Jimmy Carter in Context

Author(s): RUSSELL D. MOTTER

Source: *The Mississippi Quarterly*, Fall 1992, Vol. 45, No. 4, SPECIAL ISSUE: THE SOUTH IN TRANSITION (Fall 1992), pp. 467-482

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/26476065

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Mississippi Quarterly*

JSTOR

This content downloaded from
149.10.125.20 on Wed, 02 Mar 2022 20:01:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

RUSSELL D. MOTTER[1]

University of Hawaii, Manoa

Jimmy Carter in Context

PRESIDENTIAL STYLE IS A "PRESIDENT'S habitual way of performing his three political roles," James David Barber has written: "rhetoric, personal relations, and homework."[2] Essentially, then, style is a president's manner of doing things. Jimmy Carter's critics have argued that his presidential failures were of his own making—that he was a victim of his own style. Such a conclusion rests on assumptions about the nature of the presidency that ignore the historical circumstances that influenced Carter's failures and successes. This essay suggests a strategy to assess Jimmy Carter's presidential style, and it offers an evaluation of the effectiveness of his style within the historical realities he confronted and from which he came. The key variables in such an approach are political circumstance and presidential personality. The possibilities and limitations of the presidency in 1977 and the way Carter's style, personality, and Southern roots served him in achieving his goals define the context of his presidency.

While Jimmy Carter campaigned for the presidency in the summer of 1976, Walter Dean Burnham wrote that "millions of Americans thought they had lost control over their own lives, over the political process—victims of the illegitimate exercise of raw power." Precipitated by Vietnam and Watergate, this crisis of confidence had brought about a fundamental "breakdown in elite credibility and institutional performance."[3] Jimmy Carter too sensed the nation's drift, caught as it was in "spiritual malaise." At a town hall forum in Los Angeles he recounted the "national nightmare" that began with the assassination of John F. Kennedy and ended with "revelations of official lying and spying and bugging" and the resignations of Vice President Spiro Ag-

---

[1]The author wishes to thank Professors I. A. Newby and Margot Henriksen of the University of Hawaii-Manoa, Professor Richard H. Immerman of Temple University, and Professor Stanly Godbold of Mississippi State University for their criticisms and comments.

[2]James David Barber, *The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1985), p. 5.

[3]*New Republic*, August 13, 1976, p. 10.

This content downloaded from
149.10.125.20 on Wed, 02 Mar 2022 20:01:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

new and President Richard Nixon.[4] Offering himself to the American people, Carter pledged to return the nation to its moorings.

Carter's campaign revolved not so much around issues as around his own personal qualities. "Can our government be honest, decent, open, fair, and compassionate?" asked Carter in his campaign autobiography, *Why Not the Best?* Yes, he answered; but the change must begin at the top. Only the president "can set a standard of morals, decency and openness." The president, therefore, "ought to be personally responsible for everything that goes on in the Executive Branch of government."[5] Carter predicated his candidacy on "the desire to restore respect for and trust of the government within the consciousness of the American people," and its success hinged on his ability to persuade them that he was worthy of their trust.[6] Carter considered himself a decisive leader who could make Washington work again for ordinary Americans. Leadership had failed, not the system. "Don't be apathetic," Carter told the voters, "our government can work, and it will work, if we can only have leaders once again who have wisdom, and who are as good in office as the people who put them in office."[7]

Carter sought a symbiosis of people and leaders in which leaders drew strength from the organic goodness of people, and people demonstrated their goodness when leaders offered them ethical leadership. This conception of leadership, to which Carter held fast in his presidency, was rooted in religious faith. As Bruce Mazlish and Edwin Diamond have pointed out in a portrait of Carter's character, leadership in the Southern Baptist church "is built upon charismatic qualities that attract a following and win spontaneous support." When Baptists see a moral leader, their faith in God and in people who believe in God is enhanced. "The important thing," wrote Mazlish and Diamond, "is that a leader

[4]Remarks at a town-hall forum, Los Angeles, California, August 23, 1976, in Jimmy Carter, *A Government as Good as Its People* (New York: Simon and Schuster), pp. 138-139.
[5]U.S. Congress. House. House Administration. Campaign position paper, "Jimmy Carter's Code of Ethics," issued March 1, 1976. *The Presidential Campaign 1976*, Vol. I, Part 2 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1978), p. 92.
[6]U.S. Government, Interview with *U.S. News and World Report, Campaign, 1976.* Vol. I, Part 2, p. 735.
[7]U.S. Congress, Speech at Democratic National Committee fund-raising affair in New York City, October 19, 1976, *Campaign, 1976*, Vol. I, Part 2, p. 1052.

