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Why Carter Lost:

Dissecting the 1980 Presidential Campaign

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Introduction

It was a typical Presidential election year, 1892. The Gilded Age economy was the central issue as Democrats and Republicans, predictably, could not agree on how the task of managing it should be undertaken. On one side, Democratic nominee Grover Cleveland argued that the McKinley Tariff Act of 1890 was directly responsible for unequal wage distribution and disproportionate price increases for consumer goods around the globe.¹ On the other, Republican incumbent Benjamin Harrison claimed that highly protective tariffs were necessary if American industries were going to compete with the nations of Europe who paid their workers significantly less.² On November 8 that year, the divided public settled it by yielding the administration to the Democrat, thus marking the fifth occasion in the American timeline that the sitting President had been ousted via the general election.

Even if the campaign's rhetoric was relatively typical, its result was not. Both men were actually seeking a second term as Commander in chief. In the previous election of 1888, it was Cleveland who was unseated by Harrison. By returning the favor, Cleveland would become the first and only man to serve nonconsecutive terms in the nation's highest office. His election also marked the first time in history that incumbent Presidents lost consecutive general elections.

It would take another 88 years for it to happen again. Jimmy Carter followed his 1976 ousting of incumbent Gerald Ford by losing the White House four years later to Ronald Reagan. Carter achieved the Presidency by distancing himself from scandalous Washington politics, involvement in Vietnam, and by positioning himself as a simple, trustworthy alternative to tainted Washington insiders.³ His ad campaigns often featured him in ordinary clothing, overtly stressed his hard-working roots as a peanut farmer, and leveraged his family to attest to his character. He rarely missed an opportunity to mention his home, Plains, GA—"population 683."⁴

A key issue, touched upon during his successful campaign, was the American position on human rights. He stated, "We should begin by having it understood that if any nation...deprives its own people of basic human rights

¹ "Tariff Reform Gaining," *New York Times*, November 29, 1891, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1857-1922) (94876149).

² "Harrison Talks Tariff: He Makes the Well-Worn Appeal to Workingmen," *New York Times*, September 5, 1888, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1857-1922) (94599797).

³ Michael G. Krukones, "The Campaign Promises of Jimmy Carter: Accomplishments and Failures," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (1985): 136, <http://www.jstor.org/brockport.idm.oclc.org/stable/27550171>.

⁴ "1976 Campaign Ad: Southerner Jimmy Carter," YouTube Video, 4:21, posted by "AuthenticHistory," June 12, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vtDfaV96DI&t=183s>.

that fact will help shape our own people's attitude towards that nation's government."⁵ He carried this message with him into the early days of his Presidency, earning him applause as he expounded upon his plans in various addresses around the nation.⁶ Throughout his term, however, Carter would be faced with ample global and domestic crises, his management of which would define his Presidency for all time. While these did not necessarily dissuade or distract him from pursuing his moral agenda, they certainly distracted critics and historians from regarding his crusade with any esteem or relative significance. And they most certainly cost him his job. Jimmy Carter lost the election of 1980 because Ronald Reagan was able to exploit his deficiency in dealing with three key sociopolitical forces: the economy, the Iranian hostage situation, and the energy crisis.

The Economy

On November 13, 1979, Ronald Reagan appeared on American television to announce his intention to seek the Presidency of the United States. For his audience, he surrounded himself with an impressive desk, and array leather chairs, and, of course, an American flag. His 24-minute opening appeal leveraged his acting skills and his charm. His carefully choreographed routine of standing, sitting, pacing, and referring to a globe in teacher-like fashion achieved the desired effect of portraying him equally accessible and Presidential. He wasted little time getting to the heart of his campaign platform: "No problem that we face today can compare with the need to restore the health of the American economy and the strength of the American Dollar. Double-digit inflation has robbed you and your family of the ability to plan. It's destroyed the confidence to buy and threatens the very structure of family life itself..."⁷

Reagan's opening salvo included the basis for his economic plan. He called for a major overhaul of government, which he claimed "overspent, overestimated, and overregulated". This, he promised to achieve by reviewing every federal agency in order to eliminate inefficiency and waste. He eased into his assertion that overtaxing big business

⁵ Charles Mohr, "Carter Suggests that U.S. Foster Rights Overseas," *New York Times*, September 9, 1976, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1923-Current File) (122895146).

