Reagan's Liability: 
Secretary of Interior James Watt

Lightning rods figured prominently in the strategic thinking of top officials in the Reagan White House. Reagan aides were determined to avoid what they perceived to be the prior administration's error of overexposing the president. "One of the most destructive aspects of the Carter administration," observed David Gergen, Reagan's first director of communications, "was that they continually let him go out there and be the point man, on everything!" Unlike Carter, Reagan would delegate authority and responsibility to subordinates. As one presidential aide told a New York Times reporter: "The President feels that he ought not to be answering questions about the B-1 bomber or anything else that specific. . . . His job is to announce broad policy. Let Cap Weinberger take the heat on the B-1 or let Ted Bell take the heat for cuts in school aid. We believe in the delegation of authority." "It is terribly important," Gergen explains, "that the President not be out on the line every day, particularly on bad news. . . . You only have one four-star general in battle, but you've got a lot of lieutenants who can give blood. And if the going is getting hot and heavy, it is far better to have your lieutenants take the wounds than your general." This meant that "on the budget issue, we intentionally put [David] Stockman out front" and "on environmental issues, as controversial as [James] Watt was, it was better to have Watt out talking about environmental issues than the President."

White House staff took care to have bad news or unpopular policies announced at departments. Press Secretary Larry Speakes explained ("mostly tongue-in-cheek" he insisted later): "What's good news, we announce at the White House; bad news comes from Interior or Education." James Baker, Reagan's first chief of staff, made sure that proposed Social Security reforms in the spring of 1981 were announced by Health and Human Services Secretary Richard Schweiker rather than by the White House, and, as negative congressional reaction mounted, White House staff began referring to
the package on background as "Schweiker's Folly." Baker's successor, Don Regan, told Secretary of Agriculture John Block that it was the department's job to get the farm credit story out to the press. "We were keeping the President away from it," Regan later explained, because it was "a no-win situation in which the President can be damaged because there literally is no way to help these farmers." When Watt resigned in the spring of 1983, Reagan's staff canceled a scheduled environmental address "because it would shift the attention to the President" and opted instead for a low-key appearance at the swearing-in ceremony of Watt's successor, William P. Clark. "The idea," explained a presidential aide, "was, 'Get it over there [in the Interior Department].' When we have something developed that we can go out and talk about in a positive way, then bring it back to the White House." The administration's lightning rod strategy was facilitated by Reagan's detached leadership style. Avoiding blame on a policy gone awry was bound to be easier for a president who was widely reported to be inattentive to and uninformed about the details of policy. Claims of noninvolvement that would have seemed disingenuous if not dishonest coming from a Carter or a Johnson were believable coming from Reagan. Of course, the style itself invited criticism from those who felt this degree of detachment to be unbecoming a president of the United States. As was the case with Eisenhower, Reagan absorbed a steady stream of elite criticism disparaging him for being a caretaker president who simply ratified decisions reached by his advisers. When these criticisms reached a crescendo, as in the case of Reagan being allowed to "sleep through" the 1981 downing of two Libyan fighter planes, White House staff vigorously worked to dispel the public image of Reagan as disengaged by emphasizing the president's involvement in the decision-making process.

For the most part, however (at least before the Iran-contra scandal), Reagan and his aides generally seemed comfortable with the image of a relatively detached president, willing to sacrifice credit on some issues if it meant avoiding blame on most issues. Reagan and his aides made a conscious effort not to have Reagan equated with everything that occurred in the government. "The President does not strictly speaking 'run the Government,'" one aide told a New York Times reporter. "He makes the key decisions, but the Government is 'run' in the department and agencies." As Reagan himself, in a 1986 interview with Fortune magazine, explained his leadership philosophy, "I believe that you surround yourself with the best people you can find, delegate authority, and don't interfere as long as the policy you've decided upon is being carried out."

In several respects, Reagan's public persona closely resembled Eisenhower's. Both were widely viewed as passive executives, detached from the specifics of policy, affable but not particularly bright, and even somewhat
befuddled. But in at least one critical respect Reagan and Eisenhower’s public images and leadership styles were decisively different. Reagan came to office with a well-defined policy agenda and a past history of ideological commitment. Eisenhower had never even voted before 1952, and his policy message often lacked definition. Few could have doubts about where Reagan stood on the issues that were dear to his heart; few ever did figure out exactly what Eisenhower or "modern" republicanism stood for.

One should be careful not to exaggerate Reagan's ideological clarity of purpose. For one thing, as Bert Rockman points out, that clarity was "often... greater in rhetoric than in operations." If the broad direction was clear, Reagan rarely offered much in the way of specific guidance about the policy implications of these general objectives. Moreover, clarity of purpose was not characteristic of every policy area nor was it a constant throughout Reagan's tenure. In marked contrast to the clear policy agenda of the 1980 campaign, for instance, Reagan's 1984 reelection campaign was notably vague on specific issues. And when it came to foreign policy, particularly in the second term, Reagan's position was often difficult to pin down. Did "letting Reagan be Reagan" mean following the path of confrontation with "the evil empire" or did it mean pursuing nuclear arms control? His cold warrior instincts coexisted with his desire to be remembered by history as a man of peace. This lack of clarity, as Jane Mayer and Doyle McManus report, meant that "Schultz, Weinberger, Casey, and McFarlane all interpreted the president's will according to their own, often conflicting inclinations. Each insisted that he alone knew the true mind and meaning of the president; each insisted he was doing what the president truly wanted." In domestic policy, however, particularly during the first term, Reagan's position was rarely ambiguous, even when his directives were framed broadly.

Reagan's well-defined agenda had its benefits. Because Reagan had made it clear to others where he stood on such issues as taxation and national defense, he was able to plausibly (even if incorrectly) claim a mandate and push Congress to enact sweeping tax cuts and defense increases. But there was a downside to having a "clear and polarizing agenda that let everyone in government know what the broad objectives of the Reagan administration were." Where Reagan's position was popular, as with taxes, clarity served him well. But in other areas where his position was unpopular, as with the environment or funding for the Nicaraguan contras, clarity often left Reagan exposed to criticism despite his detached governing style.

