gift I ever got outside of that, I think, was my red sports car from Mitsubishi, but that wasn't a gift to me, that was a gift to the people of Illinois. I had bought the first car to come out of the Mitsubishi factory, but it had the Chrysler nameplate. I had put a down payment on it when I broke ground with Iacocca. So the Japanese were quiet for a while, and my wife had this car. And they called up one day and said, "We'd like to give you a Mitsubishi car." I said, "Well, you can't give it to me, but you can do it and we'll keep it at the mansion. We'll be very proud of it, but it will be for the people of Illinois." So they did. Red sports car. I asked them to put every conceivable option on it. (laughter) Fastest car they made, but what they didn't tell me was it was going to be stick shift.

DePue: Oh!

Thompson: I hadn't driven stick shift in years. I learned on stick shift, but that was about it. I always hated stick shift, because I was always having trouble coordinating the clutch with the accelerator. Back in those days, that was quite a feat to

learn. And I didn't know it was stick shift until I got to the factory to pick it up one day. I was determined to drive it back to Springfield with the troopers following. And once I got it out of the factory driveway, I just floored it. I had the trooper riding with me, of course, and the chase car was going crazy because they couldn't keep up. They were radioing to the body guy, "Tell him to slow down! Stop!" I finally stopped, and I let the trooper drive it back to Springfield. It was a great car.

DePue: Did the car stay at the mansion?

Thompson: It stayed at the mansion for a long time, and then it disappeared from the mansion, I think, under Jim Edgar. We later tracked it down. First it was out at the fairgrounds in storage, and then the state police glommed onto it and made it theirs. (laughs) They would use it for undercover buys and things like that. Later on, and this was after I was governor, I came back to Bloomington to make a speech. I think it was to the Chamber of Commerce, and the people in charge of the dinner surprised me. They went and rescued the car; they got it from the state police, they pumped up the tires, they washed it, and they had it in the lobby of the hotel when I walked in the door. There it was. I said, "My car!" And it was a lot of fun. People took pictures with it, I took pictures with it. That was my Mitsubishi car.

DePue: Moving along in the calendar in this busy year, you get back from that trip, and sometime in the spring there was some kind of a televised hearing of the Gary Dotson case that was glomming lots of press attention. He was a rapist, and I don't quite comprehend what happened in that case.

Thompson: Ordinarily, a request for a pardon, which is what this was, would be filed with the Prisoner Review Board. They would make a recommendation, send it to me, and my staff would go through it. Then I'd get it from my staff, I'd go through the file, and I'd make the final decision, yes or no.<sup>37</sup> I went through thousands of those with no publicity or controversy or anything like that, but this one was accompanied by a great deal of publicity because there was a recantation. The petition for pardon was accompanied by the story of the victim, the complainant, that she had lied, and that Dotson was innocent. So it was enough of a press controversy that I knew I couldn't get away with doing it in the ordinary fashion, just sitting at my desk.

So I said, All right, if there's a recantation, then we ought to have a hearing. We had a hearing at the State of Illinois Center—it was not then the Thompson Center—in Chicago, in the auditorium, because there was a great deal of press interest. For a couple of days we heard witnesses, including the victim and her recanted story, and there were questions by my counsel and by me. I took it under advisement and thought about it. I ultimately did not believe the recantation, so I denied the pardon on the grounds of innocence.

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<sup>37</sup> On this process, see Julian D'Esposito, interview by Mike Czaplicki, September 2, 2014, 58-60.

But I commuted his sentence to time served because he had already served a longer sentence than the average rape case. I said, "I'm not vacating your conviction, but I'm letting you out." And he came out.

He wasn't out very long until he was back in. And I think he went back in for abusing his wife. She went to the authorities, and this, of course, was a violation of his release. He went back in, and she came to me, I think, on Christmas Eve and asked me to let him back out. I said, "Okay, last time." And I let him back out. He wasn't out very long before he was back in. Eventually he got out permanently.

DePue: Was he married to this woman long before the rape case itself?

Thompson: Yes.

DePue: Why did you not believe the woman when she recanted her testimony?

Thompson: Because part of her testimony before me in the hearing was demonstrably not true. She gave an alibi for where she was, and was quite certain that she had been home watching a certain television program, and we proved that that television program was not on when she said it was. And I just had a feeling about it to begin with.

DePue: This is putting you in the role of trying to guess her motives, but why would she want to recant?

Thompson: I have no idea. I have no idea. You don't always know why recantation takes place. Sometimes you know, but you don't always know. So that was Dotson.

DePue: The next subject here, you appointed Bernard "Barney" Turnock as the director of public health. This was during the time of the AIDS epidemic. And I wonder if you can just address your feelings about what you thought was the appropriate approach to combatting AIDS in Illinois.

Thompson: I may be confusing this with another public health issue.

DePue: Salmonella was roughly this timeframe as well.

Thompson: Yeah, that's what I was thinking, it was salmonella, where Thomas Kirkpatrick—who was sort of a half-cousin of mine, as it turned out, from DeKalb County—was in charge of the department. In the middle of this salmonella crisis he went on vacation to Mexico. And I later relieved him and appointed a replacement. But I think maybe I'm confusing that with the Turnock appointment.

DePue: I know that Turnock was appointed in April of 1985. And this was roughly that same timeframe that the salmonella crisis was going on.

Thompson: He may have been Kirkpatrick's replacement, but I don't think it had anything to do with AIDS.<sup>38</sup>

DePue: Do you recall anything about the way the state of Illinois addressed the AIDS crisis?

Thompson: Not really. This was so much in the hands of the federal government. Back then the states didn't have very much in the way of AIDS programs or issues because the federal government had the resources and the laboratories that the states just didn't have.

DePue: You just mentioned this: May 6th was the official debut or revealing of the State of Illinois Center in Chicago.

Thompson: Yeah.

DePue: Helmut Jahn was the architect who designed this. The original expectation was that it would cost \$89 million, and it came in at something like \$172 million plus, so roughly twice as much.

Thompson: Yeah.

DePue: What led to this huge overrun in cost?

Thompson: When you look at things like Millennium Park in Chicago, which came in at triple the estimate, it's really hard to estimate the cost of a building of that size. I think this was the largest building that maybe the state had ever done, certainly the largest building in my time as governor. And you're never really sure when you estimate with a smaller project. My wife was the president of the Chicago Public Library Board for over ten years, I think. She built libraries, and by God, every one of them came in on budget, on time. (laughs) She was a stickler for that. And my building didn't come in on budget on time, but—

DePue: Maybe she should have been in charge of that building.

Thompson: Maybe she should have been. It was an extraordinary design, to begin with. It was not the ordinary shoebox. They tried to have me build a shoebox building, and I said no.

DePue: Who's "they"?

Thompson: The committee that I appointed to pick the architect and the design. They came up with these three designs, and two of them were shoeboxes. The

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<sup>38</sup> The salmonella outbreak in the spring of 1985 was the worst in U.S. history, prompting Thompson to replace Kirkpatrick with Turnock. Thompson created the AIDS Interdisciplinary Advisory Council in November 1985, but the issue was not taken up comprehensively by the General Assembly and in the budget until 1987. See Bernard Turnock, April 16 & 22, 2014, and Jeffrey Miller, July 7, 2015. Both interviews by Mike Czaplicki.

Helmut Jahn design was extraordinary. And remember, Chicago, at that time, was the architectural capital of the United States; I mean, we built the first skyscraper in America in Chicago. We had Frank Lloyd Wright and we had world renowned architecture beginning in the third quarter of the nineteenth century.

DePue: Is it Louis Sullivan?

Thompson: Louis Sullivan and Wright, and I'm forgetting one. I'll remember. But I was very, very clear, in my own mind anyway, that we weren't going to have an ordinary building for the State of Illinois in Chicago. It was an extraordinary thing to build it in the first place. The state had small office buildings around the state in major population areas, but this was like a second state Capitol. I regarded it as that, and I wanted it to be unique, so I picked the most radical design. And it, in fact, won the Ten Year Award of the American Institute of Architects for the design. So yeah, in the end it cost more, took a little longer to build. It was all glass. But it was, it is, one of the most visited buildings in Chicago today. The most visited building is Navy Pier, which was also built during my time. But this was a remarkable building. I'm very proud of it.

DePue: As a matter of comparison, towards the end of your administration the secretary of state, who's in charge of the Illinois State Library, built a new Illinois State Library that's just across the street from the Capitol building. The other street is the Supreme Court building. Would you describe that as a shoebox building?

Thompson: No. I think that's a beautiful building. A shoebox was a long, rectangular building going up in the sky. The state library is not that, it's a very traditional design. And I told Jim at the time I thought it was a beautiful building. He certainly was not going to build anything radical, we knew that.

DePue: I think that as a matter of pride for him, he was proud that it didn't look like the State of Illinois Building.<sup>39</sup>

Thompson: I think that's right. And as a matter of fact, I like both buildings. But he was the secretary of state then and built what he thought was an appropriate library facility.

DePue: I'm going to quote from the *State Journal-Register*, May 7, 1985, and this is discussing the unfurling of the ten-story crimson banner. The banner itself was ten stories tall.

Thompson: It was, indeed. It was a red bow.

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<sup>39</sup> On his desire for a more traditional style in the library's design, see Jim Edgar, interview by Mark DePue, June 22, 2009, Volume II: 433-436.

- DePue: Yeah. Here's how they described it. "A glittering, \$172 million structure praised by some as a modern Taj Mahal"—
- Thompson: (laughs) I don't think that was praise.
- DePue: —"and criticized by others as resembling a fat alderman." (laughs)
- Thompson: I don't remember that. The Taj Mahal was not praise at all. It was—boy, people who didn't like the building—
- DePue: And some called it a "white elephant."
- Thompson: I don't think it's a white elephant. It houses state government, or most of state government, in Chicago. It's a very busy place, and as I say, one of the most visited buildings in the city.
- DePue: You're going to have to help me with the pronunciation of the sculpture that's outside the center that was there at the unveiling as well. Dubuffet?
- Thompson: Dubuffet, yeah. Very famous French artist and architect. *Monument with Standing Beast* is the name of it.
- DePue: And I suspect a lot of old-school people look at it and say...
- Thompson: Oh, I'm sure. But you know, Dubuffet is a remarkable artist and architect, world famous for a long time. We were lucky to have the monument. There's not another one in the world like it. And by God, it's been kept clean.
- DePue: You mean graffiti has not appeared?
- Thompson: Yeah, there's no graffiti. And there have been weddings inside that.
- DePue: Inside the building or inside the—
- Thompson: Inside the monument.
- DePue: I didn't know it was that large.
- Thompson: You can get in. It's got a small space inside, and people have been married in there.
- DePue: Governor, I think what we need to do some time when I'm up in Chicago with you is take a stroll over to the building.
- Thompson: I think you're right. Hopefully, Governor Rauner will replace the carpeting.
- DePue: In recent years, the building has not fared well in terms of maintenance. And you and I have discussed this to a certain extent.

Thompson: Yeah.

DePue: But here is an article in the *Chicago Tribune* dated August 14, 2014, so roughly a year ago. This is just a portion of it, “The building with paint chipped off its rusted exterior columns, faded carpets, held together with duct tape, and graffiti marring its once-glistening Jean Dubuffet sculpture represents not the majesty of the state, but the poverty of its coffers. There appears to be little political risk for Governor Pat Quinn to let some of the building’s most visible features go to seed, especially when he can claim that he’s directing the state money to more pressing needs, like rebuilding crumbling roads and bridges.”

Thompson: See, and that’s all bullshit. Because in fact, the building did not go to seed because there wasn’t money to fix it. The money was there. He wouldn’t spend it. And in fact, when the first-floor tenant—the first floor is all commercial space, aside from the atrium—who held the master lease to the commercial space offered to repair it for free, to replace all the chipped metal outside, the rusted metal outside, the carpets held together with duct tape, the inadequate restroom facilities and the general seediness that the Quinn administration let it go to—he was turned down. So it’s not true that the building went to hell because they didn’t have the money to spend on it and it went to other worthy enterprises, it was appropriated just like the money for the mansion was appropriated and not spent in the midst of a political campaign. And they turned down the offer of free repair by the commercial tenant, who was really embarrassed at how his premises that he was renting looked. So that’s the story of the building.

DePue: The next topic of discussion is Build Illinois.

Thompson: Oh, yeah!

DePue: And it’s 12:00 in Michigan time, so I wonder if it might be wise for us to take a quick lunch break and pick this up after lunch.

Thompson: Absolutely.

DePue: Because that’s a long discussion, Governor.

Thompson: Build Illinois? What a great program.

DePue: (laughs) A happier topic for you than the State of Illinois Building, perhaps.

Thompson: Yeah, for sure.

(end of interview #17)

## Interview with James Thompson

# IST-A-L-2013-054.18

Interview # 18: June 9, 2015

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Good afternoon, Governor.

Thompson: Good afternoon.

DePue: This is Mark DePue, director of oral history at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, and we're back on the ninth of June, in the afternoon now, and just had a good lunch. Now we're ready to get down to business and talk about one of the things that I think you probably look back with the most pride and remember a lot about, and that's Build Illinois, one of your signature programs, certainly.

Thompson: Right.

DePue: So the first question is an obvious question. Where did the idea come from? Why Build Illinois?

Thompson: I don't know. I've been thinking about that in preparation for this session.<sup>40</sup> I suppose the honest answer is that I wanted to do a capital program. We had

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<sup>40</sup> Former governor Jim Edgar credited Thompson's chief of staff, Jim Reilly, with coining the name, and Thompson's scheduler at the time remembered Reilly going "off for a few days to write the whole concept of Build Illinois." Reilly, however, thought Thompson came up with the name during a conversation at the mansion. Jim Edgar, June 10, 2009, Volume II: 297; Gene Reineke, December 7, 2009, 33; Jim Reilly, August 11, 2009, 41. All interviews by Mark DePue. On Build Illinois in general, see Robert Mandeville, interview by Mike Czaplicki, February 20, 2014, 227-236; Jeffrey Miller, interview by Mike Czaplicki, June 24, 2015; and Jim Edgar, interview by Mark DePue, June 22, 2009, Volume II: 431-433.

the ordinary capital budget, but that wasn't big enough. I wanted to do something more, because we had a lot of capital needs in the state. You always do, but they were particularly pressing.

DePue: Infrastructure needs?

Thompson: Infrastructure, yeah. So my guess is that between me and the program staff and the budget staff, we came up with this idea. I named it Build Illinois. And the romantic version I like to tell is that I copied it from Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas. In the middle of the nineteenth century, Lincoln and Douglas were members of the Illinois General Assembly, and they both were members of the Internal Improvements Committee of the House. They produced what was the Illinois Internal Improvements Act of eighteen-whatever it was, and it was a grand scheme to build highways, to build canals, to build all sorts of things. It passed, and they started on this. It eventually almost drove the state into bankruptcy, so it didn't have a good reputation when it was all through. (laughs) But one day, when I was at an antique show in New York, this historical documents dealer out of Maryland, whom I had met before, said, "I've got something for you." And it turned out to be the report of the Internal Improvements Committee of the House with the bill, and this copy of the report was Stephen A. Douglas' copy.

DePue: Wow!

Thompson: And it's signed by him. That's in Chicago, in my office there. So that really got me all excited, that I had Douglas' copy of the Internal Improvements Act, the forerunner, I like to say, of Build Illinois. Now, that's the romantic story. Nobody can deny it, because they have no idea. But that wasn't really how we started in Illinois. We had to find revenue, because it was going to be a bonds program, but the bonds had to have a revenue base or they wouldn't lend you the money. So I said, "I want an easy tax," because I didn't want to go through the tax wars all over again. And we noticed that while you had to pay sales tax when you went to a car dealer and bought a car, if you bought a car from your neighbor, you didn't have to pay sales tax. We fastened on that. It was an easy tax to ask for, easy tax to vote for, and it was enough to fund \$2 billion of bonds, which back then was a big amount.

DePue: What's the enforcement mechanism, that you had to get transfer title for the vehicle?

Thompson: Title, yeah. You had to prove the tax was paid if you were going to get the title. So I made a speech—I think it was in the state of the state that year.

DePue: Yeah.

Thompson: And it was immediately popular with the Democratic General Assembly, and with the Republicans. Or in the words of the Speaker, Mr. Madigan, who told reporters standing in the corridors after my speech, "The greatest public works

program since FDR.” I thought, Oh, that’s good! The reporters told me that’s what the Speaker said. “Oh, okay, I’m for that!” (laughs) And we passed it. There was more controversy about how we were going to spend the money, of course, than there was about passing the tax and instituting the program.

DePue: Before we get there, I’m going to go back to the motive, because let’s face it, you’ve been elected three times, but sometime in 1985 you’re going to have to declare whether or not you’re interested in running for reelection.

Thompson: Right.

DePue: So part of the speculation was that you’re doing this to get some economic development as a hedge against your likely opponents in that 1986 campaign.

Thompson: Absolutely. I mean, why wouldn’t I? It was good for the state of Illinois, so it was good for me in an election campaign. Absolutely.

DePue: How much of the motive had to do with Illinois’ economy, while it was improving just like the national economy was improving, didn’t seem to be improving as quickly as the rest of the nation.

Thompson: Yeah, it was a jobs program, obviously. Anytime you build infrastructure, it’s a jobs program. The jobs are not always just the construction jobs, because the revenue earned from construction jobs bleeds into the local economy and the state economy. And since this was going to be a statewide program with building in every part of the state, the bleed was a little more than ordinary. Heck, I was proud to run on that in the ’86 campaign. You bet.

DePue: I’m going to show you a picture here of the logo for Build Illinois, and then I’m going to read some passages out of here as well. But where did the idea for the logo come from?

Thompson: Me.

DePue: Going back to Lincoln!

Thompson: I’m a Lincoln guy. I said, “Give me a statue of Lincoln, but relate it to the present day. So put him on an I-beam.” It was a combination of old and new.

DePue: So you’ve got Lincoln standing on—half of it looks like it’s a log that he’s ready to split. A rail splitter?

Thompson: No, it’s all an I-beam.

DePue: No, not in this picture it’s not. The right half is the I-beam.

Thompson: Oh, maybe you’re right. Okay, so it went from a log and Lincoln and the axe at the back to an I-beam in the front, and the I-beam represented Build Illinois.

DePue: This is reading Nora Newman Jurgens, “Build Illinois: the Plan and the Master Plan,” and I think this might be out of *Illinois Issues* magazine.<sup>41</sup> “Build Illinois is an all-encompassing attempt to deal with the state’s crumbling infrastructure, disappearing jobs and shrinking tax base. It is an attempt to turn the state around after ten years of slow growth and neglect. It is also a response to new federalism.”

Thompson: Right.

DePue: New federalism?

Thompson: Yeah, new federalism was the absence of revenue-sharing from the federal government. Nixon did away with revenue-sharing. He said there was no revenue to share.

DePue: Now, what I want to do here is list the five or six different portions that this money would be going to. The first is Illinois Housing Development Authority—

Thompson: IHDA, yeah.

DePue: Something like \$1 billion just for that portion. Now, what was the concept there?

Thompson: Oh, that sounds like a lot. I mean, out of a \$2 billion program?

DePue: Yeah, that’s what was stated here, and this is dated 1986.

Thompson: I don’t think...hmm. That’s surprising. I wouldn’t give half the program to IHDA. Neither would the legislature, I don’t think. But in any event, that was for housing loans and low income housing.

DePue: The next piece would be DCCA’s, D-C-C-A, Department of Commerce and Community Affairs? I think that’s what it stood for at that time.

Thompson: Right. They had their own loan program.

DePue: That’s the extent of your comments, as far as DCCA, and where the money goes through there?

Thompson: Yeah, loan program for commercial buildings.

DePue: The next portion, then, is IEPA, Illinois Environmental Protection Agency.

Thompson: So that would be pollution control.

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<sup>41</sup> Nora Newman Jurgens, “Build Illinois: the Plan and the Master Plan,” *Illinois Issues* (January 1986).