⁶ Jimmy Carter, "Jimmy Carter: United Nations Address (1977)" (speech, New York, NY, March 17, 1977), U.S. Embassy Consulate in Korea, <https://kr.usembassy.gov/education-culture/infopedia-usa/living-documents-american-history-democracy/jimmy-carter-united-nations-address-1977/>; Jimmy Carter, "President Jimmy Carter Inaugural Address 1977 HD," filmed January 20, 1977, YouTube Video, 14:59, posted by "Ron Fuller," January 28, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tr6U_hgCfVY; Jimmy Carter, "University of Notre Dame Commencement," filmed May 22, 1977, C-SPAN video, 27:17, <https://libguides.csuchico.edu/c.php?g=414275&p=2823092>.

⁷ Ronald Reagan, "Candidacy for Presidency: Ronald Reagans announcement of Candidacy for President of U.S. 11/13/1979," filmed November 13, 1979, YouTube video, 24:31, posted by "ReaganFoundation," April 16, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fAtYMD-H2UY>.

was not the answer by reminding viewers that “Business is not a taxpayer. Only people pay taxes.” Businesses will respond to taxes levied upon them by passing the burden on to consumers in the form of price hikes.⁸

By the time he accepted the Republican nomination for President, his individual proposals had evolved into a bulleted plan, founded on the emerging principles of supply-side economics. What later would be termed *Reaganomics*, his economic strategy consisted of:

1. A phased tax reduction across the board, including income tax reform for citizens and depreciation tax reform for businesses.
2. A reduction in government regulations.
3. An overhaul of federal spending and a freeze on federal hiring.

Reagan claimed that every major tax cut in American history has worked to stimulate investment, put people back to work and create more commerce. He railed President Carter for having a plan in which its only pillars consisted of telling people to accept hardships and curb their energy consumption⁹ The President’s campaign strategy for addressing the economy only served to solidify the claims of his challenger.

The 1970s were a decade of rampant inflation and stunted GDP. The first half saw an exponential rise in inflation, each year, before peaking at 12.6% in November 1974. From there, the year-over-year inflation numbers steadily declined until Carter took office. When he inherited the economy, the rate was 5.2%. While still relatively high, it was the lowest the nation has seen in nearly four years. Almost immediately, however, the metric began to climb. The final year of Carter’s Presidency saw no month with inflation lower than 12.5% over the previous year. It was around 12.6% on Election Day and topped out at 13.5% by the time he left office.¹⁰ To compound the issue, wages and GDP dipped as unemployment spiked to 8.2% in 1980.¹¹

This dismal economic picture alone would likely have been enough to put him on the defensive for most of the 1980 campaign. An additional trifecta of missteps, however, compounded his economic credibility.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ronald Reagan, “Ronald Reagan 1980 Republican National Convention Presidential Acceptance Speech,” filmed July 17, 1980, YouTube video, 39:12, posted by “Educational Video Group,” May 16, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kCXN5UEH9_o.

¹⁰ “Historical Inflation Rates: 1914-2018,” US Inflation Calculator, accessed November 21, 2018, <https://www.usinflationcalculator.com/inflation/historical-inflation-rates/>.

¹¹ Kimberly Amadeo, “Unemployment Rate by Year Since 1929 Compared to Inflation and GDP,” The Balance, last updated July 31, 2018, <https://www.thebalance.com/unemployment-rate-by-year-3305506>.

The first involved the platform that won him the White House in 1976. One central issue to his bid that year, ironically, was addressing unemployment and inflation. In one television ad he claimed he was the right man for the job. "I want the chance to give back to you the security in the hopes of tomorrow that inflation is stealing from you. With your help, we can do it. You can depend on it."¹² On the eve of the election, pundits opined that a potential Carter Administration, in order to live up to campaign vows, would have to give top priority to reducing unemployment and inflation.¹³ During his Presidency, he tried. Programs such as freezing government pay raises, making nominal cuts to the federal budget, and proposing a tax-credit to workers in exchange for curbing wage demands, however, all failed.¹⁴

The realities of the economy of the 1970s, combined with his failed attempts to rectify the burdens of unemployment and inflation ultimately helped accentuate Carter's second misstep with regards to the economy during the 1980 contest. That is, he failed to offer the public a new plan for stimulation until very late in the race. As noted, from the outset of his campaign, Ronald Reagan presented a concerted program to address nearly all aspects of trepidation within the economy. Later, scholars debated the relative viability of supply-side economics, given the fact that the approach seemed to promote trade and budget deficits.¹⁵ Even if *Reaganomics* was flawed, however, it still offered the public *something* in 1980. It also wielded for itself the sitting President's own economic record as its most potent weapon. In 1976, Carter never presented an actual program, despite his campaign promises.¹⁶ In 1980, he waited until the end of August to unveil his vision for economic revival. This included more tax cuts to businesses than to individuals, as well as a revised depreciation tax schedule, which led leading Republicans of the day to refer to it as a "poor imitation of the...Reagan proposal."¹⁷

Carter's third misstep in managing his economic position during the campaign offers an explanation, perhaps, as to the reasons why he failed to produce a stimulus plan in a timelier fashion. He never acknowledged that the

¹² Jimmy Carter, "Carter Presidential Campaign Ad 1976," C-SPAN video, 0:36, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?154002-1/carter-presidential-campaign-ad-1976>.

