

REFLECTIONS ON JIMMY CARTER

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Under President Carter

Shortly after noon on January 20, 1981, I left the West Wing of the White House for the last time. I had not attended the inauguration because the President had asked me to take care of some last minute details. Just before leaving, I walked from my office in the southwest corner of the West Wing down the corridor to the Oval Office. As I stood there quietly in front of the President's desk, I realized I was about to experience in a very personal way one of the fundamental elements of the American political system--the passing of political power from one president to another. In a few minutes, I was going to walk through the southwest gate of the White House compound, through which I had freely passed almost daily for four years, and, once out, would not be able to come back in. In literally a moment--a footstep--I would pass from White House Chief of Staff back to private citizen.

What was it like to be Chief of Staff to the President of the United States? I was asked that question in a symposium at the University of California in San Diego about two years ago. The questioner asked: "Is it like being a quarterback?" "No," I said, "White House Chiefs of Staff are not like quarterbacks; the President is the quarterback." The questioner persisted, "Is it like being a goalie, constantly protecting against political onslaughts, or like a play making point guard on a basketball team, or a blocking back running interference?" "Those are all interesting sports analogies," I said, "but the best sports analogy that comes to mind is a javelin catcher."

And what is it like to be a *former* White House Chief of Staff? Well, it did not take me long to find out. I had been out of the White House and away from Washington for about a month when I dropped by a 7-Eleven store in Sandy Springs to get some milk. I noticed when I entered the store that there was a woman looking at me rather quizzically. As I was leaving, she put her hand gently on my arm and said with perfect sincerity, "Excuse me, but didn't you use to be Jack Watson?"

What I want to discuss briefly with you tonight is Jimmy Carter and his presidency. It is interesting to compare Jimmy Carter to the four men, two Democrats and two Republicans, who immediately preceded him to the presidency.

John Kennedy, of course, had been a Congressman, a United States Senator, and, in 1956, a strong candidate for the Democratic vice presidential nomination. He was a "Washington man," through

and through, who, with the exception of his military service in World War II, had spent his entire adult life in Washington as an elected official.

Lyndon Johnson, like Kennedy, also spent virtually his entire adult life in Washington. Before being elected to Congress as a very young man, Johnson had served as a Congressional Aide. He, too, served first in the House and then in the United States Senate where, as all of you know, he rose to the powerful position of Majority Leader. He ran unsuccessfully for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1960 and then, of course, was elected Vice President on the Kennedy ticket.

Richard Nixon was also a creature of Washington who served as a Congressman, Senator, and then Vice President for eight years under Eisenhower. He was the Republican nominee for president in 1960 and remained a prominent national figure in Republican politics until winning the presidency in 1968.

Gerald Ford, House Minority Leader for many years, likewise spent virtually his entire adult life in the Congress of the United States before becoming Vice President and then President.

Then along came Jimmy Carter, a former Sumter County School Board member, State Senator, and one-term governor of Georgia. Carter had never served in the Congress, never been in the Cabinet or part of the Washington political establishment, and never run for national office or been a prominent national figure. In fact, his only previous association with the federal government was his service in the United States Navy. Carter obviously achieved the Presidency by a remarkably different route, not only from that of his *immediate* predecessors, but from virtually *all* of his predecessors.

By contrast, President Reagan's route to the presidency was much closer to the historical norm. He had been a two-term Governor of the most populous state in the Union, California. He had either run for president or been mentioned as a potential presidential candidate ever since 1968. He had been a major national figure and leader of the conservative Wing of the Republican Party for years and had, in fact, almost wrested the 1976 Republican Presidential Nomination from the incumbent Republican President, Gerald Ford.

How then did a man like Carter, with his drastically different background, get elected President in the first place? Ironically, one of the reasons was that he *was* such an outsider. The nation was still reacting to the aftershocks of Watergate and was eager to turn to someone with no connections whatsoever to the "Washington Establishment." Carter had great appeal as a small town man with his

roots deep in rural America, a peanut farmer and former naval officer with a southern accent and a big smile. After a slow start, his popularity began to grow day after day during his presidential campaign as he got off the plane carrying his own suit bag on his way to spend the night in somebody's house. A lot of people thought that staying in people's homes was a campaign gimmick, but I can flat tell you that it was no gimmick. In those early days, we could not afford the hotels. Carter was about as long a shot for the Democratic nomination as anybody ever was. Do you remember everybody asking, "Jimmy who?" and the story about when he told his mother, Miss Lillian, that he was going to run for president, she laughingly replied, "President of *what?*"

Carter was also widely and correctly perceived in 1976 as a profoundly decent, moral man. He was seen not merely as a religious man, but as someone who had been active in his church his whole life. Time and time again, his positions on the issues and his public speeches reflected his religious character and his moral view of the world. Although the American people really did not know Carter very well when they elected him president, most of them liked what they saw.