- DePue: Superfund, to help kind of tie over some superfund projects; to clean up various spills and other environmental issues.
- Thompson: Right.
- DePue: The next one is Environment and Natural Resources, or maybe that's Energy and Natural Resources?
- Thompson: Mm-hmm.
- DePue: And then Department of Transportation.
- Thompson: Right. Roads, bridges.
- DePue: And Capital Development Board.
- Thompson: State facilities.
- DePue: So tell me, then, about all of the jockeying that had to have been going on in the legislature for everybody's piece of pie. And back in those days, wouldn't everybody refer to this as just pork-barrel projects?
- Thompson: Oh, sure they would. If it's your project, it's necessary infrastructure. If it's somebody else's, it's pork barrel. And that's always been the way of the world. The concept was one that the legislature liked. I think at one point near the end of session they tried to run their own bill, and I said, "Forget it. If I don't get my bill, you're going to get nothing." They backed off of that, and they passed my bill. So that was the authorization, the tax, and the bond issue.
- Then they got around to spending it. Now, you know that there's nothing like a capital bill going through the legislature to whet the chops, and everybody in the legislature had a different idea of how to spend it. Chicagoans, suburbs, downstate metro areas, downstate agricultural areas; the Democratic caucus in the House, the Republican caucus in the House, the Democratic caucus in the Senate, the Republican caucus in the Senate, the leaders, the members; those that they were associated with out in industry; the road builders, the college and university people—there wasn't a group in state government that didn't want a piece of Build Illinois, in both the public and private sectors. And as I recall, didn't we have an extended legislative session on this bill to finally come to an agreement on how we were going to spend it? I think we did.
- DePue: I believe you must have, because it was late June and they were still negotiating; it was finally signed in July.
- Thompson: Right. I think that was the time when we were dragging on into the months after the session should have ended June 13th.

DePue: So once you get beyond that point, then you need a supermajority?

Thompson: Supermajority, which just (laughs) makes it much more difficult because then you can't say no to anybody, you need their vote. I think that was the time when I got tired of all the wrangling and called up Pate Philip. We got in the chopper and flew over to Detroit, Illinois, and had buffalo-and-onion sandwiches on white bread and drank beer, and we went out and sat under an apple tree and just had a nice afternoon while they were fighting in the legislature. Then we got in the chopper and flew back.

Eventually it was settled. I was pretty firm on no crazy stuff. Statue of Jack Benny in Waukegan? I mean, come on. (DePue laughs) Oh no, that was a serious proposition, yeah. They wanted a statue of Jack Benny in Waukegan. That was his hometown. We finally got it signed, and then we started doing the projects, and that's where I was able to take over again. So I proposed it, fought for it, traveled around the state in support of it, and boy did I find receptive audiences, because they were all waiting for the money.

DePue: After it had been passed?

Thompson: Before it was passed. But after it was passed, and now we had the money, it was back to me to both announce the projects and start spending the money. I went all around the state again. For every single project, we had a groundbreaking under the direction of Jim Skilbeck, my advance guy. And we not only had a groundbreaking, we had big signs announcing, "Build Illinois, Governor James R. Thompson." We did the groundbreaking in front of the signs. Then after a decent interval when there was progress on the site, I would come back for a site inspection. And there were big signs. I brought members of the legislature from that district with me, and I brought people from the local town—Chamber of Commerce, mayor, what have you—with me. And they were all very pleased to stand in front of the Build Illinois sign and tell their townspeople that this thing was going up, whether it was a highway or a building, or whatever it was. Then when the project was through, I came back again—big sign—and I announced the ribbon-cutting. So by the time we got through, I think it was fair to say that almost everybody in Illinois knew what Build Illinois was and whose program it was.

DePue: That it was your program.

Thompson: You got it.

DePue: And those local politicians' programs.

Thompson: Right. I was happy to share the credit with them. And one thing I always yelled at George Ryan about: he did the same thing. He had a program called

Illinois FIRST.<sup>42</sup> But he had to have, like, six taxes to support it, liquor taxes and a lot of controversial taxes. It was a hell of a thing, and he finally pushed it through. I went out with him a couple of times to the sites, and I said, “Where are the signs?” He said, “Well, ah, I...” I said, “You’ve got to have the signs. How are they going to know what this is?” And then I’d see a sign that was halfway in a bush, you know? I’d say to Skilbeck, “For God’s sake, look at that! His sign’s in the bush! Who’s going to know what he’s doing here?” But George didn’t have the same flair, I’ll say, for doing this.

DePue: Yet he was **your** lieutenant governor—

Thompson: He was.

DePue: —during Build Illinois, so it wouldn’t have been a secret to him that this is how a skilled politician should do it.

Thompson: Yeah, I know, but he had his staff and I had mine, so—

DePue: Maybe his staff wasn’t quite as skilled as your staff was.

Thompson: Maybe so.

DePue: A couple of questions to draw you back towards the beginning of this. You said this was popular with the Democrats. Are you a Keynesian economist? You thought you were priming Illinois’ pump in that respect?

Thompson: Absolutely.

DePue: Did you have to work the floor of the House or the Senate?

Thompson: No.

DePue: Not for this one.

Thompson: For the White Sox park, yes. But not for this one. (laughs)

DePue: Yeah, we’ll get to that one later, in a different session. I’m looking forward to that one.

Thompson: That was fun!

DePue: So how much political clout did you have to expend?

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<sup>42</sup> The Fund for Infrastructure, Roads, Schools & Transit was a program approved by the Illinois legislature in 1999, which raised \$6.3 billion in new revenues to secure the sale of bonds for transportation and school projects. Neighborhood Capital Budget Group (NCBG), “Illinois FIRST,” in *Chicago TIF Encyclopedia* (Chicago: NCBG, 1999), 56.

Thompson: Really not a lot. It was more like holding back the dam bursting. I mean, they were so focused on where the money was going.

DePue: “They” being each one of the legislators?

Thompson: Yeah. And the leadership.

DePue: Did you have somebody on your staff who was fielding all of these requests, all of these people’s projects?

Thompson: Yeah, this was a biggie, and it took a multidisciplinary approach—people from the program staff, the budget staff, the press staff, and the legislative staff. And then, of course, you had help from your code departments—Department of Transportation, Department of Conservation—all of the code agencies that had anything to do with a project that fell within their area of expertise.

DePue: Any involvement from the other constitutional officers?

Thompson: No.

DePue: So this is entirely portions of the budget you had direct control over?

Thompson: Yeah.

DePue: The normal session was supposed to be done in June, and late in June, Speaker Madigan got into it to a certain extent with Lee Daniels, who was attempting to give control of the Metropolitan Fair and Exposition Authority over to you. You would have more power in appointment of the board of trustees there.

Thompson: Mm-hmm.

DePue: Madigan really balked at that. And part of this was McCormick Place was being rebuilt and remodeled, and that was seriously overrun on the budget as well.

Thompson: Mm-hmm.

DePue: You remember any of the specifics on that?

Thompson: Not really. McCormick Place was a joint state-Chicago thing. Under the deal that I made with Daley to rebuild Navy Pier—

DePue: Richard J.?

Thompson: No, Richard M.

DePue: But that would have been after this. I think Washington—

Thompson: It was after this. But McCormick Place was forever adding buildings. And we had a fire in the original buildings; we had to replace that. But the deal on McCormick Place was that the mayor would appoint the chairman, I would appoint the executive director, and we'd split the board. Of course, Daniels, on behalf of suburban Republicans, wanted to get into that. And Madigan, who was the protector of the Chicago interests, was not going to go for that. So that didn't go very far.

DePue: Reading about the background of Build Illinois, the end result is there was \$380 million initially, with you having the authority over which projects will not get funded above \$317 million. In other words, there would have been a lot more projects, and from what I can read between the lines here, they would have exceeded the \$380 million. But you'd get to pick and choose the winners and the losers.<sup>43</sup>

Thompson: Right.

DePue: And was that something that you were insisting on, negotiating this?

Thompson: Absolutely.

DePue: It's just the kind of thing where you can reward your friends and punish your enemies, then, when you get down to the ones that you want to—

Thompson: Not really. No, no, no. That's not right, because remember, these projects had to be bid. What it really was, was a control mechanism not to have to do goofy stuff. Sometimes legislators asked for goofy stuff. And you could say no.

DePue: They don't think it's goofy.

Thompson: I know they don't think it's goofy, but it was goofy, sometimes. And you had to have somebody who could say, "No, we're not doing that," or, "No, we got to have this money for another part of the state. It's got to be divided fairly all across the state." That was **really** important to be able to say; to be able to say, "No, we haven't done southern Illinois yet. We've got to do southern Illinois." So you had to work out a mechanism of control to give somebody the chance to say yes or no for a significant part of it. And obviously, even below that figure, where the legislature had a great deal of input, that was all negotiated. I mean, I didn't say, "Hey legislature, here's \$300 million, do as you please." That was very closely negotiated. I understood that the legislators had a great deal of legitimate interest in what was going to be built where, obviously. And

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<sup>43</sup> Separate from \$100 million for housing programs, Thompson planned for a first-year funding level of \$280 million, \$69 million of which was to fund projects chosen by the General Assembly. Legislators approved projects totaling \$135 million, however, and it was Thompson's authority to pare this back to his intended funding level that DePue is referring to. Nora Newman Jurgens, "Where is Build Illinois its first year?" *Illinois Issues* (April 1986).

they were the ones who put the votes on this project. So we got to an accommodation.

DePue: You mentioned the Jack Benny statue. Do you remember any others?

Thompson: (laughs) No, but if the rationale for the program was jobs, it had to be significantly job-related. It couldn't be some local favorite that the mayor had been waiting twenty years to get that isn't going to do much of anything for anybody. I mean, you just can't do that. Not with state money.

DePue: One of the things that your administration became known for early on, because of Class X, was increasing the number of prisons that were being built.

Thompson: Right.

DePue: Were any of these part of Build Illinois?

Thompson: I don't think so. They could have been, but I don't think so.

DePue: While we're on the subject, do you recall any of the dynamics involved with locating the next prison?

Thompson: Oh, yeah. When all of that started, prison expansion, a lot of times the local attitude was, "Don't put a prison in my district."

DePue: NIMBY [not in my backyard].

Thompson: Yeah. And by the time we were through, it was, "Please put a prison in my district." (laughs) So near the middle and the end of the program, there was a lot of competition for prisons. For downstate, they were a lifeblood of a certain area, you know? Not only put in three, four hundred jobs in terms of staff, but the construction, and the bleeding effect of those jobs, whether it was construction or service.

DePue: Are there any particular Build Illinois projects that you were most proud of? The most pleased in terms of the impact it had?

Thompson: No, I think I was proud of all of them. It's hard to pick and choose. Every one of them was important to the program, and every one of them was important to the local area. And if there was an overriding theme of my administration, it was we will be fair to all parts of the state of Illinois, because I was elected to be fair to all parts of the state of Illinois. So I didn't really pick and choose. Some were big projects, some were smaller projects. This was my program, so I was proud of all of them.

DePue: Do you remember any specific projects within the Chicago city limits?

Thompson: Not really.

DePue: Looking back on it, has Build Illinois been successful?

Thompson: Absolutely. It's still going.

DePue: In what respect?

Thompson: Bonds are still being paid off, monies are still being expended. Oh, yeah, it's—

DePue: Who's administering the monies that are being expended now?

Thompson: The governor of the state of Illinois.

DePue: In other words, as long as there's money coming in from—

Thompson: The bonds.

DePue: —the sale of used cars?

Thompson: Yeah. It's still going. Very much diminished, of course. And I don't know what the status of George's program, the Illinois FIRST program is. But every once in a while I'll see a reference to, or hear a reference to, Build Illinois. And that's thirty years ago.

DePue: Exactly. It is a ways back. Any final comments, then, on Build Illinois?

Thompson: Immensely proud of it.

DePue: One of the things you're most proud of in your administration?

Thompson: Absolutely.

DePue: The next significant program was the Educational Reform Act. And you mentioned before we got started today that you don't remember quite as much about the Educational Reform Act.

Thompson: No.

DePue: It included 169 individual reforms found in over thirty bills, and again, something that dramatic and that sweeping would require an awful lot of legislative heavy lifting, I would think.

Thompson: Yeah, but when you're dealing with elementary and secondary education, there is a swarm of interest in the local communities—parents, teachers, schoolchildren, mayors, legislators. So it's not like the governor has to do all the heavy lifting.

DePue: One of the things that was in the national dialog at that time was *A Nation at Risk*, which talked about the status of American education and how we were slipping behind other countries.<sup>44</sup>

Thompson: Right.

DePue: Do you remember any reaction to that at the time?

Thompson: Not really.

DePue: I've got an article here from the *Sun-Times*, February 28, 1985. So just like Build Illinois was discussed for most of the legislative session, school reform was being discussed in the legislature as well. It's got several different components, and I'm just going to read these through, to jog your memory.

Thompson: Yeah, okay. Math and Science Academy, yes.

DePue: More pay to reward teachers—

Thompson: Right.

DePue: —some way to measure teachers' performance, like an in-state exam for them; a curriculum reform; a lot of discussion about English as a second language; and accountability issues, like no courtesy graduations. If you think about it, all of this stuff is still being discussed today.

Thompson: Sure. Oh, absolutely.

DePue: Some things just don't change much.

Thompson: No. And it had to be paid for, so what did we have? We had telephone tax, cigarette tax, and current revenues. And remember what it says, what the governor **wants**.

DePue: What the governor wants, yeah.

Thompson: Not necessarily what the governor got.

DePue: (laughs) Yeah, and some of this stuff, especially when you get into teacher's issues, the teachers union has different views about things like merit pay, et cetera.

Thompson: Oh, sure. Yeah.

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<sup>44</sup> The National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (Washington, DC: The Commission, 1983).

DePue: But part of the ongoing discussion, since long before even the Illinois Constitution of 1970, was the share that the state government should pay for primary and secondary education.

Thompson: Right.

DePue: I should know that figure right off the top of my head. I think it's 50 percent.

Thompson: Yeah. That was what the Constitution of 1970 suggested.

DePue: "Suggested." You used that term carefully.

Thompson: Because that's what the Supreme Court ended up saying it meant. It was not a command, it was a suggestion.<sup>45</sup>

DePue: Illinois has a reputation of having one of the smallest percentages that's borne by the state, and one of the highest percentages that's borne by local property taxes.

Thompson: That is true. It's not necessarily all bad, and the reason why I say that is simple. Local tax money for elementary and secondary education goes with local control. If local taxpayers are going to pay for it, they want to control it in a significant way. Now obviously, the state of Illinois has a lot to say about elementary and secondary education, but they probably have more to say about it than they're willing to support with money. But local people, with their local school boards and their local superintendents and their local taxes, have a huge voice in elementary and secondary education. And the theory in this state has always been, if you want it, you have to pay for it—with the exception of Chicago and some of the poorer school districts around the state where the state of Illinois makes up a significant portion of the budget.

DePue: To get to some baseline of funding?

Thompson: To get to the baseline, exactly. New Trier has more local support, and they're proud of it since they're one of the premier local school districts in the state. Chicago has less of a tax base in many instances. East St. Louis has little tax base. Poorer communities around the state rely mostly on state funds. But they still have local control, because that's the way the system is designed. In the suburban areas around Chicago where the taxes are the highest, you also find the greatest satisfaction with the schools. So it goes hand in hand.

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<sup>45</sup> Section 1, Article X of the Illinois Constitution declares, "The State has the primary responsibility for financing the system of public education." The Illinois Supreme Court held that this "sentence was intended only to express a goal or objective, and not to state a specific command." *Blase v. State of Illinois*, 55 Ill. 2d (1973) at 98. See Michael Bakalis, May 19, 2014, and Ann Lousin, June 18, 2013. Both interviews by Mark DePue.

- DePue: How about school consolidation, which is always the topic of discussion in Illinois?
- Thompson: Oh, yeah.
- DePue: You're shaking your head.
- Thompson: Yeah, school consolidation is great. You know, you can make speeches about school consolidation until you actually come up with a plan to do it, and then the people down at the grassroots level don't want their schools consolidated. They want to keep their local schools. They may have five hundred people in the local schools, but they want to keep them there, their schools. They don't want to have to go hat in hand to a neighboring district that is going to take over a consolidated school area. You could consolidate a lot of the towns in Illinois; you could at least do shared services. But the minute you put a plan like that out there, the locals say, "Whoa, wait a second, we're not going all the way over to Pinckneyville to ask for services. We want our local services right here with our mayor. And we want our local schools right here with our schools, where dad went to school and grandpa went to school, and we're not going to change it." There's a lot of that, you know? What the experts tell you you ought to do and what the people want to do are sometimes two very different things.
- DePue: So there might be truth to that old joke about the hardest animal to kill off in Illinois is the school mascot?
- Thompson: Sure. On a much higher level, look at all the trauma they went through at the University of Illinois with Chief Illiniwek. Now, you go down to the local high school and the local grade school, you ain't seen nothing yet. Which school downstate, the high school team, was the Chinks?
- DePue: The Pekin Chinks.
- Thompson: Pekin.
- DePue: It's not the Pekin Chinks anymore.<sup>46</sup>
- Thompson: No, it's not.
- DePue: Speaking of Chief Illiniwek, that was finally resolved after your time.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Pekin changed its team name to the Dragons in 1980. Julie Deardorff, "School Nicknames Become Name-calling to Some," *Chicago Tribune*, September 4, 1992.

<sup>47</sup> The University of Illinois ended its use of Chief Illiniwek as the school's symbol in 2007. For the ritual around Chief Illiniwek and the controversy that led to its retirement, see Tom Livingston, February 16, 2011, interview by Mark DePue. Livingston, who was Gov. Jim Edgar's travel aide and scheduler, served as Chief Illiniwek his senior year at Illinois.

Thompson: It was.

DePue: Did you take a public position on that?

Thompson: Absolutely.

DePue: And your position was...?

Thompson: I was for Chief Illiniwek. You know, political correctness—if that's what it's called; I didn't think it was correct—has its limits. And you've got the current brouhaha over the Washington Redskins. But nobody says anything about the Chicago Blackhawks, right? Because they're winning games. They're going to the Stanley Cup. Besides, Blackhawk was a chief of some renown in Illinois, and nobody is saying you denigrate the Indians or the Indian nation or the Native Americans when you name a team after Chief Blackhawk. But the Blackhawks just have their insignia on the uniforms. Illiniwek always had this white guy doing Indian dances. That was it. That's what set it off. That's what kept the controversy going.

I always liked Chief Illiniwek, and I always resisted doing anything about Chief Illiniwek while I was governor. In fact, when I would go over to the University of Illinois to basketball games or football games, I'd put the war paint on. There I was, sitting in the stands, and I had war paint on my face. And I can remember Terry Branstad, the governor of Iowa, saying to me one time at a governor's conference, "Goddammit, do you have to go to basketball games with that war paint on your face? They want me to do it at the University of Iowa!" I said, "Hey, have at it." I identified with my school, you know?

DePue: So you had the Illini playing the Hawkeyes.

Thompson: Yeah.

DePue: More on education, then. Ted Sanders was state superintendent. Were you in the position of selecting that, or was that an elected position at that time?

Thompson: It might have been an elected position. Or if it was selected, it was the board. And I really didn't interfere that much in the board's selections.

DePue: Any memories about Ted Sanders or Bob Leininger?

Thompson: No. Sanders had a really good reputation. But on that kind of stuff, you've got to know when to hold 'em and know when to fold 'em. If you go in intruding into the business of every board in the state, A, you don't have enough time; B, you may not have the expertise; C, if you're looking for expertise to rely on, it may be prejudiced or biased out there in the community. So you've got to be careful about that. You appoint a good board and let them do their job. That was always my theory.

DePue: One of the things you did recall from this time period was the Illinois Math and Science Academy, which ended up in Aurora. So first of all, the concept of having a special academy for that?

Thompson: I got to meet and work with Leon Lederman, who at the time ran Fermilab out in Aurora. He and I came up with the concept of the Math and Science Academy, because we were convinced that the United States, broadly, and Illinois more narrowly, were behind parts of the world in math and science education at the secondary level—high school. We were behind Japan, we were behind some of the European countries. And obviously, as the future proved, a lot of the economy that we have today is based on math and science. New York, I think Brooklyn, and North Carolina had math and science academies. I think that's right. But they were day schools, they were not dormitory schools. And we wanted to have a dormitory school, so that these kids were immersed in math and science twenty-four hours a day and didn't get on the bus and go home every night.

DePue: Plus, wherever you put it, you can draw a pretty tight circle around that area, unless it is a dorm school.

Thompson: Oh, yeah. Right. So we pushed and pushed and pushed, Leon and I, and we finally got it through the legislature. We sited it in Aurora. I think we started out by using unused facilities, or formerly-used facilities, and gradually we built a new campus. In fact, one of my young partners at the firm, a young man that was my partner on the tobacco case I just argued in the Supreme Court, went to the Math and Science Academy for high school. Parents made him go, he said, but after he got there, he loved it. He went to college after that, and then to law school.

So if you go out to the Math and Science Academy today, you'll see this big bronze plaque that has Lederman and me as the co-founders of the school. And I was always very proud of that, very, very proud of that. We got that school going; I got it continuously funded. It was one of my legislative priorities. We raised money in the private sector as well. I sat on the board of it, not *the* board, but the secondary board for a while. Leon Lederman today is retired, out in Idaho; he's ninety-two. In fact, he just auctioned his Nobel Prize medal. His wife gave an article in the newspaper, said, "Well, Leon's medal has been sitting on a shelf in our house in"—wherever they were, out in Aurora someplace—"And then he retired and we moved to Idaho, and it's been sitting on the shelf in Idaho for twenty years. We finally said, we don't need that medal sitting on the shelf, let's sell it." So they sold it at auction, got \$750,000 for it.

