

James Watt & Ted Kaczynski

Two very different men are gone, but their legacies are
undoubtedly intertwined.

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A photo of Ted Kaczynski positioned in the window of a member of the Eugene, Oregon activist community. It reads "Be Like Ted."

This week, two men who did bad things shuffled off this mortal coil, and left behind gigantic legacies of pain. Lest their deaths be clouded out by Trump's new indictment, I want to spare some time to talk about them.

At the end of May, the former Secretary of the Interior James Watt died at the age of 85, and this past weekend, news broke that Ted Kaczynski — best known as The Unabomber — died in his jail cell at 81. Their deaths are not linked or connected in any way, but by no effort of their own, they became, undoubtedly, bonded.

In my work, as a freelance journalist who specializes on specific issues of conflict in the West, I have spent a great deal of time thinking about the legacies of both Watt and Kaczynski: the way they both inflicted their own kind of violence. One was a government official from the West who used his power to terrorize the land itself, and brand environmentalists as enemies of America. The other was a terrorist who gained power by fear, who believed so intensely that our society was failing nature, that he was forced to start killing people. He chose the West as his hide-out.

James Watt was born and raised on a Wyoming ranch, educated from grade school to law school there, then entered politics. By the mid-1970s, Watt had aligned himself firmly with the low-simmering Sagebrush Rebellion, which bubbled up among ranchers across the West in opposition to the public rise in environmentalism. The Sagebrush Rebels advocated for the transfer of lands from federal to state hands. They pushed a story, a narrative, a myth: that ranchers were the best stewards.

Here's a little background on what the Sagebrush rebels were all about, from "A Clan Not to Cross," the third written chapter from the first season of *Bundyville*:

"... a movement was stirring in the West among ranchers angry about new attention that conservationists and environmentalists were getting from federal officials. Americans wanted public lands opened up for recreation. They wanted to see endangered species protected. They wanted lands kept pristine.

The 1976 passage of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) closed the door on the frontier era — the time when people could head west, farm 160 acres of land, apply for a deed, and see that land become theirs.

Before FLPMA, "no one questioned the ranchers' right to use that grazing range," Liesl Carr Childers [a professor of history at the University of Northern Iowa, who has written about the Sagebrush Rebellion] tells me. But after FLPMA, they had to share the conversation about the land with people they never had to before.

Some ranchers didn't like it. They stood up, largely advocating for public lands to be transferred from federal control to state hands. They called themselves Sagebrush Rebels, and by the late '70s, they were all over the press. A glossy September 1979 Newsweek cover showed a cowboy atop a horse with the headline, "The Angry West: Get Off Our Backs, Uncle Sam."

...

In states like Nevada, most of the land mass is controlled by the federal government. And when the feds decided to equally weigh all of the interests in the land — camping, hiking, ranching, mining — it meant that some rural people felt pushed aside. It made it seem like the priority users were the people who lived in the cities across the West — the Las Vegases and Denvers and Portlands — and not the people trying to earn a living off the land in their own backyard.

"You set up this automatic tension," Carr Childers says. "The Sagebrush Rebellion is really about a conflict between ranchers, in part, and miners and traditional users, and people who live in urban areas who think about public lands differently."

Rebels advocated for land to be transferred to the state level — the idea being that local control would mean keeping ranchers, miners, and loggers in business longer. And to that end, even soon-to-be President Ronald Reagan was on board. "Count me in as a rebel," he said in 1980 on the campaign trail.

But by the '80s, the movement had lost steam. The Reagan White House wasn't as focused on pleasing environmentalists. In a way, the rebels were getting what they wanted. The administration sold off land, cleared a path for extractive industries.

Shortly after Reagan's inauguration, he announced he was appointing Watt as head of the Interior, which manages federal lands across the country. This was, to put it mildly, a huge hit to the environmental movement.

Before he took office, Watt was the President of the Mountain States Legal Foundation: a right-wing nonprofit that formed to "fight in the courts those bureaucrats and no-growth advocates who create a challenge to individual liberty and economic freedoms," he explained.

