

Stewardship of the Land: James Watt, Populist Evangelicalism, and the Rise of Modern Anti-
Environmentalism

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Abstract

James G. Watt, secretary of the interior under Ronald Reagan, was one of the most controversial figures to hold the office. Much of the historical legend of Watt stems from a 1981 House Committee Briefing where Watt casually referred to the Second Coming of Christ in discussion of his obligations as secretary. But what role did evangelical and populist rhetoric actually play in Watt's political language and policy decisions? How did he use this language to justify anti-environmental policies? How does Watt's particular anti-environmentalism fit into the movement's broader history? Watt both reflected and led a critical shift in anti-environmental politics and rhetoric—away from the disorganized, states' rights emphasis of the Sagebrush Rebellion and towards the hyper-individualist and anthropocentric Wise Use Movement. This shift stemmed from Watt's unique blend of Western anti-environmentalist sentiments and the broader policies and strategies of the New Right. Watt employed evangelical and populist language to justify and support his policies against political opponents. Watt failed to achieve many of his policy aims due to constant political battles with environmentalists and members of Congress and was quickly forced to resign after he made a widely condemned joke about minorities in 1983. Nevertheless, Watt's legacy of an anthropocentric, individualist, and pro-developmental conservative "environmentalism" continued to dominate anti-environmentalist discourse for years afterwards.

On February 5, 1981, James G. Watt, newly confirmed secretary of the interior, casually referred to the Second Coming of Christ in discussion of his obligations as secretary. The moment sparked a firestorm of accusations of religion directing policy and marked the beginning of one of the most controversial periods in the history of the Department of the Interior. An examination of the context of the controversy helps reveal a larger picture of the shifting strategies, ideas, and rhetoric of anti-environmentalist activists over the next two decades.

This paper argues that Watt, employing evangelical and populist rhetoric to justify and promote his particular understanding of environmental and public land policies, represented an emerging variant of anti-environmentalism. The language he used over the course of his time as secretary of the interior reflected larger trends among conservatives in the New Right of the 1970s and 1980s, but it also inspired later anti-environmentalist organizations such as the Wise Use Movement of the late 1980s and 1990s. Watt, representative of the conservative movement in a variety of social and political contexts, acted as a vanguard in the promotion of a conservative “environmentalism” based in deregulation and the opening of public land.

Watt deployed emerging conservative rhetorical strategies to justify and support policy positions. He used the ambiguity of Biblical interpretation to his advantage to simultaneously frame his policies as moderate and unimpeachable—mollifying environmentalists’ critiques of him as “radical”—while also discreetly reassuring dominionist and pro-development Christians of his support. Similarly, Watt employed populist appeals in his speeches and writing to disguise his primarily pro-business policies as defending grassroots Westerners from liberal elites. This populism is best understood as what historian Michael Kazin calls a “language” used by its

speakers to mobilize noble “ordinary people” against “self-serving and undemocratic” elites.¹ Indeed, Watt explicitly followed this definition, repeatedly framing environmentalists and the larger liberal movement as “Washington elites” who were disconnected from the realities of life in the American West. By casting these environmentalist elites in opposition to the people defined as “concerned westerners” like himself, Watt was effectively able to harness the latent populist energy of American politics in support of what he saw as his crusade to fashion a conservative anti-environmentalism.²

While Watt was unable to personally oversee the transition to this new anti-environmentalism due to his resignation in 1983, his language and policies served as a bridge between the two major anti-environmentalist movements to come before and after him: the Sagebrush Rebellion and the Wise Use Movement. Scholars such as Jacqueline Vaughn Switzer and James Morton Turner have persuasively noted the broad similarities and differences between the Sagebrush Rebellion and Wise Use Movement. This paper continues along these lines to highlight the movements’ intellectual continuity and heritage. Watt’s language and policies overlapped with both previous and subsequent variations of broader anti-environmentalist movements. In effect, Watt’s pro-development and individualistic language and policies were steppingstones from the states’ rights program of the Sagebrush Rebellion to the hyper-

¹ Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*, 2017 Revised Edition (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017) 1.

² For more on the larger conservative reaction that Watt was a part of, see: James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991); Matthew Avery Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Kevin Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books, 2015).

individualistic program of the Wise Use Movement—all while maintaining a focus on environmentalists and Washington “elites” as the primary enemy of Westerners.³

At the heart of Watt’s rhetoric was a reliance upon the language of evangelicalism and Christianity more broadly. Historians Mark Stoll and Lynn White have noted the prominent position of Christian—particularly Protestant—concepts and language in the development of both environmentalist and anti-environmentalist ideologies. Indeed, Stoll argues, Protestantism proved essential to the formation of both preservationist and exploitationist attitudes towards the environment, complicating any simple characterization of Christianity as being necessarily environmentalist or anti-environmentalist. This paper builds upon this foundation to show how Watt used religious language to construct his unique brand of conservative anti-environmentalism. Harnessing Protestant concepts like stewardship and dominionism, Watt effectively formulated a rhetorical strategy that provided political cover to controversial policies.⁴

Equally important, however, is Watt’s use of rhetorical populism. Watt’s populist language is representative of a broader historical trend in the conservative movement of coopting populist rhetoric. As Kazin has shown, conservatives were successful in the postwar period at incorporating populist rhetoric into their own political program. By successfully altering the definition of “elites” to mean the government and cosmopolitan liberals rather than the

³ Jacqueline Vaughn Switzer, *Green Backlash: The History and Politics of Environmental Opposition in the U.S.* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997); James Morton Turner, “‘The Specter of Environmentalism’: Wilderness, Environmental Politics, and the Evolution of the New Right,” *Journal of American History* 96, no. 1 (June 2009): 123–48; James Morton Turner, *The Promise of Wilderness: American Environmental Politics Since 1964* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2012); James Morton Turner and Andrew C. Isenberg, *The Republican Reversal: Conservatives and the Environment from Nixon to Trump* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

⁴ Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203–7; Mark Stoll, *Protestantism, Capitalism, and Nature in America* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1997).

traditional definition of urban businessmen, conservatives were able to paint liberals as enemies of the “people.” This elasticity shows the problem of understanding American populism as a formal ideology. While scholars such as political scientist Cas Mudde argue that “Populism is only a ‘thin-centered ideology’” focused on conflict between the “people” and the “elite,” other scholars such as Kazin and Paul Elliott Johnson provide a better understanding of populism that acknowledges its shifts in specific meaning over time.⁵ As Kazin explains, “Populism, more an impulse than an ideology, is too elastic and promiscuous to be the basis for [formal, ideological] allegiance.”⁶ Watt’s populist appeals in favor of his anti-environmentalist policies, therefore, are best understood as being just that—rhetorical appeals that are not necessarily part of a carefully considered political ideology.⁷

Making use of this evangelical and populist rhetoric, Watt was able to reorient the broader anti-environmentalist movement. In a slow transition over the course of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, anti-environmentalism became increasingly aligned with the emerging New Right, embracing its rhetorical and political strategies. While this development was not immediately apparent at the beginning of the 1970s, by the end of Watt’s tenure as secretary of the interior in 1983, a clear alignment of the New Right and anti-environmentalism had emerged. Anti-environmentalism became increasingly centered along conservative lines, discarding old Sagebrush Rebellion strategies and culminating in the hyper-individualism of the Wise Use Movement.

