

WTAE-TV, Pittsburgh, "Close Up" interview, with Governor Thornburgh regarding events and details of Three Mile Island nuclear accident, April 19, 1979 (25:21)

>> Host: Good evening and thanks for being with us once again on "Close Up." Governor Dick Thornburgh has been in office now for a little less than four months. He is fighting a battle of the budget, trying to keep the state fiscally sound. He's fought the battle of the potholes. But one battle that came along a few weeks ago was totally unexpected. It was called "Three Mile Island," and we're gonna talk a little bit about that tonight and what we learned and why we learned it and try to draw some lessons from what happened on that Wednesday about 2 1/2, 3 weeks ago. When did you first find out that something was amiss at Three Mile Island, and what was your first reaction to it?

>> Thornburgh: I was hosting a breakfast meeting of freshman Democratic legislators, trying to make them believers in the budget, Don, at our home. I got a call about 7:45 in the morning from our emergency management people telling me that there had been an accident at the nuclear facility at Three Mile Island. They didn't really know much about it at the time, but they wanted to notify me, and then we undertook the long, really, 10 days of constant attention to that site.

>> Host: Okay, you heard at 7:00 in the morning there was an accident. When did you realize it was more than what was being described officially?

>> Thornburgh: Well, I think when somebody tells you there's an accident at a nuclear facility, you take it seriously from the beginning. I immediately notified our press people so that they would be in a position to begin gathering whatever information we could to keep the public and the news media informed, notified our emergency management people in the surrounding counties. We got in touch with appropriate federal officials and began to try to mobilize because I think from the very first there was a realization that there was a possibility, always a possibility, that we might undertake some kind of an evacuation. But there was no book you could pull down, telling you how to do it. This was a totally unprecedented event. There wasn't anybody you could ask for advice. We just tried to do the best we could, and I'm very grateful that the crisis passed, and we now have enormous problems to deal with about the future of nuclear energy and the ability of central Pennsylvania to recover.

>> Host: A lot of people criticized the news media for the way it handled Three Mile Island for the coverage it gave. I've got mixed feelings myself about the job they did. What bothers me is some of the statements that came out of Met Ed officials. Mr. Herbein is it? Initially dismissed the entire event. "We're making a mountain out of a molehill." What's the answer to that in the future? I mean, whom can we rely on?

>> Thornburgh: Well, I must say that for the first two days, I was terribly frustrated by the fact that we couldn't seem to get a straight story. We were getting conflicting and contradictory versions of what was going on. We would learn about events that had occurred at the site long after they had happened. And it made it very difficult for me because my single responsibility during this entire incident was to take whatever steps were appropriate to protect the health and the safety of the residents of central Pennsylvania. In order to make those decisions, we had to have reliable facts. I'm trained as an engineer and as a lawyer. They're two professions that depend on the integrity of the facts, and by the time we reached Friday morning, it was perfectly clear to me that either people didn't know what was going on or that they were mistaken about what was going on, or there was a possibility of deliberate misrepresentation. It's then that I called the Nuclear Regulatory Commission in Washington and talked to President Carter, and we had the services thereafter of Harold Denton, the chief regulator for the NRC.

>> Host: Do you think Met Ed did not know what was going on, or were they deliberately misinforming people, because they were not telling the truth.

>> Thornburgh: I don't know. I think that will certainly be one of the lines of inquiry that will be undertaken by President Carter's commission, by the Senate committees that are looking at it, by our own study commission. There's no question. There's a clear consensus that the utility was understaffed when it came to appropriate technical personnel. They simply didn't have the depth of experienced people there to handle this incident. And that suggests to me a very serious shortcoming in the licensing requirements of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. And I think that's one of the things that very clearly will have to be improved as we look toward an uncertain future for nuclear energy. We must have appropriate technical personnel at the site of these complicated reactors to deal with this sophisticated technology. We must have people there who can assess and diagnose a situation on the spot and transmit to the public and to those of us who have other governmental responsibilities accurate information. And

there must be a communications capability. We had the darndest time trying to get phone calls through at Three Mile Island, for example. Finally, the president ordered the Signal Corps to set up a facility there that hooked us in with the White House and with the Island.

