

PUBLIC RELATIONS, POLLS, AND PUNDITS: THE FAILURE OF IMAGE MANAGEMENT IN THE CARTER WHITE HOUSE

Mary Wesley Head
Georgia State University

According to a Gallup Poll summary of the Carter presidency, Jimmy Carter's job approval rating upon taking office in January of 1977 stood at sixty-six percent approval. During his first two months, it climbed to a high of seventy-five percent, reached just after his human rights speech before members of the United Nations. In the following weeks, however, Carter's approval rating began a downward spiral that was to continue for the rest of his presidency, dipping below the fifty percent mark as early as the end of his first year in office. With only two exceptions, one following the Camp David Peace Agreements when Carter's approval rating rose to fifty-one percent, and the other after American hostages were taken in Iran when he scored a high of sixty-one percent, Carter never again had majority approval of the way he handled his job as president.¹

The Carter Administration placed great stock in opinion polls and other measures of the public mood. Some of those in the Carter camp believed his low ratings resulted from an image problem. Gerald Rafshoon, the President's media adviser since 1966 and a close personal friend, told him in mid-June of 1977: "Although you are still personally popular, your performance is perceived as inconsistent. The media talks about your flip-flops They add up and can affect you politically."² Jody Powell, Carter's Press Secretary and a trusted member of the "inner circle" of presidential advisers, told Carter that his "take-charge, decisive executive manner has not come through to the public or to opinion molders here in Washington."³

Even people outside the administration picked up on this theme. In a candid and lengthy April, 1978, memo to Robert Strauss, Carter's inflation adviser, Jack Valenti, president of the Motion Picture Association and onetime adviser to Lyndon Johnson, reported that: "The President is perceived today as a man notably decent and honest who has not gained hold of his job. There is a growing (and menacing) notion among those with whom I discuss politics that the President's resolve is slack, his grasp of the issues loose, and his ability to summon the nation to his cause slight."⁴

Bombarded by assessments of his image problem, and confronted with the March issue of *The Gallup Opinion Index* which devoted its entire thirty-two pages to the public's perception of the new chief executive's first year in office (grim reading, that), Carter convened a meeting of his top advisers at Camp David. Dubbed the

Image Summit by the media, the discussions, held on April 16 and 17, 1978, resulted in the formulation of an "image repair team" headed by Gerald Rafshoon. This marked the beginning of a concerted effort within the White House to promote a better image of Jimmy Carter.

Rafshoon, a 44 year old advertising man and Northern transplant to Georgia, first met Carter in 1966 when the latter was running for Governor of Georgia. Rafshoon worked on that campaign and subsequent campaigns, and was responsible for the highly successful television commercials that helped put Carter in the White House. Following Carter's election, Rafshoon moved his agency to Washington where he and Patrick Caddell, Carter's pollster, opened joint offices. Rafshoon joined the Administration in an official capacity on July 1, 1978.

The media had a field day with Rafshoon, christening him the "darkly handsome media wizard," the "Secretary of Symbolism," the "President's personal huckster, his minister of cosmetology--a glib, brash, bright, highly energized but almost totally apolitical entrepreneur of images whose sole function in the White House is to make Jimmy Carter look good, whether he is or not . . ."⁵ Rafshoon's own assessment of his role in the Carter Administration was a bit more conservative. He insisted that he was not an image maker. As he told one reporter: "I consider myself a communicator, trying to help articulate the President's goals and themes."⁶

From his abode in the Executive Office Building, an office that was once Richard Nixon's hideout, Rafshoon set about shoring up the sagging Carter image. According to a job description prepared by his assistant, Greg Schneiders, Rafshoon's assignment was to "retail" the President by "direct approaches to the unorganized populace" and to help him "communicate his message well thereby, making him popular and, hopefully, effective." His concerns were mostly with "Presidential tone, themes and priorities and then with his personal appearance, travel, speeches and media."⁷