DePue: Wow!

Thompson: Yes!

DePue: What did he win the Nobel Prize for? Was it physics?

Thompson: Yeah, physics. Something to do with splitting the atom, or splitting something, you know? It's in the area of the Superconducting Super Collider, which we didn't get, Texas got.<sup>48</sup> And they still have a hole in the ground. It never got built.

DePue: Are you suggesting that if Illinois had gotten it, it would be more than a hole in the ground?

Thompson: I don't know, because it was going to be funded by the feds, basically. And they abandoned it down in Texas, even though it went to Texas because Bush was president. It was pretty heavy lifting to try and get that away from Texas with George H.W. sitting in the White House. I'm glad we didn't get it, because it would have been a lot of heavy lifting and a lot of heartache every time we looked at the big hole in the ground. So Lederman sold his medal for three quarters of \$1 million. He says, "All I do now is sit on the front porch and look at the mountains." He didn't need the medal. (laughs) Leon.

DePue: You mentioned the funding of it, did you and your staff plan for the telephone tax to be part of that?

Thompson: Yeah.

DePue: I should mention here, some of these questions got fed to me. One of my volunteers, Philip Pogue, who is a retired school superintendent himself, has done a major project interviewing lots of educators and legislators who were involved with this piece of legislation thirty years ago. That's obviously his interest. He's done a lot of these interviews himself. So he's the one who has suggested some of these questions to me. Pre-kindergarten for at-risk—does that one ring a bell to you at all?<sup>49</sup>

Thompson: Yeah, and that's still going on today. Mayor Emanuel takes a great deal of pride in his recent initiative for full-day pre-kindergarten. It was a half day in Chicago for a long time after it was introduced, and now it's full-time pre-kindergarten in most of the schools. I don't think he's got all of the schools covered yet. But especially in minority communities, that's a really, really important period in the life of a young child; to get them before kindergarten and in kindergarten to get the concept of education into their heads and have some source of learning apart from the family, or in most of those kids' cases, apart from their single-parent family. So yeah, that's a nationwide reform that Illinois wanted to be part of.

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<sup>48</sup> On Thompson's pursuit of the SSC, see Jeffrey Miller, interview by Mike Czaplicki, June 24, 2015.

<sup>49</sup> The program was called the Illinois Prekindergarten Program for Children at Risk of Academic Failure.

DePue: And I would have thought that this had been around a long time, but maybe not, Casimir Pulaski Day?

Thompson: Oh! Yes.

DePue: Was that part of the package?

Thompson: I don't remember whether it was part of the package; I don't think it was. I think it was separate.

DePue: Why does Casimir Pulaski need his own day?

Thompson: Because that's what the Polish people wanted. But we picked the wrong general. We should have made it General Kościuszko Day because, while Pulaski helped the Americans in the War of the Revolution, General Kościuszko was an even bigger help and even more important to the Revolution than Pulaski. But the Polish community came forward with Pulaski, and I was not about to tell them, "Hey, you've got the wrong general." What did I know back then, right? (DePue laughs) So we had Pulaski Day in Illinois, which is a school holiday. But, of course, Lincoln's birthday is not a school holiday. Now we've got this godawful amalgam of President's Day, where Millard Fillmore gets equal billing with Abraham Lincoln and George Washington. Oh, that's just nonsense from the federal government.

DePue: But the beauty of it here, Governor, is it's always on a Monday.

Thompson: Yeah, but you can celebrate Lincoln's birthday anytime you want to. That can be on Monday.

DePue: State employees get both Lincoln's birthday and President's Day off.

Thompson: Yeah, I know, but it's not a school holiday, and it should be. You know, back when I was in school—

DePue: Back in the good old days?

Thompson: Back in the good old days where kids learned the Gettysburg Address by memory or you didn't get out of your grade. We knew all about the Civil War and we knew all about the American Revolution. Now they can't be bothered. And they want all these three-day holidays, so some bright person had the idea, "Well, let's put Washington and Lincoln and all the other presidents together on Monday, call it President's Day." Nobody does a thing except go to the store sales. President's Day sales in department stores—oh, garbage!

DePue: Furniture sales.

Thompson: Yeah. That's just complete nonsense. We've gone to hell as a nation.

DePue: Since you broached the subject and I didn't have to, there has been an awful lot of criticism for a couple of election cycles, and it's probably going to continue, about the state of American education. Now, you were involved back in 1985 with major reforms in Illinois educational programs, and yet we don't seem to be better off, we seem to be worse off.

Thompson: Well, I'm not there anymore. If you look at that article you showed me, a lot of that was process reform—reading, teachers, math and science, all-day kindergarten, competency tests, learning environment, blah-blah-blah. Besides math and science, what substantive educational programs, learning programs, do you see in there?

DePue: Let's start at the top, and it says, "Teachers—more pay to reward best teachers."

Thompson: Okay.

DePue: Are we doing that?

Thompson: We are.

DePue: But best teachers as defined by whether or not they've got a master's or higher level?

Thompson: There's this big controversy now about whether teachers should be graded and rewarded on the results of their class test results. I don't know, it just seems to me—and I'd been away from elementary and secondary education in Illinois really since my daughter graduated—I never hear anything about what they learn today, as opposed to how they learn, who teaches what they learn, how you reward the people who teach, and how you put together testing. Now we've got students being able, with the urging of their parents, to say, "I don't want to take that test." So they have to sit in the schools unoccupied while their classmates take the test? What kind of nonsense is that? I mean, that's just nutty.

That's on the same tier as vaccinations. Some Hollywood actress says, "I'm not vaccinating my child." The next thing you know, half the country doesn't want to vaccinate their child, because they read in *People* magazine that this starlet, who's probably dumber than a box of rocks, doesn't want her child vaccinated.<sup>50</sup> I mean, that's just—anyway... You can tell I'm getting old, right? (DePue laughs) I'm just going by what I learned and what my daughter learned when she was in elementary and secondary. And they learned stuff, important stuff, particularly about the history of the country and how we got where we are.

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<sup>50</sup> Thompson is most likely thinking of Jenny McCarthy, who was a highly influential critic of vaccinations between 2007 and 2010. In particular, she promoted the incorrect belief that vaccinations cause autism.

DePue: And you just were being critical that they weren't being taught about Lincoln or the Civil War, or the American Revolution, or the Constitution.

Thompson: Yeah.

DePue: Much of the criticism that's coming from conservative circles today is aimed at teachers unions, and you were a longtime champion of public sector unions.

Thompson: Yeah, and they were a longtime champion of me.

DePue: So is that misplaced criticism?

Thompson: There are a lot of things that teachers unions and citizens can agree on. But we have gotten ourselves to the place in Illinois where it's all process. Teachers think that reforms that are being pushed by conservative legislators and governors are designed to break teachers unions. The conservatives are saying our children aren't educated enough, and it's because we have bad teachers, or all the money's spent on the teachers and not enough on the students. It just goes on and on. It goes around in a big circle. Everybody's half right and half wrong. At the end of the day, who's going to replace the teachers? And at the end of the day, how are you going to get good teachers unless you reward them? So the question is, what do you reward them for, and how do you measure that? And you've got to make sure that what you're rewarding them for and how you measure it does not have a disguised motive of breaking teachers union political power. You know? It's not easy. It really isn't.

Now, I was always a strong champion of unions—I gave them the right to strike—and they were strong supporters of mine. They were Republicans in the IEA downstate; they were Democrats in the IFT, the Illinois Federation of Teachers downstate, and the CFT, the teachers in Chicago; yet they all supported me, almost 100 percent. And I tried to be the interlocutor, the intermediary, between the organizations and the legislature and the local parents and schools, and stuff like that. But if the administration is not interested in that, a lot of times it doesn't work.

DePue: Again, to echo some of the critiques you get from the right, one of the problems with the teachers union is they will protect incompetent teachers. Do you think there's any merit in that?

Thompson: There's probably some of that, because unions are big on seniority. Unions will sacrifice the new to protect the old; I mean, that's the heart of unionism. You see private sector unions go out on strike, or even public sector unions like teachers, and when the contract settlement comes, it's usually at the expense of the newest members of the union rather than the oldest members of the union. First they'll pay for the strike out of their benefits. And when the strike is settled, the school board's saved enough money during the strike to pay for the settlement, and oftentimes the settlement will involve layoffs. And

who gets laid off? The newest, youngest teachers, regardless of their merit, while the oldest, more senior teachers are protected.

DePue: Mm-hmm.

Thompson: But that's also true in the private sector. That's true of the auto workers, it's true of the steel workers.

DePue: You're saying it's true of unions.

Thompson: Yeah, it's true of unions, sure. That's their number one principle.

DePue: Protect their union members?

Thompson: Protect what they have.

DePue: If you were a politician today, would you be out there stumping for school choice?

Thompson: What do you mean by "school choice"?

DePue: That parents have the option of sending their kids to a private school rather than a public school.

Thompson: They've always had that option.

DePue: With assistance from the public coffers to pay for it.

Thompson: Oh, yeah. I don't think I would support that. I think if you want to send your kids to a private school, you ought to pay for it. We've got charter schools, which are a choice, but they're funded by the public school system, so it's not—

DePue: And I guess that's the other aspect of it, where they have more control over sending their kids to charter schools.

Thompson: Yes.

DePue: You would be supportive of that?

Thompson: Oh, yeah.

DePue: And here's one that you didn't have to deal with when you were governor, but it certainly is part of the debate today, Common Core.

Thompson: Yeah, I had nothing like that.

DePue: Which is essentially the federal government getting involved with recommending, dictating what every student is going to be learning.

Thompson: Did you ever read the United States Constitution?

DePue: Yes I have.

Thompson: See anything about schools in there?

DePue: It was deliberately left out.

Thompson: Yeah, okay, so... But then there's a lot of stuff going on today that wasn't part of the Constitution. Scalia's not always wrong, you know.

DePue: (laughs) Antonin Scalia.

Thompson: Antonin.

DePue: In the process of doing this, do you remember getting any feedback or questions or queries from other governors about what was going on in Illinois in terms of school reform?

Thompson: No. They did steal my Build Illinois program, though.

DePue: What states?

Thompson: New York. Governor of New York, I think it was Pataki, went zipping right back from a governors conference where I spoke on Build Illinois, and they did Build New York. That was the name of it, Build New York. I said, "Great compliment!"

DePue: Did you steal any ideas from other governors over the years?

Thompson: Always! Always. That's what governors conferences are for.

DePue: And do you remember any of those things that you were inspired to take?

Thompson: No.

DePue: Let's move on to a couple of other things. Dave Gilbert, after a long, successful association with you, moved on to the private sector—

Thompson: Yes, he did.

DePue: —retired as the press secretary. Who took his place, Fields?

Thompson: Dave Fields, yeah. Gilbert went to the Continental Bank.

DePue: Was Dave Fields able to fill those big shoes?

Thompson: Yeah. I mean, they were different guys, different personalities, different backgrounds, but Dave was a very competent press secretary. Both Daves. Dave Fields had the good fortune to win the Illinois lottery, \$6 million.<sup>51</sup>

DePue: So he didn't need to be a press secretary anymore.

Thompson: No. He retired after that. (laughs) I can remember him coming into my office, "Governor!" "Yes?" "I just won the lottery!" I said, "What?" He said, "I just won \$6 million in the lottery!" I said, "Well, good for you! Buy my tickets next time." So he said, "Can you go down to the press conference and announce this?" I said, "Not on your life. You go down to the press conference and announce this. I don't want to go down there and be asked questions like, "How did **your** press secretary win the lottery?" And, "Did you ever talk to the lottery director?" I said, "You go down there and tell them how you won the lottery." So he did.

DePue: Did you get any blowback on that one?

Thompson: No.

DePue: Or just some friendly kidding on it?

Thompson: Kidding, yeah. I said, "Listen, if I had anything to do with that, I'd have won the lottery, not Dave Fields."

DePue: (laughs) This one maybe wasn't quite as fun as hearing one of your chief aides had won the lottery. You'd been lobbying hard to have this Saturn plant built in Illinois.

Thompson: Yeah.

DePue: And in the summer, you found out that the Saturn plant would not be built here.

Thompson: Right. It went to Tennessee. I think in reality, that was sort of a fetcher program.

DePue: A "fetcher program"?

Thompson: Fetcher, yeah. They'd hold it out, and all these governors and their staff would run in and have their slide shows and make all these promises, "We'll buy the land, we'll build your plant, we'll run roads up to the plant, get the rail lines to the plant," on and on and on and on and on, so we could show the people of our state that we were really trying to get this plant. But I think General

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<sup>51</sup> On Gilbert's departure, see David Gilbert, interview by Mark DePue, April 22, 2014. On Field's lottery win see Kim Blackwell Fox, interview by Mike Czaplicki, July 14, 2014.

Motors knew all the time they wanted to put it in the South, or in this case, the semi-South.

DePue: Away from unions?

Thompson: Away from unions. Yeah, sure. Even though they were a union company, in terms of new facilities, you know, it's like Boeing. In Seattle, they're a union company. They went to South Carolina. That's not a union company there. It was a big deal. But they had every governor in the United States running in to them. Big states, little states.

DePue: To include the governor of Illinois?

Thompson: To include the governor of Illinois, you're darned right.

DePue: So how was it different for the Mitsubishi plant?

Thompson: If I'm recalling correctly, there were three or four states that wanted that plant. Mitsubishi was not as big a company as Honda or Toyota, but nevertheless, important. Important not just for the plant and the jobs, and the associated economic development for the region, but for what it said about the state. If the Japanese, whose predilection is to go to the South, and whose predilection is for non-union plants, came to Illinois with its union forces, it said something powerful about the state and its desirability as a home. Yeah, there were three or four other states, I think. I don't remember who they were. I can guess; probably Ohio, probably Indiana, maybe Missouri. But I just had it in my head we were going to get this plant, and we got it; even if I had to crawl around on the floor.

DePue: You think that trip to Japan was the key part of that campaign?

Thompson: Yeah. Oh, they want to see you. Plus, I think I was favorably viewed by the Japanese business community, because we had other successful businesses in Illinois. So we had somewhat of a head start, I think.

DePue: Well, on the downside, I'm sure you can—

Thompson: Downside?

DePue: On the downside, not of the Mitsubishi plant, but this is about the timeframe that International Harvester was closing up shop.

Thompson: Yeah.

DePue: Were you involved in discussions to keep major industries like that going and present?

Thompson: Sure. And if I wasn't involved, my top economic development staff was involved. I don't remember whether I did that one personally or not. But look, you soon learn that everything has its cycle in the economy and in the business world. I mean, look at McDonald's, the number one restaurant company in the world, with declining sales today, getting bitten and chewed on their heels by the new Chipotles and Five Guys, and whatever. All those companies. These things turn. Illinois pioneered the development of farm tools, mechanized farm tools. That's where International Harvester came from. At one time, in the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century, they were number one in the world in farm machinery. But then they got competitors, Deere, Caterpillar, the Japanese.

DePue: Farmall, which isn't around anymore.

Thompson: Farmall. Soon every nation in the world was making farm machinery. So the older companies sometimes survived and sometimes they didn't, or they may—look at the heron out there, on the right-hand side.

DePue: Oh yeah, on the lawn there.

Thompson: Sometimes production moved overseas, if the company survived. Sometimes they wanted to be nearer to all of their customers, so they had multiple facilities. Sometimes their original Illinois facility got outdated when they had multi-story buildings, when what they needed was a football-size field on one level. That's the way of the world. Illinois Bell is another example of that. Western Electric is another example of that. In many instances, there's nothing you could do to prevent that, because other considerations in the 1980s drove business decisions on companies that were founded in the 1880s. It's the way of the world.

DePue: While you might be able to take some credit for a Mitsubishi landing in Normal, Illinois, would you suffer any political damage in having IH close up?

Thompson: I don't think so. As sad as they are to see a facility leave their community, as badly as they feel, as worried as they are about the job losses, people are not dummies. They understand if a facility is outdated, and they understand if it now has foreign competition when it never had it before, or if a lot of their customers are overseas, and therefore they have to build facilities closest to their customers that they didn't have in the nineteenth century. People are not dumb.

DePue: One of the people, Susan Mogerman, I've interviewed about the next subject has said, "You know, it's a small thing, but it's something near and dear to the governor's heart, and that's the creation of the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency in 1985."

Thompson: Yeah.

- DePue: July 1, 1985, it was stood up.
- Thompson: Of course she would say that. She was the director.
- DePue: Well, that was right after your time. I think you appointed her as assistant director.
- Thompson: Yeah.
- DePue: She remembers very well—
- Thompson: I'll bet.
- DePue: —that discussion you had with her. (Thompson laughs) But I want to go back to 1981. And that's the time frame that the state of Illinois purchased the Dana-Thomas House in Springfield.
- Thompson: Oh, yeah.
- DePue: Why and how much and from whom?
- Thompson: A word of background. I am a history guy. I am an architectural guy. I'm a museum guy. I am a natural resources guy. And I, when I was governor, protected those areas; that was my personal part of the budget.
- DePue: Otherwise, everything you've just mentioned are kind of drops in the budget.
- Thompson: Right, they are. They didn't cost a lot of money. But they were important to me personally. It was part of who I am. Yeah, I was a champion of education, and I was a champion of all the other things that government does—I built prisons, and I helped seniors, and the list is endless—but for personal interest, what gave me pleasure were those areas, just because of who I am.

The Dana-Thomas House was one of the preeminent Frank Lloyd Wright houses in the nation. In the world, actually. And it was two blocks from the governor's mansion. It had been built by Susan Lawrence Dana, who went through, I think, three husbands, each one wealthier than the last. She was living in this Victorian house that her father built, across the railroad tracks from the mansion, a couple of blocks down. And she got the bright idea early in the twentieth century that she wanted to remodel her father's house. She heard about this young architect in Chicago, Frank Lloyd Wright, and she summoned him to Springfield—she's kind of an imperious lady—and told him she wanted him to remodel her father's Victorian house. Wright agreed to do that. He asked her what the budget was, and she said, foolishly, "Whatever it takes." (laughs) Well, that was music to an architect's ears, right?

So if you go to the Dana-Thomas House today, it is one of the most magnificent Arts and Crafts houses in the world. Frank Lloyd Wright did the

house, and he did the furniture, and he did the glass, and he did the windows, and he did the lamps—he did everything, the fountain, everything. And I don't think Mrs. Dana knew what she was in for, because if you go there today, the only part of her father's house that is left is a small living room. The rest was pure Frank Lloyd Wright creation. Mrs. Dana took ill at some time in the 1940s, and they moved her to this little cottage—I guess it was the cottage that was across the railroad tracks. And they wanted to sell the contents of the mansion. So they dragged all that stuff out to the mansion lawn.

DePue: The Wright-designed furnishings?

Thompson: Furniture, yeah, out to the lawn. And the dining room chairs were out there for, like, \$10 apiece. But because they were so avant-garde, the people of Springfield refused to buy them, and they had to drag them back in the house. So they survived. I have Mrs. Dana's coffee pot. A young antique dealer attended the sale in the 1940s and bought the coffee pot. He couldn't afford the chairs. I met him years later when he was sort of retiring from his business, and he gave me the coffee pot. And I'm going to give it back to the Dana-Thomas House, because it should be in the kitchen there.

They moved Mrs. Dana across to this little cottage, and the house was bought by the Charles C. Thomas Publishing Company of Springfield, who published medical and legal textbooks. Thankfully, they didn't hurt the house. They worked around the house. They didn't destroy any of the historically important architectural parts of the house, they didn't sell any of the furniture or glass. And they were in it for thirty, thirty-five years. And now I'm governor, and Charles C. Thomas announces that they've outgrown the house, they're going to sell it. And they got an offer from a New York antiques dealer, who dealt primarily in Tiffany glass in New York, of \$1 million for the glass. This New York antiques dealer was going to come and take all the windows out, take all the lighting fixtures out, and take it to New York and sell it piece by piece. Well, I heard about that, and I said, "Over my dead body." So I made a deal—

DePue: This is 1981, right, in the midst of some very tough economic times?

Thompson: The worst. The worst since the Great Depression. I made a deal with Thomas to buy the house for the \$1 million they had been promised by the New York antique dealer. Now, I've got to get that \$1 million appropriation through the legislature when we're just cutting the hell out of every program in the state. Awful. And people would say, "Well, you want to buy this house, and you're cutting grandma and the little children" and on and on and on and on. I would say, "Yes, but, these are capital funds. They can't be spent for grandma and the little children. They're to be spent for structures." Then you get the, "Well, I want this building in my community that's important for grandma and the

little children.” So you know who was my champion in getting this through the legislature?