This chapter is a case study of how clarity of purpose can undermine a president's attempt to distance himself from policy conflict and thus thwart the attempt to deflect blame onto subordinates. The particular vehicle chosen for analyzing this phenomenon is the tenure of Reagan's first secretary of the interior, James Watt. Because Reagan unambiguously signaled to attentive elites that he favored economic growth over environmental protec-
tion, development over conservation, it was difficult for Watt (or Environmental Protection Agency [EPA] director Anne Gorsuch Burford) to provide effective cover for Reagan. Having a clearly defined ideology and agenda thus worked to undercut Watt’s viability as a lightning rod.23

LIGHTNING ROD OR LIABILITY?

Was Watt a lightning rod or a liability? Proponents can be found on both sides of the question. Watt often referred to himself as a presidential lightning rod, and his claim has been repeated by a number of commentators, among them Laurence Barrett and Hedrick Smith.25 No evidence, however, is marshaled to support the contention. Others have argued the opposite thesis that Watt was a liability to President Reagan, bringing criticism to the president, but again it is usually presented as a self-evident fact rather than a proposition needing to be established.

One of the aims in this chapter is to show that evidence can be brought to bear on these competing claims. In the case of Watt, the answer depends on the time period under investigation. During the first year of his tenure there is support for Watt’s view of himself as a presidential lightning rod. Beginning in 1982, however, Watt afforded Reagan little, if any, protection from critics of the administration’s environmental and public land policies, and by the third year of the Reagan presidency, Watt’s high-voltage politics was unmistakably burning the president. In contrast to Secretary Benson, who served to deflect criticism away from Eisenhower throughout his eight-year tenure, Watt quickly became a liability for the president.

"THE SINS OF WATT"

During the summer of 1981, it was standard fare among political pundits and strategists to refer to Watt as a lightning rod for the president. Writing in August 1981, Kenneth Walsh of the Denver Post, for example, argued that Watt “is the lightning rod for the president’s philosophy on natural resources, energy and the environment.” Reagan, Walsh pointed out, “can look down from his lofty perch at the White House and watch Watt doing the dirty work for him.”27 A California Republican strategist agreed that Watt was serving Reagan as a lightning rod. “Watt’s critics aren’t striking at Reagan himself, are they?” he asked rhetorically.28

These claims accurately reflected the reality that during the first year, by and large, critics of the administration’s environmental policies targeted Watt, not Reagan.29 Typical in this respect was a much publicized speech delivered on May 2, 1981, by Nathaniel Reed, a Republican and former assis-
tant secretary of interior under Presidents Nixon and Ford. Reed told his Si­erra Club audience that “my quarrel is not with Ronald Reagan. I think he will be a good President and a notable environmentalist.” Rather the source of the problem was James Watt and other appointees who “have broken faith with the Republican Party and betrayed their President.” Pointing to the “significant environmental progress . . . California made . . . under the leadership of Governor Ronald Reagan,” Reed suggested that Watt’s reckless approach was at variance with “the environmental philosophy and the record of his President,” which he characterized as “very good.” Even “the Watt budget,” Reed maintained, was “an aberration from . . . the true Reagan philosophy.” Having reached the conclusion that Watt was “utterly lacking in the vision and judgment necessary to continue as Secretary of the Interior,” Reed closed by reaffirming his belief that not only was “President Reagan . . . a good man . . . who knows and cares for the outdoors,” but “that when he has fully recuperated [from the assassination attempt], he will steer the natural-resource policies of his Administration back in the di­rection of the great Republican leaders of the last two centuries.”

Even among those less sympathetic to Reagan, Watt was the primary tar­get. California Senator Alan Cranston, for instance, called for Watt’s resig­nation on the grounds that “his policies are reckless and irresponsible [and] a radical reversal of a long-standing bipartisan California tradition of love and respect for the land that includes probably as many Republicans as Democrats—in some cases even Ronald Reagan.”

The entire “dump Watt” movement, which was sponsored by the leading environmental organizations and climaxed during the late summer of 1981, focused almost exclusively on what the movement termed the “sins of Watt.” The Sierra Club opened the campaign against Watt in April by ac­cusing him of “sabotaging conservation goals supported by a vast majorit y of the American people.” Environmental policies of the administration were commonly referred to as “Watt’s policies.” The president of the Wil­derness Society, for example, called “Mr. Watt’s policies . . . the gravest threat to the integrity of the national park system in its entire history.”

This separation that environmental and political elites drew between Watt and Reagan was reflected in public opinion polls taken during 1981. A CBS/ New York Times poll, conducted during September 1981, for instance, found that half the respondents believed they could “trust President Reagan to make the right kind of decision about the environment,” while only a third did not. Gallup polls conducted in June and October found more people approving of Reagan’s handling of the environment than disapproving. On the basis of a California Field poll conducted in August 1981, Mer­vin Field concluded that “President Reagan’s popularity does not seem to be adversely affected by Watt’s poor image. The public seems to separate the
very favorable view it has of the president from that of the secretary of the interior.”

"RONALD REAGAN IS THE REAL JAMES WATT"

This separation between Watt and Reagan did not persist, however, much beyond the first year. Criticism of Watt increasingly became coupled with criticism of the president. Environmentalists came to see Reagan and Watt as a team bent on squandering the nation's natural resources.

After the "dump Watt" movement of the summer of 1981 failed to produce Watt's dismissal, the notion that Watt was being flogged for what were in fact Reagan's policies became a recurrent theme in environmental circles, starting first with the more radical groups such as Friends of the Earth and then rippling out to more mainstream conservation groups, such as the Audubon Society and the National Wildlife Federation. A letter to the editor published in the October 1981 issue of the Friends of the Earth publication, *Not Man Apart*, strenuously objected to "the environmental movement's attacks on James Watt," who was only the president's "front man." The letter stressed that it was "a fundamental error" to blame Watt for what were after all "Mr. Reagan's policies." In closing, the letter called for environmentalists to "shift our fire from Mr. Watt and focus our efforts on Mr. Reagan and his administration." This view was echoed by another reader who believed that "Watt is the symptom, Reagan is the disease."