This content downloaded from
149.10.125.20 on Wed, 02 Mar 2022 20:01:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

be worthy of the people's trust, and constantly reassure them of this point."[8]

The slogan "a government as good as its people" thus resonated in Carter's campaign, but his hope that "good" leadership would inspire collective sacrifice for the common good was never fulfilled in his presidency. Ironically, Carter's slim "mandate" did not survive his victory. For many Americans, the election of an honest man to the presidency ended the nation's spiritual crisis, although for Carter himself the crusade to transform government lasted four years. He never again harnessed the innate goodness he sensed in the American people; as a result, he was unable to translate the appeal that won him election into a successful strategy of governance.

Candidate Carter's status as a Washington outsider added to his allure. He had begun his political career as an outsider and he remained one. In his first quest for public office, Carter ran for the Georgia senate against a party favorite whose secure seat had become vulnerable as a result of reapportionment. "He had the established politicians for him," Carter recalled of his opponent; [m]y supporters were mostly young, and newcomers to politics." Carter had victory in hand when voting irregularities in Quitman County threatened the results. He reported the violations to local officials, called the newspaper in nearby Columbus, and notified state party officials, all to no avail. He eventually persuaded *Atlanta Journal* reporter John Pennington to investigate. Carter's story interested Pennington, who wrote a series of articles that generated statewide attention. Meanwhile, Carter challenged the official results of the election, and after a series of legal appeals was declared the winner. The episode was a defining political moment for Carter, and as he retold the story in his campaign autobiography, its implications for 1976 were unmistakable. The "outsider," with truth as his ally, had triumphed over a corrupt establishment.[9]

Compared to the circumstances of his election, Carter's tenure in the state senate was uneventful but instructive. He authored no signifi-

[8]Bruce Mazlish and Edwin Diamond, *Jimmy Carter: A Character Portrait* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), pp. 161-162.
[9]Jimmy Carter, *Why Not the Best?* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1975), pp. 80-86. See also Betty Glad, *Jimmy Carter: In Search of the Great White House* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1980), pp. 88-93.

This content downloaded from
149.10.125.20 on Wed, 02 Mar 2022 20:01:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

cant legislation but made a mark by hard work and attention to detail. The discipline and drive that characterized his presidency he first displayed there. Although the legislature met only forty-five days a year, Carter made the most of those days. During the session, when most lawmakers worked four-day weeks, Carter was always in the capitol on Fridays attending to the details of obscure legislation (Glad, p. 94). He had pledged to read every bill that came before the senate, a promise he later called "foolish" but nonetheless kept. He remained an outsider, and with only two or three exceptions, distanced himself from his colleagues. Carter proudly recalled that he was often the "lonely opponent of 'sweetheart' bills designed to give some special person a break" (*Why Not?*, p. 87). He became so adept at ferreting out special-interest perquisites that one legislator, whose bills Carter often successfully challenged, began taking drafts of his bills to Carter and asking him to "go through" them and "cross out what you don't like" (*Why Not?*, p. 87). In his autobiography Carter reveled in this story of how one man's resolve struck a blow at special interests; but Reg Murphy, editor of the *Atlanta Constitution* and one of Carter's harshest critics at the time, noted that the young senator's style alienated seasoned members and observers of the legislature: "He didn't have many friends in the state senate then."[10] Despite his antagonism to Carter, Murphy's recollection corresponds substantially with the disposition Carter later displayed as governor and as president.

Carter's years in the Georgia senate proved that his talents lay outside the legislative process, but his experience there helped shape his opinion of legislative bodies in general. The influence of lobbyists and of the interests they represented was pernicious and pervasive, Carter concluded. "The lobbyists . . . often represent well-meaning and admirable groups," he said later. "What is forgotten, however, is that lobbyists seldom represent the average citizen, and often express the most selfish aspect of the character of their clients" (*Why Not?*, p. 92). Ubiquitous lobbyists with money and access separated legislators "from the citizens most affected by the[ir] decisions," Carter believed, leading him to conclude that legislative bodies by nature were incapable of disinterested governance (*Why Not?*, p. 90). In Carter's mind, this inordinate influence of special interests confirmed the need for strong executive leadership

[10]Quoted in Mazlish and Diamond, p. 145.