DePue: Bill Cellini?

Thompson: No.

DePue: Pate Philip?

Thompson: Pate Philip. Exactly. (DePue laughs) I took Pate to the house. He said, “You want to buy this thing, with all the tough times?” I said, “Yes.” “Well, okay, but we’re going to get yelled at.” I said, “We’re already being yelled at. Just pass the bill.” And he did. We got the house for \$1 million. Pate said, “You know, I’ve got this billiard table up in my attic, and there’s a place for it in the basement of the house.” I said, “We’re ready and willing and able to receive it, Pate, as soon as you donate it to the house.” “Okay.” He had it trucked down to the house, and it’s in there. And he became like the godfather of the Dana-Thomas House. Now, you know Pate. Who would have imagined that Pate Philip would become the godfather of the Dana-Thomas House?

Then I had to do two things: I had to bring the mechanical systems up to snuff, because they went back to the turn of the century. But I waited on that until we had some money, and I could ask for the money for the mechanicals without getting (mimics grumbling). That was about \$8 million. So what did I have all told in the house, nine million?

DePue: Eight million for the mechanicals, back in the 1980s?

Thompson: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

DePue: Some serious money, Governor.

Thompson: Well, some serious mechanicals. I mean, you were dealing with 1900s stuff.

DePue: To include rewiring the whole place?

Thompson: Everything. Rewiring, bringing back the original surface of the walls, going underneath the stuff that had been added, plumbing, HVAC, heating, lighting—everything. So then, Christie’s announced an auction of some things that over the years had escaped from the house: a double lamp, the liquor cabinet, just a whole bunch of other things.

DePue: I read about this. Don Hallmark was writing eloquently about all this in 1987, does that sound right?

Thompson: Yeah.

DePue: Don Hallmark was the—

Thompson: Superintendent.

DePue: Yeah, site manager.

Thompson: It's now six years later. I said, "We're going to get that stuff back." Of course, Frank Lloyd Wright was a big deal at that time, so every museum, every antique dealer in the nation was lusting after this stuff.

DePue: I read that Barbra Streisand was one of the potential bidders.

Thompson: Yeah. I said, "I've got to raise the money to get this stuff back." So I raised \$3 million to get the stuff back. I did it by going to—I forget now, it's one of the moguls out east who's still active in buying minority stakes in companies, and then beating on the board to adopt his program—one of those guys. I went out to see him in his magnificent office, with all of these magnificent paintings, multi-million dollar stuff. He listened to my story, and he gave me \$50,000.

Then I went back to Chicago and went to see the Crown family. And I said, "Well, this guy in New York has given me \$50,000." So they had to, in order to save face, give me \$50,000. I had a \$100,000. I figured I needed \$3 million. So I went to New York on the Friday before the auction on Saturday.<sup>52</sup> I had with me a list of, like, the hundred biggest businesses in Chicago. And I sat down in my hotel room, dialing for dollars, and my pitch was, "We have this magnificent Frank Lloyd Wright house in the state of Illinois, and some of its furnishings have escaped from the mansion. I need to raise the money to get them back. And you know the Japanese will be bidding against me," sort of like the yellow peril from the nineteenth century, right? They were aghast at the notion that the Japanese would be able to bid against me. Just all day long, and that's all I did was dial for dollars.

I got to 5:00 in the afternoon, and my last call was to the CEO of First National Bank in Chicago. By this time, I'm exhausted, I got a glass of Jack Daniels on my desk, and it's raining like hell in New York. I get Dick Thomas on the phone, and I said, "Dick, there's this Frank Lloyd Wright house in Springfield. It's the most magnificent Frank Lloyd Wright house in the country. It's the most fully furnished Frank Lloyd Wright house in the country, but unfortunately, over the years, a number of pieces have escaped, and I'm on a campaign to get them back. I've been calling your fellow Chicago business people all day long, and I've met with some really nice success. You're the last call on my list. I'm almost there." He said, "How much do you need?" And I said, "Forty-five thousand dollars." He said, "If I give you the \$45,000, will you get off the phone?" I said, "Yes!" He said, "Okay, you've got the money." I hung up the phone, got my Jack Daniels.

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<sup>52</sup> The auction was held June 8, 1991.

Coming out to sit with me at the auction the next day at Christie's was Margaret Van Meter, who was always interested in this kind of stuff, and had gone on trips with me. Just a wonderful, wonderful lady.<sup>53</sup>

DePue: I saw her on the roster for going to China.

Thompson: Yeah, right. She was coming out to the auction. So once I finished dialing for dollars, I got a call from George Steinbrenner, who was a friend of mine. I had met him when we had the Hambletonian at Du Quoin.

DePue: Was he, at that time, owner of the Yankees?

Thompson: Yes. But he was a big harness guy. So he would come to Du Quoin and stay at the Du Quoin mansion, which was my summer home for the time of the fair. And since Du Quoin is essentially a nighttime fair, because it's too hot in the daytime to be out on those fairgrounds—although my daughter was out there every day for ten days, it didn't bother her. She'd run out the kitchen door in the morning, and you wouldn't see her until night. So he and I got to be good pals. He called me, "Hey, I'm going out for drinks with a couple of guys, you want to come?" I said, "Oh, yeah." He had this, like, Rat Pack that he ran around with.

DePue: Now, this was out in New York City, I'm assuming?

Thompson: Yeah, New York City. And, of course it was a typical George Steinbrenner group—a bishop in charge of all the archdiocese real estate in New York City, a limousine dealer from Newark or wherever the hell he was from, an Olympic champion in something—about ten guys. They adopted me and took me out for cocktails. And of course this group, along with Steinbrenner, could tell the most incredible stories. I'm this young governor from Illinois, and I'm just sitting there open-mouthed, eyes wide open, listening to this stuff. And what I didn't realize at the time was, Steinbrenner kept refilling my glass. I was drinking martinis, and I wasn't paying attention. I'd drink from the drink and put it down, and he'd refill it, get the waitress over. They finally had to leave. I staggered out of there. Thank God the troopers were there.

I got back to the hotel, and who calls? Margie Van Meter. "Jim, you know we're going to dinner." (gasps) I said, "Absolutely, Margie, we're going to dinner." "Well, you know, of course, Jim, that I only drink double Jack Daniels when I'm with you." And I said, "Yes, absolutely. We'll have some." I'm near death at this point, right? So we go out. We're drinking double Jack Daniels. And she said, "How about a bottle of champagne?" I said, "Oh, absolutely!" Well, I finally sent her back to her hotel. I got home, and at about

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<sup>53</sup> She was married to A.D. Van Meter, who was the Chairman of the Illinois Housing Development Authority from 1977 to 2003. At the time of this interview, their son, Andy, was chairman of the Sangamon County Board, a position he first assumed in 2000.

2:00 in the morning, I was at death's door. I'm not kidding. I'm ready to give it all up, I'm ready to meet my maker. I am so sick, oh!

So I go to the auction floor the next morning with just a hammering headache. And sitting next to me was the foremost Frank Lloyd Wright collector in the nation. He owned a pizza company in Detroit.<sup>54</sup> He had a Frank Lloyd Wright museum, and that was his avocation. His family never got a vacation, they got piled into a trailer and dragged to every Frank Lloyd Wright house in the nation. I went out to help him open his museum, and I met his wife, and she didn't look happy. I said, "Aren't you proud of this museum?" "No!" I said, "Why not?" "Well, my family has never had a vacation. He'd get us into that goddamned trailer, and he'd drag us all over the nation to see Frank Lloyd Wright houses, and I'm sick of it!" I'm thinking, Shh, we're opening this museum! (DePue laughs)

He said, "Jim, I'll tell you what, I know you're bidding on this stuff to bring it back to the house, so I'm not going to bid against you. And I'm going to give you \$25,000." And all the other museums who were represented there were so taken with the fact that I was going to bring it back to the house, which is where they thought it ought to be. Once it gets out of the house—especially for something like a Frank Lloyd Wright house, where he designed and built this furniture for the house—yes, it's an extraordinarily valuable antique, but it loses the context of the house where it was made to be used and displayed. So they didn't bid against me. I had dealers to compete with me, but they couldn't compete with me. I was sitting on three million, \$25,000, right? And the big collectors were not bidding against me. Of course, the Thomas Publishing Company was not thrilled, since they were the consigners, and there was no action on the floor except for little niggly bids at the beginning.

DePue: I would have thought Christie's would have been the one that would—

Thompson: No.

DePue: —benefit from having higher bids.

Thompson: Yeah, both would, but the Thomas people were the consigners.

DePue: But I thought it wasn't their property to begin with.

Thompson: Some of it was.

DePue: Oh, okay.

Thompson: The big stuff. So I got everything. And the guy from Domino's Pizza gave me a ride home on his jet. I was pleased with myself. He was pleased for me, and

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<sup>54</sup> Tom Monaghan, founder of Domino's Pizza.

took me back to Chicago. So I got everything except one piece that they later had; they didn't put it in the first auction, but they put it in the second. It was another double lamp. They said, "You know what? We're not putting this in the auction, because we know what will happen. You'll go there and bid, and nobody will bid against you." They said, "We'll sell this to you. But we want \$600,000 for the double lamp." I said, "Well, I'll buy it, but I want to buy it for \$600,001," because the record price in the United States for a piece of decorative art at the time was \$600,000. I wanted to pay \$1 more and get the record for the Dana-Thomas House. So we made the deal. I paid him \$600,000, which I had left, for the double lamp. And we brought it back to the house.

Later, there was an auction in Chicago for one of Wright's weed vases; it was a tall, narrow, copper vase, called a weed vase. No, it's not the weed vase. I take it back. It was the urn that had been in the house, a copper urn. And that went for something like \$400,000. I didn't have quite that much money, but I bid anyway and got it. And I ran out of the auction hall and called up the head of Sara Lee, who was a big collector. I said, "I got the Frank Lloyd Wright urn for the Dana-Thomas House." "Congratulations! That's great. You do fine work." I said, "Well, the only trouble is, I'm about \$40,000 short!" He said, "What?" I said, "Yeah, I had to have it for the house, and I got a little carried away, and I'm \$40,000." He said, "Oh, okay, I'll give you the \$40,000." John Bryan, who is the chairman and CEO of Sara Lee. We got it. It's in the house.

DePue: When we talked many sessions ago about you raising funds for political campaigns, you certainly gave me the impression you were willing to make those phone calls, but you didn't necessarily enjoy making those phone calls.

Thompson: Right.

DePue: And now you had one day where all you did was pick up the phone and dial these deep pockets.

Thompson: Three million dollars in one day. About \$2.9 million in one day.

DePue: So I guess that speaks to your passion for this subject.

Thompson: I guess so, yeah. Well, it's true. You know, dialing for dollars in political campaigns, I'm asking for me. In things like the Dana-Thomas House, I wasn't asking for me, I was asking for the house and for the patrimony of Illinois. So to me it was different.

DePue: What is it about Frank Lloyd Wright? Was there something that spoke personally to you in terms of his architecture?

Thompson: No, he was just the number one architect in Illinois, and one of the number ones in the nation. And he had this **magnificent** house in the city of

Springfield, close to the mansion, and it had a magnificent story about Mrs. Dana. I mean, all the stars were aligned.

DePue: I can't think of any more famous architect in American history, anyway.

Thompson: Right. Exactly.

DePue: Otherwise, you wouldn't have people going around and spending every vacation they have visiting Frank Lloyd Wright.

Thompson: Right. His poor wife and kids, honest to God!

DePue: A couple of other questions here about the Frank Lloyd Wright home, the Dana-Thomas House, and then we'll pick up the rest of the IHPA story the next time I come back.

Thompson: Okay.

DePue: We mentioned already that Susan Mogerman was one of the people working in the IHPA by that time. I think she was probably deputy director. But they were proud because a couple of the people who were personally working on the Dana-Thomas House decided it was important to refinish, refurbish some of this furniture.

Thompson: No.

DePue: And—

Thompson: Oh, no.

DePue: They—

Thompson: Oh, no, no.

DePue: —they said that you came in and they were all just as proud as they could be, "Look at this, Governor," and you had that reaction.

Thompson: No. Nothing was ever refurbished. No, I wouldn't have allowed that. I mean, that would have been sacrilege. Whatever it is—lacquer, varnish, whatever—you cannot remove the original finish of wood. It would take the value of the furniture down by more than half. More than half. Maybe three quarters. No matter how shabby or dirty the original finish is, you just can't do that with wood. You can't. You can do it with silver—you can re-silver. That's okay. You can't do it with metal, except under rare circumstances. But you certainly can't do it with wood antiques. You cannot tamper with the finish, unless it's so far gone you want to do it for aesthetic purposes. It may please you, but then it doesn't have the antique value anymore.

- DePue: How about for restoration? Some of the most famous paintings in the world that are—
- Thompson: That's different. Paintings, yes. You can do almost anything to a painting.
- DePue: To bring it back to the luster it had originally?
- Thompson: Yeah. You can repair a tear in the canvas so that nobody will know. That's acceptable. You can clean it. That's acceptable. You can in-paint it, where it's lost paint. That's acceptable. But a wooden finish? No, no, no.
- DePue: The house was closed for a couple of years going through a \$5 million restoration, and it was finally reopened after three years on September 7, 1990. Do you remember that day? Were you there?
- Thompson: I don't remember whether I was there or not. I might have been. I don't remember.
- DePue: And one other comment on Frank Lloyd Wright, since it's obviously a topic of passion for you. Governor Edgar gets in office. They've got a serious budget deficit, and the word goes out in March of '92, I believe, that the house will be closed. And it was closed for a period of a few months. Do you remember that?
- Thompson: Yeah.
- DePue: What was your reaction to hearing that it was going to be closed for a while?
- Thompson: I was sorry it was closed, but I'm not going to criticize another governor for doing what he thinks he had to do to accomplish some greater good. And it reopened. I closed places too that I didn't want to close. You can't save everything. But it's funny. It's the most completely furnished Frank Lloyd Wright house in the world. The house in Buffalo, New York, the Martin House, was falling on hard times. They asked me to call the governor of New York—I think it was Pataki—and plead for funds for their house. And he restored the funding for that. They are about 35 percent originally furnished. We're at 97 percent originally furnished. Oh, it's remarkable. It is absolutely remarkable the stuff is still there.
- DePue: On a personal note, I think after you get past the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum, the Dana-Thomas House is the place to see in Springfield.
- Thompson: Absolutely. I totaled it up one day. I put in nine million: a million to purchase, eight million to do the mechanicals, and I put in three million privately raised for the furnishings. The house, I decided, was worth about \$50 million. So it was a hell of an investment for Illinois. And it's interesting. When I left the governorship and I was walking on the streets of Chicago, and even to this

day, people stop me. If they don't do the generic, "You were a good governor; I'm sorry you're not back there," blah-blah-blah. In terms of thanking me for something, for something specific, it's the White Sox and the Dana-Thomas House, which always shocks me, every time I hear it on the streets of Chicago. Somebody on the streets of Chicago is thanking me for saving the Dana-Thomas House. Of course, it turns out they had visited and were just awestruck, and they got the story from the guide. But it was something new every time I heard it. White Sox, you know, yeah.

DePue: Maybe that's what it is, Governor. That's what makes the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum so special, the incredible way they tell that amazing story.

Thompson: Oh, absolutely. Every time I come out of that museum, I'm a Lincoln fan all over again. And I've been a Lincoln fan for a long time, a Lincoln history guy for a long time. I've got all the books, and I've got a huge Lincoln collection. But if I come out of that library, it's like it's all brand new to me. You know? It is a source of wonderment, it just is.

DePue: And you can have the same feeling then, apparently, walking out of the Dana-Thomas House.

Thompson: Absolutely.

DePue: Because as you mention yourself, it's the Dana story, it's the Frank Lloyd Wright story, and it's all in one.

Thompson: Or as Samantha said, "Dad, why don't you run again, then we can move into the Dana-Thomas House?" She was twelve.

DePue: I've got to ask you one final question here today, Governor.

Thompson: What's that?

DePue: This'll be a short one. I believe Jennifer Pritzker has purchased or has now a Dana-Thomas House that she's at least considering turning into a bed and breakfast.

Thompson: She's got a number of houses up in Evanston and other places on the North Shore that she wants to do a bed and breakfast. She's had some pushback from the local authorities, who don't necessarily want a bed and breakfast in that location.

DePue: What would be your reaction with a Frank Lloyd Wright home being used for a bed and breakfast?

Thompson: It's not something I would approve of. It's too troublesome. Frank Lloyd Wright houses are not necessarily comfortable.

DePue: Very low passageways, dim lighting oftentimes.

Thompson: Yeah. And they're museums. They're not bed and breakfasts. You can take a grand old Victorian house and make it a wonderful bed and breakfast. Or you can take a midcentury modern house and make it a bed and breakfast. But Frank Lloyd Wright, no, uh-uh, different world.

DePue: Governor, it's been fun hearing the story about Frank Lloyd Wright and the Dana-Thomas House.

Thompson: Yeah!

DePue: Let's finish on that note for today.

(end of interview #18)

## Interview with James Thompson

# IST-A-L-2013-054.19

Interview # 19: September 9, 2015

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Wednesday, the ninth of September, 2015. This is Mark DePue, director of oral history with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. And today I'm with Gov. Jim Thompson in your...condo, house, apartment?

Thompson: Condo apartment.

DePue: Condo in Chicago. Governor, this is our nineteenth session.

Thompson: (laughs) You sure it's not the 143rd?

DePue: I was hoping to get a couple more sessions with you in Michigan, but I understand you had quite the number of visitors.

Thompson: We did. July was just a madhouse of friends and relatives who came and stayed.

DePue: If you weren't such a congenial host and had such a wonderful place to come visit, you wouldn't have that problem.

Thompson: I know, yeah.

DePue: It's been a while since we last talked, I think all the way back in June. I'm excited about getting back with you. Last time, we talked quite a bit about the Dana-Thomas House, and you just pointed out to me a coffee pot sitting over here on your bookshelf.

Thompson: When the auction of the contents of the Dana-Thomas House was held—after Mrs. Dana was committed to institutional care, I believe, or to the cottage across the railroad tracks—an antique dealer friend of mine from downstate as a very young man attended the auction. He bought the coffee pot and gave it to me later. I'm going to give it to the Dana-Thomas House so it can go back in the kitchen where it originally was before it was taken out back then.

DePue: What's the material the coffee pot is made from?

Thompson: I'd have to look at it more closely here. It looks like a pewter top, a brass bottom, and a sort of Bennington pottery middle. I think it's three substances.

DePue: Is that also something that was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright?

Thompson: No, that was Mrs. Dana's personal possession.

DePue: Last time we talked, it was almost exclusively about 1985, and Dana-Thomas House came in with the discussion about the creation of IHPA. Eighty-five was a busy year for you; Build Illinois was kicked off that year, and the Educational Reform Act was that year. One of the pieces of the Educational Reform Act was Casimir Pulaski Day. And I don't think I asked you about that last time.

Thompson: Yeah. Good thing.

DePue: How did that sneak into there?

Thompson: (laughs) Because we ended up honoring the wrong Polish hero. The Polish community in Chicago was very desirous of honoring General Pulaski for his exploits in support of the American Revolution. I was always of the mind that individual holidays honoring individual people were a good thing, and if the number of them were kept at a reasonable level. I never did like the generic holidays, like President's Day. I mean, we owe reverence and affection to every American president? I don't think so. Some of them are barely known to the average American citizen. And it denigrates the contributions of people like Washington or Lincoln, who used to have individual federal holidays as the father of the country and the savior of the country should have. So when they approached me with this—bearing in mind that there was a substantial Polish population in Illinois, bearing in mind that those who helped the infant nation fight its battle against the British should be honored—I was amenable to that. And the legislature passed the legislation that established the Pulaski holiday.

In fact, in Chicago sometime before, a major street on the West Side, Crawford Avenue, was renamed Pulaski. So there was a lot of support for that in the city. Years later, it turns out that Pulaski was not really the enabler of the Revolution that another Polish general, General Kościuszko, was. And he was the guy who gave more aid and comfort to the American Revolution than Pulaski did. Pulaski took part, but Kościuszko was even a bigger hero. I kept my promise to the Polish community, but I'm not sure the Polish community today would make the same argument they made back then.

DePue: I think I know the answer to this, Governor, but was the Polish community here in Chicago, which is claimed to be the second largest Polish population in the world—

Thompson: Right.

DePue: —were they loyal Republican voters?

Thompson: No, but they were loyal Thompson voters.

DePue: So there's always an element of politics in these—

Thompson: Sure, absolutely. I mean, what kind of governor would I be if I couldn't do something for a constituency which so loyally supported me through four elections? Plus they were decent, hard-working people, you know? They were a great part of the economy of Chicago, they were proud Illinoisans, so why wouldn't they do that?

