

Hickel Controversy Points Up Environmental Quality Issue

Walter J. Hickel, President Nixon's controversial choice for Secretary of the Interior, was finally confirmed by the Senate last week after an ordeal from which Nixon surely has gained an awareness that quality of the environment is a highly sensitive political issue. If Nixon had been more sensitive to this issue, he might not have selected for Interior a man capable of disparaging, as Hickel did at a December press conference, conservation for conservation's sake. From his rigorous confirmation test Hickel seems to have been judged by most senators as able and a man of good will. But many senators still regard his past statements and his record as a businessman and governor of Alaska as evidence that he would make a better Secretary of Commerce than Secretary of the Interior.

Though no more than a fifth of the Senate's members actually opposed Hickel's confirmation, among those who did were the leaders of President Nixon's loyal opposition. These included the Democratic Majority Leader, Mike Mansfield of Montana; the Democratic National Chairman, Fred Harris of Oklahoma; Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota; and two of the likeliest contenders for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1972—Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts and Edmund S. Muskie of Maine.

By tradition, the Senate allows a new President wide latitude in choosing his Cabinet, and rarely has it failed to confirm a nominee. Hearings on the qualifications of nominees are held by the Senate committees having legislative jurisdiction over the departments concerned, but, except when a nominee's financial holdings raise conflict-of-interest questions, these usually are brief, amiable affairs and seldom are very searching. In Hickel's case, however, members of the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs and a few other senators questioned him intensively for 4 days, partly on his financial interests but largely on his policy views on conservation.

In the background there were some extraordinary manifestations of nationwide concern over this nomination for a post once of concern principally to Westerners interested in such regional matters as reclamation, irrigation, grazing privileges, and mineral leases. Eastern senators as well as those from the West were receiving a heavy mail, an overwhelming majority of the letters opposing confirmation. Senator Edward M. Brooke of Massachusetts, for example, received more than 3500 letters and telegrams on the subject, many from academic and professional people.

Although some prominent conservationists, such as David Brower of the Sierra Club, had denounced the Hickel appointment, there seems to have been little evidence of a highly organized letter-writing campaign against the nominee. Letters received by Brooke and other senators are, for the most part, described as thoughtful and more or less spontaneous. Regional economic issues, such as the one involving New England's plea for Interior to relax its oil import policy, were sometimes mentioned, but most of the letters were concerned chiefly with environmental problems such as water pollution and preservation of natural areas.

The Senate's handling of Hickel may go down as a classic example of senators using the advise-and-consent power to box in a new Cabinet officer on important policy issues. For instance, Hickel has been forced to recant some previously expressed views regarding the water-quality issue. As governor of a frontier state which is impatient to get on with economic development, Hickel has felt that care should be taken not to set water-quality standards so high as to interfere with industrial growth. He said as much at his December press conference. But during the confirmation hearings Senator Muskie, author of much of the nation's antipollution legislation, drew from Hickel the assurance that he would uphold the Interior Department's present "no-degradation" rule with respect to water quality.

Similar assurances were drawn from him on other issues, as when, under questioning, he told Senator Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin that he was opposed to opening up more wildlife refuges to commercial oil drilling. Hickel said he had never favored such action; yet, as governor, he had urged Interior to permit exploratory drilling in the Arctic Wildlife Range.

In an apparent effort to help his nominee and to scramble to the safe side of the environmental quality issue, Nixon let it be known, a few days before the confirmation vote, that Russell Train, president of the Conservation Foundation, was to be named Under Secretary of the Interior. Train, a white-shoe eastern Republican at home in the upper class milieu, is respected by conservationists and others as an able, articulate man who believes that people ignore ecological considerations at their peril.

Given the circumstances of his appointment, Train may be able to influence policy to a degree enjoyed by few No. 2 men in Washington. For Hickel's chances of developing credibility as a conservationist are likely to depend in part on his keeping his Under Secretary happy.

Train comes to his new job with a set of policy recommendations which he, as chairman of Nixon's task force on resources and environment, had a key role in developing. These include a recommendation for the President to appoint a Special Assistant for Environmental Affairs. The new assistant would work closely with the Council of Economic Advisers, the Director of the Budget Bureau, and the President's Science Adviser and would help the President deal with "problems of compartmentation and conflict." Noting that a great deal of new conservation legislation has been enacted, the task force said it was not suggesting any "mammoth new programs" but rather was urging better performance—and greatly increased appropriations—to make existing programs work.

As Hickel's alter ego and conservationist conscience, it is possible that Train may see some of the task force proposals come to fruition. Also, it seems that Hickel's nomination and the furor following it have pointed up the conservation issue in a way that the appointment of a noted conservationist could not have done.

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