

**NASA HEADQUARTERS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
EDITED ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT**

GABE SHERMAN
INTERVIEWED BY SANDRA JOHNSON
OWASSO, OKLAHOMA AND HOUSTON, TEXAS – JUNE 23, 2021

JOHNSON: Today is June 23rd, 2021. This interview with Gabe Sherman is being conducted for the NASA Headquarters Oral History Project. Mr. Sherman is speaking with me today by telephone from Owasso, Oklahoma. The interviewer is Sandra Johnson in Houston, Texas. Thank you again for agreeing to talk to me. We really appreciate it. I want you to start by briefly describing your background and your history and how it pertained to the work you did at NASA and how you got to that point.

SHERMAN: Sandra, thank you so much for having me. I really appreciate the opportunity. Quick background is I did not go to school to eventually work at NASA, and honestly, I didn't go to school to eventually work in politics. Through a number of different things throughout my career I fell into the marketing and communications lane. That was really where I found a home. It was through that that I met this gentleman named Jim [James F.] Bridenstine, who was running the Tulsa Air and Space Museum [and Planetarium, Tulsa, Oklahoma] at the time. He and I got to know each other, and he happened to have an opening at the museum for a marketing director, so he asked me to take that position.

When I took that position, going in, again I had known Jim for just a few weeks at the time, but I just knew there was something about this gentleman. He had a great vision for the museum. He knew where he wanted to go, and he had some big ideas that he wanted to employ

to grow the awareness of the museum. I thought, “Man, that sounds like a lot of fun, so let’s go do that.”

Then through our time at the Tulsa Air and Space Museum he was speaking with every civic club and Rotary Club around Tulsa, and before long people started to say, “Hey, you should consider running for office.” He made the decision to do that, and when he did, he asked me to be his campaign manager. I started as his campaign manager and we worked through an election in 2012 and won the Republican primary and went on to win the general election, and so he moved into Congress [representing Oklahoma 1st district] at that point.

I stayed in Oklahoma. I was the district director and also the campaign manager in the congressional office, again with a focus on putting together our communications and outreach efforts. We did that for about five years, and Jim really found a lane in space inside of Congress. It can be a complex issue, as you well know, Sandra. There were a lot of members of Congress that didn’t want to tackle it. He just jumped in full bore and said, “Space is going to be—there’s nobody leading here. It’s an important capability for our nation, we need to be leading in space.” He jumped in and took the reins.

We supported him throughout that entire effort. There was a space symposium where he introduced the American Space Renaissance Act [32nd Space Symposium, Colorado Springs, Colorado, April, 12, 2016]. It was a piece of legislation that took a lot of the great ideas from space visionaries and leaders in the industry, leaders in government, and we compiled them into one bill, and we said, “If America wants to lead in space for the generations to come, these are the types of ideas that are going to get us there.” That got tremendous coverage.

Then he went around, and he was speaking all over the place about this bill and about the United States’ position in space, what we needed to do to continue leading in space. That led to

his eventual nomination to be the Administrator at NASA. When he was nominated there was quite a delay between the nomination and the confirmation as we worked through that process. But he was always talking to me about “If this happens, I’m going to need you to come to NASA and help.” We talked a lot on the family side of things, and eventually we got that opportunity, and came up as the Deputy Chief of Staff to begin my time at NASA, and then finished as the Chief of Staff, before we left January 20th of 2021.

JOHNSON: You were first Deputy Chief of Staff. Who was Chief of Staff at that time?

SHERMAN: At that time we didn’t have a Chief of Staff. We had an Acting Chief of Staff. That was Tom [Thomas E.] Cremins, who’s somebody that means a lot to me. Just a tremendous man and just somebody who’s tremendously committed to the NASA mission. He stepped in, was our Acting Chief of Staff. Then we brought in Janet Karika as our Chief of Staff from a political standpoint, and so I served as the Deputy as she served as the Chief.

JOHNSON: Talk about getting that job at NASA. I know a political appointee has to go through an actual confirmation process, but that position isn’t technically a political appointee. Just talk about getting hired into that position and how that happened and what you had to go through.

SHERMAN: Looking at NASA from the outside, just like everybody does, you were just enamored with the history of the Agency, with the capabilities of the Agency, with the vision of the Agency. While I was sitting in the 1st District congressional office looking at this

opportunity, honestly I was a little overwhelmed, like “Oh my goodness, how can we come in here and make an impact at an agency like NASA?” Because it’s a tremendous agency.

I went to work studying a lot to get up to speed with the most important issues. Not only looking at the issues that NASA was facing, looking at the programs inside of the Agency, and trying to understand the status and who’s for certain programs and who’s against certain programs, but also because my background has been focused in marketing and communications I really dove into the communications side of NASA. What story were we telling to the general public, and then if we got the opportunity to be there where did we think we could make an impact on the communications side?

That’s really where I dove in to get smart, leading up to that opportunity. Then you’re correct, I was not a Senate-confirmed political appointee, so I didn’t have to go through a hearing or any type of strenuous confirmation process, but as just a presidential appointee I was just told, “Hey, here’s the job. Jim wants you here. We’re putting you in the position.”

I had to go through an interview process and I had to walk that out for a while and talk with the family a lot about what a move from Oklahoma to the [Washington] DC area would mean, because we’d grown up in Oklahoma and lived here for 30 plus years. It was going to be a big jump for the family. But my wife and my kiddos were on board by the time we were ready to make the decision, and so we moved the whole family up to northern Virginia and started the NASA journey from there. It was pretty incredible, Sandra, to look at from the outside, and just the amount of time we had to put in in preparation to be able to do some things from day one; it was a lot. There was a lot of prep work that went in there.

JOHNSON: Yes, that's a big change, going from Oklahoma to the DC area. Virginia is definitely a beautiful place though.

SHERMAN: Oh my goodness, I think it's one of the most beautiful states in the country.

JOHNSON: I agree. It's a lovely area. But it was a big change, like you said, for everybody. I'm glad that your family was good with you going up there.

SHERMAN: Me too.

JOHNSON: You came in a couple of months after the Administrator. But there is always a transition when we go from one administration to another. Even though there was a long period with Robert [M.] Lightfoot being the Acting Administrator, and I know some people were still there, some people were leaving. But talk about that transition, and when you first came in, and those first few months, some of the things you noticed about NASA. I know working with Congress or working on a campaign, those are a little different than working for NASA with civil servants. Talk about that transition and how smoothly it went, and how that worked for you.

SHERMAN: Great question. Number one, the confirmation process for Jim Bridenstine, it was long, it was contentious, and there were a lot of, I would say, maybe false impressions. I think he was misrepresented in a lot of ways as we led up to his confirmation. There were a lot of people that attacked him outright. He was a conservative member of Congress, and so we knew

that the attacks were going to come on his record and that that was going to happen. That process took a while.

By the time we got to NASA you had a workforce that had been very engaged in watching this confirmation process and so I believe there was a lot of folks that really questioned whether or not Jim Bridenstine was going to be the right fit for the job. Whenever we got in, like you mentioned, he was confirmed in April, I didn't start until the end of May, but what we looked at, what we put as priority number one, was to build buy-in from the workforce. That was the number one thing that we knew we had to do.

We respected the civil servants at NASA tremendously, and we wanted to make sure that they understood who Jim was, who our team was, what we were about. The fact that we had always been about caring for people and ensuring that people in our organizations that we were leading thrived, and so we wanted to go out, meet the workforce, and answer all of the tough questions up front.

You mentioned coming from a campaign. Our initial campaign at NASA was to win the workforce. That's absolutely the way that we focused our first 90 to 120 days. What we did is we traveled to every [NASA] Center. We held town halls at every Center. We took all the tough questions that anybody wanted to ask. We actually cued them up front. All the questions, let's move them up front. All the easy questions, we'll get to those at another time. But there are some serious concerns amongst the workforce, and we need to address them head-on. At every stop we not only toured all over the facilities and spent time with all the folks that were working on the programs, but we made time for an all-hands discussion. Ask any question you want. We were going to spend the amount of time we needed to to ensure that people knew that we truly cared about them and the success of the Agency. We worked every Center that way.