The Sagebrush Rebellion

⁵ Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (Autumn 2004): 544.

⁶ Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, 3.

⁷ Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*; Paul E. Johnson, “Imagining American Democracy: The Rhetoric of New Conservative Populism” (PhD Thesis, University of Iowa, 2013). For more on populism as an international phenomenon not strictly tied to nations or regions, see Federico Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017).

At the time of Watt's confirmation as secretary of the Interior, anti-environmentalists had not yet developed a formal ideological approach to matters of environmental and land use policies. With the rise of the environmental movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, polls showed that most Americans supported environmentalist reforms. Nixon heartily sought environmentalist backing in his first years in office, passing several key pieces of environmental legislation and calling for further action in the 1972 Republican Party Platform.⁸

This public embrace of environmentalism by the leaders of the Republican Party, however, was one of political convenience and calculation rather than a clear desire or drive for environmental reform and was therefore easily set aside later in Nixon's first term. Cognizant of the popularity of environmentalist policies in the current moment, Nixon attempted to court the environmentalist vote for the Republican party with a series of environmentalist policies in his first term. By 1971, J. Brooks Flippen argues, Nixon increasingly saw the environmental program as failing to provide him the political support he was looking for.⁹ Furthermore, the administration faced increasing pressure from business and industry to back away from environmentalist policies in order to save jobs in a stagnant economy. As Flippen explains, "Now doubting that he could achieve both his economic and environmental objectives, Nixon agreed with industry."¹⁰ Nixon's failed veto of the 1972 Clean Water Act marked the end of Nixon's environmentalist efforts, notably confirmed by an injunction to his cabinet in March

⁸ J. Brooks Flippen, *Nixon and the Environment* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2000); Turner and Isenberg, *The Republican Reversal*, 34–36. For more on conservative environmentalism in the Nixon administration, see J. Brooks Flippen, *Conservative Conservationist: Russell E. Train and the Emergence of American Environmentalism* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2006).

⁹ Flippen, *Nixon and the Environment*, 133–34.

¹⁰ Flippen, 139.

1973 to “Get off the environmental kick” and “Promote energy developments.”¹¹ By the time of Nixon’s resignation, the idea of a strong Republican environmentalism had largely faded away.

Some conservatives celebrated the collapse of Republican environmentalism. These conservatives, agreeing with business critiques of the policies as job-killing, saw Nixon’s subsequent victory in the 1972 election—after vetoing the Clean Water Act—as demonstrating that environmentalist votes were not needed. The party, in their minds, could now safely return to the pro-business policies conservatives had long pushed for without concern about the electoral harm of ignoring the environmentalist movement. Anti-environmentalism was now politically viable.¹²

Nevertheless, the anti-environmentalism that slowly emerged over the rest of the 1970s remained largely under the surface, even during the growth of the so-called Sagebrush Rebellion. This political movement, largely made up of rural Westerners, focused its attention on the issue of federally-owned lands in the West. The federal government owns a vast majority of Western land: 49 percent of land in Wyoming, 64 percent in Utah, 86 percent in Nevada.¹³ The sheer size of the public domain in these states meant that the federal government and its many agencies exercised a massive role in local policymaking.

Discontented rural Westerners found this arrangement unacceptable. The federal ownership of vast swaths of Western land, they argued, violated the sovereignty of states. As Switzer explains, “The issue was centered on how lands should be managed; management is a prerogative attached to ownership. The states clearly have sovereignty over the people on the federal lands, but lacking ownership, it is argued, they cannot manage the lands.”¹⁴ Without state

¹¹ Flippen, 214.

¹² Turner and Isenberg, *The Republican Reversal*, 38.

¹³ Turner, *The Promise of Wilderness*, 19.

¹⁴ Switzer, *Green Backlash*, 174.

ownership of the public lands in the West, they believed, states could not claim the sovereignty guaranteed by the Constitution. To rectify the unequal power balance in the U.S. federal system, they organized to change the ownership of public lands.¹⁵

The controversial decisions of President Jimmy Carter fueled this growing hostility. Perceived to be indifferent to Western concerns, Carter's administration pursued many policies that outraged Westerners in general, but especially those living in the rural West. Western ire was particularly focused on federal wilderness policy, reflected in the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) and the Roadless Area Review and Evaluation II (RARE II), that promised to add nearly 15.4 million acres to the wilderness system.¹⁶

The Sagebrush Rebels proposed instead to transfer the ownership of all federal land in the West to the state governments. By directly owning the public lands, Sagebrush Rebels argued that the states would have the freedom and sovereignty over their own lands that the Constitution intended them to have. The states would be free to continue to pursue environmentalist or conservationist policies or allow for expanded leasing of the lands for grazing, logging, mining, and drilling. The individual states could then determine how to manage their newly secured land.¹⁷

The Sagebrush Rebellion, in other words, focused primarily on the issue of states' rights. The Rebellion supported a devolutionary politics of placing the state government on an equal—if not superior—footing with the federal government when it came to land management. The rebels did not assert an individual or private right to access or own the public lands held by the federal

¹⁵ Switzer, 171–74; Turner, “The Specter of Environmentalism,” 130–37; Turner, *The Promise of Wilderness*, 192–95, 227–32.

¹⁶ Turner, *The Promise of Wilderness*, 227–30.

¹⁷ Switzer, *Green Backlash*, 176–77.

government. Instead, the Rebels sought simply to transfer the decision-making of public land management to the state governments.¹⁸

However, underlying the entire Sagebrush Rebellion was a nascent anti-environmentalism that, while not yet ideologically or rhetorically organized, drove the rural Western outrage and backlash. This can be seen in the immediate circumstances that led to the explosion of Sagebrush Rebellion activity in the late 1970s. The Carter Administration's environmentally minded policy of adding more and more land to the wilderness system outraged Western ranchers and industries seeking access to the public lands for grazing, logging, or drilling. Thus, for many of the Sagebrush Rebels, there was a clear concern with the effect of environmentalist policies on Westerners' access to resources on public lands.¹⁹

Furthermore, a distinctly populist undertone permeated the protests and legislation of the Sagebrush Rebels. By focusing the movement's hatred on the distant federal government and its bureaucratic agents, the Sagebrush Rebellion tapped into a populist rhetorical trend that had emerged in the Postwar period of framing American politics as a conflict between the conservative "people" and the liberal "elites." Sagebrush Rebellion rhetoric on bumper stickers asserted the "grassroots" nature of the movement while speeches by Rebellion leaders such as Senator Steven Symms of Idaho argued that local and state leaders were naturally better fit to manage the public lands compared to "the people on the banks of the Potomac."²⁰ This rhetoric portrayed Westerners as an oppressed people struggling against the immoral, greedy, and urban, liberal elites. As Turner explains, "Many sagebrush rebels viewed the wilderness system as the work of outsiders, usually urban environmentalists and an overbearing federal government."²¹

¹⁸ Switzer, 176–77; Turner, *The Promise of Wilderness*, 230–32.