This content downloaded from
149.10.125.20 on Wed, 02 Mar 2022 20:01:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

committed to the common good.[11] The president must act as a "counterforce" to those interests, Carter believed.[12] He sounded this theme during the presidential campaign, pledging to bridge the "chasm" between government and people through openness that put the common good before special interests. "I owe special interests nothing," Carter proclaimed. "I owe the people everything."[13] Again, trust and symbiosis between leader and led were pervasive themes of Carter's campaign.

Carter's rural roots and emphasis on "the people" have led some mistakenly to label him a populist. The substance of his leadership more closely resembles that of Southern Progressives, as Erwin Hargrove has observed.[14] Southern Progressives were middle-class professionals and businessmen. They, like Carter, campaigned for reform without the "popular and 'democratic' rebelliousness and suspiciousness, and nativism" that Richard Hofstadter found in the Populist mentality. And unlike the Populists, who spoke to specific social categories of people, Carter aimed his message at the mass of Americans. Hofstadter's observations concerning the Progressives directly parallel themes of Carter's presidential campaign. Progressivism, Hofstadter wrote, "was the effort to restore a type of economic individualism and political democracy" that had been destroyed by industrialization and corrupt political machines, "to bring back a kind of morality and civic purity" that had been lost.[15]

Carter's suspicions of large corporations and his criticism of businessmen during his presidency are among the sources of the idea that Carter was a populist. But despite his distrust of large corporations, Carter did not believe them inherently evil, as Populists had during the late nineteenth century. He believed that large corporations often acted against the public interest, but he was certain government could check

[11]U. S. Government, Speech before an audience of small-business men and women, September 13, 1976, in *Campaign, 1976*, Vol. I, Part 2, pp. 726-727.
[12]Charles O. Jones, *The Trusteeship Presidency: Jimmy Carter and the United States Congress* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), p. 6.
[13]U. S. Government, Speech before an audience of small-business men and women, September 13, 1976, in *Campaign, 1976*, Vol. I, Part 2, p. 727.
[14]Erwin Hargrove, *Jimmy Carter as President: Leadership and the Politics of the Public Good* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), pp. 7-8.
[15]Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR* (New York: Vintage, 1955), pp. 6-7.

This content downloaded from
149.10.125.20 on Wed, 02 Mar 2022 20:01:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

corporate greed and ensure market fairness through vigilance and reform. Consistent with Hofstadter's view that Progressives were dedicated to the formation of a "responsible elite," Carter did not hesitate to advocate state intervention as a means to restore or ensure fair play in economic activity.

Carter's pledge of open government echoed another Progressive theme. He considered secrecy an integral component of machine politics. In keeping with the Progressive tradition, Carter sought openness to ensure good government. He agreed with Woodrow Wilson's dictum about public business: "There ought to be no place where anything can be done that everybody does not know about." Carter would also endorse Hofstadter's restatement of Wilson's position: "If the people knew what decisions were being made, knew how they were being governed, and had in their hands the instruments of action, they would have a fair opportunity to elect men who would devise the necessary remedies" (Hofstadter, pp. 230-231).

During the campaign, Carter used his pose as outsider to great advantage; but once he was in office, that pose became a liability. Because the campaign hinged so largely on issues of honesty, competence, and openness, Carter ran without pandering to traditional Democratic constituencies, including organized labor and other liberal interest groups. This approach led to reservations about him within his own party.[16] Part of Carter's problem with liberals, thought his pollster, Patrick Caddell, sprang from "differences over style and approach." Liberal insiders resented Carter's anti-Washington message, the implication of which, in the words of Gaddis Smith, was "that anyone who had been in Washington before the arrival of Jimmy Carter was tainted."[17] As Caddell predicted, Carter's message, coupled with his disregard for Washington protocol, alienated many Washington insiders whose support he would eventually need.

Another Carter problem, Caddell said, lay in differences among Democrats over national priorities and uncertainties over Carter's political philosophy. Throughout his career, Carter rejected political labels.

[16]Patrick Caddell, "Initial Working Paper on Political Strategy," Jody Powell File, Box 4, Jimmy Carter Library, Atlanta, Georgia.
[17]Gaddis Smith, *Morality, Reason, and Power: American Diplomacy in the Carter Years* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), p. 246.

