

Tribute to William D. Ruckelshaus

By: Daniel Fiorino

On November 27, 2019, the nation and the Academy lost a giant. William D. Ruckelshaus was known for many things: for placing principle above politics by resigning rather than obey a presidential order he thought was wrong, for launching the United States Environmental Protection Agency in its crucial first era of the early 1970s, for returning to that same agency and putting it back on track when it was in serious trouble in the 1980s, and for his many contributions to the nation and the world as a corporate leader and private citizen.

All of this mattered, of course. But what matters most is that Bill Ruckelshaus lived a life and set an example of principle, integrity, commitment to the public good, and thoughtful action. As the William Ruckelshaus Center at Washington State University put it: "It is appropriate that Bill would leave us at Thanksgiving, because few people have ever lived a life that provided us with more for which to be thankful."

In the public mind, Bill Ruckelshaus is best known as the man who resigned his post as Deputy Attorney General rather than obey President Richard Nixon's order to fire special prosecutor Archibald Cox in 1974. Was this some kind of agonizing choice? Not for Bill. "It was not a heroic act," he said later. He had promised to protect the special prosecutor.

For the rest of us, what will stand the test of time is the exemplary leadership Bill Ruckelshaus provided in two rounds as the head of the EPA. As someone who had worked on air and water pollution control with the Indiana Attorney-General's office in the 1960s, Bill had what was then rare experience in the environmental field. He took the job at EPA (recommended by Attorney General John Mitchell, for whom he worked) not knowing quite what he was getting into.

Yet he made EPA into an effective, visible, and highly respected (if not always beloved) agency. It was important to demonstrate action, he said, and show that pollution was a serious problem calling for serious action. In that first round at EPA, he put the new air and water laws on track, built a record of consistent and strong enforcement, and banned DDT, the chemical that put the environmental movement on the map in Rachel Carson's 1962 book, *Silent Spring*. He left EPA in April 1973 to become acting director of the FBI and then Deputy Attorney General to Attorney General Elliott Richardson, leading to his Watergate fame.

But the EPA was not done with Bill Ruckelshaus, nor he with it. Scandals and mismanagement put the agency in big trouble in the early 1980s, and President Ronald Reagan asked him to come back and set the sinking ship aright. Few of us at EPA in 1983 will ever forget the rally at the EPA's Waterside Mall headquarters celebrating his return. That shopping center was full of respect, happiness, and genuine affection for a returning hero. And Bill did not disappoint. He rebuilt the agency on its scientific foundations, brought first-rate leadership back in, created a new atmosphere of transparency and integrity, and put the agency back to work.

Whatever else Bill did, his heart was with the EPA—the people, the issues, the institution. He said it clearly in a 1993 interview:

I've had an awful lot of jobs in my lifetime, and in moving from one to another, have had the opportunity to think about what makes them worthwhile. I've concluded there are four important criteria: interest, excitement, challenge, and fulfillment. I've never worked anywhere where I could find all four to quite the same extent as at EPA...you work for a cause that is beyond self-interest and larger than the goals people normally pursue.

In the spring of 2019, Bill Ruckelshaus did an interview that was used as a video presentation at an American University conference on “EPA and the Future of Environmental Protection.” Our reasoning was simple: In thinking about the future of the EPA, why not hear from one of the most important and respected figures from the past? Although famous for starting the EPA of the 1970s with strong and visible enforcement, he saw the future as one built much more on “cooperation, coordination, working together, collaboration.”

Protecting the environment is not like painting a house, he cautioned, where you do it and the job is done. When it comes to the environment, “You've got to stay everlasting at it.” In a democracy, trust is what matters: “We are not going to succeed unless we are trusted.” The man who returned to the EPA in the 1980s warning all of us that we should be transparent, to operate as if we were in a fishbowl, remained committed to the public's trust to the end.

Upon hearing of his passing, according to the EPA Alumni Association (and yes, there is such a thing), one EPA veteran remarked that “Now we are on our own.” As one of 1800 former EPA officials who are part of that Association, I know exactly what that meant.

We are on our own, but not quite: We have the life of Bill Ruckelshaus to guide and inspire us.