¹³ Luther J. Carter, "Jimmy Carter," *American Association for the Advancement of Science* 194, no. 4264 (1976): 506, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1742461>.

¹⁴ Krokones, "Campaign Promises of Jimmy Carter," 138.

¹⁵ M.V. Naidu, "The Aftermath of Reaganomics – Increased Deficits, Higher Unemployment, and Decreased Social Programs: Canada, A Case Study," *Peace Research* 25, no. 4 (1993): 1, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23607480>; Paul A. Samuelson, "Evaluating Reaganomics," *Challenge* 30, no. 6 (1987): 61, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40720524>.

¹⁶ Luther J. Carter, "Jimmy Carter," 506.

¹⁷ Lee Lescaze, "President Introduces Economic Revival Plan," *The Washington Post*, August 29, 1980, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1980/08/29/president-introduces-economic-revival-plan/e920e642-4b59-42d1-8b30-043392987c56/?utm_term=.b936d679b2da.

economy was actually *the* central issue on the minds of voters. To reiterate, the very first claim that Ronald Reagan made when he announced his candidacy was that the health of the American economy was the greatest problem facing the nation. The President disagreed. During his only debate with Ronald Reagan, which took place one week before the election, Carter stated that the control of nuclear weapons was “the most important single issue of this campaign.” When given the chance to elaborate, he explicitly expressed a hierarchical disparity between the economy and nuclear proliferation by stating, “Inflation. Unemployment, the cities are all very important issues, but they pale into insignificance in the life and duties of a President when compared with the control of nuclear weapons.” At one point, he referenced a conversation with his daughter, Amy, in which she agreed that this was the most important issue of the campaign, simply because of the destructive power of the weapons. He only discussed nuclear reduction, however, within the context of what he perceived as Reagan’s opposition to any arms control treaties. This presented Reagan with the opportunity to list concrete examples which detailed Carter’s history of voluntarily canceling military defense projects. This, according to Reagan, only weakened the American bargaining position and forced the President to agree to a SALT-II Treaty which he claimed generally favored the Soviets.¹⁸

The Iranian Hostage Crisis

More so than his dealings with the Soviet Union, however, it was the Iranian Hostage Situation that had the most negative impact on Jimmy Carter’s Presidency as it related to foreign policy. This diplomatic crisis was a subplot of the Iranian Revolution that saw the monarchy of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi dissolved after a series of protests aimed at his dictatorship grew increasingly violent. The Shah fled the country and the Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returned from exile to assume power of a new Islamic Republic of Iran.¹⁹ Eventually, President Carter reluctantly agreed to allow the exiled Shah admittance into the United States to receive treatment for cancer.²⁰ This sparked outrage in Iran, inspiring Muslim students to storm the American embassy in Teheran and take hostage the 52 Americans working there. They demanded the Shah be extradited back to the country to face a revolutionary tribunal. Carter refused on the basis of not negotiating with terrorists and the stand-off commenced.²¹

¹⁸ Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, “1980 Presidential Candidate Debate: Governor Ronald Reagan and President Jimmy Carter – 10/28/80,” filmed October 28, 1980, YouTube video, 1:34:51, posted by “ReaganFoundation,” April 23, 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8YxFc_1b_0.

¹⁹ John Skow, “The Long Ordeal of the Hostages,” *TIME*, January 26, 1981.

²⁰ Jimmy Carter, *White House Diary* (New York: Farrar, Staus and Giroux, 2010), 364.

²¹ “Doing Satan’s Work in Iran,” *New York Times*, November 6, 1979, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1923-Current

Interestingly, overtly referencing the hostage negotiation process during the partisan portion of the Presidential campaign became a “taboo” subject.²² On September 13 that year, Ronald Reagan issued a statement which included the promise, “I want to assure the American people that I will not make those negotiations a partisan issue in the campaign.”²³ Most likely, this was simply political posturing on the part of the Republican nominee for a variety of potential reasons. For one, he often seemed reluctant to discuss how his methods for handling the situation would have differed from the President’s. “You don’t talk about them,” he said, while accusing Carter of “negotiating in the press.”²⁴ He was also keenly aware of how attempting to politicize the crisis backfired on Senator Edward Kennedy during the Democratic Primary.²⁵ Later, conspiracy theorists even put forth claims that Reagan-Bush campaign officials maintained direct contact with Iranian leaders to actively persuade them not to release the hostages until after the election.²⁶ Whatever the case, the saga played out in the press as a humiliating demerit to American prestige. There is no doubt that the President could not assume all responsibility for the crisis and he could not fairly have been expected to presume that it would have extended for 444 days. Many of Carter’s methods, however, were certainly ineffective and were on the minds of voters when they went to the polls.