>> Host: President Carter said the media blew this thing totally out of proportion. Do you agree with that?

>> Thornburgh: Oh, I think that's a little harsh. I think the news media people were laboring under the same kinds of disabilities that we in government were, that it was very difficult to get a handle on things. One of the problems was that there were statements coming out of Washington, miles away from the site, from NRC officials, from congressmen, from staff people on the congressional staff which bore no relationship whatsoever to what the actual conditions were at the site. And the best witness for that, interestingly enough, was Harold Denton, who made one assessment while he was in Bethesda and an entirely different and more conservative estimate once he was on the site the afternoon of Friday the 30th, when he made his first appearance. He said as he left, after doing what I thought was a yeoman task, he said there's one thing that he learned -- that the information and the data for decision making must come from those people who are on the site and possessed of the technical skills to evaluate what's happening.

>> Host: Interesting you say that, because the Friday, the first Friday after this all happened -- I guess that's two days later -- things really got antsy, even around here. We had sent several reporters up to Harrisburg. The wires began clanging at about 4:00 in the afternoon, and the word "meltdown" came over the wires, and people really got nervous. Now this word came not from Mr. Denton in Harrisburg or at Three Mile Island. This came from somebody at NRC in Washington. I think it was Mr. Hendrie, who is the chairman. But, again, he was, what, 150 miles away from the scene. And the news media -- and we did it, too -- took that word "meltdown" and ran with it. And whether we are to blame for that, or whether they are to blame -- the thing that really interested me was that even nuclear power plants are politicized. If you study the taped conversation among NRC people -- there are liberals, there are conservatives, there are pro-nuclear power people and anti-nuclear power people. When an absolute scientific judgment must be made, you can't keep politics out of that.

>> Thornburgh: Well, I think you can. I think we were very grateful to have the services of Harold Denton, for whom I

developed a great respect. He was able to size the situation up, give me the information I needed on a constant basis. He briefed the press on a daily basis to try to lay out the facts as he saw them, and I don't know whether he's a Republican, a Democrat, a liberal or a conservative or whatever. I think he's a professional, and he was able to take charge and provide the necessary information that we needed.

>> Host: The problem again, though -- Harold Denton certainly had a calming effect on everybody, just his demeanor, the way he talked. But, again, looking and listening to NRC tapes, he was scared as hell.

>> Thornburgh: I think he was scared when he was in Washington because he didn't know what was going on, but when he got to the site, and we spent a lot of time together during that period, he was totally in command of himself, and I think did just the type of dispassionate evaluation of the facts that's necessary in a situation like this.

>> Host: One of the problems in putting this thing back together is the time frame -- who knew what when? There was a point in time -- it sounds like Watergate -- there's a point in time when Mr. Denton apparently felt that an evacuation might be a good idea.

>> Thornburgh: He was in Bethesda then.

>> Host: Okay.

>> Thornburgh: And getting all kinds of contrary reports. And his first recommendation to us after he'd made an assessment on the afternoon of Friday the 30th was that our cautionary advice to pregnant women and preschool children to leave the 5-mile area around the site was in order, that there was no general evacuation necessary, and we went on from there, of course, constantly, on an hour-by-hour basis, re-evaluating the situation to see if any more drastic steps were required. Thank heavens they weren't.

>> Host: The question I was getting to was this. Was there any time that Denton or the NRC thought privately there should be an evacuation, without telling you? Because you are the only man who can do that.

>> Thornburgh: Oh, apparently there was. There were some discussions on the tapes about evacuation. We at 9:15 on Friday morning the 30th -- Bill Scranton called me and said that the NRC had called and said that we were to evacuate. I said, "Well, who

was it?" And he identified the individual. And I said, "Well, is he authorized to do that?" And he said, "I don't know." We went back and checked and found out that this individual was not authorized. And it was then that I called Chairman Hendrie and requested that we have somebody at the site upon whom we could rely.