¹⁹ Switzer, *Green Backlash*, 174–77; Turner, "The Specter of Environmentalism," 130–37.

²⁰ As quoted in Turner, "The Specter of Environmentalism," 131, 134.

²¹ Turner, "The Specter of Environmentalism," 132.

The Sagebrush Rebels called attention to their role as the producers of the nation's natural resources, questioning the legitimacy of the liberal and elite federal government to oversee that production.²²

In this way, the Sagebrush Rebellion complemented the rising conservative movement of the 1970s, intersecting in its strategies and opposition to the federal government. Indeed, the Sagebrush Rebellion and the New Right shared many of the same organizing strategies, including a reliance upon an ostensibly grassroots activism actually fueled and funded by conservative corporations, think tanks, and industrial groups such as the Mountain States Legal Foundation, the Western Timber Association, and Texaco. These institutions contributed valuable resources to both movements that fueled further organization and lobbying. As Turner explains, "Behind the sagebrush rebellion were the institutional structures of the New Right, joining citizens, corporations, and think tanks in promotion of conservative goals."²³ In both cases they attacked the federal government's reforms—on economic, social, or environmental fronts—as part of an elite conspiracy to force Americans into a "regimented system that would destroy their livelihoods and tear down their values."²⁴ Thus, the Sagebrush Rebellion and the New Right shared a similar opposition to the perceived scheming of the federal government against the people—narrowly defined as either Westerners for the former and conservatives for the latter.

Nevertheless, while the two movements shared a similar suspicion of the overreach of the federal bureaucracy in the matters of Western land management, they differed in the ultimate solution to the problem. The Sagebrush Rebellion, reflecting what Turner calls an "older form of

²² Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, 165–69.

²³ Turner, "The Specter of Environmentalism," 132.

²⁴ Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, 167.

conservatism,” emphasized the rights of the state governments against perceived federal abuse of power.²⁵ The emergent New Right, however, saw privatization as the preferable strategy. This newer approach focused on the individual right of citizens to own and access the land rather than simply transferring authority to the state governments. As R. J. Smith, a New Right consultant to President Reagan’s Council on Environmental Quality, explained, “We just felt that state governments would prove even more corrupt land managers than the federal bureaucrats.”²⁶ New Right activists believed that privatization under the auspices of a conservative-dominated federal government could more reliably limit the power of the federal government over the long-term.

The Rise of James Watt

James Watt quickly arose as a leader of this emerging alternative movement. Watt had a long association with land use policy. A former advisor and spokesman on resources and the environment at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Watt began a period of work in the federal bureaucracy during Nixon’s first term, serving successively as deputy assistant secretary for water and power resources, director of the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation, and finally as member and then vice-chairman of the Federal Power Commission under President Gerald Ford.²⁷ In these roles, Watt advocated anti-environmentalist policies similar to those he would be pursue later as secretary of the interior.²⁸ Watt insisted on an anthropocentric view of the environment

²⁵ Turner, *The Promise of Wilderness*, 231–32.

²⁶ As quoted in David Helvarg, *The War Against the Greens: The “Wise-Use” Movement, the New Right, and the Browning of America*, 2004 Revised Edition (Boulder, CO: Johnson Books, 1994), 37.

²⁷ Ron Arnold, *The Eye of the Storm: James Watt and the Environmentalists* (Chicago: Regnery Gateway, 1982), 4–21; Stoll, *Protestantism, Capitalism, and Nature in America*, 190.

²⁸ “C. of C. Opposes U.S. Controls on Pollution,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Aug. 18, 1967; “Brief Analysis,” *Daily Sentinel* (Grand Junction, CO), Feb. 8, 1968.

that would foreshadow much of his later policies, arguing in several speeches that resources should be put to use for human needs.²⁹

Watt's most notable work in the 1970s, however, occurred in the private legal realm. Hired by corporate conservative organizer, Joseph Coors in 1977 to head the newly founded Mountain States Legal Foundation, Watt quickly found himself facing off against both environmentalists and the federal government to stop legal challenges to western resource development by liberal groups.³⁰ As Turner explains, the mining industry funded the foundation, which "worked to protect the 'American way of life' from 'extremists,' 'narrow special interests,' and a 'bureaucracy which is out of control.'"³¹ Watt found himself in the perfect position to pursue a New Right variation of anti-environmentalism, attacking environmentalists and government bureaucracy equally with support and funding from conservative businessmen. Indeed, due to the visibility of his role, the incoming Reagan administration nominated Watt for secretary of the interior.³²

By the time of Watt's confirmation as secretary of the interior in 1981, the specifics of Watt's anti-environmentalism had begun to take form. He continued the broad antipathy of Sagebrush Rebels towards the federal bureaucracy and environmentalists but realigned the anti-environmentalist movement more clearly along the lines of the New Right. Under Watt's direction and rhetorical influence, anti-environmentalism became much more clearly anthropocentric, individualist, and pro-development. Instead of simply transferring the public

²⁹ Glenn Thompson, ed., "Planning the Change," *Journal Herald* (Dayton, OH), March 7, 1967; "Adjustments Seen in Resource Use," *Spokane Chronicle*, April 18, 1967. "For Urban Size Break: Cities and Metropolitan Areas Should Halt Growth After Exhausting Own Water Sources, Wyoming Senator Says," *Kansas City Star*, Aug. 29, 1967.

³⁰ "Pro-Growth Legal Foundation to 'Counterbalance Bureaucrats,'" *The Billings Gazette*, Sept. 30, 1977.

³¹ Turner, *The Promise of Wilderness*, 232.

³² Darren Dochuk, *Anointed With Oil: How Christianity and Crude Made Modern America* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), 522.

lands to the state governments as the Sagebrush Rebellion wished, he would instead maintain the lands within the federal domain with a new management style that emphasized ease of private access and development.

