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Exit Walter Hickel...

Two years ago, when Walter J. Hickel was sworn in after a protracted grilling in the Senate, President Nixon said of his new Secretary of the Interior, "The last shall be first as far as this Administration is concerned."

He has been first only in being summarily fired from the Cabinet. In the President's confidence, as his press secretary made brutally clear in announcing the Secretary's dismissal, Mr. Hickel has been last.

Nobody will question the President's right to drop a Cabinet member whom he feels to be out of sympathy with the Administration's purposes. But the action then properly raises questions as to what those purposes really are. What was there in Secretary Hickel's conduct of the Interior Department that, in contrast to the President's initial enthusiasm for him, wiped out the "essential element of mutual confidence"?

The famous letter in which Mr. Hickel asked greater Administration sensitivity to the attitudes of the young no doubt irritated the President. But to believe that it was fundamental in its author's ouster is not only to charge Mr. Nixon with an implausible degree of pettiness but to impugn his political shrewdness as well.

Far more credible as the decisive factor in the breach between the two men was the degree to which Walter Hickel surprised both the President and his own critics by an increasingly militant defense of the environment. The record is impressive. He took the side of those who wanted to preserve the Everglades, not those who would destroy it with a giant airport. He at least delayed the Alaskan oil pipeline until effects on the permafrost could be adequately studied. He stopped all drilling in the Santa Barbara Channel until ways could be found to minimize the danger of another great oil spill. He cracked down severely on offending oil companies in the Gulf of Mexico and acted effectively to protect the alligators of Florida and the whales of the world. And it was at his instigation that suits were filed against companies accused of polluting interstate waters with poisonous mercury.

As Secretary of the Interior, Mr. Hickel had his shortcomings, but he learned fast and took on stature. When he was slapped with his graceless discharge he was a different man from the appointee who had declared opposition to "conservation for conservation's sake," who felt that water standards should not be set so high that they would "hinder industrial development."

It is revealing that as Mr. Hickel became more and more isolated within the Administration—snubbed is perhaps the more accurate word—his stock with conservationists went steadily upward. He earned the enmity of exploiters, and we honor him for that. On his departure, Senator Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin, who had voted against confirming him, spoke for many when he said that "conservationists have lost a great fighter and a great friend." We can only hope that what this once free-swinging entrepreneur has learned as Secretary of the Interior will somehow yet be turned to good account for the country.

...Enter Rogers Morton

Having shared in the highly skeptical view of Walter Hickel when he was first appointed, we are ready to give his prospective successor the benefit of the doubt. Representative Rogers C. B. Morton has been a Congressman of a moderately progressive Republican cast and a demeanor as far removed as possible from that of the ebullient Secretary before him. He has likewise been chairman of the Republican National Committee in the campaign just past, though no one holds him responsible for his party's doubtful showing or for the tactics employed by his superiors.

The questionable aspect of the coming appointment is Mr. Morton's almost total lack of involvement in the great environmental movements of the past few years. For three terms he sat on the House Committee on the Interior without making a noticeable impression on conservationists, or on the environment for that matter, and then shifted to another committee.

Representative Morton has a reputation in his own district, however, as a man who has worked for the protection of the Chesapeake Bay area, and he has been interested enough in the general field to have eagerly sought the Cabinet post ever since President Nixon's election.

Whatever Mr. Morton's success in the office, we are glad to see the tradition against an Eastern Secretary of the Interior shattered at last. Only once in this century has an appointee come from a state east of Illinois. Usually the post has been considered a plum for the resource-developing states of the West, where there is frequently strong local resentment against protective controls, especially when established by "outsiders."

We hope this will be only the first of Mr. Morton's precedents for good and that in setting others he will have more support from the White House than his predecessor was privileged to enjoy.