YOU DON’T KNOW JACK


No, really: You won’t know Jack Ward Thomas—13th chief of the USDA Forest Service—until you have read this remarkable volume culled from a much larger set of journals he has kept since 1986. Skillfully edited and introduced by Harold K. Steen, preeminent historian of American forestry, this book offers a blust set of insights into and a disturbing feel for environmental politics during the Clinton years.

Thomas was a reluctant chief. Much more comfortable in the field and lab, committed to refining our understanding of the biota with which we share this planet, and convinced that wildlife management was, as he put it, “90 percent about people and 10 percent about animals,” he had no interest in moving to the nation’s capital where 100 percent of his work would be to manage (and be managed by) political animals.

Yet Thomas’s career trajectory also makes a certain kind of sense. For nearly 20 years he had served as chief research wildlife biologist at the Pacific Northwest Forest and Range Experiment Station in La Grange, Oregon, and had racked up an impressive scholarly résumé. That in-house success led Chief Dale Robinson in 1989 to tap him to head an interagency team charged with establishing a management strategy for that most-controversial of birds, the northern spotted owl. In the public eye at every moment, he had no doubt caught the eye of incoming Clinton administration officials seeking to replace Robinson, as Steen notes, with a scientist representing “a clean break from the Reagan-Bush era focus on commodity production on the public lands.” Because he was not a forester, and thus represented a wider shift in the agency’s culture away from “timber beasts” trained to “get out the cut” in the post–World War II era, Thomas was the logical choice to head the Forest Service.

Still, the timing was wrong. His wife, Meg, had been diagnosed with cancer, and she died shortly after they moved to Washington in 1993. Her loss was critical, for she had argued he was duty-bound to accept the new post; his grief is a leitmotif throughout the diaries. So, too, was his unsettled sense that, for all his accomplishments, he was a political appointee who entered the chief’s office in a manner unlike his predecessors. If Thomas’s selection generated some disquiet within the agency, it also put him in an awkward position with the administration, whose land management policies he felt often depended more on fickle politics than on steady professionalism.

But no one was more passionate about “inside-the-Beltway” politics. Like another great Washington diarist, Harold Ickes (secretary of the Interior under Franklin D. Roosevelt, whose published diaries provide an unusual glimpse of how power politics fueled human ambition during the Great Depression and World War II), Thomas at once disdained and reveled in moving to the nation’s capital where 100 percent of his work would be to manage (and be managed by) political animals.

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In this contested space, allies were thin on the ground, but Thomas has a soft spot for Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman. About Wes Cooley (R-OR) he had only hard words: “They are both so rude, arrogant, overbearing, obnoxious, ignorant and filled with hubris that they can be easily played. If they … did not exist, it would be to our advantage to invent them.”

Yet there was nothing disingenuous (Continued on page 58)
about his intense affection for the men and women he led. Whether at the scene of the disastrous 1994 Storm King Mountain fire, or on trips to regional offices and district units, Thomas came away with a reinvigorated commitment. There “is no doubt what contact with the field people means to me,” he wrote in April 1996. “They persevere. They achieve. They are proud. They inspire me. The struggle is worth it, it truly is.”

Yet such inspiration could only go so far. Worn down by partisan wrangles and bureaucratic infighting, angered by what he perceived was the administration’s legislative ineptitude, and aware that his strengths might be better suited to the academy, in 1996 Thomas accepted an endowed professorship at the University of Montana. “Was it all worthwhile?” he wondered on his last day in office. “All I know is that I did the very best that I knew how to do. I worked as hard as I could work. I could not do more than that. In those respects, I am content.”

—Char Miller
San Antonio, Texas