It is no stretch to say that Watt hated environmentalism. In his book *The Ecocentrists*, Keith Makoto Woodhouse wrote:

"In Watt's view federal management of public lands generally did more harm than good, and the national wilderness system was already large enough. He resented environmental organizations and opposed many of their goals, at one point calling them 'a left-wing cult which seeks to bring down the type of government I believe in.'"

He was a cattleman, and he intended to govern in favor of the cattleman. He rolled back restrictions on strip-mining, paused grazing reductions, threw out plans to survey the ecology of rangeland, and ramped up the number of oil, gas and coal leases. But, on the other hand, he was good for environmentalism: a boogey-man embodying all the worst things the government was willing to do to its public lands. The Sierra Club petitioned to "Replace Watt," and gathered more than a million signatures nationwide.

Watt was also a born-again Christian, and spoke openly about his views that the world wouldn't be around much longer. According to *The New York Times*, Watt was asked, in a hearing of the House Interior Committee, did he want to preserve wilderness for future generations?

"I do not know how many future generations we can count on before the Lord returns," he said.

His fight with environmentalists was a product of what he believed was the moral thing to do, he told *The Washington Post* in 1983:

"I'm a fundamentalist in my commitment to the Judeo-Christian principles of America. The concept of stewardship is the Judeo-Christian teaching that you have a responsibility to take care of that which is given to your charge, and pass it on in better condition than when you got it, that you are your brother's keeper, that you have compassion for people, that you help another person get a job, feed his family."

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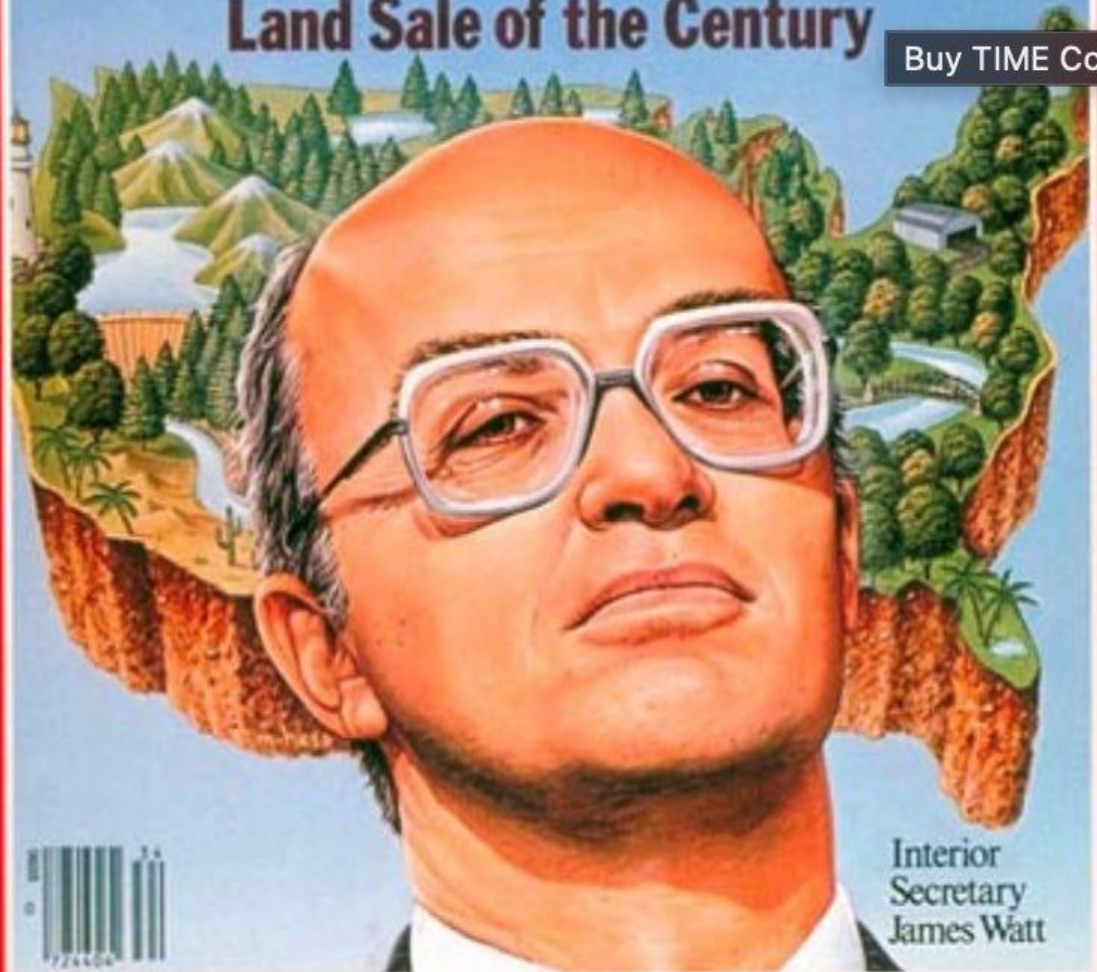
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James Watt

