James Watt, the Environment, and Public Opinion:
How Stubborn Is Too Stubborn?

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# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements........................................................................................................3

Introduction..................................................................................................................4

Chapter I: The 1960’s-Beginning of the Environmental Movement.................................7

Chapter II: The 1970’s-Rise of the Environmental Movement.......................................19

Chapter III: The Early Reagan Administration and James Watt.....................................34

Chapter IV: James Watt: Tenure, Resignation, and Legacy...........................................49

Conclusion....................................................................................................................60

Bibliography..................................................................................................................64
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Introduction

The decades following World War II saw Americans gradually caring more about the physical space in which they lived. As their opinion began to shift from indifference to concern about the state of the environment, lawmakers began to take notice. The public turned to its elected officials to do something about maintaining a clean and healthy environment for itself and future generations. In the beginning, lawmakers were only too glad to oblige. If it resulted in a supportive population, then what was the downside to putting measures in place to protect the environment?

By the late 1970s, however, political scandals and severe energy and economic crises began to deflate public support for the movement. It’s not that they suddenly no longer felt that the environment deserved to be protected. Rather, they had more pressing concerns about their own economic welfare and energy needs. The initial public enthusiasm dwindled, but support was generally still there. In other words, if it were possible to save the environment and revive the economy at the same time, people would have been happy.

Unfortunately, immediate economic relief and strong environmental policy seemed to be mutually exclusive, at least for the administrations in the late 1970s. People began losing
patience with leaders like Jimmy Carter, who tried to do both and failed. As often happens when people are dissatisfied with something, they yearn for the total opposite. That was exactly what the American public got with Ronald Reagan. His conservative agenda completely countered his predecessor, Jimmy Carter. He made it clear that he had little tolerance for regulation of any kind, including regulations to protect and preserve the environment.

The man he put in charge of furthering his agenda in the area of the environment, James G. Watt, took this view to the extreme. As Secretary of the Interior, Watt made a point to sell public lands, and to utilize the nation’s natural resources. Although claiming to strike a balance between environmental protection and using the land for what he called the public benefit, he clearly had little interest in preserving the environment. Watt zealously pursued his policies, and did not seek public or Congressional support. The public still supported environmental protection, but in a more economically efficient way. Instead of creating more moderate environmental policies, the Reagan Administration, with James Watt leading, shifted gears far to the right, and tried to undo much of the legislation and structures that had been created during the previous decade.

Watt’s decreasing popularity made him a liability to Reagan’s re-election campaign. In 1983, Watt resigned as Interior Secretary, and was replaced by someone infinitely more moderate and tolerable to both Congress and the American public. By his second term, Reagan
had replaced many of his original environmental administrators, many of whom supported his initial agenda and Watt’s policies, with moderates.

This thesis makes the point that Reagan’s environmental agenda, compared to his other successful conservative initiatives, suffered because of the audacity with which James Watt implemented his own policies, regardless of whether or not they were popular or wanted. Although Reagan may have supported them, Watt’s one-sided policies refused to take the opinions of others into account, resulting in significant animosity. If Watt had been more willing to at the very least seek some sort of approval for what he was doing, perhaps he would not have had to resign, and could have continued in his position as Interior Secretary. He would have been able to get something he wanted done rather than forcing Reagan to find someone who did not share the same vision.

The history of the environmental movement from when it first began to take off after World War II helps provide the context in which Reagan and Watt were working. The first chapters of this thesis discuss the shifts in public opinion and perception about the environment in the 1950s and 1960s, and how that shift inspired the government to act. Next came the “environmental era” of the 1970s, when much of the initial environmental legislation was passed and many of the structures, such as the Environmental Protection Agency, were put into place. Next, it moves on to talk about Reagan’s own plans for the environment, and how James Watt
seemed to fit into them. There is a discussion of Watt’s personality, with heavy references to a book written a year after he resigned as Interior Secretary by his devoted wife. The insight into his personality, particularly from someone very close to him, helps us to understand Watt’s public actions. The final chapter provides examples of some of Watt’s controversial policies, and tracks his downfall and finally his resignation.

The thesis concludes with a discussion of the counter reaction to Watt’s tenure as Interior Secretary, and what it meant for Reagan’s environmental agenda. It argues the larger point that ignoring the will of the public and that of Congress, and simply pushing through an agenda, may be in fact counter productive.

Chapter I: The 1960s-Beginning of the Environmental Movement

It makes perfect sense to say that public opinion in the United States shapes public policy. That is, after all, how our Founding Fathers designed our new government to function. Gordon Wood argues in The Creation of the American Republic that after living under a monarchy, the focus of the builders of our nation was on the creation of a government in which the will of the people would be the ultimate guide. The government belonged to the people, not
to a single person or group, making public opinion crucial. Environmental policy in the 1960s and 1970s is a perfect example of this. As people’s perceptions of the state of the environment around them changed and voters became aware of the health risks posed by environmental degradation, support for environmental protection became increasingly widespread. This led to a massive grassroots environmental movement in the 1960s and 1970s and protecting the environment and improving America’s “quality of life” became a leading issue in American politics. It also created the fodder for the conservative backlash that began in the 1970s and reached its peak during the Reagan era.

Samuel P. Hays discusses how American’s attitudes towards environmental policy changed over the first half of the twentieth century. With each generation, people not only put a higher value on environmental quality in their own neighborhoods, but they began to see the broader ecosystem differently. Prior to World War II, environmentalist sentiment revolved around the idea of “conservation.” Conservation typically involved developing natural resources in a more sustainable way rather than preserving land without development. Conservationists during this period concerned themselves with eliminating waste that harmed both the economy

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and the environment.\(^2\) The growing field of natural resource professionals advocated this “wise use” strategy.\(^3\) There were other groups at the time that labeled themselves as “conservationists,” but were more concerned with the traditional preserving of pristine wilderness. However, the efficient management conservationists dominated the period before World War II.\(^4\)

After World War II, Americans began to concern themselves with the idea of environmental protection and its connection to human health and quality of life. Social factors helped contribute to this shift in perception as to the importance of the environment. Rising levels of education helped to shape American environmental values.\(^5\) Standards of living rose and families became smaller, so people began to focus on nurturing their children. Parents wanted to encourage their children’s development through summer camps and summer vacations, so they wanted to preserve places where their children could experience nature and grow.\(^6\) More prevalent use of the automobile made more people able to live farther away from their workplace. This combined with the desire to live in a more quiet space increased people’s


\(^3\) Ibid. 103

\(^4\) Ibid. 103-104


\(^6\) Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence*, 22-23
interest in the environment they lived in.\textsuperscript{7} Importantly, people began to associate “home” with a more natural, rural environment, and work with the urban place because they were able to commute back and forth instead of having to live where they worked.\textsuperscript{8} Hays also discusses the connection between the environment and health. After World War II, better medical technology such as antibiotics highlighted other causes of illness, in many cases related to environmental factors such as air or water quality, rather than sickness caused by infectious diseases.\textsuperscript{9} People who were concerned about their health became more interested in their environment.\textsuperscript{10} They became concerned with promoting health through their own activities, which included spending more time outside and exercising. Better health was therefore equated with a healthy environment.\textsuperscript{11}

Americans were more aware of the connection between the environment and human health than they had been in the past. Public opinion shifted dramatically from a feeling of apathy and indifference towards the environment they live in to concern for their well being if they do not take care of the place they live. The term “quality of life” was first used during this

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid. 23
\textsuperscript{8} Hays, “From Conservation to Environment”, 112
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid. 110
\textsuperscript{10} Hays, \textit{Beauty, Health, and Permanence}, 24-25
\textsuperscript{11} Hays, “From Conservation to Environment”, 110
period. The meaning expanded to include a healthy environment in which to live. The developing American consumer society also had a lot to do with this shift. Middle and working class Americans went from desiring simple necessities, then to conveniences, and then to amenities. People began to value environmental quality as part of their rising standard of living. They wanted to have the ability to escape to the wilderness when they wished to. American society began to value the aesthetic in addition to traditional consumer goods.

Support for environmental preservation and for the legislation that goes with varies regionally in the United States. Generally, the northeastern and West Coast states tend to be more inclined support environmental legislation that helps to preserve and conserve, while Midwestern and Rocky Mountain States do not. This separation has to do with the type of economy characteristic of each region. The Northeast and West Coast tend to be more service-based economies. They rely on technology and the people that use it. The Midwest and particularly the Rocky Mountain states depend more heavily on extractive industries. They are less likely to favor any restrictions placed on them by the government for environmental

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12 Hays, *A History of Environmental Politics*, 23
13 Hays, “From Conservation to Environment”, 110-111
14 Ibid. 108-109
The environmental values were developing positively in places with growing demography. It is important to note here that James Watt, the Secretary of the Interior under Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, hails from Wyoming. Although this will be explored later, it is important to keep this fact in the back of one’s mind to help understand why Watt played such an influential role in the conservative backlash against environmental reform.