After a year of limiting themselves to criticizing Watt, Friends of the Earth launched a direct assault upon Ronald Reagan with a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times*, charging that "Mr. Reagan is the real James Watt." The advertisement scored Reagan for failing to make additions to the endangered species list, blocking additions to the national park system, and encouraging more oil drilling, logging, and strip mining. President Reagan, the ad continued, "is taking apart nearly every institution that protects planetary and human life. His actions and rhetoric are consistent: Destructive, disdainful and uncomprehending of environmental values."

This shift in focus from Watt to Reagan was dramatized by the decision to rename the "Watt Watch" column in *Not Man Apart* "Administration Watching." The sacrifice in alliteration was necessary, the editors felt, because although Watt is "the most colorful of the Washington wrecking crew, he is by no means the only one." Accompanying the new monthly column was a telling picture of Ronald Reagan revealing himself behind a mask of James Watt. Similarly, the Sierra Club announced in early 1982 that the campaign against Watt was being broadened into a "war on WATTism—the whole panoply of anticonservation policies of the Reagan administration."

The changing focus among environmental groups can also be seen in the
contrast between *The Watt Book*, published in August 1981 by the Wilderness Society at the height of the dump Watt movement, and an "indictment" released in March 1982 by ten leading environmental groups—including the Wilderness Society, Friends of the Earth, National Audubon Society, and the Sierra Club—entitled *Ronald Reagan and the American Environment*. While the former publication had stressed Watt's betrayal of a bipartisan tradition of environmental protection, the latter never mentioned Watt and instead pinned the blame squarely on the president's shoulders. "President Reagan," the 1982 book begins, "has broken faith with the American people on environmental protection." Rather than calling for Watt's resignation, as *The Watt Book* had done, *Ronald Reagan and the American Environment* demanded that "President Reagan be called to task."45

Representatives of the ten environmental organizations that produced the 1982 report subsequently held a joint press conference in San Francisco, in which they sharply criticized Reagan for what they characterized as his "war on the environment." William Turnage, executive director of the Wilderness Society, blamed Reagan for the "incredible pattern of destruction of environmental programs" that amounted to a "counterrevolution." A representative of the Natural Resources Defense Council echoed Turnage's view, explaining that the decision to "indict" the president was made on the basis of "an across-the-board pattern of lawlessness and heedlessness with regard to the nation's natural resources." Repeating the charge made earlier by the Friends of the Earth, Turnage declared that "Ronald Reagan is the real James Watt."46

This anti-Reagan message was repeated by Russell Peterson, president of the Audubon Society, a former Republican governor of Delaware, and chair of the Council on Environmental Quality under Presidents Nixon and Ford. Writing in the *New York Times Magazine*, Peterson attacked Reagan personally for having "repudiated what I hold to be a Republican tradition of conservation and protection of natural resources that goes back to Theodore Roosevelt." "No other President in my experience," Peterson continued, "has seemed to be less caring about the need to protect the nation's natural beauty and natural resources." Peterson recounted the environmental movement's realization that Watt was "no maverick Cabinet officer whose zealous policies might embarrass the President," but rather "was doing exactly what he had been hired to do," which was prosecute "the President's war against environmental protection."47

Further evidence of this change in attitudes exists in the very different reactions that accompanied the 1981 scheme to increase oil drilling off the coast of California and Watt's announcement in August 1982 of the intention to sell off 35 million acres of "surplus" public lands to private companies. The former plan was widely portrayed as a product of Watt's "anti-environmental extremism," while the latter initiative was attributed directly to
the Reagan White House, even though Watt, and not the White House, announced the plan.48

By 1983, the tendency among environmentalists to blame both Watt and Reagan was even more pronounced. When Watt announced a coal-leasing plan in the summer of 1983, for instance, the Sierra Club immediately went after Reagan in an article entitled “Coal Leasing: More Reagan Giveaways.”49 In the minds of environmentalists, Reagan was so closely identified with the cause of privatization that they saw Watt’s role as little more than announcing the president’s policy.

Another full page advertisement taken out by Friends of the Earth, this time in early 1983, showed just how intimately connected Reagan and Watt had become in the minds of the group’s leaders. Under pictures of the president and the secretary, the ad declared:

After two years, it’s clear that Ronald Reagan and James Watt do not believe in preserving publicly owned land for the future. They have made unconscionable “sweetheart” leases to oil, mining and timber companies within your national forests and wilderness. They have refused to add to the national parks . . . . Reagan and Watt have shown virtually religious devotion to converting public land to private use. . . . Their minds are set in concrete and their hearts are cold to the natural world. To them, the only values in nature are commercial ones.50

More moderate voices followed in stressing the consistency between Watt’s statements and actions and Reagan’s preferences. John Seiberling (D-Ohio), chair of the House Interior subcommittee on public lands, concluded that “it begins to appear that Mr. Crowell and Mr. Watt are not acting on their own but are part of an Administration-wide broadside assault on the nation’s wilderness heritage.”51 In the summer of 1981, former President Jimmy Carter had publicly criticized “the misguided and radical new policies of the Department of Interior” without ever mentioning Reagan by name, but two years later he lambasted Reagan personally for “a deliberate across-the-board abandonment of United States leadership on environmental issues.”52

Editorials in the Los Angeles Times, which had begun by reserving criticism for Watt, eventually felt forced to conclude that the “only . . . reason why President Reagan would continue to tolerate Watt in his cabinet” is that “he must agree with Watt’s policies.” The Times described “Watt’s, and Reagan’s, policies” as “totally unacceptable to a majority of Americans.” Watt, the Times concluded, was only “the whipping boy for the wrongful conservation policies of the Reagan Administration.”53