The media, however, attributed to Rafshoon the role of White House "enforcer." Part of his program organizing communications included determining who gave interviews, what issues were topics for discussion, and what the official White House stance was on each subject. Should some errant staff member grant interviews without first obtaining the Rafshoon stamp of approval, or, in an approved activity, utter views which strayed from the "party line," he or she might suddenly be "canceled" like Midge Costanza. While some observers credited Rafshoon's efforts in this area with bringing discipline and order into a previously anarchic administration, others saw in him the specter of a latter-day Haldeman or Ehrlichman.⁸

At the time, the popular impression viewed Rafshoon as one of the most important men in the President's inner circle. One example of this saw Carter's veto of a \$37 billion defense bill widely called the "Rafshoon veto" because many believed Rafshoon influenced the President to veto the bill as a show of strength. As one reporter observed, "Congressmen who lose battles with the White House often claim they have been 'Rafshooned.'" ⁹ 'Rafshooned' means being victimized by a media blitz, like being portrayed as a big spender because of having voted to override the President's veto . . . ¹⁰

Rafshoon consistently maintained that his objective was not to remake Jimmy Carter, but to rehabilitate him. For the record, he thought that Carter had not "followed his own political instincts. As a result," he asserted, "too many people still feel that they do not know him. He has not made enough of an impression of who and what he really is." The idea, he maintained, was that the public was not getting a "new Carter," but the "real Carter." ¹¹

During his first few months with the Administration, Rafshoon prepared "Public Activity Plans" which set forth the "tone, themes, and priorities" he thought should be communicated by the President. He planned a "series of informal dinners . . . for national media figures . . ." to be hosted by the President and Mrs. Carter for the purpose of "develop[ing] somewhat of a personal relationship with these people." ¹² Finally, he recommended that Carter's advisers help him develop a "punchier" style of oratory, asserting that when listening to Carter's speeches, "most people focus only on the first couple of sentences . . . and that these sentences are too often technical and boring." ¹³

With salvage operations concerning the President's deteriorating image underway, public perception of Carter during the summer of 1978 continued in a downhill slide. A *New York Times*/CBS Poll conducted between June 19 and 23, 1978, placed Carter's job approval rating at thirty-eight percent approval, 8 points lower than an April reading, and 13 points down from the fifty-one percent level recorded in January of that year. ¹⁴ Results of a Harris Poll conducted during approximately the same period were even more grim. It revealed:

A substantial 64-to-23 percent majority feels that although he is well-intentioned, 'at times you begin to wonder if he has the basic competence to do the job

By 67-to-17 percent, a majority thinks he comes up with too many new programs, 'but doesn't seem to

with too many new programs, 'but doesn't seem to know how to follow through effectively'

By 51-to-35 percent, a majority feels 'he does not inspire confidence as a President should.'¹⁵

The most optimistic reading from the same period came from a Gallup Poll showing that forty-two percent approved of the way Carter was handling his job, while an equal number disapproved. By late July, however, Gallup recorded that Carter's approval rating had dropped to thirty-nine percent.¹⁶

During the month of July, 1978, political commentaries and editorial cartoons showed an increasing awareness of Carter's image troubles relating in part to Rafshoon's appointment. In fact, recognition of the image difficulty itself became apart of the image problem. Of course, by this time, Carter's defenders were blaming his image on "bad press" and a post-Watergate mood of general distrust and close scrutiny of those in power.

One of Carter's most aggressive defenders was his wife, Rosalyn, who said in an interview with the *New York Times* that she did not think "the public's perception of him is accurate."¹⁷ In a *Chicago Tribune* article, however, Aldo Beckman charged that "presidential images are pretty accurate, because they are created by the man himself." Citing the cases of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, he said that although they had their problems with Congress and with the press, 'weak' was never a description they were forced to handle."¹⁸

Carter's approval rating did rebound a few points in the polls, rising from thirty-nine percent in early August to forty-five percent in mid-September. In the months following the Camp David Peace Agreements, Carter's approval rating continued to rise, reaching a high of fifty-one percent in mid-December. One should note, however, that this was exactly where he stood in the polls at the end of 1977. After an entire year of effort, a year in which Congress ratified the second Panama Canal Treaty, the Camp David Peace Agreements were concluded, and Mainland China recognized, Carter had made no gain in public approval.¹⁹

