

VILLAGE VIEW

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In October 1923 the United States Senate began an investigation of the Teapot Dome oil scandal which occurred during President Harding's administration. During his term, Harding, a man personally ill-equipped for the Presidency, relied on a Cabinet of "best minds;" as a result, his tenancy in the White House was marked by repeated scandal, culminating in the lease to private oil interests, for a bribe, of naval oil reserves in the west.

After Harding's death, two of his Cabinet members, Attorney General Harry M. Daugherty and Secretary of the Interior Albert B. Fall, were tried for accepting bribes. Daugherty was acquitted, but Albert Fall went to jail.

Parallels may be drawn between Harding's administration and that of the present one, and between the behaviors of his Secretary of the Interior and the man who holds that position today. But there are important differences, too.

Secretary James Watt seems determined to sell and/or lease several hundred million acres of public lands and resources (which belong to you and me) to oil, gas, coal, and timber interests at prices lower than market value. To date, there is no indication that his reasons for doing so involve any personal gain to him; his motives appear to be based upon a conviction that the property and resources can best be utilized to raise money and reduce the cost of administering our wilderness areas. To this end, he proposes to open for lease or for sale, public lands to exploitation by private interests, even in face of opposition by governors and citizens of states where the properties are located.

For example: millions of acres of unspoiled land in this country already have been leased to energy corporations at bargain-basement prices. The General Accounting Office is looking, now, at these actions, with a jaundiced eye. Too late.

Vast tracts of the most spectacular and resource-rich lands in the country are now on the auction block at low prices. These are to be sold outright and include parts of Lake Tahoe and Big Sur National Forests in California.

A year ago the Interior Department sold to Shell Oil, AMAX, and eight other energy corporations the rights to dig 1.1 billion tons of coal from the Powder River Basin in Montana and Wyoming, even though coal companies already have a 200-year-supply of public coal under lease. At the time of the sale, the going price for coal in that region was 19 cents a ton. Under the leases, the rights to the coal were sold at 3.5 cents a ton. That's our coal the Department of the Interior peddled at an estimated \$100 million loss to taxpayers.

What we pay for coal when we buy it back in fuel-charges on electric bills is as yet undetermined. What we pay for increased use of coal by smokestack industries in the guise of environmental damage by acid rains is also as yet undetermined. If scrubbers to reduce acid rain are installed, prices for smokestack industries' products are certain to reflect the cost of emission controls.

While Congress begins ponderously to turn its attention to the actions of the Interior, Watt moves quickly. In the fall of this year, he is planning another gigantic coal sale in New Mexico, and proposes to lease billions of tons more in Colorado, Utah, Montana, and North Dakota within the next 18 months.

Private logging companies have three billion board-feet of

lumber cut and own a four-year backlog of standing trees. Nevertheless, the Department of Agriculture is pushing new sales in the roadless areas of our oldest and most valuable public forests.

In another deal, Watt plans to offer for lease ALL federal territories off the East and West Coasts for oil and gas drilling. **These territories comprise an area one-half the size of the United States!** With a billion acres flooding the market, successful bidders for leases won't have to pay much for the right to drill off the spectacular coast of California and in the fishing waters of New England and Alaska.

Even though energy companies announce publicly that they don't want to buy oil shale leases right now, Watt plans to put oil shale leasing on the front burner before the '84 election and sell off huge synfuel reserves. This, at a time when there is no demand, when bids (if any are offered) will be at their lowest.

The areas Watt proposed to lease for drilling and mining comprise some of America's most beautiful publicly-owned land, some in wilderness areas bordering our national parks.

Watt proposes constructing a nuclear waste dump one mile from the border of Canyonlands National Park in Utah; he favors oil and gas drilling next to the Grand Tetons in Wyoming; he suggests a tar sands mine **within** Glen Canyon; and he urges strip-mining adjacent to Bryce Canyon, Utah.

Watt is eager, too, to see drilling and mining in the wilderness buffer zones around Yellowstone Park where roads, air pollution, and dynamiting could conceivably affect the geyser, Old Faithful, a national symbol.

Watt has recently published new rules to allow drilling and mining on privately-owned lands **inside** the borders of 26 national parks.

Secretary Watt possesses the authority to carry out his plans. As Chairman of the Cabinet Council on Energy and Natural Resources, he has authority not only over Interior, but also wields tremendous influence over the Departments of Agriculture and Energy. The recent EPA scandals have done nothing to shake his determination to merchandise public land.

Once our public property and our public resources are in the hands of the energy industry, we will not retrieve them. A sale is a sale, and a lease includes all rights to the resources the land embraces, including timber, oil, gas, gold, shale, silver, or any other precious metals or minerals that may, in the future, be brought to the surface. Although no geological study revealing the existence of valuable resources has been made public, exactly what treasure may lie below the surface of these lands is yet to be determined.

No one dreamed when Mexico ceded the California territory to the United States in 1848 that gold would be discovered there that same year. These lands that Mr. Watt is disposing of so blithely belong to you and me; he is our agent, sworn to protect them on our behalf. The only way we can stop him now is through Congressional action to rein his powers.

Congressmen are barraged by powerful lobbies that represent and are funded generously by private interests. Congressmen complain of apathy among their constituencies, apathy apparent in that they receive little guidance from those who elected them. Environmental groups, like private industry, employ lobbyists in efforts to offset the influence of those of oil, timber, coal, and other private energy companies, but your legislators are most influenced by opinions of private citizens, you and me, for we are the ones who mark the ballots.

Support with your donations, if you will, the environmental groups dedicated to protecting your interests, but at the same time spend twenty minutes and twenty cents to write your Congressman a letter concerning the Great Watt Giveaway and the rape of your public lands and your public resources.