DePue: I don't know if you recall much about this piece of legislation, the Illinois Public Utilities Act.

Thompson: Not really. I remember fights about rate increases, because they were as reliable as the sun rising in the morning. Politicians who occupied

prosecutorial offices—attorneys general, states attorneys, anybody who had a consumer fraud bureau—delighted to join in the battle against the utilities for rate increases. They didn't care a lick about the fact that electric companies, like Commonwealth Edison, and telephone companies were, in a very real sense, the backbone of the Illinois economy. You cannot imagine a functioning Illinois economy without telephone service—now Internet service—and electricity. The state would stop functioning without electricity. And yet, the opponents of rate increases, people in offices who wanted to be in higher offices, could be reliably counted upon to oppose everything that came down the pike.

DePue: But there's one name in particular that seems to come up. Citizens Utility Board was created in 1983, so a couple of years before this. Wasn't that essentially something that Pat Quinn had been pushing for?

Thompson: And I signed the legislation creating the Citizens Utility Board. In retrospect, I'm not sure that was one of my finer moments because they, like the politicians in prosecutorial offices, could be counted on to always oppose a rate increase. And they were being funded by money derived from the utility bill. (laughs) Yeah, it was a Pat Quinn initiative. But I think I signed it as part of an accommodation of the Speaker, and because the members of the House and Senate were all gung ho for it. At the time, it seemed like not the biggest thing in the world.

DePue: Last time, we launched into this long conversation about the Dana-Thomas House because of mentioning that IHPA was a new agency created in 1985. I wanted to spend a little bit more time talking about that agency, and perhaps to ask you about something that you would have done a couple of years before 1985, select Julie Cellini to serve on the board of the Illinois State Historical Library.

Thompson: Right.

DePue: Which is going to be one of those things that's rolled into the new IHPA [Illinois Historic Preservation Agency]. Why Julie Cellini?

Thompson: Because she was a very smart, civically active woman in Springfield who cared very deeply about history, particularly the history of Illinois. So you've got a threefer: You've got a woman on the board, so you've got more gender equality, you've got somebody who was devoted to the community, and she cared passionately about the issues that would come before the board. That wasn't a very hard appointment to make.

DePue: A private citizen; the wife of Bill Cellini, also a private citizen.

Thompson: Right.

DePue: So tell me about your relationship with Bill Cellini.

Thompson: A lot of people think they know what my relationship with Bill Cellini was and is, but a lot of it is urban myth—or political myth in this case, I guess. Look, when I became governor in 1977, Bill Cellini was already there. He had prospered under the Ogilvie administration. He was Dick Ogilvie's director of transportation. And when he stepped down from that position, he was in the private sector as the executive director of the Illinois Asphalt Pavement Association. So he carried his interest in Illinois roads from IDOT [Illinois Department of Transportation] to the private sector, representing the asphalt interests in Illinois.

Both the asphalt interests and the concrete interests, which were their main competitor in terms of what material would constitute road building, were usually aligned on issues, for example, funding to increase road building, big highway plans, things of that sort. The only time they would differ was when they were both contending for a particular contract, and it had to be determined whether it was going to be an asphalt contract or a concrete contract. Sometimes those issues came to my desk, but rarely. Most of the time, they were decided in IDOT by the engineers and by the director of the agency.

I can only remember one meeting in the governor's office, where their requests to be heard by me were vociferous enough to get them up to my office. And I think we brokered an agreement, in essence splitting the work between the asphalt people and the concrete people. Bill, by virtue of his service in state government during the Ogilvie administration, stayed current. And Bill was also a member of a small group in Springfield that was the driving force behind the Sangamon County Republican organization. There were four or five guys in that group that used to meet weekly. And their influence in Springfield politics was pretty strong.

Once a year, Bill Cellini would hold a fundraiser for me, usually over at the Convention Center, which would give you some idea of the size of it. And the people who attended were a mixture of Springfield businessmen, maybe central Illinois businessmen, state employees at a certain rank, and road builders and the industries associated with road building. Those were very successful fundraisers, and all I had to do was attend. And once a year, Cellini would come to my office in the Capitol and spend thirty minutes with me, talking about Republican politics. Never asked me for anything. Didn't have to ask me for anything; he had a lot of influence and associations in Springfield and in state government by virtue of his service that occurred before I got there. So that was it.

And when I was able to appoint Julie to the board, I was thrilled because she was a perfect appointment. You satisfied three or four different constituencies with that kind of appointment. In fact, Bill's sister, Janis, was my patronage director for a while. She was probably the best one. She was

good. She was as smart as her brother, and as understanding of the political process as her brother.

DePue: She held the same position for Jim Edgar as well.<sup>55</sup>

Thompson: Yeah. That shows you how her talents were regarded, and it was quite apart from Bill, or whatever he did.

DePue: I understand that Bill also rented a lot of downtown Springfield office space to the government.

Thompson: As he got into the private sector, he moved beyond just the Asphalt Association in Springfield. He always kept that, of course; that was his base. But he started doing commercial development in Chicago. Construction, buildings—

DePue: In Chicago?

Thompson: Yeah. He aligned himself with a number of businessmen in Chicago, and I guess politicians in Chicago, and he just got into that business. So if he had office space and state government was desirous of office space, and his bid was competitive, I wouldn't be surprised if he was successful in that. But it never came to my desk. I was never requested to give him a contract for space. I mean, that just wasn't my thing.

DePue: What can you tell me about how he procured a \$15.5 million loan from the State of Illinois to construct a hotel that was essentially in the shadows of the Convention Center in Springfield you just talked about?

Thompson: That was next door, actually.

DePue: Yeah.

Thompson: It was connected to the Convention Center by a concourse. And it was needed. Springfield hotel space was not what it is now with the newer hotels out on Route 66 outside of town, the Crown Plaza and others.

DePue: Wasn't the Hilton already there downtown, though?

Thompson: Hilton was already there. But during the legislative session, or the state fair, or any other big occurrence in Springfield, you needed both hotels, as it turned out. But that's not the only reason it was built. Illinois was still in the throes of a major recession. And the state treasurer, Jerry Cosentino, who had funds available to him for economic development courtesy of the legislature, came to me with a program to build this hotel as part of the effort to get parts of Illinois out of the doldrums. Looking at it, I agreed to it. So it was known as

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<sup>55</sup> Janis Cellini, interview by Mark DePue, September 15, 2009.

the Cosentino-Thompson program, or the Thompson-Cosentino program, in the words of my friend Adlai, (DePue laughs) when during debate in Springfield he attacked me on the stage for this corrupt program. I still remember him drawing out Cosentino's name, which was a sort of an Italian slur on Adlai's part.

DePue: And a Democrat, correct?

Thompson: Yeah.

DePue: Wasn't part of the problem, though, a long track record of the owners of the hotel—and Cellini was a part-owner, a minority owner—not paying off the debt?

Thompson: Well, most of that, if not all of that, was after my time as governor. So I'm not that up to date on it. But it was always an issue in Illinois politics, in Illinois government. I mean, there's not much I can say about that, since I didn't have any part in it.

DePue: Let me change the subject on you then, Governor, and go back to history. Fair to say that you've had a lifelong love or fascination with Abraham Lincoln?

Thompson: Yes.

DePue: In February 1985, you announced the creation of the Lincoln Legal Papers Project. Do you remember that?

Thompson: Yes I do. Still ongoing. The idea was to search the courthouses of Illinois and look for misplaced or long-lost Lincoln documents in cases that Lincoln participated in, since Lincoln, as a lawyer, traveled the circuit, and sometimes beyond the circuit. The thought was that there ought to be papers still in the old files of the office of the clerk of the circuit court in these counties, which would aid historians in their assessment of Lincoln's skills as a lawyer, before he went on to the presidency. And they found them. In my office, I have a handwritten letter by Lincoln to one of his clients, telling them to show up for a deposition. And I didn't know much about it. I think the name of the case was referenced, but certainly the parties were referenced, or one party was referenced.

Years later, I asked the Lincoln Legal Papers Project to see if they could help me trace the case, and they did. They found the case, and they sent me a sheet of paper with the description of the case on it. It was a railroad case, the kind that Lincoln often took. My recollection is that he prevailed in that case. So near that framed Lincoln letter to his clients, I've got the page that the project sent me, explaining what it was. It was really an interesting Lincoln document, because he confessed in the letter that he couldn't remember the name of his clients. A confession you'll not find a lawyer today making. (DePue laughs) He said, "I sent it to your office at"—whatever the

town was—"because I cannot remember your Christian name." I thought, Oh, my! (laughs)

DePue: Honest Abe!

Thompson: Honest Abe. Wow!

DePue: What was it about Abraham Lincoln that fascinated you so? Was it the legal side? The political side of him? The wartime leader?

Thompson: All of it. Look at Lincoln's childhood: moved across the Midwest, from Kentucky to Indiana to Illinois; growing up poor, largely self-educated after he stopped attending school; became a lawyer after a whole number of less than successful careers as a shopkeeper, a surveyor, and a flatboat operator; he became a lawyer by—as was common in those days—studying in the office of an established lawyer, sort of learning at his knee. So if you look just at his rise from his childhood to one of the most noted Illinois lawyers of the time, you would have to regard him as an extraordinary person.

And then when you added to that his presidency, which on the one hand presided over an extraordinary civil war with a great loss of life—the North fighting to defeat slavery and the South fighting to keep it and to keep their place in the nation's commerce—and at the same time was building the railroads to the West, it was extraordinary. He saved the country. No doubt about it. I mean, that's one of the most significant American lives you can imagine; he and General Washington are the two, the father and the savior.

DePue: Which would you rate, of all the presidents, as the greatest president?

Thompson: It has to be between Washington and Lincoln, no question about that.

DePue: Even though I've got this coaster of Teddy Roosevelt that I'm using today?

Thompson: Yeah. Teddy brought the presidency into the modern era, and Teddy significantly expanded the power of the presidency, largely by force of his personality. But he didn't preside over a civil war that threatened to rip the country apart, and he didn't preside over the birth of the nation. So you've got to examine American presidents in their context. And the two greatest events in our nation's history—the Civil War and the founding of the republic—Washington, Lincoln. So it's between those two men, and I can't tell you which was the most important. I suppose if you said to yourself, Other people helped found the nation—the Founding Fathers, of which there were quite a number—then Washington's presidency was not as significant as Lincoln, almost alone, saving the union. You could say that legitimately. I just hesitate to say it.

DePue: Since we're in the arena of history, let's go back to the creation of the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency. It came from a variety of locations, but mostly

from the Department of Conservation, with all of the historic sites that were there.

Thompson: Right.

DePue: Where did the idea originate to create this new agency?

Thompson: I think with me. (laughs) I think that's all I can remember. I wanted to give Illinois history its due because of my love for history, in the same way that during my time as governor, I protected and promoted the Illinois State Museum. I kept it from budget cuts, and I gave it an expanded role. We expanded the reach of the Illinois State Museum outside of Springfield. And the geological surveys, and things that had no real champion in the legislature, I took on; I was their champion. So to me, the notion of creating a separate agency from the Department of Conservation, which had all these site responsibilities, and had the state parks, and had the promotion of the geology of Illinois. That didn't seem like a hard thing to do.

DePue: Yeah, some of the sites that we're talking about here: New Salem, Cahokia Mounds, Fort de Chartres, Fort Kaskaskia, Lincoln's Log Cabin, Douglas' Tomb, Postville, Mount Pulaski, Bishop Hill, Galena, Lincoln-Herndon Law Office right there in Springfield, Jubilee College. But one that I always thought was curious that wasn't included was Dickson Mounds. Do you have any insights into why that was excluded?

Thompson: (laughs) Yeah, because that was an impossible... Oh, I was going to say impossible thorn in the side of state government, but it was more really an impossible thorn in the side of the state governor, who happened to be me. It was one of those issues you couldn't win. You could not win. The museum, in essence, (pauses) stored and exhibited dead Indians. I mean, I can't describe it any other way. And yeah, it was a curiosity, but it was more a nineteenth-century idea of history than a modern museum.

DePue: You say "dead Indians," essentially Indian bones?

Thompson: Yeah, remains. And of course, with reference to me it came at a time of Native Americans demanding the return of their remains that had been commercially exploited by white men, and mainstream museums refusing to take part in that kind of exhibit. On the other hand, the people in the town where Dickson Mounds was located were saying, "By God, we've had this museum for however many years, and you can't take it away from us. It's our tourist attraction." And I went back and forth on it; I took one position and then I took the opposite position, and then I went back to the first position. And as I said, you couldn't win.

DePue: Whether or not to actually—

Thompson: Close it and return the remains. That's why it's not in there.

- DePue: I know that that issue extended into Edgar's year, and when it was finally resolved the remains were, I guess, handed back over to the Native Americans.<sup>56</sup>
- Thompson: They were, yes.
- DePue: But the museum stayed open?
- Thompson: Right.
- DePue: Let's go back to IHPA, then—
- Thompson: The torturing of the Illinois governor stopped.
- DePue: (laughs) And now that you've got the new Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, it's going to be governed by a board of trustees. Any insights into why you selected Julie Cellini to step into that role as the first board director?
- Thompson: Same reason as the original appointment. She was a perfectly fine representative of those interests, and she was someone I could rely on. She was smart, she was educated, she wasn't crazy, and she understood state government.
- DePue: Why a board of trustees that has the decision-making power instead of an advisory board?
- Thompson: You'll find both in state government. I don't know whether there was any real motive for choosing one or the other.
- DePue: David Kenney, who came over from the Department of Conservation—I think he was the site manager at the time—was the first director of IHPA.
- Thompson: Right.
- DePue: What, he lasted a couple weeks?
- Thompson: No, no, no, longer than that.
- DePue: Do you have any insights into why that turned over so quickly?
- Thompson: Dave served as the director of the Department of Conservation, and he did come over as the head of IHPA, but it was never intended by me that he would be there for as long as he was at Conservation. You want to bring new people into government.

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<sup>56</sup> In 1992, Edgar responded to pressure from Native Americans by agreeing to eliminate a display of skeletons at the Dickson Mounds settlement site. Al Grosboll, July 23, 2009, 123-127; Jim Edgar, April 23, 2010, Volume III: 593-594. Both interview by Mark DePue.

- DePue: The new person that was brought in was Michael Devine. Remember Michael Devine?
- Thompson: I do.
- DePue: What can you tell me about Michael?
- Thompson: Smart guy, hard worker, creative. And I'm trying to remember the name of the guy who worked with him. Schwartz?
- DePue: Tom Schwartz? He would have been the Lincoln curator at the time.
- Thompson: Correct. He was sort of a young protégé who worked with Mike Devine, and the two of them were really responsible for making IHPA grow and do well.
- DePue: One of the purchases towards the end of your administration, I believe December of 1990—this would have been right at the end—was the purchase of the Pullman Factory site.
- Thompson: Yeah. The Pullman story was always a great disappointment to me.
- DePue: The story?
- Thompson: Well, the ongoing saga of Pullman, which extends to this day, twenty-five years later.
- DePue: Are you talking about the central story of the factory and the model town and the strike?
- Thompson: Right.
- DePue: Or what's happened with the property since that time?
- Thompson: Both. If you take my reputation as someone vitally interested in Illinois history, and my reputation as a builder of big things, (laughs) then you would know that I would be an absolute sucker for the idea of rebuilding Pullman, the factory and the town. My idea was to create a railroad museum there and make it the preeminent railroad museum in the United States, which would draw tourists from all over since people are still interested in trains. That's why we bought it.

I continued my interest in it even after I left the governorship. I believe I co-chaired a commission on this, and we came up with what I thought was an outstanding plan. We presented it to Governor Ryan and that was the last we ever heard of it, which was a disappointment to me. But Governor Ryan had other fish to fry, so it went into the governor's office and never came back out again. Now the fight to do something about Pullman is carried largely by the residents of the town, and people interested in the

history of Pullman, both as a company town and as the beginning of the first black labor union. So that was my association with Pullman.

DePue: It's a sprawling site. It's not just one or two buildings.

Thompson: It is a sprawling site. It's huge. And obviously, you couldn't rebuild everything. I guess the plan was to save as much of the façade as you could, even though it had been partially destroyed by fire, to front the Railroad Museum. And as part of that, to help redevelop the town of Pullman, which is sort of an isolated community out there. It's far from downtown. The homes in Pullman were built for the factory employees who were building the Pullman cars. I don't think there's another town in America with that history of both major industry—railroads, which pulled America out of the nineteenth century—and labor unions, and the company town model. I mean, there's just so much there. And my idea was you could pay for telling the story of Pullman if you built the museum and filled it with every rail car you could find.

DePue: Back to IHPA and who had the responsibility for this, and I think Michael Devine shared your vision for what Pullman could become. But do you remember anything about his departure around 1990, right at the end?

Thompson: No.

DePue: Anything that you might want to say about Susan Mogergerman, then, as a person who was working for Dave Gilbert as one of your assistant press secretaries, and her selection to move over to IHPA?<sup>57</sup>

Thompson: And I stole her.

DePue: Yes.

Thompson: Susan, as well as being just a wonderful state employee and a wonderful community leader in Springfield and a dear friend of mine, was the kind of person you wanted to see in state government, bright, hard-working, loyal, creative. I mean, she had it all. She was really something. Susan also, in another capacity, helped me install the recreation of the Jewish holidays at the mansion every year. So she was just, I thought, a wonderful talent, and I was lucky to have her for as long as I did.

DePue: As you know, IHPA has been in the news a lot for the last year. And the discussion has primarily centered on the division of IHPA from the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library Museum, or the absorption of IHPA as part of another agency. It's been going back and forth. Since we're on the topic, I

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<sup>57</sup> Susan Mogergerman, interview by Mark DePue, March 10 & 16, 2015.

wanted to give you an opportunity just to react to all of that controversy.  
(laughs)

Thompson: Well, you know, thank you for the opportunity, and I think I'll decline because I don't know enough about it. I get the sense that there are personality divisions which lay back of much of this in terms of people who run both agencies and their relationships in the legislature. It's just way beyond my time, way beyond my understanding, and I hope it all comes out all right. How about that?

DePue: Okay.

Thompson: Good answer, huh?

DePue: An artful answer, yes. (laughter)

Thompson: They both do fine work. Let's put it that way.

DePue: Let's continue with 1985. August 19th, you announce your decision to run for reelection for the fourth time.

Thompson: The fourth time. Samantha wanted a fifth. She didn't want to leave. (laughs)

DePue: What was Jayne telling you?

Thompson: You know, Jayne never told me. Apart from being the love of my life and a wonderful woman, she was a great political wife, because she did not try to influence decisions. She only cared about whether, in making my decision, I had really thought about it and examined all the possibilities, which included the impact on family life—because there is a great impact on family life—and the welfare of the State of Illinois. But beyond that, beyond ensuring that I had thought about everything, she never tried to dictate a decision. In fact, she claimed one year that she got a phone call from the wife of one of my directors, saying, "Isn't it wonderful Jim is running again?" Jayne said, "What? Where did you hear that?" "On the radio," she said. And of course, there I was on the radio, announcing what I was going to do. I think this was probably the third time I ran, before I had really sat down and told my wife!

DePue: You had already passed the threshold of being the longest serving governor of Illinois.

Thompson: Yeah.

DePue: So why declare for the fourth time around?

Thompson: Because my heart was still in the game. I loved what I was doing. And while there were battles in fourteen years, and disappointments and victories, and all of the things you might think, rightfully, made a part of the life of the chief

executive of a state this size, I never for a moment stopped loving what I was doing.

DePue: Was it more fun to be the governor during a time when the economy was on the rebound?

Thompson: Certainly. Because the job got a lot tougher when it was not. And I thought about running for a fifth term. I know that will shock everybody now, but I did. I finally came to the conclusion that for two reasons, I would not. One, I thought it was time for new blood in the governor's office, in state government. I never believed that I had all the answers. And I had really groomed Jim Edgar to succeed me. That was my plan, at least, from the very day he joined my administration, and I, in fact, sat him down on the couch and told him that. I think I shocked him, and he went home and told Brenda, and shocked her.<sup>58</sup>

I was also going to be almost fifty-five, and I had never had a career in the private sector. I had never made any money in my working life. It was always teaching or public service, whether it was prosecutor, or governor, or assistant attorney general, or law school. And I wanted that chance for my family. I mean, I came out of the governor's office in debt because I maintained our home in Chicago and we lived in the mansion. The governor's salary, as modest as it was for that position, didn't mean for a governor to be maintaining a residence elsewhere when you had the mansion. So I was doing that. And I just thought it was time.

DePue: I'm fascinated, Governor. I ask you about why you decided to run for the fourth time, and you end up telling me why you finally decided not to run for the fifth time.