Hays goes on to discuss how people changed their minds about the environment. He points out that instead of thinking about environmentalism from the perspective of philosophy and as a broad moral question, people had a change of heart because of their own experience with the consequences of deteriorating environmental quality. This experience could be positive or negative. For example, someone could travel to a pristine location that has been undisturbed by human activity and wish to preserve more space like that for its aesthetic value. Another person could feel the direct effects of water pollution and want to do something about it. These types of experiences, Hays explains, are what helped to bring the American people out of their apathetic mindset and encouraged them to act. This is laying the groundwork for the 1960s and 1970s where public opinion helped to encourage the government to legislate strong environmental policy.

16 Ibid. 26
17 Hays, “From Conservation to Environment”, 109
18 Hays, A History of Environmental Politics, 24
The 1960s was a period of transition for the environmental movement. Suddenly the idea of the environmental protection came onto the scene, particularly in the area of water and air pollution. An important distinction between the 1960s and the decades that came before it is that the environmental movement gained tremendous grass roots momentum. This was noticeably lacking in the decades leading up to and including World War II. Perhaps the most famous event that began to change people’s perceptions and encourage them to become engaged is Rachel Carson’s 1962 publication of *Silent Spring*. Carson’s work discussed the dangers of the toxic pesticide DDT, which she linked to humans through the food chain. Carson helped solidify the connection between the environment and public health. She convinced many people that chemical pesticides, and more generally a degraded environment, could be dangerous to human health. Conservationists continued to espouse this idea, convincing more and more people to have an opinion on the environment.

As the decade progressed, the environment reached the public stage. This new prominence was reflected in John F. Kennedy’s agenda. In 1962 Kennedy hosted the White House Conference on Conservation, introduced the Water Conservation Fund (which designated

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19 Hays, “From Conservation to Environment”, 104
20 Ibid. 105
22 Ibid. 72
off shore oil revenues to acquire public lands) set up by Congress in 1965, and signed the 1963 Clean Air Act, which used federal funds to try to reduce air pollution. Kennedy’s Secretary of the Interior, Stewart L. Udall, believed in preserving the American environment. He felt Americans, while leaders in most other ways, lagged behind the rest of the world when it came to the environment. He believed protecting the land we live on was part of our social responsibility.

One of the paradoxes of human society is that while our economic standard of living has become the envy of the world, our environmental standard has steadily declined. We are better housed, better nourished, and better entertained, but we are not better prepared to inherit the earth or to carry on the pursuit of happiness.

After President Kennedy’s death in 1963, his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, continued what Kennedy had started. He signed the 1964 Wilderness Act, helping to designate areas of forest as protected wilderness areas. Benjamin Kline argues that Kennedy and Johnson’s actions were a response to public concerns. This will be a theme throughout the decades. How much of government action taken on the issue of the environment is driven by public opinion, and how much is driven by the private concerns of those in charge? The public seemed to fall on the side of special interest groups such as the Sierra Club grew in membership during the decade, and

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23 Ibid. 75-76
24 Ibid. 76
25 Ibid. 76
26 Ibid. 76
continued to grow in the subsequent decades. This reflected the concern for the environment that was growing through the decade.27

Lyndon Johnson also focused on the environment. He held the White House Conference on Natural Beauty in 1965. This conference not only helped to solidify the environment in public affairs, but also began to take the discussion out of the academic and theoretical circle and into mainstream American dialogue.28 An article written in the New York Times at the time describes how the conference was a start, but did not go far enough. The article argued that while the conference helped to create ideas on how to help the environment, it ignored several glaring obstacles. First, it had no plan to reconcile the idea that attempts to preserve the environment through legislation typically go against the American system of free enterprise.29 In other words, the conference found no way of reconciling America’s desire to protect its land with its desire to protect part of the foundation of its economy. This conflict would come back in the 1980s with James Watt, who will put free enterprise over environmental protection.

As the 1960s continued, however, the environment became more prominent in the minds of the American people. This is again reflected in articles from the New York Times from the

27 Hays, “From Conservation to Environment”, 114
29 Ibid. 23
decade. Environmental politics were officially “in” according to one 1964 article. Conferences were being held more and more frequently with an ever-growing sense of urgency. Despite the fact that majority of what was taking place was simply dialogue, the article argued the increased awareness of the American people about the issue was the precursor to action.\textsuperscript{30} Another article from later in the decade in 1969 discusses the increased public involvement in groups like the Sierra Club. It notes how the environment has become the concern of everyday Americans, not just someone with a direct interest in the environment.\textsuperscript{31} They became interested because of things like water pollution and smog (direct contact with the environment). The article points out that while public awareness had gone up, the road to successful environmental policy was still long. The movement to this point had largely been about aesthetics. The article quoted a New York congressman, saying that the focus needed to shift to education. People needed to understand how their actions relate to the environment in order to create effective policies.\textsuperscript{32} The Congressman said it would be difficult to pass policies through congress if the public’s only concern is aesthetics.\textsuperscript{33}

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\textsuperscript{32} Ibid. 16

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid. 16
As the decade continued, environmental politics moved more into the mainstream. People’s desire to clean up the environment was also reflected in popular culture, such as the famous television commercial featuring a Native American with a single tear falling down his face as he looks at the littered landscape around him. More environmental disasters also encouraged people to think beyond simple aesthetics, such as the Cuyahoga River disaster in 1969. The Cleveland river was so polluted that it actually caught on fire. The “absurdity” of a river catching on fire helped propel the environmental movement into the mainstream for the next decade. The public wanted change and regulation to protect the environment, and the government began to deliver.

While the beginnings of change were clear during the 1960s, it was gradual. People did not immediately support spending money on the environment all of a sudden. Their growing concern helped convince many that an effort to clean up and maintain the environment was needed. Public opinion polls between 1965 and 1970 show the growing level of concern in the public. The ORC Public Opinion Index Poll asked Americans how serious, compared to other parts of the country, was the problem of air pollution in their area. In May 1965, 28% of respondents felt the problem was very serious or somewhat serious. 72% felt it was not serious

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34 Ibid. 78
35 Ibid. 78
or had no opinion.\textsuperscript{36} In November 1967, 53\% of respondents felt air pollution was a very or somewhat serious problem in their area, while 47\% felt it was not serious or had no opinion.\textsuperscript{37} Finally, in May 1970, 69\% felt the problem was very or somewhat serious, while 31\% felt it was not serious or had no opinion.\textsuperscript{38} Interestingly, the numbers reversed between the middle and the end of the decade. American’s were concerned with the environment around them, and they wanted a change.

The next period in United States history, beginning with the presidency of Richard Nixon until that of Ronald Reagan, ushered in the most positive environmental legislation the nation had seen. It was hard to find someone who claimed to be somehow against improving and saving the environment during this time, so the government responded. This also helped to set up the backlash in the 1980s from conservatives who brought back that old conflict between environmental regulation and free enterprise. In the meantime, the public was beginning to demand progress on environmental policy. Richard Nixon’s Undersecretary of the Interior said

\textsuperscript{36} ORC Public Opinion Index, May, 1965. Question: Compared to other parts of the country, how serious, in your opinion, do you think the problem of air pollution is in this area--very serious, somewhat serious, or not serious? Method: Personal interviews of 2,128 adults.

\textsuperscript{37} ORC Public Opinion Index, November, 1967. Question: Compared to other parts of the country, how serious, in your opinion, do you think the problem of air pollution is in this area--very serious, somewhat serious, or not serious? Method: Personal interviews of 2,000 adults.

\textsuperscript{38} ORC Public Opinion Index, May, 1970. Question: Compared to other parts of the country, how serious, in your opinion, do you think the problem of air pollution is in this area--very serious, somewhat serious, or not serious? Method: Personal interviews of 2,168 adults.
When President Nixon and his staff walked into the White House on January 20, 1969, we were totally unprepared for the tidal wave of public opinion in favor of cleaning up the environment that was about to engulf us.\textsuperscript{39}

Clearly the American people wanted change, and that is what they would get.

