

Hickel and His Critics

*Attacked at First by Conservationists,
He Went On to Achieve Their Support*

By E. W. Kenworthy
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Few men have been nominated for Cabinet posts who seemed to have so few qualifications for the job and who aroused so much apprehension and opposition as did Walter J. Hickel. Here was a Governor of Alaska, an apparently parochial figure with the self-made millionaire's limitations of national outlook and interest, named to head the Department of the Interior, which has authority over the regulation of much of the nation's natural resources—the public lands, oil and mineral leasing, wildlife and the national parks—and also over the pollution of the nation's waters.

News Analysis

Yet here also was a man with close ties to the oil industry, a man whose philosophy seemed to subordinate conservation to development, a man who had forced a native cooperative in Alaska to break a contract to sell salmon to a Japanese company at higher prices than American canneries would pay.

Conservationists Concerned

The apprehension of conservationists and environmentalists seemed well founded.

In the weeks before his confirmation hearings, Mr. Hickel produced a number of what became known as "Hickelisms."

He said he was opposed to "conservation for conservation's sake." He said he feared that "if you set water [quality] standards too high, you might hinder industrial development." And he observed that "a tree looking at a tree really doesn't do anything, but a person looking at a tree means something."

It appeared that Mr. Hickel's only qualification for the office was political services rendered to Mr. Nixon.

Originally a supporter of Governor Rockefeller, Mr. Hickel had made a timely switch to Mr. Nixon and had campaigned effectively for him in the Western and mountain states.

Hearings Were Protracted

Mr. Hickel's confirmation hearings were protracted, intensive and aggressive. They ran for several days and filled a fat volume.

Yet, even before the hearings began, there were very considered voices who spoke out for Mr. Hickel to inquiring reporters. One of these was Joseph Fitzgerald, the head of the Federal Field Commission for Development in Alaska, who had been working for three years on the native claims question.

Mr. Fitzgerald, speaking from his intimate acquaintance with Governor Hickel, said the nominee was a man of integrity and independence, sometimes mistaken and often stubborn in his mistakes, but still a man who was open to fresh viewpoints.

Mr. Fitzgerald's only doubt involved whether or not Mr. Hickel, whose experience was limited to Alaska and its problems, would be able, for example, to take a national view of resource development and the protection of the environment.

Only a few weeks into the new Administration, Mr. Hickel displayed the qualities Mr. Fitzgerald had attributed to him. When the oil blowout occurred in the Santa Barbara Channel, Mr. Hickel at first refused to order drilling stopped. But after a visit to the scene, he quickly reversed himself.

Support Grows

Overnight, Mr. Hickel began to accumulate a constituency among the conservation groups that had opposed him. And the constituency grew as he made decision after decision that demonstrated concern for the environment.

He came into office convinced that it was safe to proceed with an oil pipeline across Alaska. But he listened to the scientific doubts of geologists and agreed that the pipeline should not get a permit until the companies had come up with a satisfactory plan.

When the Chevron Oil Company platform in the Gulf of Mexico caught fire in March, 1970, and spewed oil into the coastal waters, Mr. Hickel authorized an investigation to determine if there had been a violation of regulations. The inquiry found that not only Chevron but other companies had failed to install required safeguards.

Mr. Hickel asked the Justice Department to file suits.

Again, it was at his urging that suits were filed against 10 companies accused of discharging mercury into interstate waters.

But the very qualities that caused many to view Mr. Hickel as an increasingly attractive exception to the bureaucratic rule—his independence, his receptiveness to new ideas, his disregard of protocol, his blunt outspokenness—were to be the occasion of his fall.

On May 20 of this year, Mr. Hickel sent a letter to the President at a time when campus turmoil over the Administration's Vietnam policy was at its peak. The letter said the Administration "finds itself embracing a philosophy which appears to lack appropriate con-

cern for the attitude of a great mass of Americans—our young people." The letter was leaked to the press before it was delivered.

It was the view in Washington that Mr. Hickel would have been ousted then, had it not been for the constituency he had built up.

Then, during the campaign this fall, Mr. Hickel again displayed his independence of mind when he appeared before the American Association of Student Governments and criticized "the rhetoric of polarization"—an obvious criticism of Vice President Agnew and even of Mr. Nixon himself.

Now Mr. Hickel is expected to return to Alaska and build his political defenses in preparation for challenging Senator Mike Gravel four years hence.

As he said when he came to Washington, "You have to come from someplace — you just have to." His place seemed to be the frontier. It was plainly not the Nixon Cabinet.