I think, honestly, it was one of the most important and strategic moves we made the entire time at NASA. You know this, Sandra, but if you can build buy-in early, then whenever you start casting vision and you start asking people to maybe reach beyond themselves to push towards a goal that is bigger than any one person can achieve, you have a foundation of trust to move forward and actually chase down those goals. I think had we come in, and we'd just said, "Hey, here's the big vision, here's the goal, here's where we're headed, get on board or we're leaving without you," that would have been very difficult. What we did instead was let's go win the workforce, let's win NASA leadership, let's make sure.

One of the things I kept telling our politicals was, "When we leave NASA I hope that people say that the way that this political team and the civil servants worked together you couldn't hardly tell which was which, that we were that ingrained, that we were working that closely together, that we were sharing priorities and ideas, and that we were really building long-lasting relationships." Because that's what I believe really creates healthy teams. If you have a foundation of trust and shared vision, then you can go out and you can accomplish some tremendous things.

That's really what we started with. That was our initial campaign at NASA, was this is a tough transition, we all know it. They've been without an Administrator for quite some time. There's been a lot of ugly things said about Jim in the media and in congressional hearings. So let's go dispel the rumors, let's go build relationships, let's build trust. If we take the time to do that then the rest of our time here at NASA will be more fruitful. Like I said, I think it was one of the biggest and best decisions we made.

JOHNSON: Could you feel a difference in the workforce after you did that? Do you feel like it was very successful?

SHERMAN: I do, I do. I'll tell you. What's interesting about the NASA workforce is they're not afraid to tell you what they're thinking. I love that about them. You never have to question what's at the top of mind of the NASA workforce.

What was encouraging for us to see is we would take all the hard questions and Jim would just walk through them question at a time. Then to see the feedback on social media, to see the feedback on email chains and other things that people would share with me, and to get phone calls from NASA Centers around the country to say, "Hey, I want you to know the Administrator really won with our workforce whenever he said this and he did that and said this."

We absolutely saw a change. I'm not going to lie to you, Sandra. It wasn't an overnight thing. It wasn't like oh my gosh, now this is the greatest Administrator ever. It was okay, this is a good man and he's not afraid to answer questions, and he's going to be honest with us. I think that right there opened the door for us to then build some momentum as we started to really look at what our priorities were going to be at NASA.

Yes, there was a noticeable change. People were not mean to us. That as never the case. The NASA workforce was tremendous. It was about whether or not they were going to invest fully their time and energy into anything, into the vision of the administration or the vision of Jim Bridenstine. I think it was answering that question: Is this guy worthy of my efforts here at NASA, the mission is, the Agency is, but is Jim Bridenstine and his team, are they on board with doing what's best for the Agency?

I thought we had to answer that question right up front, and it took time, but I think we did a good job.

JOHNSON: You mentioned the hard questions. Was there anything that surprised you when you were doing that or when you first started traveling to the different Centers? Or anything at the Centers that surprised you that you weren't aware was there?

SHERMAN: I had a history with Jim. I'd worked with him for 10 years before we got to NASA. I know this guy inside and out, and I know exactly who he is, the type of character he has, the qualities of who he is as a human being. I know that he's a great guy. Again, it wasn't that there was anybody that was outright rude or combative at any of these town halls. That was not the case. But I wanted so much for people to get to know him and not the person that people painted him out to be in the confirmation hearings. What was maybe surprising to some but not to me was how quickly whenever he is with people he can win them. That really was one of the most fun things for me to see.

Again, it wasn't a surprise, it was just fun to watch as people got to see that he is very technically sound, that he absolutely knows what he's talking about, that he does value people, that it's not about anything other than valuing people and who they are and ensuring we're rallying a team to accomplish a goal. As people got to spend time with him it was always fun for me, for people to spend time with him, and then watch the way that their opinion changes, and the way that the walls come down and people are just engaged with a very good guy.

Once you got past all of the outside stuff it was always fun to watch people be like, “Okay, this is a really good guy and I think he’s got a good heart and he wants to see the Agency succeed.”

JOHNSON: You mentioned the prep work that you were doing, and I know he had a background as you said when he was in Congress and interest in NASA. But how much prep work did he have to do once he knew he was going to be nominated for the position?

SHERMAN: Great question. I’ve never seen anybody prepare like Jim Bridenstine. Nobody takes it more seriously and nobody puts in the time and effort like he does. I think part of it is when you go through a confirmation process like we went through, which was very contentious, you have to be at the top of your game coming in. He knew there were going to be opportunities where people were going to try and stump him with technical details. He knew there were going to be questions about programmatic decisions that were going to have to be made where there was a lot of political land mines in his answers. He knew the challenges both budgetary and technically about the mission that we were being called to go execute and how were we going to actually overcome those challenges.

He was loaded up. He was ready to go. Every day he spends a large portion of his morning preparing and reading and understanding what’s ahead of him so that he can go out and deliver. I think part of the contentious confirmation was actually good. It actually forces you to overprepare so that you are equipped and ready to dispel any of those myths or rumors at the first chance. I actually think it turned out to be a win for us.

JOHNSON: I can imagine it was a lot of prep work just because NASA is so detailed and so diverse and there's so many different things. You mentioned you went to all the Centers, and every Center specializes in something different, with a lot of overlap of course. But I imagine it took a lot of time. Did he have help? Did he have a team of people doing research for him and helping him get up to speed for this position?

SHERMAN: Yes, we definitely had help. When you're a presidential appointee that's going to require you to be Senate-confirmed, they put a Sherpa team with you that helps you get prepared and have the right meetings with people to where you can just get up to speed basically with where the Agency is today and what are the priorities today.

What was so good for Jim is he also had a tremendous congressional staff, Christopher [W.] Ingraham, James [G.] Mazol, and some others in our DC office. Because he was so involved in space in Congress, he was engaged on these issues every day. Our congressional staff had done a tremendous job preparing him and equipping him even before we got into the whole process of becoming the NASA Administrator.

He had a tremendous team. He was engaged in the issues already both from the national security side, which I know NASA doesn't necessarily play in national security space, but some of the decisions that we make are shaped by what's happening on the national security side, but then also on the civil and the commercial side. He was absolutely living it every day and then he had great support along the way to help fill in the gaps.

JOHNSON: Let's talk about your responsibilities as Deputy Chief of Staff, then Chief of Staff under the Administrator. I was just looking over your resume, and I noticed one of the things

you said was part of your duties was you served as the principal adviser to the NASA Administrator and Deputy Administrator. How did you communicate the desires of the Administrator? Part of your duties was communicating what the Administrator wanted to do, and what he wanted to do with NASA, and the directions that the President wanted to go in. But talk about your position and what you did exactly and how you communicated that.

SHERMAN: That's great, there's a lot in there, Sandra, so I'll try and put it in some buckets. Number one, with communications being my background, when we came into NASA we quickly realized that there was a need for a more strategic approach to communications as an Agency. You've got 11 Centers. You've got different mission directorates, functional offices. There's a lot of competing priorities across the Agency.

The question is how can you get everybody working together around the top priorities as opposed to it being just a JSC thing or just a Human Exploration and Operations Mission Directorate thing or just a Science Mission Directorate thing. How do we start approaching communications differently in a more strategic way?

These are things that have been done before at NASA. They just weren't being done when I showed up. What I knew was that if we have this grand vision of creating the Artemis Program and getting the first woman, the next man on the Moon by 2024, it's going to take a collective effort. That vision is going to have to be communicated about and pushed down and through the Agency.

We stood up initially a strategic communications working group. We had people from all the mission directorates, from the functional offices, from the Office of Communications, from the A-suite, which was the role that I served. We would come together around the priorities, and

then we would look at each other and say, “Okay, how do we work together on these? How do we ensure that the right messaging is put together? How do we make sure that it goes down and through the organization as we need to? How do we make sure that the right decisions are being made?” Not just at the upper levels where we were sitting but across the country with different communications offices or different program offices.