\textbf{Chapter II: The 1970s-Rise of the Environmental Movement}

After the United States celebrated its first Earth Day in 1970, the environmental movement continued to grow. The newly inaugurated president, Richard M. Nixon, clearly came down on the side of environmental regulation during his first term, and environmental groups were forming and gaining popularity. Although Nixon was not himself an environmentalist, it was politically expedient to side with the environmental movement. Wanting an edge over possible competition in the 1972 presidential election, Nixon promised to come out with sweeping environmental reform.\textsuperscript{40} Highly attuned to public opinion, Nixon realized the benefits of appealing to the environmental movement early on in his political career.\textsuperscript{41} When he first came to office, people feared he was going to put a halt to the environmental movement with a big conservative backlash (much like what happened later in the 1980’s with Ronald Reagan and

\textsuperscript{39} Kline, First Along the River, 80

\textsuperscript{40} J. Brooks Flippen, Nixon and the Environment (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 2000), 9

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid. 18
James Watt), but Nixon knew that a sudden harsh backlash against the environmental movement would hurt him politically, so he tried to portray himself as more moderate.42

The Santa Barbara Oil Spill in January 1969, just days after Nixon was sworn into office, shocked Americans into demanding the President take more of a stand on the environment. While the spill was no worse than some of the other oil spills that have occurred, it was very visible off the scenic California coast, causing public outrage. The high visibility of the catastrophe allowed people’s concern for the environment to turn into activism. The slow response of Nixon’s administration caused even more furor.43 Nixon had to change his strategy from one of moderate indifference to environmental activism. This way, Nixon’s Democratic opponents would not be able to use it as ammunition against the Nixon administration.44

The 1970s saw a significant increase in the amount of environmental legislation being enacted into law. This was the result of not only a sympathetic president, but also a Congress that wanted to make those changes.45 Although the environmental movement cemented itself in American political culture during this decade, it did not lack opposition. The 1970s also saw the rise of conservative public interest lawyers dedicated to stopping the environmental movement

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42 Ibid. 20-21
43 Ibid. 25
44 Ibid. 28
45 Kline, First Along the River, 91
and redefining the phrase “public interest.” On the whole, however, the American public remained in favor of environmental regulation, particularly when faced with environmental disasters such as the Three Mile Island nuclear disaster. Their desire to have a safe and clean environment reflected the connection made in the previous decades between the environment and public health.

In a speech to Congress in 1970, Nixon laid out his plan for not only for cleaning up the environment, but also for keeping it that way. He made sure to point out that action needed to be taken immediately, rather than quick fixes that would do nothing to benefit future generations. He called environmental action a “common goal” for all Americans, and used words such as “rescue” to plead his case. Words and phrases like these throughout the speech made it clear that the environmental movement had a powerful ally in the White House, and that Nixon felt a sense of urgency for regulation, although for Nixon personally it was more politically urgent. This also shows how the environmental movement was moving into the mainstream of American politics and political culture.

Nixon described five categories that needed to be addressed in order to improve and maintain environmental quality in the United States: water pollution, air pollution, solid waste

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management, parklands and public recreation, and organizing for action.\textsuperscript{47} He stated that while progress was being made on cleaning up the water, more needed to be done.\textsuperscript{48} He estimated the government would need to spend $10 billion on water treatment facilities in order to maintain a good standard of water quality.\textsuperscript{49} The focus needs to turn to prevention, and strict regulations need to be properly followed and enforced.\textsuperscript{50} Nixon was very adamant about this, perhaps foreseeing the problem in the future that industry and business would have when faced with environmental regulation. He felt that the structure for making and enforcing any type of legislation needed to be streamlined in order for it to be effective. Federal, state, and private efforts need to be coordinated. He made the argument that waterways belong to everybody; so one community cannot pollute them. In other words, everybody needs to be responsible for the nation’s shared resources.\textsuperscript{51}

Nixon’s primary focus when discussing air pollution was reducing emissions. He stressed once again that we must look to the future when dealing with the problem of air pollution because a quick fix would not benefit many people for very long. He argued that more people were driving, and only more would begin to as the decade went on. His suggestion was to try and

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid. 156-157  
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid. 157  
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid. 158  
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid. 158  
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid. 159
find a solution to this--a car that did not emit as much carbon dioxide, or ideally, nothing at all. Research and development would be necessary to achieve the nation’s environmental goals.\textsuperscript{52}

The nation was moving in the right direction Nixon said, by phasing lead out of gasoline. Nixon even complimented industry for playing a role in this. Although he framed this as if he wanted to work with industry, his next remarks make it clear that he plans to impose strict restrictions and regulations on them.\textsuperscript{53} He argues that firms who choose to spend their own money on controlling pollution will be unfairly affected without these regulations. They will be at an economic disadvantage if they choose to go along with the environmental movement, which Nixon, clearly favoring the movement, sees as unfair.\textsuperscript{54}

Nixon discusses waste disposal in terms of incentives. People will not make an effort to properly dispose of their waste without the proper incentives. He gives the example of abandoned cars in the United States. At the time of his speech, it cost a significant amount to dispose of a car properly, which involved taking the car apart and putting its different pieces in the proper waste disposal streams. Most people did not want to be burdened with this extra expense, so Nixon suggested the price of disposal being included with the price of the car. This way people would not feel they needed to abandon their car on the side of the road somewhere to

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid. 160
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid. 160
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid. 161
become an eyesore and someone else’s problem. People need incentives, and Nixon was willing to give them.\textsuperscript{55}

Nixon’s discussion of public land and parks and recreation is particularly interesting. He told Congress that they should think of public lands the same way they think of money. Public lands should be used for the highest possible good, whatever that may be.\textsuperscript{56} It is important to note Nixon saying this in the 1970s, as this will be the same argument James Watt and other conservative lawyers and lawmakers working for the “public interest” will make when they say public lands should be put back into private hands so they can in fact be used for the public good. Nixon wanted to increase funding for park and recreation facilities.\textsuperscript{57} He also said he would issue an executive order to have all heads of government agencies and the Administrator General review federally owned property to determine their “best use.” Then, the government would sell land that the agencies felt could be better used in a different capacity and use the generated revenue to purchase more lands that could be used for parks and recreation.\textsuperscript{58}

Finally, Nixon established the Council on Environmental Quality to be what he called the keeper of the nation’s environmental conscience.\textsuperscript{59} He concluded by saying the key to success in

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid. 161-162
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid. 164
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid. 163
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid. 165
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid. 166
reclaiming and maintaining a clean and healthy environment is the people. The Patent Office would even give special consideration to requests for patents designed to either help reverse or prevent environmental degradation.\textsuperscript{60} The federal government must also lead by example, Nixon pointed out, to be successful. He stated his intention to issue an executive order taking responsibility for all environmental damage already caused by the federal government and its facilities, and also put a plan in place to curb any further environmental abuses.\textsuperscript{61}

While Nixon’s speech seemed to put many plans into motion for “rescuing” the American environment, it also appeared to be pretty idealistic. Nixon would not only need an enormous amount of money for this to happen, but also the cooperation of business, industry, and the American people. He would have to maintain their interest as long as he wanted anything to get done. A bad economy and government scandals would cause overall support to dwindle, but not fade out completely. The public, for the most part, favored environmental regulation throughout the decade, particularly when it pertained to their health. The more the public became aware of their environment, the more legislation they wanted. In the early years of the decade, the Nixon administration was glad to abide. In a 1973 public opinion poll, 66\% of respondents were satisfied with how far America had gone with environmental regulation or felt it had not

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid. 166
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid. 167
gone far enough. Only 13% felt environmental regulation had gone too far, while 21% did not know.⁶²

Several important pieces of environmental legislation were passed during the 1970s. The first of these was the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), signed by Nixon on January 1, 1970. The purpose of this act was, in short, to maintain the natural environment for future generations, and to ensure that Americans can live in harmony with their surroundings.⁶³ NEPA required all heads of federal agencies to submit environmental impact reports on any new actions or legislations they were planning on taking. These statements included the prospective environmental toll the action would take, any unavoidable negative consequences to the environment, and any alternatives that could potentially have less environmental impact.⁶⁴

Another important component of NEPA was the establishment of the Council on Environmental Quality. The council would consist of three members qualified for making decisions and doing research on the environment selected by the President and approved by the Senate.⁶⁵ The Council was to report annually to Congress on the state of the nation’s various

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⁶² Roper Report 73-9, Sep, 1973. Question: There are also differing opinions about how far we've gone with environmental protection laws and regulations. At the present time do you think environmental protection laws and regulation have gone too far, or not far enough, or have struck about the right balance? Method: Personal interviews of 1,263 adults.


