

An official portrait of Mr. Watt in 1983. After leaving the government he was a lobbyist for builders seeking contracts from the government and was later indicted on federal charges in an influence-peddling case. He pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor. Michael Evans

James Gaius Watt was born in Lusk, Wyo., in the high plains eastern part of the state, on Jan. 31, 1938, to William and Lois Mae (Williams) Watt. His father was a lawyer and homesteader. James shared ranch chores, repairing fences and pumping water for cattle. He attended high school in Wheatland, Wyo., and graduated from the University of Wyoming in 1960 and from its law school in 1962.

In 1957, he married his high school sweetheart, Leilani Bomgardner. They had two children: Erin and Eric. They all survive him.

In Washington, Mr. Watt was a legislative assistant to Wyoming's Republican senator, Milward L. Simpson. He became a born-again Christian, in 1964, after attending a gospel meeting. In 1966, he was hired as a lobbyist for the United States Chamber of Commerce, promoting business interests and opposing controls on energy, water and environmental pollution.

When former Gov. Walter J. Hickel of Alaska became President Richard M. Nixon's Interior secretary, Mr. Watt was named a deputy with oversight for water and power resources. In 1975, President Gerald R. Ford named him to the Federal Power Commission. He became a proponent of the "Sagebrush Rebellion," a Western movement that sought regional control of public resources.

In 1977, Mr. Watt became president and chief counsel of the Mountain States Legal Foundation, created by the Colorado brewer Joseph Coors Sr. to protect property rights. He filed many lawsuits to challenge Interior Department environmental policies.

He and Reagan knew his nomination for Interior secretary would provoke opposition because of his anti-environment, pro-development activities. But he was easily confirmed by the Republican-majority Senate after insisting that controlled development of resources would strengthen the nation in an energy emergency.

After leaving the government, Mr. Watt was a lobbyist for builders seeking contracts from the Department of Housing and Urban Development from 1984 to 1986. In 1995, he was charged with 25 counts of perjury and obstructing justice by a federal grand jury investigating fraud and influence-peddling during his lobbying at H.U.D. But the prosecution's case deteriorated, the felony charges were dropped, and he pleaded guilty to a single misdemeanor. He was sentenced to a \$5,000 fine and 500 hours of community service.

Mr. Watt, who had a home in Jackson Hole, Wyo., and in recent years lived in Wickenburg, Ariz., co-wrote "The Courage of a Conservative" (1985, with Doug Weed), about conservative political agendas.

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James G. Watt, Polarizing Interior Secretary Under Reagan, Dies at 85 - The New York Times

In 2001, when the administration of George W. Bush proposed drilling for oil on public lands in an effort to cope with the nation's energy problems, Mr. Watt hailed the approach being advanced by Vice President Dick Cheney.

"Everything Cheney's saying, everything the president is saying, is exactly what we were saying 20 years ago," he told The Denver Post. "Twenty years later, it sounds like they've just dusted off the old work."

Eduardo Medina contributed reporting.

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## James G. Watt, Polarizing Interior Secretary Under Reagan, Dies at 85

A friend of developers, he declared that department policies had swung too far toward conservation under the influence of “environmental extremists.”

By Robert D. McFadden

June 8, 2023

James G. Watt, who as President Ronald Reagan’s first Interior secretary tilted environmental policies sharply toward commercial exploitation, touching off a national debate over the development or preservation of America’s public lands and resources, died on May 27 in Arizona. He was 85.

His son, Eric Watt, confirmed his death in a text message on Thursday but declined to cite a cause.

After taking office in 1981, Mr. Watt was asked at a hearing of the House Interior Committee if he favored preserving wilderness areas for future generations. He had been picked by Reagan from a Denver legal foundation that had often challenged the rules and policies of the department he now headed. Critics called him a fox in the hen house.

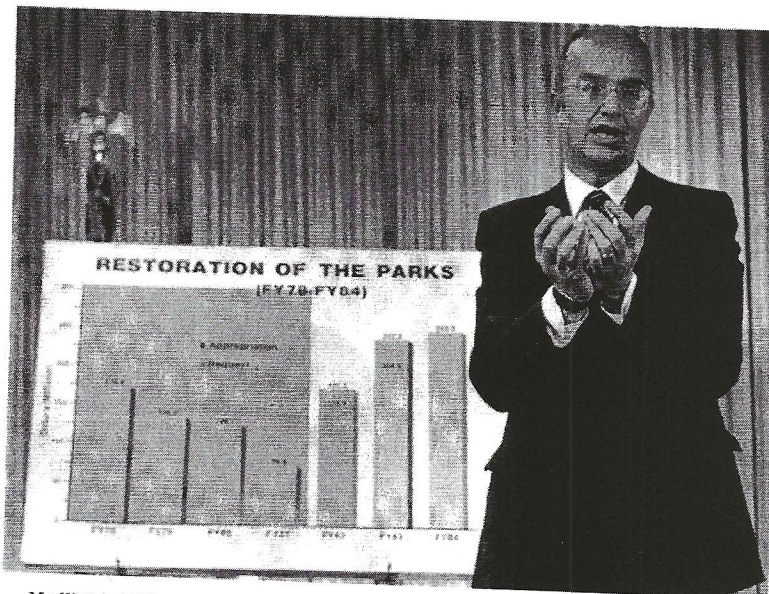
He replied, “I do not know how many future generations we can count on before the Lord returns.”

