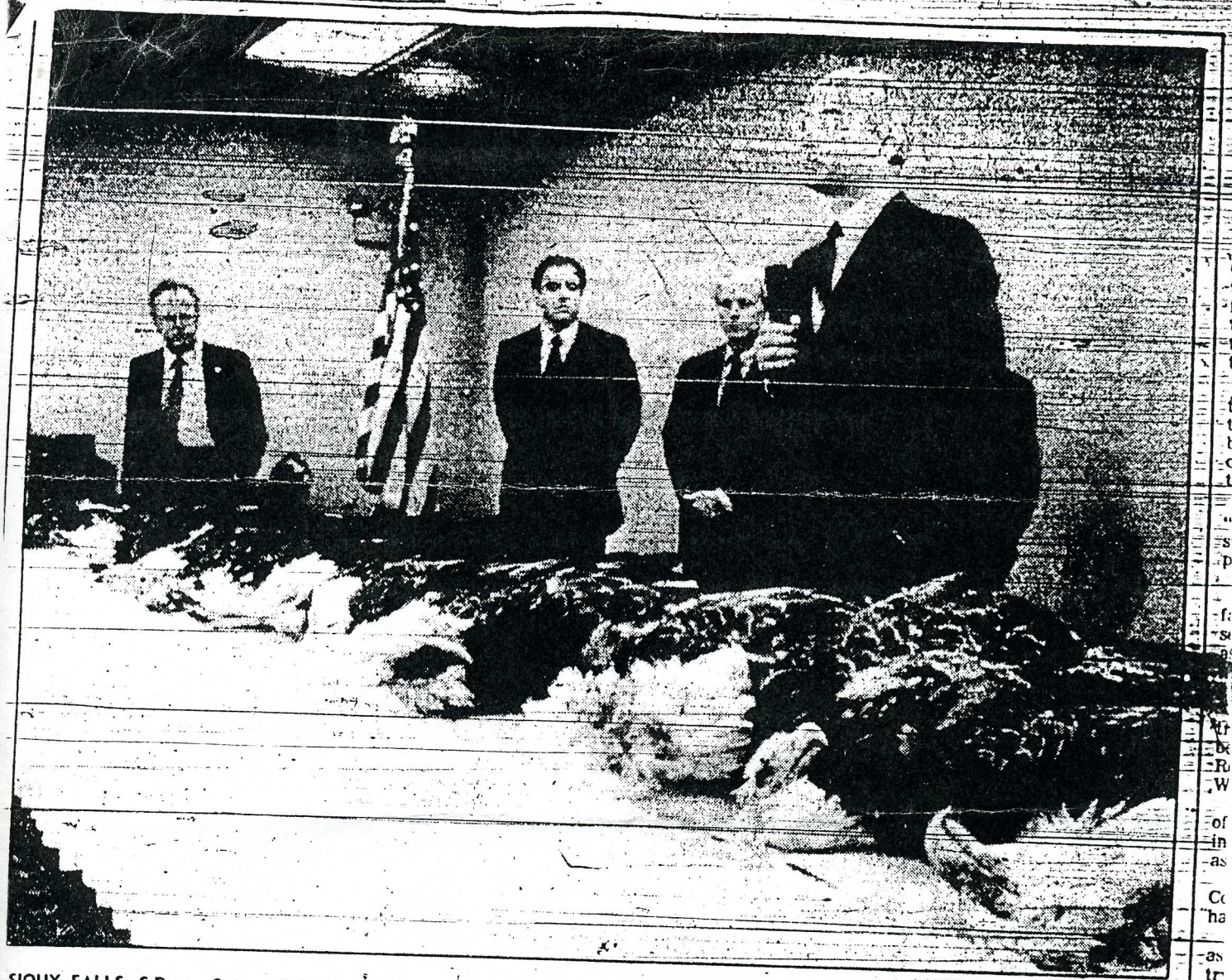

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. — Surrounded by 23 frozen eagle carcasses, Secretary of Interior James Watt used the display to denounce the destruction of the nation's wildlife and to show, he said, the disregard some have toward game laws. — AP Laserphoto

Probe of Eagle Killers Revealed

By VIC WATIA

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (UPI) — Interior Secretary James Watt, flanked by carcasses of 23 bald eagles, announced yesterday a crackdown in nine states by federal agents on the killing of bald eagles and other endangered birds.

Watt said U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service agents will arrest 50 people for killing and selling the birds for commercial purposes.

HE SAID 28 people will be arrested in South Dakota where more than 200 bald eagles were slain in the last two years at the Karl Mundt National Wildlife Refuge.

Gov. Bill Janklow said state law enforcement officials have estimated between 75 and 100 bald eagles are killed annually in that refuge.

Other states involved in "Operation Eagle" sting operation were Florida, California, Missouri, Utah, Oklahoma, Montana, Colorado and North Dakota.

WATT SAID the majority of arrests involved American Indians but emphasized the investigation was not an Indian issue.

Watt's announcement came at a news conference in which 23 slain bald eagles purchased by federal agents during the undercover operation were displayed on a table.

"To appear in front of a table filled with the carcasses of our national emblem is a revolting and repulsive thing for any person to have to do," said Watt, who used the display to call attention to the wanton destruction of the nation's wildlife.

THE INTERIOR secretary said agents were careful in their investigations not to promote the killing of birds, making purchase arrangements only after learning of a kill.

He said the investigation was targeted at people who have been killing eagles and other endangered species rather than the commercial buyer. He also said there were other ongoing wildlife investigations that would result in "many other arrests."

But Watt said details of the wildlife sting operations would not be announced until they were completed.

CLARK BAVIN, chief agent for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Division of Law Enforcement, said the two-year investigation broke up several related rings in the nine states that have been selling eagles and parts of eagles for commercial purposes.

South Dakota U.S. Attorney Phil Hogen, who was coordinating the arrests in all nine states for the Interior Department, said a bald eagle carcass brought about $1,000 on the commercial market.

Hogen said most of the South Dakota arrests were in the Lake Andes and Mission area and involved members of the Yankton Sioux Tribe.

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