environmental spheres, including the air, water, and others. They would review programs already in place by existing federal agencies regarding environmental protection to make sure they were doing what they should and that they were as efficient as they could be. If the plans were found to be not up to standard, they would give recommendations for additional legislation to remedy the situation.\(^{66}\) In addition to these jobs, the Council was to conduct research and help advise the president when he makes his own report to Congress on the environment.\(^{67}\) NEPA was one of the first attempts to streamline environmental regulation in the United States. The Act sounded good on paper, but whether or not it would actually be implemented correctly was a different story. After Nixon signed NEPA, many withheld their praise until they saw some actual action being taken.\(^{68}\)

In the early part of the 1970s, Nixon seemed to be delivering on his promises. Not only was NEPA made into law, later that same year Congress created the Environmental Protection Agency. On December 2, 1970, the EPA came into existence and helped to streamline environmental policy making in the federal government. A *New York Times* article from July 1970 described the reasons for forming the EPA. There was a conflict in environmental policy

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\(^{67}\) National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 § 204, 42 USC § 4344 (1969)

making because the same people who are supposed to be protecting and preserving the environment are also the ones charged with developing its natural resources. In other words, federal agencies such as the department of Agriculture were put in an awkward position when they are expected to regulate the nation’s food supply but must also regulate the use of pesticides. One side would have to win over the other, and the article argued that in most cases the environment will lose. Clearly President Nixon and the Congress agreed, and the EPA was formed to take over those areas in federal agencies tasked with environmental regulation. Not only did it help solve this conflict, but also put the regulatory process under one big umbrella. The EPA was one of the biggest success stories from the decade, and its structure and place in politics solidified as the decade went on.

Another important piece of legislation from the 1970s was the Endangered Species Act of 1973. There were many species that have either become extinct or very much endangered by the policies and practices of humans over the years, and the government wanted to try and curb the number of species heading toward extinction and to conserve those that were already endangered. To do this, the act called for maintaining the ecosystems in which these species lived so that they were able to survive and possibly begin to thrive again. The act also was to

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provide a program for conserving these endangered species.\textsuperscript{70} It stated, “The policy of Congress that Federal agencies shall cooperate with State and local agencies to resolve water resource issues in concert with conservation of endangered species.”\textsuperscript{71}

Other action taken in the early part of the decade included the effective banning of the pesticide DDT, made famous in Rachel Carson’s book \textit{Silent Spring}. Under the Pesticide Control Act of 1972, all pesticide makers must register their product with the government, which will then put the chemical into one of two categories-first, pesticides that are approved for general use, and second, pesticides that are restricted to certified applicators only. The Act also reserved the right of the government to cancel a certification for a certain chemical if it was deemed too dangerous even for sporadic use.\textsuperscript{72} This gives us an example of the government acting on behalf of public opinion, where the fear of DDT after reading about it in Carson’s book eventually led to a worldwide ban.

Increasing amounts of environmental legislation is not the only indication of the growing environmental movement in the 1970s. Environmental groups were growing in membership and power. Historians distinguish between two types of environmental groups that emerged in

\textsuperscript{70} The Endangered Species Act of 1973 § 2, 16 USC § 1531 (1973)
\textsuperscript{71} The Endangered Species Act of 1973 § 2, 16 USC § 1531 (1973)
\textsuperscript{72} Gladwyn Hill, “Environmental Movement Registers Gains in Three Years” \textit{The New York Times}, 9 April 1973, p. 77
decade. Mainstream groups focused on the areas of regulatory and administrative action, courts, legislation, and the electoral sphere. Groups of this type include the National Resources Defense Council, the Sierra Club Defense Fund, and the Environmental Defense Fund. They bring together lawyers and scientists to help lobby for litigation in Congress and to try and get court decisions in their favor. This type of group represents that they are working in the public interest. This will be important to remember when examining how the conservative movement became more mainstream in the later part of the decade and into the 1980s, Conservatives made a very similar argument and employed many of the same tactics these types of groups pioneered.

Alternative groups, on the other hand, try to arouse public knowledge of a particular subject, and then encourage them to try and get the government to change things. They focus on protests and publicity stunts to try and get the attention of both the public and the government. The successes of groups like Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, and the League of Conservation Voters over the years speak to the importance of public opinion in shaping environmental legislation.

The true test of the strength of the environmental movement that had been building up in the early part of the decade came in 1973 when the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting

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73 Kline, *First Along the River*, 85
74 Ibid. 88-89
Countries, or OPEC, announced an oil embargo against both Western Europe and the United States. The embargo, a result of the Yom Kippur War, was intended to put pressure on Western nations to lessen their support for Israel. What resulted was a massive energy and economic crisis for the United States.

Many people quickly began to blame environmental regulation for playing a role in the energy crisis. One *New York Times* article in 1973 describes Russell E. Train, the chairman of the Council of Environmental Quality, defending environmental regulation against critics who said that these types of policies forbade power plants and other energy suppliers to be built in the United States, helping to create the energy crisis.

In July 1973, Train was named by Nixon to be the new head of the EPA after William Ruckelshaus became Deputy Attorney General. He apparently even asked Nixon for the job, hoping to continue on the path of environmental reform. However, Train came to have less support from the White House on new environmental initiatives, as Nixon began to backtrack on his initial enthusiasm for environmental regulation. Train did, however, have the support of the Congress, which continued to pass legislation even when Nixon did not fully support it.

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78 Kline, *First Along the River*, 95
Despite many calls and proposals for relaxation on environmental policies, Congress generally refused. Some environmentalists even felt the energy crisis could help their cause, because it forced people into doing what environmentalists had been urging them to do, such as carpooling and using public transportation.  

Public support, however, was beginning to erode as the crisis wore on. In 1974, 47% of people favored having adequate energy over protecting the environment, according to a Roper Report. Industry and business were also beginning to push back hard against environmental regulations. They felt regulation would only make the growing economic crisis worse by making them less competitive against foreign companies, hurting their profits, and causing unemployment. As the public worried about the environment trampling over their economic concerns, Nixon continued to try and backtrack against his initial plans. In 1974, however, he

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80 Roper report 74-2, Jan. 1974 Question: There is increasing talk about an energy crisis and the idea that there won't be enough electricity and other forms of energy to meet consumer demand in the coming years. Some people say that the progress of this nation depends on an adequate supply of energy and we have to have it even though it means taking some risks with the environment. Others say the important thing is the environment, and that it is better to risk not having enough energy than to risk spoiling our environment. Are you more on the side of adequate energy or more on the side of protecting the environment? Method: Personal interviews of 1,997 adults.
81 Kline, First Along the River, 95
resigned the Presidency over the Watergate scandal, and then Vice-President Gerald Ford took over.\textsuperscript{82} Ford made it clear he prioritized the economy over the environment when he said

I pursue the goal of clean air and pure water, but I must also pursue the objective of maximum jobs and continued economic progress. Unemployment is as real and sickening a blight as any pollutant that threatens the nation.\textsuperscript{83}

Despite the current state of the nation, if faced with a choice, the public still tended to favor environmental regulation, particularly when faced with environmental problems and disasters that directly related to their health and safety. An example of this occurred in Michigan in 1973, when thousands of people were exposed to polychlorinated biphenyls (PBBs), which are used as a fire retardant, when they were mistakenly placed in animal feed.\textsuperscript{84} Another example is Love Canal, New York, where years of reckless dumping allowed chemicals to seep into the ground finally forced residents to evacuate in 1978 after people were getting sick.\textsuperscript{85}

Jimmy Carter, elected in 1976, was more supportive of the environmental movement than his predecessor.\textsuperscript{86} New regulations such as the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act became law. Carter signed this act, better known as Superfund, in 1980. Many of Carter’s grand environmental plans were thwarted by the bad economy,

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid. 95
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid. 95
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid. 94
\textsuperscript{86} Kline, \textit{First Along the River}, 96-97
particularly after OPEC raised oil prices to $30 per barrel, forcing Americans to pay three times what they had been to fill their cars with gas.\textsuperscript{87}

Overall, the environmental movement flourished in the 1970s. Congress passed a number of significant laws, and the structure for environmental regulation and enforcement solidified itself into mainstream political culture. People accepted that environmental reforms were necessary, but often disagreed as to the extent. Opposition was beginning to grow during the decade, with the seeds being sewn for groups such as the Pacific Legal Fund to fight back against environmental regulation, setting the stage for Ronald Reagan and James Watt to attempt to put a stop to the movement in the 1980s.

