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Jimmy Carter as President: Leadership and the Politics of the Public Good

The presidency in the United States had an imperial aura under the Kennedy and Nixon administrations. Following these terms, Jimmy Carter, the antithesis of presidential majesty, was elected America's thirty-ninth president. Likewise, it was President Carter who proved that America demanded leadership of perfected goals and policies, as well as a style to accomplish these.

Utilizing oral histories of key associates of the Carter presidency, Erwin Hargrove wrote this chronicle to reconcile the public perception of the Carter administration versus first-hand accounts of those involved in the administration. This history was written in the time following Carter's term in office, but prior to any scrutiny of presidential papers. Jimmy Carter, the policy leader, was revealed in the detail of this book.

Most people, including Jimmy Carter himself, would consider this American president as a non-politician. Despite this fact, Carter surrounded himself with Washington political insiders at the Cabinet level and in his vice-president, Walter Mondale. As early as 1966, Carter had begun to consider a presidential run. The office of governor in Georgia was regarded as a stepping stone to the nation's highest office. The core of Carter's character was established during his term as governor. His role models were his father, Earl Carter, and U.S. Navy Admiral Hyman Rickover. Carter was a submarine officer under Rickover's command. While Carter was known for performing duties as expected, he was ambitious. During the 1971 governor's race, he was known as a "gut fighter."

Carter questioned the problem-solving ability of those within the federal government and sincerely felt that he could succeed as a Washington outsider. He ran for president asking, “Can our government be honest, decent, open, fair, and compassionate? Can our government be competent?” (11) Carter came to the White House with a new manner in governance. He offered a collegial style of determining what was in the public good through his own process of study and discussion. Ideas were not developed for political good, but for the good of the community. He had his own concept of how relationships should be forged, and these relations were not based on the traditions of politicians, party leaders, or influential supporters. For these reasons, many became Carter critics while others simply did not understand his motives.

President Carter critically studied and pondered every key policy matter. The White House organization was based on the concept of a wheel: Carter was the hub and the staff was the spokes. The president’s job was to make intelligent decisions. Politics did not drive the decision-making process.

Carter was involved in foreign matters while remaining detached from domestic issues. This manifested itself in the president adapting to a “D.C. style” of decision-making regarding domestic concerns. Carter subscribed to the conservative liberalism school. This meant balanced budgets and less bureaucracy, while serving constituents in need. This president wished to lead the Democratic coalition in a new direction, but this direction was not popular. Consequently, tensions grew.

The Carter administration faced difficult domestic times as oil prices skyrocketed due to an oil embargo and the fall of the Shah of Iran. Inflation reached 18% as the nation endured a shrinking economy and escalating consumer costs. The administration groped for an oil policy, but had grave difficulty convincing Americans of the acute nature of the crisis. Indecisive

economic policy led to steadily rising inflation under Carter and ultimately contributed to his 1980 presidential defeat. Clashes between forces representing less welfare money and more workfare programs injured two attempts at addressing welfare reform. A battle over the creation of a separate cabinet-level Office of Education also developed. The president wanted a department with a broad scope dealing with human development, but he compromised creating an education department with a narrower focus. “At the end of the day, Carter was disappointed with his record in domestic policy. He took responsibility for it, but also blamed Washington politics” (67).

The Carter era was also a challenging time internationally. The president based his foreign policy decisions on dealing forthrightly with difficult situations and focusing on peace and human rights. The Panama Canal Treaty was a prime example of this policy as the president wished to avoid a Panamanian uprising and correct an old injustice through a new treaty. This was accomplished. Another noteworthy issue involved normalizing relations with China, which prompted concerns with Soviet Union and Cold War manifestations. Carter became a hero in the Egypt-Israel mediation, but it took presidential tenacity to accomplish and maintain the Camp David Accords. The president’s downfall in foreign affairs came with the Iranian Revolution in mid-1978. Within the Carter administration, only Foreign Policy Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski and Energy Secretary James Schlesinger envisioned the long-term effects of the fall of the Shah of Iran and that nation’s exit from the western political orbit. As a hostage crisis lingered at the American Embassy in Tehran, Iran, President Carter was urged not to make political mistakes. Due to his nature, he confronted the Iranian Crisis head on and this proved to be a costly error.

Following a period of Democratic reform and just prior to Republican Party resurgence, Jimmy Carter had become president during a time of national transition. Additionally, this was a

time of domestic and foreign turmoil. “An American president seeks to fashion a unity among purpose, politics, and process;” (162) however, the Washington outsider theme of the Carter presidency did not incorporate these elements into success. Carter sought “public good” through appeals to diverse groups, but the core liberal Democrat and conservative Republican constituent groups were of no assistance to this president.

The criticisms of the Carter administration rested on staff management style, ambiguous policy, too much leadership, and not enough politics. Much to the character of the man, but devastating politically, Jimmy Carter chose to stand alone in failure.

This volume was a critical analysis of major policy issues that at some points were over simplified. Throughout the text, the writing seemed to be a letter of apology for the four years that Mr. Carter led policy and politics in America.

Reference

Hargrove, E. C. *Jimmy Carter as President: Leadership and the Politics of the Public Good.*

Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1988, pp.xxv, 211.