

Title Page & Abstract

An Interview with Governor James Thompson

Part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library
Illinois Statecraft – James Thompson Oral History project

Interview # IST-A-L-2013-054

Governor James Thompson, Illinois's governor from 1977 through January 1991, making him the state's longest serving governor, was interviewed on the dates listed below as part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library's *Illinois Statecraft* Oral History project.

Interview dates & location:

| | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Session 1: July 17, 2013 | Thompson residence, Chicago, Illinois |
| Session 2: July 18, 2013 | Thompson residence, Chicago, Illinois |
| Session 3: Sep 19, 2013 | Law office of Winston and Strawn, Chicago, IL |
| Session 4: Sep 20, 2013 | Thompson residence, Chicago, IL |
| Session 5: Jun 11, 2014 | Thompson residence, Chicago, IL |
| Session 6: Jun 12, 2014 | Thompson residence, Chicago, IL |
| Session 7: Jul 30, 2014 | Thompson residence, Chicago, IL |
| Session 8: Jul 31, 2014 | Thompson residence, Chicago, IL |
| Session 9: Aug 28, 2014 | Thompson summer cottage, Buchanan, MI |
| Session 10: Aug 29, 2014 | Thompson summer cottage, Buchanan, MI |
| Session 11: Oct 20, 2014 | Thompson residence, Chicago, IL |
| Session 12: Oct 21, 2014 | Thompson residence, Chicago, IL |
| Session 13 & 14: Dec 18, 2014 | IL Info Service Studio, Springfield, IL |
| Session 15: Mar 30, 2015 | Thompson residence, Chicago, IL |
| Session 16: Mar 31, 2015 | Thompson residence, Chicago, IL |
| Session 17: Jun 9, 2015 | Thompson summer cottage, Buchanan, MI |
| Session 18: Jun 9, 2015 | Thompson summer cottage, Buchanan, MI |
| Session 19: Sep 9, 2015 | Thompson residence, Chicago, IL |
| Session 20: Sep 9, 2015 | Thompson residence, Chicago, IL |
| Session 21: Oct 27, 2015 | Thompson residence, Chicago, IL |
| Session 22: Oct 28, 2015 | Thompson residence, Chicago, IL |
| Session 23: Feb 16, 2016 | Thompson residence, Chicago, IL |
| Session 24: Feb 17, 2016 | Thompson residence, Chicago, IL |
| Session 25: Apr 11, 2016 | Thompson residence, Chicago, IL |

Session 26: Apr 12, 2016 Thompson residence, Chicago, IL
Session 27: May 18, 2016 Thompson residence, Chicago, IL
Session 28: May 18, 2016 Thompson residence, Chicago, IL
Session 29: Jun 9, 2016 Thompson residence, Chicago, IL
Session 30 & 31: Aug 9, 2016 Thompson summer cottage, Buchanan, MI

Interview Format: Digital audio & Digital video (Sessions 13 & 14 only)

Interviewer: Mark R. DePue, Director of Oral History, ALPL

Technical Support for sessions 13-14: Mark Suszko, IL Information Service videographer

Transcription by: Audio Transcription Center, Boston, MA and Bonnie Bruns, ALPL volunteer

Edited by: Dr. Mike Czaplicki, Project Historian & Jan Culp, ALPL volunteer

Indexed by: _____

Total Pages: 1139 pgs (Vol I) 1-176; (Vol II) 177-361; (Vol III) 362-513; (Vol IV) 514-695; (Vol V) 696-894; (Vol VI) 895-1139

Total Time: (Session 1) 2:09 + (Sess 2) 1:24 + (3)2:00 + (4)2:10 + (5)1:26 + (6)2:41 (7)2:33 + (8)2:21 + (9)2:39 + (10) 2:07 + (11)1:54 + (12)2:14 + (13)1:53 + (14)0:35 + (15)1:53 + (16)2:22 + (17)1:29 + (18)1:54 + (19)2:41 + (20)2:11 + (21)2:01 + (22)2:24 + (23)2:03 + (24)2:32 + (25)2:08 + (26)1:47 + (27)1:41 + (28)1.58 + (29)1:59 + (30)1:34 + (31)2:09/ (Session 1) 2.15 + (Sess 2) 1.4 + (3)2.0 + (4)2.17 + (5)1.43 + (6)2.68 + (7) 2.55 + (8) 2.35 + (9) 2.65 + (10) 2.12 + (11) 1.9 + (12) 2.23 + (13) 1.88 + (14) 0.58 + (15) 1.88 + (16) 2.37 + (17) 1.48 + (18) 1.9 + (19)2.68 + (20)2.18 + (21)2.02 + (22)2.4 + (23)2.05 + (24)2.53 + (25)2.13 + (26)1.78 + (27)1.68 + (28)1.97 + (29)1.98 + (30)1.57 + (31)2.15 = 62.84 hrs

