

Thomas James Walsh Biography

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Biography

The U.S. senator Thomas James Walsh (1859-1933) is probably best known for his role in exposing the Teapot Dome oil-lease scandal.

Thomas J. Walsh was born on June 12, 1859, in Two Rivers, Wis., the son of Irish immigrants. After receiving his law degree from the University of Wisconsin in 1884, he practiced law at Redfield, Dakota Territory, for seven years. He then moved to Helena, Mont., and quickly became one of the state's leading lawyers.

A Democrat, he was elected in 1912 to the U.S. Senate and retained that seat until his death. In the Senate, he was sympathetic to labor and social welfare legislation. He led the fight for the confirmation of the nomination of Louis Brandeis to the Supreme Court, assailed the anti-Red raids of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, and opposed Herbert Hoover's appointment of an antilabor judge to the Supreme Court.

On the other hand, Walsh avoided battle locally in Montana with the powerful Anaconda Copper Mining Company. He was also an advocate of the opening of the western public lands to development. A loyal Wilsonian, he supported American membership in the League of Nations and later the World Court.

After the passage of the resolution for an investigation of the leasing of Navy oil-reserve lands, Walsh took charge of the investigation in the fall of 1923 and uncovered evidence that Secretary of the Interior Albert B. Fall had corruptly leased the reserves at Elk Hills, Calif., and Teapot Dome, Wyo., to two oilmen. Though he was criticized by many newspapers and Republicans for his alleged sensationalism and partisanship, Walsh's labors led to the resignation under fire of Secretary of the Navy Edwin L. Denby, who had cooperated with Fall in transferring the reserves to the Interior Department, and to the conviction of Fall for bribery. His work also forced President Calvin Coolidge to appoint two special prosecutors, who voided the leases in the courts.

Although a devout Roman Catholic, Walsh was personally and politically a "dry." He was an unsuccessful dark-horse candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1924 and 1928. He was the overwhelming choice of the delegates for the 1924 vice-presidential nomination, but his refusal was adamant. In 1933 president-elect Franklin Roosevelt selected Walsh to be attorney general, but Walsh died on March 2, 1933, on the way to Washington for the inaugural.