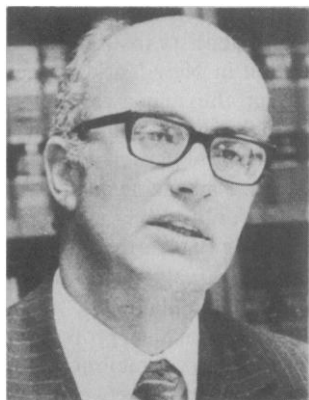


# Development Advocate to Head Interior

Serious opposition to Reagan's choice to head the Department of the Interior, James G. Watt, proved to have almost completely dissolved in the course of 2 days of Senate hearings on his appointment. The smooth-talking, self-confident Watt already had most of the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources on his side, and the few liberal senators who had looked askance at the choice appeared eager to be assuaged by Watt's assurances that his pro-



James G. Watt

AP

development outlook was compatible with existing environmental laws.

The only witness to express unequivocal opposition to the proposed appointment was former Senator Gaylord Nelson (D-Wis.), who in January was named the new president of the Wilderness Society. Nelson pointed out that the Denver-based Mountain States Legal Foundation (MSLF), which Watt has headed for the past 2½ years, is dominated by development interests that have consistently opposed environmental legislation. Laws pertaining to "water quality, air quality, strip mining—they fought them all," said Nelson. "Now they support the laws," he added, but "the people who led these fights for all these years are now the ones being called extremists."

Watt's association with MSLF has been the major focus of environmentalists' concern. The foundation was formed in 1977 by a Washington-based group, the National Legal Center for the Public Interest. It calls itself a public interest group even though most of its major supporters are corporations or groups such as Burlington Northern Railroad, Adolph Coors Co., Arizona Cotton Growers Association, and numerous mining, oil, and utility companies. The purpose of the foundation is to assert the values of private enterprise and individual rights against increasing government encroachment. Of the 47 cases in which it has been involved or filed briefs, ten have involved the Department of the Interior, usually opposing it. MSLF has, for example, taken stands opposing federal restrictions on grazing lands, protesting withdrawal of government aid in response to inadequate auto emission-control legislation, challenging a ban on motorized rafts in the Grand Canyon, and seeking to prevent proposed wilderness areas from being withdrawn from oil and gas leasing.

Watt, who has frequently been quoted as denouncing "environmental extremists" apparently succeeded in con-

veying the message that his concern for "balance" between environmental and developmental values did not entail wholesale tearing up of the public lands of the West. He said he saw no need for revisions in the major environmental laws passed over the past decade, including the Clean Air Act. He expressed approval of the tough federal Surface Mining Act passed in 1977, although he said that the regulations constructed by the Interior Department were "much more extensive and greater than the act requires." Asked for his feelings about the Alaska Lands Act, passed at the end of the last Congress, Watt refused to comment, saying that he had deliberately decided not to be briefed on it in advance of his confirmation.

Watt, 42, is no stranger to Washington, which has been the scene of virtually his entire professional life. He was a commissioner on the Federal Power Commission from 1975 to 1977. Prior to that, he worked for 7 years at the Interior Department, the last three as director of the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation. Questioned a number of times about his support of the Sagebrush Rebellion—the movement to transfer public lands in the West to state or private hands—he said that he did not favor transfer or sale of public lands. Rather, he said that better management and more extensive federal-state cooperation would "defuse" the rebellion which, he claimed, has been triggered by "arrogance" on the part of Interior's land managers.

Watt, although questioned skeptically by Senator Dale Bumpers (D-Ark.), managed to avoid any confrontations on specific issues by offering repeated assurances of his intent to follow existing laws, generalizations about the need for "balance," or pleading ignorance as he did with reference to the Alaska legislation. Expected opposition from Indian groups—who were reportedly upset at the MSLF stance on two cases relating to Indian rights—failed to materialize after Watt assured the committee that he endorsed Reagan's stated policy supporting Indian self-determination.

Watt himself said, in response to a question, that he had spent 15 to 20 minutes discussing the issues with Reagan. From that they agreed on four basic programs to pursue: making more public lands accessible for "balanced multiple use"; development of a strategic minerals policy; improving management of and access to parks and recreation lands; and national energy self-sufficiency.

Paul Tsongas (D-Mass.) asked Watt what he would like his legacy at Interior to be; to which the nominee replied, "I would like America to say, Mr. Watt, you had a vision of building a strategic minerals reserve for America . . . and you, Mr. Watt, were the catalyst to bring together the forces within our system to bring a strategic minerals reserve that made America a better and stronger country."

Senate confirmation for Watt was regarded as assured; and he can probably expect very smooth relations with the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, now chaired by Senator James A. McClure (R-Idaho), successor to Henry M. Jackson (D-Wash.). The committee lost its most renowned environmental supporter, Frank Church (D-Idaho), in the election, and has taken on six new conservative Republicans.—CONSTANCE HOLDEN