

Hugh Sidey Assesses the Carter Presidency (1980)

Veteran *Time* magazine White House reporter Hugh Sidey wrote the following assessment of Carter's presidency on the eve of the Democratic presidential nominating convention in 1980. What did he find to be Carter's greatest weaknesses as president? His greatest strengths?

The stately old East Room of the White House, which has managed to maintain its dignity through the drying laundry of the John Adams family, the gallons of lemonade poured by the abstemious Lucy Hayes and the baleful exit of Richard Nixon, witnessed another extraordinary event last week in the long and colorful caravan of presidential history. Jimmy Carter, the 38th man in this procession, went somberly and with weighted shoulders before the television cameras (nudging out M*A*S*H) to spend an hour attempting to untangle himself and his Administration from the clumsy conniving of his brother Billy for Libyan oil and a vision of millions in commissions.

It was the best of Carter, a profoundly caring man, loving his brother through stress, as honest as a political human knows how to be, skillfully projecting his concern from his electronic stage to an estimated 65 million Americans. He was forceful in his conviction of his own rectitude and a master of every detail in the intricate caper of Billy, the wily and greedy buffoon.

And it was the worst of Carter, the President. Rarely in the past 3 1/2 years have we seen the President so focused and eloquent on a problem--a problem that never should have been, and even now should be relegated to the lawyers who love to niggle. In a world that is stalled and frightened, with only a handful of men and women wielding the power to address the malaise, Jimmy Carter, as so often in his stewardship, confused his personal and political concerns with his larger duties as President. While most Americans surely felt admiration for Carter the man, there hovered in the background those dark clouds of doubt about his leadership that were reflected in the question by CBS's Lesley Stahl, "How do you think you got into this big mess?" He never seemed to understand why this was the real question--and the implications of his failure to answer it.

West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt once broke into tears in the presence of a friend, so distraught was he over his conviction that Carter did not grasp his true responsibility as leader of the U.S. The world drifts toward war, believes Schmidt, with Carter uncomprehending. The same sentiment echoes from Asia, where Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew finds Carter's vision "a sorry admission of the limits of America's power." An official of Moscow's Institute of the U.S.A. and Canada complains: "What drives us crazy about Carter is his capriciousness, his constant changing of the points of reference in our relationship." Following this summer's economic summit meeting in Venice, a participant observed: "Mr. Carter cannot merely keep declaring himself the leader of the free world; he must demonstrate that capacity."

When Jimmy Carter stood before the 1976 Democratic National Convention and pledged "new leadership," he had never met a Democratic President or slept in the White House. The presidency was a legend from books, the Federal Government a classroom exercise, and Washington was a distant citadel of power that somehow had been corrupted by its residents. "It's time for the people to run the Government," Carter told his audience in that moment of warm, rising hope that filled New York's Madison Square Garden.

After greeting a Democratic President in the bathroom mirror every one of 1,299 mornings and sleeping in the White House at least 700 nights, Carter has indeed brought the nation a new kind of leadership. It is at least one promise that he kept among the 600 that he made during his remarkable march to the Oval Office.

But if Carter's years have been a true return to Government by popular will, filtered through the mind and ear of this earnest troubadour of the town meetings and televised press conferences, therein lies a huge and unexpected irony. The people do not like their own political creation. . . .

Carter's record of achievement is not a bare cupboard. There is civil service reform, airline, trucking and financial institutions deregulation, the Panama Canal treaties, restored relations with China, the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, and a commendable energy program on the books. As a symbol of personal integrity and candor, he is undimmed. A majority of Americans probably would still endorse most of his ideas he set forth in his first euphoric weeks, ideas for tax reform, national health care and Government reorganization. For the most part, Carter's farm program was a wonder, expanding exports and raising prices and farm income. He has increased the military budget, put the new MX missile system in planning, leapfrogged a new manned bomber to develop the cruise missile and persuaded NATO to make significant increases in arms and readiness.