The specifics of this policy agenda, however, remained masked behind ambiguous language. Despite Republicans taking control of the White House and Senate, the House of Representatives remained under Democratic control and, in general, Americans continued to support environmentalist policies. A poll taken soon after Watt's confirmation found that 42 percent of Americans felt that a slower rate of economic growth had to be accepted in order to protect our environment—compared to only 25 percent saying that relaxed environmental standards were necessary to achieve economic growth.³³

Environmentalists and other opponents reacted angrily to Watt's nomination. Wilderness Society director William Turnage, quoted in a *Washington Post* article soon after the announcement of Reagan's pick, called the appointment "disastrous."³⁴ The Sierra Club agreed, with chief lobbyist John McComb claiming in a *Boston Globe* article that Watt's past history proved that he was incapable of balancing "conservation interests with other interests."³⁵ Indeed, the outrage was so strong and swift—twelve major conservation organizations including the National Audubon Society, the Sierra Club, and the National Wildlife Federation, signed a telegram to President-Elect Reagan soon after the announcement urging him to reconsider—that sources inside the transition team briefly reported that Reagan was having second thoughts about

³³ Opinion Research Corporation, Opinion Research Corporation Poll: March 1981, Question 5, USORC.81MAY.R04, Opinion Research Corporation, (Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1981), Dataset, <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/ipoll/study/31103678/questions#bac46a42-645e-4861-b8c0-1f618278d6a6>

³⁴ Joanne Omang, "Choice for Interior An Agency Adversary," *Washington Post*, Dec. 16, 1980.

³⁵ Joseph Seldner, "Watt: A Career of Fighting 'Extreme Environmentalists,'" *Boston Globe*, Dec. 23, 1980.

the appointment.³⁶ Furthermore, Watt's nomination drew outrage from indigenous tribes and activists, pointing out Watt's prior record including a brief filed during his tenure at the MSLF that argued that tribes did not have authority over non-Indian activities and businesses operating on reservation land.³⁷ Thus, Watt's nomination set off a firestorm of controversy among Interior Department interest groups.³⁸

This fury set the stage for Watt's confirmation hearings at the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources and subsequent briefing to the House of Representatives Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs early in 1981. Republican control of the Senate ensured a relatively smooth confirmation process, with muted opposition from Democratic senators such as Henry M. "Scoop" Jackson. In the House, however, Democratic Representative Morris Udall remained as chairman of the Interior and Insular Affairs Committee. Watt's relationship with this Democratic committee—equally invested in oversight of his policies at Interior—would be testy at best.

When Watt began his statement at the House Interior Committee on the morning of February 5, 1981, his ease and charm belied the tension underlying the meeting. The House Committee had a long tradition of inviting the secretary of the interior to give a briefing at the beginning of every new Congress. With Watt's controversial background, however, his particular briefing would prove to be the initial test of their relationship. If Watt and the Democratic representatives could work together on matters of Interior policy, the collaboration would begin here. Indeed, throughout the hearing, Watt and the committee members reiterated their hope that

³⁶ Associated Press, "Conservation Battle Starts," *Spokesman-Review* (Spokane, WA), Dec. 20, 1980.

³⁷ Penelope Purdy, "Indian Leaders Say Watt is an Opponent of Tribal Rights," *Casper Star-Tribune* (Casper, WY), Dec. 19, 1980.

³⁸ See also Samuel P. Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955-1985* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 514.

they could work together to tackle the major issues facing the management of the millions of acres of federally owned land.³⁹

Watt consistently maintained a conciliatory rhetoric over the course of hearing. In particular, Watt repeatedly framed himself as a “concerned westerner” who sought to “strike a balance” between his electoral mandate to develop natural resources and his obligation to preserve the country’s natural beauty.⁴⁰ In Watt’s view, these two competing goals were not mutually exclusive, and could—with appropriate administration—be simultaneously achieved. Good management and maintenance of the National Park System, he contended, could be accompanied without problem by cooperation with private companies to develop a “strategic minerals policy that will secure the national defense and improve the quality of life in America.”⁴¹ He just needed to change the policies of the Department of the Interior.

Watt’s testimony affirmed his intention to reorient the Department of the Interior away from an environmentalist agenda. While Watt refrained from naming his predecessor, Cecil Andrus, he repeatedly criticized former policies of the Department. He focused his attack on its regulatory and bureaucratic structure, vowing to end “unnecessary and burdensome regulations” that he saw as “frustrating America’s mineral development programs, the balanced management of our Nation’s resources, and the Nation’s economic recovery itself.”⁴² Along this line, Watt focused much of his criticism on the Office of Surface Mining, expressing his desire to reform the organization’s leadership and eliminate “counterproductive regulations” that were

³⁹ *Briefing by the Secretary of the Interior: Oversight Hearing Before the Comm. On Interior and Insular Affairs*, 97th Cong. (1981). <https://congressional.proquest.com/congressional/docview/t29.d30.hrg-1981-iii-0001?accountid=14505>.

⁴⁰ 1981 *Briefing by the Secretary of the Interior*, 5.

⁴¹ 1981 *Briefing by the Secretary of the Interior*, 4-5.

⁴² 1981 *Briefing by the Secretary of the Interior*, 3.

“inconsistent with the statutes and the intent of Congress.”⁴³ Indeed, Watt targeted the larger Interior bureaucracy as a whole, affirming his support for President Reagan’s hiring freeze, halting department travel, and surveying consulting contracts.⁴⁴ These policies represented a clear shift within the Department of the Interior away from the pro-environment messages of the Carter Administration.

Watt testified, however, that he did not plan to radically reorient the Department towards development and exploitation of resources. Instead, he wanted to “balance” development and preservation. According to Watt, Interior Department policies had favored preservationist and environmentalist goals, forsaking what he saw as the public demand for development of natural resources. He planned to remove those “unnecessary and burdensome regulations,” control development of strategic minerals, and return balance to the department.⁴⁵ Watt framed the more intensive development of public lands as a matter of environmental interest, arguing that lack of controlled development would lead to a “crash program” of rapid and environmentally harmful exploitation of Western resources in the event of a crisis. As he explained, “Those of us who love and are committed to preserving the beauty of our environment, fear this possibility. We want the right kind of development to come over time, not the wrong kind of development to come in a crisis.”⁴⁶ Thus, in Watt’s view, “reasoned” development rather than strict regulation of that development could preserve the environment.

His conciliatory language of “balance” resonated with many members of the committee, but reservations remained. In a particularly telling response to Watt’s testimony, Udall noted that while Watt’s description of his role and duties as pursuit of balance reflected the committee’s

⁴³ 1981 *Briefing by the Secretary of the Interior*, 3.

⁴⁴ 1981 *Briefing by the Secretary of the Interior*, 4.

⁴⁵ 1981 *Briefing by the Secretary of the Interior*, 3.

⁴⁶ 1981 *Briefing by the Secretary of the Interior*, 5.

own understanding, there was likely a disparity in views over what “balance” actually meant. As he explained, “To many conservationists and environmentalists, it is they who have the balance,” while conservatives like Watt were the “extremists.”⁴⁷ “Balance,” Udall, thus noted, was intensely subjective and prone to rhetorical twisting. Watt might have found “balance” in his policies, while environmentalists and wilderness advocates saw shameful exploitation.