Why then was Carter so soundly defeated in 1980? James David Barber, the distinguished presidential historian from Duke, once said that Carter's "failings as president were failings of technique, and that his triumphs as president were triumphs of character." I think that is true. Carter's failings as president, I believe, were primarily failures of *style*, and his accomplishments as president were tributes to his willingness constantly to take on difficult problems, whether they were politically popular or not. The Panama Canal Treaties are a good example. Every president since Dwight Eisenhower had urged that something be done about the U.S. relationship with the country of Panama regarding the Panama Canal. None of the preceding presidents had done anything about it because the issue was so unpopular. When Carter decided to confront the Panama Canal situation head-on in August 1977, he did so in the face of public opinion polls that showed an overwhelming majority of the American people opposed to any such action. Carter's reasoning was simple and straightforward--something needed to be done, so do it. Seven months later, the treaties were ratified.

I do not know that there was a more pyrrhic victory during the entire course of the Carter Administration than Carter's triumph in getting the Panama Canal Treaties ratified. Ironically, that triumph helped engender and expand a feeling that was growing in the country, especially among the more conservative elements, that Carter

was a weak president, that he was not "standing up" for the country, and that he was not strong on defense. It was an unfair and unfounded view, but, unfortunately, one that stuck.

Jimmy Carter is a complicated man. I met him in 1956, the year I graduated from law school. He embodies a lot of confusing contradictions. On the one hand, Carter is not merely a smart man, he is an intellectual who thrives on the spark and challenge of ideas. He is also a Southern Baptist and born-again Christian.

He served as a naval officer for about eight years, part of that time in the nuclear submarine service, and planned to spend his life as a naval officer living all over the world. Nevertheless, when his father died, he returned to the place where he was born, settled down in a town of less than 400 people, and became a peanut farmer.

Carter is a Southern Democrat and a politically conservative man, especially in fiscal matters. But because of his position on the race issue (which he had taken ever since he was a young man), he was regarded by many conservatives as a liberal. For those of you who may not know it, the word "liberal" is an epithet in the South. No Southern politician *ever* calls himself a liberal--a *moderate* or a *progressive* perhaps, or maybe even a *populist*, but *never* a liberal. As president, Carter was, unfortunately, caught in a sometimes savage cross-fire, regarded by the conservatives as a liberal and by the liberals as a conservative. Indeed, he was such anathema to the liberal wing of his own party, that despite the fact that an incumbent president is almost never challenged by someone in his own party for renomination, in 1980 Carter was challenged by Ted Kennedy.

Jimmy Carter is a literate, frequently eloquent man. He is not an orator, or a charismatic, mesmerizing speaker like John Kennedy or Jesse Jackson, but as someone who has heard and watched him give more speeches than I can remember, beginning with his race for the Georgia Governorship in 1970 and going right on through the last year of his presidency, I can tell you that he has formidable skills as an extemporaneous speaker. I have seen him captivate audiences on countless occasions, in town hall meetings for example, with the power and range of his mind, the strength of his convictions, the scope and depth of his knowledge, and his sincerity. Yet, on many other occasions, especially on television, or when he is speaking from a prepared text, he can be wooden, preachy and uninspiring.

Another interesting thing about Carter is that, although he is a genuinely humble man, he is also the most self-confident, self-disciplined man I have ever known. Behind that soft voice, big smile and gentle manner is a shrewd, tough, stubborn, relentless and demanding man.

Well, you might ask, if Carter is the man you say he is, why did he not do better as president? For one thing, people held Carter *personally* responsible for the actions of his administration and their consequences in a way that they never held Reagan responsible for his. For example, can you imagine what the public, press and congressional response would have been if Carter had run up \$200 billion a year budget deficits? I think he would have been darn near impeached. Yet, that is exactly what Reagan did, with almost complete impunity. Think for a moment what the national press corps would have done to President Carter if our trade deficit had broken records every month. Incidentally, the trade deficit last month was \$13.8 billion. Under President Carter, we were concerned if they reached \$2 billion a month. Carter inherited a budget deficit from President Ford in the range of \$65 billion. By 1979, he had cut the deficit to less than \$28 billion. It is ironic that one of the big Reagan themes in the 1980 campaign against President Carter was the "big spending" of the Democrats and Carter himself. Reagan has already accumulated a greater aggregate budget deficit than *all* of his predecessors combined, and he has two more years to go.