Volume I: Thompson's Pre-gubernatorial Career

Session 1: Early childhood and education

Session 2: States Attorney work in early 1960s and teaching at Northwestern U. Law School

Session 3: Years with U.S. Attorney's Office (Northern District), 1970-1976

Session 4: Prosecution of former Governor Otto Kerner, 1970-1973

Session 5: Late 1960s violence in Cairo, IL, the Cement Bribery Scandal, and more

Volume II: Taking the Reins and the Long Campaign

Session 6: Decision to run for governor and the election of 1976

Session 7: More on the 1976 election, and setting up the Thompson administration team

Session 8: Thompson's first year - 1977

Session 9: Thompson administration in 1978 and gubernatorial election with M. Bakalis

Volume III: First Full Term and the Re-election Fight of 1982

Session 10: The 1978 election cont., and the Thompson administration in 1979

Session 11: Chicago schools, 1981 budget negotiations, and 1980 presidential election

Session 12: Staff changes, selection of IL Senate president, and administration in 1981

Session 13: Election of 1982 against Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson III

Session 14: Election of 1982, cont.

Volume IV: The Third Term and Running for an Unprecedented Fourth Term

Session 15: Thompson and the press, Tylenol scare, and administration's year in 1983

Session 16: Economic crisis of 1983, 1984 budget, pension payment and collective bargaining

Session 17: 1984 presidential election and early 1985 legislative year

Session 18: Build Illinois, 1985 Educational Reform Act, IHPA, and Dana Thomas House

Session 19: Creation of IHPA, and election campaign of 1986 against Adlai Stevenson

Volume V: The Fourth Term

Session 20: Staff changes following reelection, budget talks, and 1987 attempt to raise taxes

Session 21: Thompson administration in 1988 and funding for new White Sox stadium

Session 22: 1989 budget year, DCFS and mental health, and passage of income tax surcharge

Session 23: Thompson administration in 1990, RUTAN, patronage & gubernatorial election

Session 24: A review of fourteen years in office, and Thompson's move into retirement

Volume VI: Post-gubernatorial Career

Session 25: Thompson's career at Winston and Strawn law firm during the 1990s

Session 26: Reflections on state and national level politics during the 1990s

Session 27: 2000 Presidential election, Navy Pier, 1990s terrorism and 9/11

Session 28: Serving on the 9/11 Commission and review of the Commission findings

Session 29: Thompson's relationship with George Ryan and Ryan's corruption trial

Session 30: Hollinger International board, Rod Blagojevich years and 2004 Senatorial election

Session 31: Illinois politics since 2008 and closing reflections

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The interviews are archived at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield, Illinois.

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Abstract

Gov. Jim Thompson, *Illinois Statecraft*, IST-A-L-2013-054

Biographical Information Overview of Interview: Jim Thompson was born on May 8, 1936 in Chicago, Illinois, and grew up in the Garfield Park and Galewood neighborhoods of Chicago. Thompson began his college years at the University of Illinois at Chicago, during a time when the school was located at Navy Pier. He finished college at Washington University in St. Louis, and enrolled in Northwestern University's law school. He passed the Illinois Bar in 1959 and went to work at the Cook County's state's attorney's office. In 1964 he argued the landmark *Escobedo v Illinois* case in front of the U.S. Supreme Court, and later that year returned to Northwestern to work as an assistant professor at the University's law school. While there, he was mentored by the distinguished professor, Fred Inbau.

In 1968 he sought a nomination from the Republican Party for state's attorney for Cook County but was turned down. Instead, by 1970 Thompson had moved to the U.S. Attorney's office, Northern District of Illinois, working for U.S. Attorney William Bauer. In November 1971 Thompson became the U.S. attorney for the Northern District when Bauer accepted a federal judgeship. While U.S. attorney, Thompson's office vigorously prosecuted many political and police corruption cases, and in 1973 he made a name for himself when he successfully prosecuted a case against former Illinois Governor Otto Kerner. On July 1st, 1975 he resigned as the U.S. attorney, and announced his candidacy for governor of Illinois.

Jim Thompson learned quickly on the campaign trail, and soon mastered the art of retail politics, having the ability to establish a rapport with any audiences. He ran against Mike Howlett, the candidate the Democratic slate-makers had selected to replace their party's unpopular sitting governor, Dan Walker. In June of 1976 he married Jayne Carr, his former law student and a successful lawyer in her own right. He pulled an impressive 65 percent of the vote in the November election. Once in office, he successfully delivered on his tough-on-crime campaign pledge when he signed Class X legislation, which tightened parole rules and imposed stricter jail terms for many felony offenses. Thompson ran for reelection in 1978 (the 1970 Illinois Constitution had moved gubernatorial elections to presidential off-years), and in August of that year Jayne gave birth to Samantha Jayne Thompson. In November, he beat Democrat Michael Bakalis by an impressive fifty-nine percent margin.