\textbf{Chapter III: The Early Reagan Administration and James G. Watt}

The 1980s brought a major change in the American political climate. In November, 1980, Ronald Reagan, the conservative Republican former governor of California, was elected President. Tensions were getting higher between conservatives and supporters of the environment. The Snail Darter case, decided right before Reagan was elected, reflects the paradox in the environmental movement between economics and public works projects and protecting and preserving the environment. In 1966, Congress appropriated funds for a dam to be

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid. 96
built on the Little Tennessee River by the Tennessee Valley Authority. Named the Tellico Dam, this project gained many opponents arguing it would have too many adverse effects for the unique environment it was being placed in. The TVA claimed the dam would boost the economy and infrastructure of the area, and the benefits would outweigh any environmental costs. Construction began, but when NEPA was passed, opponents began to hope. They thought they would be able to get the project halted by forcing the TVA to submit an environmental impact statement required by the new law, which would surely prove them wrong about their cost-benefit assessment. 88 Although they were able to delay building of the dam, with the help of lawsuits filed by the Environmental Defense Fund, by 1973 construction was under way again, this time permissible by the US District Court in the District of Columbia. 89

All hope was not lost for the opponents to the dam, as right around the time the decision was handed down to allow the TVA to continue construction, a professor discovered the presence of the snail darter—a new species of fish—in the Little Tennessee River. 90 The opponents of the dam managed to get this little fish classified as “endangered” under the brand new Endangered Species Act thus complicating the issue of the dam. It raised the question of whether

89 Ibid. 73
90 Ibid. 80-81
the Act applied to a project that had begun before the Act was created and had already used a significant amount of funds. Eventually, the case reached the Supreme Court, who ruled that the TVA must halt construction of the now nearly complete dam because it endangered the snail darter and the environment in which it lived, and since Congress did not make a special exception in its legislation, the TVA was not exempt. 91 Congress, through its legislation, clearly knew the value of protecting the endangered species. Essentially, they argued that it was not the place of the Court to change the legislation. 92

The TVA eventually got the dam completed because Congress created an exemption when the costs of the project already outweigh the environmental benefits, and Carter eventually signed the bill into law in 1978 93

This case highlights an important theme prominent in environmental politics. What should the balance be between protecting the environment and spending money? Should the environment always be held higher than the economy? Ronald Reagan’s answer to that question was a resounding “no”, instead favoring economic efficiency. Reagan was a supporter of the

91 Ibid. 129
92 Ibid. 131
93 Ibid. 171-174
TVA throughout the case, arguing that the economic benefits from the dam far outweigh the cost of losing the fish, which is nearly identical to several other species of fish in the area.\textsuperscript{94}

Reagan’s election reflected the conservative wave that was beginning to spread over the country. He represented a dramatic shift away from the more liberal period of the 1960s and 1970s, and his policies starkly contrasted with his predecessor, Democrat Jimmy Carter. Faced with a struggling economy, Americans demanded change from a radically different candidate than they had been used to. Carter received the fewest votes of any Democratic incumbent president seeking re-election. Reagan himself took this as a mandate for serious and dramatic change in almost every aspect of public policy. He was the ultimate conservative, and made it clear from the beginning these views extended to his environmental policies. He was committed to quick results and fast relief from the economic crisis, which he tried to achieve through ideologically conservative policies rather than opting for a more moderate approach.\textsuperscript{95} The environmental movement no longer had a friend in the White House, as had been the case with Nixon and Carter. Reagan’s administration wanted to shift the focus to free market economics, and one of the central themes of Reagan era economic and regulatory policy was that the

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid. 4
\textsuperscript{95} Michael E. Kraft and Norman J. Vig, “Environmental Policy in the Reagan Presidency” \textit{Political Science Quarterly} 99, no. 3 (1984), p., 425
government should play a much smaller role than had been the case since Roosevelt.\textsuperscript{96} Reagan symbolically showed his disapproval by removing the solar panels Jimmy Carter had installed on the roof of the White House.\textsuperscript{97} The idea of a mandate for change from the people heavily influenced public policy during the first year of his term, and helped him to get his economic policy of cutbacks through Congress.\textsuperscript{98} In retrospect, this mandate was not as far reaching as the Reagan Administration chose to think it was, especially in regards to environmental policy. People still wanted to protect the environment, but perhaps try to be more economically efficient.\textsuperscript{99}

Reagan, with the help of his carefully selected and loyal Cabinet members, drastically reduced the number of people working in the environmental administrative capacity. He even fired the entire staff of the Council of Environmental Quality, and replaced it with a much smaller one that would have to operate in a more limited capacity.\textsuperscript{100} Heavy budget cuts that went along with his larger national strategy also seriously slowed environmental progress.\textsuperscript{101}

\textsuperscript{96} Kline, \textit{First Along the River}, 102
\textsuperscript{97} Ibid. 101
\textsuperscript{98} Vig and Kraft, “Environmental Policy in the Reagan Presidency”, 424
\textsuperscript{99} Ibid. 424-425
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid. 428
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid. 428
His appointments to the Cabinet for environmental and energy policy positions also reflected this conservative ideology. Reagan valued ideological loyalty over expertise in the area they were now working in. Anne Gorsuch, an attorney for a Colorado telephone company, was named head of the EPA. He nominated Donald Hodel as Energy Secretary, who famously believed that the solution to the depleting ozone layer was to simply apply stronger sun tan lotion.

Perhaps the most controversial appointment was that of James G. Watt to Interior Secretary in 1981. Like Reagan, Watt was committed to the conservative ideological agenda, and had no interest in compromise or moderation. Watt’s ultra-conservative philosophy on land use had a sense of nostalgia for the time of the mysterious western frontier and the American individualist dream. Watt’s tumultuous tenure had conservationists reeling, and even conservative supporters began backing away once he put his agenda into full swing. His fiery personality and unwillingness to back down, even when he was blatantly wrong, contributed towards his downfall and eventual resignation in 1983. While it’s true that Watt probably

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102 Ibid. 427
103 Ibid. 427
104 Kline, First Along the River, 102
105 Ibid. 102
sincerely believed he was doing what was best for the country, he seriously underestimated not only the power of liberal conservation groups such as the Sierra Club and the National Resources Defense Council, but he also misjudged the public opinion and mood of the country.\textsuperscript{107} His misinterpretation of everyone’s feelings (including Congress, the President, and even his own supporters) and his unwillingness to compromise on anything not only made Watt extremely unpopular nationwide but also probably heightened public concern for the environment and redirected environmental action groups. In other words, ignoring public opinion proved to be rather counterproductive for James Watt and the environmental conservatives he represented.\textsuperscript{108}

Watt’s experience reflects more broadly on that of the Reagan administration with environmental policy. By choosing a more ideological and unyielding path, they got less done than they could have.\textsuperscript{109}

Before exploring the controversial tenure and personality of James G. Watt, it is important to understand exactly what the Interior Department and the Interior Secretary do, or are supposed to do. The department was created in 1848 as the “trustee of America’s public land assets”.\textsuperscript{110} Prior to the 1980s, its main responsibility was transferring federal lands into state and

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid. 548
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid. 547-548
\textsuperscript{109} Vig and Kraft, “Environmental Policy in the Reagan Presidency”, 425
\textsuperscript{110} Coggins and Nagel, “Nothing Beside Remains”, 479
private hands. A lot of the lands in question were in the western United States.\textsuperscript{111} It originally oversaw large grants to the transcontinental railroad companies and small grants to individual landowners, although for a long time the department was fraught with corruption and fraud, making it extremely inefficient. It gave up on the railroad operation in 1871 and then the private grant operation in 1934.\textsuperscript{112} Eventually the purpose of the Department shifted from overseer of public land transfers towards more of a resource manager and protector role.\textsuperscript{113} Agencies such as the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Bureau of Land Management came into existence to further solidify the agency’s emerging new role.\textsuperscript{114} A very hierarchical structure developed within the Department, with the Secretary at the top. This position held final powers of decision-making.\textsuperscript{115} During the post World War II era, the problem of the Department of the Interior was to try to reconcile resource development with environmental protection.\textsuperscript{116} As we have seen during the 1970s, these two responsibilities often conflicted. The Environmental Protection Agency was created for this very reason: President Nixon thought executive agencies should not be responsible for both resource development and protection, so he created an entirely new

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid. 479
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid. 479.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid. 480
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid. 481
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid. 482
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid. 485
department responsible for environmental protection. The “weakest link” when it comes to this conflict in the Department of the Interior is the Bureau of Land Management. As one might expect in this situation, the hierarchical structure of the department calls for the responsibility of reconciling conflict to ultimately fall upon the Secretary of the Interior.\textsuperscript{117} As we will see later, James Watt, in a radical shift from his predecessors, almost always came down on the side of developing resources and privatizing lands. Most Interior secretaries, other than Watt, hadn’t used their final authority to micromanage policy, instead choosing to delegate it to Interior agencies.\textsuperscript{118} The powers of the Secretary have also been more clearly defined and limited over time by Congress, although Secretary Watt tended to not take these new restrictions very seriously.\textsuperscript{119}

A significant contributing factor to James Watt’s controversial nature was his personality. Watt’s wife, Leilani, wrote in great detail about her life with him soon after his resignation in 1984, shedding great light on his personality, temperament, and political ambitions. Understanding this aspect of James Watt is crucial in understanding not only why he made many of the decisions he did, but also why he antagonized so many close to him and around the country.