Thompson: Yeah, and it wasn't an easy decision. It was not easy, because as I say, I loved what I was doing. I thought I could win a fifth term. I'm not sure Brenda really wanted Jim to run, (DePue laughs) so she never pushed me. And he didn't either. But those were the two reasons.

DePue: Let's go back to 1985—

Thompson: Let's pause for a moment.

(pause in recording)

DePue: We took a very brief break, and we are back. I wanted to ask you next, Governor, the question that the journalists always asked you. You declare that you're going to run for re-election for the fourth time in 1985. Obviously, the election is in '86, just two years away from the next presidential election. You

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<sup>58</sup> For his recollection of this conversation, see Jim Edgar, interview by Mark DePue, June 9, 2009, Volume I: 262-269.

and I have talked about this many times before, but where were you at with any presidential aspirations?

Thompson: Done. It wasn't going to happen.

DePue: Because of a matter of timing, and that it looked like Bush was clearly going to be running himself?

Thompson: Sure. He was the vice president. How would I, as Reagan's campaign manager and later Bush's campaign manager, run against the sitting vice president? It was not going to happen.

DePue: What did you think about your potential political rivals at the time? I'll throw two of them out.

Thompson: Go ahead.

DePue: Neil Hartigan and Adlai Stevenson.

Thompson: I thought they should both fight to the death for the Democratic nomination. And they almost did.

DePue: Which one would you have preferred to take on?

Thompson: Stevenson.

DePue: You thought he was just the less astute politician? Or what was the reason for that?

Thompson: I thought he was easier to beat. But it wouldn't have made any difference to me. I would have, I think, beaten Hartigan as well.

DePue: What were the polls saying at that time?

Thompson: They were good. And we were past the recession. Build Illinois was a big hit. The state was moving forward, and if you listened to the public campaign of Hartigan and Stevenson as they were both jousting for the nomination on the Democratic side, to me anyway—and obviously I'm a prejudiced listener—it didn't seem like either one of them were saying things that ought to inspire the people of Illinois to turn away from me and be for them.

DePue: I want to ask you a little bit about the lieutenant governor, George Ryan.

Thompson: Yeah.

DePue: Any questions in your mind about changing the lieutenant governor position?

Thompson: What do you mean, changing it?

- DePue: He had been lieutenant governor for four years.
- Thompson: Yeah.
- DePue: Not having him on the ticket, having somebody else on the ticket with you?
- Thompson: I don't know why.
- DePue: What did you think of the job he had been doing for those last four years?
- Thompson: I thought it was good. He and I sometimes disagreed on issues, but I didn't demand utter loyalty, either from George or anybody else that worked with me. I was always, I think, a patient and understanding person. (laughter)
- DePue: What did you need to be patient and understanding about?
- Thompson: Well, disagreements.
- DePue: What were they?
- Thompson: You know, when the wife of one of my cabinet directors led a march around the mansion for ERA. (laughs) People are going to have different opinions in politics. Not all disagreements are between parties, sometimes they're within parties. I didn't get excited about some of the things that excited the press or excited other politicians.
- DePue: But you're still being a little bit coy on this subject, Governor. Or nothing that's coming to mind on what the disagreements might have been?
- Thompson: Oh, maybe on the gas tax, or something like that.
- DePue: What were your expectations for a lieutenant governor? What did you want that person to be doing?
- Thompson: I wanted him to do the things that the governor asked him to do, because the statutory duties of a lieutenant governor are minimal, to say the most. So the job basically was to be ready to step in if something happened to the governor—I mean, that's why you have them—and to help carry out the policies of the administration; to help the administration be everywhere at once, when physically the governor couldn't be everywhere at once.
- DePue: Oftentimes that means that there's a significant ceremonial role for the lieutenant governor.
- Thompson: Sure. There's also a ceremonial role for the governor, so you try to divide the work. If I had to be in Chicago and George was in southern Illinois, that's the way it was supposed to work.

DePue: Were there any programmatic or policy issues that you wanted him to carry the weight on?

Thompson: Yeah. I mean, I gave him a lot of free rein on economic development, especially in rural and small-town areas. George was a good people person. He listened to his fellow politicians, to mayors, and county executives. He had been in his earlier life part of county government, had been in the legislature, so that was a natural talent of his.

DePue: Early in the year, I understand that you signed seatbelt legislation.

Thompson: Yeah.

DePue: And then September came around and toughened DUI legislation.

Thompson: Mm-hmm.

DePue: How did those go over with the general public?

Thompson: (laughs) I don't remember that much controversy about DUI, because there were some very strong community groups in back of that kind of legislation.

DePue: I think that might have been one of the things that Edgar was pushing as well.

Thompson: MADD, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, was influential in politics and they came at it from a good heart. You know, we lose so many people because of drunk driving. And a lot of times, the people at fault are habituated to alcohol. It's very hard to get them away from it, and very hard to get them away from their cars. Automobiles are the modern version of the cowboy's gun. It's just part of American—I'm not going to say American manhood, because that's sexist, but part of our culture. So the two are a very dynamite combination, alcohol and driving. You want to have your laws reflect reality and to try and stem the tide of drunken driving, as far as legislation is able to do that; you want tough legislation. I was really proud of Edgar on that platform, as well.

Seatbelts, you know—

DePue: You shake your head before you even answer that.

Thompson: Signing seatbelt legislation was like, in some instances, interfering in the marital life of somebody else. I mean, by God, it was an American right to drive without a seatbelt, and no one should ever come between the driver and his belt. People, especially in rural areas, were not pleased with that legislation. I remember once I was down in one of my favorite places in the state, Giant City State Park outside of Carbondale. There probably was an event I attended there. And after the event, as I often did, I went walking through the kitchen to thank the employees for making the event a success.

I gave the lessee of Giant City the first thirty-year contract in the history of the state of Illinois to run the place, and a subsequent governor gave him another thirty-year contract. It was going to be in the same family for sixty years. It's one of the best-run facilities in the state of Illinois, just marvelous. They have done things for Giant City State Park that the state should have been doing but couldn't afford, so the operator took it over. And they make the best chicken dinner in the state of Illinois. They'll get a thousand people every Sunday. It's just a legend.

Anyway, I go through the kitchen, and I run into this lady who's the dishwasher, and she must have been ninety years old if she was a day. She started hollering at me, and I couldn't imagine what I had done to offend her. It soon became clear I had signed the seatbelt legislation. And by God, she was never going to put on the seatbelt, and by God, she had never driven with a seatbelt in seventy-five years, and she wasn't going to start now. And whoa! (laughs) Yeah, that was a fairly common reaction downstate on the seatbelt legislation. Of course, now every state in the union has seatbelt legislation. It's saved thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands of lives, and it's a no-brainer now.

DePue: Was Illinois early in that?

Thompson: We were. It started slowly. I don't think there was a penalty attached to the bill I signed. And then, as it went on, penalties were added. I think in the first bill I signed, you couldn't stop somebody for not wearing a seatbelt, and it had to be incident to a stop for something else. You know, to win acceptance of the thing, you had to start slowly. But boy, you got the same reaction downstate that you get today on the issue of guns. And there's nothing in the federal Constitution about seatbelts, but there sure is about guns; it's right there in the Second Amendment, right after freedom of speech and before illegal search and seizure, and all the other amendments—before equal protection, before due process. But, of course, the liberals who oppose guns love the First Amendment, don't like the Second Amendment, and then they go on to love the rest of the amendments. It's just—anyway. Yeah, it caused a lot of controversy. But today it's accepted, and it's been heavily promoted by state governments, by the state police and by safe driving commercials on television.

DePue: Even more, you buy a new car, the car's going to nag you if you don't buckle up.

Thompson: Oh yeah, absolutely. They do these awful beeps.

DePue: How about helmet law for motorcycles?

Thompson: Oh, the same thing.

DePue: Was that ever considered?

Thompson: Yeah, it was considered and never passed. You couldn't get that out of the legislature. A lot of people took the position. If these crazy fools on motorcycles without helmets want to kill themselves, okay. You can only go so far in regulating personal behavior that is not seen as injuring somebody else. It's just human nature. I still see people today riding motorcycles without helmets, and I just shake my head every time I see it. Or they'll ride it without the heavy jackets to protect them in case the motorcycle gets into a skid or an accident, and they come off and scrape along the highway. Or they'll have another passenger behind them and that person doesn't have a helmet. But you can only go so far in regulating human behavior.

DePue: I'm about ready to wrap up 1985, and you're probably happy to hear that.

Thompson: Why, sure. It was a good year.

DePue: (laughs) It was a good year. And Mike Lawrence noticed that. I wanted to read a quote from one of his articles that he had towards the end of the year, "Bang the gavel and sound the superlatives; another legislative session has come to an end. Let the propaganda flow. Let the speeches begin. Let the back patting proceed. And by all means, let His Tallness lead the procession." (laughter) I should point out that "His" and "Tallness" are both capitalized.

Thompson: Well, sure.

DePue: Would you agree?

Thompson: Yeah.

DePue: Was it the most successful legislative year you'd had?

Thompson: It was pretty good. By the time you've been governor for eight years, you sort of get into a rhythm. And you certainly are learning how it works, (laughs) and what the state is all about, what the legislature is all about, and the business community and the labor community and all the other constituencies of the state that are important. And it's not a go with the flow, it's sort of direct the flow in many ways. So I was happy with that year. And it brought me right up into the election year of 1986.

DePue: So nothing like running on a series of successes.

Thompson: Yeah, exactly right. That's why I say it wouldn't have mattered to me that much who the opponent was, Stevenson or Hartigan. Stevenson, I had beaten him once; narrowly, at least as far as the press and public were concerned, if you take out the 100,000 stolen votes in Chicago. But even with those in, in my view it would still have been narrow. I was used to big margins. So I welcomed the chance to run against him again.

- DePue: I might have overlooked a couple of the other accomplishments. Was off-track betting something that was passed that year?
- Thompson: Yeah, but that was just a sort of tiny foray into gambling, just like the riverboats were a tiny foray into gambling. I'd always been a supporter of the Chicago casino, and we still don't have it. It's crazy. We ship all our money to Wisconsin and Indiana, it makes no sense at all. But off-track betting is not a big deal.
- DePue: And I probably should have included this just a few minutes ago, but there was also a piece of legislation passed that mandated handicap parking spots.
- Thompson: Yeah, but that didn't seem to be controversial at the time. Been a lot of corruption in that later.
- DePue: Corruption?
- Thompson: Yeah. People getting handicap parking placards when they're not handicapped, because they were able to talk a doctor into writing a note. So of course they don't pay the meters, they sit in the space all day. Chicago's had a lot of problems with that.
- DePue: One other here, for a governor who likes to build things, what did you think of the Department of Revenue's new Willard Ice Building in downtown Springfield?
- Thompson: I liked it. I still like it. And it was nice to see it named for a fellow who did a great job for the Department of Revenue and wasn't a politician.
- DePue: It's a very distinctive design.
- Thompson: Yes. I like distinctive designs.
- DePue: (laughs) One other issue in 1985, and I guess this had been discussed for a long time, was the possibility of having the World's Fair in Chicago for 1992.
- Thompson: Oh, yeah. Yeah, absolutely.
- DePue: Lay that whole issue out for us.
- Thompson: I approached the issue of the World's Fair for 1992, in part because of my love for history, and partly because I thought it would be a great spur to economic development in Chicago. We had successfully run two World's Fairs in Chicago, both times under adverse national economic conditions—otherwise known as recession or depression—and both were hugely

successful.<sup>59</sup> Both left improvements in the city of Chicago which are here to this day. So I wanted to do it. It was going to be Chicago and Barcelona. And Chicago, in many ways, is a city that's similar to Barcelona. In any event, I pushed it, pushed it, and pushed it and pushed it. I encountered resistance from the Speaker, who appointed a committee to study it headed by Adlai Stevenson.

DePue: (laughs) That pretty much tells you what the Speaker thought of it.

Thompson: Yeah. And of course, the committee came back and recommended against it, and the Speaker said, "That's it."<sup>60</sup>

DePue: What was the Speaker's objection to it?

Thompson: I don't even remember what his stated objection was. I presume he said, "The Stevenson committee says this, and that's fine." I know what his real objection to it was, and that will go with me to the grave.

DePue: Oh!

Thompson: I mean, it's not a big deal; it's just inside baseball.

DePue: But wouldn't it have been an expensive thing to host?

Thompson: Sure, but there's also revenue.

DePue: But where would the money come from to do the construction phase?

Thompson: Bonds, the source of construction that's normal in state government. I think it would have been a great thing. But it didn't happen, and it's one of the few things I ever asked the legislature for that didn't happen. You can't get too disappointed on that kind of record, you know?

DePue: One other thing. This one surprised me. I think this happened at the tail end of the year. The Swedish American Vasa names you Swedish American of the Year.

Thompson: Yes. National Swedish American of the Year. It was a great thing. I am very proud of my one-half Swedish ancestry. My mother was Swedish. And it was a great honor. So the whole family packed up and went to Sweden to receive the award. It was in Stockholm, it was really done up nicely, and we got a chance to tour Stockholm. The Swedes said nice things about me, and then we got a chance to take a weekend tour of a town on the western coast of Sweden, Varberg, which is where my mother's family came from. The family home, with its thatched roof, was still there. (DePue laughs) And when we inquired

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<sup>59</sup> Thompson is talking about the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition and the 1933 Century of Progress Exposition, each of which is commemorated by a star in Chicago's city flag.

<sup>60</sup> The Speaker of the House at this time was Michael J. Madigan (D-Chicago).

about relatives, only one was alive, a lady in a nursing home. The rest were in the graveyard, and we went and visited that. But it was a wonderful thing, especially for my mom.

DePue: Oh, she went with you?

Thompson: Yeah. I got to do two great things for my mom: I took her to Sweden to see me get the Swedish American of the Year award and to go to her family home. The other was to introduce her to the king of Sweden when he visited Chicago. My father earlier had promised her a trip to Sweden, and they ended up—I don't know how he did this—mostly in a bus on the back roads of Norway, which she was not thrilled about. It was one of these doctor tours. So I made up for it by taking her to the real deal.

DePue: What time of the year did you go to Sweden?

Thompson: I think it was summer.

DePue: For some reason, I was thinking that happened at the end of the year, but that would be a bad time to be going to Sweden, wouldn't it?

Thompson: Yeah. It was a wonderful thing. And I always had a fondness for the Swedish neighborhood in Chicago, up around Foster and Clark. I was always very proud of my heritage. The other part is English and Scottish.

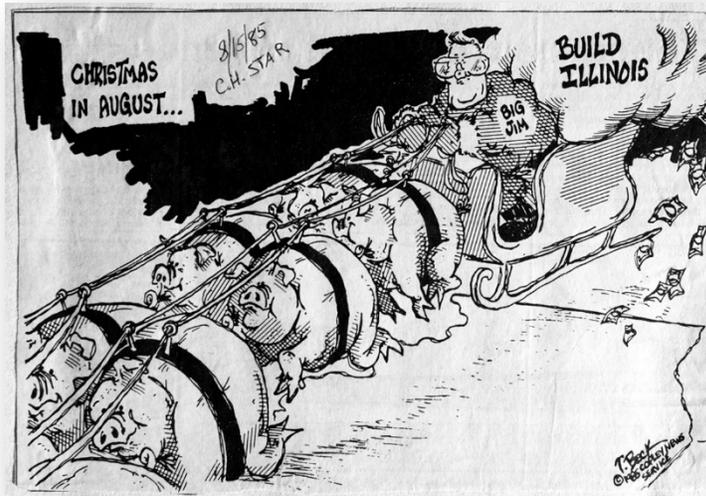
DePue: Your comments about the Swedish neighborhood reminds me just how much Chicago is a city of neighborhoods.

Thompson: Oh, absolutely. And even more diverse today. A lot of the original ethnic populations of Chicago migrated to the suburbs in the years of suburban migration all across America. But their place was taken by just a whole diverse group. And you could still drive, particularly on the northern part of the city, and know when you are entering another ethnic neighborhood simply by looking at the shop windows. You go from Spanish to Korean to—it's amazing.

DePue: I've got one other cartoon here to show you, that was drawn in 1985. I'll have you describe that for us. "Christmas in August" is the name of it, and you get to play Santa Claus, I guess.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Tom Beck was the editorial cartoonist for the *Freeport Journal-Standard*. Cartoon in Thompson Scrapbooks, v. 11: 1/1/85–12/26/85.



Thompson: (laughs) Yeah, but I don't know what the pigs are for. Who did this? T. Beck, I don't remember him. Oh, I see dollars are dropping out of my sack.

DePue: Well, what's written on the sack there, Governor?

Thompson: Build Illinois, yeah, and Big Jim. I guess it's a reference to the expected dollars that will flow to narrow selfish interests, represented by the pigs, which of course is—

DePue: Pork barrel.

Thompson: Pork barrel, lunatic idea, but—

DePue: I thought you might like that one.

Thompson: Look, no program in the history of Illinois ever did so much on so little. You know, Build Illinois bonds are still out there. For a tax on used car sales by private persons, the only funding mechanism of Build Illinois—as opposed to George's Illinois FIRST that relied on about eight taxes that were hugely controversial—we built a lot of stuff. I thought that was pretty good. Not since Lincoln and Douglas had the Internal Improvements Act to just do the same things as Build Illinois; that program ran amok and almost drove Illinois to bankruptcy, but we didn't make that mistake.

DePue: Governor, we get to start 1986 also on a happy note.

Thompson: Oh, good!

DePue: January 26th, in New Orleans, the Chicago Bears played the New England Patriots in the Super Bowl. That's for that incredible season they had in 1985.

Thompson: Right.

DePue: As governor, you had to enjoy watching that transpire.

Thompson: Except I wasn't in New Orleans. I was in Seoul, Korea, on a trade mission. But I got to do something even more wonderful than being in New Orleans. When I was in Seoul, I invited every Illinois soldier serving in Korea to watch the game with me over Armed Forces Television. Game was on at six in the morning, but we drank a lot of beer and ate a lot of pizza, and it was a great time. The Bears won. One of my everlasting, fondest memories of doing that. And the publisher of the *Washington Post*, Katharine Graham, happened to be in the hotel at the same time, and she came and watched the game with us, which I thought was a pretty neat thing to do.

DePue: Do you remember much about that season? I don't know if you're much of a football fan.

Thompson: Eighty-five? Oh yeah. A great season. My dear friend, Mike Ditka, who I see said nice things about Donald Trump the other day.<sup>62</sup> Oh!

DePue: So does that mean you're not much of a fan of Donald Trump?

Thompson: (sighs) I am sitting patiently with the Republican presidential contest, waiting.

DePue: If nothing else, Governor, it's going to be an interesting year ahead for us.

Thompson: Oh yeah, right.

DePue: Did you have a friendly bet with the governor of Massachusetts on that game?

Thompson: Oh, I'm sure I did. And it would have been the same thing that governors and mayors have been betting for a hundred years, the products of their state. Chicago, you know, deep dish pizza and on and on and on and on. That never changes.

DePue: There's a lot of sports fans and sports historians that would rate the 1985 Chicago Bears team as the greatest, or right there at the top of the list.

Thompson: I think that was probably right. It's a proud thing for Chicago that the family of George Halas, who founded the Bears and was instrumental in founding the league, still owns the Bears. Every once in a while, you get these really exciting, rewarding, fantastic things from your Chicago teams. The Bears '85

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<sup>62</sup> Reference to Ditka's interview with the *Chicago Sun-Times* on September 8, 2015, where he said he liked Trump and thought "he has the fire in his belly to make America great again and probably do it the right way."

in the Super Bowl, the White Sox World Series in 2005. The Cubs this year—oh, God, we're all hanging on the edge of our seats for the Cubs with their young team, and the rookies showing the veterans what to do, and new amenities at the field. It's undergoing restoration, which is something I wanted to do, but it never happened.

DePue: But once again, the Cardinals are having a phenomenal year as well.

Thompson: They are, indeed. And the Cardinals are a storied baseball team, and great favorites, downstate Illinois. But I'm a Chicagoan, and my father took me to Wrigley Field when I was a small kid.

DePue: What was the Cubs' heartbreak year? Was that '87, or was that later?

Thompson: It was in the eighties, I don't remember the exact year.

DePue: Were you governor then?

Thompson: Yeah, and I was there as the ball went through Durham's legs at first base. I remember that because we were in San Francisco. It was also the year of the earthquake out there. So I was out there inspecting the earthquake to see how San Francisco recovered from it, because we have a big earthquake fault in Illinois, the New Madrid. And I was able to take in the baseball game at the same time. I arrived at the stadium, and these crazed San Francisco fans were dragging teddy bears around the outside of the stadium at the end of a noose. Shows you how they felt! And that translated into the stands, too, while we were watching the game; I'm glad the state police were with me. But it was heartbreaking, just heartbreaking. But this year, I think without question the Cubs will get into the second wildcard. And they're aiming for the first wildcard now.