Mr. Watt’s response startled some committee members, but seemed to explain his intention to ease restrictions on the use of millions of acres of public lands.

The remark was revealing. Mr. Watt, a born-again Christian and a lifelong Republican, saw himself as a servant of God and prayed with colleagues at work. But it raised questions over whether he would be motivated by conservative political judgments or religious convictions, or both.

It also hinted at a side of Mr. Watt that was not apparent at first: a verbal propensity to shoot himself in the foot. In unguarded moments over a 33-month tenure, he suggested that liberals were un-American and that the popular Beach Boys rock band was unwholesome. He likened his critics to Nazis and Bolsheviks, and insulted Black people, women, Jews and disabled people.

In one of his first official pronouncements, Mr. Watt declared that Interior Department policies over the years had swung too far toward conservation under the influence of “environmental extremists,” and away from the development of public resources that he said was needed for economic growth and national security.



Mr. Watt in 1987 speaking to Interior Department employees in Denver. During his tenure he cut funds to acquire land for national and state parks and added money to build roads, bridges, hotels and other man-made structures in the parks. Eric Bakke/The Denver Post, via Getty Images

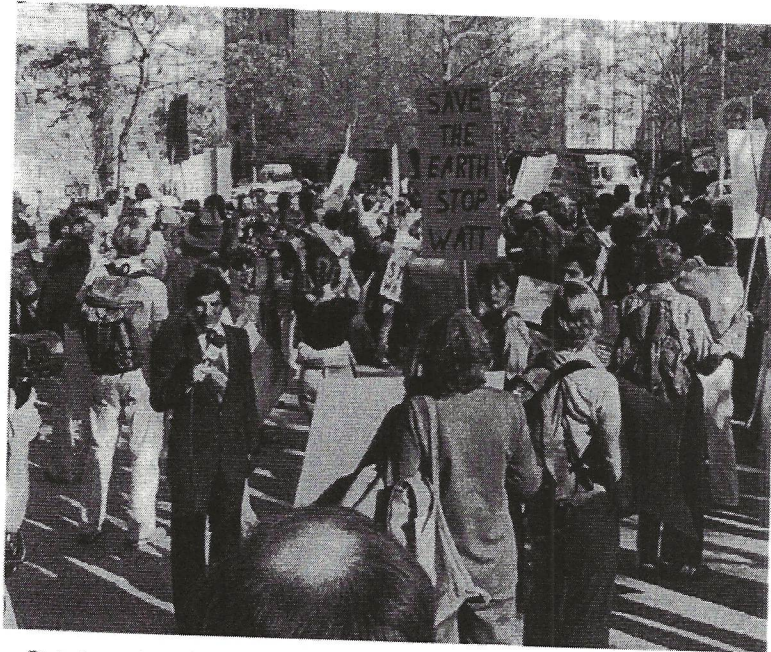
He soon transferred control of many of the resources to private industry, restoring what he regarded as a proper balance to the nation’s patrimony. He opened most of the Outer Continental Shelf — nearly all of America’s coastal waters — to drilling leases by oil and gas companies. He widened access to coal on federal lands, and eased restrictions on strip-mining, which scarred landscapes and was cheaper

than cutting deep mine shafts.

He increased industry access to wilderness areas for drilling, mineral mining and lumbering; gave private owners of hotels, restaurants and shops wider rights in national parks; curtailed the program to protect endangered species; cut funds to acquire land for national and state parks; and added money to build roads, bridges, hotels and other man-made structures in the parks.

Not all his initiatives succeeded. Some were blocked, in whole or in part, by congressional action, court decisions and public reactions. Mr. Watt acknowledged that his plan to sell federal lands to reduce the national debt failed because of wide opposition.

Environmental groups like the Wilderness Society called for his dismissal. The coalition grew to include the National Audubon Society, Friends of the Earth, the National Wildlife Federation and the Izaak Walton League. A Sierra Club petition for his recall gathered a million signatures.



Protesters gathered before a speech by Mr. Watt in Denver in 1981. "If the troubles from environmentalists cannot be solved in the jury box or the ballot box," he once remarked flippantly, "perhaps the cartridge box should be used." George Crouter/The Denver Post, via Getty Images

Mr. Watt had the support of conservative and Western Republicans and private industries. Representative Don Young of Alaska, the ranking Republican on the House public lands subcommittee, called him "the best secretary of the Interior I have seen."