Immediately following that election, the legislature passed a bill which effectively raised their own pay (as well as the governor's) by forty percent. Governor Thompson vetoed the bill on the same day, and the legislature immediately overrode his veto. The Illinois public

responded with anger, accusing the governor of being complicit in a deal with legislators. The controversy resulted in passage of the Cutback Amendment in 1980, which reduced the size of the Illinois House of Representatives by one third following the 1982 elections. Another issue that plagued Thompson for the first six years of his administration was the Equal Rights Amendment, which was brought up in the legislature every year from 1972 to 1982. Although a supporter of ERA, most ERA advocates were critical of Thompson for not being vigorous enough in his support. The measure never cleared the Illinois legislature, and the clock ran out on the amendment in 1972.

Governor Thompson's next election in 1982 against former Illinois Senator Adlai Stevenson III, was by far the most contentious and the closest election he ran. The nation's economy was in a deep recession, and Stevenson had one of the most prestigious names in Illinois and the support of the Democratic machine. Thompson appeared to be ahead in the polls going into Election Day, but the official results gave him a lead of only 5,074 votes. Stevenson immediately called for a recount, and made allegations of vote fraud. The issue ended up with the Illinois Supreme Court, which declared only a few days before the inauguration that the Election Day figures would stand, ruling in part that the state's law on recounts was unconstitutional. Following the election the FBI launched a major investigation into vote fraud. The U.S. attorney, Daniel Webb, eventually prosecuted sixty-five individuals from Cook County for vote fraud, and gained convictions for sixty-three.

In 1986 Thompson ran for a fourth time, once again facing Adlai Stevenson. Stevenson's campaign was derailed early on when two Lyndon LaRouche candidates won as democrats in the primary, for Secretary of State and lieutenant governor. Stevenson refused to run on the same ticket as a LaRouchee, so ran instead on the Solidarity Party ticket. Thompson won handily in November.

Over his fourteen year tenure as Illinois's governor, Thompson built the reputation as being a fiscal conservative, a friend of labor, as well as a builder, with his Build Illinois initiative and a new stadium for the Chicago White Sox being the most notable examples. He nixed a proposed crosstown expressway and redirected the money elsewhere. Twice during his tenure the state passed temporary income tax increases, the first in 1983 and again in 1989. He traveled the world promoting Illinois and her products, and successfully enticed Mitsubishi to build a new auto plant in Bloomington. Thompson was an active supporter of history and the arts, and established the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency in 1985. Nineteen eighty-five also marked the year a major overhaul of Illinois schools was passed. The size of Illinois government grew significantly during his long tenure, but was outpaced by Illinois's economic growth. For most of his tenure, the Democrats controlled both houses of the legislature. In Thompson's final year in office the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against him in the landmark *Rutan v. Illinois* case, which dramatically reduced the number of patronage hires politicians could make in the future.

Once out of office, Thompson joined the Chicago law firm of Winston and Strawn, where he served as chairman from 1993 to 2006, leading the firm through a period of dramatic growth. He also served on the 9/11 Commission, often helping the committee liaison with the Bush administration. He also served on several corporate boards, most notably with Hollinger International, whose chairman, Conrad Black was fired by the board in 2004 and later

convicted of fraud. Thompson's law firm defended former Governor George Ryan, Thompson's friend, during his corruption trial in 2005, and also represented Governor Rod Blagojevich early in his administration, prior to his arrest for corruption in December 2008. Throughout his political and legal career Thompson pursued his passion for art and antiques. He retired from the law firm in 2015 but remained active for years afterward as one of the state's most prominent elder statesmen. After being plagued with back problems for many years, he passed away from an apparent heart attack on August 14, 2020 at the age of 84.

Subject Headings/Key Words: Build Illinois; Class X legislation; Equal Rights Amendment fight; Cutback Amendment; *Rutan v. Illinois*; 9/11 Commission; new White Sox stadium; Thompson center; George Ryan; Jim Edgar; Gov. Otto Kerner; Winston and Strawn; Michael Madigan; Senator Phil Rock; Senator James "Pate" Philip; Adlai Stevenson III; 1982 Illinois gubernatorial election; temporary income-tax increase of 1989; Jayne Thompson; Samantha Thompson; Fred Inbau; U.S. Attorney's Office, Northern District of Illinois; Michael Bakalis; Michael Howlett; Lee Daniels; Rod Blagojevich; Barack Obama; Hollinger International; Crosstown Expressway; public employee unions;

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