Carter took criticism in the early aftermath for stating that his “first concern was the honor of this country.”²⁷ This message, he chose to relay at the precise time he instructed White House Press Secretary Jody Powell to inform the public that the hostages “had been threatened with loaded guns, kept bound, not let speak a single word, not let go outside, bathe, or change clothes.” For some, this gave the impression that he was placing global prestige above the safety of his own people. Secretary of State Cy Vance interpreted it this way and even threatened to resign.²⁸ The President quickly walked-back the comment through the Press Secretary by clarifying that the honor of the country and the safe release of the hostages were synonymous.²⁹

File) (123926997).

²² Adam Clymer, “Fears Feeding Hostage Issue,” *New York Times*, October 23, 1980, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1923-Current File) (121326920).

²³ “Carter, Reagan Speak to Italian Americans,” *Fort Walton Beach Playground Daily News*, September 14, 1980.

²⁴ Douglas E. Kneeland, “‘Disgrace’ Charged: Issue Expected to Arise in Debate in Cleveland Fixed for Tuesday,” *New York Times*, October 22, 1980, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1923-Current File) (121166429).

²⁵ Terence Smith, “President Critical: Accuses G.O.P. Nominee of Turning Issue Into Political Football,” *New York Times*, October 22, 1980, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1923-Current File) (121184605).

²⁶ Jimmy Carter, *White House Diary*, 480.

²⁷ Edward Walsh, “Carter,” *The Washington Post*, November 28, 1979, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1979/11/28/carter/bc732a52-0bde-4ab2-a5da-1366b448ebbf/?utm_term=.2f28718b2147.

²⁸ Jimmy Carter, *White House Diary*, 373.

²⁹ Walsh, “Carter.”

While this was playing out, the President and his advisors were in the early planning stages of a rescue operation that came to be known as *Eagle Claw*. Next to the sheer length of the ordeal and the fact that he never achieved the release of the hostages during his tenure, *Eagle Claw* would prove to be the most damaging aspect of the hostage crisis to Jimmy Carter's reelection campaign. On the morning of April 24, a team of six U.S. C-130 transport aircraft and eight rescue helicopters, equipped for combat, entered Iranian airspace, and proceeded to a planned staging point in a remote desert area, approximately 200 miles from Teheran. Two of the helicopters developed operational difficulties and could not make the rendezvous. Another, while there, also developed a debilitating hydraulic issue. According to Jimmy Carter's diary entry for this day, the mission called for a minimum of six helicopters in order to extract all American hostages from the embassy. When this last helicopter pulled out, it was decided that the operation could not proceed. The President aborted the mission. As the helicopters were preparing to leave, however, the rotor of one made contact with a transport aircraft, causing an explosion that killed eight and injured many more.³⁰ Early the next morning, President Carter appeared on television and relayed the entire ordeal to the American public. During this address, he personally assumed the blame for the debacle, stating "the responsibility is fully my own."³¹

Retrospective analysis suggests that the President made the most reasonable and responsible decisions concerning the planning, execution, and abortion of Operation *Eagle Claw*.³² In the immediate aftermath of the failed attempt, however, the general public was not so forgiving. *The New York Times* reported Iran to be in "a mood of national jubilation" over the American failure. Officials responded by splitting up the hostages and transporting them to scattered locations in multiple cities to ensure that the United States would be unable to make another covert extraction attempt.³³ Secretary Vance announced his resignation, claiming to have voiced opposition to the operation a week before the failed attempt.³⁴ It was reported that little contingency planning was undertaken.³⁵

³⁰ Jimmy Carter, *White House Diary*, 421.

³¹ Jimmy Carter, "President Jimmy Carter- Statement on Iran Rescue Mission," filmed April 25, 1980, YouTube video, 6:25, posted by "MCamericanpresident," March 28, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Km3dx7wppA>.

³² Shlomo Gazit, "Risk, Glory, and the Rescue Operation," *International Security* 6, no. 1 (1981): 130, doi: 10.2307/2538532.

