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Where the Evidence Leads: An Autobiography

Dick Thornburgh
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The author spent twenty-five years, from 1978 to 1993, in the state and national political arena, earning a reputation for skilled crisis management and the vigorous pursuit of justice. This memoir describes the positions he held—governor of Pennsylvania, attorney general, and undersecretary general of the United Nations—and his unsuccessful run for the Senate.

Soon after Thornburgh won a dramatic come-from-behind election for Pennsylvania's governorship (an election in which he trailed his Democratic rival by thirty points), the nuclear reactor in Three Mile Island experienced a near meltdown. Incorrect media reports almost caused widespread panic and led grocery stores in nearby states to hang signs stating, "we don't sell Pennsylvania milk." Although the final cleanup was not competed until fourteen years later, Thornburgh earned a good reputation for responding to the disaster and to bad economic circumstances during his two terms as governor, in which Pennsylvania lost more than 200,000 manufacturing jobs. Although his controversial "Thornfare" program of welfare reform angered Democrats, this plan roughly resembled President Clinton's welfare policies, adopted almost two decades later.

President Reagan appointed Thornburgh attorney general in 1988. Much of his three years was spent fighting the white-collar criminals of the savings and loan scandals and struggling with the consequences of the Iran-Contra debacle. He also supervised the investigation into the 1988 terrorist bombing of Pan Am Flight 103, in which 259 passengers and members of the crew were killed over Lockerbie, Scotland.

When Rodney King was beaten in Los Angeles, Thornburgh, a lifelong supporter of civil rights, spoke out harshly against the police action. He views his advocacy of the Americans with Disabilities Act as his proudest accomplishment. Political commentator David Broder called the ADA "arguably the most significant civil rights and social policy legislation in more than a decade." Thornburgh was especially moved when the act was signed into law because his son had suffered severe head trauma in the car accident that killed Thornburgh's first wife.

Thornburgh spent his last year in public service as under secretary general in the United Nations, the UN's top management position. During this short tenure he was frustrated by the rigidity and waste of the United Nations bureaucracy. He concludes his memoir by reinforcing the lessons that guided his career: the primacy of the rule of law, illuminated by equal justice and due process; the provision of needed government services delivered on the state and local level; and the continuous fight against discrimination.

Thornburgh's writing is inconsistent at times. The descriptions of his years as governor and attorney general are insightful, however, they lapse at times into a boggling recital of statistics and facts. Despite this flaw, Thornburgh provides an informed insider's account of governing, managing, and surviving in the pressure-cooker environment of American politics.

KARL HELICHER (December 16, 2003)

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