Evangelical and Populist Rhetoric

Indeed, Watt continued to twist the language of “balance” throughout his tenure as secretary. While he was easily confirmed by the Senate, the Democratic majority in the House and the lingering public support for environmentalist goals meant that there was no guarantee that he would be able to succeed in his administrative overhaul. Thus, to secure his reforms to the Department of the Interior, Watt carefully framed them to minimize opposition from environmentalist and Democratic opponents, while also assuring anti-environmentalist supporters of his dedication to their cause.

To accomplish this, Watt repeatedly used evangelical and populist language to characterize his policies. By framing his actions and policies in this language, Watt attempted to simultaneously gather political support from potential allies while overcoming the criticism of his political opponents. He used evangelical and populist language to shield controversial programs by delegitimizing critiques of them. By framing himself and his policies as “balanced,” Watt drew on evangelical and populist rhetoric used by the larger New Right to portray his administrative program as Biblical, popular, and moderate.

Watt’s use of evangelical rhetoric began with controversy. At his initial House briefing, when questioned by Democratic Representative Jim Weaver about Watt’s commitment to

⁴⁷ 1981 *Briefing by the Secretary of the Interior*, 5-6.

preserving resources in the long term, Watt voiced his agreement, calling attention to the indefinite number of generations until the Christian prophecy of the Second Coming of the Lord was fulfilled:

That is the delicate balance the Secretary of the Interior must have, to be steward for the natural resources for this generation as well as future generations. I do not know how many future generations we can count on before the Lord returns, whatever it is we have to manage with a skill to have the resources needed for future generations.⁴⁸

While these comments failed to trigger an immediate negative response in the hearing, the following months saw a fury of discussion and accusation that dogged Watt for the rest of his time in office. A *Wall Street Journal* feature on Watt later that spring called the remarks “cryptic,” but most later coverage of the comments in newspapers across the country took it as an assertion of the permissibility of environmental degradation due to the imminent end of the world.⁴⁹ Columnist Colman McCarthy of the *Washington Post* interpreted the remarks as meaning that federally-owned lands are “now under divine mandate to be bulldozed, leveled, drilled, mined and leased down to the last holy square yard.”⁵⁰ Peter Hegemen of the *Baltimore Sun* called it a nihilistic “combination of millennialism and advocacy of development.”⁵¹ Across the country, political and journalistic circles increasingly regarded Watt’s comments as a religious imperative for development.⁵²

These columnists misinterpreted Watt’s comments. In the exchange, Representative Weaver had asked Watt whether he believed that some resources should be preserved for future generations. Watt agreed, noting that the indefinite number of generations left until the Second

⁴⁸ 1981 *Briefing by the Secretary of the Interior*, 37.

⁴⁹ Andy Pasztor, “James Watt Tackles Interior Agency Job With Religious Zeal,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 5, 1981.

⁵⁰ Colman McCarthy, “James Watt & The Puritan Ethic,” *Washington Post*, May 24, 1981.

⁵¹ Peter Hegeman, “Interpreting God’s Will as Public Policy,” *The Sun* (Baltimore, MD), June 21, 1981.

⁵² See also Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil*, 523.

Coming of Christ meant that people today should consider future generations. He elaborated upon this point in a later *Wall Street Journal* article, noting that his responsibility is to “follow the scriptures” which, he argues, “call upon us to occupy the land until Jesus returns.” But, as he explains, this involves a balance between preservation and use of resources that makes sure that “people are provided for until He does come.”⁵³ Watt was not, as many began to contend over the course of 1981, arguing that imminent apocalypse justified unlimited exploitation. Rather, he advocated for a more balanced form of development that ensured ready access to natural resources while ostensibly leaving some in place for future use and development. Yet, this too was a rhetorical act. And while Watt’s specific words may have been misinterpreted in their context, the reality of Watt’s agreement with Rep. Weaver was much more complex.

In their analyses of the exchange, many failed to notice one of Watt’s signature rhetorical talking points, the use of the term “stewardship.” In his response to Rep. Weaver, Watt agreed that the role of secretary of the Interior required thinking about future generations as well. “That is the delicate balance the secretary of the Interior must have, to be steward for the natural resources for this generation as well as future generations.”⁵⁴ Watt refers to the role of the secretary of the interior as a “steward,” and he would repeatedly use the term as secretary. In a winter 1982 *Saturday Evening Post* article, “Ours Is The Earth,” he argued that stewardship was Americans’ collective responsibility. “We Americans are blessed with the human and natural resources to build a great nation. This blessing carries with it a responsibility for good stewardship.”⁵⁵ In a summer 1981 interview in the *U.S. News & World Report*, Watt asserted that the deterioration and degradation of the National Park System was the result of a failure by

⁵³ Andy Pasztor, “James Watt Tackles Interior Agency Job With Religious Zeal,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 5, 1981.

⁵⁴ 1981 *Briefing by the Secretary of the Interior*, 37.

⁵⁵ James G. Watt, “Ours Is the Earth,” *Saturday Evening Post*, February 1, 1982, 75.

previous administrations to be “good stewards.”⁵⁶ In another interview a year later, Watt repeated his focus on stewardship, explaining his administration’s reluctance to add to the endangered species list because it valued its role as a steward—in this case, taking care of species already on the list.⁵⁷ Again and again, Watt repeated this talking point of being a “steward.” He meant that the secretary of the interior was, like medieval stewards of manorial estates, obligated to prudent care and management of the public lands.⁵⁸

However, the word *steward* also carried very specific Biblical connotations. The Bible’s approach to stewardship of nature is ambiguous. Some scriptural analysts maintain that humanity must manage the Earth with moderation and care. The second chapter of Genesis—specifically humanity’s purpose to “till and keep” the Garden of Eden—seems to provide some scriptural support to preserve and improve the environment. However, historian Mark Stoll notes that, aside from apocryphal works such as the Book of Wisdom, no Biblical passages explicitly develop this idea. It is only in scattered interpretation of scriptures that this understanding of natural stewardship seems to be formulated. As John Calvin, in his commentary of Genesis, explains, “we possess the things which God has committed to our hands, on the condition, that being content with a frugal and moderate use of them, we should take care of what shall remain.”⁵⁹ Thus, while Biblical development of the idea of natural responsibility is ambiguous, some interpret those scriptures to encourage moderate stewardship of the environment.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ James G. Watt, ““We Can Protect Environment --And Bring On Development: Interview with James G. Watt, Secretary of the Interior,”” *U.S. News & World Report*, May 25, 1981, 90 edition.

⁵⁷ James Watt, “James Watt Lashes Back at Critics,” *U.S. News & World Report*, June 14, 1982.