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid. 485
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid. 485
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid. 488
Watt comes from the small town of Lusk, Wyoming. He met his future wife Leilani as a preteen and eventually married her in their sophomore year at the University of Wyoming, which is also where Watt attended law school. They had two children—Erin and Eric. In Caught in the Conflict, Leilani Watt described her husband’s forceful personality. She says he was willing to push forward even when it made others uncomfortable, and never looked back after making a decision.\footnote{Leilani Watt, Caught in the Conflict: My Life With James Watt (Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 1984) 30} This trait would characterize Watt during his tenure as Secretary of the Interior. He valued strong opinions and tried to encourage his children to be able to defend themselves. Leilani recalled that often around the dinner table, even before they were teenagers, Watt would play devil’s advocate with his children. He would encourage them to form an opinion and defend it, not matter how much it was attacked.\footnote{Watt, Caught in the Conflict. 66} This clearly is something that characterized Watt as Secretary. He was not afraid of upsetting people, and Leilani was surprised to hear him described as a “bear” by former Wyoming Senator Alan Simpson before he was nominated as Interior Secretary. Unlike the rest of the country, Leilani Watt did not see the forceful, confrontational personality that came to be associated with Watt. A more submissive person, she saw her husband as someone who tried to make others better by challenging them.\footnote{Ibid. 32}
While he was under consideration for the Secretary of the Interior nomination, Watt’s personality began to show itself publicly. He originally refused to be on the list of potential Reagan nominees. His wife said he was playing to political game, and he knew how to sell himself. Watt, she claimed, wanted to be asked to go to Washington.\textsuperscript{123} Leilani recounted that Watt told her he was playing devil’s advocate during the hearings, and that “I made it plain that I am not going to sell myself to the Reagan Administration. They are going to have to buy me as I am.”\textsuperscript{124} The Senate confirmed Watt as Secretary of the Interior in 1981, but not without controversy. During the hearings, Watt appeared to give the impression that the Second Coming of Christ would render environmental protection pointless.\textsuperscript{125} Towards the end of his tenure, this would come back to haunt him in a big way. Both Watt and his wife maintained that he was misinterpreted and that he was simply being attacked for his personal religious beliefs.\textsuperscript{126} Watt’s direct quote was:

\begin{quote}
That is the delicate balance the Secretary of the Interior must have, to be steward for the natural resources for this generation as well as future generations. I do not know how many future generations we can count on before the Lord returns. Whatever it is, we have to manage with a skill to leave the resources for future generations.\textsuperscript{127}
\end{quote}

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\textsuperscript{123} Ibid. 40
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid. 41-42
\textsuperscript{125} Victor Scheffer, \textit{The Shaping of Environmentalism in America} (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991)
\textsuperscript{126} Watt, \textit{Caught in the Conflict}, 98
\textsuperscript{127} Ibid. 98
\end{flushleft}
In his opening statement to the Committee, he discussed his time with the Mountain States Legal Foundation, a conservative public interest law group. He described it as “defending the private sector from illegal and excessive bureaucratic regulation.” The Foundation dedicated itself to individual rights, property, and the free enterprise system. He admitted that it had found itself on the opposite side of the courtroom from the Interior Department on several occasions, but was quick to point out that there were a few instances where it supported the Department.

Somewhat ironically, the Senate wanted to know if Watt was tough enough to handle the criticism that inevitably comes with the job. The Senate hearings suggest that there was some sort of knowledge that Watt was going to be a controversial figure: the Senate knew his style and Watt himself understood that he’d be a magnet for controversy. For example, he was asked whether he felt it was necessary to cut ties to the Mountain States Legal Foundation in case of a conflict of interest. Watt stated simply that he believed one should not live according to what he may or may not do in the future. In other words, he did not need to distance himself from his interests prior to his nomination. Instead, he would take the position of the law, whichever side

128 US. Senate. Committee on Energy and Natural Resources. Hearing to the Proposed nomination of James G. Watt to be Secretary of the Interior, 1981. 29-30
129 US. Senate. Committee on Energy and Natural Resources. Hearing to the Proposed nomination of James G. Watt to be Secretary of the Interior, 1981, 30
130 US. Senate. Committee on Energy and Natural Resources. Hearing to the Proposed nomination of James G. Watt to be Secretary of the Interior, 1981. 30
131 Watt, Caught in the Conflict, 42
Many of Watt’s answers were vague, and he seemed to attempt to make himself appear more neutral than he actually was. Jack Anderson wrote in the *Washington Post* a few months later that Watt was already going back on the promise that he reluctantly made in front of the confirmation committee. He was already making deals beneficial to big corporations with interests in Interior Department decisions, but these decisions were not widely perceived as being in the public interest, Watt’s promises notwithstanding. Many of these corporations, Anderson claimed, were also connected with the Mountain States Legal Foundation. Watt announced that he intended to put in place a program to develop the vast amounts of energy resources America possessed. He claimed to promote balance between environmental protection and energy utilization, but focused more on slowly exploiting the land rather than doing it all at once in a crisis. He recounted to his wife that he told them he was committed to the President’s plan, and would stick with it no matter what the personal cost to him would be. He believed he would not last more than 18 months without the support of President Reagan himself. It appears, however, that Watt underestimated his opposition.

132 US. Senate. Committee on Energy and Natural Resources. Hearing to the Proposed nomination of James G. Watt to be Secretary of the Interior, 1981.,
134 US. Senate. Committee on Energy and Natural Resources. Hearing to the Proposed nomination of James G. Watt to be Secretary of the Interior, 1981, 30
135 Watt, *Caught in the Conflict*, 43-44
136 Ibid. 44
The confirmation hearings were certainly not the only controversy that would get Watt in hot water with both the general public and the Congress. It almost seems as though Watt’s personality made him a scandal magnet, with his inflammatory remarks constantly being scrutinized and blown up. Two scholars, writing in *The Boston College Law Review*, made the argument that because of the many legitimately unpopular decisions Watt made and refused to relent on, even when proved wrong, caused people to turn against him in everything he did.\(^{137}\) Even if Watt made a neutral or non-controversial proposal, or even if something he said was manipulated and blown out of proportion (although, to be fair, it often times was not), people still would not give him the benefit of the doubt. These are all examples of how Watt consistently underestimated the importance of public opinion in order to achieve his goals.

One of the most famous incidents of Watt underestimating public opinion involved Fourth of July celebrations in the National Mall in Washington, D.C in 1983. The general public, and apparently the President and First Lady as well, was of the opinion that Watt refused to allow the Beach Boys, who had played at several Fourth of July Celebrations in years past, to perform because he felt they brought the wrong type of crowd with them.\(^{138}\) Watt stated that there were too many arrests for hard drugs and alcohol related incidents, so the next celebration

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\(^{137}\) Coggins and Nagel, “Nothing Beside Remains”, 545-546

would include family friendly patriotic music instead of “hard rock”. As Secretary of the Interior, Watt was responsible for public lands, including the National Mall. Beach Boys fans and many others became extremely upset by what they saw as Watt trying to impose his own musical tastes and views on them. One *New York Times* columnist even went so far as to compare Watt to Iranian dictator Ayatollah Khomeini and the Republic of China in regards to his taste for western music and popular culture. Watt’s wife insisted that the entire debacle was one big misunderstanding. The Beach Boys had never actually been scheduled to perform, nor had they performed the previous year. Watt never actually mentioned them when discussing the celebration plans. She insisted that his decision to invite acts such as Wayne Newton instead of rock bands was based entirely out of interest in crowd control, and not intended to slight anyone. Unfortunately for Watt’s public image, many members of Congress and people in the White House, including the President himself, were Beach Boys fans. Some even publicly mocked Watt’s taste in music, like White House Deputy Chief of Staff Mike Deaver, who said, “Anyone who thinks the Beach Boys are hard rock would think Mantovani plays jazz.”