The reaction among environmentalists to Watt’s resignation in the fall of 1983 provides additional evidence that Watt had long since ceased to func-
tion as a lightning rod. Watt's departure, according to Sierra Club president Denny Shaffer, meant "the insults to the nation's intelligence will end, but not the assaults on the environment." Liz Railbeck, legislative analyst for Friends of the Earth, acknowledged that "we are delighted to see Watt go" but quickly added that "we feel Ronald Reagan has the responsibility for three years of environmental wreckage. You don't change Ronald Reagan by getting rid of James Watt. The mouth is gone, but the policies are apt to be the same." These sentiments were echoed by Rafe Pomerance, president of Friends of the Earth, who stated that "Ronald Reagan bears the responsibility for nearly three years of mounting environmental wreckage left by James Watt. The general in charge of Ronald Reagan's war on the environment may be gone but the Commander-in-Chief and just about all the officers remain." Marion Edney, head of the League of Conservation Voters, agreed that Watt's resignation "doesn't change the fact that Ronald Reagan remains personally responsible for the actions of his agents." Democratic party national chair Charles Manat reminded people that "James Watt has been speaking for Ronald Reagan. . . . The President has been letting Watt be Reagan." Believing that Watt was only executing the Reagan agenda, Democratic elites and environmental activists did not view Watt's departure as likely to result in policy changes.

The elite view stressing the similarity between Watt and Reagan trickled down to the mass public. Increasingly the public connected Reagan personally with anti-environmental positions. In contrast to the Gallup polls taken in June and October of 1981, which had shown slim pluralities approving of Reagan's handling of the environment, surveys conducted by Gallup in 1982 and 1983 found increasing disapproval of Reagan's handling of environmental issues. Whereas in June 1981, 39 percent had approved of Reagan's handling of the environment and 33 percent disapproved, by the following June the numbers had reversed, with 35 percent approving of Reagan's performance and 41 percent disapproving. By the following April, the public perception of Reagan's performance had slipped even further, with only 33 percent approving and 49 percent disapproving. Only after the firing of Watt did a plurality again express approval of Reagan's handling of environmental issues.

Even more telling was a Washington Post/ABC News poll, conducted in February 1983, which found that by a two to one margin (54 to 27 percent) the public believed Reagan "cares more about protecting the firms that are violating antipollution laws than he cares about enforcing those laws." Virtually the same percentage (60 percent) of the public answered the same way when asked the identical question about Anne Gorsuch Burford, suggesting that Reagan's public image on environmental matters was not much different from that of his environmental advisers.
CHAPTER THREE

THE COSTS OFIDEOLOGICAL CLARITY

If Eisenhower's behavior encouraged the impression that the president was following the judgment of his secretary, Reagan's behavior often fostered the opposite belief that Watt was following the ideological dictates of the president. In contrast to Eisenhower's studied ambiguity, Reagan did little to cultivate an image on environmental issues that was distinct from Watt's. If President Reagan's EPA director, Anne Gorsuch Burford, could reach the conclusion that the president "doesn't care about the environment," then it is hardly surprising that others less sympathetic to Reagan arrived at the same conclusion.

One of the most important factors working to undercut Watt's status as a lightning rod was the Reagan administration's highly ideological pattern of appointments to key environmental posts. Because a president's appointments are carefully scrutinized by elites as indicators of a president's intentions, they play an important role in sustaining a lightning rod. For environmentalists, Watt was only "the largest sparkler in this diadem of Republican rhinestones," which included Anne Gorsuch Burford as head of the EPA; John Crowell, an outspoken critic of restrictions limiting timber cutting in national forests, as the man in charge of the United States Forest Service at the Department of Agriculture; Robert Burford, a leader of the Sagebrush Rebellion, as Bureau of Land Management chief; and James Harris, who as an Indiana state senator had argued that the federal law to control strip mining was unconstitutional, as head of the Office of Surface Mining. By filling so many top positions with people perceived as antienvironment (and by centralizing appointments in the White House), Reagan telegraphed his intentions to environmentalists and thereby undermined Watt's utility as a lightning rod.

During Watt's tenure, Reagan made only occasional, half-hearted efforts to persuade environmentalists of his good intentions, with little success. Toward the beginning of 1982, Ed Meese and other White House aides met with three prominent environmental leaders—Russell Peterson of the National Audubon Society, Jay Hair of the National Wildlife Federation, and J. Michael McCloskey of the Sierra Club—to persuade them that Reagan was a "good environmentalist." Instead, Peterson reported, the meeting served only to provide "confirmation of the complete disrespect on the part of the President and his team for what . . . the conservation and environmental movement stand for." "To describe President Reagan as a good environmentalist, as Meese did," Peterson said later, "is a claim that would never meet the truth-in-advertising standards." In July 1983, President Reagan tried to reach out to the environmental community by meeting with the famous photographer and naturalist Ansel Adams. According to Adams, Reagan told him that "we are not so far apart
as you think we are. I’ve always been an environmentalist.’” Adams re­
maine un convinced, however, telling the press afterward that the president
had a “totally different concept of the world and it is very hard to break
through.”64 The effort was too little, too late.

Reagan’s campaign statements made it even more difficult to persuade en­
vironmentalists that his intentions toward them were ambivalent, let alone
benevolent. During the 1980 campaign, Reagan had publicly identified him­
self with the Sagebrush Rebellion—“count me in,” he told a Utah audi­
ence.65 His assertions during the campaign that air pollution in the United
States had been “substantially controlled” and that nature rather than in­
dustry was the chief cause of air pollution helped to sow distrust toward
Reagan among those attentive to environmental issues.66

Reagan’s vigorous public defenses of Watt further eroded the ambiguity
of his position. Here it might be objected that Reagan was behaving no dif­
ferently than President Eisenhower, who also forcefully defended his secre­
tary of agriculture against critics. The difference is that Eisenhower de­
fended Benson without attacking his opponents, and often without even
siding with Benson’s policy positions. Reagan, in contrast, joined Watt in at­
tacking the secretary’s critics. In August 1981, for instance, as anti-Watt sen­
timent was reaching a peak, Reagan not only pledged his “full support” for
Watt, but expressed his opinion that Watt was correct that “we have been
victimized by some individuals that I refer to as environmental extremists.”67
By accepting Watt’s definition of his opposition as “extremists,” Reagan
hardened environmental attitudes toward himself. The more closely Reagan
identified himself with Watt the more difficult it became for critics to follow
Nathaniel Reed’s lead of defending the president while attacking Watt’s pol­
icy.