>> Host: Speaking of Bill Scranton, he was giving a speech somewhere in Pennsylvania the other night, and he really blasted the news media. Paraphrasing, he said he deplores the damage done to Pennsylvania by the news media. That's your lieutenant governor saying that.

>> Thornburgh: Well, there were a couple of what I thought were totally unjustified stories -- one directed at the Hershey Foods Company that I felt very badly about. It indicated that, almost to the effect that Hershey Foods was out of business, and it was ironic because Hershey had been the very company that had opened its facilities to the evacuees, housed and fed them and were taking every precaution with respect to their food product, and yet they were blindsided by this, I thought, was irresponsible reporting. But I thought on the large, on the whole the media did a decent job of trying to keep abreast of a fairly fluid situation. We had reporters from all over the country, all over the world. My poor press staff was simply inundated. They were not used to handling this extraordinary attention that was focused on things, and I think that all of us, of course, could look back and figure out things that might have been done differently, but I'm not sure that they would have been done any better.

>> Host: One of the problems with reporting a story like that for a newsman on the scene is he is part of the story itself. The very fact that he is there makes him a living witness to what's going on. And secondly, as this crisis -- and I guess crisis is a proper word. There was a crisis for a while. Some people deplore the use of that word. As this went on, more and more government of one kind or another had total control over what was reported, really, because our only source of information was either you, the NRC. Well, Met Ed -- forget them at this point. But government had complete control of this news story.

>> Thornburgh: Well, to be honest about it, we worked out an arrangement with the NRC that the briefings would come from the site and that they would no longer give briefings from, which we felt were counterproductive because they were misconstrued, as you pointed out, in the case of the "meltdown" language. Harold Denton and I held joint press conferences. He would address the technical

questions and were available to be questioned by all the reporters who were there, and I would address the questions of public health and public safety and environmental concerns. And I think it worked pretty well. The message, I think, while not controlled, because in this country there's no way you can control a message, was at least attempted to be responsible. We didn't -- if we didn't know, we told you. And if we knew there was a problem, we tried to get it across in as simple terms as we could.

>> Host: Which you and Denton did very well, I thought. And, again, I think some of our colleagues, some of my colleagues who were on the scene, particularly at some of the news conferences, were not paying attention. They were asking the same redundant questions over and over again, and for that they should be faulted. I want to move along in a few minutes to find out who's gonna pick up the tab for what happened at Three Mile Island, and with Governor Dick Thornburgh we'll continue on "Close Up" right after these words. My guest on "Close Up" tonight is Governor Dick Thornburgh, who has survived a nuclear crisis at Three Mile Island -- he and about a million other people who live in central Pennsylvania. That's an interesting point. What would have happened if indeed we had to evacuate a million people? Where do they go?

>> Thornburgh: Well, we had plans that had been put in effect, and, ironically, we had reviewed just a month before this event on a regular basis for evacuation of a 5-mile area, 10-mile area. We were thinking at some point through the crisis of the possibility of having to evacuate a 20-mile area. Evacuation is not something you undertake lightly. It's an enormously complicated procedure, and all of the logistics were being looked to -- school buses being utilized, roads being directed in one way, availability of housing, cots, blankets, helicopters, medical supplies, the difficulty of moving people in hospitals and intensive-care units, incubators, old people. It was an enormously complicated situation, but we were trying to do the best we could if the eventuality ever came. Fortunately, it didn't.

>> Host: So it could have been done. Just the other day, the PUC rescinded entirely a \$49 million rate increase from Met Ed. Now Met Ed said if it has to foot the bill itself for Three Mile Island -- and now it's paying \$800,000 a day extra, it says, to buy fuels from other sources -- it will go broke. What's the solution to that? Who shall pay?

