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THE RHETORIC OF JIMMY CARTER, 1976-1980

by

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In 1976 Jimmy Carter surprised everybody by moving from the back of the pack to win the Democratic nomination and going on to accomplish the nearly unprecedented task of unseating an incumbent president. Perhaps because communication is such a central component of presidential campaigns, Carter was considered a masterful communicator when he took office. And for a few months, while he engaged in a clever campaign of symbol manipulation, that evaluation continued. But by mid-term his presidency was in trouble and before it ended he was perceived as a poor communicator.

"Communication," of course, is a broader term than "rhetoric," so it is not necessarily the case that a good or bad communicator will concomitantly be a good or bad rhetor. In Jimmy Carter's case, it seems obvious that he was never a particularly effective speaker, although his reputation in this area suffered a diminution as his general reputation fell.

From the very first his ability as a speaker was suspect. As early as October of 1975, R. W. Apple, Jr. characterized his speaking as containing "no applause lines, little detail on issues, no rhetorical flourishes."¹ Three months before the 1976 election, Lewis Lapham lambasted him with this line: "He isn't an eloquent man, and his visions of America the Beautiful have the quality of the gilded figurines bought in penny arcades."²

It should be noted that the negative assessments of Carter's rhetoric seem not to be related to political prejudice. Liberals, conservatives and moderates all saw him as undynamic. Liberal former Senator Eugene McCarthy said, "He's an oratorical mortician. He inters his words and ideas beneath piles of syntactical mush."³ I. F. Stone, the liberal publisher,

complained, "There's no music in him. He just can't lift off. He can fool people for a while, but he really doesn't know how to inspire."⁴ From the other end of the political spectrum, Evans and Novack characterized him as "allergic to all efforts at eloquence,"⁵ And the more moderate Paul Healy noted, "Carter's natural speaking style is fine for insomniacs."⁶

All of these judgements do not prove, however, that Carter's lack of dynamism drove people away. *The New York Times*, commenting editorially on Carter's inaugural, noted "there was nothing memorable about Carter's words, though we liked the melody."⁷ Academic analyses tended to be even kinder. J. Lewis Campbell III found Carter's 1976 rhetoric charismatic,⁸ while Keith Erickson concluded, ". . . no other candidate could have so articulately woven together civic piety, religious disclosures, and politics."⁹ Chris Johnstone contended that Carter was rhetorically clever in convincing us that a vote for him was a vote for ourselves,¹⁰ John Patton credited him with restoring transcendence to politics¹¹ and Dan Hahn, in a backhanded compliment, attacked him for manipulating his religious rhetoric to get elected.¹² But the seeming contradiction between politico-journalistic and academic evaluations was more apparent than real. The politicians and journalists were evaluating Carter as a speaker; the academic analysts were focusing on the cleverness of the rhetorical content rather than the effectiveness of the rhetor himself.

Those academics who did analyze Carter's speeches were as appalled as the journalists. Ronald Sudol found that Carter's defense of the "strategic retreat" on the Panama Canal was a failure!¹³ William Houser judged Carter's speech at the

Camp David ceremony adequate, but also pointed out that Menachem Begin “stole the show.”¹⁴ Catherine Collins found enormous weaknesses in Carter’s rhetoric justifying the SALT talks¹⁵ and two different analyses of Carter’s 1979 energy speech found it deficient.¹⁶ To my knowledge, only one published academic analysis of a Carter speech was laudatory, and its conclusion, that Carter’s 1979 energy speech “established his ability to lead,”¹⁷ was belied by subsequent evaluations of Carter in the opinion polls and at the ballot box.

In short, with few exceptions, political, journalist and academic analyses agreed: Jimmy Carter was not a dynamic public speaker. It remains to detail the reasons for that judgement and to attempt to determine if his rhetoric might have contributed to his failure to maintain the relatively positive image he had as he entered the presidency in 1976.

Carter’s Messages

A major evaluation of Carter’s message during the 1976 campaign, which even became a campaign issue, was that he was “fuzzy” on the issues. His rhetoric was described as one which “generally avoids details,”¹⁸ was “noticeably vague,”¹⁹ made up of “generalized statements”²⁰ and “amorphous ambiguities”²¹ which reflected “general aspirations.”²² Gus Tyler concluded, “He has the skill to be a loquacious sphynx, to keep his meanings silent even when he is sounding off.”²³

This fuzziness, it should be noted, may be endemic to American electoral politics. The large, variegated and non-ideological audience, with its tendency to vote against rather than for candidates, may force those candidates into ambiguities. But whether forced or natural, candidate Carter seems to have been a master—so much so that conservatives perceived him as conservative, moderates as moderate, and liberals as liberal.²⁴

Yet, journalist critics found him to be either a liberal with some conservative quirks or a liberal who had added in some conservatism to broaden his appeal. Evans and Novak saw him as combining “a liberal idiom with some hard-line posi-

tions . . . ,”²⁵ while Patrick Anderson characterized him as “a fairly conventional liberal, but one whose views take a conservative bounce now and then.”²⁶ In July of 1976 he was said “to balance a generally liberal speech with moderate qualifications . . . ,”²⁷ and in August, “Whenever Mr. Carter came close to embracing liberal dogmas . . . he almost always carefully qualified his remarks to satisfy some conservative objections.”²⁸

So, was Carter an ambiguous politician, a liberal with some conservative tendencies, or a liberal who made some conservative statements to broaden his appeal? Charles Mohr concluded, “His record indicates that Mr. Carter is as conservative—or as liberal—as he needs to be at any moment or in any political situation.”²⁹

To accomplish his “all things to all people,” political strategy Carter utilized a number of rhetorical tactics in 1976. One of these, counterbalancing liberal and conservative positions, has already been implied. For instance, speaking in conservative Alabama in September of 1976, he called for an end to the “welfare mess” and support for a strong national defense; then, to appeal to liberals, “he recommended that welfare recipients who cannot work should be treated with dignity and respect; and he suggested that military budgets are obese and therefore can be cut without endangering national security.”³⁰

A second method he utilized was to give the policy to one side and the rhetoric to the other. His stand on abortion exemplifies this approach. Anti-abortionists wanted to amend the Constitution to make abortion illegal. Carter opposed such a measure, but in heavy Roman Catholic areas he prefaced the statement of his position with anti-abortion rhetoric, saying, “I think abortion is wrong. I don’t think the government ought to do anything to encourage abortion.”³¹

Another tactic was to agree to study a proposal or a position which ran counter to his own. Thus, while Carter opposed federal aid to cities, he promised Mayor Beame of New York that he would “study the creation of a Federal municipalities securities insurance corporation”³²

The strength of this approach, of course, is that Carter thereby appeared to be open to rational persuasion without promising any substantive change at all.

This tactic, then, shades into the next: encouraging both sides to believe he was with them. This was usually accomplished through some kind of hedge. "Carter would make general value statements reflecting the sentiments of one sector of his audience and then tack on conditions or operational statements that would satisfy another segment. [For instance, he always combined "imagery of compassion with a line about administrative toughness."³³] Though such statements might be inconsistent or contradictory, many of the people listening would only hear the part that conformed with their own views and ignore or discount the other material."³⁴

A fifth rhetorical tactic he utilized to blur the liberal-conservative question was semantic distinctions. Perhaps the best example of this approach was his position on amnesty for those who had resisted service in Viet Nam. Carter's position was that he opposed amnesty "because 'amnesty says that what you did was right.' But he [added] that, in his first week in office, he would issue a 'blanket pardon' to 'defectors' because 'a pardon says that you are forgiven for what you did, whether it was right or wrong.'"³⁵ No one has ever located a dictionary which makes such a distinction; in fact, in most "amnesty" is defined as "a general pardon."

No wonder, then, that Mr. Carter's fuzziness on the issues, fueled by his rhetorical tactics, led people from all points of the political spectrum to identify with him. That was the goal all along. As Betty Glad concluded, "Mostly Carter skillfully fudged on the controversial issues. He did this by sending out complex messages that various listeners could interpret according to their own predispositions. From the multitude of signals—a word, a condition, a posture—Carter was able to send different people different signals about his positions."³⁶

This conclusion is even true concerning one of his central positions in the campaign—his anti-Washington stance. To distance himself from the capitol he

emphasized that he had not been a part of the group in Washington that had created the mess; in fact, he wasn't even a lawyer. Further distancing was created by dressing casually, carrying his own suitcase, sometimes staying in the homes of supporters rather than in hotels and, in general, picturing himself as an outsider. Thus he came to be seen not only as non-Washington but anti-Washington.