³³ John Kifner, "Iranians Say They Will Move Hostages to Several Cities," *New York Times*, April 27, 1980, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1923-Current File) (121235136).

³⁴ Bernard Gwertzman, "He Decided Days Ago," *New York Times*, April 28, 1980, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1923-Current File) (121211112).

³⁵ Richard Burt, "Report Charges 'Major' Mistakes on Iran Mission," *New York Times*, June 6, 1980, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1923-Current File) (121137370).

Iranian officials ensured that the hostages saw pictures of the charred bodies of their fallen would-be rescuers.³⁶ The heads of nine Western European governments, despite pledging continued support to the United States, expressed “irritation” and “anger” for not having been consulted about the mission.³⁷ On the one-year anniversary of the embassy seizure, *The New York Times* finally reported that the crisis had grown to produce in the rest of the world “[d]oubt about the reliability of the United States as the guardian of world peace,” specifically linking that doubt to the “failure of the rescue attempt in April.”³⁸

Just as the issue began to fade from front-page headlines, Ronald Reagan rehashed it. At a campaign rally in Kansas City on October 21, he blasted Carter, asserting that, as the crisis approached one full year, it was a “humiliation and a disgrace” to the United States. This prompted the President to publicly accuse his challenger of breaking the promise he made the previous month to not meld the hostage negotiations with partisan campaign politics.³⁹ Carter’s rebuttal perhaps, only fueled more media coverage as the debate and election neared. Two days after Reagan made the comments, *The New York Times*, referred to the hostage crisis as a “metaphor for American weakness”. The article argued that the individual who would benefit the most from the debacle was Ronald Reagan, who, according to a recent *New York Times/CBS* poll was now seen by two-thirds of the nation as the candidate who could best “see to it that the United States is respected by other nations.”⁴⁰

The Energy Crisis

Runaway inflation, poor economy, and the Iranian Hostage Crisis were not geopolitical islands, isolated unto themselves, requiring individualized approaches of Presidential policy. This is exemplified by the Energy Crisis of 1979 which created a link between all these forces and presented Jimmy Carter the President and Jimmy Carter the candidate with even more obstacles to his legacy and to his reelection. Unlike the hostage situation, his opponent in the 1980 campaign expressed little sensitivity towards political jockeying on this issue. Ronald Reagan devoted much rhetoric to ensuring that the American voter saw their President as a problem and not as a solution.

³⁶ Kifner, John, “Iran Displays Bodies: Insists that 9 Died, Not 8,” *New York Times*, April 28, 1980, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1923-Current File) (121209845).

³⁷ R.W. Apple, “Western Europeans Support U.S., Say They Still Plan Iran Sanctions,” *New York Times*, April 28, 1980, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1923-Current File) (121219381).

³⁸ William Borders, “Handling of Hostage Issue Alters U.S. Image Abroad: Some Common Themes Emerge,” *New York Times*, November 5, 1980, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1923-Current File) (121250358).

³⁹ Kneeland, “‘Disgrace’ Charged.”

⁴⁰ Clymer, “Fears Feeding Hostage Issue.”

In his final State of the Union Address, President Carter concluded, "The single biggest factor in the...increase of inflation last year was from one cause: the skyrocketing prices of OPEC oil."⁴¹ The single biggest factor in the skyrocketing prices of OPEC oil in the late 1970's however, was the Iranian Revolution. In November 1978, a mass strike of Iran's oilfield workers halted production. At that time, the world supply of oil far exceeded demand, so the relative effects were minimal. It did, however, serve as a warning that should another such stoppage be more prolonged, it could have a serious detrimental impact on the global world industry. The timing of the strike was key as oil companies generally stocked up their supplies for winter to offset natural reductions in output.⁴² Just over a month later, Iranian workers went on strike again. This time, the work stoppage was, in fact, extended. All oil production in Iran was halted. Initially, other oil producing nations stepped up production to offset the loss. These countries failed to account for increased worldwide consumption over the previous year and production began to fall short of demand. Combined with the fact that different countries produced oil at different rates, worldwide prices became unstable. This was further complicated by the fact that, due to increased demand, spot oil became more expensive than oil purchased under contract. OPEC seized upon this and began requiring purchasers to pay spot prices or lose future contracts. This created international competition as consumers engaged in open bidding for spot oil. Worldwide governments were reluctant to invoke any pre-negotiated failsafe as these market fluctuations were viewed as a temporary setback that would alleviate itself when Iran resumed production. When this occurred under the Ayatollah's watch, output remained inconsistent and the world grew more fearful.⁴³

In March of 1979, OPEC ministers met in Geneva. Many nations were reaping extraordinary profits due to this spot oil phenomena and called for exorbitant price increases. Saudi Arabia, however, threatened to drastically increase production if these countries continued to insist on such price gouging.⁴⁴ The result was a compromise that saw oil prices jump 14.5% the next month. In their official statement, the nations expressed oil price concerns for

⁴¹ Jimmy Carter, "1980 State of the Union Address," filmed January 23, 1980, C-SPAN video, 38:15, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?124054-1/1980-state-union-address>.