That’s really where it started, is I had this vision of where Jim Bridenstine wanted to go, and the only way we were going to get it done is if we focused on a strategic approach to communications. That was internal communications and external communications. It wasn’t just what are we going to say to the public. It was how are we going to ensure that this vision goes down and through the organization? It was a two-way effort there.

I led that effort, and that is what dominated most of my time at NASA, and frankly it’s what I loved doing most. It’s something that I really enjoy when you can bring people together, rally them to a goal, get everybody buying into what it is that we’re trying to do and helping everybody see how. Because sometimes visions get so big, people can’t see how they contribute. But if you can help them see themselves in the vision and help them see that what they’re doing is actually contributing to us achieving the goals, then you can really get buy-in, and you can really build some momentum. That’s what we did.

That’s what I would say first of all, Sandra, in helping be a principal adviser not only up to Jim but also from Jim down and through the organization. Strategic communications, I made that my priority.

Secondly, going back up the chain, up to the Administrator and the Deputy Administrator, my role was as Deputy Chief and then Chief of Staff, and I’m interacting with all the AAs [Associate Administrators] and mission directors, your Center Directors, the chief of

staff community across the Agency. I had a pretty good pulse on what was happening and how people were feeling about the steps that we were taking. On any given day I could understand concerns, bring them up to the Administrator or the Deputy, get decisions made, and then we could move out.

It got to be where people sought me out for that. They knew that because of my relationship with Jim I could communicate effectively to him about the issues that were most important and help get decisions made. If something was stuck, a lot of times people came to me and said, “Hey, we really need a decision here. We really need some input here.” I could help drive those decisions through the Administrator and the Deputy Administrator.

That was a very critical role for me, one that I did not take lightly. When your job is to provide good advice to the Administrator and the Deputy on what’s going on down the Agency and also what’s happening externally, it’s a heavy responsibility. We didn’t make any decisions lightly. I try to be very deliberate in the advice that I deliver. I try and seek a lot of counsel before I deliver advice. I want to make sure I have all my bases covered.

Steve [Stephen G.] Jurczyk and Melanie [W.] Saunders and Tom Cremins and Thomas [H.] Zurbuchen and Kathy [Kathryn L.] Lueders. There were so many people there that I was fortunate enough to work for that could equip me with great information to where we could get decisions made and keep the Agency moving forward.

That principal adviser role to me was something that I did not take lightly but something that I enjoyed greatly.

JOHNSON: In that role you mentioned communicating information, like the Moon to Mars efforts. Not only having to communicate that around the workforce but also to Congress, the

media, international partners, all the different areas, academia, as well as the public. Would you talk about that?

SHERMAN: Absolutely. What we knew is that if we were going to be effective we could not just communicate to communicate. We had to communicate with purpose. And we also knew that the way you communicate to people, depending upon who they are, has to be different. You can't communicate to everybody the same way. Whenever you really step back and you say, "What are the key audiences that we need to reach?" it really shapes the way that you approach communications, especially from a strategic perspective.

There's different messaging and a different approach to reach our international partners. The Hill takes a different effort, different messaging, and a different approach. Reaching academia, different effort, different messaging, different approach. Reaching the general public, a lot of different approaches you get to use. But again it's different. The same messaging doesn't work for everybody. If you believe that you're going to just communicate to the general public and you're going to reach everybody else, it just doesn't work that way. At least not as effectively whenever you're trying to move priorities.

In those strategic communications efforts where we had the Office of Legislative and Intergovernmental Affairs, we had the Office of Interagency and International Relations, we had SMD [Science Mission Directorate], we had HEO [Human Explorations and Operations Mission Directorate], we had STMD [Space Technology Mission Directorate], we had aero [Aeronautics Research Mission Directorate], we had everybody engaged on those discussions. Then whenever it came to a major moment or milestone, we would look at the milestone and then say, "Okay,

how do we best break this milestone down and communicate it to the right people in the right ways so that the right messaging is getting to them to spur on the right action?"

Whenever you have those types of discussions, you get much better outcomes and much more engagement. We would drive milestone coms [communications] down that way, communicating the right ways to the right people depending upon who they are, where they were, and what their priorities were. Then we would also take a step back and say, "Okay, if we're going to engage the Hill [Capitol Hill], if we want to move the Hill to support the Artemis Program or Moon to Mars efforts, then what are the right tactics we need to utilize and how do we make it a win for them?" We'd put together very specific communications plans for the Office of Legislative and Intergovernmental Affairs that involved Jim going to specific members of Congress' districts and going to key universities with them and key businesses with them and hosting town halls with them, so that they would buy into what it is that we were doing and again see themselves as a part of making it happen.

When you think about our international partners, we had a very strategic approach to how we just built buy-in globally around the Artemis Program. We created the Artemis Accords, which was a very important step. But any time we went on any international travel again the goal was to help those international partners see how they could be a part of returning to the Moon.

If you know anything about the Apollo Program, which you know way more than I do, Sandra, but that was an American-led American program all the way through. What we wanted to make Artemis about is the United States leading a global coalition of nations that want to return to the Moon.

That was a really important point. If our international partners were just seeing us going alone, we wouldn't have been able to get some of the buy-in that we needed. Whenever you build international support, you also ensure additional congressional support because there's a lot of folks in Congress that want to see us leading but us working with other nations to move our space agenda forward globally. There are so many just little strategic decisions that we made depending upon the audience we needed to reach and depending upon what the objectives were that really paid huge dividends for us in the long term.

At the end of the day when we were sitting down early in Jim's tenure as Administrator he said, "We'll be successful if when we leave here anything that we've started does not get canceled by the next [presidential] administration. If there's a new administration that comes in, the workforce will be better served, everybody will be better served, if we can have some continuity between administrations." That was our goal. Our goal was to build a sustainable program between administrations. That's what we did as you've seen here in 2021, as the new administration has come in and as Senator [Bill] Nelson has come in as the new Administrator. We're moving forward with the Artemis Program.

That was such a win for us, and that was the underlying motivating factor for us. We could do a lot of really good things but if at the end of our time here they all go away then what have we really done for the workforce? What have we done for our country?

When that's your end in mind, you make decisions very differently, you approach communications and relationships very differently, and you see different outcomes.

JOHNSON: As you mentioned, it has been unfortunately a part of NASA that when NASA administrations change and when presidential administrations change, the direction changes and

programs get canceled. It creates a feeling in the workforce of anxiety among other things. But there's also a part of NASA, the NASA culture. It can be good, or it can be a negative connotation. But just talk about that and your perception of that NASA culture when you first started working here. You mentioned that part of what you did was communicate to the NASA employees and the contractors and the people that work for NASA. But maybe just talk about that and any impressions you had of that NASA culture.

SHERMAN: First and foremost, I'd say that the NASA culture is healthy and it's strong. I think that to me was very evident from day one. The whole idea of the NASA family. As you've been around NASA, you hear that day in and day out. The whole idea of NASA family is real. We didn't come in believing that we've arrived so now we get to run the family. We came in believing that there's a culture here that's in place. There's a workforce that's very competent, that knows what they're doing. How can we help them succeed? How can we build a stronger culture? But how can we help the NASA family succeed? All the way back to the last question. When programs carry over from one administration to the next, that helps the NASA culture. That helps the NASA family, because they aren't being jerked from one direction and into another.

Again that was one of those underlying things for us. We knew that there was alignment between what it is that we wanted to accomplish and what was good for the Agency and the people of the Agency.

I think the NASA culture was on full display whenever you saw the pandemic come in and you saw some of the racial tension and injustice that was happening in our country in 2020. I know we'll talk a lot about that further down. But speaking specifically about culture, we

leaned in heavy there because we wanted to make sure our people were safe. We wanted to make sure that they were as healthy as they could be. We wanted to make sure that as they are looking out and they're seeing difficult things on the news or in their communities they had a place where they could communicate about those things and where people could be brought together through those communications.

We felt like stewarding the NASA culture was a very big responsibility of ours. We tried to make decisions that aligned with that, that weren't decisions that created division but decisions that helped to bring people together.