However, that was mostly facade, the image-message. Substantively, he didn't run against Washington at all. "Carter never said that government should be reduced or should do less. He said that the number of agencies should be reduced, but not that they should deliver fewer services or employ fewer people."³⁷ At the same time, it should be pointed out that both his rhetoric and his symbolism were seen, and were meant to be perceived, "as a cryptic way of saying that we need *less* government without actually having to alienate those who directly benefit from government."³⁸

The foregoing analysis of Carter's fuzziness, liberal-conservative confusion and anti-Washington image assumes that substantive issues are significant. That is never a safe assumption,³⁹ and may be especially misleading when applied to the 1976 campaign. In what I find to be the most persuasive of the analyses of that campaign, Chris Johnstone argues that the election turned not on issues but the broader theme of faith, "in particular the faith that Americans need to have in their government and, most especially, in themselves if the democratic system is to function properly."⁴⁰ Both candidates, says Johnstone, recognized the significance of this theme, but Carter won because he either understood or treated it better. "Whereas both Ford and Carter told us that *they* were honest, competent, compassionate, etc., Carter carried the idea further. He told us that *we* were. Beyond this, he told us that he derived his own wisdom, compassion, and competence *from us*. *We* became the subject-matter of Jimmy Carter's discourse, and we were persuaded to reaffirm our faith in ourselves by acting for him."⁴¹ In a sense, we voted for ourselves. And Carter became

President. So we now turn to an analysis of his messages in office, seeking lines of continuity to his campaign rhetoric as well as signs of weakness which might have contributed to his declining popularity through the four year term.

Weaknesses emerge immediately, literally moments after his taking the oath of office. For his inaugural address was “a themeless pudding, devoid of uplift or insight, defensive in outlook and timorous in its reach . . .”⁴² Carter presented five major subjects in the address—religiosity, the American Dream, presidential responsibility, citizen’s duties, and international affairs. And each topic was undermined by the way Carter presented it.

James Reston referred to the Inaugural as “revival meeting,”⁴³ Hedrick Smith said it was “less rallying cry than sermon,”⁴⁴ and Anthony Hillbruner entitled his analysis of it, “Born Again: Carter’s Inaugural Sermon.”⁴⁵ Certainly these commentators noted the most obvious subject in the speech.

In defining the world as two distinct parts, physical and spiritual, and then emphasizing the latter, President Carter set a religious mood for his inaugural address. In the very first sentence, when Carter thanked President Ford for “all he has done to heal our land,”⁴⁶ he implied that one of the Presidential responsibilities is that of “healing,” a job which can be seen either in medical terms or, metaphorically, as a divine responsibility.

Carter specifically referred to his faith by talking of the TWO Bibles before him and by quoting the prophet Micah. And, throughout, the speech was sprinkled with religious language. He declared that the inauguration attests to the “spiritual” strength of the nation, that there is “a new spirit among us all,” that “ours was the first society openly to define itself in terms of . . . spirituality,” etc. By my count, he used the word “spirit” seven times and other clearly religious words—“pray,” “moral,” “religious,” etc.—an additional twenty-seven times.

In addition to his Christian faith, Carter asserted his faith in the nation and in the American people. He seemed to ask the citizens to have that same faith in him.

In this manner he became a missionary with his own church of political believers. He had made a commitment to America; in return, he sought a commitment from the people. Again, the religious overtones drowned out the political ones.

At the end of the speech the President listed six goals. Although they were stated in the past tense, the aphoristic form made them resemble the Ten Commandments. One statement followed another without explication, each with its own ideology, each pertaining to moral and spiritual issues. Any could be converted from aphorism to commandment by replacing “that we had” with “Thou Shalt.” “That we had strengthened the American family” would become “Thou Shalt strengthen the American family.”

Clearly, there was a religiosity theme running through the speech. How was it undermined? By overkill. We Americans don’t like to be preached to; the descriptive phrase for somebody who does so is the negatively-toned “preachy.”

We do expect a little religion to be interspersed in our political addresses—“God” has been defined as a word in the final sentence of a political speech—but we get nervous about unbending fanaticism. And a good portion of the overweening piety could have been excised from this speech. For instance, “while he could have called for a resurgence of *belief* in the nation and in ourselves, with the religious theme dominant over the secular one, Carter asked instead that we have ‘full *faith* in our country—and in one another.’”⁴⁷

Not only was the religion over-emphasized in and of itself, but it interfered with the secular messages by casting them in a non-political light. For instance, Carter was undoubtedly right in claiming that “our *moral* sense dictates a clearcut preference for those societies which share with us an abiding respect for individual human rights,” (emphasis added) but that affinity is not exclusively morality-based. It is also political and economic. The stressing of his religious standpoints meant that his discussion of political topics seemed to float in a state of limbo outside any point in political history. The

resultant tone was that of a Southern preacher's eternal moralistic generalization rather than that of a presidential policy-maker.

Carter's second subject, the American Dream, is almost inherently related to the first. The religio-political analog draws one myth into the presence of the other in a way not unusual in the American experience. Both function, amongst other ways, to provide hope to their audiences, although Carter's Dream rhetoric seemed less hopeful than his religious, perhaps because he introduced it negatively: "the bold and brilliant dream which excited the founders of our nation still awaits consummation. I have no new dream to set forth today, but rather urge a fresh faith in the old dream."

Perhaps it is too much an overstatement to call that a "negative" introduction to the dream. But it did suggest an aura of stagnation. In saying that he had no "new dream," Carter indicated his conservatism, his willingness for things to remain pretty much the same. Perhaps "he appeared . . . reluctant to define his own version of the American dream lest he lose support."⁴⁸ At any rate, given the concomitant discussion of "recognized limits" of the government, he "seemed content to go along with the revolution of sinking expectations."⁴⁹

Further, he gave conflicting testimony to the state of the Dream. First he said it "still awaits its consummation;" then that it "endures," and finally that it is "undiminished" and "ever-expanding." For something to endure and expand while it still awaits consummation seems, at best, confusing.

And when he moved beyond the dream to generalized principles and ideals, the confusion continued. When he said, "we have already found a high degree of personal liberty" he undermined the meaning with his word choice. True, liberty is sought for, thus "found"; but more importantly, it is created and fought for, processes more active than mere "finding."

Another misunderstood historic principle was revolution. In saying, "if we despise our government we have no future," Carter indicated that revolution is

outside the pale. Did we not despise our government in the time of George III? Did we then assume that we had no future? Or did we discover a moral duty, a religious calling, a God-given right to revolt? Again, we find Carter passivity.

Throughout he offered only a comforting sameness. As long as we believe in the nation's hallowed symbols such as freedom and democracy, he seemed to say, we can not only maintain the status quo, but return to a past, even better, one. Thus, instead of offering a threat of change which might alienate or worry the average American, Carter held out a glorious vision of a past to be revived. The times they may be "achanging," but with Carter in office our values wouldn't be. "All this raises a couple of important points: Is the new President's appeal to the noble principles of the American past relevant to the challenges of the present and the future? And are the American people, with their broken families, their spectacular divorce, crime and drug rates ready to respond to the new President's appeals to austerity, discipline and sacrifice?"⁵⁰

Obviously, Carter realized that such questions were central. Having grounded his address, however maladroitly, in religious and patriotic hopefulness, he sought to identify his duties and those of his countrymen.

At only one point did Carter explicitly talk of presidential responsibility: "You have given me a great responsibility—to stay close to you, to be worthy of you and to exemplify what you are." But at other points in the address other responsibilities are implicitly recognized—to be a healer, to urge us to faith, to take on moral duties, to avoid drift, to be competent and compassionate and bold, etc.

While staying close, being worthy and exemplifying others *may* be great responsibilities, Carter immediately undermined his role by saying, "Your strength can compensate for my weakness, and your wisdom can help to minimize my mistakes." As William Safire commented, "After campaigning for three years on the theme that Government must be as good as its people—promising strong leadership to match the national character—he now

changes that into an apology that he's no better than us, and therefore we can't expect much."⁵¹

Democratic theory suggests that leaders shouldn't get too far ahead of their followers, but Carter, perhaps influenced by the popularity of Schlesinger's analysis of "The Imperial Presidency,"⁵² overdid it. There was no establishment of himself in the speech except in the most humble and subservient context. His projection of his image as a common man worked against him in his desire to be perceived as a leader. He did little to project leadership qualities or to extend to the people the security which a strong, charismatic president provides.