Yet Carter is today a political cripple both at home and abroad because the larger issues have swamped him. Inflation and interest rates have doubled in his time. The true anguish at home, as described by Patricia Harris, Secretary of Health and Human Services, is among members of the middle class, who are far from deprivation but find themselves losing ground economically. Their fear is directed at Carter. Overseas, Soviet influence massed and grew and almost everywhere shoved a clumsy and reluctant U.S. against the wall. "We feel," says Raymond Aron, the distinguished French student of *Realpolitik*, "that American power is in decline. It is that simple and that unfortunate." It is, for instance, one of Kissinger's views that Americans are beginning to reproach themselves and Carter because the U.S. did not take dramatic action to resolve the Iranian hostage crisis when it first occurred. The public wanted nothing done then, but now is blaming the President for failure to act against popular will. That may be another manifestation of what has gone wrong on Jimmy Carter's watch. In his own inexperience and uncertainty, the President could not define a mission for his Government, a purpose for the country and the means of getting there. Former Secretary of the Treasury W. Michael Blumenthal confided to friends after he was fired that at first he thought Carter's long pauses during economic discussions were periods of thought. Later he decided they came from Carter's inability to decide what to do or even what questions to ask. . . .

His civics-class approach to the world appeared again when the Shah of Iran fell. While cautious in public statements, Carter in private had nearly convinced himself that Iran would return to the constitution of 1906, that the legislature would reassemble, the military would hold order and a stable government take root. "It was preposterous," says one who helped plan the American response. "The President's thinking was not based on any actual experience of how governments really work in this world."

In trying to fathom the man and his times, almost every Carter analyst comes back, both in admiration and in doubt, to the President's religiosity. It bolsters him for the great waves of criticism that pound now at the White House. But it also seduces him and contributes to many of his falterings. He is a believer--in Bert Lance, his old friend and economic counselor whose banking improprieties forced him from the Office of Management and Budget; in Billy Carter, the kid brother with a good heart who must mean well; in Leonid Brezhnev, who pledged his hope for peace in the shadowy halls of Vienna's Hofburg Palace. Carter's matrix is that found in the Scriptures, where the rules of a just and loving life are laid out. He wants to prevail by purity. Applying those patterns of human concern and behavior to the world's masses is far more difficult.

When a close Carter aide found out that the President was going to Washington's National Cathedral to pray with the families of the hostages, he knew instinctively that the U.S. would not for the time being assert its power in any way that might jeopardize the hostages. For months Carter

resisted using the rescue plan devised by his National Security experts. He was consumed by fear of losing individual lives in such an operation. The hostage crisis was incorporated into his political campaign, and from the Rose Garden he sounded the theme of peace, noting proudly that not a single American had died in combat during his presidency.

The wider interest of America's position in the world was only vaguely appreciated, if at all. Always Carter's mind fixed on the small parts of the effort and not the whole. At one stage in reviewing the attack plans on the embassy compound where the hostages were held, the President asked about the Iranian guards stationed inside the embassy, near the wall that the commandos intended to scale. Were they volunteers or conscripts? he wondered. If they were radicals, Carter explained, he could go along with killing them, but if they were only peasant conscripts, he wanted them knocked out temporarily. . . .

In almost every political arena that Carter has entered, his conviction that fervid good will would carry the day has proved false, and in many instances has worsened the problems. His belief that the Soviets would respond to dramatic overtures to scrap many of their nuclear missiles helped to fuel the continuation of arms competition. Carter's human rights campaign is now viewed as having often embarrassed U.S. allies and hardened the opposition of adversaries. His vague notion, preached mostly by his friend and onetime U.N. Ambassador Andrew Young, that the radical nations were our natural allies has been mocked in Viet Nam, Cambodia and Iran. "It is not that he does not mean well," says one thoughtful critic of Carter. "It is that almost everything he has touched he has made worse. He operated from the wrong concept of his job, the wrong theory of international affairs, and he uses administrative procedures that fail."

If there is a modern manual of leadership widely admired in the world today, it is the memoirs of France's Charles de Gaulle. His lessons are simple but rarely heeded in most White House proceedings. De Gaulle wrote of the need to concentrate on the questions of greatest national importance, of the necessity of delegating authority, of remaining at a distance but not in an ivory tower, of talking constantly to his people not about themselves but the greater interests of the nation.

In a peculiar way Jimmy Carter is consumed by himself. His world still resembles the small stretch of Plains, Ga. His goodness becomes an end in itself, defined in the Main Street encounters where the audiences are people with names and problems that are manageable. This does little, however, to define the tastes of the presidency, where decisions must have heroic dimensions, where leaders must balance their immense egos against a deeper understanding that they are but specks of dust in the ultimate sweep of history, where the future must be just as real as the present.

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