A notable exception to Reagan’s pattern of identifying himself with Watt
in opposition to “environmental extremists” came in the March 23, 1983,
press conference announcing William Ruckelshaus’s appointment as head
of the EPA. In this conference, Reagan tried to stake out a middle position
between the “zealots on both sides.” Some people, Reagan acknowledged,
“won’t be satisfied unless they can pave over the entire countryside.”68 The
conciliatory rhetoric, as well as the act of selecting the highly respected
Ruckelshaus, made Reagan seem more sympathetic to the environment than
his secretary of interior and thus might have been a first step in making Watt
a more plausible lightning rod.

This press conference, however, remained an isolated incident and never
became part of a consistent strategy for distancing himself from Watt. In­
deed only ten days earlier, Reagan had encouraged direct attacks upon his
person by attacking, in words reminiscent of Watt, his opponents’ motives.
“The lobbyists for the environmental interests,” Reagan suggested at a
March 12 press conference, “feel that they have to keep their constituents
stirred up or they might not have jobs anymore.” Those who attacked Anne Gorsuch Burford, Reagan continued, were not concerned about the environment or wrongdoing, but rather were motivated by opposition to the administration and its policies. 69 In an interview at the end of the month, a week after announcing the Ruckelshaus appointment, Reagan repeated his belief that “professional” environmentalists who criticized Watt weren't interested in solving problems, only in making sure “their careers will go on.” 70

Reagan's behavior contrasts strikingly with that of Eisenhower who, as Fred Greenstein has pointed out, studiously avoided calling into question opponents' motivations. 71 A key ingredient in getting others to believe that his intentions were good, Eisenhower reasoned, was to resist the temptation to call into question the intentions of those with whom he disagreed.

The lesson of Reagan's experience in the environmental arena is that a willingness to delegate, although probably a necessary condition, is not sufficient for a presidential lightning rod to work successfully. If distance from day-to-day operations tended to protect Reagan, his ideological orientation, as read by others through campaign statements, appointments, and attacks on the environmentalists, kept him more closely identified with policy than his hands-off management strategy might have suggested. Reagan's words and actions created a sense that, as a writer for Audubon put it, “if Jim Watt did not exist, Ronald Reagan would have had to invent him. Watt is everything Reagan wanted at Interior.” 72 In sum, Reagan was too closely connected ideologically with the schemes that Watt and Burford were carrying out, such as privatization and deregulation, to allow him to maintain the same degree of separation between the policy and the person that Eisenhower achieved in the area of agriculture.

A SELF-INFECTED LIGHTNING STORM

Although Watt's failure as a lightning rod was importantly connected to President Reagan's leadership style, Watt's own actions also contributed to that failure. In the first place, Watt himself furthered the impression of a close link between Watt and Reagan. When faced with criticism, Watt frequently stressed his ideological affinity with Reagan. The president and he, Watt insisted, were “soul mates” on environmental issues. 73 In an early interview with Public Opinion, Watt suggested that “no other Secretary of the Interior, in recent times at least, has had a President who understands my department like Ronald Reagan does. . . . When I said, ‘I want to do this, I want to do that,’ he replied, ‘Sic ’em.’ ” 74 Watt's repeated insistence on portraying himself as a presidential lightning rod, 75 ironically, undermined his ability to function as a lightning rod, for, as Fred Greenstein comments, “an
aide viewed as a lightning rod . . . will not keep bolts from striking the president."

Watt’s failure to function as a successful lightning rod was also due to his penchant for controversial public gaffes on matters totally unrelated to environmental policy. Too often the creation of controversy is taken as a sufficient indicator of the existence of a lightning rod effect. But Watt resembled less a lightning rod than a storm creator, as his one-liners—from his comments about the Beach Boys, to his letter to Moshe Arens, to his joke about the coal lease advisory commission as including “a black, a woman, two Jews, and a cripple”—sent the White House scrambling for cover. A presidential aide deserves the appellation “lightning rod” only for absorbing heat in the pursuit of a president’s objectives or for absorbing blame for negative outcomes, not for generating gratuitous controversy.

To be sure, many of the policies Watt pursued were bound to generate controversy. No interior secretary could aggressively promote oil drilling off the coast of California, accelerate the leasing of western public lands for coal mining, and attempt to open up national wilderness areas to mineral exploration, and hope to avoid becoming embroiled in controversy. Interviewed in 1990, Reagan indicated that Watt had done what Reagan wanted done. “I appointed him,” Reagan explained, “with the understanding that he was going to do those things that he and I had talked about . . . . And he knew when he took the job that he would turn enough people off that pretty soon he would lose any effectiveness that he had if he did the things that we wanted done. . . . And I have to say, if you look back and analyze point by point the things that were done, he was darn good.”

Even viewed solely from the perspective of Reagan’s own strategic and programmatic interests, Watt’s tenure was far from the success Reagan claims. As Paul Portney points out in a review of the Reagan administration’s environmental record during the first term, although many of the administration’s public land and water resource policies were “inherently controversial,” “they became more so because of Secretary Watt.” Much of the criticism of Watt, Portney argues, stemmed as much from style as from substance, particularly from Watt’s unwillingness to consult with state government officials and congressional committees or subcommittees and their staffs.