Even his explicit listing of his duties worked against him, for they did not include the duties we normally associate with leadership, thus raising the question of whether he knew the full extent of his duties. For instance, what about the powers of the office? What about specific actions? It is a widely held belief that unity comes through action, but Carter's view of unity (which he called for in several passages) was totally passive.

The overall impression of the secular portions of the speech was passivity. Carter even justified inaction when he said, "even our great nation has its recognized limits and . . . we can neither answer all questions nor solve all problems." The unstated addenda was, "so we won't even try."

And the language the President utilized elsewhere in the speech reinforced this image of passivity. For instance, he relied on negatives to describe the positive. Rather than calling on us to face the future boldly, he said, "nor can we afford to lack boldness as we meet the future." Since the negative was used to state the positive, the logical assumption was that Carter was more passive than active. Another clue indicative of his passiveness is found in the verbs he used to describe action: "to help shape" and "a step forward" both indicate gradual change and moderating action.

So Carter undermined his leadership theme with his unctuous humility and his (explicit and implicit) passivity, the latter

of which was to dog him throughout his presidency.

Just as it is axiomatic that if leaders are to lead followers must follow, so it is true that no politician talks about his responsibilities without speaking of the roles of citizens.

With Carter, the references to the citizens, like "A President may sense and proclaim that new spirit, but only a people can provide it," seemed selected to make the American people feel they were an integral part of the decision-making process. It was a ritualistic reaffirmation of the government's dependence upon the people, of the role the people play in government. As such, it is standard fare in inaugural addresses. Woodrow Wilson's inaugural (the one Carter studied most closely while preparing his own⁵³) included a call for returning government to the people, in these words: "The great government we loved has too often been made use of for private and selfish purposes, and those who used it had forgotten the people."⁵⁴

Beyond the specific indentifications of citizen roles, Carter relied on plural pronouns to suggest their involvement. He used "we" forty-three times in the speech and "our" thirty-six times. By contrast, he employed the personal pronoun "I" only six times. Of the thirty-five paragraphs of the speech, twenty-five began with "we," "our," or "let us."

Perhaps because he undermined his role of leader so badly by overstating his dependence on the citizens, the undermining of the roles of citizens was relatively tame. But at least a modicum of damage was done. For instance, in attempting to mute the call for sacrifice while avoiding the discussion of specific policies, he may have produced discomfort. It is not comforting to hear the president ask for "individual sacrifice" without an explanation of what that might entail, or even the necessity for it.

In a similar manner, when he said we would "fight our wars against poverty, ignorance and injustice" he may have conjured up negative feelings. "Wars against poverty" remind one of the Johnson era and, while containing possible evocative

meanings, may also suggest images of a sprawling bureaucracy rather than the controlled one he had promised in the campaign.

One stylistic weakness in his discussion of citizen roles should be mentioned. When he said, "Your strength can compensate for my weakness, and your wisdom can help to minimize my mistakes," he lost the desired balance. "Strength" vs "weakness" works, but he obviously could not find a suitable opposite of "wisdom." And while our strength could *compensate* for his weakness, all our wisdom could do was *help to minimize* his mistakes—whether that was to be because of limitations on our wisdom or the egregiousness of his mistakes was not discussed.

While the speech "was addressed primarily to the spirit of the American people, rather than the intractable problems of foreign affairs,"⁵⁵ there was a thread of international concern running through the speech. As compared to the absence of concern for substantive domestic problems, Carter stressed international policies and the importance of respecting human rights. He set forth "a new role for the country as an international symbol of decency, compassion and strength."⁵⁶

It was here that his tone best reflected his message, for he was calm and controlled rather than frenetic and aggressive. We were reminded, in subdued terminology, of the armaments race and the threat of nuclear weapons. But the competition remained unnamed; it was the world which suffered the danger, not us alone. Even enemies seemed to share the problems as much as provoking them. Carter preferred words over weapons and suggested that perseverance in this preference would lead to peace.

Throughout the discussion of foreign affairs, Carter evinced a quiet patriotism. But the caution created by his consideration of reality undermined his pathos. Each inspirational idea was balanced with probabilities. Each potentially powerful statement was diluted with a drop of realism. For instance, near the end of the speech he said, "I would *hope* that the nations of the world *might* say that we had built a lasting peace . . ." (emphases

added) His credibility would not have been destroyed if he had employed a more assertive language. This conditional approach unsettled more than refreshed, for it robbed him of emotive force.

He continued to dribble in probabilities with statements like, "we urge all other people to join us, for success *can* mean life instead of death." (emphasis added) When speaking of the rising passion for freedom, he weighed down the impact by starting the next sentence with the words, "Tapping this new spirit . . ." "Tapping" is a control word; the implied mechanicalness emasculates the zeal of the passion, as if the furies could be dispensed from a water cooler.

In short, Carter's foreign policy discussion was undermined by his cautious approach, preventing him from stirring the audience with the desired emotional force. His logos weakened his pathos.

The major image of Carter which emerged from his inaugural was passivity. At a later point in his tenure that would come to be called weakness, and would be blamed on his actions, or lack of actions. But the seeds of that judgement were already revealed in the inaugural address.

Two weeks later, on February 3, 1977, President Carter presented his first Fireside Chat—and again demonstrated rhetorically the weakness which would eventually destroy his presidency. This can be demonstrated by examining his treatment of problems and solutions in that speech.

The problems were introduced as emergencies but the solutions were hardly described as panaceas:

problem: "One of the most urgent projects is to develop a national energy policy."⁵⁷

solution: it "started before this winter and will take much longer to solve."

problem: "the worst economic slowdown of the last forty years."

solution: "It will produce steady, balanced, sustainable growth."

problem: "we must reform and reorganize the Federal Government."

solution: the system "will take a long time to change."

problem: the tax system is "a disgrace."

solution: "The economic program . . . will . . . be just a first step."

problem: "The welfare system also needs a complete overhaul."

solution: We have "begun a review."

Finally, speaking generally about all of his proposals, he said "Many of them will take longer than I would like . . ." How one reacts to all of these identifications of emergencies followed by slow and partial solutions depends somewhat on political orientation. A sympathizer might say that Carter was just being realistic about how long solutions take, while an opponent might contend that Carter was trying to demonstrate a commitment to promises on which he had no intention, or chance, of delivering.

A more rhetorical assessment would take as its point of departure Murray Edelman's claim that every government engages in a "cycle of anxiety and reassurance" to provide a "supportive following."⁵⁸ All citizens of this country should be familiar with the process: first we are told that somebody (usually Russia) is a great danger; then we are assured that our government can cope with the situation. In this speech, then, Carter's problem was that he oversold the anxiety part of the formula by elevating problems into emergencies. Naturally, then, the world of political reality being as slow as it is, he could not promise to solve the emergencies immediately.

Assuming that he continued this rhetorical approach throughout his presidency, it may give us a clue to his declining fortunes. That is, any leader who oversells problems without overselling his solutions is bound to be perceived as incapable of coping with the problems.

Another early problem which continued throughout his presidency was his penchant for taking conflicting positions . . . or taking forceful positions and then retreating. Neither of these tendencies projects competence, and both may be related to the fuzziness found in the campaign rhetoric—in two ways. First, the "something for everybody" aspect of fuzziness appears to be a first cousin to the "conflicting positions" approach. Second, the fact that his fuzziness allowed him to

avoid taking any position in the campaign left him free to adopt any position he favored later, and he often did so without considering political implications. Then, faced with political reality, he had to retreat.