And what if there are no trees to pass on?

He pauses. "You might have provided shelter, so somebody can live out of the blizzards of Wyoming."

It's hard to envision someone more parody-worthy than Trump Interior Secretary, Ryan "backward-ranger-hat" Zinke, but Watt even drew the attention of *Saturday Night Live*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nPQnZmI2Sqw>

Watt perpetuated the idea that federal lands transfer was religiously justified. This is something that, during my work on *Bundyville*, became more and more apparent: from the Bundys, to former Rep. Matt Shea, and beyond. People believe the Earth is here for them to use, and abuse, because God bestowed it to them to do so.

In recent years, several Mountain States Legal Foundation attorneys have followed in Watt's very-successful footsteps: attorney William Perry Pendley — who once advocated for selling off all public lands — was appointed as Trump's director of the Bureau of Land Management. Karen Budd-Falen, who served as an attorney for the Bundy Family, also worked there. The group has represented Patch of Heaven, the Nevada church camp, in their ongoing water fight with Ash Meadows National Wildlife Refuge.

Watt branded environmentalism as extremism, and that rhetoric — the idea that environmentalists were simply radicals lying in wait — hung on well beyond his tenure. Famously, after the planes crashed into the World Trade Center towers on September 11, 2001, Rep. Don Young (R-Alaska) surmised that "there's a strong possibility" it could have been the work of eco-terrorists. (Way off, Don.)

So what did Watt have to do with Kaczynski? He helped lay the foundation for an entire political system that branded environmentalism as a silly part of a culture war, or a liberal agenda. He, and scores of other government officials after him, chose to disregard science, to govern by faith. Look where it got us.

Ted Kaczynski's reasoning for his two-decade long bombing spree was not explicitly environmental. But it was about the downfall of all of society, and humanity's pillaging of nature for its own ends. Like other bombers before him, he thought his actions would help shuffle civilization into a downward spiral — to "overthrow not governments but the economic and technological basis of the present society." Like Watt, he nihilistically believed a new era was ahead. That didn't bear out; what did is that he killed three people, and injured 23 others, and is remembered most for those killings.

Kaczynski's ideas were, undoubtedly, inspired by the actions of men like Watt. His manifesto, "Industrial Society and Its Future," was published at the recommendation of the FBI and the United States Attorney General by *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* in response to his demands, and a threat he would bomb again.

The manifesto is about many things; quite honestly, I think any extremist can find something to excite them in the document — from the leftest of lefties, to the rightest of the right.

He wrote of how modern society was willfully ruining the planet, making the world uninhabitable — that it was never really protected because of the whims of social politics:

“Any illusions about achieving anything permanent through social arrangements should be dispelled by what is currently happening with environmental legislation,” he wrote, “A few years ago it seemed that there were secure legal barriers preventing at least SOME of the worst forms of environmental degradation. A change in the political wind, and those barriers begin to crumble.”