We looked at eliminating division as one of our top priorities. We looked at it through the lens of the Artemis Program in that, just walking this out, you have a lot of people that believe that human exploration is the priority, and you have other people that believe that Earth science is the priority, so you have a natural rub there from budgets and workforce allotments and everything else. That's a natural friction that's happened at NASA. You have Republicans that want to go back to the Moon. You have Democrats that want to go on to Mars. There's a natural friction there, tension there.

What we did is we tried to identify those divisions and then tackle them. How could we take the division out of the way and bring people together? How could we take the mission of the Human Exploration and Operations Mission Directorate and tie science into it? How could lunar science become a really big deal? Dr. Zurbuchen, man, he leaned in heavy on this and helped bring the community along to where people weren't fighting us on the dollars that were being spent on Earth science because the budgets were always strong, but they were buying into the mission that we had because it was beneficial to science.

Then you looked at Republicans and Democrats, Moon versus Mars. We tried to eliminate all of that as well and say, “Look, the Moon is what gets us to Mars. If you’re for Mars you should be for the Moon. If you’re for the Moon then you should be for Mars.” We tried to build the messaging and the program around eliminating that division as much as we could.

All the way back to creating or stewarding a healthy culture at NASA. What we all know is that the more divisions there are, the less healthy the culture is going to be. How can we create unity? One of the things that we did is we started a unity campaign at NASA. It was announced before the events of 2020. But Steve [Stephen T.] Shih and the Office of Diversity and Equal Opportunity came alongside of us, and we built this NASA Unity Campaign, not knowing what was in the future. But we announced it, we got it out there, we started taking action.

Then whenever we did have some of the struggles of the pandemic and the racial injustice and those types of things, we had already put a vehicle out there that could be utilized to help address some of those things. There’s a lot of culture. You’ve heard the saying. Culture eats strategy for breakfast. Culture will absolutely ensure you deliver on your objectives and your goals, or it will ensure that you do not. We knew that we had to maintain a healthy culture at NASA if we wanted to see our priorities move forward. At the end of the day our priorities, we felt, were going to be what were the healthiest for the Agency and the workforce long-term if we could get continuity from one administration to the next.

It was a big challenge, Sandra, but it was something I felt like we really moved the needle on.

JOHNSON: Since you brought it up, let’s talk about the Unity Campaign. Then also once the social unrest and everything of 2020. How did you help? In your resume you mentioned that

you helped to add inclusion to the core values of the Agency. NASA has always been—well, not always. The '60s not so much. But when things started changing, NASA has prided itself on the feeling of inclusion once, as a federal agency, they started opening up to women and minorities. But when things happen in the public and there's a lot of unrest, then it does affect the workforce.

I know we have groups that can help at each Center. But talk about it from the Administrator's Office. How did you help with that inclusion and that feeling that people could feel comfortable to express how they felt or have somewhere to go to or have some reassurance about how they'll be treated?

SHERMAN: Absolutely. What we knew is that if we were silent at the top it would not serve the workforce well. People would be left wondering where is leadership? We couldn't do that. We knew from the outset that we're going to lean in. When you start looking at the way that the events unfolded in 2020, it got very real very quickly. Fortunately like I said, we had a vehicle out there that we could bring a lot of these renewed efforts or new efforts underneath in the Unity Campaign, which was good.

But as you know, Sandra, the workforce, they don't want just nice talking points and platitudes, they want to see action, they want to see us actually taking steps to where we're not just talking about inclusion but we're living it and we're promoting it. We had to take a real serious look at leadership and say, "Okay, we can say a lot of nice things. But how do we ensure that these nice things that we're saying actually work their way down and through the Agency?"

The core value of inclusion came up and that was just right. We started having the discussion and it was like okay, how do we ensure. We know what our core values are as an

Agency, and they drive decisions. That's one thing that NASA is really good about. The core values aren't just nice on a wall. They actually drive decisions inside the Agency. If we added inclusion to those core values, what we knew is that people would rally to that. It would drive down and through the Agency, and people would make decisions based on that core value. Then it would be something that people would be held accountable for. It would be something that shaped the way that we communicated, shaped the way that we stood up programs, shaped the way that we just promoted the Agency in general. Those core values are powerful.

I believe it was a conversation between Jim Bridenstine, Jim [James] Morhard, Steve Jurczyk, and myself, Bettina Inclán, Melanie Saunders. It was a lot of leadership with Steve Shih and everybody, where we were like, "This makes sense."

We thought okay, now we need to roll this out but we need to do it in the right way. We held town halls. We did a lot of things to communicate about why this was an important thing for us. I think leaning in early from the A-suite level really made a difference in people feeling like okay, they're taking it seriously, number one, we have permission to go out and evaluate our organizations, evaluate our people, and say, "Okay, are we making decisions that are inclusive of the people that are so critical to making this Agency move forward?"

It did a lot of good I think introspectively. Allowing people to just look around and say, "Okay, I'm going to reevaluate a little bit and see if there's anything else I could or should be doing." We saw some tremendous actions come out of that and a lot of great leadership. Again Dr. Zurbuchen in science, Mike [Michael] Kincaid in STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math], some tremendous steps that they just implemented and ran with that we thought were very valuable.

JOHNSON: Talk about that for a minute. What were some of the things that they were implementing? Can you just give an example or two?

SHERMAN: Yes. Mike Kincaid was a direct report of mine. He's the AA of the Office of STEM Engagement. He leaned in really early and he was like, "Gabe, hey, thank you, number one, for the stance that leadership has taken. Number two, here's how I'm going to start communicating to my team." He set the tone early as the AA, sent out good email communication saying, "Here's how we're going to do things." He encouraged and I believe continues to encourage ongoing dialogues to ensure that people, if they feel like something is not being inclusive, or if they feel like we aren't implementing or standing for some of the values that we have, those get brought up.

But it was also about creating space for conversations about how this has shaped people throughout their entire lives, not just inside of NASA. Helping people understand okay, this lack of diversity or this lack of inclusion has been something I've dealt with my entire life, and here's how it's impacting me. When you have that understanding your people can make better decisions. They can make better decisions in long term. I thought he did a really good job inside of STEM engagement of creating the space for conversations, leading from the top, saying, "Hey, here's what we're going to be about," and then looking for tangible ways to move inclusion down and through that Office. He was a really good one. There were so many good ones, Sandra.

Dr. Zurbuchen was another one in science. Very vocal, again from the top. When you set the tone from leadership at the top inside of an organization, it gives people permission down

and in to take the steps that they feel they need to to promote inclusion. They did a really good job of that.

JOHNSON: Speaking of inclusion, one of the ideas that came up through the Moon and Mars effort is sending the first woman to the Moon, and the next man of course. But let's talk about that for a minute, why the Administrator felt that that was important, or why his team, and you included, felt that was a good decision and something that was important to do.

SHERMAN: Yes. We've got to give a lot of credit to Mike [Michael R.] Pence, Vice President Pence. He's somebody that utilized that line in a National Space Council meeting, which again set the tone for everybody. The Administrator and he had had conversations about it. Whenever he did that in such a public fashion, if you think about it, Sandra, it shaped every decision we made from there on out.

When that announcement was made that we were going to send the first woman and the next man, what that did, think about the Artemis Program. It's named Artemis. Why is it named Artemis? Because Artemis is the goddess of the Moon in Greek mythology. When we started to lean in to the first woman and next man, it just opened people's minds to the possibility.

Whenever we started looking, if you think about the '60s, there was one type of astronaut. It was a white man. That was the one type of astronaut that we had. If you look at our astronaut corps today, man, some of the most diverse, highly qualified, incredible professionals you'll ever meet, from a variety of backgrounds. It was only fitting that we would send the first woman and the next man. That makes absolute sense, and it's time.

I have two daughters, one 13 and one 15. Whenever we moved down this track of the first woman and next man, they just loved that idea. It speaks to them and it inspires them. We don't want to just return to the Moon with the Artemis Program. We want to do it in a very different way and a very sustainable way. The way that you do that is you bring all of America and you bring a global coalition that is represented in that return. You can't do that if we're just sending the next man and the next man back to the Moon. It's got to be a bigger effort than that. It wasn't just something where it was a nice thing to say. It shaped everything that we did, from the name of the program to the Artemis team announcement. Whenever you look at those astronauts that are on that initial team, everything was driven by that one decision.