The conflicting positions taken during his presidency neared legendary proportions. He opposed the Cuban military intervention in Angola and Zaire at the same time that he was talking of restoring diplomatic relations with Havana.⁵⁹ He preached against inflation and protectionism, but paid off the maritime members for their support with inflationary and protectionist subsidies.⁶⁰ "He proclaim[ed] a new policy of reducing American arms sales abroad. Then, in the four months following the proclamation, he approve[d] sales of more than \$4 billion."⁶¹ Faced with the discovery of a Soviet brigade in Cuba he first announced its existence there as unacceptable and summoned several special sessions of the Security Council. But when he subsequently reported to the nation he hinted that the whole affair was overblown and claimed the brigade was not a "clear and present danger," thus downgrading "the significance of the drama in which he was supposed to be the central character."⁶²

Nearly equalling his conflicting positions, both in regularity and in damage to his tenure, were his retreats. He retreated from his \$50 tax rebates and his cancellation of 30 expensive water projects,⁶³ from defense cutbacks and the human rights test in foreign affairs.⁶⁴ He proclaimed "the moral equivalent of war" on energy, then retreated to a position which held that no real sacrifice was necessary.⁶⁵

While the reasons for all these retreats are still not clear, several hypotheses have been advanced. A *New York Times* editorialist claimed they suggested "an excessive haste either in the embrace of policy or withdrawal from it."⁶⁶ James Reston, calling it a penchant for "passing long on first down," suggested the positions were taken before considering the politics of the situation: "He advocated a 'homeland' for the Palestinians without checking it out even with his own State Department. He announced his energy and welfare

programs without analyzing the opposition in Congress, and he called for support of his Panama treaties before the text was published or both sides agreed on what it meant.”⁶⁷ Herbert Klein more simply attributed the retreats to Carter’s tendency of “shooting from the hip.”⁶⁸ And Joseph Kraft concluded that Carter just didn’t know what he was doing, saying he was reminded of “the old image of a small figure in deep seas whose idea of governing is to lash the waves.”⁶⁹

C. Vann Woodward, rather tongue in cheek (I think), marveled at “Carter’s remarkable propensity—gift, flair—for fusing contradictions and reconciling opposites. The political consequences have been an unusual assortment of unified ambiguities and ambiguous unities. He once described himself as ‘a populist in the tradition of Richard Russell.’ Which is rather like conjuring up ‘an anarchist in the tradition of Grover Cleveland,’ or ‘a socialist in the tradition of Herbert Hoover.’”⁷⁰ But to the rest of us, Carter’s contradictions and retreats were not seen as gifts or flairs. We saw weakness or, when charitable, a man “hesitant in his exercise of power.”⁷¹

And just when Carter’s popularity had reached a devastatingly low point, history played a bad trick on him. Iranian “students” took over the U.S. embassy, taking our employees there hostage. It looked like a political opportunity for Carter to appear a strong leader and achieve the national unity he had been seeking throughout his presidency. So he played it to the hilt. And it did help for a while, long enough for him to wrap up his re-nomination on the Democratic line. But it ultimately defeated him, and it did so in part because of the way he approached it:

Jimmy Carter played into Khomeini’s hands by blowing up the political value of the hostages . . . In his withdrawal from campaigning during the Presidential primaries, so that he could handle the “crisis,” Jimmy Carter helped create a feeling of emergency in the United States which suggested that the holding of the hostages was a national security threat, comparable to

that posed by major powers in the past. The only president in the twentieth century who had not campaigned on national security grounds was Franklin Roosevelt in 1944, during World War II. In his dramatic refusal to turn on the Christmas lights at the White House until the hostages should be returned, a symbolic refusal which had not been employed even during World War II, Carter suggested that the whole nation had been dimmed by this assault on its integrity. In his calls for a moratorium on all ‘criticism’ right after the hostages had been taken, and in his subsequent suggestions that his critics were unpatriotic, he reinforced the view that the U.S. was in a great battle, where the contribution of each and every American, somehow, would make a significant difference in the outcome. But, saying that each and every life was so important to all Americans, and putting their safety at the top of his agenda, he created a domestic political climate in which it would be very difficult for him to employ American’s military power, even in the form of threats, to salvage American prestige. In effect, President Carter, with the collaboration of the mass media, helped turn the American hostages into a symbol of the entire nation. Like the individuals imprisoned in Iran, the American nation as a whole had been captured—with few options open to it, but to implore with its captors to let it go.⁷²

But did Carter have any choice? That is, did he define the hostage situation as a crisis or did the media do so? The executive producer of ABC’s *World News Tonight*, Jeff Gralnick, contends that “If the government had nothing public to say, except that it would run things as if no crisis existed, the media would not have been able to do anything with the Iran story.”⁷³

In a sense, then, the “crisis” was of Jimmy Carter’s making. Yet, because he lacked either the will or the ability to solve the problem, escalating it into a crisis was a mistake. “Moreover, his many public attempts to exercise influence—in political

circumstances where failure was likely—helped diminish American ‘power’ on the world scene. For power is based on prestige, and prestige has always been protected by avoiding public attempts to exercise it when one cannot do so. Indeed, the mobilization of such strong emotions, when the situation did not permit him to transform those emotions into effective action, contributed to American feelings of impotence . . .”⁷⁴ and, along with the other weaknesses of the Carter messages, contributed to the assessment of Carter as too weak to continue to inhabit the White House.

Carter’s Style

Style is a nearly ineffable subject. Almost all agree that language, voice and physical components, all of which we will return to later, are components. But there is something else, less easily defined, that is also included—perhaps “tone” or “mode of approach” hint at it. Or better yet, although impossibly imprecise, “feel,” as in “the feel of the man,” gets at it.

This “something else,” this “feel,” is partly the result of the cumulation of the other components of style, but it also is composed partly of other elements nearly impossible to identify. Or perhaps these other elements vary from observer to observer, come from the interplay of the characteristics of observer and observed. At any rate, people who can agree on assessments of language, voice and movement can still come to differing judgments of style, so some attempt must be made to understand these nearly mystical elements if assessments of style are to move beyond the banal.

And such an examination is especially important in attempting to understand Jimmy Carter, for he was from the beginning a candidate of style, or, in the more popular parlance, an image-candidate. Countless references could be dredged up from his early days on the national scene, in which people said they didn’t know what he stood for but they liked him, or they didn’t know why they liked him, they just did.

Obviously, such unreasoned acceptance made his opponents nervous, so Max

Lerner cast his discussion of Carter’s style in the form of an answer to the hypothetical question, “What has Jimmy Carter got that I don’t have?” “Maybe the answer is: an engaging smile, a soft voice with an ingenuous look, a cool mind, a steel will, a Southerner’s roots, a moderate’s instincts, a liberal Georgian’s connections with a black constituency, a rural evangelical religion, a capacity to fudge issues, a politician’s antipolitical stance, a fair amount of cheek, a profile that can be made to look like Jack Kennedy’s and a set of morals that can’t.”⁷⁵

It will be noted that Lerner’s list includes some traditional style categories—voice, appearance, language—as well as political assets. But it also includes some estimates of unmeasurable qualities—mind, will, roots, instincts, cheek—which made up, for him, the “feel of the man.”

Of especial interest during the 1976 campaign was the impact of what Lerner called “a Southerner’s roots.” Beyond the political fact that Carter was expected to carry the South, his Southern heritage was presumed to be a component of his style, explaining his success in small gatherings, his first-name-basis orientation, his avoidance of issues, and even his smile. His campaign, so invigoratingly fresh to much of the country, was found to be the style of traditional Southern politics:

It is still a style in which issues are not discussed in the campaign. It is still a very personal style. It is still a style in which the candidate spends most of his time and energy trying to convince the voters that he is a Good Ol’ Boy. It is still a style that reduces the constituency to friends and neighbors who cannot, after their votes are counted, argue that the candidate for whom they used their franchise stands for anything more specific than, say, God.

It was inevitable that some Southern politician would do what Carter is doing today, try the Southern style of politics on the national electorate.

It seems that Carter has found the exact moment when the national electorate is ready for the Southern style, when many of us prefer that the energy

crisis, detente, the economy, busing, assassination conspiracies and Watergate be left undiscussed.

Carter is not the man to remind us of these perplexing and often painful problems, certainly not as long as his smile works.⁷⁶

So Carter's style was traditional Southern. Or was it? The author of that piece was not talking so much of Carter's personal style as the design of his campaign. At a more personal level, there is evidence that his years away from Georgia made him something of a Yankee. William Miller argued against the Southern style analysis, saying, "he is no Southern talker, orator or writer. He writes and speaks without embellishment. Though verbally agile, he uses words as instruments only, to convey facts, points, arguments. . . . His formal speeches . . . are not particularly well-written. His spontaneous talk is not eloquent. In a particularly un-Southern way, his speeches have no rhythm. Big words pop out in unexpected places. Complex formulations intrude when he is trying to be simple. Parallels don't parallel. . . . He is a long way from either the verbosity or the eloquence of the 'Southern' use of language."⁷⁷

The conclusion, then, is that Carter ran his campaign in the Southern style (i.e., manner) but without the eloquence (bombast?) which has been presumed to be a part of the personal style of Southern politicians.