To be sure, style is not so easily separated from substance. It is difficult to be inclusive and cooperative while pursuing policies that radically break with existing expectations and constituencies. The style—confrontation and exclusion—stems from the substance—radical change in the direction of public policy. But in refusing to permit political realities to shape strategic calculations, Watt squandered opportunities to restore the balance between commercial versus natural uses of public lands that the Reagan administration believed had been lost in the preceding decade. Watt expected to be able
to trade on Reagan's support; he failed to understand that success depended in large part on building support so that the president could then afford to back his preferences. 81

Portney identifies a number of areas where it would have been possible for a more politically skillful secretary to enact significant changes in directions consistent with the Reagan administration's basic philosophy. There was, for instance, "a large measure of expert consensus" on reducing federal spending in areas such as federal water projects. There was also substantial support for increased leasing of energy resources on public lands; indeed the Carter administration had already pledged to increase such leasing in a second term. In addition, a number of long-time observers of public land management had concluded that some federal lands were too difficult to manage and not worth the trouble; support also existed for selling or exchanging certain lands to local or state governments. Moreover, even some of those sympathetic to the environmental movement felt that the multiple-use mandate had been supplanted by "the ideological fantasy that the only decent and harmonious natural relationships were nonconsuming ones. 82 Had Watt's definition of his policy goals combined judgments about what is desirable with estimates about what is possible, he might have been able to advance significantly the Reagan agenda. 83

Instead, Watt's attempt to radically recast governmental policy created so much controversy that relatively little change actually occurred, a fact celebrated by liberals and lamented by conservatives but agreed upon by both. 84 Writing toward the close of Reagan's first term, one expert concluded that despite the liability that environmental and natural resource policy had become for Reagan, "less happened, for good and for ill, than either the administration promised or the public believes." "In spite of the administration's intention to greatly increase public land sales," for instance, "such transactions have been no greater than in previous administrations because of adverse public and congressional reaction." "In spite of all the Sturm und Drang, . . . no truly fundamental change" took place at the Interior Department. 85

Such an outcome was not preordained by the nature of contemporary public opinion on the environment. Public support for the environment is widespread, but the issue is not highly salient for most people most of the time. Although during the 1980s a substantial majority of Americans, for instance, agreed that environmental protection standards "cannot be too high" and believed environmental improvements must be made "regardless of cost," only a small fraction named the environment as one of the most important problems facing the country. 86 In such situations where public opinion is characterized by a "permissive consensus," Riley Dunlap explains, the government ordinarily "has considerable flexibility in pursuing the goal and is not carefully monitored by the public." Only if administra-
tion policy becomes "obviously out of tune with the public consensus" does the administration risk incurring substantial political costs. By violating that zone of indifference, Watt helped to create a backlash against the administration's policies and to discredit antienvironmental positions in a way that continues to hamper the Republican party.

SEDUCTION BY METAPHOR

It is one thing to shoulder the blame for a controversial policy; it is quite another to push an agenda so recklessly that one discredits a president's policy objectives. One of the great dangers of the lightning rod metaphor is that its uncritical use can lull cabinet members into a false sense of usefulness. To claim lightning rod status is to suggest that the criticism one is receiving is a sign that one is serving the president well. Little wonder then that Watt rushed to endorse the description of himself as a lightning rod for it allowed him to wear controversy as a badge of honor. But the label begs some tough questions.

To say, as David Gergen does, that "on environmental issues, as controversial as Watt was, it was better to have Watt out talking about environmental issues than the President" sidesteps the question of whether Reagan would have been better served by another interior secretary (a la Donald Hodel) who would pursue the same basic policies in a less confrontational and controversial manner. Even if criticisms of Watt had been completely insulated from perceptions of the president (which, we have seen, they were not), we would still need to ask about the effect that Watt's actions had on the administration's ability to achieve its policy objectives. The danger of the lightning rod metaphor is that it tempts us to avoid asking this all-important question.

The answer in Watt's case is clear enough. As Paul Portney, among others, has pointed out, Watt's "style created a backlash that came to stand in the way of achieving his substantive objectives." In the face of mounting criticism, the Reagan administration had to retreat from many of its policy objectives. Not only did public support for environmental positions and groups increase in the wake of Watt's tenure, but sensible antienvironmental positions became tarnished with the brush of antienvironmental extremism. To have Watt out front on environmental issues did not so much deflect blame away from the president as to caricature antienvironmentalism in such a way as to make it easier for environmentalists to mobilize support and to thwart administration objectives. To speak of Watt as a lightning rod is thus not only to misstate Watt's effect on public support for Ronald Reagan but, more important, to lose sight of Watt's monumental failure as a public manager and political strategist.
In a recent paper, political scientists Michael Kraft and Norman Vig ask, "Why So Little Applause for the Bush Environmental Record?" As they surveyed the Bush environmental record toward the end of the summer of 1990, they found a president who had attempted to strike a judicious balance between decisions that supported environmental values and decisions that gave priority to economic development. Despite Bush's substantial environmental achievements and his markedly better environmental record than Reagan's, Kraft and Vig found that "Bush gets surprisingly little credit from the environmental community or from the public at large." The environmental community focused on those decisions that favored economic development and gave the president little credit for those decisions that came down on the side of environmental values. Just a few months before the president would sign the Clean Air Act in November 1990, for instance, a Sierra Club official could blast Bush for his "shameful lack of leadership on the global environment." Toward the end of his term, as the debate about the president's role at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro reached its peak, criticism of Bush among environmentalists reached a crescendo. Many environmentalists had come to believe that "Mr. Bush is no environmentalist." A few even insisted that he would go "down in history, second only to Ronald Reagan, as America's anti-environmental President." The rising tide of negative elite evaluations trickled down to the mass public. Although the American public rated Bush better on the environment than it had Reagan, it still did not view Bush's environmental performance particularly positively. Even when Bush's overall approval scores were high, 62 percent of the public said that Bush had "mostly just talked about" protecting the environment rather than having "really made progress." By the summer of 1992, only 31 percent approved of Bush's handling of the environment. Cued by elite interpretations, the public came to see the gap between Bush's rhetoric and his administration's actions not as a sign that the president was well intentioned but rather that he was insincere.

Kraft and Vig attribute Bush's failure to get credit for the environmental achievements of his administration in part to poor salesmanship on the part of the Bush White House. But Kraft and Vig also argue that a large part of the answer lies in the "demanding and highly critical environmental community." Bush's failure as a leader, in other words, cannot be explained without looking at his would-be followers. Why were these followers so unwilling to accept the mixed record of the Bush administration? Why were they so unforgiving of the president when the administration leaned in the direction of economic growth? And why were they so unappreciative of the president when the administration leaned in an environmental direction?

