Bill Ruckelshaus: Courageous pathfinder, consensus-builder, citizen hero

It later became known as the Saturday Night Massacre. In what the Washington Post called "the most traumatic government upheaval of the Watergate crisis," the nation's top two Justice Department leaders quit rather than follow President Nixon's order to fire the Watergate special prosecutor.

For Deputy Attorney General William D. Ruckelshaus, that act of courage under fire was a defining and pivotal moment for the country and for himself personally. The message, rich in symbolism, was that no one, not even the President of the Unites States, is above the law -- and for Ruckelshaus personally, no personal sacrifice is too great to maintain the Constitution and our rule of law.

On that evening of October 20, 1973, destiny called. For Ruckelshaus, who had been viewed as a rising star with limitless potential in government, perhaps even the White House itself, defying his commander-in-chief brought an abrupt conclusion to any march to power he may have harbored. Barely 40, this extraordinary civil servant had launched the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency at the dawn of the environmental movement, headed the FBI, and heeded the summons to help his friend Elliot Richardson run the Department of Justice during a most perilous chapter of American history.

In an instant when the full measure of his character was called to account, Ruckelshaus didn't blink or think about losing his ticket to fame. As he later put it, he had pledged to Congress not to interfere with the Special Prosecutor, and he would not violate that pledge or keep Archibald Cox from doing his duty, without fear or favor.

And so Ruckelshaus quit, honor intact, and became one of the few heroes of Watergate, the act of conscience inspiring many, including young people who were "turned off" by the cynicism of the age.

Except for a repeat term as EPA administrator during the Reagan Administration, Ruckelshaus never regained Cabinet-level fame and glory, and never looked back or second-guessed his decision. Instead, he hung out his shingle as an attorney and started over again. He moved to Seattle in the Pacific Northwest and built a mighty reputation as a bridge-builder, conciliator and world citizen, working with particular acumen and passion for dealing with vexing issues that long divided business and the environmental community and regulators.

Ruckelshaus, the staunch environmentalist, worked as senior vice president of Weyerhaeuser Co., one of America's premier timber companies and landowners. There and in subsequent posts, he plunged into finding "win-win" solutions, refusing to accept a false choice between jobs and the environment. He was appointed by President George H.W. Bush to serve on the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy and served on the World Commission on Environment and Development created by the United Nations. President Clinton later appointed him as U.S. envoy help implement the Pacific Salmon Treaty with Canada and the United States. Governor Gary Locke, now the U.S. Commerce Secretary, named him chairman of the Salmon Recovery Funding Board and Ruckelshaus became a pro-bono expert in restoring salmon runs and wildlife habitat. He has served on numerous other non-profit organizations, including the world Resources Institute, the National Council on Science and the Environment, and the Urban Institute.

Ruckelshaus' lifetime work in collaborative approaches to policy development and multi-party dispute resolution resulted in creation of the William D. Ruckelshaus Center, co-sponsored and co-housed by the state's two rival flagship universities, Washington State University and the University of Washington. The institute, led by a board chaired by Ruckelshaus himself, is working on a variety of consensus-building projects to resolve conflicts.

Ruckelshaus also answered the call-to-duty from Governors Locke and Gregoire to work his magic on one of the most significant environmental remediation projects in America, cleanup and preservation of Puget Sound. The Sound, with 2,500 miles of shoreline in 12 counties, is one the country's most important transportation and shipping arteries, a magnet for tourism and commerce and home to the orca, salmon and numerous threatened or endangered species.

"He is the right man at the right time," Gregoire said when she enlisted Ruckelshaus to head the leadership council of the newly created Puget Sound Partnership two years ago. The multibillion-dollar project, cutting across myriad jurisdictional and special interest fault lines, is supposed to restore Puget Sound by 2020. That will require unprecedented cooperation by dozens of sometimes contentious players, broad public education, and permanent new funding, probably including a dedicated tax increase.

Just his cup of tea. He laughed when asked about taking on an almost-impossible challenge at an age when most of his colleagues have long since retired. He said he isn't looking for more high-profile legacy-polishing in the autumn of a distinguished career, but the intriguing prospect of inventing an ecological breakthrough that can be exported around the globe.

"It just just interests me," he told The Associated Press of his latest high-risk challenge. "I find this challenging and fulfilling, interesting and exciting -- my

four tests for whether I want to do something. ... If we can do this, it's a demonstration for the rest of the world about how mankind can live within the ecosystem and both can prosper."

Gregoire, Locke, Secretary of State Sam Reed, Congressman Norm Dicks and other movers and shakers consider Ruckelshaus a personal hero for his storied career that spans government and the business and non-profit sectors, his sterling reputation for integrity, smarts, creativity and his uncanny ability to get people to work together across the political aisle and to gain the trust and cooperation from diverse, suspicious and even warring camps.

Ruckelshaus, born in 1932, was born in Indianapolis and has his degrees from Princeton and Harvard Law. Before college, he fell in love with Washington state when he served in the U.S. Army at Fort Lewis near Tacoma. He served as deputy attorney general of Indiana and then was in the Indiana state House, rising to majority leader. The moderate Republican narrowly lost a U.S. Senate seat to Democrat Birch Bayh, and then began his ascent at the highest levels of the Nixon Administration. After his life in the corporate and legal communities, he became partner in an investor group. He and his wife, Jill, live in the Seattle suburb of Medina and have five grown children.

Kathy Fletcher, probably the state's senior Puget Sound expert, says Ruckelshaus is one of the those rare birds who can pull people together. "He puts in the hours, with passion and patience. He's not a famous guy who makes a cameo appearance and leaves."

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