Rather than offering himself as a Southerner, Carter presented an average American persona, often saying in 1976 that he wasn't the best qualified man for the job, by training or experience. However, he claimed to be the best because his values and beliefs perfectly mirrored those of his audience. At a time when memories of "The Imperial Presidency" still haunted the public, the idea of a commoner in the White House was attractive. Indeed, it was Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. who most clearly delineated Carter's common man approach: "Mr. Carter's tone is direct, colloquial, engaging, often flat but sometimes oddly moving. His faith in work, discipline, education, character recalls an older and

better America. He speaks without embarrassment about deeply personal things—trust, truth, the family, love and, when pressed, the Almighty. He rarely goes in for rhetorical pretense or flourish. It is the tone of a plain, homespun American talking seriously to his neighbors or his Sunday School class."⁷⁸

The "averageness" Schlesinger noticed was carried into the White House, where Carter's early symbolic activities (walking "home" after the inauguration, refusing to set up an elaborate vacation retreat at la San Clemente, removing the gold braids of the "palace guards," enrolling Amy in a public school, etc.) stripped the presidency of some of its accumulated royalist trappings and returned "the office to a more normal, less immune to criticism, status."⁷⁹

The "averageness" of Carter led him to demystify the office. That reassured the populace, as did his "cool" or "soft" approach. He was calm, organized and ready to negotiate rather than impulsive, excitable and ready to fight. A public tired of frenetic politics was ready for this approach.

But these same characteristics eventually became liabilities when the audience began once again to desire active, forceful leadership. For instance, Terence Smith complained that in his Panama Canal appeal "His tone was subdued, as though he was trying to convince his audience of the merits of the treaties more by gentle persuasion than exhortation."⁸⁰ Note that the change was not in Carter but in the audience expectation. In 1976 gentle persuasion was desired; by 1978 we wanted exhortation.

By 1979 Carter's calmness had become a real liability, and what had been called calmness was now attacked as detachment: "Carter has seemed a man detached from the message he was delivering. In part the impression is a product of the even level of his recitals; a less charitable description would be monotony. There are rare intervals when any statement seems to achieve precedence over another. One can almost imagine him announcing the start of a fateful nuclear collision and the appointment of a new ambassador to an

obscure country without noticeably altering the decibel count.”⁸¹ Indeed, Murray Kempton worried that “alarmed serenity” was “his highest pitch of style.”⁸²

So, once again, we find that Carter’s rhetoric contained a weakness that undermined his presidency. This time it was less that he didn’t turn out to be the kind of person we wanted than that he did, but we had changed our minds about what we wanted. From cheering his walk down Pennsylvania Avenue on inauguration day, we had moved to an anti-pedestrian stance. The common man in the White House no longer fulfilled our expectations.

Language

As befitted his cautious man personality and image, Jimmy Carter normally was careful and precise in his use of language. This was especially true of the mechanics. After Carter’s first presidential press conference, James Wechsler noticed, “There are no unfinished sentences, rambling detours, embarrassing stammerings, rarely even a dangling participle.”⁸³ James Reston apparently was the journalist who was most appreciative of and impressed by this facet of Carter’s language, as he mentioned it in three different columns in 1977: “he speaks in sentences, thinking between commas, without a subject or predicate out of place”;⁸⁴ “In good times and bad, he faces his critics with more regularity, more precision of fact and language, and more patience and courtesy than any other president of the television age”;⁸⁵ “More than any other Chief Executive since the last World War, Mr. Carter respects and uses the English language carefully and accurately.”⁸⁶

This careful handling of language, so lauded at the grammatical level, occasionally got Carter into trouble at other levels, as it did during the 1976 Florida primary:

Asked if he had promised to nominate Governor Wallace at the 1972 Democratic convention (as Mr. Wallace has often said he did), Mr. Carter denied that was true and said there was proof of that denial in a telegram he had sent to the Alabama Governor.

“I told him I’d have to decline the honor of nominating him,” he said as the television cameras whirled and the tape recorders registered his every word.

Did he use the word “honor” in his telegram? He was asked.

“No, I’m using it now,” he said.

Sincerely or sarcastically?

“I used it deliberately,” he said.

But sincerely or sarcastically?

“Well, if it had been an honor to nominate him,” he said curtly, “I would have nominated him. Does that answer your question?”

His apparent intention, before the questions became so insistent, was to leave the impression that although he had not nominated Governor Wallace . . . it was not an entirely unacceptable idea.⁸⁷

So in this case his attempted careful use of the language to tint an issue was unsuccessful, but we saw earlier that he was able to utilize language to create a fuzzy impression, defusing some of his more unpopular stands by mastering “the art of presenting liberal positions in conservative language and conservative positions in liberal language,”⁸⁸ or, as James Reston called it, the art of “being precisely imprecise.”⁸⁹

None of this criticism should be taken to imply that Carter was in any way an unusual politician in attempting to make his language work for him, although the fact that he promised never to lie to us made it seem that his language-based “hedges” were more reprehensible than the same thing from other politicians.

Sometimes Carter was attacked for handling language not only as others do, but as is required in the political world. A case in point was his preference for the subjunctive mood. Marshall Frady, hinting darkly of unpalatable manipulation, charged that Carter “had learned over the years that his purposes were better served by the subjunctive than the declarative . . .”⁹⁰ And in a *New York Times* editorial it was suggested that “Careful scrutiny of a candidate’s phrases often reveals deliberate hedging. ‘I would never give up full control of the Panama

Canal,' Mr. Carter said, adding 'as long as it had any contribution to make to our national security'—a conditional note which opens a wide realm of judgmental freedom."⁹¹

We will never know, of course, whether Carter really was hedging on the Panama Canal in 1976, saying what his audience wanted to hear, or if his "conditional note" was the careful language of a realistic politician who understood that the political world is a probabilistic world, best dealt with through hypotheses, contingencies and possibilities, i.e., with the subjunctive. As George Will has noted, "Most of what a President says is politically, if not grammatically, in the subjunctive mood because he can do little alone. A President's principal power is the highly contingent power to persuade Congress. And Congress hears a discordant clamor of other voices."⁹² From this perspective, the subjunctive only brings the rhetoric into realistic alignment with the political world.

Unfortunately for Carter, his language-based problems stemmed less from his carefulness and use of the subjunctive than from carelessness and the fact that "As a man and as a wordsmith, Mr. Carter likes absolutes and superlatives . . ."⁹³ We recall that his autobiography was not titled "Why Not Competence" but "Why Not the *Best*," that he promised *never* to lie to us, that he characterized the Federal bureaucracy as "*totally* unmanageable."⁹⁴ In 1976, offering to shake hands with each contributor at a fundraiser, Carter said that "they should take the handshake as something that would 'cement a lifelong friendship between us.'"⁹⁵

To see how this penchant for hyperbole continued, and was bothersome, in his presidency, consider Carter's 1980 State of the Union Message.⁹⁶ While we expect exaggeration from politicians, in this speech the absolutes and superlatives were magnified by the poor fit between his announcement that henceforth we're going to "face the world as it is" and statements like "the United States will remain the *strongest* of all nations" or "our nation has *never* been aroused and unified so greatly in peacetime," or the U.S.-U.S.S.R.

relationship "is the *most critical* factor in determining whether the world will live at peace." (emphases added.)

But his most famous superlative in the address was his contention that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was "the most serious threat to the peace since the second world war." His primary opponent, Senator Kennedy, took issue with that one, asking, "Is it a graver threat than the Berlin Blockade, the Korean War, the Soviet march into Hungary and Czechoslovakia, the Berlin wall, the Cuban missile crisis, or Vietnam?," and concluding, "Exaggeration and hyperbole are the enemies of sensible foreign policy."⁹⁷ They were also Carter's enemies, as in this speech they undermined his assertion of fealty to the facts and brought into question his ability to assess the world.