Ignoring the darker side of the victory, some observers proclaimed Carter's rise in the polls as vindication for his trying year. Hedrick Smith, in an uncharacteristically optimistic commentary, appeared so moved by the President's change in fortune that he wrote that "this fall, marked by the breakthrough at Camp David and the effort to rescue the dollar, will probably become known as the period when Jimmy Carter strengthened his Presidency by exercising power

with more robust self-confidence."²⁰ Unfortunately, Smith was premature in his judgment. Carter's gain in the polls was short lived. By mid-January, the Gallup Poll showed the President's approval rating down to forty-three percent.²¹

During the winter of 1979, events exacerbated an already bad situation. The fall of the Shah of Iran and subsequent end of oil shipments from that country, the incident involving Mexican President Lopez Portillo's unanswered insults to the United States, the so-called "Billygate" affair, and the worsening economic climate shredded what little respect remained for President Carter in many quarters. Commentaries and cartoons turned savage. Now, for the first time, there emerged a blatant and hostile image of Carter as the failed leader. From this point on, Carter's image problem became a crisis.

Carter advisers reacted to the dramatic slide in the polls and avalanche of "bad press" by sending each other, and ultimately Carter, memorandums assessing the situation. Gerald Rafshoon's contribution to the furor was a memo entitled simply "Leadership." It was a long and, at times, brutally candid assessment of Carter's failure to lead the country. Rafshoon's files indicated that he labored over this communication rejecting five different drafts because of language that was "too rough" and thoughts he could not bring himself to present to the President.²²

Rafshoon believed that there were "three primary elements of leadership . . . : a clear, unifying vision or sense of purpose; the ability to develop public support for national goals; [and] bold decisive action." He told Carter: "We are perceived as having failed on each of these scores." The reasons, he asserted, were several--"the times," Carter's "type of leadership," "events," the "structure and process" of the administration, and Carter's personal "style."

Carter's personal style helped get him elected in 1976. Why was it partly to blame for his image crisis now? On this point, Rafshoon told the President:

One of your greatest strengths is your thoroughgoing methodical approach to problems. This quality, unfortunately, does not project to the public as strong leadership.

You have always eschewed bombast and demagoguery. Instead, you are soft-spoken, thoughtful, cautious. Again, it is very difficult for the public to perceive the leadership value in this approach.

Most importantly, you have never been willing to take

the steps necessary to become a first-rate, effective public speaker . . . I have found a speech teacher in New York who, on a confidential basis, will give you some practical coaching immediately and then will be available to give you some professional help before each major speech.

Rafshoon concluded his "Leadership" memo with a plea that went far beyond the political ramifications in the immediate future of perceived failure. While emphasizing that Carter's image problems could be overcome with "bold and decisive action," he added that

the consequences of failing to overcome [them] must not be understated. The people of this country want their President to be a strong leader. If they think that you have failed in that regard, they will vote you out of office.

But there is a more serious consequence of failure in this area. Your Presidency is a national experiment with quiet, secure, non-macho leadership. If that experiment is considered a failure no successor will lightly take it up again. A Ronald Reagan or John Connally elected on a campaign of "tough leadership for a change" would have a mandate for disaster. While pursuing policies of responsibility, restraint, and quiet strength we must (to quote David Broder quoting Machiavelli) "so contrive that your actions show grandeur, spirit, gravity and fortitude." It is not enough, in other words, to be a strong leader. You must look like a strong leader. If you don't, the consequences will not be limited to your fortunes or your term(s) of office. The most serious consequences will come in reaction to your failure after you are gone.²³

