

# North Country Notebook



George Vukelich

## Watt's Gone, Reagan Stays

by George Vukelich

The resignation of James Gaius Watt as Secretary of Interior carries with it an important lesson, not only for environmentalists but for everyone who would understand the political process in America.

The lesson is that in politics, as in war, the point man is there to draw fire, not to command the platoon.

James Watt drew the fire, but Ronald Reagan commands the platoon.

"Although Secretary Watt's style is different from that of the President," Rep. Bob Kastenmeier noted before the resignation, "and he is certainly less adept than the President in expressing himself, the politics and philosophy of Secretary Watt and the President are the same. Watt is part and parcel of the Reagan administration, and that is why the President has not demanded his resignation."

Also before the resignation, even Republican Congressional leaders were saying Watt had become such a political liability that they couldn't afford to vote for his programs and then go face the polls and the folks back home. He was contaminated, and he was contaminating them, and sooner or later he had to be deep-sixed off the fantail because he was stinking up the whole ship.

When Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker and Senate Finance Chairman Bob Dole—two stalwarts who had supported Watt's programs for two years and, one assumes, his style in championing them—began to wrinkle their noses in public, it was the beginning of the end.

Both GOP leaders declared that Watt's continued presence in the administration was threatening the Republican party as a whole, its majority in the Senate and the President. His latest gaffe, characterizing that panel of advisors—who have become famous and stayed nameless—as "a black, a woman, two Jews and a cripple," made it easier to dump him.

"After all," Steady Eddy says, "it's one thing to shoot yourself in the foot. It's a whole different thing to shoot your President in his foot."

Perhaps Ronald Reagan could have sold Ronald Reagan's environmental policies to the American people.

You could see almost from the beginning that James Watt was going to have difficulty selling those policies to the American people. He arrived as a circuit-riding preacher from Out West, warning us about godless communists and godless liberals (who were the same in his book), saying that Jesus was coming back soon, and while we were waiting we might as well cut down the trees and peddle the gas leases.

His environmental policies—that is, *President Ronald Reagan's environmental policies*—were offensive to a great many Americans of all political persuasions. How else explain the fact that during James Watt's tenure as Secretary of Interior, the membership of the Sierra Club, the nation's most visible (and, some say, most militant) conservation group, has more than doubled since 1980, skyrocketing from 181,000 to 365,000. The increase was the result of almost constant anti-Watt mail solicitations and a national petition drive that collected more than a million signatures demanding Watt's ouster.

"Watt has given us new credibility," conceded William Turnage, executive director of the Wilderness Society, which published "The Watt Book," a looseleaf daybook chronicling the career of James Gaius Watt in office. A clearinghouse of information concerning Interior's plans, bills before the Congress, editorials and newsbreaks from coast to coast, it was a veritable psychological profile of the bustling secretary carrying out his boss' quiet wishes.

"The Watt Book volumes," Steady Eddy observes, "would make Aldo Leopold proud."

Indeed, for it was Aldo Leopold who helped organize the Wilderness Society in 1935 "for the purpose of saving the wilderness remnants in America." It did not suffice just to have such a society, Aldo warned. There also had to be wilderness-minded people scattered through all the conservation bureaus; there had to be, also, "a militant minority of wilderness-minded citizens on watch throughout the nation and available for action in a pinch."

The pinch has come again with the stewardship of James Gaius Watt. Indeed, the crunch has come.

"Mr. Watt's defenders," said Rep. Sidney R. Yates (D-Ill.), chairman of the House Appropriations subcommittee on the interior, "like to say that he's unpopular because of his words rather than his policies. If they read the conference committee report on Mr. Watt's appropriations bill, they will see that the whole Congress and the country are concerned about the harmful effects of his programs."

One of Mr. Watt's defenders on the very eve of his resignation was the Washington Times, owned by the Rev. Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church. In an editorial titled "Stay with It, Jim," the paper asked:

"But who, pray, has he offended except those who disdain Watt's philosophy and Reagan's policies.

"Jim Watt, remember, is the man who perhaps best symbolizes the free market in an administration where closet statisticians abound. Jim Watt is battling intensely for a realistic and constructive use of our natural resources. These are his sins. And, oh yes, he has the poor taste to be a devout Christian."

"Ronald Reagan," says Russell Petersen, president of the National Audubon Society, "is the real James Watt."

Petersen has seen all kinds of strange birds in his time. I'd trust him on the identification.