Two specific favorite words in Carter's vocabulary—"comprehensive" and "reform"—are difficult to categorize. Surprisingly, both can be seen as either cautious or hyperbolic locutions. A comprehensive program may be one put together carefully, covering a multitude of problems . . . or a rag-tag melange of ideas thrown together almost haphazardly and mislabeled "comprehensive." Likewise, "reform" may suggest a cautious, non-revolutionary improvement or may be employed to provide a patina of acceptability to an otherwise undistinguished proposal. Thus, whether one perceives Carter's legislative drafts as "comprehensive" or "reforms" may depend somewhat on the observer's ideology. But the fact that Carter preferred those descriptions is undeniable. He proposed "a comprehensive strategic arms limitation agreement, a comprehensive Middle East peace settlement, a comprehensive national energy program, comprehensive welfare reform and comprehensive tax reform."⁹⁸ He used the word "reform" so often that the *Wall Street Journal* started quarantining the word by encasing it in quotation marks.⁹⁹

There is a chance that these two favorite words were more expressive of Carter's hopes than they were descriptive of his programs. All along, Carter seemed as concerned with how he felt about actions as with the actions themselves, which ex-

plains his excessive use of adverbs as well as permitting his feelings to rise to the surface in other comments, sometimes inappropriately, as in his promise to “whip Kennedy’s ass.”¹⁰⁰

In a strange kind of way, Carter’s use of language as self-fulfilling prophecies seems to have been related to his whole desire for and promise of trust. That is, we are what we think we are; our feelings capture reality; our programs are as we describe them. We must trust ourselves, our feelings, our solutions. Then, as we see how well everything works, we will be able to trust each other and, eventually, even our government. Somehow, the key to his whole political approach was revealed and reflected in his language. It was, in a sense, the politics of biofeedback wherein trust and confidence flowed from actions, but successful actions flowed from trust and confidence. So the “logical” point at which to begin to repair the damage to public confidence was the rhetorical. Hence the “trust me” campaign, the symbolism of his first year, the 1978 presentation of the liberation of the Panama Canal as an act of atonement,¹⁰¹ the malaise speech of 1979 and perhaps even his overall preference for the straightforward and banal rather than the eloquent.

Unfortunately for Carter the end result was merely that he was seen as lacking eloquence and his “plain” style one that reduced “great phrases into banalities. Lincoln’s ‘we must think anew and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves’ degenerated into Carter’s ‘we must change our attitudes as well as our policies.’ And the Founding Fathers’ ringing pledge of ‘our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor’ became, in Mr. Carter’s pallid paraphrase, ‘their property, position, and life itself.’”¹⁰²

Voice

It is obvious to anyone who ever heard Carter speak that “soft-voiced”¹⁰³ and “low-pitched”¹⁰⁴ describe his voice accurately. But our concern is less with phonics than functions. How did this soft voice affect his audiences? The evidence, assuming journalistic listeners are somewhat

representative, is that, as in so many other of his rhetorical characteristics, Carter’s voice was a plus in the 1976 campaign and a hindrance thereafter.

In January of 1976, James Wolcott, in an otherwise highly critical piece, praised Carter’s voice: “As a speechmaker he’s articulate and expressive, quietly softly expressive, as if straining his voice would tear into the delicacy of his mood.”¹⁰⁵ “Carter is cool, very cool, yet his emotional tonalities surface. The most impressive remark Carter made . . . was when he said that more than being disappointed by Watergate, the American people were ‘hurt,’ and his voice curved around the word, as if curving around the pain of a hard truth . . . the word was laid on the plane of the sentence like a bruised apple upon a still-life table.”¹⁰⁶

Six months later, David Halberstam’s coverage of the Democratic Convention included these reflections on Carter’s voice: “Watching him again and again on television I was impressed by his sense of pacing, his sense of control, very low key, soft, a low decibel count, all this in sharp contrast to the other candidates who, getting free television time, tried to get the maximum number of words in. Carter, by contrast, even when he was getting (and knew he was getting) only a minute and a half on the network news shows, used the pauses. The pauses were reassuring: they seemed to echo his own self-confidence, the lack of rush, his strong sense of his own roots among a people less and less sure of theirs.”¹⁰⁷

Carter’s voice, clearly, was a positive factor in 1976. But by mid-term the assessment had changed. Marshall Frady hinted at the new evaluation: “For all his commendable gameness and earnestness, yet there still lingered about him some sense of slightness, a quality of balsa wood. It may have been merely the light wispiness of his voice—some sound of thin grasses in that drawl with its muted fogs—or the fine and almost mincingly polite effect he maintained, an unrelenting niceness and diffidence . . .”¹⁰⁸ “His voice still has that faint, shrill, reedy strain and an odd off-syncopation—it’s as if, however further he has ranged now in eminence and self-cer-

tainty, his voice were still left somewhere back about at the point of his high-school graduation."¹⁰⁹

Frady didn't come right out and say that Carter's voice made him appear weak. But that was his message—slight, light, thin, muted, mincing, diffident, faint, out of tune with the world, as naive as a high school graduate.

Again, it will be noted that the change was not in Carter but in the public desires. In 1976 his soft voice calmed us and we liked that, seeking surcease from the frenetic world; but by 1978 we had decided that we wanted a tough leader and Carter's soft voice sounded to us like weakness.

Physical Aspects

As befitted a non-dynamic speaker, Carter rarely gestured. When he tried to improve his image in 1980 by clenching his fist during one of his speeches, everyone realized that it was an artificial attempt to appear more resolute and discounted it accordingly.

Carter's physical attributes apparently helped him in 1976, especially on television. "The camera is kind to him, it heightens his strengths—a strong sense of himself, a good smile, a face wonderfully American, born of a thousand Norman Rockwell covers; we know him if not from our past, then at least from what we were told was our past. Similarly, the camera minimizes his potential weaknesses: he is said to be short, but he does not *look* short, therefore he might just as well be tall. He is said to be cold and aloof, but he does not *look* cold and aloof, therefore he might just as well be warm."¹¹⁰ However, though no critic seems ever to have mentioned it, there is a possibility that his slight physique added to the perceptions of him as weak during his presidency.

As to the judgements of his stage movement, the only assessment I have found is the minor complaint of William Safire that he "looks to both sides too quickly, as if at a fast badminton match . . ."¹¹¹

There are, however, several critiques of his movements off stage, one positive and one negative. Wolcott found that "his movements have a dancerly wholeness,

suggesting not only a campaigner who knows how to proportion fatigue equally throughout his body, but somehow so assured, so serenely confident, that doubts and fears don't manifest themselves as bodily neuroses but are consciously objectified."¹¹²

Almost diametrically opposed to that assessment, as though he were talking of a different person, Frady found a "peculiar awkwardness": "He slumped slightly forward with his head thrust out and slightly lifted, giving him rather the look, with his pink chapped skin, of an unshelled terrapin. He went swooping along corridors and down main street sidewalks with a kind of marionette's tight, dangly slap and flop in his movements, a strange flimsily hinged looseness in his wrists, his hands flapping at his sides as he eagerly forged on."¹¹³

I can not solve the Wolcott-Frady disagreement; they neither seem to be describing the movements of the Carter I saw. That Carter walked precisely—not as stiffly as Richard Nixon, rather more like a child who had mastered walking and was proud of it. Likewise, his lack of gestures when speaking reminded me of a child reciting a piece rather than an engaged personality involved in persuading an audience.

There were also, I found, differences in his rhetorical movements depending upon his attitude to the subject. In his 1980 debate with Reagan, when he spoke on a subject he seemed comfortable with (domestic programs for the poor, the Camp David accord, his energy conservation proposals) he rested his hands on either side of the podium, halfway between top and bottom. His weight was evenly distributed on both feet and he spoke either into the camera or to his questioner. He rarely faced Reagan when he was in his comfortable stance. He also smiled slightly more, blinked less and squinted not at all.

When he appeared uneasy (discussing the economy, the hostage situation, the SALT treaty and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan) he placed his hands at the top of the podium, shifted his weight nervously from one foot to the other, reared

back slightly and turned his head toward Reagan significantly more often. He also smiled less, squinted noticeably, and blinked approximately 17% more often.

Without hard empirical data it is difficult to know how all of this was translated by the public. Yet what we know in more general terms would lead us to assume that his lack of gestures contributed to the perception that he lacked dynamism, his physique may have suggested weakness, and his nervous stage movements may have undermined his ethos. While these conclusions must remain highly tentative, it can be said with assurance that there is nothing in our literature to suggest that any of the physical characteristics here identified might have helped his image.

So, with the possible exception of this last category, we have found that all the components of style examined here—feeling tone, language, voice and physical aspects—contributed to the perception of Carter as a weak man, a weak president. It is doubtful if even an objectively strong president could have overcome the image of weakness portrayed in Carter's rhetorical style.

Characteristics

Keeping in mind the image of the man which emerged in his style, we turn now to an examination of personal characteristics of Carter's which were embedded in the content of his rhetoric—if you will, his implicitly-revealed ethos.