This content downloaded from
149.10.125.20 on Wed, 02 Mar 2022 20:01:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

That stance was central to his perception of himself as an outsider, which turned the rejection into a virtue. In his memoirs Carter noted that neither liberal nor conservative Democrats were "confident" he "was a member of [their] faction." He added: "It [was] obvious that the overwhelming Democratic majority in both Houses [of Congress] was not about to embrace me as a long awaited ally in the Executive Branch."[18]

This cool reception indicated widespread antipathy in Congress to strong executive leadership. Carter's reputation as a domineering governor raised red flags on Capitol Hill; and as Carl M. Brauer has pointed out, members of Congress who had been elected to oppose such excessive presidential authority as the disgraced former President Richard Nixon had displayed were loath to see Carter the president exercise the power he allegedly enjoyed as governor.[19] Moreover, the Democrats in this group had not ridden Carter's coattails into office and felt no obligation to support his program.[20]

Carter's agenda exacerbated these problems of party factionalism and congressional independence. The key items of his agenda were a comprehensive energy program, a treaty returning the Panama Canal to Panama, reform of the welfare system, reorganization of the executive branch, and a national environmental policy.[21] In retrospect, one is tempted to call Carter a visionary for embracing so ambitious an agenda. In 1977 he was called foolish. All of his proposals in these areas had worthy goals, but each called for an expenditure of political capital Carter did not have. His energy plan called for unwelcome sacrifices, the Panama Canal Treaty diminished American power in its traditional back yard, and governmental reorganization bored the public. Consistent with his apolitical approach as governor, Carter ignored advice to postpone part of his agenda for a second term. "It became too much for everybody to absorb—except Carter," Bert Lance later wrote. Indeed, the decision to push for so much so soon "led to the later criticism that the Carter administration had no set agenda."[22]

---

[18]Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), p. 68.
[19]Carl M. Brauer, *Presidential Transitions: Eisenhower through Reagan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 201.
[20]Thomas E. Cronin, *The State of the Presidency* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1980), pp. 174-175.
[21]Jones, pp. 126-129.
[22]Bert Lance, *The Truth of the Matter: My Life In and Out of Politics* (New York: Summit Books, 1991), pp. 127-129. See also White Burkett Miller Center Interview with Jimmy Carter,

This content downloaded from
149.10.125.20 on Wed, 02 Mar 2022 20:01:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Carter rejected the conventional advice because of his own success as an unconventional politician. On a personal, but no less political, level Carter's desire to "do everything at once" stemmed from a commitment to keep his campaign promise never to lie to the American people. In his own estimation his political success depended on preserving this personal reputation. From his days in the Georgia legislature, Carter believed promises kept were a gauge of integrity, a measure of trustworthiness. Carter sought and won this confidence in the presidential campaign, but his victory there could not sustain him against a Congress with imperatives of its own.[23]

Carter neither sought nor developed rapport with politicians, who as a species offended him. As governor, he disliked political gladhanding, and as president he was even more reluctant to indulge in it. When he tried, his efforts were often transparently artificial.[24] He resented having to cajole members of Congress, who regularly put constituent interest and personal popularity before what he felt was the national interest. He recalled his displeasure of having to host White House suppers for House members during debate over the Panama Canal:

> We had them over there in groups of thirty or forty *ad nauseam*. I mean, it was horrible. Night after night after night after night going through the same basic ques-

Jimmy Carter Library, p. 5. Carter also made the following entry in his diary on January 28, 1977: "Everybody has warned me not to take on too many projects so early in the administration, but it's almost impossible for me to delay something that I see needs to be done." (Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith*, p. 65). In a quantitative analysis of presidential agendas, Paul C. Light concluded that Carter's agenda was not particularly heavy, compared to those of other recent presidents such as Johnson or Kennedy. The problem, according
to Light, was Carter's refusal to assign priorities in his agenda. "Carter's domestic program moved to Congress without any indication of relative importance," wrote Light. In addition,Carter's program faced competition from the Congress's own "eight year backlog" of priorities frustrated by Republican presidents Nixon and Ford. Paul Light, *The President's Agenda: Domestic Policy Choice from Kennedy to Reagan*, rev. ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), pp. 52-59, 156. See also Mark A. Peterson, *Legislating Together: The White House and Capitol Hill from Eisenhower to Reagan* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 255-257.