Last year, I co-reported a podcast called *Burn Wild* for the BBC about the long tail of a case of environmental extremism that played out in the early 2000s, involving the Earth Liberation Front, and several destructive actions claimed by the group in Washington, Oregon and Colorado. (I wrote a newsletter about that here.)

The particular people we were speaking to for the project had all lived, at one point, in Eugene, Oregon in the 1990s, and several said parts of Kaczynski’s manifesto, and writings by a world-famous anarchist author, John Zerzan, who resides in Eugene, were foundational in their thinking about activism.

What they were saying reminded me of a *New York Magazine* article by John H. Richardson that I’d read years prior, called “The Children of Ted,” which centered on a movement of young people who had read Kaczynski’s manifesto, felt invigorated by it and were revisiting the story of The Unabomber:

Quietly, often secretly, whether they gather it from the air of this anxious era or directly from the source ... more and more people have been having Kaczynski Moments.

Books and webzines with names like *Against Civilization*, *FeralCulture*, *Unsettling America*, and the Ludd-Kaczynski Institute of Technology have been spreading versions of his message across social-media forums from Reddit to Facebook for at least a decade, some attracting more than 100,000 followers. They cluster around a youthful nickname, “anti-civ,” some drawing their ideas directly from Kaczynski, others from movements like deep ecology, anarchy, primitivism, and nihilism, mixing them into new strains. Although they all believe industrial civilization is in a death spiral, most aren’t trying to hurry it along. One exception is Deep Green Resistance, an activist network inspired by a 2011 book of the same name ... The group’s openly stated goal, like Kaczynski’s, is the destruction of civilization and a return to preagricultural ways of life.

John Zerzan was one of Kaczynski’s most well-known penpals, and agreed to be interviewed for the podcast. We were there trying to understand how the actions of

the Earth Liberation Front had aged, and how Zerzan thought of violence. He had fallen out of contact with the man over an academic disagreement: “He wasn’t anti-civ, his perspective was that it was about technology and *only* technology,” he told us.

“I’m in favor of property damage, focused property destruction,” he said, and reminded us: the Earth Liberation Front never killed anyone.

“I don’t advocate sending bombs in the mail,” Zerzan said. “But were those people innocent? I don’t think so. Doesn’t mean I advocate sending bombs in the mail.”

While in Eugene, we also visited with some members of the activist community to talk about the Warner Creek blockade, and hear how it felt to realize members of their own community had been in the ELF. Sitting around one man’s backyard fire pit, I noticed a sign in the window of his house, positioned above a wire peace sign. It was a photograph of Kaczynski, and it read “BE LIKE TED.”

Kaczynski was a symbol: someone who struck out at capitalism, who stuck it to the man very literally. The people he killed were, in this line of thinking, footnotes, names on paper but not real living beings. Or, even more chillingly, they were real people in the minds of these new acolytes — but they just didn’t matter. After the podcast came out, I started noticing more of that sentiment in the form of little “END CIV” tags and graffiti. There were more Children of Ted than I could have ever guessed. When news of Kaczynski’s death broke, social media was filled with memes calling him, affectionately: “Uncle Ted.”

Both Watt and Kaczynski were men who wanted to see the world end in some way: for Watt, his faith caused him to think the world might be short on time; why not drill and live rich? For Kaczynski, he lived by his own kind of religion, too: when he was arrested, he was living in a primitive cabin in Montana, off-grid, beyond reach, surrounded by bomb parts, and all alone with his world-ending ideas.

Together, both thrived in the world of the extreme. They were agenda-driven men who created villains and foes, who devoted themselves to waging war, who lived in self-made worlds where ideology, and not humanity, mattered.

I found it odd that both should die as the East Coast was suffocating under smoke from wildfires in Canada, raging like never before. Watt helped create a world that disregarded science and helped create the circumstances that would lead to a world on fire; Kaczynski simply thought society should be destroyed. Lit on fire for his own cause. Both were wrong.

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The Ted K Archive

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