⁴² Nicholas Cumming-Bruce, "Workers Strike in Iran's Oilfields," *The Washington Post*, November 21, 1978, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1978/11/01/workers-strike-irans-oilfields/cb475916-3413-473c-9eb0-f71d57ee1d94/?utm_term=.440b79f7d3aa.

⁴³ Robert Stobaugh and Daniel Yergin, "Energy: An Emergency Telecoped," *Foreign Affairs* 58, no. 3 (1979): 568-570, doi: 10.2307/20040493.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 569.

developing countries only and suggested individual governments act however they saw fit to control prices further⁴⁵ What actually resulted was a sort of hysteria that future supply would be diminished, future prices would be higher, or both. This increased demand, which accelerated price increases, further complicating the crisis. On top of this, the newly formed Department of Energy maintained an allocation system that permitted farmers, military, and other local government services to purchase all the gasoline they wanted before the rest made its way to the pumps for regular consumers.⁴⁶ By summer, shortages led to extremely long lines at gas stations around the nation. In Houston, for example, consumers waited as long 45 minutes, with some running out of gas just before reaching the pumps. Stations regularly ran out of their supply within two hours as many people topped off their tanks and filled additional canisters in anticipation of future shortages. This played out in the shadow of Exxon headquarters, as police provided security.⁴⁷ In New York City, customers often began lining up for gas two hours before the stations even opened. By this time, it was not uncommon for lines to stretch as long as eight blocks. Cab drivers were forced to refuse fares. Equally frustrated gas station owners demanded increased police presence to combat harassment from customers.⁴⁸

To his credit, President Carter did attempt to warn the American public about impending crisis more than two years before it reached its peak. On April 18, 1977, he addressed the American public from the Oval Office to detail the situation and plead for sacrifice, calling it “the moral equivalent of war.” He accused the United States of being “the most wasteful nation on earth”, discarding more it imported. “If we fail to act soon, we will face an economic, social, and political crisis that will threaten our free institutions.”⁴⁹ However, as this address was delivered less than four months into his Presidency and the energy crisis, by his own admission, “had not yet overwhelmed us,” it was dismissed by many as political hyperbole.⁵⁰ Furthermore, the average citizen generally believed that the crisis was the result of collusion between governments and oil companies to increase profits.⁵¹

⁴⁵ “Text of OPEC Conference Statement,” *New York Times*, March 28, 1979, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1923-Current File) (120929049).

⁴⁶ Stobaugh and Yergin, “Energy,” 570.

⁴⁷ KTRK-TV, “Long Lines at the Gas Pumps in Houston, June 4, 1979,” filmed June 4, 1979, YouTube video, 32:11, posted by “ABC13 Houston,” June 4, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zspKaMmD8Ek>.

⁴⁸ PBS NewsHour, “Tempers Flare in Lines for Gasoline in 1979,” YouTube video, 13:38, posted by “PBS NewsHour,” July 23, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G7SnaMphvug>.

⁴⁹ Jimmy Carter, “Moral Equivalent of War,” filmed April 18, 1977, YouTube video, 8:24, posted by “JoeyWestbrook,” February 22, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bbNFKgNoWcQ>.

⁵⁰ Stobaugh and Yergin, “Energy,” 566.

⁵¹ Frank Barnaby. “Our Interminable Energy Crisis,” *Ambio* 8, no. 5 (1979): 222, <https://www.istor.org/stable/4312480>.

Other critics accused the President of advancing proposals that placated OPEC through conservation and sacrifice, rather than seeking a solution to liberate the nation from dependence on foreign oil.⁵² Carter's general approach was to speak candidly to the American people and present a bleak dire future if preemptive steps were not taken. His "moral equivalent of war" speech opened with him stating, "Tonight I want to have an unpleasant talk with you." He suggested that the problem he was predicting wouldn't be solved within the century and he appealed to citizens to think of their children.⁵³ In July 1979, he spoke to the American people about a "crisis of confidence" which he defined as an erosion of a better future for those children—one that Americans could previously take for granted. He accused the nation of forgoing a history of pride in hard work, strong families, close-knit communities, and faith in God in favor of worshipping "self-indulgence and consumption."⁵⁴ He closed his address by laying out an energy plan which he presented more concisely at his final State of the Union address, early the following year. The highlights of his proposed bill included:

