

Charismatic Reagan Administration Secretary of the Interior James Watt Dies at 85

If there's one thing that James Watt coveted more than anything in his life, it was the prayers he received from other Christians throughout his life in public office. Now, Watt is in heaven and no doubt sending those prayers back to those who need them.

Watt, the Reagan administration's sharp-tongued, pro-development Secretary of the Interior who was beloved by conservatives but hated by environmentalists, died May 27 in Arizona at 85.

Charisma Media Founder and CEO Stephen Strang interviewed Watt and his wife, Leilani, for the January 1983 issue of Charisma magazine while Watt was still in office. Published in the magazine, Strang, in an article titled "The Power Within," said Watt and his wife had something that helped them not only withstand the pressures of public life, but it helped them to change the direction in which the nation was heading.

"I made a commitment that changed my inner life," Watt told Strang. "I had always lived under the principles of the teachings of the church, but I had never made a commitment to Jesus Christ."

Watt was raised in a "religious" home, but he did not become a Christian until the age of 26 in 1964. "College classmates remember him as being 'religious' because of his lifestyle—but he had yet to make a commitment to Christ," Watt told Strang during their interview.

That came years later, after law school and after his entrance into politics. While serving as an aide to Wyoming Senator Milward Simpson, he was invited to attend a meeting of the Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship International at a hotel in Washington, D.C., and it was there that Jesus became his Savior. Later that year, he received the Baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Over the years, the Watts were active in the church and served in a variety of positions at Christ Church, an Assemblies of God church in Washington, D.C. They served as Sunday school teachers; Watt himself served on the church board of trustees.

Many of his opponents believed that Watt tried to use his positions in public office as a "bully pulpit." But, as Strang wrote, "he did not quote scripture to back up policy decisions and he didn't cram his own religious beliefs down others' throats." But he came under attack from many who unfairly characterized him as a fundamentalist.

☒ Watt and his supporters saw him as an upholder of President Ronald Reagan's core conservative values, but opponents were alarmed by his policies and offended by his comments. In 1981, shortly after he was appointed, the Sierra Club collected over a million signatures seeking Watt's ouster and criticized such actions as clear-cutting federal lands in the Pacific Northwest, weakening environmental regulations for strip mining and hampering efforts to curtail air pollution in California's Yosemite Valley.

Those were only a few of the "controversial" issues Watt dealt with during his time as Reagan's Secretary of the Interior.

Watt's critics couldn't halt his confirmation as Secretary of the Interior, but they were always looking for something that he would say that they could use against him.

That happened when Watt once made a comment about the future, saying, "I don't know how many future generations we can count

on before the Lord returns.” He never publicly explained what he meant until Strang’s interview with him, when Strang asked him to explain:

“The best way for us to handle that question is for me to give you an exact excerpt from the hearing that caused this flack,” he said. “Then, if you’ll run that comment in its context—it is very strong and very good—it will show you the distorted hostility and candidly the spiritual battle we are in with the enemy with no regard for integrity, no regard for fairness.”

How prophetic. What might Watt think of what is going on in today’s government, especially in the Biden administration?

Watt said he represented a part of America that needed representing. And, there is little doubt he did that until his death last month. {eo}

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