Yes, there's a lot of benefits to that decision, Sandra, I'm not going to lie. You look at Congress' support. They rally behind that. You look from an international perspective. People rally behind that. From a general public perspective people rally behind that.

As we get closer and closer to landing on the Moon I can't wait to see the hype about who that first woman is going to be. That's going to be a great conversation. I feel bad for the Astronaut Office because they're going to have to figure that out. But that's going to be a wonderful conversation for us to have as a nation and as a people, to see something like that come together. To know that we played a role in all of that regardless of when it happens, because we know it is going to happen. Regardless of when it happens, that's going to be an incredible moment for Jim, for our team, because we feel like we really opened up the door. Back to that core value of inclusion, we're making human spaceflight more inclusive with that kind of a statement and that kind of priority.

It was really really a great thing. To be honest, I think when you look at the program surviving from one administration to the next, that's a critical component of it. Nobody wants to

be against the first woman getting to the Moon, everybody wants to support that. I think it definitely helped in moving this ball forward. Because it's the right thing to do, and it builds a tremendous amount of support, and people are just really excited I think about seeing who that first woman will be.

JOHNSON: Talk about the relationship between the NASA Administrator's Office and the White House. President [Donald J.] Trump released five space policy directives during his administration. Maybe we can take each one of those and just discuss those and how that relationship worked and how your Office implemented what the President was wanting.

SHERMAN: You bet. A lot there to unpack. I'll try and do a good job. If I miss something you just steer me back. First of all we'll start with the relationship. I thought President Trump, one of the best things that he ever did for our country was to reestablish or reinstitute the National Space Council. That was such a powerful thing. Then whether he knew it or not, having Mike Pence lead the National Space Council again was just a brilliant decision. Number one, Vice President Pence loves space. He loves it. He's passionate about it. Number two, because he's so passionate about it, he wants to be engaged. He wants to know. It's not just a nice to have position for him. It was a priority for him.

In my role as Chief of Staff I worked with the chief of staff at the National Space Council. We were on the phone daily, usually multiple times per day, talking about different issues that were coming up on the Hill, different budgetary issues whenever it comes to our relationship with the OMB [Office of Management and Budget], White House priorities, events around some of the major milestones that we had.

That working relationship with the National Space Council was so critical for us at NASA. Fortunately for us Dr. [Scott N.] Pace, who was the Executive Secretary of the National Space Council, and Administrator Bridenstine had a good relationship, a positive relationship, where they weren't necessarily always on the same page but they were always able to have great conversations about any disconnects that were there and help move everybody closer to the priorities and the goal of landing that first woman and next man on the Moon.

There were times, because Vice President Pence was so engaged and because the National Space Council was reinstated, we could have collective conversations between the White House, the Space Council, NASA, OMB, commercial companies, national security agencies. We could bring people together, have conversations, get decisions made, and move out.

When we hit sticking points, what we knew is we had a very competent Executive Secretary of the National Space Council, and a Vice President that loved space. If there was something that was a real rub, we could go right to Dr. Pace. We could go right to the Vice President, have those conversations, work through them, and then move out. Mike Pence, he basically told everybody that look, space is a priority. We need the budget for NASA. We were able to work with Director Russ [Russell T.] Vought over at OMB, and Dr. Pace at the Space Council and get incredibly strong budgets for everything at NASA. Not only for human exploration but for science and aero and STMD. A rising tide lifts all ships. That's what was happening in the NASA budget, is the numbers were going up, and everybody was benefiting.

Of course at NASA you always need more money. But it was great to see the types of budgets that we were getting. I think a lot of it had to do with the President saying, "This is a priority," putting Mike Pence in charge of the Space Council, reestablishing the Space Council,

and then encouraging dialogue, to where we didn't allow differences or conflicts to go unchecked. We actually had the dialogue, had the conversations, and then reached resolution and moved forward. That was incredibly positive.

You think about the space policy directives, whenever you come out with a space policy directive that says, "Hey, we're returning to the Moon, let's go make it happen," that's a great thing for an agency like NASA. Like you mentioned earlier, Sandra, there have been times where NASA has said that, we're going back to the Moon, but it wasn't backed up with budgets. It wasn't backed up with the administration buy-in or engagement like we had. Then that nice hey, we're going to go back to the Moon language goes nowhere. The NASA workforce is very aware of that. They've seen this movie before.

For us to have a space policy directive that said, "We're returning to the Moon," that was nice to have; it didn't necessarily move the needle inside of the workforce but it was a nice to have. We got that top cover. Then once they started to see budgets and the administration buy-in and global partnerships and congressional support, when they started to see all of those things come online to rally to execute that space policy directive, then it's easy to get engaged. Then it's like okay, this is really happening.

A funny story on the 2024 date. This all ties to Space Policy Directive 1, so I'll share it here. We're sitting there. I was actually leading a chief of staff off-site at NASA Headquarters. I brought all the Center chiefs and functional office chiefs and mission directorate chiefs together at Headquarters for a two-day off-site. Day two, which was when the announcement was made, was just my Center chiefs. It was just a small group of us. We'd had a great day, and the National Space Council meeting was happening, we knew that was happening. I had to jump out of that off-site multiple times ahead of the Vice President's speech because so much of it was so

fluid, and I was trying to be ready from a messaging standpoint as well, like okay, how are we going to talk about this.

Then he gets up there and he delivers that we're not only going back with the first woman and next man, but we're also going to do it by 2024. I about came out of my chair. I was just like, "Yes. Let's go do this." We have a date, it's a near-term date. Prior to those discussions it was like well, maybe 2028, maybe 2030, maybe 2032, who knows. But man, when he came out and said 2024 I thought okay, this is real. We're getting budgets. We have a date. We have hardware that's in a really good spot. What's not to be excited about?

I looked around at the Center chiefs after it was over, and I said, "Okay, that was a lot. Let's just pause here. I want to just do a quick around the room. I just want to hear where you guys are coming from." I would say that the enthusiasm in the room was not as high as I thought it would be. It wasn't because they didn't like Pence, it wasn't because they didn't like the idea. It was the years of seeing and hearing things like this and then not delivering on it, then having their hands tied as the workforce and not being able to deliver on it.

We talked about earlier about communicating up to the Administrator and the Deputy Administrator. That was a really important day for me because it helped me realize what we're up against. Again it's not that there was any malintent. It was is this real, what does this really mean to us down and in, is this going to be backed up with budgets or is it just political rhetoric, what is it. All very valid and real questions. That group was so transparent with me and so up-front with me. It really helped me communicate up and say, "Look, guys, this is awesome, and at the same time we've got a tough hill to climb to convince the workforce that this is not just nice language, but that it's real."

The space policy directive, the date, all of those things, once we started building momentum around what the program was going to look like and we started to see budgets materialize, then you take all of those steps and it starts snowballing into something that can leap from one administration to the next. But there in that room that day I was the most excited, Sandra. I was the most excited. Then everybody else was like, “Okay, that’s nice, but now let’s talk about how this is really going to happen.” Because the chiefs of staff, they’re the ones that make stuff happen. They’re the ones that get it done down and in. Whenever everybody else is saying nice big things they’re the executors. They’re out there making it happen.

I valued that group so much. They were so important to any success I had at NASA. So much of it was because of their support and encouragement and direction. To have those types of conversations with them was so valuable for me.

JOHNSON: How about commercialization of low-Earth orbit? Of course we’d been working on commercialization for a while, but that was included in one of his space policy directives. The President did believe in commercialization as much as possible. Talk about how it was when you first started, and what changes had to be implemented.

SHERMAN: I think a couple of things. One, everybody believes that the commercialization of low-Earth orbit is a good thing. The question is how do we make it happen, and what is the government’s role in making it happen, can we stimulate enough demand, can we help on the supply side? There are so many discussions, and they’re complex discussions, they’re complex problems that we have to solve if we really want to realize true commercialization of low-Earth orbit.