>> Thornburgh: Well, it raises some very serious public-policy questions. I think there's an inherent unfairness in just passing

those costs through to the customers of the utility because they, in effect, end up paying for something that the utility was at fault for in one way or another. On the other hand, those customers are not gonna be very well-served by a bankrupt utility, one that is unable to provide energy, and they'll have to buy energy at perhaps an even higher price from some other source. There are provisions under the federal law for insurance coverage of losses in a nuclear incident, but the type of incident that's contemplated is a disaster, not the type of threat that developed out of Three Mile Island. It may well be that this is a cost due to the unprecedented nature of the event that will have to be picked up by the public at large. The federal or state government may have to step in because it's going to be an extremely difficult job to apportion fairly the costs, which could be rather substantial by the time we're through. We just don't know at this point. It's interesting that insurance policies for nuclear power plants are limited to -- I think it's \$300 million. But that is a liability-type insurance, I believe. It's not, as you say, for economic losses suffered by the utility itself. So this, again, is a wholly unique situation, I guess. It's never happened before.

>> Thornburgh: I think -- I suppose there's always a temptation to look for productive byproducts of an event like this, but I do think that we have now gotten a glimpse of what a nuclear catastrophe could mean in this country. We've seen what happens when the worst fears that we have almost come to pass, and I hope that our lawmakers in Washington and those of use who are charged with state responsibilities take this opportunity to review entirely what government's response and position should be in connection with this type of incident. We have been given a peek through the door of what might happen, and we must use that experience to fashion some changes in our structure so that we ensure that the people of Pennsylvania and the nation don't suffer in the -- I hope we don't have a recurrence of this, but it's always got to be a possibility.

>> Host: You have been in the past an advocate of nuclear power. Did the incident at Three Mile Island -- has it in any way changed your attitude toward nuclear power?

>> Thornburgh: Well, I've always felt that we ought to look at nuclear energy as an option simply out of necessity. We have a serious energy shortfall, given the situation in the Mideast and the inability to use our native Pennsylvania coal because of environmental standards. But I think the safety factors, about which all of us have always been concerned, now become paramount. And my own level of skepticism about the future of nuclear energy

has been raised quite a bit. I think the proponents of nuclear energy as a cure-all for our energy problems bear a very heavy burden of proof in light of Three Mile Island. I think that there's got to be absolute assurance of the safety of these facilities. It's why I asked for and received a commitment from the NRC to inspect and report to me on each of the facilities in Pennsylvania as to their safety and as to the lack of any threat to the health and the environment of Pennsylvania before we're going to begin looking, again, to nuclear energy as the cure-all.

>> Host: It's interesting. Many of the environmentalists want an end to nuclear power, period. We have 72 plants operating in the United States, and some people say, "Shut them all down." The same people say we can't burn the coal, either, because that's gonna pollute the air. What do we do, build windmills or put up solar -- what's the answer?

>> Thornburgh: Well, I think one of the answers that I like to think of as a Pennsylvanian is if we had devoted just some small portion of the billions of dollars that's gone into nuclear-energy research to our coal industry -- we're sitting in Pennsylvania on top of a hundred-year supply of energy from coal, and yet because we are not able to economically carry out coal gasification or liquefaction programs or the kinds of environmental programs that can clean up the sulfur dioxide in the coal, and we can't really burn Pennsylvania coal in the state, we're sitting on a treasure that we can't tap. And I hope that the problems that we've had with nuclear in the last month or so will once again remind us that we have a very valuable resource that we ought to be working in research and development to make maximum use of.

>> Host: Governor Rockefeller of West Virginia has been sharply critical of President Carter and the Environmental Protection Agency with regard to that same question. Here we are, sitting on hundreds of year's worth of coal, and we can't touch it. At the same time, there's a major question mark about nuclear power. Do you also, as Governor Rockefeller, fault President Carter and his Department of Energy for going off on a shotgun-type direction?