Perhaps as important as what Rafshoon included in this and subsequent memos is what he deleted. In a draft of the "Leadership" memo, for example, he wrote that the perception of Carter as a failed leader was "made worse (unfortunately and, probably, unfairly) because it seems that you not only cannot control members of your own family but you don't even have any influence with them." In the margin beside this statement he scrawled "too rough." It did not

appear in subsequent drafts.²⁴ In drafts of a later memo entitled "Campaign Themes," Rafshoon told Carter: "You are seen to be weak, providing no sense of direction, unsure of yourself about where you want to lead the country and unable to lead if you do discover where you want to go." Significantly, and once again, this statement did not appear in the final draft of the memo.²⁵

Clearly, Rafshoon chose his words carefully in preparing the final copies of these memos. The drafts, however, are revealing in that they hint at a growing sense of frustration with Jimmy Carter and his image problem. This may have resulted from Carter's refusal to take Rafshoon's advice on some important matters--namely, his speaking style. As Rafshoon told Carter in the "Campaign Themes" memo:

Your speaking style is a serious problem. I know you don't want to talk to a speech coach about it (although I really wish you'd reconsider). You should, however, practice more. On certain speeches--like the energy T.V. address and the W.H. Correspondent's Dinner--you did extremely well. On others--particularly prepared texts--when you haven't practiced you've not done well.²⁶

Carter's approval rating in the public opinion polls continued a downhill slide throughout the spring and early summer of 1979, undeterred by the signing of the MidEast Peace Treaty (March) and the SALT II Treaty (June). Additionally, a *New York Times*/CBS Poll showed that for the first time respondents preferred both Edward M. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan to Carter.²⁷ These circumstances, combined with growing national irritation and frustration with the energy crisis and the realization that such a foul national mood made a second term increasingly unlikely, led to the well known Camp David Domestic Summit and the "crisis of confidence" speech of July 15, 1979.

Originally, Carter planned to give an energy speech on July 5th., after his return from a summit meeting in Tokyo. With gas lines getting longer, the summer heat beating down on already boiling tempers, and Carter's popularity lower than Richard Nixon's when he so ignominiously left office, the President abruptly canceled the speech on July 4th. This action nearly caused an international crisis, sending the value of the dollar plummeting. Speculation about Carter's mental and physical health ran rife.

Members of the "inner circle" were divided over what

approach Carter should take in his speech. Even lower level advisers expressed concern that the text would carry the wrong message to the American people. Greg Schneiders, in a memo to Jerry Rafshoon at Camp David, charged:

People don't want to hear Jimmy Carter talk about our problems and they certainly don't want to hear him whine about them. They don't want to hear him talk about hope and confidence. They don't want to hear him talk about leadership. They want to perceive him beginning to solve the problems, inspire confidence by his action, and lead. You inspire confidence by being confident. Leadership begins with a sense of knowing where you're going. The Caddell speech sends all the opposite signals.

No one will even be listening after the first five minutes. But they'll still be receiving signals: uncertainty, petulance, softness. It's an interesting academic treatise. But people want Jimmy Carter to do something, to be a President, to be a leader--not philosophize about it.²⁸

Schneiders urged Rafshoon to be careful, worrying that "everyone (on the staff) up at Camp David might get into reinforcing one another's ideas." He was afraid that they would lose sight of political reality, and cautioned that if Carter made negative comments about America, they would "hear them thrown back ad nauseam during a campaign." He continued:

People are not turning to Kennedy or Connally because they seem attuned to the crisis of confidence in the country--they're turning to them because they look like the solution to the crisis. Jimmy Carter has to start acting like and looking like the solution. He's been describing--and bemoaning--the problem for three years now. It's time for action and the action better be big and bold.²⁹

Gerald Rafshoon's main concern at this point was Carter's style. In a memo to the President shortly before the "crisis of confidence" speech, Rafshoon told him that he had come to "one overriding and not very startling conclusion: In politics--or at least 1980 presidential politics--style is everything." Rafshoon added:

[W]hether or not you are President for another four years does not depend so much on what you do between now and the election as how you do it.

Consider the major challengers: Kennedy, Brown, Reagan, Connally They look like leaders. They speak well, They're forceful. Their presence suggests that they just might be able to lead the country out of the dreary morass of problems we're presently caught in It is consistently argued (and believed by the public) that you have failed to provide leadership. . . This is not so because you have failed to provide leadership. You haven't. It's because you don't look like you're providing leadership.

Your natural style--low-key, softspoken, gentleness--was perfect for 1976. People were looking for the antithesis of Richard Nixon--a non-politician. In 1980 they're looking for a leader. . . . You're going to have to start looking, talking and acting more like a leader if you're to be successful--even if it's artificial. Look at it this way: changing your position on issues to get votes is wrong; changing your style (like the part in your hair) in order to be effective is just smart and, in the long run, morally good. I know you think it's phony and that you're fine the way you are but that pride is, by far, your greatest political danger

You've got to improve your speaking style. It should be more forceful, less gentle, harder and more interesting. Your ability (or lack of it) to move an audience and a nation by your words is no longer a minor matter of personal concern to you. It is the single greatest reason (under our control) why your Presidency has not been more successful than it has.³⁰

During this time, while Carter kept the nation waiting, a sense of excitement, of hopeful expectation, emerged. As one writer put it, "the longer the silence from the summit, the greater the suspense."³¹

Public response to Carter's "crisis of confidence" or "malaise" speech was mixed. Although he scored a sharp increase in public approval immediately after the speech (an eleven percent increase in a *New York Times*/CBS Poll),³² the mass cabinet resignations which

followed negated the success. Political commentaries and editorial cartoons, for the most part, remained savage. Some accused him of equating his "political ill health with the country's moral sickness."³³ Others believed him to be engaged in political posturing.³⁴ Many expressed open hostility. Not only did this indicate a loss of respect for Carter's leadership, it revealed a loss of respect and growing dislike of Carter, the man.

Gerald Rafshoon, Carter's "Secretary of Symbolism" and "Minister of Cosmetology," left the administration in mid-August, 1979, less than a month after Carter's controversial speech. His stated purpose was to begin work on the 1980 reelection campaign. His actions, however, resembled those of a man abandoning a sinking ship.

REFLECTIONS

Why did Carter, the consummate image candidate in 1976, fail to project an image that would help him become a successful president? Who's fault was it--Carter's? Rafshoon's? The media's? Was this horrid obsession with image, this compulsive "opinion poll-itis" merely a circumstance of the age of mass communications? Do we now live in an era where charisma and stage credits are prerequisites for a political career?

While it is certainly true that the media played a large part in creating an image problem for Carter at the very beginning of his term in office, the media cannot be blamed for the deterioration of that problem into a crisis. There seems to be no reason why the early views of Carter, the technocratic and lackluster leader, had to dissolve into a general picture of weakness and failure--unless, that is, one subscribes to the view that Carter was an unfortunate victim of circumstance, a prisoner of stagflation, oil-crises, and the Ayatollah Khomeini. While Carter had his share of extenuating circumstances to deal with, such a view does not seem valid. The deterioration of his image problem into an image crisis--a situation which was both a product of and fuel for the self-consciousness within the Carter Administration--could have been avoided. It was Carter's fault that it was not.

From the very beginning, Carter refused to learn from his mistakes. When criticized, he became defensive, digging in his heels to protect himself and those around him. While there seems to be no question that Carter was good, honest, and sincere--the very qualities for which he was elected--there is also little question that he was self-righteous and obstinate. When criticized, he played the role of

martyr. So convinced was he of his character, that he refused to believe that such things mattered little if he was not also effective.

To be effective, Carter needed to listen to those who told him that his management style was a problem. Furthermore, he should have established a hierarchy and a method for the planning and implementation of what he liked to call "bold and decisive actions." It was not enough to merely define problems and describe ways in which they might be solved like Rafshoon's "Leadership" memo, "Campaign Themes" memo, and a host of others did. Muttering that "bold and decisive action" was necessary did not produce "bold decisive action." Follow-through was needed. But because Carter kept around him a true bureaucracy, a staffing network in which there were no rewards for achievement and no punishments for failure, there were no incentives to follow-through on any of the plans devised. Hence, the public heard myriad plans and programs for solving the country's problems, but seldom if ever saw recognizable results.

Finally, to be effective, Carter needed to swallow his pride and take speech lessons--perhaps even acting lessons as well. After all, in this age of "live by satellite" and "up to the minute reports," who can deny that there is a connection between presidential image, political power, and the national interest?

NOTES

¹"Carter Popularity," *The Gallup Opinion Index*, Report No. 182, October-November, 1980, pp. 13-14.

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³Memo, Jody Powell to President Carter, 12 December 1977, "Memoranda: President Carter, 9/6/77-12/27/77 [CF, O/A 55,]" Box 39, Jody Powell's Files, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁴Memo, Jack Valenti to Robert Strauss, 10 April 1978, "Memoranda: Jody Powell 4/1/78-5/30/78 [CF, O/A 160]" Box 36, Jody Powell's Files, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁵William Safire, "Memo to Rafshoon," *New York Times*, 3 July 1978, 19:1; "Packaging a New Carter," *Time*, 21 August 1978, p. 16; James Wooten, "Can Rafshooning Save Jimmy Carter?" *Esquire* *Fortnightly*, 13 March 1979, p. 26.

⁶"Packaging a New Carter," *Time*, 21 August 1978, p. 16.

- ⁷Memo, Greg Schneiders to Jerry Rafshoon, 10 July 1978, "Wexler's Group," Box 7, Gerald Rafshoon Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ⁸"Packaging a New Carter," *Time*, 21 August 1978, p. 16.
- ⁹Terence Smith, "Rafshoon Resists the Label of Image Maker," *New York Times*, 27 November 1978.
- ¹⁰Martin Tolchin, "New Pro in the White House," *New York Times Magazine*, 17 December 1978, p. 30.
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- ¹⁵Louis Harris, "Confidence is Carter's Problem" *Chicago Tribune*, 6 July 1978, sec. 3, p. 4.
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- ¹⁷Steven V. Roberts, "Mrs. Carter Defends President, Calling Poor Image Undeserved," *New York Times*, 25 July 1978, 13:1.
- ¹⁸Aldo Beckman, "President Must Fight His Image," *Chicago Tribune*, 16 July 1978, sec. 2 p. 6.
- ¹⁹"Presidential Popularity--Jimmy Carter," *The Gallup Opinion Index*, Report No. 182, October-November, 1980, p. 14. A December *New York Times*/CBS Poll showed Carter's approval rating declining after the Camp David Summit; Robert D. McFadden, "American Unmoved by New Peking Ties," *New York Times*, 19 December 1978.
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- ²¹"Presidential Popularity--Jimmy Carter," *The Gallup Opinion Index*, Report No. 182, October-November 1980, p. 13.
- ²²Memo, Jerry Rafshoon to President Carter, "Leadership Memorandum 2/79," Box 29, Greg Schneiders' Files, Gerald Rafshoon Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ²³Memo, Jerry Rafshoon to President Carter, "Leadership Memorandum 2/79," Box 29, Greg Schneiders' Files, Gerald Rafshoon Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

²⁴Draft of memo, Jerry Rafshoon to President Carter, February 1979, "Leadership Memorandum, 2/79," Box 27, Greg Schneiders' Files, Gerald Rafshoon Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

²⁵Memo, Jerry Rafshoon to President Carter, No Date, "Campaign Themes Memorandum 1979," Box 24, Greg Schneiders' Files, Gerald Rafshoon Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Adam Clymer, "Carter's Standing Drops to New Low in Times-CBS Poll," *New York Times*, 10 June 1979.

²⁸Memo, Greg Schneiders to Jerry Rafshoon, 10 July 1979, "Memoranda from Jerry Rafshoon, June, July, and August 1979," Box 28, Greg Schneiders' Files, Gerald Rafshoon Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Memo, Jerry Rafshoon to President Carter, No Date, "Memoranda from Jerry Rafshoon, June, July, and August 1979," Box 28, Greg Schneiders' Files, Gerald Rafshoon Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

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