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James Watt, westerner, Interior secretary, rabble-rouser, dead at 85

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BY: **MICHAEL DOYLE**, **HEATHER RICHARDS** | 06/09/2023 01:51 PM EDT

Former Interior Secretary James Watt uses his hands to indicate a quote during his testimony June 9, 1989, before a House Employment and Housing subcommittee on Capitol Hill in Washington. | Scott Applewhite/AP Photo

GREENWIRE | James Watt looked more like a bookkeeper than a sagebrush rebel, but make no mistake — the man saddled up for the Western cause.

One of the nation's most polarizing Interior secretaries, Watt was reported by his family Thursday to have passed away May 27 at the age of 85. But while his tumultuous Interior stint early in the Reagan administration has largely defined him, his career went much further.

As a federal power commissioner, Watt struggled with routing Alaska's big natural gas pipeline. As president of the Mountain States Legal Foundation, he blazed a trail for other conservative legal advocacy groups. As an upward-through-the ranks congressional staffer and Interior appointee, he quietly guided numerous natural resource policy moves.

And as a Wyoming native, Watt brought to all his life's work a distinctly unsentimental view of the region that shaped him.

"I have seen the West not simply through the eyes of the summer traveler, but as a native fighting the cold, biting wind; the grinding dust; and the blinding blizzards," Watt said at his Jan. 7, 1981, Senate confirmation hearing.

Through all that, Watt added, he "learned the value of water and land."

But though he subsequently secured Senate confirmation on an 83-12 vote, Watt's valuation methods and his blunt, sometimes awfully impolitic manner quickly put him on a collision course with environmentalists, lawmakers from both parties and, eventually, the White House itself.

None of which really surprised those who knew Watt, as Reagan's former chief of staff James Baker recounted in a 2004 oral history taken by University of Virginia scholars.

"When we interviewed him, he told President [Ronald] Reagan, 'The day will come, Mr. President, when you will have to fire me. I'm an advocate for my position. And when that day comes, you fire me,'" Baker recounted.

Laughing, according to the interview transcript, Baker then added that "Jim was a very strong person."

He was also, perhaps, a harbinger of politics to come.

"Jim Watt was an early warning for Main Street Republicans that their right wing was going to try to repeal the second half of the twentieth century," former Sierra Club Chair and Executive Director Carl Pope said in an email, adding that "Donald Trump and Ron DeSantis are the GOP harvest for ignoring the warning."

A Western man

Watt was born in 1938 in Lusk, Wyo., a town with a population at the time of about 1,800. His father, a lawyer, later moved the family to Wheatland, a larger town of about 2,100.

Watt earned a degree in business from the University of Wyoming in 1960, and received his law degree from the same university in 1962.

He began his political career in 1962, when he joined Milward Simpson's campaign for a U.S. Senate seat. Simpson's son, Alan, who would later win election himself, told a Senate panel that Watt's job was as "an issues person doing opposition research, planning and organization."

In due course, Watt, too, would become an extremely ripe oppo target.

The bounty was epitomized by what the University of Wyoming's American Heritage Center, the repository of his papers, identifies as "the 'Watt Book,' a two-volume set of negative information ... compiled and distributed by the Wilderness Society."

Watt joined the newly elected Sen. Milward Simpson's (R-Wyo.) staff. He then held myriad positions that included special assistant at Interior and later deputy assistant secretary for water and power resources.

In 1972, he was appointed director of the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation. While there, he led completion in 1973 of a long-delayed outdoor recreation plan, the nation's first.

The 104-page, data-packed document included policy prescriptions not usually associated with Western conservatives, including a call to "accelerate studies" of proposed trails, wild and scenic rivers, and wetlands to "ensure those unique lands are preserved."

In 1975, Watt joined the Federal Power Commission. Its work included the siting of the Alaska gas pipeline, one of the hottest resource controversies of its time.

The pipeline was being designed to take natural gas from Alaska's North Slope and convey it more than 4,000 miles to the Lower 48 states.

With one seat vacant, the four-member power commission split 2-2 in May 1977 on which route to recommend. Watt was on the side of a route also favored by environmentalists because it avoided the Brooks National Wildlife Range in northern Alaska.

"One of the primary reasons for voting for that route was the environmental sensitivities that I, and later President [Jimmy} Carter and the Congress, recognized," Watt later told a Senate panel.

When the Federal Power Commission was unplugged with establishment of the Energy Department, Watt in 1977 helped found and became the president and chief legal officer of the Denver-based Mountain States Legal Foundation.

Funded by conservative businessman Joseph Coors and others, the group was described by Watt as fighting against excessive government regulation. Its lawsuits targeted everything from affirmative action to the Bureau of Land Management's wild horse program.

"His steadfast advocacy for property rights and his belief in the power of the individual inspired many, and his legacy will continue to resonate within Mountain States Legal Foundation and the broader community,"' foundation spokesperson Stanton Skerjanec said in an email today, adding that "His extensive knowledge of environmental policy and his legal acumen were invaluable in addressing the complex challenges the foundation and its supporters face."