Jim came in very early on. One of the things that he really tried to make a priority and helped everybody understand is he wanted NASA to continue to do the things that only NASA could do. We need to go explore and push the boundaries in areas that only NASA, being that we're a federal agency, these are the things that we need. They're high-risk, there's questions on the return, but they're the right things that pave the way for future commercial activity. That's where NASA should live.

Then everywhere else we need to start being one customer of many so that we can build a robust low-Earth economy. You look at commercial crew and commercial resupply. You look at some of the steps that we're trying to take and some of the next step program activities with commercial habitation. What NASA is trying to do is open up the doors through being a customer for commercial activity in low-Earth orbit.

That has to continue. The problem is the funding levels from Congress are low for those types of activities. What we need is a bipartisan effort to say, "If we want to get to a real commercial low Earth economy there's government investment that has to happen in specific areas." Then from a regulatory standpoint and other steps that only the federal government can do, we need to just open up the doors for commercial activity. I think sometimes we get in our own way whether it's on a regulatory or a budget side.

There's so much work to be done. It was great for us to say that that is a priority. It's a priority of the administration and we need to make it happen. The challenge is just on the budget and the regulatory side. There's a number of things that we still have to work through.

But whenever you think about creating a sustainable human presence on and around the Moon and eventually a sustainable human presence at Mars, we have to continue to do better on

the low-Earth side of things so that we can prove out the technologies, the capabilities, and the eventual business cases for long-term sustainability on the Moon and at Mars.

We've got a lot of work to do there. There were some good things that happened while we were there. But there's so much more that has to be done if we want to realize a true commercial low-Earth economy like we all envision. NASA has to play a significant role; we can't be the only customer. We've got to get to a spot where there are more customers than just NASA, and that comes about by bringing down costs and reducing risk and having a good regulatory environment.

There's a number of challenges ahead of us on that front, but we have to be willing to tackle them and invest in it, because it will pay dividends in the long term.

JOHNSON: When you talk about some of the preconceived notions about the Administrator coming in and whether deservedly or not, they're there, and also with the President. He (President Trump) made it pretty clear that he wasn't a believer in climate change. As NASA, that is one of the things that we are involved in. Talk about that and maybe a little more about the work that NASA was doing under the Administrator and any changes that were going on during his administration.

SHERMAN: I'm going to talk big picture Earth science first. Whenever you think about Jim's position on climate change, his position evolved throughout our time in Congress as he got more information, as he spent time with more people, he started to not just take any one side's word for it, he started to do his own investigations and form his own opinions about what's going on.

There was so much that was thrown out there in the confirmation hearings that were a challenge, and frankly just untrue.

But he got to a spot where he had to very clearly and very publicly articulate what his position was on climate change, and he did, and he did it very effectively. When he did, it took that perceived resistance or those challenges that people saw with his administratorship coming in, it took all of that off the table. Suddenly the people that were opposing him and were dug in and were ready to fight about things and thought he's going to come in and censor science or we're going to come in do—all of that stuff was taken off the table.

In a matter of one hearing, him going on the record and saying, "Here's what I believe, here's why I believe it, that climate change is real, that humans are contributing, and that NASA has a duty and a responsibility to continue to study the Earth, to gather the data, to deliver it to policy makers to make decisions, and that those budgets need to remain strong." As soon as we went there the attacks, they shifted from one side maybe to the other.

But what that did is it allowed us to then—again that was a place of division like we talked about earlier. Is it going to be human exploration or is it going to be Earth science? Inside of Earth science does he believe in the science or does he not believe in the science? We were able to eliminate division there on the Earth science front. The budgets were strong in the Trump administration for Earth science. We were able to lean in and say, "Look, it's going to be okay. NASA is going to continue to do what NASA has always done. We're not here to stop it, we're here to promote it. It's going to be an important thing."

One of the things that Jim was so good at is tying how what NASA is doing on the Earth science front actually helps people make decisions here on Earth. He spent a lot of time talking about NASA's Earth science data and research and the impacts it has on farming and agriculture.

We went across the country talking about NASA Earth science and the impact it has on agriculture and food production here in the United States and across the globe. I don't know if a NASA Administrator has ever been asked to speak at the National Future Farmers of America Association. Jim was, and the question was why. It wasn't just because of human exploration. It was because of how he was tying NASA's work in Earth science to what these people were devoting their lives and their careers to, providing food for the world.

Those were all really important steps along the way. As we leaned in there, yes, there was some resistance as that became a very public position, as we were being commended by some and being scorned by others. But it was one of those things that opened up the door for us to continue moving forward on other priorities. Had Jim not been very clear about his position then we would have fought that battle day in and day out over and over and over and over and over again. It was much better for him to just weigh in and say, "Here's what I believe, here's why I believe it," and then be able to move past it and go push on priorities, and continue to advocate for strong Earth science budgets and the work that was being done in SMD and across the Agency.

But it was a big move for us. That was our first steps into gaining bipartisan support for the priorities at NASA. There's parochial support in a bipartisan way whenever you have a Blue Origin in your district or a SpaceX in your district, but there's broader support whenever people understand that you see the value in the Earth science research, you see the value in the data that NASA is providing and understand the scientific challenges that we're facing, and you're committed to seeing those dollars spent effectively to provide the best data possible so we can make the best decisions possible.

I think that was a real turning point for us. You think about the space policy directives and the other initiatives or statements from the administration, I think that the biggest thing for us was Jim was going to do what he felt was right. He was going to say what he believed. The consequences would be the consequences, and we were okay with that. That's what he did. Here's what I believe, here's why it's right, here's why this mission is important, here's why we got to have the funding. Then that eased tensions I think a lot, and it helped us build bipartisan support moving forward.

JOHNSON: One directive was the establishment Space Force. Were there any discussions at NASA about how the Agency would collaborate with the new military branch?

SHERMAN: Absolutely. What was great is a lot of my friends back home—and I think this was true across the country—whenever they heard the Space Force come online, they believed that NASA would be running the Space Force, that that's where the Space Force would live. They all texted me like sign me up, man, send me to space, I want to be in the Space Force. We had a good laugh about that.

A lot of people, they don't understand the separation from NASA being on the civil side versus national security space. I think for a lot of folks NASA just is space. If it's national security or civil doesn't matter, NASA will be involved. What was great about the Space Force piece coming online was there's only one agency that's sending humans to space right now, that's us. When you think about space being the way Jim said it, it was a very congested and contested domain, that's really important for us when we are putting humans on rockets and we are sending them to the International Space Station, making sure that not only the assets that we

have in space are safe and protected and there's nothing nefarious going on with satellites or any of the other hardware that we have in space, but also ensuring that our people are safe whenever they go to space because those capabilities are being protected I think is very very important.

We aren't telling the Space Force what they should or shouldn't do. What we are doing is we worked with the Space Force for situational awareness. What does NASA have going on and how can we help as NASA tell the story of the importance of Space Force? We want space to be protected for everybody. We want access to space to be protected for everybody. We want the technology development that we know is capable in space to be something that is realized. We want a thriving low-Earth economy. We want commercial companies doing great things in space that create jobs here on Earth. You cannot accomplish all of those things if space is not protected. You just can't. Unfortunately there are bad actors and unfortunately things will happen and so it's important for us to make it a priority. As an American I thought it was a great move. I know there were a lot of people that maybe made fun of what the Space Force is or was. There's a good TV show out there on it. But I'll tell you I think it's an important, important function and priority for our country.

The way that Jim looked at NASA's role in all of this is we're on the soft side. We're on the soft power side of things. You probably heard him give that speech a number of times at NASA that NASA is a tremendous tool of diplomacy. We can do a lot of things because people want to work with NASA that then help with national security. They build relationships. Other countries' space agencies want to work with NASA, they want to work with the United States. We're a soft power tool of diplomacy for the United States.

That's really where we saw our role. It wasn't to be the Space Force; it wasn't to militarize NASA as some people thought we were going to do. But it's to support the Space

Force with data and understanding and situational awareness of what we have going on to help be in step with what's going on from a national security perspective out there. Then it's to continue to use NASA for what it is. It is one of the greatest diplomatic tools in the entire world. This brand and this Agency are revered globally. When people get an opportunity to work with NASA it's a big deal, and there's a lot of great things that can come from it to protect and preserve peace on Earth as people work together in space.