⁵⁸ “stewardship, n.”. OED Online. March 2021. Oxford University Press.

<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/190092?redirectedFrom=stewardship> (accessed March 03, 2021).

⁵⁹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, trans. John King, 1948 English Translation (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948), 125.

⁶⁰ Stoll, *Protestantism, Capitalism, and Nature in America*, 25–26.

However, some Biblical passages discuss humanity’s “dominion” or absolute control and trusteeship over nature and reinforce a more exploitative interpretation of stewardship. In perhaps the most famous passage, God commands that humanity have “dominion over” the Earth.⁶¹ In this interpretation, humans can control nature, and do with it as they see fit. This is reinforced with that same passage’s assertion that humanity is made in God’s image. Humanity, being in the likeness of the creator, necessarily sits at the head of and executes dominion over the rest of material creation. This passage supports the long-held Western notion of the “Great Chain of Being,” a linear ordering of the universe into ranks of priority based on their proximity to the presence and likeness of God. Under this system, inanimate matter such as rocks fill the bottom rung, succeeded by plants, animals, humans, angels, and then finally God.⁶²

These passages and interpretations constitute a theological concept known as dominionism. Under this structure, humans possess a total authority over the management of the natural world. This interpretation is necessarily anthropocentric. To the extent that nature matters, it is to serve the needs and wants of humanity. Chapter two of Genesis expands upon this idea, with God telling Adam that the fruit of every tree in the Garden of Eden—besides the infamous tree of the knowledge of good and evil—is fit for human consumption.⁶³ In this sense, God created nature for the sustenance and provision of humanity. Given these seeming Biblical imperatives of domination over nature, philosopher Peter Marshall concludes, “It comes as no surprise... that Christians should have traditionally interpreted the divine command of Genesis to

⁶¹ Genesis 1:26

⁶² Peter Marshall, *Nature’s Web: Rethinking Our Place on Earth* (New York: Paragon House, 1994), 97–98; Stoll, *Protestantism, Capitalism, and Nature in America*, 22–25; Sean Nee, “The Great Chain of Being,” *Nature* 435 (May 26, 2005): 429.

⁶³ Genesis 2:15-17

mean that man should conquer, enslave, and exploit nature for his own ends.”⁶⁴ Humans, these Biblical passages seem to contend, have an imperative to exploit resources.⁶⁵

New Testament passages such as the Parable of the Talents reinforce this interpretation. In this story, laid out in the Gospel of Matthew, a master left three servants with coins. While the first two servants invested the coins, earning a profit, the third simply buried it. When the master returned, he commended the first two for their actions while severely rebuking the third servant.⁶⁶ In the context of dominionism, the passage encourages a capitalistic mode of thinking about natural resources. We should not, this interpretation argues, preserve our natural resources or leave them sitting idle because eventually Christ will return and will demand to know that we wisely used the gifts he gave us. We must explicitly use and develop those resources—especially in such a way that they will accomplish Christian ends. To this end, Stoll notes that for conservative Christians, stewardship “has economic connotations of making the most out of what has been given to mankind’s care.”⁶⁷ Thus, according to this interpretation, stewardship justifies not preservation of nature, but rather its exploitation.⁶⁸

Watt exploited this ambiguity of the concept of Biblical stewardship of the environment as part of his rhetorical program. He used the language of stewardship to effectively employ both interpretations in rhetorical support of his policies. By affirming his policies as part of a program of environmental stewardship, Watt simultaneously claimed that he was both a moderate environmentalist—tilling and keeping nature—and a dominionist—pursuing exploitation of the environment as a Biblical imperative. How audiences perceived his use of the language of

⁶⁴ Marshall, *Nature’s Web*, 98.

⁶⁵ Stoll, *Protestantism, Capitalism, and Nature in America*, 22–25; Marshall, *Nature’s Web*, 97–98.

⁶⁶ Matthew 25:14–30

⁶⁷ Stoll, *Protestantism, Capitalism, and Nature in America*, 191.

⁶⁸ Stoll, 22–25, 188–92; White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis.”

stewardship depended on how they understood the concept. If they understood stewardship of the environment in a moderate sense, then Watt’s rhetoric and policies would appear moderate and arguably preservationist. If they understood stewardship of nature as dominionist exploitation, then they would interpret policies as dominionist and pro-development. In his discussion of stewardship in “Ours Is The Earth,” Watt explains that it “involves decisions on the *use* of resources as well as the *preservation* of resources.”⁶⁹ By framing stewardship and his policies in this way he could present it as both moderate—avoiding extremes of absolute preservation and absolute development—and pro-development—ensuring private access to resources on public lands. In effect, Watt was able to employ the evangelical language of stewardship as a “dog whistle”—making his pro-development policies appear moderate and benign while assuring fellow evangelical anti-environmentalists of his dedication to fostering further development of public lands.⁷⁰

This rhetorical usage of “stewardship” and “balance” therefore gave Watt political coverage on controversial policies. While Watt did not pursue meaningful compromise with environmentalist groups, he would still mask the particularly outrageous portions of his policies behind a seeming veneer of preservationism. For example, in February 1982, when Watt proposed a moratorium on oil and mineral exploration in wilderness areas, he called the lands “special” and claimed the wilderness areas “should be preserved in the natural state.”⁷¹ While environmental groups initially met the announcement with “guarded optimism,” they soon became outraged once the department released the details of the draft legislation. The

⁶⁹ Watt, “Ours Is the Earth,” 75. Italics in original.

⁷⁰ See also Valerie Hobbs, *An Introduction to Religious Language: Exploring Theolinguistics in Contemporary Contexts* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 42–46.

⁷¹ Eleanor Randolph and David Treadwell, “Watt to Ask Wilderness Moratorium: Would Ban Drilling, Mining in Concession to Environmentalists,” *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 22, 1982.

moratorium would not be permanent and would, in fact, severely limit further expansion of the wilderness system. William A. Turnage, executive director of the Wilderness Society, called the proposal “an act of infamy” after congratulating the Reagan administration on the proposal only a day earlier.⁷² Thus, Watt relied upon an appearance of compromise and balance to support his political program. By masking controversial policies in the language of “preservation,” “balance,” and “stewardship,” Watt briefly mollified environmentalist criticism.

In a similar manner, Watt made use of populist rhetoric to characterize his policies as popular and morally correct—particularly in contrast to those of a vaguely defined Washington “elite.” In his testimony at the 1981 House briefing, Watt portrayed himself as a “concerned Westerner” who sought to protect the Western environment against potential devastation by the federal government in the hypothetical future.⁷³ He placed Western people in opposition to Eastern elites in several other speeches. Notably, in his first public speech following confirmation, Watt contended that “elite groups” sought to “lock away public lands and resources for their own special use.”⁷⁴ At another point, Watt referred to environmental activists working in Washington as “hired guns,” apparently seeking to divide the environmental movement between people living and working outside the politics of Washington and professional environmentalists working inside the Beltway. Indeed, Watt described these professional environmentalists in starkly elitist terms, as only interested in “membership dollars and headlines.”⁷⁵ During a speech at the annual coal convention of the American Mining

⁷² Robert A. Jones, “Environmentalists Assail Watt Plan: Wilderness Moratorium Is Called Deceptive After Details Are Learned,” *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 23, 1982.

