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JAMES WATT:
HIS POLICIES AND HOW THEY COMPARE TO THE PREVIOUS
ADMINISTRATION'S AND HOW SUCCESSFUL HE
HAS BEEN IN IMPLEMENTING THEM

The election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency of the United States has been responsible for a major shift in most governmental departments, with the Interior Department being no exception. Reagan nominated James G. Watt, a native westerner, to be his secretary of the Interior. Congress approved the nomination with some debate, as Watt represented a radical departure from the previous administration's policies. During the course of this paper I will deal with Watt's policies on several major issues: On and offshore oil and gas development; acceleration of mining coal by strip mining; the expansion of the National Park System; and the development of water resources in the Western States. I will compare these policies to those of the previous secretary's, Cecil B. Andrus, and then analyze

how effective Watt has been so far in his implementation of his policies.

James Watt's views on oil and gas leasing, both on-shore and offshore, can best be expressed in one word: acceleration. Watt intends to do whatever is required to speed up the government leasing program. He has made a proposal that would open up almost the entire outer continental shelf to oil and gas leasing using new procedures that eliminate protection for marine and coastal environments.¹ He has reduced the outer continental shelf environmental studies by 25 percent, thus handicapping a roadblock in the leasing procedure. He has reconsidered a decision made by the previous administration concerning granting oil exploration leases in four separate sensitive California coast areas. On land he has proposed to allow oil and gas exploration in what was off-limits before: wilderness areas. He is teaming up with the governors of several Western states (including our Governor Matheson) to try and formulate idea on how to transfer lands currently

¹Sierra magazine, July/August 1981, page 12.

held under federal jurisdiction to the states -- a move which most experts believe would certainly lead to an acceleration of leasing. Watt feels that we must do everything in our power to increase our domestic energy supplies.

And coal is part of that domestic energy supply. Watt wants to increase the United State's production of coal by transferring those lands mentioned above to the states, and by altering the Office of Strip Mining and the nation's strip mining law. Watt believes that the Office of Strip Mining has been "too enthusiastic"² in its regulatory activity, thus suppressing coal production. He is pushing for drastic changes in the OSM, as he feels a shake-up would slacken the OSM's "activity." Watt also feels that the individual states should have more authority in determining how mined land is to be restored, as each state represents a different case. This is contrary to the present policy of letting Washington dictate a uniform law for all states.³

² New York Times March 16, '81

³ US News and World Report May 25 '81, page 40

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Watt believes we need a moratorium on the creation of any new National parks or even the acquisition of new land for present parks. He instead wants to channel these funds into restoring and improving our present parks, including increasing their handling capacity by enlarging roads and concessions. He has advocated an 85% cut in the Land and Water conservation fund. Watt has accused the national park service of "grabbing for 'more and more lands' and has expressed his scorn for the new urban parks that Congress has established."⁴ The present parks attendance figures have been rapidly increasing, with estimates being that one out of every four Americans pays at least one visit to a park every year. And with this kind of attendance, Watt feels the parks aren't getting the kind of care that they need. Quoting Watt: "The nation's parks are not now being properly protected for the people's use and the government must learn to manage what it owns before it seeks to acquire more land."⁵

⁴Sierra, July/August '81 p.11

⁵New York Times, February 20, '81

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Watt, although being born and raised in the west, favors only twelve major water projects. And Watt wants no new construction to begin on any new water projects. However, he does want to regulate more authority to the western states for development of their water resources.

Comparing Watt's policies to those of his predecessor, Cecil D. Andrus, is somewhat like discussing the differences between black and white. Andrus has had a long history as an environmentalist, while Watt has long been associated with conservative organizations, like Joseph Coor's Mountain States Legal Foundation.

Andrus' position on oil and gas leasing is that of giving leases in suitable areas, but slowly to prevent any mishaps. This is in contrast with Watt's gung-ho leasing program. But Andrus was in favor of leasing, and felt that "offshore lands can be utilized with probably adequate protection and give us less exposure than some of our present tankers."⁶ Andrus was also in favor of onshore development, but on a

⁶Government document: Hearings on the Proposed nomination of Cecil Andrus for Secretary of the Interior, page 20.

limited basis with no leasing on wilderness areas. He realized the need for increasing the domestic energy supply. Andrus felt "we should move as rapidly as possible for self-reliance", but not at the price of our national parks.