According to Watt’s wife’s recollection, the White House had to cover up this apparent lack of

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139 Ibid. B28
141 Watt, *Caught in the Conflict*, 12-13
142 Ibid. 13
communication, which they attempted to do with humor. Watt ended up with a “shoot-yourself-in-the-foot award” (a fiberglass gold foot presented to him by the President) after apologizing to the First Lady on the phone. He also publicly announced that the Beach Boys were invited to play in the National Mall at a later date after learning more about them from the First Lady.\textsuperscript{143} Watt’s wife was upset that her husband was made to look foolish and out of touch, insisting that the media, and the White House for that matter, had tangled the facts and distorted the truth.\textsuperscript{144}

Although the Beach Boys incident was one of the final (and more bizarre) straws for the American people and the Congress, “misunderstanding” was a common theme during Watt’s tenure as Secretary of the Interior. The more public opinion turned against Watt’s take-no-prisoners management style, the more Watt insisted facts were being skewed and the truth was being hidden.

Chapter IV: James Watt: Tenure, Resignation, and Legacy

James Watt’s policies as Secretary of the Interior always was controversial. Many decisions were unpopular because it appeared that Watt just wanted to get rid of public lands and

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid. 14-15, 17
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid. 20-21
put them into private hands as quickly as he possibly could. His forceful personality did not help matters, and his unwillingness to invoke a program of gradual change for the department antagonized both the American people and the Congress. Even when Watt proposed something that would in other circumstances have been relatively uncontroversial, such as Project Bold, he was shot down from all sides simply because people wanted to stop him. Just about everything Watt did became a scandal, and he did nothing to try and subdue people’s hot tempers. Watt believed in the program he was running and continued to believe that people just refused to see the truth. The scandals took their toll, however, and Watt was forced to resign after making an insensitive comment about handicapped people in public, which just happened to be the final nail in the coffin after several giant missteps that actually landed him in a hearing in front of Congress. By this point in 1983, everyone had had enough of James Watt.

Profoundly conservative, Watt wholeheartedly believed in Reagan’s ideals and wanted to reform the way the Department of the Interior was run. He believed land use policy stood in the way of resource utilization, which should be the favored goal of the department. New environmental laws and regulations simply stood in the way of the development that was necessary for the United States, Watt believed.\textsuperscript{145} He wanted regulatory reform, where cost-benefit analysis would be used to determine the value of an environmental policy, and the

\textsuperscript{145}Coggins and Nagel, “Nothing Beside Remains”, 489
allocation of resources would depend on the free market.\footnote{146} Watt (and the entire Reagan Administration for that matter) believed in “environmental federalism”. This was a euphemism for handing over as much responsibility as possible to states and private interests instead of keeping it within the federal government. It was decentralization, and it was the common denominator for most of the Reagan Administration’s policies in the 1980s.\footnote{147} Reagan’s strategy at the beginning of his first term in office was to take on Congress and work through the executive rule making process when he couldn’t get his way, especially after 1982, when the Republicans suffered large losses in the mid-term elections. This strategy was used across the board in executive offices and agencies, including the Department of the Interior and the Environmental Protection Agency. In order for this to be effective, the people in charge needed to be loyal to Reagan, which is exactly what he got in James Watt and also Anne Gorsuch, Reagan’s first administrator of the EPA.\footnote{148}

Michael E. Kraft and Norman J. Vig argue that Reagan’s administrative strategy could have fared better in the Department of the Interior had Watt not jumped right in and attacked his new mission so ferociously. He could have attempted to make reforms more gradually instead of forcing them down people’s throats. Then, perhaps, people would have been more receptive to

\footnotesize{\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{146} Vig and Kraft, “Environmental Policy in the Reagan Presidency”, 425
\item \footnote{147} Ibid. 425
\item \footnote{148} Ibid. 426-428
\end{itemize}}
some of the more reasonable plans that Watt had proposed. Instead, they ended up as failures.\textsuperscript{149} 

This, combined with Watt’s stubborn management style, made for a Department of the Interior that no one was actually happy with.

During his tenure, Watt tried reforming American environmental policy in several different ways. The most obvious and general is that he tried to revert as much Federal land as possible to private ownership. Ronald Reagan created the Property Review Board in 1982, with three goals in mind. First, the Board was rather generically responsible for improving the management of public lands. Second, it was supposed to get rid of any lands it deemed useless by selling them to the private sector, and finally to use the money from these sales to help reduce the federal deficit.\textsuperscript{150} This optimistic plan fell short, however. Once again, the view of the American public was not accounted for. Whether they were aware of it and chose to ignore it, or whether they honestly thought the American people were completely on board with their plans, Watt’s Department of the Interior was constantly plagued by this problem. They also seemed to cling to the idealistic ideology of decentralization and deregulation rather than realistically looking to see if their plans would actually be economically efficient. In this case, they were wrong. There was significant public resistance to the sale of public lands, especially since the

\textsuperscript{149} Ibid. 425

\textsuperscript{150} Coggins and Nagel, “Nothing Beside Remains”, 494-495
plan seemed so short term. Watt and the Administration conveniently chose to ignore the fact that most Americans perceived the federal government’s role regarding the environment as a long-term protector for future generations rather than a short-term exploiter. There was even resistance from Western landowners, who generally made up Watt’s support base.\textsuperscript{151} Obviously something was wrong with Watt’s strategy if his supposed supporters were resisting him.

Another policy that ruffled many feathers involved parkland acquisition. Traditionally, the government acquires new parkland frequently because it is popular among constituents and relatively cheap.\textsuperscript{152} Watt, however, saw it as a problem to be remedied. He immediately cut funding for acquiring more public lands, and even refused to spend the money that Congress specifically continued to allocate for it through the Land and Water Conservation Fund.\textsuperscript{153} It was policies like this that made Watt many enemies in Congress. The battle between Watt, the Courts, and Congress would see constant opposition that any policy Watt put forward. It is interesting to look at two more specific Watt policies—one that failed because people were actually opposed to it, and one that failed because people were opposed to Watt.

A policy that failed because of intense opposition was the attempted St. Matthew’s Island exchange in 1983. St. Matthew’s is an island in the Bering Sea about 200 miles off the west coast

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid. 496
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid. 498
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid. 497
of Alaska.\textsuperscript{154} Officially considered a wilderness area since 1970,\textsuperscript{155} the island afforded “the highest order of environmental protection.” It also happened to be in an excellent location to build a facility to aid in resource development of the surrounding continental shelf.\textsuperscript{156} Under the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980, the Secretary of the Interior had the right to exchange lands in Alaska with federal lands. If the lands being exchanged were not of equal value, two criteria were to be met. First, the federal land must serve some sort of ANILCA function. Second, the land must serve the “public interest”.\textsuperscript{157} “Public interest” is, to be sure, one of the most vague terms used by the United States government. Using it to justify a policy is asking for conflict with all of the different interpretations one could possibly have of the term. Public interest for one might be detrimental to another. As it turns out, this would be the source of contention with Watt’s opponents over his policy.

Using his ANILCA authority, Watt decided to exchange a portion of St. Matthew’s Island for holdings of lands owned by Native companies in Alaska. The idea was that these companies could then lease the section of the island they exchanged for to an oil company, more

\textsuperscript{155} Coggins and Nagel, “Nothing Beside Remains”, 500
\textsuperscript{157} Coggins and Nagel, “Nothing Beside Remains”, 499
specifically the Atlantic Richfield Company.\textsuperscript{158} Conservationists and many others were angered by Watt’s blatant attempt to use the authority ANILCA had given him to exploit the areas resources instead of conserve the environment. They filed suit in the District Court of Alaska in \textit{National Audubon Society v. Hodel}, arguing that Watt was not in fact acting in the public interest. For his turn, Watt argued the land exchange was in the public interest because it encouraged oil development.\textsuperscript{159} The court ruled in favor of the conservationists, saying that Watt’s idea of public interest was wrong. It didn’t conform to Congress’ original intention, which was to conserve the environment and protect it against resource development. Watt also overstated the potential benefits that could come from resource development, and understated the potential for environmental damage.\textsuperscript{160}

This case is typical of Watt’s policy strategy. He would try to get what he wanted though manipulating existing statutes and ignoring Congress and more generally public opinion. In their decision, the District Court of Alaska said Watt abused the discretion he was granted as secretary.\textsuperscript{161} Watt’s blatant disregard for the desires of the public or the intent of Congress provoked significant animosity among all parties involved.