[23]For a quantitative analysis of Carter's "proposal to promise" record, see Jeff Fishel, *Presidents and Promises: From Campaign Pledge to Presidential Performance* (Washington, D. C.: CQ Press, 1985), pp. 15-56.

[24]Miller Center Interview with Bert Lance, Jimmy Carter Library, pp. 52, 54; Miller Center Interview with Bert Carp, Jimmy Carter Library, p. 56. See also Theodore H. White, *American in Search of Itself: The Making of a President, 1956-1980* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), p. 201.

This content downloaded from
149.10.125.20 on Wed, 02 Mar 2022 20:01:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> tions when I was absolutely convinced that the House members knew they ought to support the legislation. But it was politically damaging for them to do it, and they were tortured.[25]

Carter's failure to connect personally with legislators contributed to his difficulties with Congress. House Speaker Thomas O'Neill later wrote that one of Carter's biggest mistakes was selling the presidential yacht *Sequoia*. Presidents Eisenhower and Johnson had used the boat to great effect, often inviting senators and congressmen aboard to discuss politics over afternoon drinks. "In such a setting," O'Neill said, "Jimmy Carter could have been enormously persuasive."[26] But Carter would have been uncomfortable doing so, and his discomfort might well have compromised the effort. Carter, said a former aide, "did not enjoy politics in the same sense that a Humphrey or a Johnson did. . . . He seemed to like sometimes going against the political grain to do what was right."[27] To Carter's critics this stance was naive, but it seems more like stubbornness. Carter knew the rules of the game. He simply refused to play by them.

O'Neill's comments reflect a common misunderstanding of Carter's personality and presidential style. Critics often rebuked Carter for neglecting traditional political mores—mores ill-suited to his personality and antithetical to his political philosophy. Carter rejected coalition politics, as Erwin Hargrove has pointed out, and tried instead to integrate the demands of competing interests into a "new policy synthesis" of fiscal conservatism and social liberalism (p. 187). This approach had worked for Carter as governor, though often at the expense of personal popularity. He accepted this trade-off even when other politicians did not, believing that logic and fairness would ultimately prevail over selfish interest. Since these were givens of Carter's presidential style, Erwin Hargrove rebukes critics who insisted that Carter be what he could not be. "It is difficult to imagine," wrote Hargrove, "how Carter could have incorporated the insights of his critics about his deficiencies in the political arts into his style of leadership without giving up his very great strengths as a leader" (p. 179).

High expectations greeted Carter's presidency. Even though his

---

[25]White Burkett Miller Center Interview with Jimmy Carter, Jimmy Carter Library, p. 22.
[26]Thomas P. O'Neill, *Man of the House: The Life and Political Memoirs of Speaker Tip O'Neill*, with William Novak (New York: Random House, 1987), pp. 314-315.
[27]Quoted in Hargrove, p. 17.

This content downloaded from
149.10.125.20 on Wed, 02 Mar 2022 20:01:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

margin of victory was slim, the symbolism he invoked at the outset of his term encouraged an optimism not felt since the inauguration of John F. Kennedy. Carter's walk along Pennsylvania Avenue following his inauguration was a powerful moment for that great majority of Americans Carter believed he represented. The walk symbolized the removal of the partition between people and President. It was "one of those few perfect moments in life when everything seems absolutely right," he later wrote (*Keeping Faith*, pp. 17-19). Other symbolic acts quickly followed—he decommissioned twenty White House limousines and enrolled his daughter Amy in a nearby public school. Carter "is surely right in thinking that these symbols and gestures are required as an antidote to the governmental excesses of the past," columnist Meg Greenfield wrote of this "perkicide" in *Newsweek*. "And above all, I think the instinct is right that tells him how important it is to try to stay human in the White House."[28]

If Carter was naive, it was about his resistance to ceremonial aspects of the presidency. He was correct to break symbolically with the Imperial Presidency, but Speaker O'Neill was equally correct when he wrote that people "*want* a magisterial air in the White House" (p. 314). Political scientist Barbara Hinkley has written that election to the presidency produces a "transmutation and alchemy."[29] Carter never experienced that transformation, or if he did, he actively resisted its outward manifestations. He carried his own luggage and banned the playing of "Hail to the Chief." Such symbolism, according to O'Neill, dimmed the aura of authority due Carter as president (pp. 314-315).[30] Carter cultivated the image of Carter the person rather than Carter the president.