I thought it was a good move. I think NASA's level of engagement with Space Force, it'll always be just a degree of separation because they're on the national security side and we're on the civil side. But it does not mean that the Space Force and NASA shouldn't have a great relationship and be communicating effectively, because I think when we get all areas of space working together in the United States, national security, civil, and commercial, there's a lot of really good things that we can all accomplish. It's just we don't want people to be siloed and not communicating across. It's a fine line to walk, and Jim being a combat veteran and a former Navy pilot—I guess once a Navy pilot always a Navy pilot—it is very important to him to see that step taken and to see national security prioritized like that.

JOHNSON: We talked a little bit earlier, you mentioned COVID and the pandemic. Let's talk about that and the response from NASA and the effect on NASA. Did you have a role in shaping that response?

SHERMAN: Absolutely. Couple things. Another good story here. It was late February. If you remember the pandemic really set in early March, mid March where the country started to really address it. Not that there wasn't anything going on already, but you started to see it in a very

public way at that point. But I think it was mid to late February, we were sitting in the A-suite. We had a leadership meeting. I can remember exactly where I was sitting on that day. The COVID discussion was happening amongst leadership there.

I could tell Jim, he was sitting there, he was just getting a little—maybe agitated is the right word. He in his gut knew that this was going to be a big deal. He wasn't sure if everybody was taking it as serious as they needed to. He sat up in the middle of that meeting and he said, "Look, I'm telling you guys in two weeks we will not be sitting here together; we need to start planning now. We can't delay. We need to lean in to this hard and we need to start planning right now for what this is going to look like." Almost two weeks to the day, Sandra, we were out of the office. That moment of leadership where he said, "Hey, everybody, this is serious, this is a big deal, and we need to start planning right now, because in two weeks we're not going to be here," that got everybody's attention. In 10 seconds everybody was locked in.

What was incredible to see was the way that leadership across the Agency then organized to start preparing for this eventuality. Yes, I was intimately involved. One of a small handful of people in NASA leadership that was on the COVID planning team from the get-go.

Jim set the very high level direction and then he let Steve Jurczyk, who was the Associate Administrator at the time, he was one of the most amazing men I think anybody would ever meet, and has more capacity to process more data and information than any human I've ever met, just an incredible guy, he basically tasked Steve with saying, "Okay, number one, we're going to keep our people safe." That's priority one. We are going to err on the side of safety. If it means pulling everybody off their jobs, then it means pulling everybody off their jobs. Number two, we need to do everything that we can to keep people paid. We want to keep them safe but we've also got to keep people paid. Because we can't lose our workforce, we can't lose the industrial

base that is supporting our efforts. Commercial companies that are our partners that are working on our projects, man, we need to try and take care of those folks. We want everybody safe; we want to get as many people paid as we can possibly get paid. Then what we need to do very quickly is identify what are the missions that if they don't go in '20 will hurt the taxpayer, what are the missions that are going to cost us billions of dollars or hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars that if they don't go in '20 we're in a really bad spot from the taxpayer perspective."

That's what we did. We started working through how do we keep people safe, how do we ensure that people get compensated, and what are the real mission-critical missions that have to go off in '20 for it to be the right thing to do. It's going to be something that we can ask people to do and put the safety protocols in place and ensure that these missions move forward.

It was an incredible effort. Cathy [H.] Mangum was Steve Jurczyk's right-hand person and Cathy pretty much led the COVID planning operation. Steve was giving direction and Cathy was making it happen. She was like our COVID czar inside of NASA. You want to talk about a special person, just somebody that has a way of leading and rallying a collective group of people in a way that's very unique and very special, and she did a tremendous job for us.

I think we were one of the first, we leaned in early first, and what we heard time and time again was that our response became the foundational response that everybody else built around and emulated and mirrored throughout the federal government. It's not patting ourselves on the back. I'm actually saying because of who the workforce is that whenever they have to step up and tackle a task like this, they do it at a very high level in a very cooperative way. Because of our high-level team and the performance there, we set a standard for how the rest of the government or others should operate. I think we handled it very well because of the people that we had engaged.

It was an incredible leadership challenge as well. You go from running an Agency where everybody's together every day for a crazy amount of hours every week to now this is dining room tables and basements across the country where we're actually trying to move a nation's space program forward. That was such an amazing challenge. But to think in the pandemic that we were able to get Mars 2020 off, that we were able to get [SpaceX] Crew-1 and [Crew Dragon] Demo-2 done. Actually Demo-2 went [May 2020]. Crew-1 went as well [November 2020].

You think about those missions, especially Demo-2, where for the very first time in 11 years we were returning human spaceflight to American soil on American rockets. That was an incredible feat. We did it in the middle of a pandemic, and we did it safely. We did Mars 2020 [Perseverance Rover, July 2020] in the middle of a pandemic and did it safely. I think that the only reason we could do those things, Sandra, was because people inside of the Agency knew that safety was the priority, that keeping them safe and healthy was the priority. Since we set that tone early, whenever we worked through the process and said, "Okay, these are the things that we need to continue to push on," people were willing to rally to them because they knew that their safety was prioritized. I thought we came out of the gate strong and it set the tone for the response from there on out.

JOHNSON: It was effective from everything I've read. Like you said, things still continued to happen from our extra bedrooms or our dining room tables, which is pretty amazing. I think the whole world has changed somewhat as far as working from home is concerned.

SHERMAN: I agree.

JOHNSON: We've got a few minutes left in your time. Let's talk about some of the accomplishments. I know you mentioned several accomplishments under Jim Bridenstine's tenure as NASA Administrator. But if you had to point to one, what was the most important accomplishment that your team was able to implement or help make happen? What are you most proud of as far as accomplishments?

SHERMAN: I'll tell you, you asked for one, I'm going to give you three.

JOHNSON: That's okay.

SHERMAN: I'll tell you the thing that I'm most proud of, and this comes back to the workforce to be honest with you. In early February whenever the Biden administration White House weighed in and said, "Look, Artemis is a priority, we want to get the first woman and the next man to the Moon, and we're going to keep things moving," that was a very emotional day for me. Just because I knew what that meant not only for the hard work that we put in during our time at NASA, but the political have a shelf life. We're only going to be there for a certain amount of time. You can do a lot of damage in a short amount of time if you aren't careful. What we were able to do was provide some certainty. To provide some certainty between administrations to me was one of the best things that we could have ever done for the workforce, for our country. I want the people of NASA to show up and feel confident that what they're working on is going to be here and that the priorities that they are devoting their lives to are real and that they're going to get to see their hard work and their effort, they're going to get to see the fruits of that labor,

it's not just going to go someplace and die. To come out the other side of the previous administration and to see this administration embrace Artemis, I thought that was incredible. Yes, from a United States perspective it's what we should be doing and we're going to do it and the whole world is going to benefit from it. But man, just for the NASA family and the people at NASA, that was just an incredible moment for me knowing that our effort to create something that was sustainable and provides not only sustainability of programs but maybe some stability inside of NASA for people whenever they start thinking about okay, what am I going to be working on today, man, that was a big, big moment. I'm incredibly proud of that.

All the way back to one of the first things that you asked me, basically what did you do. The strategic communications side of that, that whole strategic effort where we were looking at the Hill, we were looking at international partnerships, we were looking at engaging our functional offices, our mission directorates, our Centers. That collective effort and the vision that Jim Bridenstine gave the Agency, that's what's resulted in what we're seeing today. I think the workforce wins, our country wins. I think Earth wins at the end of the day, the nations that are coming with us to the Moon. There's global success because of that one decision that I think 10, 15 years from now we'll all look back on and think wow, that was such a pivotal, pivotal moment. It happened in just one little press conference from one question from one reporter. Very very powerful.

The second thing I'm incredibly proud of is our record on safety. If you think about how we approached the pandemic I thought that again we kept a lot of people safe, leaning in early. Then to return human spaceflight to American soil safely was just an incredible thing in the middle of the pandemic. I remember sitting in the flight readiness review at KSC [Kennedy Space Center, Florida]. We're all spaced out all across this big room, everybody in masks, and

Steve Jurczyk leading that FRR [flight readiness review]. The weight of that moment, we finished up that FRR and there's Steve. You can see he feels the weight of the moment emotionally and others. You could just see he just felt the weight of those decisions.