1. A major conservation effort, which included potential rationing and mandatory goals for each state.
2. Initiatives to develop solar power and other synthetic alternatives.
3. Incentives for further coal and other fossil fuel development.⁵⁵

Rather than present these plans as an optimistic channel to the future, President Carter couldn't resist reverting to the doom-and-gloom authoritative rhetoric that Ronald Reagan would exploit throughout 1980. Near the end of the State of the Union, he invoked political journalist Walter Lippmann by applying his quote, "You took the good things for granted, now you must earn them again. For every right that you cherish, you have a duty which you must fulfill. For every good that you wish to preserve, you will have to sacrifice your comfort and ease. There is nothing for nothing any longer."⁵⁶

Even though Carter's plans did call for the United States to reduce its dependence on foreign oil, Reagan constantly accentuated the President's call for conservation when addressing potential voters. He announced his candidacy exactly four months after Carter's "Crisis of Confidence" speech aired on American televisions. In this

⁵² Paul Davidson, "What is the Energy Crisis," *Challenge* 22, no. 3 (1979): 42, <https://www-istor-org.brockport.idm.oclc.org/stable/40719779>.

⁵³ Carter, "Moral Equivalent of War."

⁵⁴ Jimmy Carter, "Jimmy Carter's Full 'Crisis of Confidence' Speech (July 15, 1979)," filmed July 15, 1979, YouTube video, posted by "reece888888," May 2, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kakFDUeojKM>.

⁵⁵ Carter, "1980 State of the Union Address."

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

address, he jabbed the President's plans by proclaiming, "It's no program to simply say, 'Use less energy'."⁵⁷ He took this further when he accepted the Republican nomination, "Those who preside over the worst energy shortage in our history tell us to use less, so that we'll run out of oil, gasoline, and natural gas a little more slowly. Well now, conservation is desirable, of course. We mustn't waste energy, but conservation is not the sole answer to our energy needs. America must get to work producing more energy."⁵⁸ During their debate, Reagan reminded viewers that the nation was "energy-rich" and accused Carter of imposing too many regulations which were preventing energy companies from exploring alternative sources.⁵⁹ In many ways, the candidates' positions were aligned when it came to tapping into American resources more effectively to reduce dependence on foreign oil. Reagan realized, however, that long lines at the gas pumps were much more tangible than reduced "confidence" in the future. He not only sent citizens to the polls with a more positive message, he actively reinforced the President's rhetoric as an impediment to that message.

The Election and Aftermath

For much of the campaign, *Gallup* reported that Jimmy Carter maintained a popular lead over his challenger. With less than two weeks before the election, he enjoyed his widest margin of 8 points.⁶⁰ *TIME Magazine* had the candidates locked in a dead-heat in mid-September.⁶¹ And while *The New York Times* polls didn't reflect an uninterrupted lead for the President lasting throughout, it did concur with the assessment that he had pulled ahead in the late stages⁶²

After their debate on October 28, both men claimed argumentative victory. The Carter camp was satisfied that most of the debate centered around Reagan's "extremely dangerous" foreign policy, rather than the economy. The Reagan side expressed confidence that the President was exposed for continual misrepresentations of the economy as well as their candidate's stance on arms reduction.⁶³ Global news outlets seemed to side with Reagan. *The*

⁵⁷ Reagan, "Candidacy for Presidency."

⁵⁸ Reagan, "1980 Republican National Convention."

⁵⁹ Carter and Reagan, "1980 Presidential Candidate Debate."

⁶⁰ Michael D. Cohen, "Presidential Races Can Change Significantly as Election Day Approaches," *Gallup*, October 26, 2000, accessed November 24, 2018, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/2392/presidential-races-can-change-significantly-election-day-approaches.aspx>.

⁶¹ Ed Magnuson, "The Mood of the Voter," *TIME*, September 15, 1980.

⁶² Hedrick Smith. "Poll Shows President Has Pulled to Even Position With Reagan," *New York Times*, October 23, 1980, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1923-Current File) (121335986).

⁶³ Hedrick Smith. "Carter and Reagan Voicing Confidence on Debate Showing," *New York Times*, October 30, 1980, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1923-Current File) (121197921).