Still, Jimmy Carter was not one of "us." Austere, extraordinarily self-disciplined, and tenacious, he was the antithesis of the narcissistic "me generation" that ultimately rejected him.[31] He demanded much of himself, immersing himself in the details of governing as no other president ever did. In other ways he was equally fastidious, almost to the

[28]*Newsweek*, April 28, 1977, p. 80.
[29]Barbara Hinkley, *The Symbolic Presidency: How Presidents Portray Themselves* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 12.
[30]For more on Carter and the importance of ceremony and symbolism in the presidency see Cronin, *The State of the Presidency*, pp. 158-161.
[31]Thomas E. Cronin, "An Imperiled Presidency," in Vincent Davis, ed., *The Post-Imperial Presidency* (New York: Praeger, 1980), pp. 143-144.

This content downloaded from
149.10.125.20 on Wed, 02 Mar 2022 20:01:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

point of compulsion. He often planned ahead the classical music he listened to during the day, and before bed combined spiritual inspiration with foreign language study by reading a chapter in his Spanish-language Bible. Like Jefferson, Carter loved nature and later wrote on the outdoors with the proficiency of a field biologist. He had few casual interests, but many passions. "I am a Southerner and an American," Carter wrote. "I am a farmer, an engineer, a father and husband, a Christian, a politician and former governor, a planner, a businessman, a nuclear physicist, a naval officer, a canoeist, and, among other things, a lover of Bob Dylan's songs and Dylan Thomas' poetry" (*Why Not?*, pp. 9-10).

On substantive matters, Carter was the most knowledgeable president of recent times; Speaker O'Neill called him "the smartest public official I've ever known" (p. 297).[32] Carter had a keen sense of where he wanted to lead the country. He approached policy as a technical matter, engineering logical, comprehensive solutions to problems and presenting them on the basis of utilitarian merit without regard for their political impact. This approach necessitated command of the issues. He exhorted legislators to base their judgments on a single criterion: "Is this policy good for the country?"[33] When politicians opposed his plans, he tried to go over their heads by appealing to the public. He had little patience with legislative politics.

Carter's liabilities as a mass communicator short-circuited his strategy of going to the public over the heads of Congress. He was unpersuasive on television, and even though he excelled as an off-the-cuff speaker, he was a poor orator. Carter was so prone to hyperbole that, in the words of one advisor, he painted himself "into awkward corners" (Donovan, p. 232). Carter's embellishments were often harmless—he used superlatives liberally and regularly referred to acquaintances as "good friends."[34] His press secretary and fellow Georgian Jody Powell attributed this characteristic to regional custom: "If a South Georgia farmer has a mule, it's the best damned mule that ever existed."[35] Sometimes Cart-

[32]See also Hedley Donovan, *Roosevelt to Reagan: A Reporter's Encounters with Nine Presidents* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), pp. 232-239.
[33]White Burkett Mills Center Interview with Jimmy Carter, Jimmy Carter Library, pp. 27-28.
[34]Carter referred to Syrian leader Hafez Al-Assad as his "good friend" after their first meeting. See also Jimmy Carter, Public Papers of the President (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1977), Vol. I, 1977, p. 84. See also the *National Journal*, August 5, 1978, p. 1259, and December 30, 1978, p. 2084.
[35]Quoted in Donovan, pp. 231-232.

This content downloaded from
149.10.125.20 on Wed, 02 Mar 2022 20:01:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

er's embellishments were calls to action, but his task was complicated by the nature of his agenda, by his own limits as a politician, and by events beyond his control.

Carter also used hyperbole to avoid explaining the intricacies of complex policy proposals. He doubted the public's ability to understand solutions that were complex, nuanced, and even contradictory. The energy issue is instructive. Carter focused on the consequences of complacency in order to arouse public attention, but in so doing, oversimplified the problem. Oil and gas lobbyists thus found it easy to refute his claim that "we are running out of oil," and that in turn made their own campaign against his proposals more persuasive. In a similar instance, Carter labled the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 "a grave threat to peace," but invited disbelief when he failed to match the assessment with commensurate action (Glad, p. 460).His announcement in January 1980 of a grain embargo and a boycott of the upcoming Olympic Games in Moscow, as more than one observer has remarked, "came too close to the Iowa caucuses to be considered anything but political."[36] Carter's desire to solve problems cannot be disputed, but his tendency to exaggerate the nature of the problem he faced led many to doubt the assumptions on which he based his policies.