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid. 1000-1001
\textsuperscript{160} Ibid. 1001
\textsuperscript{161} Ibid. 1001}
The animosity was so strong that even ideas Watt had that were not actually that controversial got shut down and caused problems. An example of this is Project Bold. The state of Utah owned a lot of land within the state, but much of it was interspersed within federally owned lands, making land management extremely difficult for both sides. While there had been small exchanges happening to try and remedy the situation and makes things easier on everybody, the process was too slow. The governor of Utah at the time, Scott Matheson, put forward a plan of massive land exchanges between the state of Utah and the federal government so that the lands were not as sporadically laid out between each other. James Watt enthusiastically endorsed this idea because it streamlined many public lands, which was one of his goals. They ran into problems, however, trying to agree on mineral rights and other details. They also faced opposition from just about every corner. There was opposition from just about everywhere. Everyone found some sort of problem with this seemingly non-controversial plan to streamline.

Thus was the story of James Watt’s tenure as interior secretary. He just could not make it work with the public or the congress. He demonized himself by stubbornly sticking to his extremely controversial principles. Watt continued this bad romance with the nation during his

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162 Coggins and Nagel, “Nothing Beside Remains”, 502
163 Ibid. 503
tenure until it hit a boiling point. Although it is easy to simply blame his own inflammatory personality for a lot of this, several factors are actually responsible. It bears repeating that Watt seriously underestimated the public’s desire to protect the environment, and also the power of conservation groups such as the National Audubon Society, the Sierra Club, and others, which frequently, as we have seen, brought suit against him when they did not like his policy or his method of enforcing it. His own extremism also just encouraged more people to join them, counterproductively strengthening them further.\textsuperscript{164} Leilani Watt recalled that Watt was aware of the gap between himself and the environmental opposition, but he eventually became resigned to it and gave up trying to reconcile his viewpoints with theirs. He didn’t worry about pleasing the “special interest groups.”\textsuperscript{165} He also frequently failed to obtain Congressional ratification or state support for what he was doing, both of which were essential to the success of his programs. Finally, his own supporters seemed to only support him in private. If they felt their positions were threatened in any way, they would back away from Watt.\textsuperscript{166} They became disenchanted with his extremism, and also his unwillingness to consult with them.\textsuperscript{167}

\begin{footnotes}
\item 164 Ibid. 548
\item 165 Watt, \textit{Caught in the Conflict}, 83
\item 166 Coggins and Nagel, “Nothing Beside Remains”, 545
\item 167 Ibid. 546
\end{footnotes}
The final straws of James Watt’s tumultuous time as Secretary of the Interior came when Watt was involved in the Powder River Basin Scandal. In 1982, the Department of the Interior made one of the largest coal lease sales in history when it sold 1.6 billion leases in the Powder River Basin in Montana and Wyoming. There was little demand for this, however, leading to an investigation. It was found that the leases were sold for hundreds of millions of dollars less than what they were worth, making the entire department, and Watt in particular, look extremely corrupt.\textsuperscript{168} Congress had to put a moratorium on coal leasing.\textsuperscript{169} The final straw came when Watt, in a Congressional hearing during the investigation for the Powder River Basin Scandal, made an insensitive comment that fueled the public’s raging anger against him. Watt was quoted as saying “We have every kind of mix you can have. I have a woman, two Jews, and a cripple. And we have talent.”\textsuperscript{170} At this point, despite Watt’s insistence that he did not mean to sound derogatory with his choice of language, just about everyone had turned against him. His wife recalls that he did not handle this final scandal with the same swagger that he usually did. He was visibly depressed instead of trying to fight back.\textsuperscript{171} She described him as being hurt, particularly since his personal convictions had been under attack for some time. Although both

\textsuperscript{168} Ibid. 529-530
\textsuperscript{169} Watt, \textit{Caught in the Conflict}, 162
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid. 162
\textsuperscript{171} Ibid. 168-169
Watt and his wife describe it as yet another misinterpretation, Watt’s phrase about the Second Coming in his confirmation hearings came back to haunt him. People began questioning his personal religious faith, which, according to his wife, seemed to put him over the edge and helped to convince him to resign. He was angered when the Washington Post printed a nasty cartoon mocking his Christianity, something he held very dear.\(^1\) Watt was a born-again Christian and made no secret about his faith to the public. It clearly influenced his viewpoints.\(^2\)

Watt submitted his resignation to Reagan in 1983 and took questions from reporters and journalists on horseback at a friend’s ranch in California. He believed that he had outlasted his usefulness to the President and had done all he could to sow the seeds of revolution within the Department of the Interior. At no point did he acknowledge that few people shared his extreme views, and that everyone was constantly twisting his actions and words into something they were not. He continued to argue this point even after he resigned.

\(^1\) Ibid. 91-92
\(^2\) Ibid. 97
Conclusion

In his own book, *The Courage of a Conservative*, Watt hardly mentions his brief time as Secretary of the Interior. His brief epilogue, however, is an impassioned defense of everything he did and said, clearly showing he still believed he was right all along and that everyone else refused to hear the truth. The entire account was extremely accusatory towards liberals, whom he blamed for being uninterested in facts throughout the Congressional investigation hearings during the Powder River Basin Scandal.\(^{174}\) His own fact filled statements were ignored, and members of Congress were ill informed. He claimed to have constantly won in matters of substance, while acknowledging that he lost the battle of public opinion.\(^{175}\)

Watt’s experience shows that public opinion is truly essential for any policy to work. Watt was unsuccessful because he neglected to see the importance of public opinion polls, and tried to force change down people’s throats instead of working within the framework of the political culture at the time. This had a broader effect on the Reagan Administration as a whole. After Watt’s resignation, and the resignation of several other original Reagan appointees for that matter, Reagan had to appoint more moderate candidates to fill the positions. A *New York Times*


\(^{175}\) Watt, *Courage of a Conservative*, 197
article argues Reagan knew the environment was going to be an issue on which his administration reflected negatively in the next presidential election. Watt’s successor, William P. Clark, was seen by the public as much more moderate, and as someone who would slow down Watt and Reagan’s destructive environmental agenda. In fact, people weren’t sure if he would go far enough in reversing Watt’s policies.176

The environmental movement regained momentum during Ronald Reagan’s second term as President. Unlike Watt, Reagan could not afford to ignore public opinion. The Democratic congress began to pass more environmental legislation, such as re-authorizing the Safe Drinking Water Act in 1986.177 In 1983, Reagan reappointed William Ruckelshaus to head the EPA after the resignation of the controversial Anne Gorsuch.178 Ruckelshaus believed the Reagan Administration had undermined the EPA with its controversial regulatory reform and falsely believed in the decline of public support for environmental protection.179

When the Reagan Administration came in, the public was willing to give it a good deal of leeway on the means to achieve our environmental goals because it was by then clear that some of the approaches we were taking were not going to work or were causing distortions. I don’t think the public was ready to abandon-nor do I think it is now-its commitment to a clean environment.180

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177 Kline, First Along the River, 104
178 Scheffer, The Shaping of Environmentalism in America, 179
179 Kline, First Along the River, 103
180 Ibid. 103
Reagan’s Vice President and successor George H.W. Bush even promised to be the “environmental president” during his 1988 campaign.\footnote{Ibid. 104} Obviously Bush understood better the importance of the public’s desire to protect the environment instead of pushing forward with his own personal philosophies. Public opinion never did wane into the 1990s, with Earth Day 1990 promising that the 90’s would be a “green decade.”\footnote{Ibid. 109}

While many of Ronald Reagan’s conservative reforms survived and are revered to this day by conservatives, his plan for the environmental movement was derailed by the forceful and confrontational nature of its implementation. The fact that the Sierra Club was able to collect one million signatures demanding Watt’s resignation as Interior Secretary\footnote{Shabecoff, “Calmer Seas With Clark at Helm”, B6} speaks to the fact that he antagonized people and was only interested in doing what he wanted to do. If he had been willing to listen to what people actually wanted, perhaps he would have been able to stay longer and get more of his own policies into place. Instead, he left in disgrace after alienating himself from the public and the Congress, and making himself a liability to the Administration whose values he was supposed to be upholding. He acted as though he were doing exactly what Regan wanted him to do, but his refusal to yield to any opposition made him rather counterproductive to Reagan’s policy ambitions. After Watt left, Reagan had to replace him with a moderate in order
to save his administration’s face. Reagan had to alter his intended environmental policy because James Watt failed to create support for it the way many other Reagan programs were supported with his stubbornness and ideological nature, and ended up endearing more people to the environmental cause.
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