DePue: And there's a tradition, the wildcard teams generally do well.

Thompson: Yeah, they do. So we're very excited, between the changes of the stadium, the new ownership of the team, the young rookies—Kris Bryant, oh my God, he's going to be Rookie of the Year. Their pitching has been incredible. It's just a fantastic team this year. I know they've been luring us with great promises for a hundred years, but—

DePue: What was it, 1909 was the last one?

Thompson: Yeah. So this has been exciting. And it's one of the reasons why I worked very hard to build the new White Sox stadium and keep them in Chicago. It's a part of our culture, part of our story, part of our pride to be one of the few cities in the United States to have two baseball teams. And they can surprise you.

DePue: When we get to 1988, we're going to do the full story, the back-story, for the White Sox stadium.

Thompson: Absolutely. I'm ready to tell it.

DePue: So let's go back to politics, as much as it's fun to talk about sports.

Thompson: And you know, ever since that time, I've been a great fan of and a great friend of Ditka. His restaurant is just down the alley. And there's a wonderful picture in the hallway of my house in Michigan that's got me and Mike Ditka sitting in the stands at Soldier Field after the new stadium was built. I worked on that bill on behalf of the Bears as a lobbyist. And I got Ditka to endorse the vice president, Bush, for president on the same day he had a heart attack.

DePue: That Ditka had a heart attack?

Thompson: Yeah. I mean, he's a hell of a guy. Ditka has a heart attack. Bush is coming to town; he's campaigning. I call up Ditka, and they say, "He's had a heart attack." I said, "Is he okay? What's going on?" "Well, he's doing all right." I said, "Can I talk to him?" They said, "Yeah, okay." So I talked to Mike. Because I knew Mike was a Republican, I said, "Mike, got George Bush. It would really be wonderful if you could endorse him." And from his hospital bed, he agreed.

I put up that phone, picked up the other phone, and called Charlie Brumback, I guess, at the *Tribune*.<sup>63</sup> I said, "I need to buy a full page ad in the *Tribune* tomorrow morning." He said, "Well, here's the people who—" I said, "You don't understand. First of all, I don't have any money. I'll get it, but today I don't have it." To pay for this ad is something like \$10,000 for a full page ad. "And I'll have to send over the copy." And I persuaded him to give me an ad on credit. (laughs) So the next day, there's this picture of Mike Ditka—who is, of course, on everybody's mind in Illinois, and particularly Chicago, because he just had a heart attack—endorsing George Bush. I thought that was pretty neat as a political accomplishment. And Mike's been a dear friend ever since.

DePue: That 1985 team had no shortage of personalities on it.

Thompson: No.

DePue: Now, can we get back to politics?

Thompson: Yeah. Let me take a break for a second.

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<sup>63</sup> Brumback was the president and CEO of the newspaper, and in 1989 became the president and chief operating officer of the paper's parent company. Bob Goldsborough, "Charles T. Brumback, Former Tribune Co. CEO, Dies at 86," *Chicago Tribune*, January 12, 2015.

(pause in recording)

DePue: Another quick break, and as I promised, get back into politics. Nineteen eighty-six.

Thompson: Hey, a good year!

DePue: An election year. But being an election year, and after this great success you had legislatively in 1985, what were your expectations, legislatively, going into that year? Do you recall?

Thompson: I have no idea.

DePue: Fair to say that you weren't going to be as ambitious in your legislative agenda?

Thompson: The legislature never seems to be ambitious in an election year. Understanding that phenomenon, and understanding that I was going to be busy on the campaign trail, I think it was sort of the understanding of both my office and the legislature that this wasn't going to be a big push year.

DePue: I wanted to start with a comparison of what the economy looked like in 1982, when you ran for the third time, and 1986, when you were going to be running for the fourth time.

Thompson: Yeah, wouldn't that be a comparison?

DePue: Unemployment in 1982, 11.3 percent, much higher than the national average.

Thompson: Right.

DePue: The same thing was true in 1986, but it was now at 8.3 percent and falling.

Thompson: Right.

DePue: So a fairly significant improvement. Inflation: 1982, 8.4 percent. And would you agree that that's almost a debilitating level of inflation to deal with?

Thompson: It is.

DePue: In 1986, 3.9 percent and falling. Much more manageable. And this one always fascinates me, the thirty-year loan rate in 1982 was 16 percent.

Thompson: Yeah.

DePue: Who in the world would want to borrow money to buy a house at 16 percent?

Thompson: Right, but they did.

- DePue: Yeah. It's still high in 1986 at 10.19 percent. In today's world, that's incredibly high, but that's a huge improvement.
- Thompson: And you know, the hell of it is, there is absolutely nothing the governor can do about any of those things, except suffer from them politically.
- DePue: Even unemployment?
- Thompson: Even unemployment. To the extent that you focus on a job creation program, both the public and private sectors, you can hope to do something about unemployment. But it's at the margins. I mean, you're talking about national economic forces, and today, global economic forces. Just look what China has done to the stock market in the last month. But you've got to enter election contests under those kind of conditions, both '82 and '86. And governors have no ability in any meaningful sense to do anything about those things. You can do something at the margin on unemployment, hopefully, by having a vigorous economic development program. But as far as inflation, that's the job of the Fed. And it's just tough, tough to govern under that kind of condition, tough to run for public office under that kind of condition. But '86 was certainly better than '82.
- DePue: Yeah, significantly better. The economy's coming back, and that means there's a lot more revenues coming into the state as well.
- Thompson: Right.
- DePue: The 1987 budget, which is obviously what has to be discussed in the 1986 legislative year—
- Thompson: Not anymore in Illinois.
- DePue: Yeah, well, (laughter) you might want to avoid that discussion too.
- Thompson: I think so.
- DePue: Here we are in September, and we still don't have a budget.
- Thompson: With no budget. No. No, no, no. The state's being run by the federal judges, and the...
- DePue: Going back to the 1987 budget, the one you proposed is \$20.1 billion. And without making a comparison, it might not mean much. It was up from \$14.1 billion in 1983. So four years later, it's a 43 percent increase.
- Thompson: Yeah, big increase.
- DePue: What was driving that increase?

- Thompson: The same thing that drives a budget every year in any meaningful sense, education spending, Medicaid spending, welfare spending. That's where the money is in state government. All the rest is at the margin. You can create whole new departments of government, and they're still at the margin compared to the dollars derived from the big programs that are, in every real sense, mandated. Now—
- DePue: Was Build Illinois not part of the budget?
- Thompson: No, it was a separate program. And its revenue base was very small. But it triggered a big economic development building program, because you get the multiplying factor of \$1 of revenue will trigger \$10 in spending because of the bonds. We only had one tax to support Build Illinois, and it would be regarded today as an insignificant tax, a sales tax on the sale of motor vehicles by private people, not car dealers, which is why it encountered virtually no opposition in the legislature. The legislator's eyes were wide open at the possibilities of Build Illinois, and they weren't going to worry about the tax revenue.
- DePue: I know that public aid, welfare, was one of the areas that there was a large increase: \$2 billion in 1977, \$3.2 billion in 1987. So with inflation in there, perhaps not quite the jump. Were there additional mandates of Medicaid benefits that the federal government was imposing?
- Thompson: Oh, it was a federal government program that the states participated in. If you wanted federal Medicaid funds, you had to follow the program. And it was a matching program. So federal decisions drove Medicaid spending policy, which drove the state contribution. It's a big thing today. It's huge.
- DePue: But the focus in 1986 for you primarily sounds like it's going to be on running for re-election.
- Thompson: Right.
- DePue: Did you have an opponent in the primary?
- Thompson: No.
- DePue: Were you paying much attention—
- Thompson: I had a mule skinner once, but I don't remember which election that was. I think it was the second. He came to the Capitol with his mules and announced his campaign for governor in the driveway.
- DePue: Of the Capitol?
- Thompson: Yeah.

DePue: I haven't heard that story.

Thompson: I was pleased to have a mule skinner as an opponent, because I didn't have any other real one.

DePue: Governor, what was his platform?

Thompson: I don't remember, but it was a wonderful scene outside my window. (laughs)

DePue: You're the guy who rode the horse in the Capitol Building, and now you've got a mule skinner.

Thompson: Right, dumbest thing I ever did.

DePue: Bakalis might have agreed with you on that.

Thompson: Yes. Mike thought he was going to ride to victory on that one.

DePue: What were the main issues going into the election, as you saw it?

Thompson: I don't remember exactly whether the campaign for a fourth term raised issues by itself. We were basically a two-term state; that was our history. You could get two terms, even if you weren't very good; you couldn't get three terms, even if you were terrific. So once that was broken with the third term, I don't think there was that much chatter about a fourth term. People still liked me. There wasn't any other opponent on the Republican side. Edgar was not chomping at the bit. He was content to wait. And I don't think even the Democrats made a big deal about the fourth term; they had other harpoons.

DePue: One of the things, apparently, you did early in 1986 was veto a cost-of-living increase for state welfare payments. Do you recall that?

Thompson: Not really.

DePue: And I'm sure the issue, then, was just holding the line on expenses.

Thompson: Right. Legislators can vote extraordinary sums way beyond the revenue capacity of the state, but governors can't sign that stuff.

DePue: Let's talk about the Democratic primary. I think Hartigan had already dropped out by that time.

Thompson: He had dropped out. There was going to be a primary, but Hartigan...

DePue: Do you remember anything about Ed Vrdolyak talking about a request to contribute to the Chicago Democrats to print their sample ballots?

Thompson: What was that about?

DePue: I think it was about being able to educate the Democratic base on who they should be voting for.

Thompson: Oh, was that Punch-something?

DePue: Punch Ten?

Thompson: Yeah. I thought that was in '82, in preparation for the mayor's race.

DePue: I'm sorry, I should have been better on top of this myself, but it's in reference to what's going to happen in the Democratic primary.

Thompson: I have no memory of that.

DePue: I think once I prod your memory, you'll recall.

Thompson: Oh, go ahead, prod.

DePue: Because the Democratic primary, you end up having a couple of Lyndon LaRouche candidates.

Thompson: Oh yeah, yeah. Wasn't that fabulous?

DePue: It made your life a whole lot easier for the rest of the race.

Thompson: It sure did. It sure did. It did a lot of things.

DePue: If you don't mind, let me lay out some of the background here.

Thompson: So what was the Vrdolyak printing—

DePue: Again, I think it was to educate the Democratic base about who they're supposed to be voting for; that they're not supposed to be voting for—

Thompson: The Solidarity Party. They're supposed to be voting for the Democratic Party.

DePue: Well, the Solidarity Party didn't—

Thompson: That was later, yeah.

DePue: —didn't exist. So here's what happened in that election. Adlai Stevenson III, runs and is selected as the Democratic candidate for governor.

Thompson: Right.

DePue: The lieutenant governor candidate was a gentleman by the name of Mark Fairchild.

Thompson: Yes.

- DePue: He beat George Sangmeister.
- Thompson: Yes.
- DePue: So Mark Fairchild, a nice safe-sounding name. (Thompson laughs) And Janice Hart won as secretary of state; she beat Aurelia Pucinski. Am I saying that name right?
- Thompson: Yes, you are.
- DePue: So you've got a couple very ethnic names that got defeated by very WASPy [White, Anglo-Saxon Protestant-like] kind of names.<sup>64</sup>
- Thompson: Yeah.
- DePue: Mark Fairchild and Janice Hart. The problem was that both of them are Lyndon LaRouche candidates.
- Thompson: (laughs) Insane people.
- DePue: So now that I've refreshed your memory—
- Thompson: Oh, you didn't have to refresh my memory about that.
- DePue: Tell me about Lyndon LaRouche. What did he represent, and why were they running as Democrats?
- Thompson: Lyndon LaRouche was one of these characters that comes along every once in a while in American politics. He had sort of a fanatical following. I don't even remember what his issues were, but he was sort of a cult candidate. He ran for president of the United States on the LaRouche—I forget what the name of the party was. But he had his followers. The two, Fairchild and Hart, filed in the primary election, and that's where the Democrats made their first mistake. There was no attempt to throw them off the ballot. Now, that wouldn't happen today. The Democrats have learned their lesson not to ignore other candidates trying to take established Democratic positions.

So these guys file. Adlai names George Sangmeister as his running mate, a wonderful man. State senator from the southwest of Chicago; it was not Cook County, but it was one of the southwestern counties around Frankfort, Illinois. He names him as his lieutenant governor, and then so far as I could see, never ever refers to him again. Sangmeister was just sort of dropped there, blessed, end of story. Off Adlai goes on his merry way. Statewide, nobody ever heard of George Sangmeister. And as you say, he did have an ethnic name. Now, it should have been an ethnic name that helped him, a German name. The Germans were the largest ethnic population in the

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<sup>64</sup> White Anglo-Saxon Protestant.

state of Illinois. But those were the times before Blagojevich, or Barack Hussein Obama. The average voter in Illinois didn't know George Sangmeister from Fairchild, and faced with that dilemma of not knowing anything about either one of them, they picked what we used to call a "safe" name. The same thing with the Hart-Pucinski race. Nobody knew who Aurelia was, nobody knew who Janice Hart was. Janice Hart sounded like a nice name, like Smith, so they voted for her.

I'm watching the news that night, and the news comes on that the two LaRouche candidates have beaten the two Democratic candidates for lieutenant governor and secretary of state. And my jaw dropped. I whipped my head around and yelled, "Jayne!" She was in the other room. She said, "What?" I said, "The LaRouchies have beaten Sangmeister and Pucinski. They're going to be on the ballot with Adlai!" And I whipped my head around so fast; it was sore for a week. (DePue laughs) No kidding, it really hurt.

So now Adlai's got a terrible, terrible problem. He's got these two crazies on the ticket. And of course, who's going to vote for Adlai if his lieutenant governor is a crazy? Because people think, Wait a minute, if something happens to Stevenson, we'll have a crazy for governor! And that was the reaction. He couldn't stay on the ticket with these two. And there were efforts to get them off, but it was a little too late. Should have gotten them off when they were trying to get on, rather than after they got on and won. So that failed.

Then he's faced with, **he's** got to get off and start another party. He eventually ends up with this Solidarity Party, stealing the name from the Polish movement in Poland—Lech Wałęsa and others—thinking that they would flock to the polls for the Solidarity Party. Although he should have learned the lesson that they didn't flock to the polls for Sangmeister and Pucinski. (laughs) He should have done something like the "New Democratic Party," or something like that. But this strange name, Solidarity, intruding into the Illinois elections. And he went out and picked all these new people, most of whom stayed home and didn't campaign. They were pleased to lend Adlai their name, but that was about it.

DePue: Mike Howlett as lieutenant governor candidate, there's a name from the Democratic—

Thompson: Mike Howlett, Jr. Yeah.

DePue: And Jane Spigel for the secretary of state position.

Thompson: Who?

DePue: Jane Spigel? Spigel?

Thompson: There you go.

DePue: You said you whipped your head around, but what did you think about your election possibilities?

Thompson: Plus he had to fill the other offices too. Every position on the ballot he had to mostly fill with people that nobody ever heard of, and they never did anything in the campaign. They stayed home. So what happened was, you had many generations of Democratic voters in Chicago who were trained to do one thing, go in and vote the Democratic ticket. What are you going to do? Untrain them for this election, and then hope to go back for the next election? Not bloody likely, in the terms of the Democratic ward committee, county chairman, all the others.

Secondly, there were a fair number of Democratic committeemen in Chicago and Democratic county chairmen downstate who weren't exactly thrilled with Adlai, let's put it that way. And they liked me. They liked me better than they liked Adlai. And voters in their areas pretty much did what they told them to do. So what do they tell them to do? They told them to go in there and vote the Democratic ticket. Of course now it doesn't have Adlai on the ballot. So these guys accomplished two things: they kept their decades-long tradition of voting a straight Democratic ticket strong, and they helped me, because the vote for the Democratic ticket was a vote against Stevenson and a vote for me.

DePue: What was it about Stevenson they didn't care for? As loyal Democrats—

Thompson: Well, why didn't the labor leaders like Stevenson? Why did the UAW refuse to endorse a Democratic governor for the first time in the history of the state?

DePue: More than your hard work in trying to convince the labor unions to support you?

Thompson: Yeah, and on the personality side, they regarded Adlai as aloof, and never really part of the Democratic Party. He was not a hail-fellow-well-met like they were, he was sort of a patrician, which he was.

DePue: Despite his efforts to portray himself as an Illinois farmer, et cetera?

Thompson: Yeah. So if you look at the '86 election results in Madison County, for example—it's not an exact science, because I carried Madison County four times, no matter who was running against me—I'm pretty sure the Democratic chairman of Madison County told his voters to go vote the Democratic ticket, like they always had. And I'm pretty sure that happened in the city of Chicago as well. As far as they were concerned, they protected the rest of their ticket; they helped a Republican governor that they liked and had gotten along with in the legislature and elsewhere. There was no downside for them.

DePue: When you heard that news, the primary election night—that these two LaRouchies had snuck in—did you figure, well, this is going to be a pretty easy election to win?

Thompson: No, no. Elections are never easy, and you don't really drop your guard in the campaign. You campaign just as vigorously. You have to. But it was sure a joyous moment. And there are not too many of those in politics.

DePue: Obviously a memorable moment for you.

Thompson: A very memorable moment, yeah. And a funny story, never told: one of my young field men in Rock Island by the name of Josh Grafton, started working in my campaigns at the age of sixteen. His older brother was nominally the campaign coordinator there, but it was young Josh who did most of the work. Then he went on to the University of Illinois, where it was later discovered his college roommate was a young man by the name of Fairchild. (DePue laughs) When we learned this, we learned it pretty quickly, because Josh called up and said, "Oh, my roommate is the lieutenant governor candidate!" And I said, "Shut up! Don't say a word, or I'll kill you!" Because I just thought, Oh, I can see this story, "Thompson Campaign Worker College Roommate of Lyndon LaRouche Lieutenant Governor Candidate." And suddenly it would be all my fault that this guy got in. It would be a plot; it was a conspiracy. I could just see this. But it never came out.

DePue: Reading one of the articles about Mark Fairchild, he became a LaRouchie while he was walking through the airport, because that's where the LaRouchies were hanging out, apparently.

Thompson: Like the Hare Krishna, yeah.

DePue: Yeah. And he saw a bumper sticker, a banner or something, that said, "Nuke Jane Fonda."

Thompson: Yeah.

DePue: And at that moment, he decided he was interested in who this LaRouche character was.

Thompson: (laughs) I mean, for Adlai, it had to be a terrible, terrible blow to organize a new political party, get it on the ballot with a strange name in Illinois politics, and you're stuck with it.

DePue: But Governor, from my perspective, it's just another fascinating twist in Illinois politics.

Thompson: Oh, absolutely. No question about it.

DePue: Did you change your strategy at all once you found out you had that LaRouche fiasco?

Thompson: No, I knew based on both assumption and conversations with Democrats that a lot of them were going to stay with the Democratic ticket to get the rest of their ticket elected. Adlai was the star, but he wasn't the whole ticket, and they had to carry the rest of the ticket. They weren't interested in electing whoever it was that Adlai drafted to fill those spots. They could also help me and claim credit for it. When you talk to a Democratic county chairman downstate and he says, "Jim, this is going to be real easy for me. I'm going to have my folks just vote the straight Democratic ticket," I say, "God, that's a mighty fine idea." So we had the advantage, but it still was not a certainty. It was no sure thing. You never know how political campaigns are going to turn out, what the issues are going to be a year ahead of time. You had the debates, and you had—I won't say a normal campaign, because it was not a normal campaign, but everything else was the traditional campaign.

DePue: Let me just run through a couple of things here. After this, were the polls very favorable for you?

Thompson: Yeah.

DePue: It sure looked like the economy was again the issue, just as it was in the 1982 campaign.

Thompson: It's always the issue. In the governor's race and the presidential race it is the singular most important issue, it always is. I don't care what other issues they dredge up. People's pocketbooks are always the issue, because how well people are doing enables them to have all sorts of things, material things, sending their kids to college, buying a home, building the middle class. Now, the great political issue is what's happening to the middle class, right? And diversity of income. So it's always about the economy, and always about its impact on voters. That's what happened to George Bush, that's why he lost.

DePue: He raised taxes.<sup>65</sup>

Thompson: No, that wasn't it. That wasn't it. The economy was foundering, we were getting into a recession, and voters had the belief that he wasn't doing anything about it, or not doing enough. And Clinton was beating him over the head **every** day on that singular issue.

DePue: And I'm sure you remember that catch phrase that the Clinton folks used over and over again.