>> Thornburgh: Well, I think it's a matter of balance. There's no such thing as a no-risk proposition in this life that I've ever found. And, to be sure, there are shortcomings in the use of nuclear energy. We've been reminded rather grimly of that within the last month. There are shortcomings in the use of coal in the sense of environmental hazards. There are obvious shortcomings in the continued reliance of this country on the Mideast for oil supplies, which could be cut off at a moment's notice by any of

the countries who are major suppliers for political reasons. What we've got to do, I think, is to develop a comprehensive and balanced energy policy which takes advantage of the great resources we have that devotes our tremendous know-how, our technological abilities to providing sources of energy that are constant and assured and as low a risk as we can contemplate. But the idea that we're going to have a no-risk source of energy guaranteed in perpetuity is just nonsense.

>> Host: That includes nuclear energy.

>> Thornburgh: Absolutely.

>> Host: There's always a risk. There are some people who say that there are studies that show that burning of fossil fuel causes 20,000 premature deaths each year east of the Mississippi. I mean, I can't prove that or whatever, but there have been studies taken along those lines. Interesting -- right after Three Mile Island, we took a Gallup survey, commissioned by WTAE-TV and The Post-Gazette, and the attitude toward nuclear power among western Pennsylvanians was still very favorable. Are you surprised by that?

>> Thornburgh: I think that's been the experience of all the polling that's been done post-Three Mile Island, that there is a healthy respect for the safety problems involved. There is a healthy skepticism about the ability of the nuclear industry now to perform as safely as we would like. But I don't think there's a rejection of the potential of this source of energy. I think there's a tremendous concern that I share that everything be done to provide the technological know-how at the site, that there be safety measures taken that ensure as far as possible that we don't have a repeat of this incident. But I think that there's no way in the world that we can reject out of hand forever and always the idea that we're going to have nuclear energy as part of our energy sources in this country.

>> Host: Pennsylvania has, or had, three on-stream reactors, I believe -- Shippingport, Three Mile Island, and one in --

>> Thornburgh: Peach Bottom.

>> Host: Near Philadelphia. Given what's happened at Three Mile Island, would you wince a little bit if a fourth went up somewhere, anywhere in the state?

>> Thornburgh: Well, we have others that are under construction. The Susquehanna project in Berwick. There are others on the drawing board.

>> Host: Is that the one which has been the subject of target of many demonstrations in the last couple of weeks?

>> Thornburgh: I think it's hard to find any nuclear facility that hasn't been the target of demonstrations at this point. But I'm concerned, as one having responsibility for my fellow Pennsylvanians and their health and safety, that I'd be assured by the licensing facility that these facilities are in order, in terms of safety. I want to be assured by the Public Utility Commission that the financial base that backs up these operations is sound. And I think I want to be assured, as well, that we are not putting all of our eggs in this country in the nuclear basket. I want to push, as I indicated earlier, for a much greater commitment of research and development resources to our coal that we have in abundance in Pennsylvania -- not only to solve our energy problems but to help Pennsylvania bounce back as far as jobs for Pennsylvania working men and women go.

>> Host: We have just a couple of minutes left, and I hate to let you go without talking politics a little bit. They're lining up at the Republican gate for the 1980 presidential nomination. There are many contenders. Have any contacted you, soliciting your support?

>> Thornburgh: Yeah, I've talked to most of the major contenders. They are interested in Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania is the largest state in the nation with a Republican governor and two Republican senators, and I think we intend to play as important a role as we can in choosing a sound ticket for the Republican Party in 1980. I've got no candidate at the present time. I think we want to see in Pennsylvania as many of the contenders here, hear them speak, hear them address the problems of the nation, and then we'll make up our mind as the event draws closer.

>> Host: You have no particular favorites at this point?

>> Thornburgh: Not that I'm gonna state publicly.

>> Host: Okay. On that unhappy note, thank you, Governor Thornburgh, for joining us on "Close Up" tonight. Thank you for being with us, as well, and good night.