Carter's chief rhetorical failure was not articulating a unifying vision for his presidency. His political advisor and later Chief of Staff, Hamilton Jordan, subsequently pointed to the failure to articulate a "unifying political philosophy that had been affirmed though [Carter's] election." In an after-the-fact evaluation, Jordan argued that Carter based policy decisions on *ad hoc* assessments of "the best interests of the country," without regard to political implications of the decisions.[37] Patrick Caddell presciently advised just after the 1976 election: "We must devise a context that . . . cuts across traditional ideology. American society. . . needs some kind of [new] direction."[38] Unlike Carter, Caddell understood that politics did not end with election.

Carter's relations with the press suffered from the same kind of fric-

---

[36]Mark Rozell, *The Press and the Carter Presidency* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1989), pp. 148-149.
[37]Hamilton Jordan, *Crisis: The Last Year of the Carter Presidency* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1982), pp. 316-317.
[38]Patrick Caddell, "Initial Working Paper on Political Strategy," Jody Powell Files, Box 4, Jimmy Carter Library.

This content downloaded from
149.10.125.20 on Wed, 02 Mar 2022 20:01:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

tion that poisoned his relationship with Democratic party leaders and Washington insiders. His style conflicted with the mores of the Washington press corps, and neither the press nor Carter was flexible. The press amplified these differences, which ultimately hindered Carter's success by costing him leverage with the public. Carter's contempt for the press and his distaste for Washington's "highly structured social life" put him outside the matrix Richard Neustadt has termed the Washingtonians" and Carter disparagingly referred to as the "insiders."[39] Journalists disagreed on the merits of Carter's policies, but they shared common expectations concerning leadership itself and found Carter's lacking (Rozell, pp. 4-5).

The high moral standards Carter set for his administration intensified this scrutiny. Implicitly at least, as Jody Powell later wrote, the press challenged itself "to prove that Carter was at least as rotten as all the rest."[40] Moreover, as a self-proclaimed outsider, Carter and his staff arrived in Washington with few political allies. "Nowhere within the press, Congress, or the ranks of the Washington power structure," Carter later recalled, "were there any long-established friends and acquaintances who would naturally come to our defense in a public debate on a controversial issue" *(Keeping Faith,* p. 127).[41] Also working against the new administration were unrealistic expectations of Carter's presidency, partially encouraged by Carter's campaign promises. Failure to meet these expectations made Carter appear weak and inept. "I thought that doing the best job possible in the White House would be enough to gain [their] support," wrote Carter of the press *(Keeping Faith,* p. 126).

The context of Carter's arrival in Washington is thus significant. His naivete, however, was not as great as he later suggested, and his calculated neglect of the press and other Washington insiders was part of the style he brought to the presidency. His low opinion of the news media dated back to the voting fraud incident in Quitman County, Georgia, when having notified the newspaper in nearby Columbus of the irregularities, Carter returned to the polling site to find that "the reporter and the political boss were chatting on the steps of the courthouse." Carter concluded that the two "were old friends and the reporter was

[39]Carter, *Keeping Faith,* p. 126; Richard Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents: The Politics of Leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan* (New York: Free Press, 1990), p. 50.
[40]Jody Powell, *The Other Side of the Story* (New York: William Morrow, 1984), p. 206.
[41]See also Powell, pp. 207-208.

This content downloaded from
149.10.125.20 on Wed, 02 Mar 2022 20:01:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

not interested in writing any story critical of election procedures in Quitman County" (*Why Not?*, pp.80-81). Also, Carter had never forgotten the coverage he received by the *Atlanta Constitution* in his second run for governor: "The *Atlanta Constitution*," Carter later said, "categorized me as an ignorant, racist, backward, ultraconservative, rednecked South Georgia peanut farmer."[42]

Carter thought Washington journalists were cut from the same cloth as other insiders. "Having run deliberately and profitably as one who had never been part of the Washington scene," Carter explained, "I was not particularly eager to change my attitude after becoming President. This proved to be a mistake" (*Keeping Faith*, p. 176). Just as Carter had bridled at the rural stereotypes that had hurt him in Georgia politics in the 1960's, so was he equally sensitive to presumptions Washingtonians had about Southerners in the 1970's. "There's still a tendency on the part of some members of the press to treat the South . . . as a suspect nation," Carter said in the summer of 1976. "There are a few who think that since I am a Southern governor, I must be a secret racist or there's something in a closet somewhere that's going to be revealed to show my true colors."[43] Jody Powell detected a similar regional bias on the part of the press. Powell and other Georgians were intensely loyal to Carter and protective of his reputation, and like him had little patience with those who presumed too much about his background or judged too quickly his unorthodox political style. "Carter was smarter than most reporters and clearly knew it," Powell wrote. "They do not take kindly to being looked down upon by any politician, particularly not a peanut farmer from some piddly-ass little gnat-hole in south Georgia" (p. 207).