Religious

The most obvious characteristic of Jimmy Carter, revealed in his rhetoric as well as in other ways, was that he was a deeply religious person. Despite the obviousness of the religious overtones in his speeches, which James Naughton said were "moral sermons" rather than "political speeches,"¹¹⁴ some analysts found religiosity of negligible importance in 1976: "Patton dismissed Carter's explicit expressions of fundamentalist faith as an issue in the campaign; Swanson classified religious disclosures as 'junk news'; Rarick *et al.*, investigating his 'persona,' ignored piety as an element of character; and Hamilton Jordan, the candidate's cam-

paign strategist, labeled it the 'weirdo factor.'"¹¹⁵ Nonetheless, Erickson has persuasively demonstrated that "Carter's references to his spiritual faith and use of religious-political discourse . . . were not inconsequential. Carter's religious-political discourse reaffirmed our civic piety and faith in America: his religious discourses communicated trustworthiness, served as a source of identification with evangelicals, and generated media attention."¹¹⁶

Furthermore, an analysis of his pre-presidential rhetoric by Brooks Holifield, professor of religious history at Emory University, demonstrated that Carter was not inconsistent in his religious references, and suggested that the religion was deeply ingrained rather than added on for electoral advantage. For instance, as Governor of Georgia, "Carter rarely used the word 'God' in his official speeches, 'but when he did the term functioned generally in two ways: the poor should have the right and means to develop their 'God-given talents,' and the powerful have the responsibility to share their 'God-given blessings' for the common welfare.'" ¹¹⁷

As I suggested earlier, in discussing his inaugural address, Carter's religious orientation was not an unmixed blessing when he reached the White House. The reasons for that are not entirely clear, but several suggest themselves. One is that there was an inherent contradiction between his religious and political appeals: "To audiences consumed with impotent rage Mr. Carter used the language of Christian piety to convey a sense of the Lord's vengeance. Thus the paradox implicit in his success. He presented himself as the candidate of hope and new beginnings, but he floated to the surface on a tide of despair. In place of a vision of the future he offered an image of the nonexistent past, promising a safe return to an innocent Eden in which American power and morality might be restored to the condition of imaginary grace."¹¹⁸ Once he became President, then, the hoped-for transformation did not materialize and the rage and despair were turned against him.

A second explanation suggests that re-

ligion is a private affair, so the public display of it creates doubts about the displayer. "When the language becomes moralizing, and the speaker begins to whine, the listener is overcome with a sense of phoniness and will respond with embarrassment and/or the impulse to flee. . . . When piety is pursued privately, it evokes humility. But when piety is made public, it becomes obsessive and suffused with self-serving righteousness. The more Mr. Carter protests against the sin of pride, the more he communicates his enslavement by it. At best, the piety proclaimed here communicates heroic egomania, at worst, an egomania joined by hypocrisy. The first quality accounts for Mr. Carter's failures during the first two years in the White House: his incapacity to learn anything of the subtleties and nuances of governance. What is there to learn for a man who is in constant touch with God?"¹¹⁹

Whereas the second explanation suggests that Carter's religion underwent a subtle change, a third holds that it was Carter who changed. More specifically, the God-Carter-people relationships changed. During the campaign Carter's religion was used to suggest to the people that Carter's godliness could help him be a good president, that because of the God-Carter relationship the Carter-people relationship would be close. That is, because we are all equal in the sight of God, Carter would not be an imperial president.

But once he became president the equality ceased. Carter became the mediator between the people and God, at best a minister, at worst a pope. The quotation from Micah which Carter utilized in his inaugural, "He hath showed thee, o man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but do do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God," perfectly portrayed the pre-presidential attitude: the leader and the people together should do good, be just, show mercy and display humility.

The scriptural quotation which he wanted to use in that address,¹²⁰ but was talked out of by his advisors, II Chronicles 7:14, suggests a different relationship: "If my people, which are called by my name,

shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land." Here is implied a quite different God-leader-follower relationship; namely, the leader must get the people to turn from their wicked ways. Question: why would a candidate who had argued that we needed a government as good as the people want to open his presidency with a quotation highlighting their "wicked ways?" The answer suggested here is that the people's goodness was not seen as accomplished but as potential. That potentiality required a leader who could mediate between them and God and bring goodness to fruition. The equal who was going to run the office with our help suddenly became the superior who was going to cure us of our evil ways and thus bring God's blessing upon us. That change in Carter's mission, and the people's role, was sensed by the people, leading them to distrust him. His 1979 "Energy Sermon,"¹²¹ then, did not display any new negative attitude about the people . . . it just made explicit the attitude that Carter had been struggling to sublimate since his inauguration.

By 1980 his religiosity could not save the presidency for him. In addition to the problems it had caused with the electorate in general, he even lost ground amongst the evangelicals. In part that was because he had been a disappointment to them, for instance with his refusal to support an anti-abortion constitutional amendment; more importantly, however, his opponent was also a born-again evangelical Christian . . . and one whose conservatism was more appealing to the evangelical movement than was Carter's moderation.

Inflexible and Mean

A second Carter characteristic displayed in his rhetoric was inflexibility and meanness. It may be surprising to some that such attributes coexist with religiosity. It shouldn't be. If religious fanatics are absolutely intolerant of opposing creeds, it stands to reason that non-fanatic but nonetheless deeply religious people might be relatively inflexible.

Whether Carter's unyielding nature came from his religious orientation or some other cause(s), he brought from his Governor's experience "a reputation for being stubborn and inflexible, a moralist with little appreciation for the art of political compromise."¹²² Early in the 1976 campaign he was described as "single-minded,"¹²³ and that perception of him as a driven man, coupled with his born-again religious emphasis, suggested to many that he might be some kind of fanatic.

The first direct evidence of Carter's inflexibility came in his response to criticism of his campaign rhetoric. As Charles Mohr noted at the time, "It is not easy, perhaps not even plausible, for Mr. Carter to admit simple error or a mistake or an ordinary political vice such as telling one audience what it seems to want to hear and trimming those remarks for a different forum."¹²⁴

So how did Carter respond when caught out in an error? "He tend[ed] to explain that his staff did not follow up or that an aide wrote a letter which Carter did not see or that Carter had forgotten an incident from the past or that he was unaware of some tactic in his campaign,"¹²⁵ or, if no answer seemed possible, he flashed his "mules eating briars smile" and pressed on.¹²⁶

Perhaps part of the reason he was seen as inflexible was his seeming lack of humor. Charles Mohr reported that Carter had "about the same attitude toward humor as that of a simple meat-and-potatoes cook towards garlic, hot peppers and herbs. A little, he seems to believe, goes a long way."¹²⁷ He employed only two pieces of humor during the campaign. In the first he would point out that he might not be the most qualified person in the country, or even in the immediate audience, for the presidency, then thank all his audience members for choosing not to run. In the second he talked of his family, saying his third son was 22 years old and that following his birth Carter and his wife had a fourteen year argument which he won, and their youngest, Amy, is now eight.

Others, closer to Carter, claimed that he did have a sense of humor, but that, since it entailed attacking others with a series of zingers, it was inappropriate for the cam-

paign. As one 1976 aide described Carter's humor, "Jimmy's idea of self-deprecating humor is to dump . . . on his staff."¹²⁸ Clearly, such "funny-ness" would be perceived by most as meanness. To avert that perception Carter chose to avoid humor and be perceived as dull instead.

Another Carter rhetorical tactic which might have had some alleviating affect on the charge of inflexibility was his constant attempt to find a way to identify with his audience. However, he was so inflexible in insisting that that component be in every speech that he sometimes seemed to be trying too hard, as when he told voters in Boise, Idaho that "he felt a 'special kinship' for the people of Idaho because 'potatoes and peanuts are the only major crops that grow underground.'"¹²⁹

By the 1980 campaign Carter's many policy vacillations had erased the charge of inflexibility, but he was still occasionally considered mean, especially in terms of his attacks on Reagan. The *New York Post* talked of the attacks on Reagan as "savage tactics,"¹³⁰ "the politics of extremism,"¹³¹ going "for the jugular,"¹³² "fighting dirty,"¹³³ and a "crude attempt to smear"¹³⁴ by a "compulsively nasty little campaigner"¹³⁵ who "has an attraction to opponents' groins and eyeballs."¹³⁶ The *Daily News* somewhat less vitriolic but still upset, said, "The whole tone of the President's campaign . . . has been ugly, mean-spirited and dirty. His tactics are a disgrace to the Presidency and a disservice to the country."¹³⁷ Even the *New York Times*, which supported Carter, said his 1980 campaign was "vacuous,"¹³⁸ "negative"¹³⁹ and "whiny,"¹⁴⁰ and that he had "overstepped the bounds"¹⁴¹ and made "unworthy cracks,"¹⁴² not recognizing that "there is a difference between hard blows and low ones."¹⁴³ Carter probably would have been happy to have returned to the days of being perceived merely as inflexible.