Guardian of London surmised that Carter succeed in most areas, but not the most important one: “the destruction of Mr. Reagan’s credibility as a potential president.”⁶⁴ A poll of 1,019 viewers, conducted by *CBS News*, favored Reagan 44 percent to 36 percent, with 20 percent calling it a tie.⁶⁵ A *Boston Globe* article with the headline, “Chalk up a big one for the challenger” identified multiple news outlets, traditional pollsters, and other forms of data collection—all of which saw Reagan as the clear winner. “If Carter loses big, after he’d been pulling close to even, he can blame the debate.”⁶⁶

Carter did lose big. Reagan outpaced the incumbent by 10 percent in the popular vote and crushed him 489-49 in the electoral tally.⁶⁷ Reagan won the male vote; the female vote. He captured the majority voters over the age of 30. He won over Moderates by a six-point margin. There wasn’t a region in the nation that favored Carter. The challenger won over Protestants, Catholics, and Evangelicals. The demographics that did favor Carter, favored him four years before. He made up ground nowhere. In fact, among those who voted for him in 1976, only 63 percent repeated in 1980. Approximately 4 percent of those votes shifted to Reagan, while 6 percent went to the Independent candidate, John Anderson, who claimed nearly 7 percent, overall.⁶⁸

In his diary entry for November 4, 1980, Jimmy Carter ruminated on the reasons for his loss: “Most of the things we did that were difficult and controversial cost us votes in the long run: Camp David Accords, opening up Africa, dealing with Cuban refugees, Panama Canal Treaty, normalization with China, energy legislation, plus the hostages and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan—particularly the hostages.”⁶⁹ Either the President was attempting to politicize for historical posterity, or he remained ignorant to the issues that actually affected people the most. Camp David, China, Cuba, and the Panama Canal were not even discussed during the final debate (other than Carter, himself, glossing over the treaty between Israel and Egypt). These simply weren’t on the minds of the average voter to the point where, even collectively, they could have contributed significantly to the defeat. He was correct about

⁶⁴ David Broder, “President fails to destroy rival’s credibility,” *The Guardian*, October 30, 1980. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Guardian (1959-2003) (186177306).

⁶⁵ Hedrick Smith. “Carter and Reagan Voicing Confidence.”

⁶⁶ David Nyhan, “Chalk a big one for the challenger,” *Boston Globe*, October 30, 1980, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Boston Globe (1960-1987) (1009981020).

⁶⁷ “Historical Election Results,” National Archives and Records Administration, U.S. Electoral College, accessed November 25, 2018, <https://www.archives.gov/federal-register/electoral-college/scores.html#1980>.

⁶⁸ “National Exit Polls Table,” New York Times, accessed November 25, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/elections/2008/results/president/national-exit-polls.html>.

⁶⁹ Carter, *White House Diary*, 480.

the hostages. In fact, just two days before the election, Ronald Reagan preemptively filmed television commercials and prepared speeches only to be used in the event the President managed to negotiate an eleventh-hour release . At this stage, his advisors believed he had a substantial lead that could only “be threatened by a sudden resolution to the hostage drama.”⁷⁰

The most obvious omission from Jimmy Carter’s reflective list of encumbrances to reelection was the economy. This was the issue Ronald Reagan expounded upon when he launched his bid. It was the catalyst, driving force for his campaign and his trump card when all other things were equal. Less than a week before the debate, *The New York Times* published a poll in which indicated 56% of Americans considered inflation to be the “most important problem.” This was followed by 29% who identified unemployment as their biggest worry. This suggests that as much as 85% of potential voters saw the economy as the most pressing issue facing the nation.⁷¹ In his reflection, Carter did identify “energy legislation” as a force which cost him votes. This phrasing suggests he considered his failure to get a bill through Congress as *the* impediment to his campaign—not the energy crisis itself. As noted, he previously inextricably linked inflation to the volatile market for Middle Eastern oil. As also noted, the volatile market for Middle Eastern oil was the direct result of an Iranian Revolution that, for Americans, was defined by 52 of their own being held captive in Teheran for 444 days. These three issues are what Americans lived with daily. More than Egypt, Israel, China, Cuba, or Panama, it was this triad that influenced votes.

The peanut farmer from Plains, Georgia got elected because he was a man for the people. He dressed plainly. He spoke plainly, and he spoke directly. He cultivated a bond with the citizens of a nation jaded to national politics. He cherished this bond and never lost faith in it. By 1980, though, that bond was gone—or at least it wasn’t the same—only, he didn’t know it. He never conceded his faith that the people desired a voice that offered more truth than hope. Unfortunately for James Earl Carter, truth that is bleak is not truth that inspires.

⁷⁰ Howell Raines. “Reagan Prepares an Attack on Carter if 52 Are Freed,” *New York Times*, November 2, 1980, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1923-Current File) (121425933)

⁷¹ Hendrick Smith, “Poll Shows President Has Pulled to Even Position.”

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