Jimmy Carter was a solitary president. He had few close friends in Washington when he arrived and fewer when he left. "I had run a kind of lonely campaign up to the convention," Carter said after his

[42]Quoted in *Playboy*, November 1976, p. 66. See also an interview by Gary L. Roberts, "Jimmy Carter: Years of Challenge, Years of Change," in Harold P. Henderson and Gary L. Roberts, *Georgia Governors in an Age of Change: From Ellis Arnall to George Busbee* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), p. 253. Despite Carter's dissatisfaction with the *Atlanta Constitution*'s coverage of the gubernatorial campaign, he said his administration received "fair" treatment from the two major Atlanta newspapers.
[43]Quoted in *Playboy*, November 1976, p. 66.

This content downloaded from
149.10.125.20 on Wed, 02 Mar 2022 20:01:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

election. "That's my nature and that's part of my political strength."[44] While this may have been helpful in getting elected, once he was in the White House, it was a liability (Brauer, p. 201). Even his hobbies—fly-fishing, wood carving, furniture making, and running—attest to a need for solitude and introspection. No wonder Carter approached the presidency bearing the full weight of the office on his shoulders.

Carter's relationships with his personal advisors added to this pattern of insulation. He had no chief of staff for the first two years, and he used memos to consult staff and cabinet officers. He thought of himself as a synthesizer of ideas but preferred to synthesize alone. As a result, early in his administration subordinates tried to anticipate what he wanted to hear rather than what, in candor, they thought he needed to hear. With the exception of Bert Lance, who headed the Office of Management and Budget and was also Carter's closest and most trusted advisor, the so-called Georgia mafia were all very young, a generation younger than Carter himself. Neither they nor Carter considered themselves Carter's equals. Only Lance was equal, and when he resigned in September 1977, Carter had no personal confidant, no one to say "no" to him, on his immediate staff.[45]

Carter encountered many problems because of his unorthodox presidential style. For the most part, he wanted to govern apolitically, perched above the political fray, rather than engaging in the "horse-trading" and "logrolling" that generally characterize American politics. As a result, he appeared to some people sanctimonious rather than disinterested, and his calculated stance as an outsider bruised egos and alienated centers of power that might otherwise have worked for or with him. The agenda he pursued was equally unconventional and in itself a challenge to entrenched interests. He attacked intractable problems with calls for civic virtue that mainly went unanswered in a political world that no longer recognized the term. The Carter presidency is thus rife with a sense of missed opportunities. Like a character in a Greek

---

[44]Quoted in Jules Witcover, *Marathon 1972-1976: The Pursuit of the Presidency* (New York: Viking Press, 1977), p. 645.

[45]Even though Carter continued to consult Lance after his departure, Lance's presence was sorely missed. The person closest to Carter was his wife, Rosalyn. Charles Kirbo, Carter's lawyer, was a close friend, but he visited Washington intermittently. It is safe to say, therefore, that for as long as Bert Lance was in Washington, he was Carter's closest advisor.

This content downloaded from
149.10.125.20 on Wed, 02 Mar 2022 20:01:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

tragedy, Jimmy Carter went to Washington to do away with a system dominated by power brokers and special interests only to find he could not succeed there without the help of those brokers and interests.

Addendum to Robert Drake Bibliography

Since the appearance in the Spring 1992 issue of the *Mississippi Quarterly* of "A Robert Drake Bibliography," a primary listing, Jan Nordby Gretlund has called attention to the omission of the following item, copy of which Mr. Drake has provided:

Drake, Robert. "The Lady *Frum* Somewhere: Flannery O'Connor Then and Now." *Modern Age*, 29 (Summer 1985), 212-223.

Before its publication, Mr. Drake read the essay at the Flannery O'Connor Memorial Symposium in Sandbjerg, Denmark, on August 3, 1984.

This content downloaded from
149.10.125.20 on Wed, 02 Mar 2022 20:01:17 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms