

COMMENT ON "MAKING JIMMY LOOK GOOD: IMAGE MANAGEMENT IN THE CARTER WHITE HOUSE"

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The two papers we have heard this evening are among the first fruits of research in the Carter Presidential Library. The authors are to be congratulated for venturing into the very recent past, where historians often fear to treat. That they are already able to reconstruct these stories is due to the diligence of the Library's staff and the determination of President Carter to open his papers to scholars at an unprecedented rate.

The story they tell is not pretty, but it is a common theme in modern presidential history: handlers skilled in the black arts of media manipulation search for the right sound bites, the right photo opportunities to market a sitting President. In 1988, we cannot hear this story without thinking of a more pervasive--and successful--effort at presidential image making. The medium has become the message, and the masters of the media the true rulers. If there were to be a writers' strike in the White House tomorrow, Ronald Reagan would go into reruns.

In contrast, "image management" in the Carter White House sounds like an oxymoron. Ms. Head chronicles Jimmy Carter's slide down the slippery slope of opinion polls, the installation of Gerald Rafshoon to shore up the President's popularity, and Carter's unwillingness to follow doctor's orders. The fault, she concludes, lies with the President for not following the advice of his handlers. (Personally, I rather admire Mr. Carter for believing that being President is more important than acting like one.)

Mr. Holland's paper is tightly focused on a few days in the early summer of 1979 and the remarkable battle for the soul of Jimmy Carter and his Presidency. He concludes that Carter's public presentation was acceptable, but that any advantage he might have gained from the speech of July 15 was quickly dissipated by the wholesale changes in his cabinet and senior staff.

Let me raise three questions which apply to both papers, and then comment briefly on the tome by Pat Caddell which was dubbed by some the "Apocalypse Now" memorandum.

1. Why did Jimmy Carter personally become the target of people's anger in the midst of the various crises which confronted the nation in the late 1970s? If Ronald Reagan has been the Teflon President, then certainly Carter was velcro. Everything stuck to him.

Even now, George Bush is gearing up to run against the "gloom and malaise" of the Carter years.

2. What do we know about the struggle between policy makers and image makers in the Carter White House, particularly with regard to the July 15 speech? The fact that Mondale, Schlesinger, and Eizenstat line up on one side of the issue and Caddell, Rafshoon, and Powell on the other is suggestive. And where was that fellow Jordan during all this?

3. Why did Jimmy Carter act counter to his own political interest in the crisis of 1979? I'm not so much concerned about why he refused to take speech or acting lessons as with why he chose to play the role of Jeremiah or Jimmy the Baptist. Prophets are without honor in their own country. They also have a hard time getting reelected.

And that leads me to the Caddell memo. Pat Caddell offered President Carter a prophetic vision of America. The source of that vision was "scientific" and ostensibly objective data from public opinion polls. In the tradition of Daniel Bell (a participant in one of those White House discussions about the future of the Republic), Caddell considered himself to be a non-ideological expert, one who had gotten beyond the old politics of left and right. But prophets always take sides, and science is never value-free. The Caddell memo was profoundly ideological and essentially conservative. Echoing the message of Christopher Lasch, Caddell located the crisis in people's heads, not in their pocketbooks or in the structure of the American and global economy. Of all the history books for Carter to read, Caddell had to recommend Lasch's *Culture of Narcissism*, the gospel of malaise. Lasch--and Caddell--fundamentally misread the preceding decade of American history: now that people had their basic needs satisfied (a la Maslow), they were worried about higher orders of need. Anomie, malaise, crisis of confidence, wounded psyche: that was the problem, according to Caddell. In Cambridge or Manhattan, perhaps, but don't tell a steel worker in Youngstown or Pittsburgh, a farmer in south Georgia or Iowa, a motorist in Los Angeles or a heating oil user in Providence that the problem was in his psyche. The comments of Americans which Carter jotted down on his trusty legal pad at Camp David were closer to the truth than the wisdom of Caddell, Lasch, and a host of hothouse intellectuals. In 1979, the average American didn't have time for a crisis of confidence, and if he had, he wouldn't have had the money to pay the

psychiatrist.

Caddell figures out that Americans were upset (no great feat), but he misread the source of their anger. A sea change was occurring in the American economy and in the expectations of the American people. Neither Caddell the post-liberal cosmopolitan, nor Carter the southern progressive, was fully prepared to deal with the great rending of the nation's economy and social fabric in the late 1970s, though I think the President from Plains was more nearly so than the guru from Boston.

Mr. Holland says we should look at administrative style in the Carter White House. Yes, and we should also look at Carter's domestic policies in light of structural changes in the American economy and the end of liberal optimism. Postwar American history breaks in two at about the time of the Carter administration. Pax Americana and the engine of progress collapsed together. The task of assessing the Carter presidency includes an evaluation of image making and administrative style, but they are only parts of the elephant (or should I say donkey). In the final analysis the Carter administration--and the Carter Library--offer a view of a major change point in American history, a change still very much in process.

That work is well begun with these papers. Let us hope that the authors will keep at it. Along the way we will need to hear from more of the participants through the medium of oral history. Caddell, Powell, and Rafshoon have not kissed and told like Larry Speakes, though Jim Fallows did a pretty fair Speakes imitation. And most of the participants in that incredible gathering at Camp David have yet to tell their stories. What a story it will be!

The history of the Carter years is not just a chronicle of gloom and malaise and a battered President. It is a repository of information on the Republic's unfinished business. When "morning in America" turns into the morning after we will need the history of the Carter years. It is a usable past, too valuable to be left in the hands of present-day politicians and their media consultants.