Here we are in the pandemic returning human spaceflight to American soil, and everybody's on board that we're going to be able to do this and do it safely. Then to be able to sit down with our astronauts Bob and Doug before we put them on a rocket and feel good about the path that we're on and being able to see their families and their kids and know, at least feel very very confident, that we're going to send them up and we're going to bring them home safely. That was just an incredible thing.

That fed forward to Crew-1 as well. I think our record on safety, that's a big deal, and inside of that I would say returning human spaceflight to American soil. Just a massive accomplishment. Of course that was years in the making but we were able to help see that across the finish line.

Then lastly I would say Mars 2020, ensuring that that got off the ground. You've seen all of it here this year as we landed, as Perseverance started its mission, as Ingenuity [Mars helicopter] flew on Mars. You want to talk about inspirational and aspirational type activities that NASA does, that was absolutely and has been just an amazing program. We had people, Sandra, that were jumping on planes and flying from JPL [Jet Propulsion Laboratory, Pasadena, California] to KSC every week to ensure that they were getting the work done at KSC and then flying back to JPL. We had the logistics worked out with our friends at JSC [Johnson Space Center, Houston, Texas] to ensure that the transportation was provided for the key folks to get from one place to the next and to do it safely, to ensure that that program launched on time. Had it not, as you know, if you don't hit the window for a Mars mission, you're waiting a long time,

and storing the Mars 2020 mission and Perseverance rover, storing that, that hurts the taxpayer in a very significant way. It was just incredible to be able to make sure that that went off without a hitch.

There's a number of other things that I'm really proud of. The underlying piece to those three priorities were bipartisanship. They're unifying efforts, is what we were able to make them into. They were collective efforts across the Agency. It wasn't just that we did those things, it was how we did them that I'm probably more proud of than anything else.

JOHNSON: Do you think you have any regrets about things that weren't accomplished or anything that you felt like could have been accomplished if you'd had another four years?

SHERMAN: Oh, man. I think there's always the woulda coulda shouldas that you could look at, and the man, if we'd only been there for four more years we'd have—but to be honest I think I don't really have regrets. We worked as hard as we could work. We approached things as strategically as we could. We did what was right because it was right. I think the record will show that, that the way that we conducted ourselves and the way that we approached our responsibilities in leading the Agency were good, were right, were positive. I don't have any regrets, I think.

What I do wish is that Jim's confirmation would have happened much sooner. I think if we would have been able to get that done in 2017 whenever he was nominated, we'd have picked up almost a full year of momentum. Maybe that would be my one I wish it would have happened kind of thing, is just getting him confirmed sooner. It would have just helped us all move forward in a better way sooner. I was very grateful for the Agency that Senator Nelson's

confirmation happened quickly. That's the way you want it to happen. You want it to happen quickly. I think he and Pam [Pamela A. Melroy] and Bob [Robert D. Cabana] and everybody at the top are going to do a tremendous job. That was I think good for the workforce, it's good for our country, when those things happen quickly, you get the right people in the right places, and you're off and running.

I think part of the reason why Bill Nelson was confirmed quickly is because a politician named Jim Bridenstine was very effective. Whenever they looked at another politician coming in to do that job it was like well, we had one that did a great job, maybe we're onto something here. I think that that was a really strong move on this administration's part.

JOHNSON: Do you have any events or anything you attended? Looking on the fun side as opposed to the work side, although it was work-related. I know different Administrators and their teams enjoy different things. As you mentioned he spoke to Future Farmers. The types of events an Administrator gets invited to are varied and not always what you would think a NASA Administrator would be doing. But are there any events that you got to enjoy along with him that you have good memories about, who it involved, and that sort of thing?

SHERMAN: Yes. I'll share two with you. One of them I wouldn't say is the most fun, but it was one of the most impactful things that I did at NASA. Then the other one was a little bit of both. Number one, in like my first two months of being Deputy Chief of Staff we have some tremendous people down in coms, they try and take care of people that are hurting and bring NASA into their lives in impactful ways. There's a little girl in Washington state, her name is Keegan. She had leukemia. It was rough. Very rough leukemia. Her goal in life was to become

a NASA astronaut. She's young, she's under 10 years old. She was not going to make it to get that opportunity in her life.

What we did is we made her an honorary astronaut. We brought her into the astronaut corps essentially. I got on a plane and flew out there and got to present that certificate to her and spend time with her family. We had a retired NASA astronaut there with her. We got to do some just amazing things for her. She also got to go tour one of the facilities. NASA was just so great in showering their family with love and appreciation and support. Keegan eventually passed away. But man, just a couple months into my job getting to go do something like that and see the impact that NASA and what we do has on people and how it inspires people was just an amazing thing and kind of set the tone I think for me for the rest of my time there. This is an incredible Agency with an incredible mission. We inspire people unlike anybody else. Yes, that was hard, looking back on it, but it was also really really good.

One that was maybe a little bit lighter but was a lot of fun is around the Crew-1 launch. It was actually the Mars 2020 launch. We had a group of inner-city kids that came out. We had a gentleman in Tulsa, Oklahoma, that had been to a launch, and he said, "I've got to get kids that don't believe that this is even an opportunity for them, I've got to get them out to see a launch." What we did is we went to work and he funded 20 something kids, and drove them out, put them up in hotels. They just rallied this entire effort around these kids. We put together an incredible program for them on the ground. Got to speak to them, got time with the Administrator. They got to see not one but two launches because we had another launch go off that week as well, a national security launch. Spending time with those kids, no kidding, Sandra, one of them showed up that morning before they left and she was not scheduled to go on the trip. Her mom

or dad just didn't know about it. Her mom walked up to the gentleman that sponsored the trip and said, "Hey, could my daughter go?"

He's like, "Ah, we're kind of full, we've already done this and done that."

She was like, "Oh my gosh, it would just mean the world to her. She's smart, she's so smart, she does great in her classes."

The gentleman that was sponsoring it finally said, "Okay, we'll figure it out. Just run home and get her packed and then bring her back." In like one minute they were there, and she had her bag and everything. They said, "How did you do that?"

She said, "We live in our car and this is everything she has." She got to come out and go to NASA and see the launch and be a part of all of that.

Again back to what does NASA do, I think that's a major thing that we are and should continue to be about, is inspiring that next generation. Getting to spend time with those kids and getting to see the look on her face whenever a rocket took off. I got to go speak to them at dinner one night, and some of them were having seafood that they'd never had before. Just getting to share all those experiences was pretty incredible.

Those were two major major highlights. Then of course getting to go to a launch for the first time is pretty incredible. I got to go to a number of launches during my time, but the first one that I got to go to was very special, just being able to be a part of that was super cool. Yes. There's so many experiences I could share with you, but those are definitely some of the highlights.

JOHNSON: I think most Administrators realize that it's not necessarily a burden. It's a heavy load that you carry because inspiring that next generation is one of the most important things

NASA does. There are not a lot of federal agencies out there that have that opportunity to do that.

SHERMAN: You bet.

JOHNSON: Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you want to mention? We've gone through most of my topics that I had planned.

SHERMAN: I think we've covered a lot of good ground. I wouldn't necessarily have any one particular thing that I want to call out. I think most importantly I want people to know and I want the record to show that the people of NASA are what make NASA. Getting to serve alongside them and help out for the small amount of time that we were able to be at NASA was just an incredible thing. I truly believe that if we can make the right decisions inside of our government and help NASA succeed, give them the opportunity to succeed, we have the people that are going to do incredible things. My hope in this administration and future administrations is that we make the right decisions to allow NASA to go be NASA. If we do that, we're going to see some incredible things not only for our country but for the world at large. I'm just very hopeful that that'll be the future for NASA.

JOHNSON: I am too. We appreciate you taking that time for us.

SHERMAN: Yes, you bet. Thank you again for asking me. Really really enjoyed it.

[End of interview]