Before explaining Bush's failure, though, it is worth recalling the good will
initially shown toward Bush in the environmental community and the words and deeds through which Bush earned that good will. Bush self-consciously set out to differentiate himself from the more divisive, partisan politics of Reagan, not only in the area of the environment but also in such areas as civil rights and education. The "kinder, gentler" phrase was meant to convey Bush's intention to govern by inclusion and conciliation rather than through polarization and confrontation.

Throughout the first year or so of the administration, Bush appeared to be quite successful in persuading environmentalists that his heart was with them even when his policies always weren't. After meeting with president-elect Bush, Jay Hair, president of the National Wildlife Federation, told reporters that he found the difference between Mr. Bush and President Reagan's "ideological shrillness and lack of commitment to good stewardship of the land" to be like "night and day." Shortly into the new administration, journalist Jack Germond commented that he thought "Bush's heart is in the right place on environmental questions. His record is not up to this point, but I think it is too soon to tell."

Bush's appointments, particularly the selection of William Reilly as head of the EPA but also the choice of Michael Deland as head of Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) and Robert Grady as associate director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) for natural resources, energy, and science, helped to signal the president's sympathy for environmental positions. The appointment of Reilly gave Bush something Reagan never had in his first two and a half years: a prominent administration official with credibility in the environmental community who could try, as one official close to Mr. Reilly put it, "to reassure his friends that he believes that the President has his heart in the right place." When the White House weakened a wetlands agreement to take into account objections raised by Alaskan officials and development interests, for instance, Reilly explained to a reporter that "the President's commitment to no net loss of wetlands is one he believes in quite strongly."

The portrayal of Bush as a president with environmental instincts opened the way for advisers to play the role of lightning rod when administration policy did not match presidential rhetoric. Several people within the administration played this role but none so visibly or with such gusto as Chief of Staff John Sununu. As early as February 1990, leaders of eight national environmental groups wrote to Bush to complain that "the direct, personal involvement of your chief of staff [is] reversing your pledges [and] driving a wedge between you and conservationists." "You have articulated laudable goals," the signers continued, "but it appears your chief of staff is not committed to meeting them." Sununu was identified as the "nation's chief environmental foe" and as "the new James Watt." Sununu's "idea of open space," joked one critic, "was a K Mart parking lot." Sununu was charged
with "isolating President Bush from other world leaders on environmental issues." A New York Times editorial scored Sununu for an "impatience with environmentalists [that] stops just short of contempt." Columnist Tom Wicker excoriated Sununu, "the White House chief of everything," for his "myopic approach to energy," and columnist Leslie Gelb held Sununu responsible for Jim Baker's and William Reilly's unwillingness to speak their minds in public and to the president. Sununu attracted perhaps the most intensive criticism for his role in the dispute over global warming. The press carried the story of an arrogant chief of staff high-handedly overriding the considered opinion of not only the relevant experts within the administration but within the entire scientific community. Sununu's skepticism of the models upon which predictions of greenhouse warming are based was genuine; what was misleading was the implication that Sununu was a rogue elephant. In fact Sununu expressed the misgivings of important elements within the Republican party who feared that warnings of "global warming" and impending doom were being used by environmentalists to justify government regulation of private enterprise. Because the debate over global warming has critically important consequences for how we choose to organize our social lives—if nature is resilient, individuals should be left to their own devices; if nature is fragile, individuals should be regulated in the name of the collective good—it is understandable that the controversy is politically charged. It is also understandable that a president who conceives of himself as an environmentalist and wants others to do so would give Sununu running room on an issue that is central to the Republican party's self-definition and yet also has proven troublesome for Republicans who have not yet figured out how to package this skepticism without seeming to be indifferent to "the fate of the earth."

The environmentalists' view of Bush as a president whose good intentions were being thwarted and diverted by scheming aides was genuine. It was not just dissembling designed to avoid antagonizing a popular president. Even relatively dispassionate observers, like Kraft and Vig, for instance, felt that "Bush's advisers may be pulling him back from his political instinct to support environmental efforts." Kraft and Vig's harshest condemnation is reserved for Sununu. The chief of staff, they argue, "has clearly exerted personal influence on climate change policy that goes ... beyond his own technical competence. He has imposed his own judgment against others' on scientific issues in a manner that reflects his biases and values."

This sense that Bush, unlike his immediate predecessor, possessed environmental instincts is what enabled Sununu to be an effective lightning rod. Many environmentalists seemed to believe that if only Bush had another chief of staff or if only Bush would involve himself more directly in environmental policy making, administration policy with respect to climate change or wetlands preservation or clean air would look very different.
was well cast as an environmental bogeyman for not only did he exercise considerable power but he also harbored a well-advertised distrust of the scientific evidence that provided the basis for many environmental proposals.¹¹⁸

Ultimately, though, Sununu's role as an environmental lightning rod broke down, and environmentalists increasingly aimed their pointed barbs directly at the president. Environmentalists became less and less willing to view Bush's intentions in a charitable light. As the attacks became more vehement and more personal, administration officials publicly expressed "a growing frustration here that we never get credit for anything."¹¹⁹ In the spring of 1990, press reports emerged that Bush "privately has seethed at the criticism from [environmental] activists, angry that they keep demanding more when he believes he has offered them much."¹²⁰ The simmering feud erupted in public in the summer of 1990, with headlines proclaiming, "Bush, Environmentalists End Relationship in a Huff."¹²¹ Environmentalists criticized Bush for bad faith, broken promises, and empty rhetoric. Many in the Bush administration, meanwhile, wrote environmentalists off as implacable critics who could not be pleased. As one Bush aide expressed it, "If we are going to get beat up, why bother?"¹²²

Why did the environmental community give Bush so little credit and so much blame? Why were they so hypercritical of an administration that had done so much better than its predecessor? Robert Grady of the OMB offers an organizational explanation. In order to maintain and expand their memberships, Grady argues, environmental groups must continually press for more.¹²³ If the groups praise the administration, members may feel that there is a less pressing need to contribute to the group. If things are going well on the environmental front, contributors may decide that perhaps scarce resources would be better spent in some other area. To combat this threat to organizational maintenance, these organizations keep up a steady drumbeat of criticism and demands. There is truth to this analysis, but there must be more to the story. After all, many voluntary groups share this same basic incentive structure yet not all are as harshly critical of existing policies and authority or as apocalyptic about the future as are environmentalists.