Cautious (The Engineer Mentality)

Despite the fact that he sometimes "went overboard" in his rhetoric, especially during campaigns, Carter generally was a cautious president. Elected as a centrist, he clung tenaciously to centrist positions and moderate language. His watchwords,

hence approach, emphasized stability, predictability, efficiency, caution.

An examination of his 1978 address on inflation at the annual meeting of the American Society of Newspaper Editors¹⁴⁴ will exemplify this approach. He used words denoting "increase" ten times, "holding the present course" twelve times and "decreasing" twenty-one times. That is, at forty-three points he utilized words of caution, but not once in the address did he employ more absolutist words like "solve" or "stop." Three times he emphasized that the programs should be coordinated with others; another three times he demonstrated the gradualism of his approaches by referring to them as "steps toward," and on seven occasions he underlined the fact that his program could not be enforced by referring to the necessity for government to set a good example.

Discussing his goals and programs he said he wanted to keep the inflation rate at a "reasonable and predictable level," develop "very carefully targeted initiatives," adopt "measures that avoid. . . extremes," use "our existing . . . output more efficiently," and make sure that all programs are "economically efficient and consistent with sound budget policy." Even this modest approach might have been perceived as too hopeful so Carter emphasized that there are "no easy answers," and that "it is a myth that government itself can stop inflation."

Throughout, his cautious approach emphasized reasonable and efficient programs put forward by a rational and prudent man. The resultant image was less of a dynamic leader than a competent administrator.

This emphasis on administration may have been one of his great weaknesses as president. As early as April of 1977 Hedrick Smith complained that Carter "has not yet projected a clear vision of the American future," but rather "has seemed more like a problem-solving engineer intent on making both Government and society work better than a social reformer articulating a philosophy of social justice or coming down hard early in his term on a cluster of programs that would give his Administration a clear-cut political definition."¹⁴⁵

By the start of 1978, the President's

press secretary, Jody Powell, was conceding Carter's thematic weakness: "If there is one area that I see the biggest failure, it is exactly in that area. We haven't clearly enough articulated that overarching, unifying theme or presentation of what we're about or the way we're approaching things."¹⁴⁶

Despite Powell's implication that the problem was lack of communication, there are indications that it went deeper than that. James Fallows, one of Carter's speechwriters, said "I came to think that Carter believes fifty things, but no one thing. He holds explicit, thorough positions on every issue under the sun, but he has no large view of the relations between them, no line indicating which goals (reducing unemployment? human rights?) will take precedence over which (inflation control? a SALT treaty?) when the goals conflict. Spelling out these choices makes the difference between a position and a philosophy, but it is an act foreign to Carter's mind."¹⁴⁷

Fallows' position was echoed by another close aide: "I'm not sure there is a generalized political philosophy. If you want to know where Jimmy Carter stands, tell him what the problem is and what needs to be solved."¹⁴⁸

But whether because of lack of communication or Carter's inherent orientation, it is clear that his Administration was themeless and that Carter plunged himself into "a preoccupation with the details of program and policy, for which a more confident President would have been willing to rely on hired thinkers. . ."¹⁴⁹

This concern for detail was one of the primary pieces of evidence that critics pointed to when charging that his orientation was too reliant on his engineering outlook. James David Barber said he was a "technocrat" with "a sort of hydraulic worldview."¹⁵⁰

The values associated with this engineering approach, Jimmy Carter's values, have been labelled "clean" virtues. Sheldon Wolin explains:

Consider what is absent from his list: the basic political virtues of justice and equality. These are 'dirty' virtues, the despair of any society that tries to realize them. At best there are approxi-

mations, always there are anomalies and imperfections. The crucial point about the clean virtues is how profoundly congenial they are to the 'values' and mode of thinking represented by administrative and organizational thinking: rationality, efficiency, straight lines of authority, choosing among priorities which have been rendered homogeneous so that they can be treated as commensurable, and depersonalized job descriptions.

The commandments of managerialism are the analogue to purifying rites: clean it up, get it straight, cost-account, organize, rationalize, one column for costs, another for benefits. Administration is the baptismal rite for a political world that has to be cleaned of disorder and mutiny.¹⁵¹

Thus, there is a link between Carter the engineer and Carter the born-again Christian. But for our purposes there is a more important linkage—between the engineer and the ineffective rhetor: "The engineer believes that political problems must, ultimately, have objective solutions, beyond controversy—solutions with which everyone will agree. Indeed, he is inclined to believe that political argument and controversy represent something discreditable and unreasonable in men, a vulgar inheritance of a pre-scientific age. To indulge them, he thinks, is to show indifference to mankind's higher interests. It is to fail to be truly serious."¹⁵²

So Carter did not really try to persuade the country. Rather, he tended to give dry and boring reviews of the needs, merely listing his solutions. "This habit of listing his proposals rather than arguing for them is one of the reasons which prevented Carter from being an effective rhetor, since one of the basic rules of public speaking is to present one's audience with viable arguments which support one's assertions."¹⁵³ Yet, as Tom Wicker has said, "Presidents are elected fundamentally to carry the country," and Carter's refusal to do so showed him to be "recoiling from the first duty of a political office."¹⁵⁴

Thus, just as his messages and his style undermined his standing as a strong

leader, so too did his basic characteristics. His religiosity, inflexibility and engineer's cautiousness all led to the perception that Carter, while basically a good man, was deficient in leadership capabilities.

Changes in Office

Beyond the relatively unchanging nature of his messages, style and personal characteristics, it remains to be asked if there were any changes in Carter, or his rhetoric, during his term which led to the debilitating shifts in our perceptions of him.

We have already hinted at the changed perceptions which came from changes in our expectations, and have noted several ways in which he seemed to change once in office. But there is one additional alteration in his rhetoric, and perhaps in his outlook, for which he alone must bear the responsibility. That change was from Carter the commoner, the man of the people, who by relying on us would accomplish things with us to Carter the President who was above us, who relied on himself and his Georgia staff and did things for us.

This change first surfaced in his 1978 State of the Union speech. In that speech he addressed the problems of an unfeeling government, too oriented toward lawyers, accountants and lobbyists and too little concerned with the people. "We must have," he asserted, "what Abraham Lincoln sought—a government for the people." In selecting that particular phrase . . . the President effected a distortion in Lincoln's original that was as revealing as it was radical. Lincoln's formulation . . . recognized that a democratic conception required that the first two prepositional phrases had to control the third and that, by itself, government 'for' the people was inconsistent with democracy. Carter, in contrast, omitted the crucial references to government 'by' and 'of' the people. The effect was to set democracy against itself, to use it to legitimate an essentially bureaucratic conception of government and to redefine the president as a manager. . . ."¹⁵⁵

Every president, of course, comes to be seen as an "insider," but that was an espe-

cial problem for Carter because he had run on the rhetoric of an outsider in 1976. To offset the changed circumstances, the 1980 campaign plan was to utilize an "insider-outsider" approach: to run as "the same man, with the same instincts and concern for ordinary citizens as the Jimmy Carter of 1976—but with four years of practical experience, the outsider who now knows how Washington works, but is still prepared to take on the oil companies, the special interest groups."¹⁵⁶

However, Carter was unable to shake off his new orientation and return to his 1976 emphases. For instance, in the three 1976 debates with Ford he had employed the word "people" over seventy times;¹⁵⁷ but in the 1980 debate with Reagan he "referred to 'the people' only nine times . . . while invoking references to the presidency twenty-seven times."¹⁵⁸ Furthermore, when he did mention the "people" in 1978, it was clear that his perception of their role had changed. "Rather than providing the source of wisdom and knowledge for his presidency, the people are subjects, to be commanded by the president. For example, in discussing energy, Carter said, 'We have demanded that the American people sacrifice and they've done very well.'"¹⁵⁹

Not only did the change in his rhetoric undermine his attempts to depict himself as a man of the people, but the paternalism of his new stance fed into Reagan's theme of getting the government off our backs. Faced with a choice between a father and a champion the people opted for the champion. Carter's changed orientation undermined his reelection bid as well as his presidency.

Conclusion

When I began this study I expected to find an occasional place where President Carter's rhetoric contributed to his political demise. But I was surprised by the extent to which that turns out to have been the case. In every component I examined, message, style, personal characteristics, changes in office, I found that his rhetoric undercut his position, either inherently or because citizen expectations had changed. The conclusion, then, seems unavoidable:

just as he talked his way into the White House from 1972–1976, once there he talked himself out of it.

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