In the years since its founding, the foundation employed former Interior Secretary Gale Norton and former top Bureau of Land Management leader William Perry Pendley, among others.

Trouble in the Cabinet

In December 1980, the newly elected Ronald Reagan announced his intent to nominate Watt as Interior secretary.

The nod came after a meeting between the two men that Watt later described as lasting "about 15 to 20 minutes."

By that point in Watt's career, though, he was an open book, as noted his confirmation hearing by then-Sen. James McClure (R-Idaho), the chair of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee.

"Excessive regulation, unresponsive federal bureaucracies and obstructionist special interests have urged Westerners into a sagebrush rebellion," McClure said. "I know Mr. Watt to be sympathetic to their concern, as many of us are."

Max Friedersdorf, a legislative affairs assistant in the Reagan White House, described in his University of Virginia oral history how Watt was one of several "problem children" in Reagan's Cabinet.

"I didn't know Jim Watt from a bale of hay, but he was our man, and we took him around and got him confirmed with some difficulty," Friedersdorf recounted. "Then he immediately got into Dutch with the Congress because of his policies."

Watt's policies included an offshore oil and gas leasing program that spanned much of the U.S. coastline and the largest-ever coal lease auctions in the Powder River Basin of Montana and Wyoming. He proposed cutting land acquisition funding, withdrew strip-mining regulations and dramatically cut Endangered Species Act protections.

In some political circles, Watt was cast as a useful lightning rod, drawing criticsm away from the president.

But the policies and, equally damning, Watt's abrasive style increasingly flummoxed more moderate Republicans. He was already on thin ice when he finally did himself in on Sept. 21, 1983, when he was addressing a U.S. Chamber of Commerce breakfast meeting in Washington.

In what he later described first as a “joke” and then as an “unfortunate” choice of words, Watt flippantly characterized a five-member Interior advisory commission established to examine coal leasing programs.

“We have every kind of mix you can have,” Watt said. “I have a Black, I have a woman, two Jews and a cripple. And we have talent.”

The apparent “cripple” to whom Watt was referring was a Pennsylvania State University minerals economist who had a paralyzed arm. He was also Jewish.

With congressional Republicans joining the immediate outcry, Watt submitted his resignation to Reagan about three weeks later.

The man who replaced Watt, Reagan’s one-time national security adviser, William Clark, acknowledged in his own University of Virginia oral history that “there was a lot to do after Jim Watt left Interior. As Reagan once said, put oil on those waters.”

Clark said he faced “a couple of thousand lawsuits that had been filed against Jim Watt and the department,” but added that he was eventually able to calm things down. The 1984 Democratic presidential nominee, Walter Mondale, subsequently told Clark that Watt’s removal took away one of Reagan’s top vulnerabilities that Mondale had hoped to target in his campaign.

After Interior

Watt’s close friends felt he’d ended up a whipping boy for Reagan’s policies.

“He was the lightning rod for the administration,” recalled former Wyoming Gov. Mike Sullivan. A Democrat, Sullivan befriended Watt during their student years at the University of Wyoming, a friendship they maintained throughout their disparate political careers. “It was a fiery, fiery time.”

A firmly religious man, Watt was also passionate about his conservative beliefs and loyal to the Reagan administration’s mission to support energy development on federal lands, Sullivan recalled. But he carried “more than his share of the criticism,” Sullivan said.

Watt kept a sense of humor about the passionate political opposition sparked by his leadership of Interior, however.

Sullivan recalled accompanying Watt to a convention in Jackson, Wyo., “at the height of his set of controversies.” After driving in a motorcade through a crowd of shouting protesters, Watt turned to Sullivan and said, “I don’t understand why they don’t like you.”

Watt moved back to Wyoming in 1986.

About the same time, he co-authored a book entitled "The Courage of a Conservative." It was not, however, a detailed and score-settling account of his Interior tenure but instead a defense of conservative virtues and a vitriolic attack on the liberals who, he declared, threaten to "further erode our spiritual freedom and political liberty."

He included, as well, a few of the jagged insults for which he had become known.

"You don't need to go to Russia to see the failures of socialism," Watt wrote. "Just go to an American Indian reservation."

His subsequent consulting work involving the Department of Housing and Urban Development led to criminal charges, ultimately resolved by a guilty plea to one misdemeanor count of withholding documents from a grand jury, for which he paid a $5,000 fine and was put on five years' probation.

“It seems to me that what you did there is out of character," U.S. District Judge Royce Lamberth told Watt at his sentencing, according to news reports at the time. “You have had a life of great integrity, and it's a shame to see what happened here."

Watt married Wyoming native Leilani Bomgardner in 1957. They had two children, Erin and Eric. Eric Watt announced his father's death in a statement that did not cite the cause or specific location where he died.