Andrus' position on strip mining is again contrary to Watt's. Andrus was the author in 1969 of the first surface mining act of any state in the West. As Governor of Idaho, Andrus was ardently opposed to most strip mining operations. Andrus was in favor of a federal strip mining bill, which was made into law by Congress. This is the same law that James Watt is doing his best to gut. Like Watt, Andrus was in favor of letting states regulate strip mining, but unlike Watt, he didn't believe that they would do it properly. "I prefer to have the states do it, if we have an option. But more importantly than who does it is that it is being done, to see that reclamation is accomplished after the fact, and to see that coal is extracted in a manner that doesn't do irreparable harm."⁷

Andrus and Watt would likely have a vivid debate concerning their views on the National Park System, as there is no issue that they are in less agreement. Watt is in favor of imposing a moratorium on acquiring any new lands for the park system, while Andrus was. Watt believes that the present road system in our parks is not adequate, and Andrus agrees with him. But they differ greatly in their solutions: Watt wants to widen and expand the roads, while Andrus said "but one cannot sustain the heavy loads in some of the areas... rules and regulations are needed which determine when people go and how many go. Otherwise you'll destroy it."⁸

Perhaps the areathat James G. Watt and Cecil D. Andrus are in most agreement is water development in the West. Watt is for the contruction of twelve major water projects, and no others, while Andrus was in favor of only projects that were economically feasible and presented only minor

⁷ Hearings on the Proposed nomination of Cecil Andrus for Secretary of State, page 20.

⁸ US News and World Report July 27, '77 p. 62-63

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environmental effects. And needless to say, this was very few. Andrus, like Watt, was very tough when it came to approving new water projects. Quoting Andrus: "We are not anti-development, but it's going to be good development, it's going to be needed development."⁹

Watt's implementation of his policies so far has not been very successful. Congress has refused to go along with Watt on most issues. Democrats claim Watt is abrasive and arrogant, and while these qualities shouldn't effect government policies, they do. Republicans claim his proposals have been badly drafted and ill-timed, problems that he probably could have avoided if he had first consulted with Congress.¹⁰ Whatever the case, he has many enemies in Congress. And because his policies are a radical departure from the previous administration's pro-environmental ones, many environmental groups are up in arms. The Sierra club recently delivered well over one million signatures on a

⁹US News and World Report July 27 '81

¹⁰Congress Quarterly Week Reports '81 p.1257

"dump Watt" petition. And environmental groups have become a more organized, more politically persuasive body. The Audobon Society and the Wilderness Society both recently have had major new thrusts in the organization of members for political reasons. Even the National Wildlife Federation, regarded as one of the most conservative environmental groups, has become politically active because of Watt's policies. With 4.6 million members, it is referred to as "the General Motors"¹¹ of the environmental groups, and has a potentially massive impact on Congress.

And it is Congress that must approve most of Watt's proposals and for the most part, he has run into stiff opposition:

*Congress has blocked Watt's request (S 910) to use funds which are marked to buy new land for the Federal Park System for the upgrading of present parks.

*Congress recently voted to make available money

¹¹New York Times, April 19 '81.

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to continue buying Federal park land, in direct defiance of Watt's proposal.

*On May 21, '81, the House Interior Committee invoked an obscure provision to block oil and gas leasing in three popular Montana wilderness areas, thus handing Watt a major setback in his leasing program. The Committee said Watt was to withdraw from leasing any of the entire 1.5 million acres of Bob Marshall, Scapegoat, and Greedy Bear National Forests. Under the provision, the land would be off-limits until January of '84, when all wilderness area will be closed to further leasing under the '64 Wilderness act.¹²

Perhaps Watt's biggest setback so far has been his decision to reconsider granting oil exploration leases in four environmental sensitive basins off the California coast. Californians have mounted strong opposition and the state has filed two lawsuits in an attempt to block Watt. Because of intense pressure

¹²Congress Quarterly Week Reports, '81 p.912

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from the Californian delegation, the House Appropriations Committee barred Watt the use of '82 funds for oil development in those areas. This loss has been very detrimental to Watt, as other groups opposed to Watt have started to apply pressure since they have been shown it can be effective.

Since the day President Reagan nominated James G. Watt to be his Secretary of the Interior, Watt has been shrouded in controversy. Watt's policies represent a major shift from the previous Secretary's thus raising much opposition to them. Congress has not been too friendly to Watt. And environmental groups are fast becoming a dominate political force thanks in a large part to their organization in opposition to Watt. And perhaps even the business world is having their doubts about Watt. Quoting Senator Alan Cranston of California: "Some of the people in the business world who want access to minerals and timber are afraid he's so zealous, it might cause a backlash and do more harm than good."¹³

¹³CQWR, "81 p. 1258