⁷³ 1981 *Briefing by the Secretary of the Interior*, 5.

⁷⁴ Bill Stall, “Watt Raps ‘Elite Groups’ in Environmental Movement,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 24, 1981.

⁷⁵ Eleanor Randolph, “Aims at Moderates: Watt Seeks to Ease His Negative Image,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 14, 1981

Congress, Watt referred to himself as the “mainstream of the environmental movement” while dismissing “environmental ‘special interest’ groups” as being “outside most people’s thinking toward environmental issues.”⁷⁶ Thus, Watt repeatedly spoke of his political opponents in populist terms, seeking to portray himself and his policies as popular in contrast to the elitist policies of environmentalists and the Eastern political establishment. Ordinary Americans, he argued, should ignore policies promulgated by figures who were not representative of the people.

Indeed, much of Watt’s populist rhetoric revolved around “othering” liberals as distinct from the American (Western) people. Watt argued that these Washington environmentalists and liberal politicians, pontificating on land use and environmental policies in the West, constituted a corrupt, elite class that threatened the rights, liberties, and livelihood of Western citizens. Watt framed these liberals as fundamentally un-American and morally and politically corrupt. Indeed, Watt made such an assertion in a 1981 private luncheon, explaining that he never used “the words Republicans and Democrats... It’s liberals and Americans.”⁷⁷ While Watt later insisted it was a joke, the quote still retained its populist rhetorical force.⁷⁸ By delegitimizing Democratic and liberal opposition to conservative policies as effectively un-American, Watt was able to rhetorically define the American people—and therefore the populist moral high ground—as Republican, conservative, and anti-environmentalist.

Ultimately, Watt’s tenure as secretary of the interior did not last long enough to achieve his desired reform of American land use policy. In October 1983, he was forced to resign following political fallout from comments he made earlier that fall. Speaking about a coal-leasing panel, he said that the panel had “every kind of mix you can have. I have a black, I have a

⁷⁶ “Watt Says He’s An Environmentalist,” *Casper Star-Tribune*, May 12, 1981.

⁷⁷ John Johnson and Thorne Gray, “Watt Pledges Aid for San Luis Dam,” *Sacramento Bee*, Oct. 31, 1981.

⁷⁸ Richard D. Hall, “Farmers Question Watt’s Dry Wit on Water Issue,” *Sacramento Bee*, Dec. 15, 1981.

woman, two Jews, and a cripple.”⁷⁹ The remarks led to severe political blowback, leading a *Washington Post* article to note that the comments had “brought the loudest and most widespread condemnation of Watt since he took office” including criticism by GOP senators and a Republican newspaper.⁸⁰ While Watt initially wrote an apology, he later submitted a letter of resignation citing the end of his “usefulness” to the Reagan administration. Reagan accepted this resignation, noting in a statement that Watt had succeeded in initiating a “careful balance between the needs of the people and the importance of protecting the environment.”⁸¹ Watt’s career was effectively over, but he and Reagan believed he had already accomplished a lot.

Indeed, while it is too much to say that Watt succeeded in achieving his full policy agenda of wholesale development and privatization of public lands, Watt had, in fact, brought these perspectives and policies to the forefront of American land use policy and succeeded in reshaping anti-environmentalist thought. He was, in fact, able to defuse the Sagebrush Rebellion with relative ease. While both Reagan and Watt had claimed to be “Sagebrush Rebels,” their election did not achieve the results the Rebellion wanted.⁸² Watt repeatedly expressed his belief that reform of federal land policy made the transfer of public lands to state control unnecessary. As he explained during questioning at the 1981 House briefing, “We need not bring about massive land transfers if we will properly manage the Federal resource base. That is key: management as a good neighbor. We will implement those programs in an effort to defuse the ‘sagebrush rebellion.’”⁸³ This “good neighbor” policy involved close cooperation with the

⁷⁹ Dale Russakoff, “6 GOP Senators Call for Watt’s Resignation”, *Washington Post*, Sept. 23, 1983.

⁸⁰ Dale Russakoff, “6 GOP Senators Call for Watt’s Resignation,” *Washington Post*, Sept. 23, 1983; “Staunchly Republican Paper Declares Watt ‘Has to Go,’” *Washington Post*, Oct. 1, 1983.

⁸¹ David Hoffman, “Cites End of His ‘Usefulness’: President Accepts Watt’s Resignation,” *Washington Post*, Oct. 10, 1983.

⁸² David Nyhan, “Sagebrush Rebels Feel Their Victory is Near,” *Boston Globe*, Aug. 18, 1961; Udall et al., Briefing by the Secretary of the Interior, 9.

⁸³ 1981 *Briefing by the Secretary of the Interior*, 10.

Western state and local governments to get their feedback on federal policies.⁸⁴ The effect of this change in policy—along with Watt’s other anti-environmentalist efforts—resulted in defusing much of the specific states’ rights anger of the Rebellion. Watt’s policies, in fact, led many of the Sagebrush activists to turn to new political agendas along the lines he advocated—namely privatization and continued favorable leasing of federally-owned land to private companies.⁸⁵ Thus, while Watt himself was unable to fully carry out these policies, they would serve—along with his rhetoric—as inspiration to reorient the broader anti-environmentalist movement towards his own individualist, anthropocentric, and pro-development position.⁸⁶

Wise Use Movement

This reorientation would ultimately come to fruition in the Wise Use Movement of the late 1980s and 1990s. Referring to Gifford Pinchot’s definition of conservation as “the wise use of resources,” the Wise Use Movement advocated a form of anti-environmentalism that attacked environmentalist activists while arguing for its own “balanced” policies.⁸⁷ More a coalition of various organizations than a true, organized movement, the Wise Use Movement nevertheless coalesced around a shared antipathy for environmentalists and love for the free market.⁸⁸

While inspired by Watt, two other key figures founded the movement: former Sierra Club member and author Ron Arnold and conservative activist Alan Gottlieb. Working together at a think tank that Gottlieb had founded, the Center for the Defense of Free Enterprise, Arnold and Gottlieb helped organize a conference in Reno, Nevada, bringing together activists and representatives from trade groups, governments, and industrial firms. The conference produced a

⁸⁴ 1981 *Briefing by the Secretary of the Interior*, 8.

⁸⁵ Dan Balz, “Once Riding High, Sagebrush Rebels Turn in Midstream,” *Washington Post*, April 10, 1982.