Thompson: "It's the economy, Stupid." Yeah.

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<sup>65</sup> For this argument, see Jim Edgar, interview by Mark DePue, September 2, 2009, Volume II: 495-496.

DePue: We already talked about the improvements in the economy earlier in this conversation, and you had quite a track record, just from the things that had happened the last couple of years. Getting the Mitsubishi plant in Normal—

Thompson: Right.

DePue: —a Honda plant, a new parts plant in downstate area; the overseas trade initiatives that you'd have.

Thompson: It wasn't a Honda plant. It was in southern Illinois. Magna was the company name when they opened a plant down there. I forget what city it was in, but it was a big deal for southern Illinois. Things that might not seem that important up here can be a big deal in southern Illinois. And while there aren't that many votes in southern Illinois, as they've always said, southern Illinois can't elect you, but they can beat you, because they can be the swing in a close election.

DePue: And you've already explained that if they're voting the Democratic ticket in 1986, that helps you?

Thompson: Yeah, absolutely.

DePue: Of course, Stevenson is going to come out with this own assertions, and one of them was that with all these things that you want to do and that you had been doing already, you're going to need an income tax or a tax increase of some type, just like you did in 1983 after you had promised there wouldn't be an income tax or any kind of tax increase in '82.

Thompson: I never promised that.

DePue: Maybe I'm putting words in Stevenson's mouth.

Thompson: No, those were his words, but they weren't true.

DePue: And you had a much larger budget in 1987 that you had just gotten through the legislature than you certainly had four years before.

Thompson: Correct.

DePue: Now, how do you defend against those assertions?

Thompson: What, that I had a larger budget?

DePue: Yeah.

Thompson: The budget supported increased services. Why would I have to defend that at all? That's a good thing.

DePue: How about the claim that you'd have to come back in '87 and ask for an income tax or some kind of a tax increase?

Thompson: Did we have a tax increase in '87? I don't think so.

DePue: No, but I believe you requested one.

Thompson: But we didn't get it.

DePue: Because of the Democrats in the legislature?

Thompson: Yeah, well, there you go.

DePue: But that's all in the future. We can't factor that in, but—

Thompson: Look, let me give you the basic statistic that was the hallmark of the Thompson administration. I don't know whether you asked Dr. Bob about this or not, or whether he raised it, but this was his conclusion, and it's true: after fourteen years, Illinois government was providing more services to Illinois citizens than it had ever provided in the history of the state of Illinois, and it was taking fewer dollars in taxes from the income of the people of the state of Illinois than before my administration began.<sup>66</sup>

DePue: You mean as a percentage of their income?

Thompson: Yeah, as a percentage of their income. Now, why was that? First of all, because we didn't do any mammoth tax increases, and secondly, because people's incomes grew. But if you want to measure what it cost the people of Illinois for these services, greatly expanded from what they were in 1977, that's a pretty good track record. Pretty good. That says more about my administration than any other single factor.

DePue: I don't have the numbers in front of me, Governor, but one of the things that you would get as a challenge today to that record is about shorting the pension payments.

Thompson: Yeah, like every governor that followed me and maybe the ones before me, I had a couple of years where we didn't fully fund the fund. But in my administration, that was sort of minor compared to what they did after me, when they really shorted the pensions.

DePue: Which governors are you speaking of there?

Thompson: Some of my successors.

DePue: (laughs) Governor Edgar passed legislation, I believe, in '97, it might have been early '95, to restructure pension payments, and had that serious ramp

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<sup>66</sup> Dr. Robert Mandeville, Thompson's budget director.

up.<sup>67</sup> Are you talking about him, or are you talking about Ryan and Blagojevich?

Thompson: Whoever should wear the label. All I'm saying is that governors who followed me shorted the pension funds in far greater numbers than I did.

DePue: One of the issues that Stevenson is running on is that, "He's been governor for ten years. It's time for a change." And you've already alluded that in the past, that's been a popular issue to run on.

Thompson: Well, yeah. I mean, that could have worked if you had a candidate that people were ready to change to. Those people who might have been attracted to that issue, once they got attracted to it, then had to decide, Okay, maybe it's time for a change. But is this the guy?

DePue: How about Stevenson's allegations of, "Your abuses of power with pinstripe patronage."

Thompson: Oh, geez.

DePue: Describe what that term means, "pinstripe patronage."

Thompson: Of all the criticisms ever leveled against me in fourteen years, that is the phoniest. Pure phonyism. Pinstripe patronage was an allegation that in legal matters, who represented the state of Illinois in important cases? I relied oftentimes on the men and women who were assistant U.S. attorneys when I was a U.S. attorney. Well, let's start at the beginning. How would you hire lawyers? Want to put that out to bid? Lowest bidder gets to represent the state of Illinois with no reference to competency, talent, track record? No, you don't hire lawyers that way. And all the newspapers who repeatedly used that phrase, pinstripe patronage, sure as hell didn't hire their lawyers that way. Do you think the *Chicago Tribune* put their lawyers out to bid? Oh, no, no, no. Who did they hire? They hired the titans of the big Chicago law firms.

If you look at guys like Ty Fahner—former attorney general of Illinois, just recently stepped down as the chairman of Mayer Brown, one of the best law firms in America—that's a pretty good name to hire. Or maybe Tony Valukas, who's still the chairman of Jenner & Block and was a U.S. attorney himself; that's a pretty good hire. And you could go on. Those were the people I was accused of hiring. Well, yeah, I did; they're the best lawyers in Illinois, that's why I hired them. Were they friends of mine? Absolutely. Can you hire lawyers any other way, but to pick out the ones that you think are the best? No. Does anybody else do it any differently? No. Did they win

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<sup>67</sup> Governor Edgar assigned Thompson's administration responsibility for getting "the hole going on the pension stuff" by only covering the current payout each year, a practice he continued until state finances improved and he developed his reform plan. Jim Edgar, interview by November 17, 2009, Volume III: 554; April 23, 2010, Volume III: 622; June 18, 2010, Volume IV: 733-734. All interviews by Mark DePue.

for the state of Illinois? Yes. What else is there? That was the whole pinstripe patronage, because they were lawyers who wore pinstripes, I guess, in their blue suits to court. I mean, it's just nonsense. Nonsense. But once your critics use that in campaigns, then it becomes urban myth for the press.

DePue: Kind of a catchy phrase. Is that part of it?

Thompson: Oh, it is. Yeah, sure, absolutely.

DePue: Another critique is that during the Thompson years, there was an explosion of new prisons.

Thompson: Absolutely.

DePue: And an explosion of the prison population.

Thompson: Absolutely. I'm not running away from that. I'm proud of that. Hey, as a former prosecutor on three levels in government—county, state, and federal—I ran as a law and order candidate. I was a creator of Class X, all of that stuff. If you're a law and order candidate and you have tough criminal laws and tough criminal enforcement, you're going to put crooks in jail. And if you're doing that, you've got to build the prisons to hold them. Where was that criticism going? It certainly wasn't going anywhere downstate where I built prisons. They were the biggest jobs in town. That one never bothered me. I said, "Yeah, criticize me for being a law and order governor, please. I'll give you the space."

DePue: Any reflections, then, of that current debate in our political discussion?

Thompson: Well, yeah. We sentenced too many people to prison for nonviolent, oftentimes personal, narcotic offenses. I got too many people, especially in the federal penitentiaries, who don't belong there, based on the kind of crime they committed. And everybody keeps talking about it, but nobody's doing anything about it. Obama pardons eight people? Hello, there are thousands like them in the penitentiary. You see them coming out? No. You see Congress passing laws to cut sentencing? No. Judges are bound by our sentencing rules; they can't do much. So today it's a lot of talk and no action. But that's not the kind of people who went to prison in my administration, murderers and robbers and burglars, narcotic sellers. Yeah, so we built prisons.

DePue: One of Stevenson's claims that he put forth a lot was that criticism about the budget for the mansion, especially the food budget, that you were spending over \$400 a day for food.

Thompson: Really? I don't know who was eating it.

DePue: And that you were fond of lobster. He pledged that he would never eat lobster in the mansion.

Thompson: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. For a guy who spoke French at the dinner table in the mansion, that criticism is—

DePue: As a guest he spoke French in the mansion?

Thompson: No, when his dad was the governor.

DePue: I guess he would have been a child then.

Thompson: Yeah. Actually, that was not in the '86 campaign; that was the '82 campaign, wasn't it?

DePue: I read the same kind of comments for '86.

Thompson: And you know where that started? That started with a press story by a reporter for the *Alton Telegraph*, who on a dull day with nothing to do, looked at the budget for the mansion. This was in the first term. New governor. I mean, who was eating in the mansion? Two people. Kind of hard to stuff \$400 a day into two people. This one really pissed off my wife, because she very carefully, carefully managed the mansion food budget, and she wasn't going crazy with it. We had no reason to. We were two people, brand new to the mansion.

DePue: But you have told me before, Governor, that you weren't shy about using the mansion to entertain, to advance the causes of Illinois, et cetera.

Thompson: Of course not, that's what it's for.

DePue: And that's all part of the budget for the mansion.

Thompson: Sure, I fed the legislature; I fed business; I fed labor. That's what I'm supposed to do.

DePue: You were quoted in an article, and I think this might have even been a Mike Royko article. I'm going to read some of the passages from this. You were labeled by Stevenson as a "big, blubbing, harpooned whale."

Thompson: There you go. There's really civil political dialog, isn't it?

DePue: (laughs) He quoted an earlier article saying that you were, "kind of snide, he had no sense of humor"—

Thompson: Snide? What?

DePue: —"he was so obvious, so artificial. He was slippery. He'd do anything."

- Thompson: Really? You know, that really sounds like Adlai, doesn't it? That's how he would talk about me. That's how he would campaign. I had more sense of humor than anybody in Illinois politics, for God's sake!
- DePue: (laughs) And that you'd ripped him off and implemented much of his agenda from the '82 campaign, like Build Illinois.
- Thompson: The words "Build Illinois" never came from his mouth.
- DePue: Your comment was that he was running a "Chicken Little campaign."
- Thompson: Right, that's true.
- DePue: (laughs) That's true that you said that, or that's true that it was a Chicken Little campaign?
- Thompson: Both.
- DePue: That it was a "replay of the conflict, chaos, racism and worse of the Chicago Council Wars."
- Thompson: There you go. That's pretty good, huh?
- DePue: In fact, they even end up in a political cartoon.
- Thompson: I don't remember that quote, but that's a pretty good one.
- DePue: So tell me about the Chicago Council Wars. And here's another political cartoon.
- Thompson: I really do not remember that quote. "Chicago-style politics, conflict, chaos, racism and worse. Springfield beware!"
- DePue: This is *Chicago Star*.
- Thompson: Who is this T. Beck? He does some pretty good stuff. (laughs)
- DePue: And you're looking into a crystal ball, except it's not a crystal ball—
- Thompson: It's Adlai's head.
- DePue: It's Adlai's head.
- Thompson: Close to a crystal ball. You had a new black mayor in the city of Chicago, Harold Washington. And you had the old guard of the Democratic party, alderman in the city of Chicago, and they fought bitter, bitter wars. Council Wars was the name of it. They were determined to defeat everything he wanted to do, he was determined to defeat them, and eventually he won.

DePue: Washington won?

Thompson: Yeah.

DePue: Was the wimp factor still working for you as well?

Thompson: No, that died.

DePue: Here's what Mike Royko said about the language that both of you were throwing around. "Both men are simply expressing their truthful, sincere"—(Thompson laughs) "bone-deep loathing for the other."

Thompson: Yeah, there you go. Mike Royko was a good guy. Friend of mine. Supporter of mine.

DePue: Continuing on here, in terms of the nature of the election campaign, let's go into the debates themselves. And I'm afraid I get to read some more language from the debates themselves. You criticized Stevenson for mischaracterizing your record on education. You said, "He keeps talking about the study that supposedly ranks education in our state near the bottom. We tried to get a copy of the report. We found there was no such report."

Thompson: There you go.

DePue: Does that ring a bell to you?

Thompson: Absolutely.

DePue: That's from the first debate, September 10th, and I think that must have been in Chicago.

Thompson: He just made that up.

DePue: You're convinced of that?

Thompson: They never produced a report. That's like his '82 vote fraud campaign in DuPage County. Never produced any evidence of that. Zero. Zip.

DePue: You were also critical, apparently, in the first debate that he kept such a low profile, ever since 1982. Can you elaborate on that one?

Thompson: No, I really don't remember that.

DePue: That he kind of disappeared until the '86 election.

Thompson: That's true, yeah. He was not instrumental in Democratic politics. He just was on the farm.

- DePue: The second debate, September 25th, I believe was in Springfield. Stevenson's pledge to build no new nuclear plants. Does that ring a bell at all?
- Thompson: Not really.
- DePue: What was your position on new nuclear plants at the time?
- Thompson: I thought we had enough. We had what, six, seven?
- DePue: I think more than any other state at the time.
- Thompson: More than any other state. I thought that was enough, but it wasn't my decision, it was between the electric companies and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.
- DePue: And this was a time nationwide when they just weren't being built anymore.
- Thompson: Yeah, and there were protests against them.
- DePue: Now, I'll bet you have a reaction to this allegation—Stevenson's as well—that, "You can be bought for a campaign contribution." He asserts that during your years, "Contractors must contribute to the Thompson campaign to get state business."
- Thompson: Really? And the proof of that was?
- DePue: This goes hand and hand with pinstripe patronage, does it not?
- Thompson: The proof of that was? Thin air.
- DePue: I'm not sure if it was in the debate or an offside conversation with a journalist or something, he said that you reminded him of a woman who can't say no. "If he were a female, he'd be pregnant constantly."
- Thompson: Well, he wouldn't dare say that today, would he?
- DePue: He did take a considerable amount of heat from feminists of the era.
- Thompson: Yeah, I'll bet he did! I bet he did. But there weren't that many feminists, actually. If he said that today, he'd be run out of town on a rail.
- DePue: And your response to all of the corruption allegations, and apparently you said this directly to Stevenson in the debate, "I thought when you accused me in Chicago a couple of weeks ago of killing babies that that was probably the cheapest shot in Illinois politics. But this comes pretty close to tying it today."
- Thompson: Hmm. Pretty tough campaign! (DePue laughs) The one I remember was '82, the Thompson-Cosentino plan, where he just outraged me for what he was saying about our efforts to promote economic development as though it was

some sort of corrupt thing. And that's when I think I said, "Hey! You got any evidence of that? Take it down the street to the U.S. attorney's office, right down the street. Just take it right on down there." I was just *livid*. I think that was '82.

DePue: Running four campaigns is like having fourteen budgets, they all kind of blend together, don't they?

Thompson: (laughs) They do.

DePue: And then late September or early October, there's flooding in the Collar Counties. Do you recall that?

Thompson: Oh, I recall floods. And I recall going out to see floods, because you have to go out to see the floods.

DePue: Most people would see this as a bad thing, but how does it play politically?

Thompson: It shows you're in action. It shows you're doing what people expect a governor to do, to confront danger and tragedy, whether it's floods or it's tornadoes. Tornadoes are the worst, because they're so quixotic. Floods, they flood everybody in the neighborhood. Tornadoes can go down a street, not touch this side of the street and devastate this side of the street. The people come out of their wrecked houses or escape from their wrecked houses and look across the street, the houses are not touched. And yet their every possession has been thrown out into the yard for everybody to see. Those are the most emotional and the ones where you really have to react quickly and be out there, because they look to the governor.

Your presence says to them that Illinois will do everything they can to help after a tornado like that, and the feds too, FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency]. But the emotional part of it is they want somebody to tell their story to, and they want somebody to see their tragedy. So when you're there, and they come out and they want you to come into their house and see the devastation, it's a very emotional thing. And it's the connection of the governor, as the state's father, I guess, to people who are undergoing this awful, awful tragedy. So yeah, the governor's got to show up in times of floods and tornadoes and ice storms and drought and all other kinds of devastation.

DePue: It reminds me of the last presidential election and Hurricane Sandy, which seemed to play to the benefit of the sitting president.

Thompson: Absolutely. And a sitting governor.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Reference to Barack Obama and New Jersey governor Chris Christie.

DePue: But Stevenson charges that you were too slow to call out the National Guard.

Thompson: Really? What, did I sit and ponder it? He does make stuff up, honest to God, out of thin air.

DePue: The third debate was October 16th. I don't know where that debate was. One of the charges that he leveled against you was this promise of no tax increase in 1982, which we've already addressed. And yet you have that income tax increase in 1983. (cellphone rings)

Thompson: The temporary tax?

DePue: Yeah.

Thompson: That stayed temporary?

DePue: For one year, as I understand. And another charge about prisons, this time that gangs were running the prisons.

Thompson: Gangs are very strong in prisons. Been true of every governor's administration, every president's administration.

DePue: In that particular election cycle—again, it's gotten personal between the two of you, just as it was in '82—did you ever bring up the issue of the 100,000 fraudulent votes in the '82 election?

Thompson: I don't think so.

DePue: Why wouldn't you? Why didn't you?

Thompson: I couldn't say that Stevenson did it, or that he directed it, or that he was part of a conspiracy to do it, one more, brief trip...

(pause in recording)

DePue: Did you want to repeat what you just mentioned here?

Thompson: Sure. In '82, we did not discover the hundred thousand stolen votes until after the election. And it was a real theft, because eighty people went to the penitentiary for it. By '86, since I couldn't say Stevenson directed that in '82, I didn't think it was an issue. I might have made references to it during the campaign. But since Adlai was off the Democratic ticket, if Democrats were not going to vote for me, I wanted them to vote the Democratic ticket. So not an issue.

DePue: By the time you get to October, you're getting close to the end of the campaign. How were the polls looking for you?

- Thompson: I think they all looked good. And the final margin was a healthy margin. What was it, three hundred and some thousand?
- DePue: We'll get to that in just a second here. Were you happy with the campaign that you ran that year?
- Thompson: I was. Directed by Mr. Baise, as I recall.
- DePue: Greg Baise?
- Thompson: Greg Baise. He elected Reagan and he elected me.<sup>69</sup> Pretty good.
- DePue: Were you worried that it had gotten as negative as it seemed to get?
- Thompson: I didn't worry about negative. That's for sideline critics to worry about.
- DePue: What do you recall, then, of that last election night? Any special memories from that night?
- Thompson: No, not really. The one you really recall is the first one, you know? They declared me the winner, and only my dog and I were listening. I'll never forget that.
- DePue: And the dog didn't care much?
- Thompson: No, he cared. He barked.
- DePue: Ruff!
- Thompson: When I said, "Hey, Dog, we won!" (laughter) There was nobody else in the room.
- DePue: Would it have turned out differently, do you think, if the LaRouchies hadn't upset the applecart?
- Thompson: No, I don't think so.
- DePue: Would it have been another squeaker?
- Thompson: No, it would not have been a squeaker. A squeaker came in the depths of recession.
- DePue: The results you were just talking about, 52.7 percent for yourself, 40 percent for Stevenson, and 6.6 percent for Frank Broven. I hadn't heard that name either; apparently you had to have somebody who was running for governor on the Democratic ticket, and I don't know if that was LaRouchie or who it was, but that's what I saw in the results. Let me see if I can find that,

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<sup>69</sup> See Gregory Baise, interview by Mark DePue, August 19, 2013.

Governor, and I'll let you take a look at that. I'm going to pause it here until I find it.

(pause in recording)

DePue: The Governor is now looking at the results that I saw. And again, I had never heard that name before. So there had to be somebody on the Democratic ticket.

Thompson: Hey, he must have been a hell of a guy. He got 208,000 votes.

DePue: (laughs) Maybe those are the votes you've been talking about, the people voting straight Democrat ticket.

Thompson: Yeah! So my margin was four hundred thousand. That's pretty healthy.

DePue: Comfortable margin.

Thompson: Comfortable. Especially for a fourth-term candidate.

DePue: If that's the case, do you go to bed early that night then?

Thompson: No, you never go to bed early. It's a grand celebration.

DePue: Any final thoughts about the '86 election campaign?

Thompson: It was a great campaign. Great election. Wouldn't have missed it.

DePue: A nice way to finish off your political career?

Thompson: Yeah, absolutely. No, I had four more years to finish it off.

DePue: (laughs) Yeah, certainly not ready to retire.

Thompson: Including the goodbye tour, 1990.

DePue: We'll get to that here in a future session. I think we probably talked this one out today, if you don't mind, Governor.

Thompson: No, that's all right.

DePue: And we'll pick up '87, and I'm sure you're looking forward to talking about 1988 as well. Some interesting politics and some interesting discussions. That's the White Sox stadium in '88.

Thompson: Oh, that was great! Lots of stories about that one.

DePue: Until tomorrow.

Thompson: Okay.

(end of interview #19)

(end of volume IV)