Remember the aborted rescue mission in Iran in 1980. Do you recall how Carter was treated in the press? As a result of that mission, I think we lost three lives--three too many. Under President Reagan, some 240 Marines were killed in Lebanon, and no one held President Reagan responsible. Please do not misunderstand what I am saying. I do not hold President Reagan personally responsible for the death of those Marines either. But, during the Carter Presidency, partly because of the President's own "hands on" management style, the country seemed to hold him responsible for everything that went wrong. Perhaps people do not hold President Reagan responsible for the actions of his administration and the consequences of his policies because they understand that Reagan does not run the government or manage his administration the way President Carter did. Carter knew what was going on in his administration and why, and President Reagan largely does not--and the people know it.

Reagan also, however, enjoys a relationship with the American people that Carter did not have. There is a reservoir of affection for Reagan that Carter never really had. That reservoir is an enormous asset for a president, and Reagan has it in great abundance. Nothing seems to destroy or diminish it for Reagan--not staggering budget and trade deficits, not criminal indictments of top administration officials, not evidence of wide-spread self-dealing and corruption, not trading arms for hostages and then secretly transferring the proceeds illicitly to the Contras in Nicaragua, not

ignoring education or abusing the environment. Whatever else can be said about Reagan, his capacity for engendering and sustaining the support and affection of the American people--no matter what--was his greatest attribute.

Another one of President Carter's problems was that he tried to do too many hard things at once. In 1977, for example, he was dealing with the Panama Canal issue, proposing a comprehensive national energy policy, working on a national urban policy, fighting pork-barrel water projects in the West, decontrolling natural gas, reorganizing the government (leading to the creation of the Departments of Energy and Education), and fighting constantly to restrain the growth of federal spending and reduce the budget deficit. What political capital he had, he used up fast. Carter had an almost uncontrollable urge take on the most difficult political problems and tasks, regardless of the political risks, and he literally paid for it with his presidency.

No reflections on the Carter presidency should conclude without a brief reference to his experience at Camp David. No problem loomed larger on the international front than the dangerous and highly unstable situation in the Middle East between Israel and the Arab World. Carter invited Menachem Begin and Anwar Sedat whose nations, Israel and Egypt, were historically two of the most implacable enemies on earth, to join him at Camp David. For thirteen days and nights, Carter patiently and persistently probed, trying to find common ground between those two extremely different men. He isolated himself and the two of them from the press and the public until the three of them emerged on the night of the thirteenth day with an historic accord. In my opinion, no other political figure of our time could have done what Carter did at Camp David. His unique personal qualities and characteristics were what made the achievement possible--extraordinary intelligence, single-minded attention to detail, patience, quiet but firm persistence, and his remarkable grasp of all the relevant historical, emotional, cultural, military and sociological elements that separated Israel from Egypt and the Jews from the Arab World. I have always regretted, though I have never heard him say on word about it, that the President did not receive the Nobel Peace Prize for that unprecedented achievement. But for him, I am absolutely sure, the accord would never have been reached, and the treaties would never have been signed.

Many people have said, and I emphatically agree, that the verdict of history on Jimmy Carter and his presidency will be far more favorable than the people's verdict in the election of 1980. He

accomplished so many things, against such great odds, and got so little credit for it. He opened the federal government and the federal judiciary to women and minorities to an unprecedented degree. He was trying to lead the Democratic Party back to the political center, where the majority of the American people are, and where he himself is. He promoted civil rights at home and human rights abroad as much as any president in history. He awakened the country to the energy crisis and enacted a comprehensive national energy policy which began to decrease significantly our nation's dependence on foreign oil. He restrained federal spending without doing it at the expense of the poor, the elderly and our children's education and welfare. He kept our nation at peace honorably, and he conducted an administration that was absolutely free of corruption.

Carter wanted very much as President to stir our country's best instincts and to reconnect our nation's actions and policies, at home and abroad, to its highest principles and noblest traditions. He himself expressed these ideals when he said extemporaneously at a town hall meeting one evening:

I think we have a special responsibility here to affirm civil rights and human rights. For if we are meek, or quiescent, or silent on the subject of civil rights at home and human rights abroad, there is no other voice on earth that can replace the lost voice, the absent voice, of the United States. That is exactly what the persecutors want and is exactly what the persecuted fear.

I shall always be glad to have known him and proud to have been a small part of his presidency.