⁸⁶ See also Helvarg, *War Against the Greens*, 39.

⁸⁷ Dean Kuipers, “Setting the Woods on Fire: Dan Quayle’s Favorite Environmentalists,” *LA Weekly*, July 9, 1992.

⁸⁸ Switzer, *Green Backlash*, 191–223; Turner, ““The Specter of Environmentalism,”” 137–46.

list of policies published as a guidebook for the new movement—*The Wise Use Agenda: The Citizen's Policy Guide to Environmental Resource Issues*. The policies were clearly anti-environmentalist and advocated widespread development of natural resources. The guide's "Top Twenty-Five Goals" included drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, gutting endangered species legislation, and even passing a "Global Warming Prevention Act" that would actually open National Forests to logging companies to replace "decaying and oxygen-using forest growth" with "young stands of oxygen-producing, carbon-dioxide absorbing trees to help ameliorate the rate of global warming."⁸⁹

Arnold, Gottlieb, and the other Wise Users saw themselves as not simply opposed to contemporaneous environmentalists, but rather advocating their replacement with a new form of environmental thinking. In Arnold's introduction to *The Wise Use Agenda*, he explained the conference members in these terms:

They were not single-minded preservationists and they were not single-minded apologists for industrial development. They were representatives of a new balance, of a middle way between extreme environmentalism and extreme industrialism.⁹⁰

The Wise Users argued that they represented a new form of environmentalism that properly counted humans as part of the environment. As an article in the *Washington Post* noted, this new philosophy sought to counter the "'anti-human' bias of groups such as the Sierra Club," and focused on "'man's place in the ecosystem' and the obligation to use natural resources for the betterment of mankind."⁹¹ Effectively, the Wise Use Movement advocated for a new "environmentalism" that justified industrial development. Arnold argued that this new agenda

⁸⁹ Alan M. Gottlieb, ed., *The Wise Use Agenda: The Citizen's Policy Guide to Environmental Resource Issues* (Bellevue, WA: Free Enterprise Press, 1989), 5–6, 12–13.

⁹⁰ Gottlieb, ix.

⁹¹ John Lancaster, "Western Industries Fuel Grass-Roots Drive for 'Wise Use' of Resources," *Washington Post*, May 16, 1991.

and movement would act as a “new view and a new hope for man and nature alike.”⁹² The movement sought to present what it saw as a new, “balanced” alternative to the mainstream environmentalist movement.

However, this understanding of “balance” between preservation and development was not, in fact, new. It drew from the language, rhetoric, and policies of James Watt. Watt had presented this idea of a “balance” or a “middle way” as part of his strand of anti-environmentalist thought. Watt advocated an individualist, anthropocentric, and pro-developmental anti-environmentalism. Arnold, Gottlieb, and the Wise Use Movement simply elaborated upon his ideas. Watt had spoken of “working with the private sector... to bring about a strategic minerals policy,” and argued that national defense and the economy required resource development.⁹³ The Wise Use Movement now went a step further to argue that this resource development constituted a part of a new anthropocentric “environmentalist” ethic due to humanity’s equal role in nature.⁹⁴

Indeed, the formulation of this idea of anthropocentric “environmentalism” and its explicit connection to Watt can be seen as far back as 1982. In that year, the Free Congress Research and Education Foundation—a conservative think tank associated with activist Paul Weyrich—hired Arnold to write a biography of Watt. The book, *At the Eye of the Storm: James Watt and the Environmentalists*, doubles as a partisan hagiography of Watt and a discussion of the politics and ideology behind Watt’s ideology and policies. Arnold concluded that Watt represented a paradigm shift in environmental ideology. He noted the work of contemporary conservative social scientists who argued that humans were part of the environment, relating to nature through their economic development of resources. Watt’s policies of rejecting

⁹² Gottlieb, *The Wise Use Agenda*, x.

⁹³ 1981 *Briefing by the Secretary of the Interior*, 4-5.

⁹⁴ See also Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil*, 523.

environmentalism and advocating development, Arnold argued, represented a new paradigm of ecological thought that rightfully centered humanity and its needs. The foundations of the Wise Use Movement’s anti-environmentalist ideology therefore, can be found specifically in elaboration of Watt’s policies.⁹⁵

Likewise, the Wise Use Movement relied upon Watt’s rhetorical strategy. Like Watt, the Wise Use Movement used moderate language to mask ardently pro-development policies. By framing their policies as “balanced,” the Wise Use Movement similarly presented themselves as eminently reasonable and moderate—avoiding extremes of preservation or development.⁹⁶ Similarly, the Wise Use Movement presented environmentalist opponents as “corrupted,” continuing Watt’s populist characterization of the environmentalists as morally illegitimate.⁹⁷ And, though Arnold and Gottlieb did not use quite the same evangelical rhetoric as Watt, it could be found in the movement as a whole. A 1993 *Arizona Daily Sun* article noted several instances where Wise Use activists denounced environmentalists as “determined to destroy Christianity” and ““anti-God, anti-American, and anti-gun.””⁹⁸ Thus, while the anti-environmental movement no longer used Watt’s particular evangelical language prominently, the broader religious rhetoric remained.

Despite Arnold’s claims, Watt did not usher in a paradigm shift in environmentalist thought. But he did play a leading role in the shift of the anti-environmentalist movement. Pulling the movement away from the states’ rights focus of the Sagebrush Rebellion towards the individualist, anthropocentric, and pro-developmental policies and rhetoric of the Wise Use

⁹⁵ Arnold, *The Eye of the Storm*, 254–61.

⁹⁶ Gottlieb, *The Wise Use Agenda*, ix.

⁹⁷ John Lancaster, “Western Industries Fuel Grass-Roots Drive for ‘Wise Use’ of Resources,” *Washington Post*, May 16, 1991.

⁹⁸ Jack Anderson and Michael Binstein, “‘Wise-Use’ Groups Flourish,” *Arizona Daily Sun* (Flagstaff, AZ), Jan. 16, 1993.

Movement, Watt inspired a reorientation of anti-environmentalism. Like Watt, the Wise Use Movement advocated for privatization and the easy access of private industries to public lands. Like Watt, the Wise Use Movement rejected a purely preservationist environmental and land use policy in favor of one ostensibly dedicated to a “balance” between protecting and exploiting nature.

Indeed, Watt’s rhetorical strategies to make radical policies and ideas appear moderate served as his central contribution to modern anti-environmentalism. Watt carefully deployed evangelical and populist rhetoric to provide political cover for the often controversial actions he undertook as secretary of the interior. While his tenure was short and marked by intense battles over those policies, Watt’s rhetorical lessons informed later anti-environmentalist language. By reorienting opposition to environmentalism along the lines of privatization, individualism, and an ostensibly moderate approach to nature, Watt prefigured and inspired the anti-environmentalist movement today.