An additional part of the story is provided by focusing on the egalitarian, antiauthority ethos of many environmental advocates.¹²⁴ Many such advocates are openly hostile to the political and economic system and are not particularly interested in letting the president, or any other established leaders, off the hook.¹²⁵ Lightning rods presuppose followers who want to believe in leaders. In the absence of such a belief, blame avoidance is not a viable strategy. But this explanation by itself is also insufficient. Many environmentalists are Republicans. The leaders of organizations like the National Wildlife Federation and even the Sierra Club are very much part of the establishment and regularly engage in the necessary bargains and compromises of politics.¹²⁶
Bush's failure to continue to deflect blame in the area of environmental policy is more deeply rooted still. It is a failure that is grounded in a growing ideological divide between political elites on environmental questions that made it virtually impossible for Bush to chart a middle course. The gap between movement conservatives and business interests on the one hand and environmentalists on the other was simply too great. Passage of the Clean Air Act seemed to belie this divide but the division quickly reasserted itself in the intense debate over how to enforce the law. One senior administration official confided, "At the heart of this debate [are] really . . . different world view[s] inside this administration." The opposing sides tried to iron out their differences in a series of contentious sessions, but "the conclusion was the sides were so far apart that Bush would have to make the choice." Similarly, Bush found it virtually impossible to adopt and hold a middle ground in the controversies swirling around the Earth Summit. Bush's "split-the-difference" or "find-a-balance" pattern of decision making ultimately proved ill suited to a political environment in which the competing sides were so far apart that compromise was seen as unacceptable to both sides.

But ideological polarization among followers is not the whole story either. For Bush's own rhetoric was also critically important in undermining the president's desire to deflect blame onto subordinates. When Bush promised to be the "environmental president," he invited voters to judge him on the basis of his administration's actions in this policy area. Yet the environment was, as Kraft and Vig point out, in fact "a low salience issue for the president." Bush was thus asking voters to hold him personally accountable for an area of public policy in which he would play little role and in which policy direction was hotly contested within his party. Rhetoric is never mere rhetoric. Those who favored environmentalist positions used Bush's own words to hold the president's feet to the fire. A New York Times editorial, for instance, argued that "Mr. Bush takes pride in his innovative clean air bill and his decision to join an international agreement to abolish ozone-threatening chemicals. Those are fine achievements, but they do not unhook him from a campaign promise he made on Aug. 31, 1988. 'Those who think we are powerless to do anything about the 'greenhouse effect,' he said. 'As President, I intend to do something about it.' Do what?' Such widely publicized campaign commitments may have given the president a popular issue on which to run but by lifting his profile on the issue those same promises made it more difficult for him later to deflect blame onto subordinates.

Yet why did Bush find it so difficult to slip the harness of his rhetoric? Why didn't the rhetoric serve as a signal of the president's good intentions, and why weren't the deeds understood as the work of overly zealous aides or the product of unfortunate but necessary compromises with his conservative
electoral base? Why was the rhetoric instead seen as largely hollow and the deeds viewed as a sign of Bush's hypocrisy and opportunism? After all, Eisenhower made visible campaign commitments to retain price supports for farmers, and yet farmers did not accuse Eisenhower of hypocrisy so much as they charged Secretary Benson with betrayal. Eisenhower's pledges were widely seen as genuine expressions of his desire to help farmers, while the administration's policies that backed away from price supports were widely interpreted in terms of Benson's zealousness or knavery. Why was Bush unable to emulate Eisenhower's success?

Part of the answer is relatively straightforward. Farmers in the 1950s were overwhelmingly Republican and thus had a strong predisposition to support Eisenhower. Many environmentalists, on the other hand, were strongly predisposed to distrust Republicans, especially after eight years of the Reagan administration. As Russell E. Train, a Bush friend and ex-EPA boss and president of the World Wildlife Fund, says, "Most environmentalists are not predisposed to support a Republican president."

Another part of the answer is that Eisenhower never promised to be the "agriculture president" and was thus able to keep a greater personal distance from the issue of price supports, despite the specific pledges he made during the campaign. In 1952, Eisenhower campaigned largely on the themes of "Communism, Korea, and Corruption"; agriculture was relatively peripheral. Bush's pledge to be "the environmental president," on the other hand, played a central role in defining the Bush candidacy. Only Bush's "no new taxes" pledge had greater visibility in the campaign.

Moreover, Sununu's proximity to the president made him a more risky lightning rod than Benson, who was lodged some distance away from the president in a second-tier department. People can believe that a president may not know or understand or particularly care what his secretary of agriculture is up to; it is much harder to persuade people that a president doesn't approve of, doesn't know about, or doesn't understand what his chief of staff is doing.

Sununu's extensive involvement with environmental issues, however, reflected a larger problem for Bush, namely the deep disagreements within the administration in this policy area. The Eisenhower administration included diverse views on agriculture, but most of these differences were small enough that they could be compromised and settled well below the presidential level. Reagan's initial top environmental appointments to a large degree shared a common ideological orientation, which often muted the scope of conflicts within (though not outside) the administration. Bush's strategy of including people with large philosophical differences meant, as Kraft and Vig point out, that decisions were inevitably thrust into the upper reaches of the Bush White House.

Bush's experience, then, teaches us some of the difficulties of avoiding
blame in a deeply polarized policy environment. Part of what made Eisen­
hower’s strategy of blame avoidance viable was that the differences between
opposing sides were small enough that it was possible to carve out a middle
ground where both sides could believe the president was still with them.
Where the differences become too large, a president finds it difficult to keep
his commitments ambiguous and to persuade opposing sides of his good in­
tentions. The greater the ideological divisions, the greater the pressure on the
president to choose sides and to become involved in the disputes. Ideological
polarization thus undermines the two factors—detachment from decision
making and ambiguity about intentions—that enable a president to deflect
blame onto subordinates.