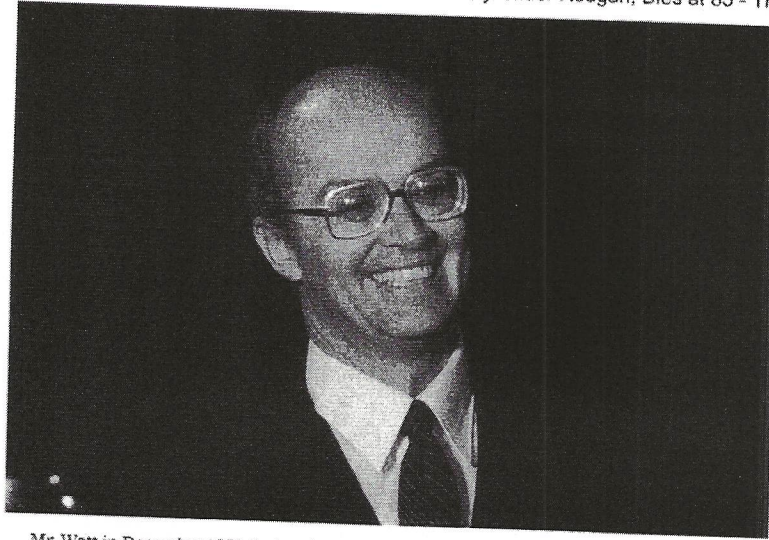
Mr. Watt attacked critics aggressively. "I never use the words Democrats and Republicans," he said in a favorite line. "It's liberals and Americans." He became the Republican Party's third most sought-after speaker, after President Reagan and George Bush, who was then vice president.

But his assertiveness led to trouble. Some of it was comic. He banned women's pantsuits in his department, but the edict was flagrantly violated. Heralding divisiveness, he reversed the bison on the department logo from left-facing to right-facing. "If the troubles from environmentalists cannot be solved in the jury box or the ballot box," he remarked flippantly, "perhaps the cartridge box should be used."

He accused his critics of using sham environmental concerns to achieve "centralized planning and control of the society." He told *Business Week*: "Look what happened to Germany in the 1930s. The dignity of man was subordinated to the powers of Nazism. The dignity of man was subordinated in Russia. Those are the forces that this thing can evolve into."

The blowback was swift. "The secretary has gone bonkers," said Gaylord Nelson, a former Democratic senator from Wisconsin and chairman of the Wilderness Society. "It's time the white-coat people took him away." Michael McCloskey, head of the Sierra Club, said, "Only James Watt could fail to see the difference between Hermann Goering and John Muir," the naturalist Sierra Club founder.

As planning for the 1983 Independence Day celebration on the National Mall began, Mr. Watt said that pop-music groups retained in recent years had attracted "the wrong element" — presumably young people drinking and taking drugs. The Mall's most prominent band had been the Beach Boys, popular since the 1960s.



Mr. Watt in December 1980 during the announcement in Washington that he would be Reagan's choice for Interior secretary. He became the Republican Party's third most sought-after speaker, after Reagan and Vice President George Bush. Taylor/Associated Press

Mr. Watt, a Pentecostal fundamentalist who did not drink alcohol or smoke, proposed instead for the celebration the Las Vegas entertainer Wayne Newton, whose signature song was "Danke Schoen," and military bands, saying they would better represent the patriotic, family-oriented themes he preferred.

Protesters and disc jockeys denounced Mr. Watt as a nerd. With his bald pate and nimbus of gray, scowling behind spectacles, he had long been a favorite of editorial cartoonists. He was summoned to the Oval Office. Reagan and his wife, Nancy, were Beach Boys fans, the president informed him, and gave Mr. Watt a souvenir trophy — a plaster foot with a bullet hole in it.

After Mr. Watt told graduates of Jerry Falwell's Liberty Baptist College (now known as Liberty University) that the United States was "God's chosen place," and said, "We have abandoned the political role to the religious left," an editorial in The New York Times declared, "Mr. Watt Shoots the Other Foot."

He committed his last gaffe in a talk to a business group. Upset by a Senate vote barring him from leasing any more federal land for coal mining, he described a panel reviewing his coal-leasing policies as having "every kind of mixture — I have a Black. I have a woman, two Jews and a cripple."

Protests and demands for his resignation erupted, joined by members of Congress and expressions of displeasure from the White House. Mr. Watt publicly apologized. But the administration had become a perceived enemy of the environment and Mr. Watt a political liability. He resigned on Oct. 9, 1983. President Reagan said he had "reluctantly accepted" the resignation. Mr. Watt was succeeded by William P. Clark.